

Milk, Medicine and Old-Age Homes

Compassion in Castro's Cuba

By Marvin Olasky

In 1939 Winston Churchill responded to a question about Stalin's Soviet Union by calling it a "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." That's my reaction—and the reaction of many of the people I interviewed during five intense days in Havana—to speculation about the post-Fidel future of Castro's Cuba.

A Cuban typically doesn't even refer to Castro by name—he moves his hand under his chin as if stroking a beard—but he knows that the leader is 77 and has sounded shaky in recent speeches. As they wait for the end, Cuban leaders bicycle along in a pack worthy of the Tour de France. They watch each other nervously and wonder whether to attempt a breakaway that could work well if the timing is right, but could drag them back to the pack—or even earn them a stint in prison.

Most Cubans break the law regularly. They buy food on the black market and seek private medical care when the state health system fails them. There's always a low-level of anxiety present. I've seen dire poverty in India and political oppression in the old Soviet Union, but Cuba's combination of poverty plus nagging fear under sunny skies is extraordinary. So is the courage and hope of some Cuban churchgoers ready and willing to unravel the riddle by trying their own faith-based initiative.

Three Spanish expressions heard in Havana summarize what I saw. First, heard regularly: *No es facil* (It's not easy). Every aspect of life is difficult, from finding basic material sustenance to traveling across town, to relaxing even though any neighbor or associate might be an informer.

Second, heard occasionally to help others explain why the government resents non-government attempts to fill the gaps: *Ni comen ni dejan comer* (They don't eat, neither do they let others

eat). Churches are ready and willing to help the poor and particularly the elderly. But it is officially and ideologically the responsibility of the state to provide all social services. Officials therefore turn down church requests to build homes for the elderly and citizen attempts to organize the collection of garbage rotting in the streets. That's because all acts of compassion are an indictment of government failure—and Cuba's Communist Party is desperately trying to avoid facing the truth.

Third, abundantly seen on billboards, "the Beard's" favorite slogan: *Un mundo mejor es posible* (A better world is possible). Marxist sloganeering tends to have three stages: belief, cynicism, and flipping the slogan on its head. Some Cubans may still believe that the regime can produce a better world; many appear to be cynical; but the future is with those who believe that a better world is possible once Castro has gone. They are the ones willing to take reasonable risks to strive toward that goal.

My sense, from numerous conversations, is that those who have religious faith also have cultural faith: They don't underestimate the riddle, mystery, and enigma, but they still believe that a better world is possible, post-Beard, and they want to prepare for that. In early March I travelled to Cuba on a humanitan visa. This report summarizes some of the conversations I had with Cubans.

Evangelicals

Estimates of the number of Protestants in traditionally Catholic Cuba range from 600,000 to two million (total Cuban population: 11 million). The number is hard to estimate because the explosive growth has come in unregistered *casas cultos*, house churches. Not more than 30% of Cuban Protestants, perhaps far fewer, adhere to establishment denominations that make up the *Consejo de Iglesias*, the Cuban Council of Churches, a leftist body tightly connected to and directed by government authorities. The Council is the only group authorized to publish and distribute religious literature, broadcast religious radio programs, approve overseas travel by pastors, and accept large-scale humanitarian donations. The largest denominations, such as the Baptist and Assemblies of God conventions, generally scorn the Council.

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Dr. Leoncio Veguilla, president of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba, sits in an office decorated with 18 Don Quixote statuettes. The kindly 73-year-old did hard labor in prison from 1965 to 1970 for failure to toe the Party line. He spent time in a forced labor

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camp, cutting sugar cane alongside criminals and religious prisoners labeled “social scum” and looks back on that time as “very difficult, but an opportunity to preach the gospel to prisoners.” Released and ordered not to preach again, he immediately defied his captors. Veguilla recently celebrated his 50th anniversary as a preacher: “47 pastors were sentenced to prison with me. The others are dead or have all left the country. I am the last.”

Veguilla hopes to do more for the elderly. The government allows Baptists to run one home with room for 30 *ancianos* (elderly persons), pays for a doctor and two nurses whom the Baptists can select, and recently gave permission to enlarge the home so that 15 or 20 more can live there. But thus far the Baptists have been denied permission to open more homes. Nevertheless, Veguilla is reading Abraham Lincoln biographies—“I love the history of Lincoln, how he worked to free the slaves”—and still hopes that freedom will come to Cuba without the need to fight a civil war.

Rev. Efrain Paz, some twenty years younger than Dr. Veguilla, wears a baseball cap that shades his broad friendly face and rides a 1963 Czech motorcycle. An Assemblies of God church group used to crowd into his living room, but the government gave him permission to cover his back yard so members could gather. Instead, the church built a stand-alone sanctuary that houses 84 battered folding chairs, 12 white plastic porch chairs, 28 wooden movie theater seats, and a pulpit.

When a government inspector discovered a building, not just a roof, over the back yard, he arranged to have a woman falsely accuse Paz of rape. Another accuser said the church had given medicine to needy people without the proper license, although it was hard to throw a pastor in jail for helping the sick. The stalemate continued for four years until several months ago when the building was finally approved. The lesson Paz learned: “Officials say, ‘You can’t do it, can’t do it, can’t do it.’ But if you’ve already done it and enough people like it, they may say, ‘So be it.’”

Paz points out that the number of Assemblies of God churches has jumped from 200 in 1980 to over 2,600 now, with 130,000 adult members. He says, “The politics of the government are slowly changing,” as desperate officials give churches limited opportunity to take over social functions. “If the Assemblies of God had freedom, we would set up homes for the elderly and hospitals.... We have fully-licensed doctors who have been called to be ministers. Since they do not work for the state they are not allowed to do medical work—but they could.”

Salvation Army Captain Odilio Fernandez, born in 1963, is a baseball fan. His U.S.-made calendar displays twelve Cubans (such as “El Duque” Orlando Hernandez) who became Major League stars in the U.S. A lean, third generation Salvation Army leader, he explains that the Salvation Army came to Cuba in 1912 and by the 1950s had built numerous homes for the elderly. It also established programs for children and organized food distribution for the needy. The Revolution seized everything except for one home for the aged—the smallest one.

That home still operates without any restrictions at present. I visited a prayer meeting there: Sixteen elderly women, bright-eyed and alert, some holding Bibles, asked God for wisdom in using their

time and for His mercy in the lives of each others’ children and grandchildren. Thirty other aged men and women live there in dignity, three to five to a room; I watched one helper using a file on the toenails of a 92-year-old. The bathrooms were clean.

Only three of the 46 persons at the home are Salvation Army members; one resident who died recently was a Communist Party member. The government pays for the salaries of one doctor, three nurses and some attendants, all of whom the Salvation Army chooses.

Captain Fernandez explained that the government is trying to maintain the status quo: “Inside our facility we can do what we want, but when we asked permission to open another home for the elderly the government said no. It always says ‘this far and no further.’ If we had freedom we would open up elderly homes everywhere.”

I walk up two flights of dark and narrow stairs and enter a small room with cracked vinyl couches and an artificial Christmas tree on one desk: Welcome to the office of three-year-old MANA, an interdenominational *Ministerio de Ayuda a Necesitados y Ancianos* (help for the needy and the elderly). MANA director Dulce L. Montalvan Diaz has linked her program to 40 churches throughout Cuba and has 70 employees and volunteers who respond to requests for emergency help: “We’ll help everybody. You don’t have to be a Christian.”

In 1980 Montalvan was in desperate need. Her husband escaped to Miami, leaving her alone with an eight-month-old daughter. Under house arrest, with neighbors yelling in bullhorns that she was a traitor and family members “not helping because they would also be judged,” she survived only with the help of other “delinquents” who sent “a little chicken, a little rice, a little oil.” When she was allowed to leave her house a woman employed her in cleaning. “I met people who were going to church, so I went there also. I felt at home there. Pastors prayed for me. I became a different woman.”

Now Montalvan tries to keep track of resources and needs on a “Frankenstein computer” that was constructed part by part from computers that died. She says, “I don’t have a budget. I scrounge. I go to this house and ask for lemons. Someone moving to Miami brings me clothes. A failing enterprise leaves me its leftovers. A government official can’t do anything for me officially but helps personally.” Montalvan finds help in unlikely places: “A non-Christian who worked in a bar gave me part of his tips. He had been very critical of Christianity, but then he saw that we try to put it into practice. Now he goes to church, and he and his friends find milk for me.”

If the government did not interfere, she says, “I would love to have a home for the elderly and a hospital.” She is working not only for charitable purposes but for civic ones as well: “We must sow more seeds of Christianity and show the alternative to both the Beard and to vengeance, or else when he dies desperate things could happen.”

Catholics

About four to five million Cubans identify at least nominally with the Roman Catholic Church; priests estimate that 10% of baptized Catholics attend mass weekly. Some Catholics mix into their faith elements of Santeria (the way of the saints) also called *la regla lucumi*, a ritualistic belief system with its origins in West Africa that deifies the saints and involves animal sacrifice. Cuba has close to

1,000 priests and nuns, less than half the total there prior to 1960, and many fight a cold war (which sometimes turns hot) against the state regime. Many Catholic churches regularly distribute medicine and other material help to members, even though state health officials threaten them with “severe sanctions” for doing so. In February, 2003, the Archbishop of Havana issued a pastoral letter asking the government to move from “policies of vengeance” to “policies of compassion.”

Father Eduardo Pini of the *Orden de las Escuelas Pias*, an affiliate of the Catholic social services agency *Caritas de Cuba*, pointed to the government-constructed wall that now separates his church from the school it used to run: “Old people say there was always a breeze here, but it’s been 45 years since we could open all the doors and let the air move freely.” It would be wonderful for a statesman to say, “Mr. Castro, tear down that wall,” but Pini does not expect that. He would love to run schools and childcare centers, but “that is beyond forbidden,” so he concentrates on helping 150 elderly parishioners and others with medical needs.

According to Pini the state pharmacies “are a euphemism; we should die of shame.” Pini distributes on Tuesdays medicines donated by Spanish friends and brought to him by trustworthy tourists from Barcelona. The need for vitamins, antibiotics and Advil-type pain relief and for medication to deal with diarrhea and hypertension is particularly severe. It would be easier, of course, to ship in massive amounts by container, but anything coming through the Port of Havana ordinarily goes to government concerns, and thievery is common. Pini says: “Even the state doesn’t get what it wants. Corruption is the norm in any state-run activity. Stealing is the norm.”

Children up to age seven and the elderly are entitled to a state-provided quart of milk per week, but the reality is different: “Will the warehouse have milk? Did the warehouse manager sell it? The truck driver?” Pini notes that about seven years ago Catholics tried to bring in a large container of powdered milk through the port: “It was stuck in customs for a long time, and a friend kept an eye on it. The government eventually said that the acidic content of the milk was too high, so the milk had to be thrown out. But the friend told him that the milk ended up in ice cream for tourists.”

Sister Maria Soto of the *Siervas de Maria* speaks of going to the homes of elderly sick people at 7 p.m. and returning to the convent twelve hours later: “First we pray with the sick, and then watch over them. I like it that we work at night, a time often of robbery, of bad things.”

Maria recalled that when she was 16 she planned to be a teacher, but the idea of becoming a nun gradually overwhelmed her: “When I was a little girl they always spoke very badly about the church. But the church never spoke hatefully of anyone. At school they were always harsh. At church I felt love.” During her school days Maria had to present oral reports on Marxist-Leninism, “but I didn’t believe what I had to say. I asked God to forgive me. Most students were like that: We agreed with the professors out of necessity. Later I realized that the professors said what they said out of necessity, so I can forgive them too.”

Maria and other nuns can’t help but be aware of rumors of a battle

between the Cuban Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Office of Religious Affairs of the Cuban Communist Party. But with a glowingly innocent smile the 27-year-old showed the food and medicine that people bring to the sisters so that they can give it to those in need: “We try to be light in the darkness... If people bring us more, we will do more.”

Hector Gonzales and Maria Concepcion Morales, physicians and co-leaders of Pro Vida-Cuba, run the country’s anti-abortion group out of a living room/office of standard Havana peeling walls and old linoleum. Cuba’s pro-abortion policy is different from China’s, they say: Officials do not force anyone to abort, but they apply “great psychological and economic pressure so the woman will choose abortion of her own free will.” The government wants to brag about its low rate of infant mortality, so unborn children who

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might have physical problems or who will be born into worse-than-average economic conditions are almost always aborted.

The government does not allow pro-life centers outside church walls, so some nuns try to offer counseling within their churches. (However, when a few nuns created a childcare program the government shut it down.) Dr. Concepcion leads a center in her church that counseled 107 pregnant young women last year. She recalls a typical situation. A hospitalized six-month-pregnant woman had decided to have an abortion because “I don’t have anyone to help me.” Dr. Concepcion found a nun within two hours who pledged to stick by the woman.

One Catholic dissident (I’m withholding her name) lives in a building that reminded me of slum housing in Chicago or New Haven. Until recently 10-15 people per week would walk up five flights of narrow stairs, turn into a dim corridor, and knock on her apartment door. They would ask for one of several hundred banned books—Orwell, Solzhenitsyn, and so forth—that she kept in her bedroom and loaned freely. Like 80 or so other Cubans, she was running an “independent library” and taking a great risk doing so, especially because she has a small son. She ceased that activity, in part because Cuban State Security agents play rough: When they interrogated her last fall they threateningly asked her, “Do you love your son?”

Shades of Gray

The evangelicals and Catholics I’ve quoted so far are all dissenters from the Castro regime, but others are in more ambiguous situations. They have tried to work with the state, but Cuba’s government sees the social projects of non-state organizations, even non-antagonistic ones, as competition.

A 33rd-order Masonic leader (whose name I will also withhold), with fingernails trimmed or bitten down to the quick, sat in a rocking chair in his airy front room and explained how his fraternal group is providing a means of community for Cubans that is “safer” than

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that of religion. His lodge has members who are also Communist Party members, but they will not allow in employees of the Ministry of the Interior. (The Party is also allowing and sometimes encouraging members to join churches, but denominations like the Assemblies of God require Party members to renounce that affiliation before joining.) Fraternal organizations such as Rotary are seen as counter-revolutionary and are illegal, but officials allow others, such as the Masons and the Odd Fellows.

This Mason argues that the 30,000 Cuban Masons—down from 34,000 in the 1950s but up from the post-Revolution nadir of 19,000—will play an important role in the post-beard period: State officials once argued “that all organizations in civil society were obsolete, since the government would take their place, but the government has since seen that it needs us.” Officials have allowed the Masons to retain their 220 pre-Revolution temples (although most are in a state of disrepair) and he anticipates that, post-beard, “the government will come to the Masons and other groups for moral support.” But he concluded, “My personal opinion is that Masons have not been able to give answers to the deeper questions of life.”

Just as the Ministry of the Interior is known as the organization that makes Cuba hellish for any who dissent, so the Ministry of Agriculture through its Socialist controls has made rich farmland produce food shortages. Over the past decade, though, the government has become so desperate that a slightly more flexible bureaucracy, the Ministry of Internal Commerce, has been allowed to set up “demand and supply markets” at which sellers set prices; the relation of the two kinds of markets is somewhat like that of regular schools to charter schools. A government supervisor at one neighborhood *mercado* boasted to me that his market did 30 million pesos in sales—over \$1 million—last year.

On one Sunday morning, a kilo of tomatoes was going for eight pesos, a lemon or a bunch of bananas for one peso. But onions, which have been selling sluggishly at 12 pesos for a kilo, now dropped to ten at one booth, and a seller in a Ben and Jerry’s T-shirt who identified himself as “William, but not Clinton” was selling onions of the same quality at the next booth for eight pesos. I asked William, “Why the difference in prices,” and he smilingly responded, “That’s competition.” Why would anyone buy your neighbor’s onions for ten pesos when they could buy yours for eight? “His sign is at the front, mine is close to the back. It would be unjust to have my sign exactly next to his.” Hmmm—thus far and no further. But even William’s small step is a challenge to the socialist status quo.

Sadly, the Presbyterian Church has been the prime sycophant among the denominations that make up the government-affiliated Cuban Council of Churches; Hector Mendez, pastor of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Havana (founded in 1906 by an American missionary), has served on the CCC’s central committee. Another reason for suspicion is the immaculately-restored church building that he proudly shows off. Real churches in Havana have junky chairs and broken windows, not dark wooden pews that would fit on the Philadelphia main line. A third strike is his boast that “we are the first church in the country to have a website”: In Cuba it takes special permission, as well as big bucks, just to have access to the Internet.

But Mendez suddenly looked at me hard with his sad, deep-set eyes and said, “Not all pastors are as they appear. Do you know what pleases me most about the past ten years? In 1994 very few people came to church for activities – transportation problems, perhaps, blackouts. So I started going to different houses to set up Bible studies. We now have 50 Bible studies in homes, each with 5-15 people. In all we have more than 400 people studying the Bible every week in 23 different places.”

Then he reviewed, apologetically, the history of the past 45 years: “The state took over all church schools in 1961. Only 14 out of 50 Presbyterian pastors stayed. People, especially young people who wanted to continue their studies, were fearful.... I was young then and studying to be a lawyer, but I saw churches that didn’t have Bible studies and had no one to preach, so I entered seminary.... I didn’t want to be political, I just wanted to help people spiritually. We did what we needed to do to keep the churches alive. I went to a meeting in Peru in 1982 where people talked about victories, and all I could say is we teach the Bible and preach.”

He asked with a fixed stare like that of Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, “Do you understand how important discretion is here?” Even though his Presbyterian church is well-connected, “We can’t even give away clothing with a lot of publicity. You have to understand that for over 30 years every aspect of social service has belonged to the government. When we distribute medicine or glasses, we have to be very careful... We would like to do much more. We want to be known as the church with Bible studies in homes and the church that helps people materially as well. We’ll take advantage of opportunities... I dream, but I keep my feet on the ground, and now, perhaps, a better situation is possible. Do you understand?”

Next month Dr Olasky discusses his conclusions about the enigma of Cuba and offers some practical suggestions for individuals who would like to help.

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