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## Thank God for Cuba

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Under the leadership of Pope Pius XII, I spent many hours on my knees as a child during the Cold War, cold floor time praying the family rosary for the fall of Russia and communism. My understandings of communism and socialism have evolved since then, but childhood Cold War fears are where my relationship with Cuba began.

So when I called my parents from Havana to share the wonder of my first days in Cuba, I was not surprised when my father greeted me with "Thank God," an expression of relief that his Catholic daughter was apparently safe in a country he thought had outlawed God. I was delighted to report to my parents that I found in Cuba a rich mix of spiritual and religious traditions, and people whose lives, in common with many of the world's faith traditions, are dedicated to social justice and care for all people.

I don't think my parents necessarily expected that I would find Cuba a hostile place, but they were certain that I would find it a spiritual desert. But it is not. Castro's government did officially align itself with atheism (scientific materialism) in 1962 during the early years of the revolution, and the Catholic Church did announce official opposition to Castro's communist government, as a result of which many clergy were exiled or otherwise left the island. But sacraments and masses and religious observances quietly continued during the following two decades during which religious activities were publicly discouraged because they were considered not appropriately revolutionary.

The revolution was center stage, and religion—with all its baggage—was not. But discussions between Castro and Cuban church leaders began in the mid-eighties to bridge religious and revolutionary goals, and led to the 1991 opening of the Communist Party to churchgoers, and the 1992 declaration by Parliament that Cuba was officially secular, not atheist. The evolutionary nature of Cuba's revolution thus has left the official door open for Cubans—should they choose—to make religious affiliation a facet of their public citizenship.

When Pope John Paul XXIII traveled to Cuba in 1998, he was the first pope to do so. His visit did not return religion to the island, because it was already there, but it did bring the fact of the many openly-religious practices in Cuba to the world's attention. The outdoor Mass led by the Pope in Revolution Square was attended by tens of thousands of people whose interest in spirituality was not necessarily Catholic, but was genuine and diverse, and had the blessing of the revolution.

The part of Catholicism that I hold most dearly is its social teaching that prompts questions about religion's alignment with dominant and oppressive cultures, and embraces instead a preferential option for the poor. In Cuba I found so much inspiration for this

challenging work of raising up those in need, from the work of Josefina (Fifi) Bocourt Diaz of the La Guinera community in leading a housing reclamation project, to that of Lic. Miriam Soilet Castellanos, head nurse at an AIDs sanitorium in Santiago. And I found even more inspiration in the daily work of many Cubans in being comrades for one another, looking to one another's social needs, living out a commitment to the revolutionary goals of equitable health care, housing, education, and respect for all.

During our group's trip in April, we saw several fully functioning churches (of many denominations—as well as temples and mosques and santeria chapels), and I have particularly enjoyed recounting visits to the Catholic churches for my doubting parents. At Regla, an historically black city next to Havana, fellow traveler Eileen Nelson took a picture for me to give my mother, one that showed a sculpture of my mother's confirmation namesake, St. Rita, hanging on the Cuban wall of the Church of Nuestra Senora de Regla. The small wooden church dates back to 1690 and is located near the harbor and also near a museum and chapel dedicated to santeria. The black Senora de Regla is the patron saint of sailors, and is the Catholic counterpart of Yemaya, the goddess of the sea in the Yoruba religion.

In Santiago de Cuba, our hotel was next to the Santa Iglesia Basílica Metropolitana, a large and impressive cathedral in the colonial style, originally built in 1524. Pirate attacks and fires led to subsequent rebuildings, and resulting eclectic décor in the church. But the evening mass I attended was thoroughly post-Vatican II, and very familiar. It was followed by a concert of Latin religious music, also very familiar to Catholic ears, sung by a gifted girls choir visiting Cuba from Toronto on an international cultural exchange.

Outside Santiago, we visited El Cobre, the site of an old copper mine and an awe-inspiring monument to runaway slaves (they were freed mine workers who declined recall to slavery when mine owners developed technology for reopening closed mines!) El Cobre is also the sight of perhaps the most beloved of all Cuban churches (built in 1598), the sanctuary of Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre, to whom Pope John XXIII paid homage on his visit. The Virgin statue housed in the church is believed to have come across the sea in 1605 to three young workers following a terrific storm. In 1916 Pope Benedict XV proclaimed her the patron saint of the island. And in 2001 I reported to my parents that I found religious culture alive and well in Cuba!

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