

For the Cross and Fatherland: A Brief Study of Fidel Castro's Struggle with the Cuban Churches, 1959-1961

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Before 1959, the island of Cuba, which was one of the Latin American republics originally colonized and christianized by Spain, was 91% Roman Catholic. Because, however, the practicing membership of the majority church was smaller than official religious statistics indicate, the hierarchy often had to resort to the importation of many foreign priests thereby making the majority church considerably weaker than in other areas of South America. This situation also permitted the Protestant Church, and other semireligious organizations such as the Masonic Lodge, to gradually increase in prestige and numbers. Nevertheless, it was the Roman Catholic congregations that were most important to the welfare of the nation. They added to the moral fiber of the people, and, in addition, were responsible for a vast percentage of primary, secondary, and adult education as provided under Article 55 of the Constitution of 1940.¹ Conversely, this same church associated itself with political conservatism at a time when the Cuban Government was being attacked as unconstitutional. It therefore had long been a problem to reform-minded revolutionaries. Fidel Castro, in the most recent insurrection, struggled from 1959 to 1961 to divorce the Roman Catholic Church from the national political arena. The purpose of this paper is to relate the history of that contest and to assess his degree of success or failure.

I. PARTICIPATION IN THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT

Prior to his political ascendancy in Cuba, the leader of the insurgents of the Sierra Maestra was cognizant that the collective churches of Cuba could play an important role in bringing the revolution to a successful conclusion. Many religious leaders had judged the regime of Fulgencio Batista as unconstitutional, and were "sick of finding bullet-ridden bodies in the streets." These men—in addition to lawyers, writers, and liberal students—were desirous of working toward national independence.² Thus they could offer physical and spiritual support to political reformers who had pledged themselves to this cause.

The first religious assistance rendered to Fidel Castro was given by the Roman Catholic Church in 1953. After the assault on the Moncada Barracks by the "26th of July" movement, which was organized by Castro, President Batista placed the rebels who survived the ordeal on trial for treason. They were quickly convicted and received maximum sentences. Before Fidel was summoned to the courtroom, however, the Archbishop of Santiago, Enrique Perez Sarantes, made a public appeal to the former army stenographer to end the shedding of blood.³ This appeal, in the form of a pastoral letter, was not without significance. To the populace, the timing of the petition was interpreted to mean that the majority church was sympathetic to the revolutionary movement.

There is no indication that the "26th of July" leaders procured the support of Catholic priests while they were in exile in Mexico, but they did accept their aid after returning to the Cuban mainland in 1956. Altogether, eleven chaplains were permitted to join the rebel forces in the Oriente mountains.⁴ The vanguard of these clergymen was Father Sandrinas, a Catholic priest, who had recently witnessed the persecution of a co-worker by Batista henchmen. To identify himself with the rebels, he wore fatigue-green clerical apparel and accompanied the revolutionary band on as many of their missions as possible.⁵ The remaining chaplains were Franciscans.⁶ Largely Basque refugees from Franco's Spain, they were accustomed to political turmoil and thought that working for constitutional government was a worthy purpose. It might also be conject-

ured that they were sympathetic to the combatants, because many of them were of Spanish Loyalist origins. On the other hand, Castro had good reasons for soliciting clerics to join his organization. In 1958 there were rumors to the effect that he was a Communist. Now—his supporters could counter such allegations by asserting that all the leader's men were good Catholics, and he even had several priests counted among his forces.⁹

The village priests also participated in the revolutionary movement. Their most common method of assistance was to request that parishioners donate money, foodstuffs, and clothing to the patriots of the Sierra Maestra. In addition, they often served as recruiting officers. One pamphleteer concluded that the Church had given the revolution "all the men it needed."¹⁰

II. THE INITIAL IMPACT OF THE REVOLUTION ON THE CHURCHES

By February, 1959, Major Castro had securely established himself in Havana. His immediate objective was to consolidate his power. He began, therefore, to exclude those individuals and organizations which might checkmate his authority. The Roman Catholic Church fell into this category.

The initial move against the Church was subtle, not openly hostile. It was an attempt to "divide and conquer" and to "neutralize not dissolve." Raul Castro, presumably acting for his brother, ordered all newly appointed governmental department heads to be of the Protestant faith.¹¹ The reaction to this directive was mixed. Some Protestant leaders were convinced that Cuba was only nominally Roman Catholic, and they accepted the jobs feeling that this would be a good springboard for mass conversions. A prominent Presbyterian minister was moved to write: "It is my conviction which I state now with full responsibility for what I am saying, that Fidel Castro is an instrument in the hands of God for the establishment of His reign among men."¹² Other clergymen, who were disgusted with the indifference shown to the poor in previous regimes, looked upon the new job offers as opportunities to help the forgotten Cuban *campesino*. Not all the favors offered, however, were accepted. A former school teacher recorded: "The Presbyterians, who predominate in governmental circles, i.e. as far as Protestants are concerned . . . turned down an offer of free land for a campsite from the government, insisting on paying for it in cash."¹³ This preference for Protestant leaders, especially since they had not contributed to the revolutionary movement, was regarded as an open insult by the majority church. Such acts dampened Roman Catholic enthusiasm for the Provisional Government and drove an additional wedge between Cuban religious denominations.

The next attack on Roman Catholicism was even more penetrating. Using the "26th of July" organization as a convenient grapevine, Castro suggested that members of the various cells speak to village priests and inquire if they desired that religious instruction be given in public schools. Naturally, these priests were eager to discuss the matter with their parishioners. As the controversial topic permeated the island, the revolutionary hero then pulled an unexpected maneuver. He directed the editors of the "26th of July" newspaper, the *Revolution*, to publish an article entitled "Why Catholic Education?"¹⁴ The editorial, published in February, charged that the Catholic Church wanted to take over the public school system. The paper further pointed out that this was in direct violation of the Constitution of 1940. Castro obviously was hoping that public opinion would urge the government to "control" the dominant church.

In the same month other minor incidents indicated that an effort was being made to de-emphasize religion. The word "God" was deleted from the preamble to the Constitution, and any references to the Deity were excluded from civil oaths. In April, the intimidations became more per-

sonalized. At Managua Military Camp, 120 Catholic teachers were denied the right to give instruction to the soldiers stationed there. Orders were given simultaneously that priests and teachers would no longer be permitted to hold religious services for prisoners at La Cabana. The same was also true for Preson de Boniato.¹⁴

As late as November, 1959, Castro still had not advocated an open break with the Catholic Church. The nearest that he came to this position was to offer a substitute. At a hitherto undisclosed date, members of the Provisional Government met with a certain Father Lence to plan the creation of a Cuban National Catholic Church. A slogan was devised to publicize the movement. Thus the words "For the Cross and the Fatherland" became familiar to inhabitants of all geographical areas of the island.¹⁵ This new attempt to harness the Church was within the ideology previously framed. The bearded crusader desired a modification of the power structure in order for it to work in closer harmony with the State.

The National Catholic Church endeavored to do two things. First, it urged the people to distinguish between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary priests. Those who were working against the government were to be boycotted and persecuted. Second, the new organization emphasized the favorable social effects of the revolution. The crack-down on the national lottery, the elimination of prostitution, the confiscation of gambling equipment, the end of minority discrimination, and finally all the good works being done for the poor were accomplishments that were frequently cited. Religious captions such as "He Who Betrays the Poor Betrays Christ" and "Leave the Temples and Go Out and Serve" were painted on church walls and displayed on posters along highways to draw further attention to the imperfections of the older church. Finally the Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico has dramatically characterized the overall manner in which the Government portrayed its accomplishments by writing:

The Cuban Revolution was a veritable Sermon on the Mount. . . . Who can be against a creed that reads: Distribute the land, give to the poor, educate the unlettered, care for the sick, share the wealth, make public what is private, make the strangers your own, raise the humble, and level the proud.¹⁶

With the traditional Christmas season approaching in December, the propaganda efforts to depict the character of the new church increased. One particular outdoor display that caught the eye of several observers was the substitution of revolutionary heroes for the traditional Christian saints in Nativity scenes. For example, Major Castro, Major Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and Major Juan Alemda represented the biblical wise-men gazing into the cradle of the Christ child. The Star of the East was transformed into a miniature bust of Lenin.¹⁷ This type of indoctrination, admittedly crude, probably did not sway the educated classes, but it did have repercussions within the illiterate masses. With only 800 priests in Cuba prior to the revolution, the commonalty had not been able to secure or afford the services of the clergy when they were needed. Such imagery fanned their already hostile feelings toward the majority church.

During this same period the Provisional Government authorized direct attacks to be levied against the dominant church. In late November the priests, who were planning to attend the annual meeting of the Congress for the Unity of the Working Class in Havana, were told that their credentials were not valid. A Catholic Congress was scheduled later the same month to counteract this unexpected development. Government militiamen, however, were able to thwart the effectiveness of the meeting. Then too, the national headquarters of *Acción Católica* was raided, and the membership list published thereby making it impotent in its secretive efforts to combat the newly formed National Catholic Church.¹⁸

By the close of the first year of the revolutionary reign, conservative Roman Catholic leaders were aware that they had a vigorous and powerful opponent on their hands—one who was threatening the very foundation of the Church itself. Far-reaching decisions had to be made. Should the Church cooperate with the government and attempt to retain its denominational superiority, or should it prepare for all out war? The point of no return was quickly approaching.

III. "THE CAMPS OF BATTLE ARE NOW LAID OUT BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND ITS COMMUNIST ENEMIES."

A year after the state-church controversy began, Fidel Castro personally encouraged the use of violence to curb the voice of estranged churches. Following a speech to a labor union in which he called the clergy "vultures," he, in a nationally televised verbal marathon, urged the expulsion of foreign-born Falangist priests. He added: "The Cassock is soiled with dust and medieval cobwebs. It is covered with the blood of the people of Spain."² The cycle was now complete. The priests, who had contributed the most to the revolutionary effort, were now being told they were a threat to the nation. Archbishop Sarantes, with the rebuke still ringing in his ears, wrote a pastoral letter in retaliation. In it he stated, "The camps of battle are now being laid out between the Church and its Communist enemies."³ The Church had decided to fight.

Shortly thereafter Castro again appealed to the people. He asked them to divide church leaders into two groups: (1) the native born, who were loyal to the revolution, but exploited by the hierarchy; (2) the foreign-born, who were ambitious for wealth and power. Concentrating on the latter group, the government commenced to deport foreign-born priests, and to close all religious institutions that were sponsored by non-Cuban sources. The American Dominican Order and the Sisters of the Bleeding Heart were the first to go. It was the Franciscan order, however, that sustained the most severe blow. A priest of the parish of San Antonio de Paula testified to a committee of the International Commission of Jurists that prior to the insurrection there had been 105 Franciscans, but now "only ten monks and fourteen priests of our order remain in Cuba."⁴

For reasons that are not altogether clear at this point, the Protestant churches—at least in Oriente Province—received equal treatment. In Christo, the International Baptist College was closed and worship was restricted in the adjacent church. The Mormon Church and the Methodist and Baptist Churches in nearby vicinities were also told to lock their doors.⁵ This local purge may not have been related, however, to the general movement against religious institutions. It should be remembered that the Fidelista intellectuals had designated, beginning in late 1960, a "Year of Literacy." They had urged state control of educational and social institutions, as well as religious establishments. Since Protestant churches usually had a parochial school attached, in order to compete with Roman Catholics, the restrictions in Oriente against Protestants may have been motivated by different reasons. Very possibly these closures were ordered as a result of the effort to rejuvenate Cuban education. The Mormon case was likely something different. Its theological discrimination against Negroes was antithetical to revolutionary principles.⁶ If these suppositions are correct then the ideology of "divide and conquer" was not being violated. But, on the other hand, many of the Protestant churches had close ties with religious organizations in the United States. Therefore, Castro may have been including some Protestants under the classification of foreign-born clergymen.

By midsummer of 1960 government officials added the policy of harassment to decrease the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. A popular technique was to place a member of the Committee of Friends in each of the congregations on a Sunday morning. If a pastoral letter was

read, or an inflammatory sermon preached, nearby militiamen would be summoned to occupy the edifice, cut microphone wires, and/or create general confusion. At the same time additional men would take down license plate numbers of automobiles in the vicinity, and later place the names of the owners of the vehicles on bad security risk bulletins. Occasionally parishioners resisted such efforts. A congregation in Havana "took the weapons of militiamen, hit them against the wall of the church, killed two men, and overturned a state car."²⁴ The pastor of this flock was later arrested twice. After the second visit to police headquarters, he sought asylum in the Venezuelan embassy.

Not all of the visits of militiamen were to create confusion. A Franciscan priest related:

Once when we were celebrating mass about 20 armed militiamen and militia-women came in through the main door of the church. They closed all the doors and refused to allow anybody to leave. . . . The priests were locked up in the vestry. After that the congregation was allowed to leave the church one by one through a small door. Both the men and women were searched . . . and this went on for an hour or an hour and a half. After that they began to search the church, the vestry, the ciborium, but found nothing anywhere.²⁵

In addition to disrupting religious services, the church structures themselves often suffered extensive damages. An example was made of the Sagrado Tabernaculo of the Carmelite Fathers in Soledad. The doors of the building were used for target practice, official records destroyed, and the statuary demolished. The Carmelite churches in the city of Camagüey experienced similar damage and were later converted into dance halls and warehouses for sugar. Also, in the same city, the convent of Las Mercedes was broken into, and the habits were "torn and scattered all over the floor, the same with books and images."²⁶ Furthermore, the use of violence spread to the living quarters of the priests. One minister, living near the Senado sugarmill, was visited in the early morning by a restless and unruly mob. After a harrowing adventure, he escaped physical harm by crawling through a window. He did, however, remain in the locality long enough to see his residence burned to the ground. A monk of an unidentified order was seized by a crowd armed with rifles and machine guns and placed on the steamer *Cavadanga*, which took him safely out of the country.²⁷

As the second anniversary of the revolution neared, the authorities in Havana further employed the administrative, regulatory, and taxing power of the state to tighten the vise on Roman Catholic churches. For example, in September, The Minister of the Interior hampered Bishop Masvidal of our Lady of Charity parish in his efforts to hold the annual Virgin of Charity procession.²⁸ In Matanzas Province a Canadian-sponsored seminary was closed shortly after accepting funds from their headquarters which were earmarked for an extensive building campaign. A church in another province suddenly discovered that their taxes were increased from \$800.00 to \$32,000.00 per year.²⁹ Finally, the government increased the amount of antireligious propaganda placed in the itinerant teachers' manuals. To illustrate, *Trajo y Lucha*, a syllabus for secondary school teachers written by an *ad hoc* committee named by the Minister of Education, accused Catholic priests of supporting the former Batista regime because he had permitted them to "feather their nests with a softer lining."³⁰ This indicated, of course, that the priests were in collusion with former political leaders for their own personal gain.

In spite of continuing pressure throughout 1960, a handful of congregations were permitted to function. The authorities were conscious that to go too far could hurt their cause in the future. An underground freedom fighter stated the case very aptly when he wrote:

The Communists have left a few churches open and have allowed a few hundred Catholic priests and Protestant clergymen to exercise a few limited functions. These are pure Communist tactics. Many more countries remain to be conquered in Latin America, and religion there is very important.³¹

IV. RELIGIOUS CONSEQUENCES OF THE BAY OF PIGS

The provisional Government of Cuba was not caught napping at the invasion of the Zapata Swamps. The militia, the G-2, and the Committee of Friends had been alerted well in advance of the "surprise" attack. Extensive preparations had been made to gather and quarantine anyone whose loyalty to the revolution was suspected. On the morning of the 17th of April 1961, the search for these individuals began in earnest. As a result, literally hundreds of priests were placed in improvised jails without any charges being preferred against them. Meanwhile, the unattended churches were looted.

The militiamen used the Bay of Pigs invasion as a further excuse to discredit religious people and priests in the eyes of civilians. In fact, their treatment in April was worse than it had ever been. For instance, in Soledad, one pamphleteer recorded that sacred wine was pilfered and consumed, soldiers danced on church altars, and others dressed in frocks and ran through the streets singing "Cha-cha-cha." An entire congregation in Camagüey was searched for concealed weapons, and forced to publicly disrobe. In Pinar del Rio, the Vicar-General of the province and three of his associates were seated at a table with lewd pictures in front of them. As curiosity seekers passed by, they were informed that a search of the priest's quarters had produced the photographs.²³ At LaSalle College soldiers dressed in the clothes of an old Mexican priest and mockingly imitated his words and gestures. He had been standing ready to administer the last rites of the Roman Catholic Church to fellow prisoners, who, along with him, were being held on the rooftop of a college building.²⁴ Even after the battle had been won by the national forces, the ridicule continued. Father Macho, who had made himself available to comfort the unfortunate invaders, was placed in custody. His guards told him to ask his Savior for help and said they would test his priestly vows by placing a naked 15-year-old girl in his cell.²⁵

The six-month period following the disastrous irruption by American-based exiles evidenced a nearly complete triumph for Fidel Castro over the majority church. The major significance of the *coup de maître* over conservative religious institutions is that it cleared the path for the further introduction of the philosophy of Communism over the paradoxical island. The subsequent support rendered to the new programs that were initiated by the Provisional Government are a strong indication that a great many people associated the traditional church with the status quo, and believed that it had in the past stood in the way of needed reforms. This segment of the population believed that no great harm had been done to the nation in the campaign against the ecclesiastics. On the other hand, there were still scattered faithful flocks that required attention. The remaining priests—with long distances to cover and several masses to be said on a Sunday morning—were content to withdraw from political activity. Their about-face was perhaps necessary, but it was also startling. A prominent American religious leader, Richard Cardinal Cushing, was so shocked that he was moved to label the native-born priests as "men of silence."²⁶

By 1962, the total number of priests on the island had been reduced to one-eighth of their former number. The skillful attempt to divide the traditional church internally, the effort to ply one denomination against another, and the persecution of conservative religious leaders by Fidel Castro provided the margin necessary for victory. The Roman Catholic Church was now peacefully laid to rest in the Cuban institutional cemetery which already housed the army, the civil courts, the educational system, the professional organizations, and the indigenous political parties. The battle for republicanism was lost.

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