The early stages of the Cuban revolution: a retrospective

by Arthur Jones

Perspective

Editor's note: Last month's announcement of thawing relations between the United States and Cuba and Pope Francis' role in helping bring it about -- a point Pope Francis reminded the world of again in his talk Monday with Vatican-based diplomats -- got NCR editor/correspondent emeritus Arthur Jones thinking about the trip he made to Cuba as a Catholic journalist more than 50 years ago, when the Cuban revolution was still young.

"On September 7, 1963," as I reported two weeks later, "while Fidel Castro was telling the Swiss Ambassador to move out of the now nationalized American Embassy, I was in the next room talking to the second-in-command of G-2, the secret police. 'The Catholic Church in Cuba,' said the commandante, 'is something of a phenomenon.' Cuba," I concluded, "is something of a phenomenon." The better word for governing church-state relations would have been "paradoxical."

I was in Cuba with U.S. State Department permission on my British passport as staff writer for the Camden, N.J., Catholic Star Herald. A year later, I returned. In 1963, all private institutions (including Catholic schools) had been appropriated by the government. Religious education took place in the churches. The day I was leaving, the Havana archdiocese ordained its first priest in two years. Cuba's Catholic newspaper had withdrawn from publication, but 10,000 copies of Pope John XXIII's Pacem in Terris were run off on the government's printing presses. (Papal charge d'affaires Msgr. Cesare Zacchi had arranged that, a coup that cost him the traditional red hat when in 1975 he returned to Rome and was appointed president of the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy.)

By 1964, the headline over my reporting was: "Castro Regime Says Church Free, But Harassment Found Everywhere." Priests were being arrested as subversives. One was brutally tortured. Catholic laymen who
became prominent locally for their religious activities could lose their jobs.

A half-century later, history's coalescing lens allows some commentary, and the nature of the revolution briefly reprised. While many of those who left initially supported or were neutral toward the revolution (or were imprisoned by it), this was essentially a "class struggle," not a classless revolution. It was those without food year-round, without education, and without even the most rudimentary health care who were, by design, the beneficiaries. There was a great deal of support among university students, or at least those I met.

Fifty years later, with President Barack Obama's announcement Dec. 17 of normalization of the U.S-Cuba relationship, the revolution's "class" nature is visible on U.S. television. The keen observer probably noticed that practically all those interviewed in Miami for nightly television reports from "Little Havana" were lighter-skinned, "European" appearing, from middle and upper classes, often with European-origin last names. Those interviewed in Havana were generally dark-skinned, more indigenous or "African" Cubans.

A half-century ago, the Cuban government through Jose Felipe Carneado, director of church-state affairs, could state "90 per cent of the priests were Spanish who did not have roots to identify with the Cuban nation (i.e. the revolution)." The Cuban government forced 100 Spanish priests (regarded as counterrevolutionaries) to leave, and a further 400 priests chose to leave or were recalled.

Zacchi encouraged 43 priests from several countries, including his native Belgium, to serve in Cuba. More were expected, including Cuban priests educated and ordained abroad. Zacchi had local enemies: communists who wanted the church eliminated and Catholics who wanted "a church of silence," not coexistence.

By 1964, Catholic Cuba was a church under duress. "Direct actions against the church -- or Catholics -- appear to fall into two categories: arrest or 'subtle punishment,' " I wrote. "There are many reports of priests, seminarians and lay people being arrested out-of-hand, or for minor infringements. Only last month in Camaguey province three seminarians were arrested because they spent the night in a church while awaiting a train. A priest went to the prison and after several hours was able to secure their release, but not before local officials had compiled a long list of details about family and relatives. These lists are sometimes used to make life difficult for Catholics them to get or keep their jobs, obtain their rations, or to travel."

Communist watchdogs noted who attended church. As the degree of religious involvement increased, so did the hazard. Said a parishioner in Pinar del Rio, where many parishioners just endure the wrath of the local communists and anti-Catholics, other Catholics directly aroused their ire. Said one man, "We could do without one of our parishioners who goes through the town ringing a bell calling the children to come to catechism class."

Altar boys were heckled -- thumped and manhandled by a small mob -- for attending a farewell party for a priest; the priest was arrested for not having a permit for the party. "The incident was settled," I wrote, "but not forgotten. It served as one more reminder for Catholics to be careful."

When I questioned church-state director Carneado about some of these incidents, he said, "It is possible you might have some accuracy there. We have a young revolution. We cannot be sure that all officials
strictly adhere to government policy. You must understand, however, that following the establishment of the Cuban revolutionary government, many counter-revolutionaries took advantage of religious organizations."

It had worked the other way, too -- for the revolution. Rectories of supportive priests had served the initial revolution as arms storage centers. One pro-revolution priest I interviewed said the Catholic church had "withdrawn" instead of preparing for the future. He'd negotiated with the government two years earlier to allow in one priest per month. One came.

In 1964, I was able to visit the Havana archdiocesan seminary adjoining the shrine of the statue of Our Lady of El Cobre in Oriente Province's Sierra Maestra. (Four hundred years ago, the statue floated up out of the sea to give confidence to fisherman battling a storm.) There were 40 seminarians and an affable president, Jesuit Fr. Mariano Ruiz. I interviewed the octogenarian archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Archbishop Enrique Perez Serantes, but as with several key Cuba "interviews" on both sides of the line, what he said was off the record. He had successfully pleaded for the revolutionaries' lives as the government hunted down the survivors of the first, failed, attempt.

Obviously, there was a much larger setting to all this. In 1963, also in Havana was the Canadian philosopher Leslie Dewart of St. Michael's College. He was just completing his landmark Christianity and Revolution: The Lesson of Cuba. He wrote: "Cuba's revolution took place after the division of the world into Russian and American poles: this had an essential bearing on the policies and positions of the Cuban Church. The same reasons that have made Cuba a crucial battlefield of the cold war have also made it especially significant in the struggle of Christianity and communism."

Of Castro, in 1963, I wrote: "He touched the pride of the people. Havana was once the gambling den and bordello of wealthy Americans. All that is gone." He rid Cuba of the "mob."

"Then there is his personal magnetism ... he sat for two hours in his open car in the streets of Havana and talked for two hours. He answered all questions. This personal contact is probably his strongest point. It is impossible to make an appointment with him: contact comes in the streets or on the beach, or in country villages and farms." He carried no sidearm; had no guards.

When I returned in 1964, he wore a sidearm. He said that after President John F. Kennedy's Nov. 22, 1963, assassination, "I thought I would be next."

The implication -- "the mob" had killed the president?

[Since 1975, Arthur Jones has worked in numerous positions with NCR, first as editor and then as a correspondent from both U.S. coasts and Europe. He is most recently author of National Catholic Reporter at Fifty: The Story of the Pioneering Paper and Its Editors (Rowman & Littlefield).]

Source URL (modified on 08/04/2017 - 1:40pm): https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/early-stages-cuban-revolution-retrospective

Links
[1] https://www.ncronline.org/join-conversation