

# The Catholic Church, Politics and Society

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**T**HE SYSTEM of relations that supported Catholic institutions in Cuban society during the first half of the twentieth century is not very different from that prevailing in Latin America at that time and which, besides the trends that gave rise to a religiosity truly committed to the poor, still prevails in the rest of the continent. The tensions of the ecclesiastical hierarchy with the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua in the 1980s and with the socialization projects in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia in the last decade, to mention only obvious examples, are testimonies of the recurring mismatch between the churches and the projects of the left on the continent.

## **The event of the revolutionary victory in Cuba and Catholicism**

I have often pointed out that at the time of the victory of the Revolution in 1959, the prominence of the Church, which had not yet experienced the renovation that introduced the Vatican Council II, was not sufficient to enable a connection in tune with the intensity of the change that was occurring in the political and economic life and in the structures of social thought.

When analyzing how the polarization of Catholic hierarchies in our America has behaved in the 50 years of the post-Council period vis-à-vis any project of radical political change, we should not fail to mention that the Council change in question was based essentially on a particular set of circumstances. The Church also experienced a post-Council “restoration” in the context of dependent capitalist relations on the continent.

In such conditions we dare to say that the Cuban case represented to its Church a different challenge, which went beyond the restoration and reconstruction of ties with a society that has changed and continues to change, with a substantially different history path and, of course, with a radically distinct State in guiding the exercise of authority, which does not respond to the interests of a structure of class exploitation, regardless of its virtues and imperfections that we may point out in government management.

For most of the believing Cuban population, the dilemma of the 1960s was a contradiction: “Catholicism or revolution.” This dilemma was more complex because the assimilation by the State of Marxism into the doctrinally atheist Soviet Orthodox canon, far from contributing to alleviate the incompatibility, generalized it even in terms of “religion or revolution.”

The atmosphere of tension reached its peak between 1960 and 1962, although there was no lack of criteria and actions, originating in both the Catholic and Marxist circles, which, to some extent, contributed to maintain the dialogue. However, as stated by Giulio Girardi (1994, p.109), in addition to the class commitments that ensured the maintenance of ecclesiastical institutions, the Churches “are not opposed to revolution, primarily because it is against the interests of the bourgeoisie and the empire, but also because it proposes a system of values, an interpretation of reality, a concept of the new man, and an educational project that are alternatives to those of the Church.” If we admit the validity of this judgment, it was not just about a class commitment in the face of a radical revolution, but about connecting with a system that imposes a new pattern on the Church-State relationship.

In the late 1960s, U.S. government agencies supported by the Church in the United States resorted to a maneuver to stimulate the massive emigration of under-age Cubans based on the assumption that the socialist State was trying to deprive the family of the “*patria potestas*” and decide the fate of the children. Encouraged by the clergy, many Cuban Catholics believed that and promoted the exodus of their children for over a year, totaling more than 14,000 children from Catholic families in the so-called “Operation Peter Pan”. Many children had to grow up separated from their parents, who were unable to join them later. Many cases of confrontation occurred in those first years, but I believe it is necessary for me to dwell on the subject at this time.

The revolutionary government marked its presence when the procession of Our Virgin of Charity in 1961, in Havana, became a political demonstration against it, by responding with the deportation to Spain of a bishop of the archdiocese and 131 priests and members of the Church, most of them Spanish. Then came the institutional weakening of the Church, marked at that time by the stigma of opposition and the preponderance in the political system of an atheist doctrinarism of Marxist influence, which would translate into years of discriminatory restrictions for believers, especially practicing Catholics.

However, the bishops took a new stand in April 1969, when they issued the first pastoral letter against the U.S. embargo on Cuba, which reads:

We denounce this unfair blockade situation, which contributes to add unnecessary suffering and render more difficult the search for development. We appeal, therefore, to the conscience of those who are in a situation to solve it, so that they may undertake firm and effective actions to bring this measure to a halt. (La Voz de la Iglesia en Cuba 1995, p.175)

In a second pastoral letter in September of the same year, the bishops state:

We should approach the atheist man with all the respect and fraternal charity that a human person deserves for the mere fact of being so. We should not

exclude honesty from his stance, [...] nor should we avoid cooperation in the practical order of our earthly accomplishments. [...] There is a huge field of shared endeavor among all people of good will, whether atheists or believers. (ibid, p.177)

As it can be seen, the Church took the initiative to show to the socialist State a corrective willingness to connect with the change that had begun a decade ago, while proposing the solution, to believers, to the “religion or revolution” dilemma. By solution I understand, here, showing that the dilemma was not like it was being presented. That is, it could be overcome.

An explicit reaction of the political leadership consistent with this step was visible only in isolated gestures, but not in the opening of spaces aspired by a Church with a very small clergy and no authorization to promote a significant immigration of priests, reduced priestly vocations within the country, deprived of Catholic schools and access to the mass media, and with no government subsidy. And, above all, navigating in a sociopolitical context conducive to atheism.

With that statement, the Church had taken, however, a step that eventually would be symbolic and auspicious, although at first it was met with reluctance or some surprise by the political authorities, who were on the eve of the first setback of their socialist project. I refer here to the setback of the “ten million harvest,” which was nothing but the summary of a crisis of the Cuban economic model, if we may call it so. The subsequent alignment of Cuba to the Soviet model, which would enable an essential improvement for the Cuban economy, failed to provide, in my view, the climate for an unbiased dialogue between the Church and the socialist political system. Although it should be indicated that the lack of dialogue did not produce a return to tensions, I do not believe that the normal relations seen in the years following the pastorals enable significant positive adjectives; I shall limit myself to characterizing this phase, in any case, as marked by distention.

### **The next path of normality: from coexistence to cooperation**

From the 1980s, a clear process of revival of religious spirituality and Catholic ecclesiastic activity (and religious activity in general) becomes visible, as opposed to the previous two decades, which could be considered a setback in the face of the ideological hegemony of atheism, enshrined since 1975 at the first Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), and officially revised only in the fourth congress in 1991. For revival I understand clear signs, sometimes proven data, of growth in the number of religious communities, the emergence of new expressions of faith and the disinhibition of a number of people who recognize themselves as believers. In fact, from that moment we can speak of an “active integration of religious institutions and movements in Cuban civil society” (Rey & Castañeda, 2002).

The *aggiornamento* could not repeat the experience of the Cuban Church

in the early days of the post-colonial republic<sup>1</sup> because now, with the exclusiveness of the public education system and the expropriation of private establishments in 1961, the revolutionary state stripped the Church of the main instrument of influence. The Church would need to conduct this second revival in less advantageous conditions, in view of the restrictions imposed by the aforementioned atheist projection, at least until the early 1990s.

The development of the Church's position in the 1980s, reflected in the final document of the Cuban National Ecclesial Meeting (ENEC in the Spanish acronym) in 1986, had already indicated that the Catholicism had recovered its presence. In parallel, *Fidel y la religion* was published in 1985, the product of 23 hours of Fidel Castro's interviews by the Brazilian Dominican Friar Betto, in which the Cuban head of state recognized that there were discriminatory elements in the politics of Cuban socialism against religious faith that needed to be overcome, and moved on to considerations announcing a willingness for political change.

It is not possible to find in Fidel's speech a translation of the condition of non-believer into doctrinaire atheism. Even in times of greater tension, his criticism was directed against the political alignment of hierarchy, faced with the example of the early Christians. In 1971, in Chile, Fidel seemed to be motivated by the Christian Movement for Socialism and in 1977, at a meeting with Church members in Jamaica, he showed the same attitude.

The visit of Pope John Paul II to Cuba in 1998 was a religious event of great relevance, but already in the context of a process of accelerated spiritual resuscitation. Therefore, it cannot be considered as its cause in the strictest sense. Nor did it have its origin in the Cuban economic crisis of the early 1990s, although it should be recognized that this was a highly influential factor. The failure of the package of social solutions to material problems would contribute to enhance the search for solutions, either actual or symbolic, through the individual path.

What we identify as revival is not only (and not always essentially) an effect of numerical growth, although this datum is usually the most visible.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the world expected the demise of global socialism, from which the Cuban experience would not come out undamaged. A new pastoral document issued by the bishops in 1993, "Love Hopes for All Things", gave another connotation to the *Final Document* of ENEC, with a local interpretation of the Catholic social doctrine to a world that was no longer bipolar, where attention should be placed on the failure of socialism and the guidelines of a new alternative project, a third way, with Catholics playing the leading role (Alonso, 2002 p.29- 55). Tensions resurfaced, but also quickly vanished; neither the Cuban State nor the Church was interested in having it otherwise.

The designation of a Cuban Cardinal in 1994 was part of the institutional

recovery process and culminated in the ideal conditions pursued in the Catholic environment to welcome the Pope in a “new Church”. No other cardinal has been appointed since the death of Cardinal Manuel Arteaga Betancourt in 1964. This decision was a sign of recognition of the revival of Catholicism on the Island. From his first sermons, editorials and pastoral documents, Ortega showed an integrative discourse that combined a tone that was both critical and open to dialogue, in a society that fell headlong into the hole opened by the impact of shortages caused by the setback in the economy after the Soviet-socialist demise; and at the same time it triggered a process of institutional, ecclesiastical and lay empowerment.

In 1989 the diocesan structure of the country was still comprised of five dioceses and two archdioceses with their corresponding prelates; the territorial and hierarchical configuration had not changed much in almost 30 years. Today, there are 11 dioceses and three archdioceses, and about 200 active churches. The number of priests, which had remained stagnant for years, increased to over 400 and its growth is no longer a problem for the country’s Catholic faith. A new diocesan seminary with excellent accommodation for study and dedication to spiritual life was open in 2010. The Catholic lay movement, which had become almost invisible, was also revived during that period, with a young and active intelligentsia. The number of Catholic publications grew considerably, and their engagement in social problems is remarkable, even on controversial issues within Cuban society.

For the pope’s visit, the Church and the Cuban socialist State worked in coordination and for the same purpose, perhaps for the first time since 1959. Gone was the false dilemma that ran through the press before the visit: that which speculated who would enjoy the success or bear the failure of the visit. Finally, success proved to be an integrative factor and failure was saved for intransigence (Alonso, 2000). Possibly also for the first time in four decades, the population found in the media a message different from the official one. The pope was the true owner of the media stage for five days.

The current Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone, recalls in his recent book the life of Pope Wojtyła: “Fidel Castro showed affection for the Pope, who was already ill, and John Paul II told me that possibly no head of state had been so thoroughly prepared for a visit by a Pontiff”.<sup>2</sup> The author adds that Castro had read the encyclicals and major speeches of the Pope and even some of his poetry.

### **The complex present: between possibility and challenges**

In Cardinal Ortega’s sermons, editorials and public interventions (i.e., from 1994 onwards), it is easy to find passages showing the level reached by the Cuban ecclesiastical discourse in terms of understanding the social construction process. Often, I turn to the following quote, taken from a statement issued in 2000, which I consider to be one of the most representatives at the global level:

Revolution in Cuba is therefore nationality, future, independence. The fact that divides the history of Cuba in two halves in the twentieth century is condensed in one sentence: the triumph of the revolution, as it is considered that the real possibility of completing the so often dreamed project of the revolution was finally achieved in 1959 [...] (Alamino, 2002, p.998)



*Statue of Our Virgin of Charity (Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre). Cuba, nineteenth century. Polychrome wood. Private collection.*

In turn, the Cuban Catholic pastoral maintains a typically “ecclesiocentric” profile. And with the exception of a very small group of laymen, the Cuban Catholic intelligentsia (laymen and clergy) that emerged in the last decades is guided, in a quite orthodox way, by the pontifical thought that articulates the Church’s social doctrine. In Cuba, the doctrinal homogeneity of organic intellectuals with Catholicism competes with the homogeneity attributed to the Marxist organic intelligentsia. Sometimes we notice more unconditionality and exclusion and less diversity among Catholics than among Marxists; or, at least, between one and the other, because in this field comparing is not only difficult but also of little use.

When we hear that relations between the Church and the State are normal, we need to define normality: do we always speak of consensual coincidences in the social project and of an explicit cooperative relationship, or do we speak of an understanding based on a combination of respect and tolerance between the State and civil institution that has more systematically questioned (no to say hampered) an organized connection with the system, i.e., the Catholic Church?

I believe that we should speak of a rugged normality, although by no means characterized by immobility: the multiplication of channels of understanding between Catholicism and the complex socioeconomic dynamics of the Cuban system are crystal clear. And they explain the acceptance by the government, in 2010, of the mediating role of the Cardinal (representing the Church) so that opposition demonstrations were tolerated, and also in order to produce a solution in the release of prisoners tried for active opposition actions that violated the law in force. In the central report that opened the VI Congress of the PCC, Raúl Castro alluded to that mediation stating that “we accomplished it in the framework of a dialogue with mutual respect, loyalty and transparency with the top hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which, with its humanitarian labor, contributed to bring this action to a harmonious end. In any case, all credit is due to that religious institution.” With a reference to “the not always coinciding, although constructive points of view” between State and Church” (Central report ..., 2011).

It is justifiable to think that the value of this event in such a relevant document in the country’s politics means that this is not considered a cyclical datum, but rather something that could pave the way for future collaborations.

We can say at this point that Catholicism recovered an institutional influence and at the same time a significant place in Cuban religious demographics. A space was open for the Catholic Church, which is proportionally more shared today with the world of Protestant denominations and religions of African origin, which are not limited to devotees and “paleros”,<sup>3</sup> in the strict sense, but that pervades broad sectors of the Catholic parish; even if the Catholic Church remains doctrinally reluctant to accept at least the institutional religious character of these belief systems. In any case, the Cuban religious spectrum today

is perhaps the one with the greatest achievements in the history of Cuba, in overcoming discrimination and contributing to promote a climate of religious freedom without differences of creed.

## Notes

- 1 The constant support offered by the hierarchy to the Spanish colonial power in view of the forces that fought for Cuba's independence, led the republic born in 1902 to be marked by the influence of anticlerical attitudes. The option for an elitist education through Catholic schools that grew exponentially in the first quarter of the century was responsible for the institutional recovery.
- 2 EFE Agency, April 22, 2011.
- 3 "Palo" or "Las Reglas de Congo" are religious groups of Bantu origin established in Central America and the Caribbean by slaves brought from Africa. The word *palo* (stick) is used in Cuba to designate this religion, due to the use of wooden sticks in the preparation of the altar. The "paleros" (also known as Ngangeros), therefore, are the followers of this religion (TN).

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*Abstract* – This essay aims to analyze the relations between the Catholic Church and the Cuban socialist State over the years after the Revolution. To this end, we established a chronology of these relations that includes the ensuing frictions, conflicts and dialogues – from the expulsion of a bishop and his deportation to Spain after a procession dedicated to Our Virgin of Charity [La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, Cuba’s patron saint], which ended in a march against the Revolution in Havana in 1961, to the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998 and the reconciliation and restructuring of the Catholic Church on the Island. As a constant background concern, the chronology takes into account the dilemma between “revolution” and “Catholicism” that was introduced in 1959. Thus, the essay traces the long road from initial divergence to the current climate of religious freedom and conciliatory dialogue between Church and State in Cuba.

*Keywords:* Catholic Church, Religion, Socialist State, Beliefs, Secular State.

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