

Recuerdos from Cuba: In the light of the 52 years of Revolution

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I AWOKE TO socialism in 1959, at the age of 15, when I joined the Catholic student movement (JEC [*Juventude Estudantil Católica*], an arm of the Catholic Action), which in Brazil had a strong leftist connotation thanks to the Dominican friars ordained in postwar France, who were motivated by the alliance between communists and Christians in the French Resistance and by the worker-priests movement. They were assiduous readers of the first Maritain and disciples of another Dominican, Father Lebret, founder of the “Economy and Humanism” movement.

Until then my worldview coincided with the American way of life. My father, a jurist, had fought against the Vargas dictatorship. From the re-democratization of Brazil in 1945 he stood by the anticommunist forces, signed the *Manifesto dos Mineiros* and joined the founders of UDN (National Democratic Union).

The student movement opened my eyes and my mind to the success of the Cuban Revolution. My gallery of icons featured the bearded men of Sierra Maestra, alongside actors like James Dean and Marlon Brando.

Cuba became the object of my attention in the media. I followed the visits of Fidel (1959) and Che Guevara (1961) to Brazil, and the defeat of the mercenaries “made in USA” in the Bay of Pigs (1961).

The military dictatorship was established in Brazil in 1964. As a student leader I was first introduced to prison in June of that year. The repressive gaze of the regime defined my new face: for fighting against dictatorship I was labeled pro-communist.

I sat in prison for 15 days. The following year I joined the Dominican order. I continued my fight against dictatorship. In São Paulo I joined the ALN (National Liberation Action), a guerrilla group led by Carlos Marighella. Thereafter Cuba began to have a more direct resonance to me: OLAS, “one, two, three ... Vietnams!”; Che’s saga in Congo and Bolivia; Marighella’s trip to Havana, from where he called upon Brazilians to take up arms against the military regime and socialism. My participation in urban warfare (1967-1969) was related to Cuba. My main task was to facilitate the clandestine exit from the

country of militants persecuted by the dictatorship. The goal of many of them was to train guerrillas on the Island. Some had participated, in September 1969, in the kidnapping of the U.S. ambassador to Brazil. Almost all of them returned clandestinely to Brazil; few survived the repressive fury.

During the years of my second arrest (1969-1973), Cuba loomed as a reference and encouragement to our revolutionary purposes. It was with unrestrained excitement that from prison I followed on the radio the sugar harvest of 1970, whose goal was to achieve a harvest 10 million tons. The target failed to be met. And thanks to Radio Havana Cuba we heard important news about Brazil, particularly clashes between political militants and the repressive government, and reports of arrests, killings and disappearances.

The Revolution and the Church

My first opportunity to meet Fidel emerged in 1980, when I was invited to attend the celebration of the first anniversary of the Sandinista Revolution in Managua. I was sure it would also be the last. At Sergio Ramirez's, vice president of Nicaragua, Lula and I talked with the Cuban leader from two a.m. to six a.m. Two questions marked our dialogue. The first "Why are the Cuban State and CP confessional?". Fidel responded almost indignantly: "What do you mean confessional?". "Yes, commander, both the affirmation and negation of God's existence are confessional expressions, contrary to the secularism that modernity imposes on political institutions."

Fidel admitted to never having seen the issue from that perspective. Years later the Party congress withdrew its atheist character and began to accept militants from different religious denominations. (The number of former religious militants was surprisingly high). The same occurred in relation to the State. An amendment to the Constitution determined its secular character.

The second question was about the relationship between Revolution and the Catholic Church. Before Fidel could answer, I presented three hypotheses: 1) "The Revolution persecutes the Church. Here is a good policy favorable to imperialism, interested in proving that Socialism and Christianity are incompatible." 2) "The Revolution is indifferent to the Church. This also pleases the United States government, as it makes the Church in Cuba a stronghold of counterrevolutionaries and people unsatisfied with the regime." 3) "The Revolution, as a political entity, converses with the Church and seeks to include it in the socialism-building process."

Fidel admitted that revolutionary politics, though it never harassed religious denominations, was mistaken in relation to the Catholic Church. For sixteen years he had refused to meet with the bishops. He asked if I would be willing to contribute to the resumption of dialogue. I agreed, but that would depend on the interest of the Cuban episcopate.

In 1981, at the invitation of Casa de las Américas, I stepped for the first time in Havana. However, the contact with the bishops would only occur in

February 1983, when the Episcopal Conference invited me to a meeting at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Cobre, near Santiago de Cuba. The apostolic nuncio and the eight bishops from the country attended the meeting.

I explained my history track in relation to Cuba since the meeting with Fidel Castro in Managua in 1980:

I believe I can contribute to the Church-State dialogue in this country. Communist Party leaders agree that I could work in that direction. However, I have told them that I will only do that by mutual agreement with the local bishops. If you think I have nothing to do here, say it now, because it is too risky for me to come to Cuba. I live under a military dictatorship, and the mere mention of this country's name causes the government to unhinge. If you believe that I have a role to play, I'm willing to face the risks. I will not act as free-lance, but rather in line with the Episcopal conference.

I already have too much work to do in Nicaragua and in Brazil, a country of continental dimensions. To me it makes no sense to come here without your approval. If you think I should interrupt the dialogue with the government, I will not come back. But the responsibility for that decision before God and history lies with you.

The bishops pulled their ghosts out of the closet, expressing fears and dangers. They feared that I would be manipulated by the Party. I was asked to leave the room for an hour. At the end, they gave me their support.

Popular education

Sunday, February 10, 1985. After lunch I answered the phone at the Riviera Hotel in Havana: "This is Piñero. Do not leave the hotel. Cervantes will meet you now," the head of the Department of America warned me. Shortly after Sérgio Cervantes, an official of that department of the Cuban CP confirmed my suspicion: Fidel Castro wanted to see me.

For five hours Cervantes and I waited in front of the TV, watching American movies. At 9 p.m. we got a call from Manuel Piñero, summoning us to the State Council at Revolution Square.

When we walked out of the elevator on the 2nd floor, the guards escorted us to a very comfortable waiting room, decorated with tasteful paintings and sculptures, but so cold that I was afraid I would catch a cold. One hour later we heard footsteps in the hallway. The door was open and Fidel walked in. He was accompanied by Piñero and three other men. "These are Chilean communists", said Fidel. "I hope they are also revolutionaries," I remarked, "because calling oneself a Christian or a communist means very little today. I know both left-wing Christians and right-wing Communists."

As soon as the Chileans left, Fidel led us to his office. He pointed me the biggest couch under the painting of Camilo Cienfuegos and took the armchair to my left. He told me about his meeting with the U.S. Episcopal delegation.

However, what concerned him were the Cuban bishops he had met not long ago: “Since the beginning of the Revolution there have been many sins on both sides. More on our side than on the Church’s side,” he admitted. “I myself had prejudices against the bishops and was misinformed. I believed Monsignor Adolfo (Rodriguez) to be a conservative and reactionary. On the contrary, he is a serious man with whom one can talk.” “For all I know,” I said, “the bishops were also pleased with the meeting. And they were very happy with the prospect of having regular meetings with you.” “Yes,” said the commander, “I am willing to do that, but to discuss key issues and not a priest’s trip out of the country or the remodeling a temple.”

He added that he had seen Pope John Paul II’s visits to South America as positive. He asked me what they meant and how the council and the synod worked, and was interested in personal aspects of my family and my religious background: “Tell me, how does one become a Dominican Friar?” he asked in a very low, guttural voice. “I was a student of the Lasallian brothers and then of the Jesuits. At that time, they spoke against the Protestants and Jews, and there was racism in the schools.”

I explained the background of Dominican friars. Curious, Fidel asked about the curriculum, teachers, examinations, additional courses: “Do you study Marxism?”. “Yes, in philosophy,” I replied. “Prejudice against the manuals favored my contact with the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and also Trotsky and Stalin. So I got rid of Plekhanov’s dogmatism and Pulitzer’s mechanicism. I also learned a lot from Gramsci’s reflections. Without it, it is impossible to really understand the religious phenomenon in social struggles.”

“But aren’t you trying to deny the value of the theory?” mused Fidel. “No, but if the mere theoretical training was sufficient, the communist parties of Latin America, which are the standard-bearers of Marxism-Leninism, would have made revolutions. So far, no communist party has made a revolution on our continent. The revolution was made by the 26th of July Movement here in Cuba, and the Sandinista Front for National Liberation in Nicaragua. Unprejudiced movements that had contact with the grassroots and were capable of capturing the popular values and even their religious feelings.” “I agree with what you are saying,” he replied.

We also talked about the Theology of Liberation. I spoke of its genesis and problems with the ecclesiastical authorities. Then I asked him what resources were used in the ideological development of the new Cuban generations. He confirmed my suspicion that in Cuba, as in most socialist countries, there was no specific political awareness program. It was wrongly assumed that the socialist society itself, through its ideological apparatus such as schools and the media influenced the minds of the youth. If on the one hand this was true, on the other one could not ignore that socialism is a contemporary of capitalism and of a much more technologically advanced capitalism. Trusting ideological training



Fidel Castro

to formal systems means yielding to the assumption that they can overlap with the informal systems of capitalist consumerism like music, fashion, and other appeals to aggrandize the ego.

Fidel heard me attentively and defended himself: “Internationalism is an important factor in the development of our youth. Two hundred thousand Cubans have been to Angola, where we currently have 40,000 young people. But it is true that selfishness has not yet been eradicated from our society.” I insisted: “I am very much concerned about the ideological education of the new generations. And I do not believe that a communist party can do that, since its boundaries are narrow and what really matters is precisely to reach those outside the party. Nor do I see how formal education can fulfill this task.”

“What would you suggest?” Fidel asked me. “The popular education methodology to strengthen grassroots movements,” I replied.

I described my work in popular education and the meaning of the dialectical methodological concept, which opposes the *banking* methodology denounced by Paulo Freire - and paradoxically still in vogue at that time in socialist countries. I considered it appropriate to mention Paulo Freire, who had been unjustly “attacked” by Brazilian communists, including in Cuba. They claimed that their views were idealists, in the light of Christian philosophy and therefore unacceptable to those who have a materialist conception of nature and history. This criticism was based on a superficial construction of his early works, such as *Educação como prática da liberdade* (Education as the Practice of Freedom). His ideological evolution is reflected in *Pedagogia do oprimido* (Pedagogy of the Oppressed) and *Cartas à Guiné-Bissau* (Letters to Guinea Bissau). But critics have ignored these works, although his method of popular education and literacy had been adopted by recently freed African countries and by the Sandinista Nicaragua. “In a next trip, talk about that with the minister of education and the party’s theoreticians”, advised me the Cuban leader.

It was past one a.m. when Fidel left. Before leaving, I noted: “In July 1980, in our first meeting in Managua, I asked you what the position of the Cuban government was in relation to the local Catholic Church. Today I ask you: Is it of interest to the Cuban government that the Church here adopts the line of the Theology of Liberation?”. Fidel did not hesitate in saying yes.

That meeting led to the idea of creating a popular education center in Cuba, along the line of the Paulo Freire method; hence the Martin Luther King Center, which has been in operation there for over twenty years.

Interview

Chomy Miyar, secretary of the State Council invited me to dinner at his house on Thursday, February 14, 1985. I was in Cuba attending the Casa de las Américas literary award. In Havana, this was considered the most irresistible invitation. It was like being invited by Fidel, who did not open the doors of his home to his friends for the sole reason that he was forced to live underground in his own country, for security reasons.

Over coffee we heard the noise of sudden braking and slamming doors. It was midnight when Fidel walked in. He sat between books and records, accepted a single glass of straight up scotch, which he sipped slowly. "I found an area in which we are competitors", I told him. "Which one?". "The kitchen. I am the son of an expert in the area. My mother is the author of a classic book entitled *Fogão de lenha, 300 anos de cozinha mineira*." "My specialty is shrimp", stated the Cuban leader.

We resumed the topics of that afternoon's meeting with the Latin American writers attending the Casa de las Americas Award: "You said you like seemingly embarrassing questions. In fact, I see in your personality a compulsive attraction to challenge. Where does this propensity to never lose come from - your father or your mother?", I asked. "Both. My mother was a very religious woman and my father was an atheist. What I do not like in interviews are personal questions or questions from those who believe I am endowed with exceptional charisma, capable of moving history. It is not isolated individuals that make history. And I do not consider myself a military dictator." "Every human being should keep a minimum distance from himself, in the Brechtian sense of the term," I said. "Then he would have a sense of self-criticism and would not give himself more value than he deserves." "If there is something I strongly repudiate" - stressed Fidel - "it is the idea of being a mythical figure. I will never forget Martí's saying that 'All the glory in the world fits in a kernel of corn'."

"There are two types of politicians" - I said - "those who act for their personal interests, even under the apparent pretext of defending collective demands, and those who do not fear any risk for putting social causes including above their physical survival. You can accuse a guerrilla of everything but of seeking power as an object of personal desire, because the chances of achieving it alive are small against the constant threat of death."

I took advantage of the occasion to find out how he saw my pastoral work in Cuba. An official of the Department of America had implied, in those days, that I should not deliver lectures or courses for Cuban Christians - a piece of information that I chose to omit to avoid creating an atmosphere of intrigue. "In your opinion, to what extent should I promote meetings and seminars, debates and retreats with Christians here?" "Only you can do that. I can't, I'm not a theologian," suggested Fidel, which pleased me because Piñeiro had also heard the answer. "I wrote a short text, *Christianity & Marxism*, which might help the reflection of Cuban Christians and communists. "We can publish it here. I could attach some of my texts and maybe give you an interview specifically on the religious issue. Have you read what I said about Christianity and Marxism in my visit to Chile in 1971?" "Yes, I have also read what you said about the subject in Jamaica in 1977, and here in Cuba."

Elated by the comment, I jumped at the opportunity. "I would like to do a long interview with you, to be published in a book aimed at the young people

of Brazil,” I said. “I am willing to grant it. When can you be back?” “Maybe in May; would that be possible?” “It is a good time,” agreed Fidel.

I returned to Havana in May 1985, in the company of my parents. Fidel called me into his office: “Let’s leave our interview for another time. I need to prepare better,” he explained. A new event had changed the situation and surely Fidel’s focus: Radio Martí’s pirate broadcasts from Miami to Cuba, with 50,000 watts of power and 14 daily hours of transmission. It had been proposed by Reagan as “an instrument of awareness among Cubans.” Despite the unfavorable context, my guardian angel whispered into my heart: “It’s now or never.” Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* came to my mind. I concentrated all efforts on catching that fish. Fidel could not escape me. I used all possible arguments. “What questions would you like to ask me?”, he asked, lowering the guard.

I had prepared a list of 64 questions, starting with his childhood, school life, family profile, Christian background, etc. I read the first ones and he immediately interrupted me: “Well, we start tomorrow.”

The long interview required four meetings and 23 hours. In November 1985 *Fidel and Religion* was released in Cuba. Three hundred thousand copies were sold in less than 48 hours. Today, the print run in Cuba exceeds one million copies. The work has been translated into 23 languages in 32 countries. It has helped to eradicate the fear of the Christians and the prejudices of the Communists.

Economic changes

The Cuban Revolution is like a cat with seven lives. It survived ten U.S. presidents, all of them willing to weaken it; numerous sabotage operations sponsored by the CIA; the missile crisis; the assassination of Che Guevara; the Cold War; the fall of the Berlin Wall; and 50 years of blockade imposed by the United States government.

What explains so much resistance by a nation with almost 12 million people, an area of 110,861 km² and no energy resources? Cuba produces only dessert and its complements, as known to the 2.5 million tourists who visit the Island annually: sugar, citrus, cigars, rum, and lots of art such as music and cinema.

Despite the quadruple blockade - 1) the fact that it is an island; 2) it is the only socialist country in Western history; 3) the U.S. blockade; 4) the demise of the Soviet Union, Cuba resists because it guarantees its populations decent living conditions. There is poverty, but not extreme poverty; education and health services are free of charge and of good quality; every citizen is guaranteed monthly food staples.

Notwithstanding the accusations of human rights abuses - monitored by the United States, the nation that keeps at the Guantanamo naval base the most hideous concentration camp known to the current world - in 52 years of Revo-

lution there has not been a single case in Cuba of missing people, extrajudicial killings, kidnapping of political opponents, torture, or illegal arrests. There are neither street children nor families living under bridges.

The country's economic situation, however, requires urgent and drastic measures. In addition to a 35% decrease in GDP during the "special period" (1990-1996) - the years of greatest impact following the disappearance of the Soviet Union -, in 2008 two hurricanes tore down about 400,000 houses, destroyed crops and caused losses worth US\$10 billion (20% of GDP). The international financial crisis has led the country's main export, nickel, to drop from \$70,000 to \$7,000/ton, and tourism, another source of hard currency, to decline. In 2009 agricultural production shrank 7.3%. Cuba does not have a significant industrial sector, imports 80% of the construction material it uses and 32% of the food it consumes, and 50% of the useful land remains idle - what has led the government to promote, now, a new agrarian reform.

The plan of economic reforms implies the dismissal of at least one million civil servants, with incentives to migrate to small and medium private enterprises; the end of the *libreta*, which ensures every citizen food staples, and of meals in the workplace (measure to be offset by higher wages); and the extinction of the dual currency (CUC, the convertible peso, is currently worth 24 traditional pesos).

With the new measures the State ceases to be the sole employer and economic protagonist. Now licenses for private enterprises are granted to almost all applicants. The difficulty lies in the absence of credit, as there are no resources, and in the lack of access to raw materials, which are scarce and difficult to import.

In the political sphere, the effects of economic changes may result in the end of democratic centralism and the adoption of a specific socialist model based on democratic and socialist decentralization.

There is no doubt that Cubans aspire to better living conditions and the end of tourism incentives that establish certain discrimination between locals and tourists, such as the use of dual currency. And this was no news to the VI Communist Party Congress held in April, when measures were taken to introduce economic changes in the country, starting with the privatization of infrastructure sectors. However, there is no indication that they want the return of capitalism. In these five decades, no one has heard of a single collective demonstration against the Revolution, as seen in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Freedom

A few months ago, when I was delivering a speech in Brasilia, an engineer asked me why there are Cubans who leave the Island. I replied: for the same reasons why friars leave the religious life; it is not easy to live in a sharing society, with no prospect of private accumulation. And then came the second question:

Why aren't Cubans free to travel abroad, as we are here in Brazil?

I answered: "We" who, paleface? I would like to talk about freedom with your housekeeper. How many times a year does she visit her family in the north-east? How many times has she been out of the country? And if she gets sick, who ensures her proper treatment? Have her children gotten to university? Do they have access to theater, ballet, literature and fine arts, like most Cubans do?

Cubans travel around the world. Today there are thousands of Cuban doctors and teachers in 77 countries worldwide in solidarity missions, including in Brazil. If the travel is justified by cultural or scientific reasons, the Revolution sponsors international tours of ballet and music ensembles, as well as scientific and technological research. What does not exist is individual tourism for mere leisure purposes... and capital flight!

Fidel and Raul, who dreamed and led the Revolution, are still alive. This is the only case of revolutionary leaders surviving five decades of their own feat. In the evening of last December 11, 2008, passing through the streets of Havana - where I attended the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Raul Castro said to me: "I would never have believed it if they told me in 1959 that I would be attending the celebration of the 50th anniversary of our Revolution."

In view of the difficulties facing Cuba - most resulting from the embargo, but aggravated by frequent hurricanes that destroy agriculture and a considerable part of the infrastructure, such as the electricity grid, the Revolution is aware that there is not much to celebrate and that it needs to meet the challenge of instilling in the younger generations something that is essential to their improvement: the conviction that, as a supportive alternative before the unjust and unequal world of capitalism, it needs to reinvent itself not as a fact of the past, but as hope for the future.

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