

## **Cuba: In a State of Evangelization** *Between Fear and Hope*

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Cuba, for almost half a century, has been the center of attention of millions of people. Some have seen in this small island a garden of roses, others a modern-day battleground between David and Goliath. The figure of Che Guevara has been given a special prominence, and the voice of Comandante Fidel has been heard extensively all over the globe.

And the Church and the C.M., what have they done in the meantime?

In Cuba the Church seems like a deforested mountainside. The lumberjacks arrived and indiscriminately cut down all the trees, large and small. The large trees were exported, the small ones burned. Now no more trees remain in the forest... But, suddenly, as a result of the sun and water, the roots that remained, since nature is powerful, opened up a space between the cement and the rocks and new shoots sprouted up. They cut down the trees, but they did not dry out the roots, and at the first opportunity, they bloomed.

Cuba is not an atheistic country. There has been an absence of God, for quite a long time his name was not mentioned, his presence was avoided, but God remained necessary. Then the sunshine of John Paul II arrived. They allowed the plants to be watered. As though they had opened up a spring that had been blocked, water sprung up and the forest turned green again, filling the plazas. Though it was surrounded by thorns, the blossom of hope budded. The Church lives, breathes, moves. She is herself.

In these 40 years, the C.M. has gone from 52 members to ten, and at one point in time, there were only five; from 12 houses to five; from a well-known missionary activity to the maintenance of 3 parishes, 2 churches and one house removed from the city for our three students and their formation director. In our houses of the C.M. there were four associations of the Vincentian Family but ... the only one remaining is the Association of the Miraculous Medal. The others have completely disappeared. But the spirit is alive and in our five houses these four associations have once again burst into bloom: the AIC, the Vincentian Marian Youth, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and the Association of the Miraculous Medal.

Pope John Paul II has been the most fantastic missionary to set foot in Cuba in all time. He began his visit by telling us, “Do not be afraid, the Lord is with us.” It was the marvelous living experience of the disciples of Emmaus with the Master. Do not be afraid, after the purification will come the green springtime of hope: “May Cuba open up to the world, and the world open up to Cuba.”

Our little company, thanks to his visit, has just begun a new project. The C.M. had gone from five confreres and five houses to nine members. Now we could have a community life and we could also dream of helping the Vincentian Family grow according to its own charism. In our Provincial Assembly, with the whole province gathered around a small table, and with the joy of those who feel young and enthusiastic, we opted for a missionary province that would have all of its houses in a permanent state of mission and directly serve the poor. This would be our external sign and identification.

- Where there is a missionary, that there be direct service of the poor;
- Where there is a missionary, that the Gospel be preached progressively, going beyond the physical structure of the church;
- In our houses, so that the Gospel may be more effective, the associations of the Vincentian Family be organized, so that the Family might be rebuilt and along with its members, the number of missionaries would increase;
- That the poor be welcomed in our houses, and in order to achieve this, we do the works that they need and which we are allowed to do, without omitting ever “the sweat of our brow and the strength of our arms”;
- That we open up to ask for contributions that will help us in our mission ... using the contacts we have, and the help of our brothers and sisters.

Like a small army of enthusiastic soldiers, we began our task. That in our houses there be associations of the Vincentian Family, that we recover the books in disuse, that the poor come to our houses with trust, that.... From the churches of La Merced and La Milagrosa in Havana, as pioneers, to the eastern provinces, the news was spread that the poor began coming to eat, the Vincentian associations began to work, the missions began to bear fruit ... and even vocations began to come forward. We are not allowed to do much, we move about within the walls of the church, but we are moving....

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The first parish to take flight was **La Medalla Milagrosa**. In the parish two works of evangelization began at the same time: an extensive mission, and an open day-residence for the elderly with a capacity to serve 175 needy elderly. The work in our social conditions seemed to be a utopian dream. *But when God reveals himself clearly in favor of the poor, nothing is impossible.*

The *first objective* is to create the missionary condition necessary in the parish so that, person by person, all who live in the territory of the parish can be reached with the invitation of the Gospel. A parish in a permanent state of mission...

The *means* are:

- To invite all committed persons in the parish to be missionaries;
- To create a school of evangelization to form them;
- And to create small ecclesial communities with these committed missionaries so that they will have an experience of community;
- The mission will be carried out during one week, three times a year: during the important liturgical seasons, in the summer and in weekly classes;
- The theme will be the kerygma, and it will be shared progressively in each one of the home visits by means of small catechesis, person to person.

The *objective* of each mission is to form small communities and to invite the participants to come to know Jesus, to live their faith in a small community and to love the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and catechist of the parish community.

The *reality* has been surprising:

1. The Gospel has been shared in all parts of the parish. Now we have 11 ecclesial communities and 62 mission-houses, with 130 permanent missionaries who work each week in one of the small communities. And the mission ... continues.

All this has been accomplished by means of a *process*. We have visited all of the houses in the parish 18 times, and in each visit we have shared a different message from the Gospel. The goal is to evangelize, person to person, sharing the kerygma by means of brief messages to each brother or sister who does not participate in the church.

The themes have been the following: 1) God loves you; 2) Jesus Christ is the Son of God; 3) Jesus is Lord; 4) Jesus has saved us; 5) We have sinned; 6) Jesus brought us forgiveness; 7) The Church, the family of the children of God; 8) The Church and the forgiveness of sins; 9) The Virgin Mary, mother of our people; 10) The Community; 11) Those who have faith, how do they live?, etc.

This constant effort has created an environment of permanent mission, of living communities, of new life. Later on, along with the rest of the diocese, we studied the four gospels. Actually we are reflecting on the Sunday gospels and on several themes central to formation.

2. *Attention to the poor* is the second reality. We have followed the principle of St. Vincent: first bread and then catechism.... Some of our confreres have asserted that the ministry of charity comes before that of the word. Based on our experience we have to say that we are in complete agreement. We have had the good fortune that the government has approved of the “Open Residence for the Elderly” and that along with this approval comes a quota of food supplies and the permission to carry out certain construction projects.

The memory of Fr. Hilario Chaurrondo, an old friend of Comandante Fidel’s, influenced the decision to allow the Open Residence for the Elderly to proceed and not to place obstacles in its path. We can also affirm that despite so many missions person to person, despite the number of small communities (one in each block), the parish is better known for its attention to the poor than for its evangelization. The poor are the ones who best spread the truth and the reality that they are living.

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**The Church of La Merced** has been another important reality. Two years ago the C.M. left the Parish of El Espíritu Santo, located near the Church of La Merced. Nevertheless, in La Merced began the mission, which has created a climate of community for the faithful from the moment of the separation. Fruits of the mission are three small communities, the well-organized parish *Caritas*, and the catechesis of children, youth and adults.

La Merced has begun its new project with the *Friends of La Merced* and the reorganization of the Vincentian Family.

The C.M. has proposed that La Merced become a center of evangelization and a place for the poor. It maintains a dining room for 45 poor persons, with service that is approaching the style of the “Open Residence for the Elderly,” and it hopes to be a “place of evangelization.” The Virgin of La Merced is identified in the religions of African origin with *Obatalá*, using devotions that are not Christian. It is to her that they look and pray.... This is the great challenge of evangelization for the Church in Cuba: respond to the reality of *synchretism*.

How can we respond to this set of beliefs?

The C.M. has been thinking of a continuous mission, an ongoing primary evangelization:

- That in the Church of La Merced we attend not only to the tourists who come as tourists, but also to those involved in synchretism who are

searching for the truth, and that we seek to relate to them through a process of dialogue;

- That in our preaching we constantly repeat the fundamentals of Christianity, because those who come to La Merced are never the same people;

- That our charitable activity become well known so that all will be attracted by the Christian signs which we offer.

In these efforts, the Vincentian Family Associations are doing marvelous work.

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**The houses in the eastern part of Cuba.** The community has three houses in the eastern part of the island: in *Santiago*, the Church of San Francisco (the second house of the province in order of foundation: 1884); in *San Luis*, a parish under the care of the C.M. since 1919, and in *Baracoa*, the most traditional parish and the best loved by our older confreres. This parish has been staffed by the C.M. since 1908 and the bishop has just divided it into four parishes.

These three houses are connected with associations of the Vincentian Family and in all three the apostolic activity is carried out according to the plan of the Provincial Assembly: the mission in the communities and attention to the poor. The AIC in these houses, along with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, is carrying out the project "Return to the Sources." This title was chosen to reflect the intention of returning to the beginnings of the Confraternities of Charity. Since we do not have the possibility of building dining rooms or residences for the elderly, it occurred to the members of the AIC to care for the poor in their own houses. The volunteers of the AIC, while cooking for their own families, also cook for a poor person. At noontime the volunteers bring them their meal, straighten up the house, and attend to the poor in Vincentian style. As a small compensation, taking into account the difficulties we have here in obtaining food and gas for cooking, we give the volunteers the modest sum of one dollar a week for each elderly person.

The experience of caring for the poor is setting the tone for us. The poor are the first to be evangelized, then they tell others what they have seen and heard. They are opening up our parishes and houses to a new evangelization.

**Looking to the future.** The province came out of its first crisis when there were only five members and five houses. Nevertheless we still have to

come out of the second one: the lack of vocations. Our Superior General, when he visited the local communities on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the presence of the sisters in Cuba, told us that *the formation of our own members* must be our first priority. We have taken concrete action: for the formation program we obtained a house on the outskirts of the city, located in a barrio called El Cotorro. A confrere was placed in charge. There has been no lack of young men who knock at the door. We have offered many courses and made many efforts, but we are in the same crisis as always in our Cuba. We currently have three candidates; we have had five, and as many as eight.

Despite this, we have a longterm hope. The Vincentian Family is coming together. We hope that introducing the charism of St. Vincent in our ecclesial communities will produce the expected fruits for the Church, the Little Company, and the Daughters of Charity. Their contact with the poor will transmit the beauty of our vocation.

And I will close as I began: Cuba is a beautiful garden, where the buds open up into flowers, and the flowers give their fruits. We need missionaries, missionaries, missionaries...

(GILBERT WALKER, C.M., translator)