

# On Pilgrimage to Cuba—Part IV

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*Summary: Notes the fervor of the revolution in the wake of the missile crisis of October. Mentions the open seminaries and work of religious sisters, food shortages, friendly people, absence of drunkenness. When asked if she could find nothing wrong in Cuba she lists their many struggles. (DDLW #798).*

## Mail from Cuba

Mail is coming through to me from Cuba quickly and I was happy to receive letters during the month from our anarchist friend Mario Gonazales (sic.) and from Lou Jones. His letter, which was dated November 14, tells of some of the reactions in Cuba after the crisis in October.

“I suppose you are aware of the byplay that took place and continues to take place between Cuba and the Soviet Union. The Voice of America has given a big play to the supposed split, and this is another case of wishful thinking on their part. At least for the president. When the news of Pres. Kennedy’s speech arrived, we passed a very bad day or two, although it never reached the stage of hysteria which apparently swept the USA, according to the articles I received from US papers and the radio broadcasts which I caught from ordinary American stations.

“The amount of mobilization here has been enormous; enlistments in the militia soared, and many militia units were immediately mobilized. As happened at the time of Playa Giron, many people who did not previously consider themselves to be revolutionaries underwent a remarkable change.

“Efforts have been made not to mobilize units which would paralyze important sectors of production, and a certain amount of voluntary labor is being used to replace mobilized workers. Of course production has been adversely affected. I am told that it is especially to be noticed in the countryside in the agricultural work which has been very seriously impaired. Meanwhile the secondary school kids continue picking coffee up in the Sierra, and they are just starting to return now in order to begin school as soon as they have a couple of weeks with their families.

Considering the disastrous effects that a full scale invasion would have upon Cuba, and the high degree of consciousness among the Cuban people of the size of such a disaster, the people

here have displayed a fundamental serenity and peace of mind which surprised everyone – even themselves, I venture to say.

“Meanwhile to get back to Cuba and the USSR. The people here did not take kindly at all to Khrushchev’s note retiring the rocket bases. It was not so much the idea of having bases here, which Cubans are quite prepared to live without, in fact I think that they prefer to be without the bases. The galling thing was that there were some expressions in Khrushchev’s note that offended the Cuban’s sense of sovereignty, and second, that Khrushchev had backed down in the face of illegal and immoral menaces. Fidel in his television appearance a few days after Khrushchev’s note, was at his best as usual when things go badly. He made it clear that the Russians were within their rights to retire the bases which were the property of the USSR but that they could retire none of the other arms which are all Cuba property, that he was highly displeased with certain expressions used in Khrushchev’s note; but that Cuba continues to be Marxist Leninist and will discuss these problems at the top level; that Cuba would not submit to inspection or permit abrogation of its sovereignty by anyone. The general reaction to his speech was nothing short of jubilation. Fidel and the Cuban people seem to know each other inside out. The people here are prepared to die for their revolution, with or without help from the USSR.

“One of the first things we received after the height of the crisis was a bundle of copies of your article, ‘Setting Sail.’ We are distributing these to English speaking Cubans here and are eagerly awaiting future articles.”

It was good too to receive clippings of two columns of religious notes, from **El Mundo**, entitled Mundo Catolico, written by one of the priests whom I met while in Cuba.

These notes were sent me in November by Mario Gonazales. In discussing the lesson of the Sunday, about tribute to Caesar, the priest takes the opportunity to point out the role the layman must play in political life and the necessity for him to “penetrate all social structures, all civilization, with whatever regime, **sin compromisos con lo politico y lo ideologico**. To penetrate and to live with the pure forces of the spirit, of love, of generosity, and with **la valoracion positiva**, in all that which is not intrinsically immoral.” (I am not sure of my translating, and so I use the Spanish text.) The column ends with a prayer by the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Msgr. Enrique Perez Serantes, a prayer for peace. And then there are the usual lists of feast days and special Masses said in the cathedral and other churches of Havana.

I must repeat again and again that the churches are open all through Cuba. That the cloistered Carmelites remain in Havana. That there are sisters visiting the prisons, teaching catechism, etc. That there is a secular institute of young women to teach catechism, that I brought back with me copies of two catechisms printed in Cuba, for first and second classes of children. That one of the priests has many catechism classes throughout the city, one estimate being five hundred groups organized for the teaching of the children. That there are two minor seminaries open and that young newly ordained priests are returning from Europe at the request of the Holy Father. That there are a number of Canadian priests working in Havana itself, and ten in Matanzas Province, and also Canadian sisters.

## Food Shortage

As for the food situation, there are severe shortages of course, and the situation will probably get worse, judging from Louis Jones' letter which speaks of the disruption of production. Here is a more detailed account of rationing, given me by one of the Catholic families. Where I was a guest there was a supplementary food allowance, and some of the families had received food sent to them by relatives in the States. I went with friends to shop and in many cases there was hours of waiting, but since each customer was given a ticket with a number on it, we were able to do other errands. There are long lines before the meat stores, and it seems to me the greatest hardship was in the meat shortages. A bad drought the last year cut down the crops and milk supplies, as well as the supply of meat. Russia has been sending canned meats, and so has China, but canned meat is not looked upon with enthusiasm any more than in the States where there was a great objection years ago to the "Home Relief Beef" which we used to see during the depression.

I took notes in my little pocket diary of some of the rationing and my notes read as follows: Weekly, 1 and a half lbs. rice per person; one half lb. beans; three fourths lb. meat; 1 and a half lbs. potatoes; 1 lb. sweet potatoes; quarter lb. pumpkin; half pound lb. fish fortnightly; 5 eggs monthly; one eighth lb. butter monthly; 1 lb. oil monthly; 1 lb. lard; 4 oz. cheese; 6 cans evap. milk; and to children under seven a quart of fresh milk daily. These were some of the figures given me by a friend who in general was against the revolution, and yet when others attacked it found good things to say for it, too.

Nothing was hard and fast in the way of rationing as far as I could see. Suddenly there would be a great many chickens on the market and they were given out alive. A half dozen to a family, and all over Havana the families were keeping them in their yards to lay eggs. Or sometimes there would be a notice that there was meat and there would be long lines of people waiting to get their share. There was a shortage of everything, and since the Cuban women love to sew and make their own clothes, and since cotton is the coolest thing to wear in the tropics there were great lines when it was announced that cotton goods had come in from China. Women complained that those who worked could not take advantage of the sales, so there was great discontent here.

In times of crisis people put up with shortages, and after all there seems to be plenty of beans and rice – I ate it twice a day all the while I was in Cuba; and it was the season for avocados. Fruit juices are sold on the street corners and they are delicious, the melon juice, the mango juice as well as oranges. At the bus stops when we were travelling, boys came on with pails of warm water, not too clean looking, containing tamales wrapped in their coverings of corn husks. I ate many of these with no hurt to my digestion, but I must confess I made an act of faith as I ate these unsavory looking morsels. Sometimes the tamales had some kind of sauce inside, generally they were like a thick cereal, a bit lumpy, with little but the corn flavor.

## With The People

But when you are hungry, how good everything tastes! And if I sound as though my trip to Cuba were a happy one, I must confess I was happy because it was so much better than

I expected, and because I was able to endure the heat, the travel, the getting around in strange places, and eating foods, and talk with people who spoke another language and who were all so friendly and kind, and who seemed to be so willing to live this individual enemy, for such they regard us from the Estados Unidos. On one occasion when a little boy came into the bus with his usual pail of tamales, the woman conductor who assisted the driver by collecting fares, helped all of us by passing out the tamales and bringing us our change. "Even the Americans are eating tamales now," she laughed and the entire bus laughed too in most friendly fashion.

I must recall too, the honesty of the people. At one bus stop I came back into the bus to find that Charles Horwitz had left his seat to go out, and had left behind his wallet which had evidently slipped from his hip pocket. There was a hundred dollars or more in it and his identification cards and other necessary papers, but there it remained; no one touched it. I could leave my transistor radio around in the same way, though one bus driver wanted to buy it from me.

Another thing—there is no drunkenness in Cuba. Coming from the Bowery as I had, it was amazing to me not to encounter any drinking in the plaza, in the bus stations, the bus stops, in the streets of the big cities like Havana, Santa Clara, Santiago de Cuba, Manzanillo, Guantanamo. When I commented on this, Marjorie Rios, an American woman married to a Cuban and living there for the last fifteen years, said that she too had never seen a barracho. Someone else added that the only ones were the Americans who used to flock there as tourists.

One of our readers, and a very dear friend, asked me after I came home, "Is there no criticism you can make about Cuba? Is everything so wonderful there, cannot you find anything against it?"

Of course one could find plenty wrong. It is a country racked by war, boycotted by its nearest neighbor and without many of the amenities of life. I could tell of water supplies breaking down, pumps not functioning in the big apartment houses, so that the tenants are forced to carry water from the first floor to fill the tanks of their toilets, the bath tubs and many pails for cooking. Of the disrupted service on the public transportation system, which leads by the way to slower and more careful driving by cab and bus drivers and by all private car owners.

Life is not easy in Cuba these days and the people are undergoing great hardships in every way. They are getting enough food to survive, but certainly not the kind of food they wish. They are just getting by, and undoubtedly food shortages make tempers short too. There is a great shortage of the professional classes, teachers, doctors, and so on. There is shortage of drugs necessary to save lives.

But there is just the same widespread efforts towards health and education and work for all, and the crisis has united the people so that there are not the problems of delinquency, and violence, drug and drink addiction, lack of work for the older and younger members of the community, lack of education in the past in Cuba's struggle for independence, Jose Marti, General Maceo, and others, but none of these were faced with the problem of a **successful** revolution, and what to do about consolidating it, and building up agrarian reforms, housing reforms, building up production so that everything would not be going out of the country in trade but there would be food, clothing, shelter, health care, and education for all. In that,

the problem in Cuba now is unique.

The Communists were the ones to throw themselves into the work of building up the country. Before the revolution, less than three tenths of one percent of the population was communist. Those who were, were highly trained and few. They had not been in favor of the Castro revolution, but when it succeeded, they threw themselves into the work of building up the country, with the help, of course, of their fellow-Communists in the USSR and other Socialist countries. What help the U.S withheld was given them by others. So now Cuba is the first Socialist State in the Western Hemisphere. What to do about it? How to live with it? How to learn from it?

As I came through Mexico, spending ten days there on the way home, I spoke to the Maryknoll nuns in Mexico City, who are still forbidden to wear their own garb as are all the other nuns, and wear plain skirts and blouses like lay women. They told me there that no religion is permitted in the Mexican schools where they teach, no crucifix is allowed in the school room, and all religious instruction must be given outside of class, as in our own public school system. But in addition they have government text books, which they are forced to use, and there is one in particular which they have protested. It is only now, this year, that they have been permitted to teach from their own text (together with the text of the government which must also be used). It seems to me the Catholics in Cuba must learn from the Catholics in Mexico how to deal with and survive in a godless state and show the same courage the Catholics in Mexico have shown. The Catholic, the Christian, must outdo in zeal, in self sacrifice, in dedication, in service for the common good those who are following the teachings of Marxism-Leninism. So let us learn our lessons, and continue the struggle with the joy, which Leon Bloy says in the sure sign of the life of God in the soul.

There is much more can be written and I have more material but the affairs of the house of hospitality, the death of Hatty Crafts, one of our older members of the CW community, the sickness of still others, the shortage of help, the great increase in mail (I need two secretaries right now who can take diction and type) have kept me very busy since my return. Visitors are always swarming in the city and country and it is hard to hide out and get work done. But the "problem" of Cuba is here to stay. Next month we will print Mario Gonzalez very fine letter, which is about the same length as this article.