



Castro and the Church

By Norman Gall

The New Leader, September 14, 1964

HAVANA

In the back alleys of Camaguey — the once prosperous and conservative capital of Cuba's sugar and cattle heartland — a young Protestant minister guides me on a rainy twilight walk past weathered shacks of wood arid fin issuing charcoal smoke. Soviet and Cuban flags and July 26th posters brighten rooms whose barren interiors can be glimpsed through windows or open doors. We pass a ramshackle store now converted into a night school for workers and crowded with people engaged in what the government promotes as "The Battle of the Sixth Grade." Nearby a voluntary labor meeting of the neighborhood Union of Young Communists ends noisily with rhythmic hand-clapping and foot-stamping, the accepted standards of enthusiasm in *Cuba Socialista*. A band of militia youths wearing blue denim shirts, pistols and black boots overtakes us and passes by.

The minister, a friend two years out of the seminary, talks urgently of his hope that religion may be brought closer to these people — especially the poor, whose support the government jealously guards. "Religion in Cuba is for the middle class, which the Revolution has defeated, not for the poor," he says, as we turn back to his home so that he can prepare for a 4 A.M. journey by truck to a congregation of West Indians in the hills.

"There were never any churches or priests in the poor *barrios* of this city, and now the world wonders why these people are Communists. They are atheists but fanatical in their faith. It is the Christians who abandoned this country, who refused to stay and fight and die if necessary for their faith. It would be stupid to say that this government lacks popular support. This is the first Cuban government to concern itself deeply with the poor. The Revolution builds schools and gives work to poor people and they, in turn, are ready to fight to the death for the Revolution.

"We, the middle class, have no freedom and are constantly watched. If a priest visits a rural neighborhood where there is no functioning church building, he is likely to run into complications with the militia and the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution [CDR]. It is possible that by next year I will not be allowed to make calls at homes in this *barrio*."

Although the Revolution's hostility toward religion has not changed, the best known graduate of the Jesuits' exclusive Belen School for Boys — Fidel Castro — appears to have decided to make things easier for religious institutions, especially the Roman Catholic Church. Fidel's alma mater is now nationalized and the Marist Fathers' School in Camaguey has become a School of Revolutionary Instruction. But the Castro regime is permitting Cubans a widening range of ritual practice, under a policy that allows freedom of worship inside the churches "as long as religion does not mix with politics."

Foreign observers here differ in explaining Castro's motives for easing the pressure on organized religion. "The children of many party members and high government officials are baptized and receive first communion," said one Western ambassador. "That may have something to do with it." Another diplomat stated: "Fidel wants more tolerance of the

regime by what's left of the Cuban middle class. He may think that the church, preaching Pope John's social doctrine, can help bring about a reconciliation among people who could be much more productive economically than they are now. In the United States most Catholics vote Democratic and it would be most helpful to obtain Vatican influence in making peace with the United States. Whatever Castro's motive is, it would be a political and diplomatic triumph for the Roman Catholic Church to stay alive and retain substantial support under this kind of government."

Among the possible reasons for Castro's "softer" church policy may also be his memory of the difficult days after the July 26, 1953, assault on the Moncada Army barracks, when the tall, white-haired Archbishop of Santiago, Enrique Perez Serrantes, saved Castro's life. The Archbishop gave sanctuary in his house to the survivors of the abortive assault and intervened personally with the Batista regime to spare their lives.

One high church authority stressed that only seven priests have been imprisoned for any length of time by the Castro regime: Three were captured with the Bay of Pigs landing force and four were caught before the invasion, when they joined in guerrilla uprisings. "The main cause of our conflict with the regime was removed," the churchman said, "when the private schools [the principal source of church influence over the middle class] were nationalized. Relations have slowly improved since 1961. Now we have government permission to publish a national Catholic magazine later this year. We have lost our daily contact with the youth and there simply are not enough priests available; it will be a difficult struggle."

When the Revolution swung violently to the Left after 1959, the nation's churches became centers of anti-Castro opposition. The pulpits were used as forums for anti-Communist denunciation and church buildings became sanctuaries for resistance leaders. Castro's government was not in a permissive mood in those years. Parochial schools were nationalized, and 130 Catholic clergymen were expelled from Cuba. Just after the 1961 Bay of Pigs landing, an angry mob raided the centuries-old Iglesia de la Soledad in Camaguey. The crowd got drunk on the sacramental wine, performed a mock wedding, exhumed some famous skeletons from beneath the altar and then burrowed further in search of money the Spanish priests were supposed to have buried.

Today at the Iglesia de la Soledad six newly-arrived Belgian priests conduct Mass. Instead of guarding against government-inspired raiders, they are now on good enough terms with Communist provincial headquarters for the party to have supplied the parish with precious spare parts for automobiles. Cars are also a measure of church-state relations in Santiago: Armed Forces Minister Raul Castro recently presented the Archdiocese with nine American autos confiscated from Cubans who had gone into exile. (The church points out that the cars replaced others seized earlier by the regime.) In some other localities, the Revolutionary Government's Construction Ministry is apportioning scarce materials and workmen to build and repair Catholic churches.

Foreign priests and Cuban graduates of seminaries abroad are strengthening the corps of Catholic clergymen in Cuba, whose number had dropped through expulsion and voluntary exile from 730 in 1960 to a low of 125. Cuba now has slightly more than 200 priests to serve this once nominally Catholic nation of seven million where (according to a Jesuit survey just before the Revolution) 11 per cent of the adult population regularly attended church. In all of Oriente Province, with a population of more than two million, there are only 32 Catholic priests. The only priest in Guantanamo, the municipality bordering the U.S. naval base, is bald, bespectacled Father Pastor Gonzalez, who tries to perform the functions of the nine priests who served Guantanamo's 120,000 people before the Revolution. Father Gonzalez noted that only half the number of baptisms performed in 1960 took place last year in his town. "We have six rural parishes in Guantanamo and I try to visit each of them once a month," he said. "But this is very hard."

Despite the apparent thaw, too, there are still occasional arrests for teaching catechism in a private home without a permit. Sitting on the elegant patio in the house of the Bishop of

Camaguey, a priest told me: "We cannot use radio or television as we did in the past. Street processions and outdoor Masses are banned, and we must get an Interior Ministry permit 15 days in advance to conduct a religious service in a private home. The 40-room house we used for spiritual retreats has been nationalized and is used as a dormitory for scholarship students." At present the province has 22 priests; it had 60 in 1959.

Much of the delicate work of strengthening the Catholic Church has been carried out by the Vatican's able *chargé d'affaires*, Msgr. Cesar Zacchi, who previously served in Bulgaria and who has had frequent contact with Fidel Castro in recent months. Msgr. Zacchi faces a difficult task in seeking to restore the position of the Church. A Polish journalist who has spent the past year in Cuba observed: "In Poland Catholicism is a major political force. In Cuba it is a helpless remnant of what it was before its priests were forced to leave."

In 1963, \$20,000 worth of Bibles shipped to the Cuban Bible Society from affiliates in Canada and Argentina were confiscated on the dock by Cuban authorities and remilled as paper for the government printing presses. But subsequent shipments of Bibles have been safely received by the Bible Society, according to recent reports.

Higher Protestant denominations also have benefited from the increased cordiality of church-state relations, although the Protestants lack privileges enjoyed by the Catholic Church in obtaining autos and in - securing the necessary permits from the Interior Ministry to hold retreats.

Still, church sources note that political attacks on organized religion have come to a near halt in the past year. A Protestant minister in Santiago observed: "The government is correcting its economic mistakes. Distribution is better organized and there are more eggs and shoes available in Santiago than at any other time in the past two years. Communism is gaining strength and many people are resigning themselves to live with it because they feel the United States will do nothing. They allow us some freedom of worship. The church is just about the only place where free speech exists, but some day they will take that away too."

The truce between Castro and Catholic and Protestant establishments does not apply to the holy war the Revolution still carries on against the Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal sects, which are dedicated mainly to the poor. Members of these evangelical and revivalist groups travel from house to house in the slums and countryside, where the mass of Castro's political support resides, and have been subjected to vigilante attacks when attempting to conduct Street processions. The government has accused them of harboring CIA agents in their midst. It has also charged them with urging workers and peasants not to serve in the militia because of religious scruples against bearing arms, not to engage in Sunday voluntary labor because of the Sabbath, and not to salute the Cuban flag or sing the national hymn because nations are the work of the devil. Officials declare the worst offenders are the Jehovah's Witnesses, whose organizational roots are in the U.S. They point out that the Witnesses have been distributing a Spanish-language edition of their journal, *The Watchtower*, which regularly contains anti-Communist propaganda.

Former Communist boss Bias Roca, writing last year in the ideological journal *Cuba Socialista*, charged that "the action promoted through Jehovah's Witnesses, the Gideonites and the Pentecostals, etc., is action connected to guerrilla groups, to acts of banditry (murders, arson and destruction of agricultural installations, schools, people's stores, crops, etc.) committed by groups dedicated entirely to counterrevolution and crime.

The warning was later sounded again by Gaspar Jorge Garcia Gallo, veteran Communist head of the national teachers' union. He declared that "the mountain zone still lives with many remnants of capitalism. There are still animism, spiritualism, fetishism and other absurd beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses and the Pentecostals are obstructing the work of the Revolution, creating a disrespect in children for the national hymn and flag. We must distinguish between the sincere believer, though mistaken, and active agents of the

counterrevolution. We shall take the offensive against the counterrevolutionaries. Conquering false beliefs is a long process."

One Sunday afternoon a year ago William Robinson, an elderly West Indian lay reader, was preaching in an Episcopal chapel in the small town of Sola, 40 miles outside Camaguey, when 13 young toughs of the Union of Young Communists noisily burst into the building. Announcing that they were acting in the name of the government, they chased Robinson from the pulpit, tore off some of his ritual vestments, and drove everyone from the church. By the time the lone soldier on duty at the town's military post was summoned, the gang had piled all the prayerbooks at the center of the chapel floor and was preparing a bonfire.

The Army private persuaded the boys not to start the fire because the whole block, occupied by wooden houses, might be set ablaze. At midnight the British consular agent in Camaguey and the city's Episcopal minister arrived with the province's military commander and chief political instructor. The Army officers profusely apologized for the attack, comforted the old man, personally restored the piled prayer-books to their shelves and promised that the offenders would be punished. They said the government did not authorize such raids.

Some clergymen feel that occasional vigilante attacks on rural churches and official denunciations of small evangelical sects may have a common origin in the fact that these institutions are the only religious movements in Cuba dedicated principally to the poor — thus posing a potential threat to Castro's power base. The regime has backed away from the repression of religious activity in the cities which occurred after the April 1961 invasion, much as it has publicly and repeatedly apologized for the lightning seizures, around the same time, of crops and lands of peasants who refused to sell their produce to the government.

There is a freeze on building permits for churches in rural areas, and Protestants complain that some of their buildings in the countryside have been closed by the government. "The rule of thumb is that I can visit the small towns, but not the countryside where no church is open, and definitely not the new farm and fishing cooperatives and housing projects," one minister said. "With all of this, however, religion is practiced in a much more relaxed way than it was two years ago." Thus, though anxious to protect its strong following among Cuba's poorest classes, this Marxist-Leninist regime appears willing to wait with increasing patience for organized religion to wither away like the state.

[Home](#) | [Biography](#) | [Publications](#) | [Publication List](#) | [Contact](#)
ngall@braudel.org.br