

Gustavus Adolphus College

Conflicts Between the Cuban Government and the Catholic Church

A Senior Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Religion
In Candidacy for the Religion Major

Religion 399 Senior Seminar

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May, 2005

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Abstract:

In this thesis paper, I show that the Catholic Church was never strongly established in Cuba even dating back to the indigenous people and the African slaves. These people never accepted the conversion to Christianity by the Europeans and therefore never helped form a strong Catholic Church in early Cuba. This weak tie with the Church continued into the twentieth century. Before the Revolution, 90 percent of the population considered themselves Catholic, but more than likely they were only tied to this religion because they did not identify with a different one. Most of the 90 percent were not strong practicing Catholics and few of them attended church on a weekly basis. The low numbers of priests on the island proves this; not many were needed since the congregations were so small. Although there were still some Catholics that remained on the island, the majority who considered themselves Catholic were not serious about practicing the tradition. However, after the Revolution in 1959, Castro began to weaken the little Church that was left by secularizing religious schools, discouraging Catholics from working in the government and even attempting to convert the Christians to Marxist-Leninists in various speeches. Even though Castro had reasons for disliking Catholics due to their public displays of anti-communism, Castro inappropriately persecuted the Church and denied them their right to religious freedom after he came into power. I conclude by discussing how still today, 45 years after Castro came into power, there has been no growth or improvement in the Church even with the help and visit of Pope John Paul II. Catholicism is endangered in Cuba and will not be revived with people like Castro in roles of leadership.

Introduction

One leisurely Sunday morning as I walked down attractive Fifth Avenue in Miramar (a part of Havana), I noticed something strange. The Catholic Church that I passed everyday on my way to the University was unusually quiet. As I approached the enormous and beautiful place of worship, I thought it strange that on a Sunday morning at 10:30 there was not a soul to be found in or outside of the church. I looked around the lobby for some sort of a brochure or a list of worship times, but all I found was a small poster taped to the door that read, "Abierto" which means, "Open." I did not quite understand what the people of the church were trying to convey; had I come when the church was open for prayer and silence? Was this a museum and I happened to be there during their hours of business? What I did not realize at the time was that this particular Catholic church no longer held worship services and the sign merely indicated that the building was open for people, such as myself, to come in and observe the beautiful architecture and art throughout the structure. In a way, I *was* entering a museum that happened to be open during my casual morning stroll through the neighborhood. The fact that this was the only Catholic church for miles in a city the size of Havana got me wondering where all of the Catholics attend church on Sunday mornings. I soon realized, after months of living in Cuba, that there was not a need for worship services at this church because members of the community did not attend. Also, in observing the culture in Cuba, I found that although most people are extremely spiritual, not many attend church services or worship formally in a place like this building. All of this information got me very interested in knowing why Cubans, unlike so many other people in Latin America, are not predominantly Catholic. I began wondering, is it possible that in a

country like Cuba where Christianity has slowly diminished, the Catholic Church could someday disappear completely? Many would disagree that the Catholic Church in Cuba is in danger of extinction, but others understand how various issues of the past affected and are still affecting the Catholic Church in Cuba for the worse.

When looking a bit deeper at the subject, one can see that many events in history led to the lack of Catholicism in Cuba. The natives of the island resisted Christianity, as did the African slaves who came into the country throughout history. The nation was never entirely dominated by the Catholic Church or any one religion, but one major event in recent history plays a significant role in why today the Catholic Church is almost invisible in Cuba. In 1960, shortly after the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro put strict regulations on the role Catholic and the Catholic Church were allowed to play in society. Castro was angered by the Catholics' reaction to the new systems of communism, socialism and even his regime. While Catholics spoke out against the Revolution and the things Castro was trying to change, he went as far as to implement rules that people trying to attain jobs in the Cuban government must not be practicing Catholics.¹ This discrimination was one reason tensions grew between the Church and state, but others included the secularization of schools and conversion from privately owned Church land to ownership by the state. Although the Church detested Castro for these reasons, similarly, he disliked the Catholics on the island since they were the people who publicly disapproved of his regime and the changes he made on the island. Even though both groups had reasons for disliking the other, Castro handled the situation extremely inappropriately by persecuting the Church and denying the people their right to religious

¹ Richard Ostling, "Castro looks at Christianity," Time Magazine, 30 December 1985. In Infotrac <http://web4.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/806/24/62872521w4/purl=rc1_SP00_0_A4073646&dyn=3!xrn_6_0_A4073646?sw_aep=mnafolke> (12 February 2005).

freedom. In looking at the history of the Catholic Church in Cuba, one can see that although Cuba was never as Catholic as other countries in Latin America, certain circumstances led Fidel Castro to put regulations on the role the Catholic Church was allowed to play in Cuban society. Because of these restrictions forced upon Catholics, many left the Church or the country altogether and as a result, the Catholic Church has vastly narrowed. Fidel Castro harmfully impacted the small Catholic Church that was left in Cuba after the Revolution and still today, forty-five years later, one can see the impression his powerful role left on the Church.

Chapter 1: History of Cuba 1492-1950s

Throughout the history of Cuba, many events took place to shape the country's economy, international relations and status in the world. Likewise, when looking at religion one can see how different events shaped and determined the faith and practices of the Cuban people in regards to religion. Throughout history, Cuba was never as Christian or as Catholic as other nations in the new world due to the circumstances of the nation's past, but over time Christianity slowly developed in the country.

"They say that it contains gold and spices and large ships and merchandize..." Christopher Columbus wrote this in his journal Wednesday, October 24, 1492 after he sailed into the Caribbean convinced that the beautiful island ahead was the coast of China or Japan.² Of course this was inaccurate, but little did he realize, the island ahead would soon, in future decades, be just as prosperous for the Spanish as he imagined China and Japan to be, filled with real gold, spices and merchandise. Cuba is like much of the Americas in that it was discovered by Christopher Columbus and his crew in 1492. Although many argue over the term "discovered," the island was indeed a new discovery of land for the Spanish and other Europeans. One of the reasons the term "discovery" is so controversial is because some see Columbus' finding to be more of an invasion. One can see in the following paragraphs how the "discovery," or in some opinions "invasion," of the new land affected not only many Europeans, but also the natives who lived in Cuba, occasionally for the better, but usually for the worse.³

With the immigration of the Spanish in the sixteenth century, many things changed in Cuba. The Spanish brought new things to the land such as crops, livestock

² Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, eds., "Christopher Columbus 'Discovers' Cuba," in The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics (United States: Duke University Press, 2003), 9.

³ Preface to "Christopher Columbus 'Discovers' Cuba," in The Cuba Reader, 9.

and the idea of land ownership. Some of what the Spaniards brought was beneficial for the people of the island; the new crops such as sugar, tobacco and various fruits were valuable to the natives, but the livestock that came with the Europeans eventually ruined all of the crops due to the grazing in the fields. The idea of land ownership was also somewhat difficult for the natives to accept. They had never owned the land they lived on; it was not something that humans could possess, but rather part of a spiritual realm that was to be respected and cherished. Eventually, with this new idea of landownership and currency to buy the land, the Spanish took over and owned all of the property on the island. This soon created even more problems for the native people of the island since the Spanish decided they needed human resources to work the land they now owned.⁴

Once the Spanish had virtually taken over Cuba, they began to look for native Cubans to work on their property as farmers, as miners and in other jobs that required manual labor. The indigenous were seen as slaves by the Spanish and were forced to work their land with little reward. They “served as the principal labor force in the early colony. They mined the quarries and panned the streams, tilled fields and tended the flocks.”⁵ The native Cubans did not accept the idea and were very adamant about surrendering to the Spanish ideas of slavery. Although many native Cubans were taken into slavery, some were so enraged by this new idea that they ran away and went into hiding in the mountains to resist Spanish control. Some runaways and many slaves committed suicide, while others killed their newborn children so the babies would not have to grow up in horrible conditions with terrible people in control of their lives. Many

⁴ David Watts, The West Indies (Cambridge: University Press, 1987), 76-77.

⁵ Louis Perez Jr., Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 28.

native Cubans who had been taken into slavery died of intense manual labor and the horrendous conditions in which they worked.⁶

A Dominican bishop by the name of Bartolomé de las Casas came to Cuba in the 1510s and witnessed many of these deaths as well as the conditions in which the indigenous people worked. Being the good Christian that he believed he was, he sided with the indigenous and tried to fight the injustices of Spanish control. Although Las Casas was generally helpful in saving the lives of many native Cubans, he had an agenda of his own to convert as many indigenous people as possible to Christianity. Many other Spaniards had similar ideas and soon, the immigrants were trying to force the indigenous into converting to their religion of Christianity. When the indigenous rebelled against this conversion, they were considered heretics or witches and were then burned at the stake. Some natives found this so disheartening that, like the slaves, hundreds committed suicide by hanging themselves while others fled to the mountains with no food, shelter or other supplies. Many indigenous people died because of the invasion of the Spanish; many died of new diseases brought over by the immigrants, but others died because they were overworked, underfed or so depressed that many took their own lives.

One legendary native in particular, by the name of Hatuey, constantly fled before the European Christians until he was finally caught in the early sixteenth century. The Christians decided to burn this heretic at the stake since he would not convert, but before they lit the fire they gave Hatuey one final chance before his death to convert to Christianity and be saved so he could go to heaven. Hatuey, a leader of one of the native Cuban tribes, had never heard of heaven and asked cleverly if all Christians go to heaven.

⁶ Perez, 29-30.

“When told that they did, he said he would prefer to go to hell.”⁷ In his writings, Las Casas uses this as an example of how poorly the Europeans treated the indigenous people of the island. For someone to reject Christianity in such a way must have had to do more with the missionaries than with the religion, in his opinion. Whatever opinion Las Casas may have held back in those days, Hatuey became famous among the indigenous people in Cuba and for many years, he was a model of resistance to European control and influence. The early immigrants had a hard time spreading Christianity to the indigenous people of Cuba for reasons such as their forcefulness, abuse and disrespect. In years to come the Europeans killed off the majority of the indigenous people of the island. Whether it was because of the new conditions that led the natives to suicide or whether it was physical violence due to labor or murder, most of the indigenous population in Cuba died.

After many years of colonization by the Spanish, there was a mix of people and cultures on the island. European born Cubans, also called creoles, rapidly began to produce sugar cane and exported the refined product to various countries in Europe with high demand for the crop. With this prosperous system in place, they needed more workers to farm the land and furnish all of the manual labor so the economy would flourish from the sales. Soon, the European workers were bringing African slaves into Cuba by the thousands to work on the sugar plantations. For many decades, Africans were forced to work in the fields, in homes and in strenuous jobs that the white people did not want. No matter what the job, the working conditions were horrendous for the Africans slaves. Most slaves, especially those working on sugar plantations, worked long hours, usually getting only about five hours of sleep per night at the maximum. Also, if a

⁷ Bartolomé de las Casas, “The Devastation of the Indies,” in The Cuba Reader, 13.

slave did anything to upset his or her master, he or she would be beaten and would have to sleep in a dreadful environment, usually getting little rest before the next long workday. Because of all of the forced labor from the African slaves, sugar production grew to be the largest export of Cuban goods and with time, sugar cane took over all the farmland on the island because of the success. The Cuban economy was flourishing because of the sugar exports to countries such as Britain, Spain and other European countries, but all of this came at the expense of the African slaves' labor and in many cases, at the cost of their lives. Many Africans died from the physical labor and bad conditions they were placed in shortly after coming to Cuba to work on the plantations. Many slaves died due to the difficult working conditions and while the black population would have eventually become extinct, the Europeans and creoles continued to rely on the slave trade to bring more black workers into the country.

In relation to religion, the creoles and the Europeans began to think of new rules and regulations for slaves and their owners, a few of which had to do with the practice of Catholicism amongst slaves. Many slave codes were written in the mid 1800s, but in the first sentence of "The Slave Code of 1842" it states, "Every slaveholder shall instruct his slaves in the principles of the Holy Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion..."⁸ Not only were the Spanish and other Europeans living in Cuba trying to convert the Africans to Christianity by influence, but they also made community rules to force the slaves to change religions. Some slaves may have converted to Christianity by free choice, but many others may have pretended to convert so as not to be beaten or ridiculed by their masters. While some slave owners were strict about the religious practices of their slaves, many others were not; some Africans converted to Christianity or accepted certain

⁸ Robert Paquette, Sugar is Made with Blood (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 267.

aspects of the religion, but most rejected the Christian beliefs and continued to practice the traditional African religions such as Santería. Many of the African slaves continued to dance, listen to music and practice their traditional African religions as one of the only ways to keep in contact with their roots and to stay sane in the difficult conditions in which they lived.⁹ This is yet another way in which it is possible that Christianity, and specifically Catholicism, never really settled in early history as a prominent religion in Cuba; the slaves rejected the conversion to Christianity, continued to practice their African religions and eventually when the slaves were freed, the whites no longer had control over their religion and they were free to practice whatever they wished.

Another important way in which Catholicism ceased to expand was due to the African majority on the island in mid 1800s. Whites, and their Christian traditions, were in a minority in Cuba for a few years. The Europeans brought over so many slaves from Africa that for a short period, blacks dominated the population of the island. When looking at history in this way it was easy to see that other religions were more prevalent and the majority of the population paid no attention to the Catholic traditions.

Also in the mid-1800s, sugar production began to decrease. This was due to the lack of demand from the European nations and the countries in the new world. Soon slavery was no longer needed as much as it was before and talk of emancipation came about around the country. In a couple of different wars in Cuba the slaves were given the opportunity to fight on the side of the rebels for their freedom. During the Ten Years War from 1868-1878, native Cubans fought for independence from Spain. Although the main motivation for Cubans to fight this war was frustration with excessive taxation, trade restrictions and exclusion from the politics of Spain, white Cubans also told slaves

⁹ Yvonne Daniel, "Rumba," in The Cuba Reader, 74-75.

that if they fought in this war, they could win their freedom. Although Cuba did not become independent from Spain in this war, as promised, all the slaves that fought in the Ten Years' War were freed. In 1879, The Little War broke out, again attempting to gain independence from Spain. This time, more slaves joined the army for a chance at winning freedom of their own.¹⁰ Again, the effort to gain independence from Spain was not a success, but more African slaves were freed because they fought in the war. Eventually the free people of color and many of the enslaved blacks, organized a sort of civil rights movement. Although it was extremely hard for the group to achieve anything quickly, by the end of the 1880s all blacks slaves in Cuba were freed by the Spanish government.¹¹

Another war that finally helped Cuba gain its independence began in 1895. This war would eventually be known as the Spanish-American War, but was not called by this name until the US entered it beginning in the middle of 1898. Many revolutionary leaders, such as Jose Martí, led the country in yet another revolt against Spain. There was a group on the island who were considered the "rebels." This group of insurgents took over the island and by 1896, their armies were operating every region of Cuba trying to forcefully take power out of Spanish hands and put it in the hands of the Cuban people.¹² Although the Spanish were not winning the war, the cautious and traditional leaders in Cuba called for annexation to the United States to help stop the crisis. In 1897, the US established a protectorate over Cuba, meaning the US military occupied the island and was able to enter the country and help fight in times of crisis. The US eventually entered the war in 1898 to help the small island become independent from Spain and after

¹⁰ Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 43,70.

¹¹ Perez, 128.

¹² Perez, 157.

a short time of fighting, the Spanish “were exhausted and lacked the resources and resolve to continue the war.”¹³ Soon, the war was over and Cuba was finally independent from Spain forever.

In cutting ties with Spain, Cuba also damaged relations with the Roman Catholic Church. The Church in Cuba was indeed run entirely by Spaniards; all of the bishops and priests were appointed from Madrid. Due to this connection, the clergy “generally espoused to the cause of Spain,”¹⁴ and were not in favor of Cuba’s independence. In the same way the government did not favor the Church. Since the Roman Catholic Church in Cuba was run and supported by the Spanish, the Church was deprived of Cuban government support shortly after Cuba gained independence. Salvador Cisneros, a former radical revolutionary president of Cuba, even went as far as to attempt to ban the phrase “invoking the favor of God” in the preamble of the Cuban Constitution. This is one example of how the Catholic Church, and the religion in general, was viewed and dealt with in the country in the early twentieth century by many Cubans. Also, the following article was adopted into the Cuban Constitution of 1901-02: “The profession of all religions is free, as well as the exercise of all cults without limitation, except that they must respect Christian morality and public order. The Church will be separate from the State and in no case will it subsidize any cult.”¹⁵ This article shows that although the Church was to be respected in the country, it was not the main focus, as the Church was no part of the government and other religions and cults were still to be valued and respected. The main reason it was so easy for the government to make the state separate

¹³ Perez, 177.

¹⁴ J. Lloyd Mechem, Church and State in Latin America (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 299.

¹⁵ Mechem, 301.

from the Church was because the Catholic Church in Cuba was already so weak due the break with Spain. The government did not have to put up a fight with the small group of Catholics and made these statements in the Constitutions with little struggle from the small opposing side. All of these examples through history showed that Cuba never focused completely on Catholicism in the country. The country was much more focused on the pride in the government, economy and independence in the world.

In 1902, Estrada Palma took power as Cuba's first president as an independent nation. Palma kept the nation under US protection for a few years and allowed the US government the right to intervene in Cuban political affairs whenever there was a need for a superior power. Although many Cubans were skeptical of this semi-annexation to another country, the Cuban economy began to thrive with American support. Even though Cuba was doing well with support from another country, this economic dependence became unacceptable to the revolutionaries of Cuba. Jose Miguel Gomez, a man active in the government and military, led a revolt that caused the US military to return to Cuba in 1906. Although Cuba was free from Spain, the United States still had formal possession of Cuba for many years after the war. The US government did not believe that Cuba had the proper leadership to function as an independent country in the world and because of this, the United States military occupied the island on and off until the late 1920s when Fulgencio Batista came to power.

Not only did Batista rid Cuba of US military occupation, but he also helped Cuba in many other ways including "the restoration of social tranquility,"¹⁶ the recognition of the poor and humble in Cuba and the acknowledgment of women's suffrage. Batista made the nation aware of these issues while at the same time he worked on matters such

¹⁶ Perez, 278.

as religiousness in various schools throughout the country. In the Constitution of 1940, written when Batista was president, the issue of Catholic schooling was addressed very openly. This newer Cuban Constitution seems to be a bit softer on the topic of religion and Catholicism than was the Constitution of 1901-02 and states that although Church and state are to remain separate in Cuba, in private education, "official instruction shall be laic."¹⁷ Although the contract stated that these institutions were subject to inspection by the state, if the family desired a religious education for their children, it was possible to obtain one in Cuba. One can see from this that although religion was still separate and somewhat distant from the government in the 1940s, Catholicism began to grow; Catholics formed schools and congregations, which was something that would have been unrealistic in the early 1900s with the negative attitudes towards religion and Christianity as a whole.

Batista did his best to improve church-state relationships in Cuba and, with the help of the Church, succeeded in many regards. 339 primary and secondary Evangelical schools were opened while he was in power, as well as one private Catholic University for higher education called Saint Thomas. Even though the Catholic Church was still very separate from the state regarding many affairs, about 91 percent of the Cuban population was considered Catholic in 1957.

"When the population of Cuba was 6,166,000, the Catholic population was 5,620,000. There were two archbishops, five bishops and 690 priests. The ratio of communicants to priests was 8,145 to one. The nuns who worked in schools, hospitals and charitable institutions numbered 2,408."¹⁸

¹⁷ Mecham, 301.

¹⁸ Mecham, 303.

While these numbers seem fairly impressive, in actuality, it is unlikely that the people who associated with the Catholic Church truly attended services or seriously practiced the religion. Many Cubans sent their children to religious schools, but even with these statistics, the Church remained weak and small on the island. The low ratio of priests to communicants also proves that the Church population did not grow. If indeed 91 percent of the island went to a Catholic Church, there would have been a demand for more priests and leaders, but since it is probable that not many people actually attended, 690 priests on the entire island was more than sufficient. The damage had been done early on in the country's history and even though Batista accomplished enormous goals in bettering the Church, Catholicism simply did not appeal to many people on the island and the Church continued on as a fragile and minute group.

Over many years of Cuban history, one can see the early failed attempts the Europeans made to convert various people of the island to Christianity. With native Cubans against the conversion to Christianity, the African slaves keeping their African religious roots intact and the Spanish, and their religion, being driven out of the country after the war, one can see how the country never became as connected to Catholicism and Christianity as did other countries in the new world.

In years to follow however, Catholicism changed slightly, succeeding with the assistance of the Batista regime. Although the Catholic population did not grow significantly, new religious establishments were founded, such as schools and Universities. When Fidel Castro came into power these small developments came to an end. The new leader and his regime would soon hinder even further what little the Church had gained. The Church population began to decline dramatically in the early

1960s. Although one can see that Cuba was never an entirely strong Christian or Catholic nation, Catholicism was progressing for a brief period. The question then was why did this religion advance a bit and then suddenly decline in years after the Revolution? What caused this to happen? Many people today blame the distant past for Cuba's lack of Christianity, but when looking closer, one can see that Catholicism drastically changed after Fidel Castro came into power in 1959. Maybe the religion changed because communism was the new national faith or, perhaps a better explanation is that Castro did some things that made Catholics fear practicing the religion they had only been encouraged to practice for a few years before the Revolution.

Chapter 2: The Revolution and Operation Peter Pan

A great deal of the history in Cuba shaped the religions that are prevalent there today. One major event in particular, shaped the future of the Catholic Church after the year 1959. Fidel Castro Ruz came to power in Cuba in January of that year. Although Batista had done a lot for the Catholic Church and succeeded in that regard, his regime, in general, was very unstable and corrupt and many Cubans began to seek change. After Castro won the violent battle against the Batista regime, Castro took over the unstable and insecure government. "Through the radio and newspapers, he had attracted widespread admiration for his courage and patriotism."¹⁹ Castro and his regime were seen as heroes and were greatly accepted by the majority of the country in the first months of his leadership. Although some were saddened by Batista's loss, most knew the government and the economy were unsteady and corrupt under his control and were better off with the new leader and fresh start. It did not take long, however, to see that there were flaws in Castro's regime like in many governmental systems of the past. One main source of tension in the newly revolutionized country involved the issue of religion and specifically, the Catholic Church. Although Cuba needed a positive change in the government, when Castro took power he negatively influenced and restricted various organizations, especially the Catholic Church. Not only did he turn all religious schools secular and cut funding and support for the Catholic Church, he also replaced the religion with his socialist beliefs all over Cuba. Since the Catholics were already in such a minority in the country, most were infuriated when he tried to take away what little they had left. As the Catholic disliked Castro, he too had equal reason to dislike the Church since the congregants were the people of the nation who reacted against the Revolution

¹⁹ Sebastian Balfour, Castro (New York: The Longman Group, 1995), 61.

and the various changes he wanted to make. Because of these disagreements, Castro's actions and attitude towards religion and Christianity led to serious tensions between the government and the Church and eventually led to a major event called Operation Peter Pan. This operation caused even more problems between the Church and state and eventually Castro began to discriminate against Catholics in Cuba and put restrictions on the Church because of this specific event. Although it took two sides to start these conflicts, Castro was more irrational and unfair when dealing with the issues than was the Church and its people.

Although Castro was raised as a Jesuit Catholic, he later learned Marxist-Leninist ideas at the University of Havana and began to realize that these values made more sense to him than anything he had ever learned in his religious schooling. With these socialist ideals in mind, Castro turned his back on Catholicism and became a diligent student and follower of Marx and Lenin.²⁰ After many years of being a self-proclaimed atheist, Castro came to power in Cuba and, while acknowledging the various religions of the nation, began to indoctrinate strong communist and socialist ideals into the minds of all citizens.

After abandoning his Catholic roots and coming into the major position of power in Cuba, one can see that the dictator was not as fond of the Catholic Church in relation to other religions for the main reason of economic inequality. It is true that the majority of the Catholic population in Cuba was in the middle or upper class which obviously conflicted with his equal, communist ideas. Indeed, Fidel Castro goes as far as to claim that the majority of these people, Catholics in particular, obtained their wealth illegally

²⁰ Frei Betto, Fidel and Religion, Translated by *The Cuban Center for Translation and Interpretation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 139.

during the Batista regime. Castro discussed how one of the first laws he made in his dictatorship was to confiscate everything that was stolen during the Batista regime, “farms, businesses, industries- everything they hadn’t been able to take out of here.”²¹ He believed the Catholics were responsible for most all of this dishonesty since they were the richest group on the island and that they were only angry with him for taking away their wealth and replacing it with his new socialist ideals. Although many people of the Church would probably disagree, Castro states, “The tensions with the Church emerged when the Revolution clashed with the privileged sector.”²² In relation to the land reforms, Castro truly believed that people owning large amounts of land should have it taken away. In this circumstance, Castro claimed the land reforms had nothing to do with religion and he was not targeting Catholics in particular by taking away what many of them had obtained over the years. While many Catholics who owned many acres thought Castro was discriminating against them, in actuality he believed it was just a coincidence that most of the Catholics were the large landowners. He claimed to truly believe that,

“The Revolution had been made not against priests, but against large land owners. Its goals were being challenged by persons with the most to lose, who were using religion to rouse popular anger against the Revolution, a campaign aided by outside forces. The Church was turning an essentially political issue into an emotional one by claiming a threat to religious freedom.”²³

Castro thought Catholics were using religion as a tool to demonstrate their opinions of how horrible his new reforms were and with these issues, he began to conflict with the Church on various transformations in Cuba. Although Castro claimed he did not

²¹ Betto, 171.

²² Betto, 177.

²³ John M. Kirk, Between God and the Party: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Cuba (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1989), 84.

target Catholics in particular regarding land reforms, he did indeed claim that they were the majority of the people who had obtained their wealth illegally under the Batista's regime. One can see the reasons the new president conflicted with many Catholics and people of the Church. While he disliked the Church for these reasons, the Church had many reasons to dislike and disagree with their new leader as well.

The people of the Catholic Church became equally upset with Castro for many other reasons. They, on the other hand, did not claim to be angry with Castro for taking away their land and other wealth; they were angrier that he took away the religiousness in their lives. A couple of the things that angered the people regarding religious issues included: the secularization of schools and the exclusion of the Church from national affairs.²⁴ Soon, the Catholic Church hierarchy and the majority of Catholics in the Cuban congregations decided they did not support communist principles since they seemed to be taking away their religious freedoms. Although many Catholics had been part of the anti-Batista movement and had initially welcomed the Revolution, the Catholic hierarchy joined the anti-Castro movement early in the dictator's leadership.²⁵ One reason for the anti-Castro movement was because of a particularly mocking speech given by Castro in the early 1960s. He no doubt made this speech because he already heard the opposition to the Revolution by the Church and was angered, but nevertheless, he addressed the country, saying the Catholic Church was carrying out orders of Yankee imperialism by putting bombs in schools and carrying out sabotage to fight against his Revolution. The greater part of the Catholic community asserted these claims were untrue. After these proclamations it was obvious the Church did not approve of Castro's regime, one of the

²⁴ Balfour, 67.

²⁵ Balfour, 67.

reasons being because of the fabrication he told about the Church and its people. Castro claimed that Catholics were rebelling against the new regime in various ways, but what irritated many Catholics more was that Castro did not address the difference between “anti-communist” and “counterrevolutionary.” He believed and preached to the country that the two terms were one in the same where on the other side, Catholics did not believe that an anti-communist (someone who did not agree with Castro’s reforms and socialist ideals) was equal to a counterrevolutionary (someone who wanted to overthrow the government).²⁶ Most Catholics had no intention of taking serious political action since they were such a small group and while it was probable that some Catholics were lashing out against the regime, most were simply anti-communist or anti-Castro and did not see themselves as counterrevolutionaries. Since Castro saw most all Catholics as counterrevolutionaries and the Church saw Castro as a deceiver, the two groups never saw eye to eye on most issues. The Catholic Church in Cuba did not support the new leader for his false accusations nor did the Church approve of the new, non-religious, ideals being implemented into various sectors of everyday life.

Many people were affected by changes Castro made in daily living. Another main area of concern for the people of the Catholic Church was when their children were taken out of the private religious schooling and put into the new nationalized secular school system. Children all over Cuba began learning about communism in alphabet books and in singing lessons. Castro was everywhere: in books “A is for Agrarian reform” (relating to the Agrarian Reform Law that was passed in May 1959 after Castro took power) and “F is for Fidel,”²⁷ while in songs at the schools children were singing,

²⁶ Kirk, 87.

²⁷ Conde, 31.

“Fidel is a wonder, he is the greatest thing there is.”²⁸ The once religious schools were converted into schools of the state and the children were no longer taught the same morals and values of Christianity. When Catholic parents and Church leaders heard this, most got very worried about the situation and from the Catholic point of view, began to wonder if the school teachers realized they were being forced by the regime to subconsciously teach the children that Fidel was their god. Catholics viewed this situation as Castro being compared the Jesus Christ, a man who would protect them from all of their problems and fears. This is when the Church decided that children were not going to benefit from this new situation and this was also when parents were forced to make a momentous decision for their families and for their children.

Similar to other countries in times of political change, many Cubans despised their new leader so strongly that they began to flee the country and live as refugees in other countries, mainly the United States. “Unable to oppose the Revolution, disaffected Cubans emigrated by the tens of thousands. The loss of population in the early years [after the Revolution] was stunning: 62,000 in 1960, 67,000 in 1961 and 66,000 in 1962.”²⁹ One group in particular who helped form the program that reporters would christen, “Operation Peter Pan,” felt that they, and their children, were being politically oppressed and religiously persecuted by the new government and decided the only way to help the children was to send them out of the restricting country before Castro’s new systems completely brainwashed them.³⁰ While it was possible that some of the Cubans who left were wealthy and knew they would not benefit from the new economic system, most of the Catholics who pondered leaving did so because they did not feel that their

²⁸ Conde, 16-17.

²⁹ Perez, 335.

³⁰ Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh, “Cuban Refugee Children,” in The Cuba Reader, 558.

children would correctly learn about Catholicism in such an environment. In 1960, this same group (one of the many large underground anti-Castro groups) set up a meeting with the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, Father Bryan Walsh (head of Miami's Catholic Welfare Bureau) and James Baker (the headmaster of an American school in Cuba). Together, these strong assemblies came up with the plan to send several children out of the communist controlled country to the United States for safety. The parents in the underground Cuban group feared that if the government found out that the children's parents had been involved in an anti-Castro group, the children would be taken hostages and manipulated even further by the regime. Because of this, thousands of parents decided to send their children away secretly for their own protection. During the first wave of Cuban migration to the US, these leaders of the operation jointly secured exit papers and plane tickets for thousands of Cuban children. With all of the plans in place and help from the Catholic Church and other various groups, approximately 14,048 children were sent from Cuba to the United States, most without their families' accompaniment. "At about the same time, Walsh developed the rudiments of the Cuban Children's Program, designed to care for those children who lacked relatives or friends with whom they could stay once they arrived in the United States."³¹ Although these two operations formed at the same time and were used to help young Cuban exiles, the terms "Operation Peter Pan" and the "Cuban Children's Program" cannot be used interchangeably; Operation Peter Pan was a program designed for parents to send their children away from religious and political repression while the Cuban Children's Program helped Cuban children without families find foster care and protection in the

³¹ Victor Andres Triay, Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1998), 2.

US. Thousands of children left the island and although many were too young to remember their families and the details of their flights, countless people who were part of Operation Peter Pan remember the separation, the trip to the US and the life after the departure.

Since so many Cubans were coming to the United States from Cuba, the US government realized there were serious political problems on the island with an end nowhere in sight. In 1961, they finally took action with the help of many Cuban exiles living in the US. Together the two groups invaded Cuba to try and stop the situation in the changing country. The US was not successful in this invasion and within a few weeks most of the invaders were either killed or captured by the Cuban army. After this conflict, named the Bay of Pigs invasion, Castro ordered his regime to be much more strict when dealing with counterrevolutionaries.

“The government moved against anyone suspected of opposition to the regime, including priests, foreigners and ordinary men and women, in and out of the government. By the end of April an estimated 100,000 persons were imprisoned or otherwise detained. Virtually no suspected opponent of the government remained free in Cuba after that time. Prisons filled with political enemies. Most were released after the Cuban victory at Girón [Bay of Pigs], but by then all organized opposition had been effectively eliminated. Thereafter, planeload after planeload of Cubans left the island.”³²

The Catholic families who opposed Castro and had not yet left the island were now at a greater risk of being imprisoned or killed and after the invasion, even more children and many Catholic families left the island. Numerous Catholics and other anti-

³²Perez, 331.

Castro people left the island following the Revolution and even more after the Bay of Pigs invasion.

While there were many groups leaving the island in the early 1960s, the only main documentation of the departed that is still available today comes from the children who left Cuba through Operation Peter Pan. Children of the operation sent letters to their parents who were still living in Cuba. "Children, in their innocence, write simple, but honest letters. The Cuban children wrote of their assimilation problems..., their loneliness and their longing for their family and their homeland."³³ In one specific letter, four brothers and sisters write about their deep longing to see their family saying, "We cry every night because we miss you very much. Come anyway you can, we are doing very badly here. We are asking you to please come. We are waiting for you."³⁴ Thousands of letters similar to this were sent to Cuban families during the years following the Revolution. The pitiful cries for the children's parents made it hard to believe that sending the children away was the best decision, but in most cases the Cuban families involved with Operation Peter Pan believed so strongly that anything was better for these children than being put into jail or being forced to conform to anti-Christian and communist values.

While it was very hard for the parents to read these saddening letters from their children, an even worse problem arose in 1962. Although many Cuban children who were part of Operation Peter Pan did indeed reunite with their families shortly after their departures from their homeland and numerous lucky parents were able to follow their children to the United States and reunite after only a couple of months, there were other

³³Conde, 101-102.

³⁴Conde, 102-103.

Cuban families who were not so fortunate. After the Bay of Pigs invasion, Castro stopped all flights leaving the island. He suspected that there were groups, like the unknown Operation Peter Pan, leaving the island in secret and immediately wanted to put this to an end. The people of Cuba were suddenly prisoners of the island and were forced to stay in the country with little hope of reuniting with the children they had sent to the United States just a few months earlier.³⁵ Although Catholics were not the only people affected by this new law, it was mostly the Catholics who had gone as far as to separate from their children and spilt up their families during those first years after the Revolution. Many Catholics were affected by this new regulation and in some cases would be affected for the rest of their lives, as many would never see their children again.

There are also many books and other testimonies written by now adults who were once a part of Operation Peter Pan as children. In various books written by Carlos Eire, Maria de los Angeles Torres and Victor Andres Triay, to name a few authors, many different sentiments are conveyed relating to the decision their parents made shortly after the Cuban Revolution. These authors and other grown children of Operation Peter Pan show a wide range of feelings; some are grateful for their parents' sacrifices, while others are angry with their families because they never got to experience a real mother or father in childhood. Also, because some of the families were never reunited after the separation, some of the people who wrote about their experience are deeply saddened by the fact that they will never know or be able to contact their families in the future.³⁶

Although all of these records are both saddening and interesting, in actuality they mostly show how horrible some Catholics thought the Cuban government to be; parents

³⁵ Conde, 176.

³⁶ Conde, 204-205.

would surrender their small, innocent children, in some cases never to see them again, for the sole purpose of keeping their offspring out of harm's way, what, for them was the evil of Fidel Castro, his regime and his rules and regulations on the island. The Catholic Church in the United States proved this even further by supporting the Cuban Catholics; it was more than just the rich, upper class Catholic Cubans who saw a problem with what was going on in the Cuba. With all of the new laws and changes that were made in schools and everyday life, other Catholics in the US could see that the Cuban children were in danger and were brainwashed and taken away from their spirituality because of the new leader.

After many Catholic Cubans fled the island in the early 1960s, it was clear that Castro had a sour taste in his mouth about Catholics. These were the people that had defied him the most. For many years after all of these problems, Castro continued to discriminate against the remaining Catholics in Cuba. For many years following the Revolution, Castro's "Communist regime expelled bishops and priests, eliminated church schools, made it difficult for practicing Christians to get government jobs and even discouraged the observance of Christmas because it impeded the sugar-cane harvest."³⁷ All of this shows that Castro was still bitter about the religion; whether it was because he was no longer a practicing Catholic or because he did not agree with the rebellions brought on by the Catholic people in Cuba and in the US, Castro did not like the Church and treated it with disrespect and discrimination.

Through all of this, one can see that the two groups (the Castro regime and the Catholic Church) despised each other. Although it may be difficult to see who caused more problems for the other in the first place, it is easy to see that the groups conflicted

³⁷ Ostling.

on numerous issues. Catholics did not approve of the lies Castro spread about the Church, the land reforms or the brainwashing he attempted in schools and in day-to-day life. The Church also rejected the idea that schools could no longer be religious and were then consumed by socialist ideals. In the same way, Castro was angered by the disrespect of the Catholic Church; he believed all the Catholics only hated him because he took away their dishonest wealth and forced them into an equal and communist system. It did not help Castro's opinion of the Catholic Church that thousands of Catholics inside and outside of Cuba were secretly working against him to get countless numbers of children and others off the island for good. Both sides of the case have reasons for disliking the other and many people were affected by all of the events that occurred in the early 1960s. When planeloads of children left the island, many were orphaned for a few years, but some were parentless for the rest of their lives. Fidel Castro was the reason these families sent their children away so it can be said that this is another one of the reasons the Church despised the new leader. Castro's attitude and actions toward the Church led to many problems and thus created many intense conflicts between the regime and the Catholic Church.

Chapter 3: The Catholic Church in Present Day Cuba

Today in Cuba, or as recently as the spring months of 2004, Catholicism is still a very small group of people on the island. While I studied there the closest contact I had with Catholicism was when I met two women who were clearly not Catholic, but extremely Christian. They called themselves “super-religiosas,” which translates easily as “super religious women.” They began evangelizing to me about Jesus Christ and the importance of believing in God and when I told them I was already a Christian they could not believe it. When I removed my sunglasses in front of them on the hot day, they saw my green eyes and then realized I was not a Cuban. They both started sighing and nodding and that was when they told me they thought I was a Cuban Christian, something that was fairly rare, but since I was from the United States, they knew this was more common and left me to continue their walk around the block to look for new recruits. Besides these women, I met no one who went to mass regularly or who strongly believed in the Catholic, or even the Christian, tradition.

Another strange and possibly weak example of the lack of Christianity as a whole on the island was the reactions I got when I used the words, “Jesús” or “Salud” after a Cuban sneezed. Both of these terms simply mean, “bless you” and signified what I thought were good manners. However, on numerous occasions when I used these phrases, whether it was to a Cuban peer, a professor or another adult, they laughed out loud and thought I was hilarious for using these expressions. I never quite knew how to react in these situations, but I always assumed their reactions were because they did not believe in those sorts of superstitious or religious blessings.

Whatever the case may have been, I noted these differences between the religiousness of Cuba in comparison to my home in the United States and realized that Cuba indeed had many more people who practiced the African traditions of Santería or the alternative to religion altogether, Marxism-Leninism. From my own experience, I noticed that although most Cubans were very spiritual in some way or another, they were not religious in the sense of attending church services or practicing established Christian traditions. Most Cubans today do not practice Catholicism and although Castro sought to improve relations for a short period, the Church has not grown or improved in recent decades.

After the Revolution, there were many problems between the Cuban government and the Catholic Church that existed on the island. As in all of history, many significant events took place in the sixties through the present day that impacted and shaped the Church and their relationship to the government in Cuba. Since Castro feared that anti-communists were going to overthrow the government in the late fifties and early sixties, many Catholics who opposed socialist ideals were imprisoned or exiled from the country. Catholics were disrespected and taught that their morals were foolish since they should be, in a sense, converting to Marxism-Leninism. Due to all of these persecutions from the government, many Catholics were either frightened enough to leave the island and live in the US or stay on the island and abandon their Catholic roots. Whatever the case might have been, numbers decreased even more significantly in the Catholic population; statistics indicated that even the nominal 90 percent of Cuba's population who indicated they had some ties with the Catholic Church before the Revolution decreased to 40

percent in the mid 1960s.³⁸ For reasons of fear, many Catholics who did not seriously practice the religion or attend mass left the Church and cut all relations so as not to be persecuted by Castro and his regime. Many congregants, nuns and priests disappeared from the religious scene in Cuba and the people who remained in the Church did so in fear. Although things began to look slightly better in the late sixties and early seventies, Castro never had any intentions of bettering the Catholic Church. His main goal was to let them be and make sure they were not regarded in national or political decision-making. The Pope's visit in the late nineties helped a few Catholic Cubans to feel safer about their religious beliefs, but overall, not much changed for Cuban Catholics over time. Even though there were many problems between the Church and state after the Revolution and eventually things began to look like they were going to improve, the Catholic Church in Cuba continued to be ignored and disrespected by the government even after many strong leaders of the international Roman Catholic hierarchy tried to help. Progress for the Church was limited due to the power the government had over the Church and its people.

There were still many problems between the Church and state in Cuba directly following the Revolution. The Church was neglected in affairs concerning large political decisions and was generally ignored after the changes in the late 1950s. One example of this is when,

“The Catholic Church was a negligible factor in national life. A total of 725 priests, one for every 7,850 parishioners, exercised only limited influence on the island. Priests were mainly Spaniards, located largely in cities, ministering mostly white, middle class congregations. The church had little national credibility and when it was warned against the perils of communism, its influence was

³⁸ Ostling.

limited to those sectors of the population already on the defensive.”³⁹

Although these numbers show that the Church had little appeal to most Cubans, it also shows that even if the Catholic Church had been trying to expand to other parts of the country and to other classes and social groups, the government made this very difficult to do since the Church had little national credibility and was being contradicted by a higher power regarding these issues. Also, since there were few priests in relation to the unsure congregants, it was nearly impossible to reach all of the groups who may have been influenced or affected by Catholicism after the Revolution. Another point of surprise was that “by the early 1960s, further, the sector of the population over which the church had the greatest influence was already in exile.”⁴⁰ The important people of the Catholic Church chose to leave the country or were sent to other places so as not to disturb the new social order in Cuba.

With these ideas in mind, it is hard to see how the Catholic Church survived at all on the small island. While the Church struggled, over the years, a few things happened that gave some Catholics hope that Castro would change his mind about the Church. Although he would never accept the Catholic faith or put much effort into strengthening the Catholic Church as a whole, he did a few things to make ties between the Church and the government slightly better. The reason he did this was because he no longer feared counterrevolutionaries in the Catholic Church since most of the opposition had been exiled or imprisoned. In the mid 1960s shortly after many troubles on the island, such as Operation Peter Pan, the Bay of Pigs invasion and other tensions between the government

³⁹ Perez, 334.

⁴⁰ Perez, 334.

and the people, the small Catholic Church slowly began to reconstruct itself by seeking, “diplomatic rapprochement with the government.”⁴¹ The only way this was possible in the 1960s after all of the problems between the Catholic Church and Castro’s regime was due to the fact that the government, “no longer felt threatened by the church-particularly since so many opponents of the regime were now in exile.”⁴² The regime was no longer as worried about the tensions with the Catholic Church because the government had been the ones to purify the Church and send many of the anti-communists out of the country in the first place. Also, since the government was now strong enough to imprison those who opposed the new system, they were fairly confident that the Catholic Church would not dare to further test the new system and therefore decided not to shun the Church from society. With the government being confident that no counterrevolutionaries would emerge from the Catholic people, the Church was finally left alone by the government, something Catholics saw as an improvement.

One major point of interest for the Catholic Church was the fact that the “church-state relations had become reasonably established by the mid 1960s.”⁴³ One minor example of this was how the religion was portrayed in the media. In 1963, many harsh criticisms of the Vatican and the Catholic people were replaced by a fair and balanced piece in a national newspaper for all to see. Although the criticisms did not disappear altogether in the country right way, it can be said that the negative comments were moderated.

Another event that shows the slight positive change in church-state relations was when the Catholic hierarchy decided to tone down its criticisms of the government

⁴¹ Kirk, 111.

⁴² Kirk, 111.

⁴³ Kirk, 113.

policies. In 1969, it seemed as though the Church made some sort of peace with the government knowing that Castro was not going to change his ways and was not going to agree with most of the Church's stances on national issues. Similarly on the other side, the government continued to ignore and stay out of matters of the Church. "One North American visitor noted there was 'no propaganda against the church or against religion, either in the press or on the radio.'"⁴⁴ The Church and state were no longer concerned with the other and the two groups continued on disjointedly. In a way, the groups seemed to have had an unspoken agreement to stay out of each other's affairs.

Even though many nations have laws regarding separation between church and state, the Cuban government did not become separate from Catholic Church affairs until after the regime cleansed the Church of any counterrevolutionaries and knew the Catholics were not going to cause any problems. Although it is normal for any government to stay out of religious affairs, it was inappropriate for the government to discriminate and persecute people based on a certain faith, as did Castro's regime directly following the Revolution. The Church was neglected and unsupported by the government for many years when finally after the government got what it wanted, became separate and from the Church and their issues.

While it seemed as though the Church was being completely ignored in issues regarding the government and international affairs, Fidel Castro made a point to strengthen ties between the government and the Church. In 1963 and again in 1967, Castro "visited the nunciature on the occasion of Pope's Day...when the papal nuncio was appointed bishop."⁴⁵ Even though Castro did not believe in the Catholic faith anymore,

⁴⁴ Kirk, 114.

⁴⁵ Kirk, 115.

his appearance showed that he somehow supported the Church and was trying to neutralize some of the tensions between the conflicting assemblies.

Another way in which Castro tried to alleviate friction was by allowing the Church to open their ties with Catholic Churches in other nations across the globe. From the end of the 1960s and continuing into the 1970s, the people involved in the Catholic Church in Cuba were meeting regularly with bishops from other Latin American countries and other places in the world. While Castro thought he was doing the Church a favor by allowing these relationships, what he did not know was that the other nations were pushing the Cuban Catholics to seek additional reform and push for change in the government. Throughout the latter part of the 1960s, many of the bishops in positions of power in the world traveled to Cuba and reported to the Pope about the situation in the newly revolutionized country. Their main goals were to report back to Rome to say that in fact, there was still a problem between the government and the Church even though it appeared the leader was trying to help and secondly, to strengthen and bring the Church into strong existence on the island.

Once Pope John XXIII in Rome got involved in the political situation of Cuba relating to the Church, more problems were uncovered by the Cuban Catholics and by the hierarchy. The Pope overlooked many serious issues of disrespect against Church brought on by Castro and his regime. One example of this was when the Pope ignored Cuba's problems "by not publicly or formally excommunicating him [Castro] when Cuban officials broke canon law by their treatment of church property and of Cuban bishops."⁴⁶ Castro was allowing his men to damage church property and treat Catholics with disrespect. The Pope could have abandoned the country's Catholics by breaking ties

⁴⁶ Kirk, 116.

with the leaders, but instead decided to ignore these problems so as not to create more conflicts between the nation's Catholics and their government.

Since the Pope and the hierarchy did not physically step in and help the Catholics of Cuba, after they saw that there were still these minor problems they continued to encourage the Cubans involved to push for respect and recognition in the country. They finally got the Catholics of Cuba to stand up for themselves and their goal by using their mission statement. Catholics decided they could not be segregated from society because they were not sending God's message to people who otherwise might have been saved. To most Catholics, their mission was, "bringing the Gospel of peace, love and salvation to *all* men-which is the essential apostolate of the Church [and] cannot be carried out properly within our doors, in a religious ghetto."⁴⁷ The people of the Church, although being allowed to practice their religion freely without much hassle from the government, were not allowed to fulfill the true mission of their beliefs and were forced to be separate from the society of non-believers. This is when things began to change in Cuba for the Church. Together with the Roman Catholic hierarchy, they decided that under the guidance of a papal nuncio, an ambassador of the Roman Catholic Church, the Cuban Catholic Church would adopt the Vatican's idea to "obtain from the revolutionary government 'at whatever costs, the guarantee (endorsed by the State) to respect church structures of control, the validity of canon law, and protection of the right to worship.'"⁴⁸ Although this was a risky move for the Church regarding their relationship with the harsh government, the result was fairly anti climactic. Castro responded the way he had responded earlier in history by simply acknowledging that the Church probably had no

⁴⁷ Kirk, 126.

⁴⁸ Kirk, 127.

intentions of overthrowing the government nor intentions of taking power from him and his regime and he handled the argument the same way he dealt with all of the other propositions, by setting it aside. In this way, he again showed that the Church had little importance or power on the island and disregarded their plea for help in preserving the Church.

Although it seemed for a brief period that Castro was being somewhat supportive of the Catholic Church, in actuality he disregarded the religion when he knew they were no threat to him. Another example of his carelessness towards the religion was portrayed in a speech he gave in 1971. Castro claimed in his speech that,

““Religion is intended for mankind, who represents the center if its objectives. All these factors, I claim, are ten thousand times more developed in socialism and communism. As a result, there is more coincidence between communism and Christianity than there can ever be between capitalism and Christianity.””⁴⁹

He tried to show the similarities between Marxism and Christianity and although this may have seemed like his way of relating to or making peace with the Catholic community, his intentions were quite the opposite. The message of this speech was to show that since the two different belief systems were so similar, Christianity should be given up and all Cubans should embrace Marxism. With all of these anti-religious messages from the leader, many religiously unsure Cubans were persuaded to stray from Catholicism and conform to the wishes of the president. Other Catholics who were still rooted in the Catholic tradition began to get discouraged and abandoned the tradition as well.

⁴⁹ Kirk, 132.

Not many radical events occurred between the Catholic Church and the government in the seventies and eighties. However, Cuba was in times of trouble regarding international affairs. The United States implemented new laws that regulated trade and tourism in Cuba. Also in the late 1980s and early 1990s the Soviet Union, a long time ally of Cuba, “progressively disavowed Marxist-Leninist tenets, dismantled socialist structures and arrived at an increasingly cordial accommodation with the United States.”⁵⁰ This of course, did not benefit Cuba; not only did their primary ally became more and more unlike them in the areas of communism and socialism, but they also made peace with Cuba’s number one enemy. Soon the Soviet Union fell and relations between the Soviet Union and Cuba only got worse. Due to all of these issues, in the 1990s, Cuba experienced an intense economic crisis. Many Cubans lost their jobs, medicine was hard to find on the island, people went hungry, young were considered malnourished and many people turned to burglary and robbery to make ends meet.⁵¹ Through all of this, Castro had little support from other countries and he knew in order to fix the crisis, he had to mend relations with other groups and countries.

Castro was making more enemies than allies in the 1990s and soon he decided he had to start mending troubled relationship. He was “forced to seek friends in unlikely quarters since the Soviet bloc’s collapse and he [was] hoping to score some points by welcoming the Pope.”⁵² He started by making amends with the Catholic Church and in 1997 began to plan Pope John Paul II visit to Cuba for the following year.

⁵⁰ Perez, 381-382.

⁵¹ Perez, 403.

⁵² Linda Robinson, “Catholics, Cuban Style,” *US News and World Report*, 26 January 1998. In Infotrac <http://web4.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/806/24/62872521w4/purl=rc1_SP00_0_A20164040&dyn=3!xrn_2_0_A20164040?sw_aep=mnafolke> (12 February 2005).

Knowing about all of the tensions between the Church and the government in Cuba, Pope John Paul II still decided to tour Cuba beginning in 1998 to try to make changes in the country regarding the oppressed Catholic Church. He knew that this was the perfect opportunity to make positive changes in the Cuban Catholic Church since Castro was looking for anything to strengthen relationships abroad. Although people joked that the only thing in common between the two men was that they were both “septuagenarians whose followers take their word as gospel” and the visit between “an atheist Communist revolutionary and the white robed Shepard of the world’s Catholics”⁵³ seemed rare, the two men planned to meet on the communist island.

When the Pope came to Cuba in the beginning of 1998 the Cuban opinions on the matter were quite split due to the past teachings of their president. One article says that as the Pope drove down the main streets of Havana, the crowds were completely divided regarding their physical positions in the city streets and also in their feelings towards the Catholic Church as a whole. On one half of the street Catholics “were cheering loudly at the arrival of their spiritual leader,”⁵⁴ while on the other side of the road faithful communists were declaring their skepticism of the man and his antirevolutionary ideals. When looking back on the many speeches Castro gave on Christianity in relation to Marxism, one can see how Cubans in general would feel this way about the religion.

⁵³ Linda Robinson, “Castro Seeks an Indulgence,” US News and World Report, 11 November 1996. In Infotrac

<http://web5.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/640/893/65901688w5/purl=rc2_SP00_1_Castro+seeks+an+indulgence_____&dyn=2!sg_df_Castro+seeks+an+indulgence_____?sw_aep=mnafolke> (10 March 2005).

⁵⁴ Brook Larmer and Rod Norland, “Preaching to the Masses,” Newsweek, 2 February 1998. In Infotrac <http://web4.infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/930/163/67110137w4/purl=rc2_SP00_1_preaching+to+the+masses_____&dyn=2!sg_df_preaching+to+the+masses_____?sw_aep=mnafolke> (18 April 2005).

Castro always told the people they did not need religion and that they were safer following communist and socialist values. With this in mind, it was easy to see how the majority of non-Catholics in Cuba believed that the Pope and Catholicism were flawed in their beliefs. Although Cubans were still skeptical of Catholicism and the pope's visit in the late nineties, Castro ordered Communist Party members and government employees to make sure the Pope's trip to Cuba was the best trip he ever had. While at any other point in history it would have seemed strange to so welcomingly invite the Pope to visit, Castro now needed the support of any powerful figure it could get.

With all of this aside, the Pope did indeed enjoy his visit and accomplished what he had planned on his short vacation to the island. "The Pope's visit was a chance [for Catholics] to emerge from the shadows of fear and repression and consolidate a leadership role in society."⁵⁵ Not only did Pope John Paul II make the Cuban Catholics feel more at ease about practicing their religion, he also made it clear to Castro and his regime that his Church in Cuba did not seek complete political power or vengeance towards the communist government, but rather acknowledgement and respect when Cuban Catholics tried to be spokespeople for the Church in their communities. While Fidel Castro acknowledged these requests, it is hard to say if they were truly fulfilled in the country after years of opposite teachings. Nonetheless, the several Cubans heard the Pope's message and Cuban Catholics were then calmer about exposing the rejuvenation of their religion.

Even though the former Pope visited dozens of countries in his time as the primary Catholic leader of the world, one can see that the Pope needed to visit Cuba not only to strengthen international relations but also to face the religious persecution

⁵⁵ Larmer.

Catholics faced on the island. It seems, from various articles, that the majority of pro-Castro Cubans knew there was a problem between the Catholics and the rest of the people, but ignored and resented the issues because they were being told to do so by their leader. When Castro needed the support of another powerful figure, he became more open-minded to the Church and allowed them to be seen in a country where Catholics had formerly been hidden and silenced.

In years following Pope John Paul II visit to Cuba, certain things changed for the few Catholics who remained on the island. The Cuban Communist Party decided to allow all believers to become members of the government party without discrimination.⁵⁶ Thus, “religious freedoms were expanded and religious believers were encouraged to...participate more actively in the revolutionary process. Henceforth it was possible to be both religious and revolutionary.”⁵⁷ Castro did indeed become more open-minded in regards to the Church, but as far as expanding and strengthening the Church, little changed.

Although the Pope’s visit had saved Cuban Catholics from religious persecution, the population of the Catholic Church did not increase. Numbers were still very low in congregations all over the country and the numbers of priests, nuns and other leaders in the Church were decreasing slowly as well. As of 2003, the average number of Catholic Cubans on the island was 47 percent.⁵⁸ While this number is slightly larger than the population directly following the Revolution and the numbers in the 1980s, this average is obviously still not extremely high. Whether the numbers decreased because the

⁵⁶ Preface to “Pope John Paul II Speaks in Cuba,” In The Cuba Reader.

⁵⁷ Perez, 394.

⁵⁸ Current and Historical Information about the Bishops and Diocese of the Catholic Hierarchy: Cuba, Statistics by Diocese, <<http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/country/sccu1.html>> by the Catholic Population. 1 January 2005.

majority of the Catholics left the country after the Revolution or because Castro scared Catholics into conforming to communism and abandoning the religion, the population of Cuban Catholics continued to remain very low.

Catholicism took a turn for the worst when Fidel Castro began to fear the counterrevolutionaries in the Church and imprisoned and exiled thousands of Cuban Catholics. After that, Catholics feared for their safety and with that, many fled to other countries or abandoned their religious beliefs. For this reason, the Catholic Church was damaged and numbers in the church began to drop dramatically. Over the years, Catholics have been in the shadows of the Cuban public, but with the visit from the Pope, they gained new hope. Although there was no growth in the Church after the Pope left, at least the few Cuban Catholics who remained felt that they were liberated to practice their religion more openly and gained new opportunities in the government and in society. Catholics gained some hope for their future, but the issue that remains is what will happen in the future? Will Catholicism continue to decrease on the island and could it one day disappear altogether? These are the concerns of many Cuban Catholics who have struggled for several years on the island.

Conclusion

Throughout Cuban history dating back to when Columbus came in 1492, one can see the many reasons Catholicism never became extremely prevalent on the island. The native Cubans resisted the conversion to Christianity by the Europeans who came and settled in the 1500s. Likewise, the African slaves who were brought to Cuba for many decades through the slave trade continued to practice their African traditions and the majority never accepted the Christian faith. Since Africans dominated the island for a short period of time, Catholicism was a minority religion and African religions took over. For many years, Cuba functioned with little Catholic influence and while Catholics were still visible in Cuba for most of early history, their beliefs were not mainstream.

In the early 1900s after the Spanish American War, Catholicism became slightly reestablished. While many Spaniards who were also Catholic left the island after Cuba gained independence, more and more Cubans considered themselves nominal Catholics. Although not many of these people attended mass or practiced the religion faithfully, the Catholic tradition was looking slightly better before the Revolution.

When Castro took over however, many conflicts arose between the Catholic Church and the new regime. Castro took land away from large landowners, most of whom were Catholic, he secularized schools and in general, he discriminated against Catholics in the country. The reason he did this was because Catholics were among the people on the island who opposed the Revolution and the changes being made. While both Castro and the Catholics disliked one another, they both had reasons for their oppositions. However, Castro handled the Catholic Church very inappropriately by leaving them out of national issues and discriminating against them in many ways. On

the other side, most Catholics did not approve of what was going on in the nation and many either fled to the United States or quickly sent their children away through the secret mission of Operation Peter Pan. Many Cubans, especially Catholics, did not want to subject their families to the new ways of the country and many left after the Revolution because of these issues.

After many years of communism as the major “religion” on the island, Catholics became worried about their religious situation and called to other countries for help regarding the conditions. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Castro was desperate for new allies and, conveniently for the Catholic Church, allowed the Pope to come in the late 1990s. When the Pope came to Cuba he gave comfort and reassurance to the Catholic people of the island, but after he left, numbers in the congregations did not rise.

Still today, many years after the Revolution, and even several years after the Pope’s visit, Catholicism is not growing or improving in Cuba. It is important to realize that someday the Catholic Church in Cuba could fade away altogether. At the rate things are going right now in the country, there are not many people keeping the religion alive and one must question what will happen when the older generation passes away. Will the tradition continue through their children? Probably some will continue to practice Catholicism, but it is likely that most of the younger generations will fall away from the faith as the Communist government and the other dominant religions in the country continue to influence them. If Castro stays in power or if someone similar to Castro comes into power when he dies, it is likely the Catholic Church in Cuba will disappear because of the damage that has already been done and the lack of interest from the government in restoring the religion on the island.

While it is important to look at the future of the Catholic Church in Cuba, it is also interesting to look at other countries in Latin America and ask how those countries kept their Catholic traditions alive and strong. While it would have been too much to go into in this thesis paper, there are many more questions one can ask regarding Cuba's Catholic Church in relation to the Church in Mexico for example. For the most part, the same immigrants entered both places in the sixteenth century, but somehow Cuba's Church is dying out and the Catholic Church in Mexico is still thriving. There are many issues to look into, but it is crucial to understand that although Catholicism has never been prevalent in Cuba, the religion is dying on the island and one day could disappear completely.

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