

FOCUS

www.herald.com

Pastoral letter launches new era for Cuba's Catholics

COMMENT

Catholic Church launching hopeful new era in Cuba

BY ELIZABETH HANLY

It may not be able to play the role that Poland's Catholic Church's leadership played during the last years of the communist regime, but five years after Pope John Paul II's visit, Cuba's Roman Catholic Church has a new opportunity to come into its own. Some Cuba watchers point to Havana Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino's Feb. 24 pastoral letter emphasizing the necessity of freedom of choice as the launch of a new era.

The letter was released on the 150th anniversary of the death of a man that patriot/poet Jose Martí called "Cuba's saint." Father Félix Varela, who died in 1853, is among the most important of Cuba's philosophers and moralists. He was eventually exiled from the island after urging independence from Spain.

"By reflecting on the poignancy of Varela's words, the church is claiming the importance of Christianity on Cuban history, culture and values," says Miami Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Wenski. The letter argues, as Varela did, that "the capacity to exercise free will is what makes us truly human. If that freedom of choice cannot be expressed, human growth is stunted."

"These are extraordinary words in the context of today's Cuba," says Carlos Eire, a Yale University professor of history and religion and author of the recently published *Waiting for Snow in Havana*.

Cardinal Ortega's letter, addressed to the Cuban faithful, suggests that no end can justify a means, turning Fidel Castro's dictum "History will absolve me" on its head. Ortega speaks about space for faith within Cuban

BY HANLY, FROM TL

education and the primacy of the family over the state's social structures. Again and again he calls for the renewal of values in Cuban society.

"This is long overdue," says FIU professor of international affairs Damián Fernández. "The Church is Cuba's only national independent institution. It has been in a privileged position internationally since the pope's visit. I haven't seen them leveraging that position. My fear is that the church may squander the good will of many of those seeking refuge there."

GRASS-ROOTS WORK

Fernández is quick to make a distinction between the church as a potential moral compass of the island and its grass-roots pastoral work, which he regards as impressive indeed. The Catholic Church sponsors countless food programs in Cuba, and it distributes literally tons of medicines. It has initiated outreach programs for the family, the elderly and the infirm. In what Bishop Wenski calls perhaps its most innovative program, Caritas is developing a pig-farming model in the Matanzas area, not far from Havana.

Soeur Ida Ramírez, who heads the Department of Pastoral Programs at the archdiocese in Havana, has designed a hands-on *Virtudes y Valores* (Virtue and Values) program for both adolescent and elementary school kids.

Miami-Dade Community College

professor of social sciences María Cristina Herrera notes that the very limitations of Cuba's church — the island's lack of priests — may be inspiring a new model of ministry, one that gives far more responsibility to laymen and women.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the publication *Vitral*, a cultural magazine published by layman Dagalberto Pérez Hernández in the Western province of Pinar del Ríos. While each Cuban diocese and many parishes have their own newsletters, none is as sophisticated as *Vitral*, which publishes fiction, poetry, news of dissident projects and prisoners, as well as good advice on such Cuban necessities as the best way to grow produce on terraces or in backyards.

RAVES ABOUT 'VITRAL'

Although over the years more than one cultural group has tried to break the state's monopoly on letters, finally it was *Vitral* that was able to do so. "This is a man with a political future," says Herrera about Pérez.

"This is a man with a political present" adds FIU's Fernández.

He goes on to describe a Princeton University effort to collect as many parish bulletins as possible. They have not only *Vitral* but dozens of boxes of so-called ephemera — mostly mimeographed sheets on paper. "These local documents are remarkable," says Fernández. "Still," he insists, "we have a situation of an aging leader, a country in serious economic decline and a society mired in illegality."

A Catholic layman's newsletter, *Vitral*, publishes fiction, poetry, news of dissident projects and much more.

Indeed, Yale's Eire points out that *robar*, the word for "steal," is vanishing in Cuba, replaced by *resolver* — taking care of business.

But not everyone agrees entirely that the church has gone far enough. "It is a fiction for the church hierarchy to state that 'our work is pastoral, not political,'" says Demian Fernández. "A church that goes on record talking of virtue needs to speak about the rule of law, of human rights and other such internationally accepted expectations. I grow impatient with a church that, publicly at least, is always so careful to distance itself from the dissidents, their efforts and ideas."

LESS SUPPORT FOR PAYÁ

One such dissident is Oswaldo Payá, a practicing Catholic living in Cuba whose plan, pointedly titled the Varela Project, aims to work within the revolution's own laws to change them. In early March, Payá used *El Nuevo Herald's* pages to state publicly that he had expected far more support from the church for that pro-

ject than he has received.

But Miami Auxiliary Bishop Agustín Román, perhaps the local church authority most vocal in his condemnation of the Castro regime, puts it this way. "Payá has one good idea. There may be more ideas. We need more than one bus to go on this trip."

Some Cubans in exile are skeptical about a stronger Cuban church. Artist Alberto Pujol, who worked with Havana's dissident community before coming to Miami two years ago, dismisses the pastoral letter, arguing that "whatever the Church does now is going to be too little too late." And Demian Fernández believes that "only if the church really sets out to act as a mediator, can its position be justified"

'IN THE CATACOMBS'

Herrera thinks differently. "For a long time the church was in the catacombs", she says. By the late 1960s revolutionary Cuba had expelled hundreds of priests; others, including the author of the pastoral letter, were in state "re-education camps". It was late in the 1970s before parishes were strong enough even to begin what came to be known as "a period of reflection."

But by the 1980s, Castro had begun courting Latin America's Liberation Theologists, and the revolution after Mariel needed to broaden its base of support. The cold war against "believers" began to thaw. The church held the first public Congress on faith on the island. "Gradually, relentlessly the church has carved out a space to jour-

ney with the Cuban people," says Herrera. "Over the last two decades the church has gained an ethical, even a prophetic authority."

Ortega also repeated another theme in his letter, that of one country, one people. Over the years, some in the exile community have accused the Cuban church of collaborating with the Castro regime. But while there are exiles who remain critical or skeptical of the church's good intentions, Ortega's pastoral letter has been eagerly received in Miami.

CLAMOR FOR COPIES

"We don't have enough paper to print all the copies that people are asking us for. We have asked the people to limit themselves to one copy per family," says Bishop Román. "It hasn't always been easy to get news out of Cuba. Some of us here in Miami didn't know what Ortega had been saying all along."

The pastoral letter may kindle new expectations. "We are dealing with a rudderless society," Fernández insists. "What promises can the government make, what symbols can it offer? People need hope, we need hope. There is a need for new imagings. If the regime doesn't project real alternatives, I think the church has the responsibility."

Elizabeth Hanly is writing a book on Cuba. She lives in Miami.

Carl Hiaasen's column will return next Sunday.