

# The Current Mood of the Cuban Church

LESLIE DEWART

In a week's brief and hurried visit to Cuba one can gather nothing more substantial than an impression of the current attitudes, problems and prospects of the Cuban Church. This is not, therefore, a full report, but only a note which attempts to portray the climate of opinion and experience among Cuban Catholics today.

To understand better the remarks that follow one should first sketch in the general Cuban background against which the Catholic mood develops. The most obtrusive fact about Cuban daily life today is that the economic situation is very difficult. Though no one actually goes hungry, for some food is always available<sup>1</sup>, the diet is annoyingly unappetizing. Stores offer practically no choice; one simply eats what is available. For the poorest people, especially among the peasants, this is an improvement over the past, but for most Cubans this is a hardship to which they are unaccustomed. All things considered, however, it is rather well borne, an index of which is the lack of general patronage of black markets. Not only food but also clothing is in very short supply. All other ordinary goods are similarly scarce and often not to be found. The distribution system is erratic: today matches have suddenly disappeared from all tobacconists, but beer is available at any bar; tomorrow there is no beer, only cider; then one can get matches, but nothing to drink. Only luxury goods are plentiful. Art galleries exhibit a lavish variety of oils by Cuban artists, and along San Rafael Street one can find tempting bargains in Chinese jade. What the deeper economic situation might be and whether it inclines upwards or not is anyone's guess—and contradictory estimates are as easily found among Cuban as among American and other experts.

Not unexpectedly, grumbling at the government for its share of the blame, whatever it might be, is widespread, indeed, almost universal—many a foreign correspondent has been taken in by Cuban complaints

<sup>1</sup>This is no longer true. The devastations of hurricane Flora in October, 1963, have brought on a state of actual low-grade chronic famine.

in this and other respects. But the conclusion that there is general disaffection and that the government lacks substantial support is quite incorrect. If one enquires specifically whether disagreement with the government's handling of economic and other matters means favouring a change of administration, or disaffection for Fidel, the reply is almost always resoundingly negative. If one probes deeper and asks whether the complainant would approve of an invasion of Cuba the response is apt to be outraged. 'What do you take me for, anyway? Just because I don't like the way Fidel is doing things that don't mean I'm a worm. Wouldn't you fight for your country even if you disagree with your government? Me, I'll fight whoever comes here, Cuban or American! This is our country, and we don't sell it to no one!' This was actually the expression and the tone used by a taxi driver whom I had previously heard bitterly to complain about the government for three solid hours during a country excursion. Whether the same taxi driver would take up arms if the call came is, of course another matter, since nationalism does not necessarily mean courage. The point is that Cuba's nationalism is an unbelievably deep reality, deeper than any 'ism' and than any other loyalty, and any appreciation of the Cuban situation must begin with this fact. Even a few, admittedly exceptional instances, among the *ultras* that still remain in the country express certain misgivings about any possible American invasion. In brief, in what pertains to foreign policy Fidel enjoys almost as much support as he ever did. Cuban opinion is not turning against him, though it is becoming qualified and discriminate—and, therefore, probably much more intelligent and useful to him as well.

As for the question of terror, the observer feels as if upon entering Cuba he had gone through the looking glass. When you read the Havana newspaper accounts of events in Alabama, or the antics of the House Unamerican Activities Committee investigating the travels of American students, or the role of the CIA in recent Caribbean *coups*, the picture of American fear, brutality and repression contrasts surrealistically with the photographic realism of the ambient placidity about you, and the terrors of capitalist imperialism are put in high relief against the peacefulness of the rattling cement mixer working overtime in the shimmering late summer heat, racing against time to complete the meeting hall for the International Congress of Architects. You sit after dinner in the lobby of the *Habana Libre* Hotel, waiting for the curtain of the adjoining University Theatre to rise on Molière's *El Avaro*, and, remembering the American press references to the

'police state' and its soulful mourning for the Cuban people's lost freedom, you muse on the novelty of overhearing the reservation clerk's loud argument with a provincial visitor who has come to the capital pursuing with quasi-Nordic fervour his quota of week-end entertainment and found his reservations mislaid—you see this, or the pitiful, superstitious, quasi-Calvinistic devotion to 'business-like efficiency' more devoutly striven for than actually attained to, and you wonder if the United States really exists or whether it is not a figment of your imagination.

Earlier I had brought into the country in my luggage an anti-Communist propaganda sheet. It had been distributed at Mass in Mexico City the previous Sunday, and I wanted to experiment. Nothing happened. The Customs inspector was more interested in the elusive serial number of my camera. Yet, in a few days time I would leave Cuba only to have my Cuban newspapers, Cuban road map and picture postcards confiscated by Mexican Police and consigned to join my mug-shot in their picture galleries, on the grounds that such material constituted Communist propaganda; my complaints would be met with abuse, with obscenity and with charges of 'pro-Communism'. Mexico is, of course, 'pro-West'.

Cuba's political structure is that of a dictatorship; this is official. And by its own proponents' admission a dictatorship, even of, by and for the proletariat, is not an ideal political form. To deny that its climate is one of terror is not to deny this. Indeed, Cuba's political dogmatism and orthodoxy are all the more repugnant because they are *not* imposed by brute force and by police agencies but by paternalism and by a rationalist bureaucracy which goes about its business with all the subtlety and all the inflexibility of a Catholic totalitarianism turned upside down. One hears, for instance, a Cuban government official expounding the doctrine of freedom and 'tolerance' and one would swear he was plagiarizing from *The Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, with the mere substitution of 'Communist' for 'Catholic', but without omitting careful and self-conscious stress upon the practical and moral need for that 'liberalism' which dictates only kindness and charity towards the dissident. But, basically, error has no rights, and only the hope of redeeming the innocently ignorant justifies 'toleration'.

For this reason, it is true, there is little freedom of speech—in the sense that mass media are closed to dissidents—on the grounds that freedom cannot be perverted for the advantage of error. It is only by way of calculated exception that Protestant and Catholic writers are

given free, regular uncensored space in the newspapers. Paradoxically, a Catholic religious columnist writes anonymously because, as he explained to this writer, he was afraid of *Catholic* reprisals for his 'collaborationism'.

The topsy-turvy quality of reality in Cuba is driven home in many other ways. You witness an argument between an anti-government *proletarian* and a well-educated, *middle-class*, pro-government tourist guide. He is an unnationalized taxi-driver making more money than ever before but pining for more free enterprize; she is a self-made young woman from the provinces, bitten by ambition, but 'willing to sacrifice myself for the next generation'. Then you note that political discussion, including much criticism of the government takes place freely in public among obvious *strangers* without any apparent fear of repression. What is puzzling is that *in private*, that is, at home or among neighbours, discussion is fearfully avoided by the 'worms', though everyone in the neighbourhood is able to tell you, in this oral-erotic, blabber-mouthed, avid-cared culture, precisely what everybody else in the block thinks about the government. Finally you get to the bottom of it. It is not the wrath of the government they fear, but that of their friends, if they should get into too heated an argument. Understandably, for cases of false or at least rash delation are still fairly common, and though the government's policy is to investigate without prejudice all such accusations—this is affirmed by persons who have gone through the process themselves—it remains the better part of prudence to avoid entrusting one's freedom to the investigative processes of a government whose *forte* is neither efficiency nor unprejudiced officialdom. The government, in short, shows itself rather more and more truly tolerant than many of its supporters. But you persist and, in the end, even many 'worms' admit it: no one with a clear conscience need fear even from his 'friends'. Only those who quite obviously wish to impress you with the irredeemable wickedness of 'atheism' continue to maintain that they fear the police.

But if entering Cuba is somewhat like going through the looking-glass, meeting Cuban Catholics is like walking into Neverland. Your sense of reality is tried by the obvious sincerity of those who, for instance, warn you about being followed by the G-2. You cannot forbear to mention that this very morning you wandered through the battlements of Morro Castle taking pictures at will after having promised, honour system, not to photograph the radar installations; or that yesterday, on your trip around the main material unloading port, Mariel, you carefully

checked whether you had been followed and found yourself humiliatingly ignored. But they have just begun to test you, for they then assure you with earnest impassivity that Castro's government has 'but two weeks to live', perhaps three, at most; and you are told by the most sophisticated intellectuals that 'we can take care of this in Cuba ourselves', that an Army revolt (or what-not) is due 'any day'.

These are, of course, extreme instances. Few Catholics really believe it is a matter of weeks: 'months' is the more common estimate. The fact remains that the immense majority of Cuban Catholics earnestly and sincerely expect some undefined sort of deliverance to take place in the near future. This, they believe, is only what is warranted by God's justice. In the meantime they lie still, nursing their hopes on the dry teat of a resentment which even they themselves are beginning to suspect as lacking the flavour of credibility. A few doubt enough to crave the milk of reassurance, and they anxiously seek confirmation of their estimates from one 'who comes from the outside, where a free press tells what's really going on in the American mind'—for they cannot yet quite believe that Russia's missile policy ended with an American undertaking not to invade. You demur: how could you presume to speak for the American mind when the American mind does not itself quite believe it, (partly because its press has not chosen to inform it?). But they want you to speak at least your mind. 'Tell me', they insist, '*esto se cae o esto se queda?*' You hear the formula with increasing frequency as you take the tack of pricking their bubble syllogisms. You tell them how glad you are that they *wonder* whether 'this falls down or this stays up', but they miss the point altogether and they want you to take their question seriously. In brief, the involution of the Cuban Church is not absolute and total. It is a matter of degree among different individuals and groups.

The hierarchy seems generally paralyzed, dissolved in the hope that 'something' will happen, though precisely what they would not care to speculate.<sup>2</sup> Their plans do not extend beyond a holding action; for instance, the activation of lay catechists. Prompted by the shortage of

<sup>2</sup>As was just noted, it is difficult to generalize. I have been told by a more recent traveller to Cuba that Mgr Pérez Serantes of Santiago is beginning to develop second thoughts, has in recent times praised certain achievements of the revolution and has spoken in a most friendly manner of Fidel Castro and even more so of Raúl Castro. If this is correct, Mgr Pérez is ahead of the rest of the Cuban hierarchy. This would be in keeping with his having also been ahead of the rest in developing the simplistic anti-Communism of early times and, before that, in having led Catholic opposition to Battista.

priests some unwitting liturgical reforms have taken place, like the use of laymen to read the Sunday epistle and gospel. Otherwise, little seems to have changed. A foreign ecclesiastical authority visiting Cuba on Vatican business tells the story how he suggested to a Cuban bishop that he convene a meeting of all his clergy in order to discuss the situation and to obtain their suggestions. The bishop demurred: priests did not express their views eagerly in groups, he said, having human respect for each other. Besides, there were so many different viewpoints among them, (more about that in a moment), so many different religious orders represented, so little to be gained by the meeting proposed. The visitor insisted. The bishop condescended to think it over, and changed the subject of conversation.

When *Pacem in terris* was published the Cuban hierarchy was at a loss. Could they in good conscience circulate it among the faithful? Evidently, the encyclical must be said to expound sound doctrine; but did it really take account of the circumstances of the Church's actual confrontation with Communism, such as obtained in Cuba? After all, it was written for the Universal Church, not for Cuba. Was it not bound—to be sure, *per accidens*—to scandalize the faithful? Despite prodding by Mgr Cesare Zacchi, the Apostolic *chargé d'affaires*, the hierarchy would not agree that the encyclical's publication in Cuba was 'timely'. In the end Mgr Zacchi took matters into his own hand and had ten thousand copies printed and their distribution arranged for. Many copies went to the Cuban government, which placed a bulk order. In certain government offices the encyclical was the object of weekly study meetings. ('You see!' was a phrase to be heard among some curial personnel). Among Catholics, however, the document excited little discussion. In a Church in which Pope Paul is spoken of as a 'semi-Communist' one could hardly hope for an enthusiastic reception for the words of Pope John.

Yet, one's impression of the Cuban Church would be incomplete if one did not know of a small number of lay and clerical Catholics (the latter no more than ten or twelve, that is, about 5 per cent of the remaining clergy) whose stand in favour of coexistence with the revolution and whose attempts to distinguish between Communism and social justice even within a Communist system receive only the open hostility and marked obstructionism of confrères and religious superiors and are supported only by Mgr Zacci. (Some priests will not receive one in their own houses or churches, but insist on coming to one's hotel, away from their own, so as to speak freely without fear of

reprisals). An anecdote, personally related by its principal, Fr Ignacio Biain, O.F.M.<sup>3</sup>, will illustrate the difficulties which their apostolate meets. Fr Biain was inclined to believe that the course of Cuban events might have been different had the Church taken a different attitude towards the revolution in the beginning. He was convinced, at any rate, that the consequences for the Church would have been vastly different had the Church not adopted a counter-revolutionary stand in the end. He was one of the very few who had opposed the voluntary exodus of more than four hundred priests after the failure of the Pig's Bay expedition. The Nuncio, Mgr Luis Centoz, had been another: he 'fought hard' to stem the tide, but without success. By the time the Vatican sent Mgr Oddi (now the Belgian Nuncio) equipped with 'special authority' to halt the mass evacuations and to co-operate with the Cuban government's request that nuns, in particular, do not give up the care of hospitals, orphanages and old people's homes, more than half the clergy and more than four fifths of the nuns had left—most of them confident, as they said, that in a few months they would return in the wake of an American victory over Communism in the Western Hemisphere. After all, the American government had promised it after the failure of Pig's Bay. But now more than a year had passed and, apparently, its promise had been rash. The religious question within Cuba seemed to have abated. No Cuban bishop had done anything about the shortage of priests. Fr Biain decided to take the initiative.

He first approached the Cuban government. Would the Ministry of the Interior agree to the entry of priests into Cuba? he enquired. The Ministry would not object, was the reply, provided two conditions were met. Entry would be permitted at the rate of one priest per month, not more than twelve in any one year; and the priests must not be Spanish nationals. Fr Biain took the news to his bishop. The bishop took the news without enthusiasm. Weeks passed before the bishop could be persuaded to look after the matter. Finally he summoned Fr Biain and handed him a list with twelve names. Let him proceed to obtain their entry, he said. Of the twelve, one was Cuban-born, and two were Spanish-born Cuban nationals. The remainder were Spanish.

Fr Biain was not discouraged. He went back to the Ministry of the Interior and appealed. Amazingly, the government relented and agreed in that particular instance to approve the entry of Spanish priests. But Fr Biain's good offices came to little. For all this took place more than

<sup>3</sup>Fr Biain, one of Cuba's best known Catholic writers, died on the 15th November, 1963.



a year ago, and of the twelve priests allowed by the government only three have managed to find their way to Cuba—one of them, it seems, partly persuaded only by his father's impending death. He was the Cuban-born among the twelve.

Why did the other nine never come? I enquired later from a Church official. 'Administrative difficulties', was the reply. 'Besides', the official went on, 'we thought, after a while, that there was indeed so much bad feeling in Cuba against Spanish priests that we decided we should get other nationals instead. We are now in touch with some Belgian priests. Negotiations should be completed soon'. 'By the way', he was asked, 'how do you account for Fr Biain's disposition towards the government?' 'Well, you know', he replied, 'He is a good man, very zealous and holy, but he is a Basque'.

The information about the Belgian priests was correct—except that the initiative in their regard had not come from the Cuban hierarchy either. In June, 1963, a special envoy, a Belgian priest, had been sent to Cuba to negotiate with a Cuban diocese for the importation of Belgian priests to relieve the shortage. The Cuban government had already signified its disposition to agree. With variation in details, however, this mission seems to have followed a course parallel to Fr Biain's. Months later, no Belgian priest had set foot on Cuban soil.

Two days after Fr Biain had told me his story, I attended Sunday Mass at one of Havana's most fashionable churches, the Church of San Juan de Letrán in El Vedado. A lachrymose homily bewailed the shortage of priests 'particularly in these crucial times', as it was cryptically explained. The congregation was exhorted to 'pray, brethren, that we may be blessed with more abundant vocations among patriotic and courageous young men'. On the following Thursday a priest was ordained in the Cathedral of Havana by Mgr Evelio Díaz. His had been the first ordination in the diocese, the fourth in all of Cuba, in the two and a half years since Pig's Bay.

Many similar anecdotes could be cited, but only one other shall be given here. It is of special importance, for it concerns the freedom of the Catholic press in Cuba today. Now it is widely thought (I myself had implicitly believed numerous reports to the point) that Cuba's Catholic magazine *La Quincena* had been suppressed by the Cuban government in December, 1960. It is a fact that the magazine ceased publication after that date, but a Cuban Catholic who was in continuous and close proximity to *La Quincena* throughout the period explained the same fact rather differently. There was interference and harassment with *La*



*Quincena* in December, 1960, he said, but when this came to the notice of higher authorities in the government a stop was promptly put to it, and the ecclesiastical owners of the printing plant and offices were given guarantees against the repetition of such events. After some hesitation *La Quincena* planned to recommence publication. The issue of April, 1961, had been already printed and was ready for distribution when the invasion came. When the expedition failed and the exodus began it was decided not to distribute the issue. 'Everything' would soon be over and, besides, the publication of the issue would have misled local and world opinion, which needed to be alerted to the 'persecution'. No further issues were planned. The plant continued, as it continues to date, in the undisturbed possession of its owners. Supplies have been guaranteed by the government should publication begin again. And Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, a top-level government official (he is also the ranking Communist theoretician in Cuba) has personally instructed certain pro-government Catholics to report to him if ever any attempt is made by anyone to take over or to interfere with the operation of the plant. This operation, however, remains minimal: the press is idle except for such occasional jobs as printing invitations to novenas—or for the printing of *Pacem in terris*. For it was *La Quincena's* printing plant that Mgr Zacchi commandeered in order to print his ten thousand copies of the encyclical.

After hearing the foregoing story of *La Quincena's* fate I obtained an interview with a relatively liberal priest who occupies a rather high administrative position in the Cuban Church. He was asked to confirm whether *La Quincena's* printing plant remained in its owners' hands and that it was free to operate. It was confirmed. Had not the Presbyterian Church in Cuba, he was asked, just founded a religious magazine dedicated 'to this time of revolution', open to all those, 'pastors and laity, who may have something to say and know how to say it with honesty and courtesy'? And did this not suggest emulation? Did the Cuban Church have similar plans?

The reply was that no such plans were being entertained. Why not? Because although the Catholic press was physically free to publish it would remain free only as long as it did not attack the government. I agreed with this estimate, but pursued the theme: what about the Presbyterian solution, writing with 'courtesy' as well as with 'honesty'? 'If we were as latitudinarian in relation to the revolution', was the response, 'as the Presbyterians are, then we would not hesitate to publish our magazine'. In short, he explained, 'we would be allowed to

say certain things, but we have nothing to say other than what we are not allowed to say'.

The unpleasant conclusion is only in small part expressed in the epigram of a visiting Italian layman: the Church in Cuba '*es una victima del victimismo*'. It is true that the Church's bitter complaints mean that the Cuban Church cherishes its wounds for the fairly transparent purpose of evoking pity—from others and from itself. The deeper part of the explanation is rather more complex.

If the Church in Cuba 'has nothing to say' except in attack of the Cuban government the reason is not that the Cuban Church lacks all consciousness of the range of Christian truths or that it altogether lacks the imagination to say it 'with honesty and courtesy'. What it lacks is the persuasion that it ought to do so, convinced as it is that to do so would be a breach of its Christian faith. For in their reasoning, to say anything else, however true and important, would amount to a concession of legitimacy to Communism. To change the subject, as it were, in the face of a statement contrary to the Catholic faith, or even to approach the same subject in any way but frontally, would be judged by their conscience to be a repudiation of the Catholic faith. Silence, thus, is the last weapon left to the Cuban Church in its conscience-bound struggle to the death against Communism. This is a weapon which the Cuban Church does not wish lightly to throw away.

If one concludes that the Cuban Church has so far learned little from its revolutionary experience the reason is that the Cuban Church remains obviously convinced that in the presence of Communism the Christian response is essentially and formally definable as anti-Communism. That is why the Cuban Church so inordinately rejoices in its 'persecution' that when it does not have enough it is tempted to fabricate some. This is not a value judgment, for one has no reason whatever to doubt the fundamental sincerity of Cuban Catholics: it is a fact, however, that requires understanding by the Universal Church, for it does matter to us all whether or not the conscience of the Cuban Church is well formed.

There is no doubt that it is consistent. The Cuban Church's refusal to live with the revolution even at the cost of leaving its mission unfulfilled is drawn with impeccable logic from the premises that the good of the Church is to be sought above all, and that in the face of Communism the Church's good is the death of Communism. The Cuban Church feels that it cannot seek its own comfort, not even its spiritual comfort, when to do so would mean adjustment to the revolution.

It will not compromise its faith by compromising with evil and falsehood. It feels it cannot under any conditions posit the slightest action which fell short of explicit or implicit condemnation of the Cuban government's beliefs. Silence is, precisely, the least protest required of it by its faith.

Therefore, it is useless to remind Cuban Catholics of reasonableness and prudence, because they defend their policy on such grounds as well. 'We *do* compromise', they say, 'as much as prudence requires, but within the limits of what is lawful'. Silence, they remark, instead of open rebellion, *is* a compromise. But silence and inactivity are the truth's last permissible concessions to error's temporary victory. 'This is a trial', they concede, ('Of all the nations in the Western Hemisphere, why did God choose Cuba?' one of them said; 'is it possible we have done something to deserve it?') and 'we must be hard-headed realists'. The Church would be 'quixotic' if it proclaimed its implacable hatred at the risk of extinction. Therefore, the Church ought to assure its existence in order one day 'when it's all over' to fulfil its evangelizing mission. For that reason it will, for the moment, refrain from positive action and from the positive testimony in opposition to the revolution which once characterized it. But it cannot, it believes, indulge itself with any laxer existence than it now enjoys: moral banishment, obscurity, silence and inactivity. For the rest, it trusts that God will look after His own. Forty years in the desert, it probably reckons, is the upper limit of its inexplicable, mysterious (but unquestionably God-willed), temporary exile.