

Church Plays Key Role In New Cuba

(The author of the following article, associate editor of the Times-Review, weekly paper of the Diocese of La Crosse, Wis., recently completed a two-week fact-finding tour of Cuba.)

By PATRICK J. WHELAN
(N.C.W.C. News Service)

"The Church is in a good position to take advantage of the new revolutionary changes taking place in Cuba, for it enjoys a prestige today which it never had before in Cuban history."

"The problem of the Church in Cuba is anticlericalism, not communism."

These were opinions expressed in a group of persons including government officials, Catholic actionists, lawyers and plantation owners — some backers of Premier Fidel Castro's revolutionary regime, some not.

The Church's high prestige today is due in large measure to the active presence of priests and young Catholic men and women in the revolutionary movement almost from its beginning in 1952, I was told.

"In the drive for independence in the 19th Century, most of the clergy were Spanish," explained a lawyer, "so naturally they took the side of Spain."

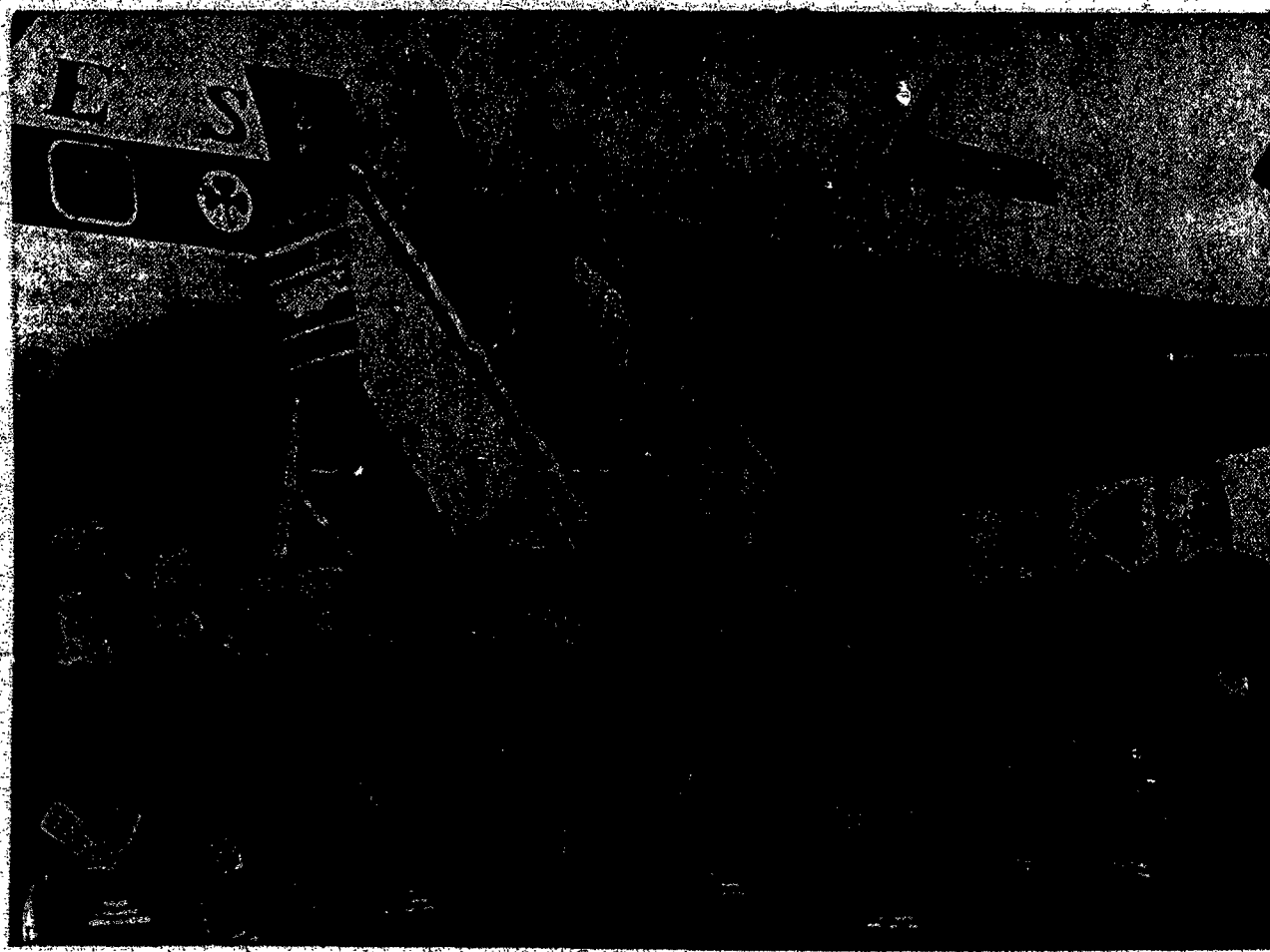
"When Cuba won its independence with U.S. help in 1898-99, the Church reached its lowest ebb in its influence on the Cuban population. Freemasonry and liberalism were in the ascendancy then."

"But in his revolution, Castro's army had chaplains for the first time in all of Cuba's history. The revolutionary armed services still have chaplains," he said, "and some of them will have the typical beards of the Fidelista soldier."

Though priests serve military personnel, they are not paid members of the armed forces as in the United States.

"Remember, it was Archbishop Enrique Perez Serantes of Santiago who saved Castro's life," said another, "and all of Cuba knows it."

"That is why Catholic priests are in a position to exert influence on the new Cuba, and to prevent excesses on the part of



From County Down To U.S. Convent

New York — (RNS) — Thirteen postulants and Sister Dom Bosco pose after disembarking from the Irish Airlines plane at New York's Idlewild Airport that brought them from Cabra, County Down, Ireland. The 13 were on their way to St. Michael's Novitiate in Englewood, N.J., where they will train for the next five years.

where one priest serves 100,000 souls.

"Thousands of people could not get to Mass on Sunday, in the church, walked up to the altar rail, genuflected, then entered some of the front pews."

I saw for myself what it meant. At the Church of Our Lady of Carmel, one of Havana's largest churches, there was standing room only. The crush around me, in the city's intense heat, continually distracted my attention.

On a Saturday afternoon I saw a priest giving Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The two rows of center pews were almost completely filled.

Most impressive was the familiarity with which a number of campesinos — farm labor-

ers in Havana to celebrate the 26th of July, anniversary of the revolution, entered the church, walked up to the altar rail, genuflected, then entered some of the front pews.

For me that was convincing evidence of the deep religious spirit of many of the Cuban peasants: unlettered and ignorant as they may be of their Faith.

A number of campesinos also crowded in to hear Mass on Sunday. Their large straw hats distinguished them from everyone else.

One priest told me that the Church in Cuba is very poor, principally because the majority of the people are poor.

Meanwhile, he said, U.S. Protestants are pouring millions of dollars into Cuba and hundreds of ministers, many of them Puerto Ricans, are proselytizing throughout the island.

Wherever there is a Catholic church, they build their own church as near to it as possible, especially in small towns and villages, a seminary told me.

In Oriente Province I saw this juxtaposition of Catholic church and Protestant chapel. And I saw Protestant churches — sometimes only storefronts — in towns where no Catholic church stands.

The Protestants also do a great deal of social service and welfare work, supported by funds from the U.S., a priest told me.

"Meanwhile, we have received no help at all from American Catholics," he added.

"Does the Church own any land, such as plantations, through wills or donations for Masses?" I asked. I had heard this assertion in the U.S.

"Very little," was the answer.

Cuba, with 6.5 million population, has only 472 churches and

only 230 diocesan and 591 religious priests — a ratio of about one to 29,000 Catholics.

Many priests have to drive great distances to celebrate Mass or administer the sacraments, often in areas where transportation is most difficult for lack of good roads.

For years, I learned, Archbishop Perez Serantes used to travel the circuit of the Sierra Maestra mountains, performing the ministrations of a parish priest. His untiring zeal finally broke his health, and he can no longer travel as he used to.

Frietary vacations are barely filling the ranks to replace those who die or retire. The whole country has fewer than 300 seminarians — and only 48 of these are in the major seminary.

"There can be few vocations without an instructed faithful," said a priest. "Also, too many irregular marriages result from the shortage of clergy and the people's poverty," he explained.

Parents discourage vocations, he said, telling their sons: "As a priest, you'll never make any money."

Many of the priestly vocations come from the poor families, he said, because there is hardly any middle class.

That is why most seminarians receive a scholarship through their bishop, he explained. If the bishop has no funds to grant, that limits the number he can train for the priesthood.

In recent years, lay groups like the Young Christian Workers, Youth of Catholic Action and the Catholic University group have done wonderful service in teaching the people Christian doctrine and Catholic social principles.

On the student level are Catholic Action societies. Several members whom I met impressed me with their zeal and knowledge. One lay leader, met a practicing Catholic, ex-

plained his thorough knowledge of the papal social encyclicals by the fact that his best friend is a YCW leader for that area.

Possibly the Catholic University groups (ACU) are exerting the greatest Catholic influence on Cuban public life.

Under the capable direction of Jesuits like the social scientist, Father-Manuel Foyaca, and Father Lorente in Havana, a generation of young university graduates has a solid grasp of Catholic social principles.

In a spacious student center near Havana University, the students have access to libraries, study rooms, and excellent counsels and instructions.

Coming Knights Hear Juvenile Crime Talk

Corning — Speaking at a breakfast before members of Corning Council, Knights of Columbus, last Sunday morning, Police Chief Norman J. Laurence said shoplifters stole \$38,000 worth of merchandise from three local stores.

Introduced to about 50 K of O members at the Baton Steuben Hotel, the chief devoted much of his talk to the problem of juvenile delinquency in Corning.

He said there is juvenile delinquency in every stratum of society and "it has no favorites." He explained that a person over 16 is treated by the courts as an adult, while one under 16 is treated as a juvenile.

He said parents should tell their children that violating a law while young makes future life extremely hard.

Charity Ladies Sponsor Sale

A bake sale sponsored by Our Lady of Good Counsel Committee of the Ladies of Charity will be held Saturday, Sept. 19, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Gorton Coy.

MRS. FRANCES KURTZ is chairman and co-chairman is Mrs. J. P. Harrison. Members assisting are Mrs. Leo Ganter and Mrs. Vincent Link.

Those wishing to have baked goods called for may contact Mrs. Paul Donovan, RE 3-5468, Mrs. J. B. Hassen, RE 3-8824 and Mrs. Vincent Link, RE 2-6725.

What is the future for the Church in Cuba? I would hesitate to predict.

But here's a quotation from Auxiliary Bishop Evodio Diaz Gila of Havana in a pastoral letter quoted in all the Cuban press:

"Today, with pride and hope, we see arising new leaders in the ranks of labor. They are Christian in their social thought, they defend and represent the working class with justice, and with the wholesome objective of building a better Cuba."

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