

# THE CHURCH IN CUBA: 1952 – 1959

## AMBIVALENCE BETWEEN REGIME AND REVOLUTION

BY

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The Catholic Church in Cuba faced unique historical challenges in the pre-Revolutionary years of the Batista dictatorship from 1952 to 1959. In common with the Catholic Church in other countries of Latin America, the Church in Cuba found itself challenged by the macro-historical process of expansive modernity and growing religious pluralism in the first part of the twentieth century. By mid-century the Church found itself caught on the horns of a dilemma: to support the authoritarian regime of Fulgencio Batista in order to maintain some level of influence with the state, or to consciously assume a role of moral and political opposition. A key element of the Church hierarchy's strategic response to its diminishing social influence in the face of both modern pluralism and state authoritarianism was the mobilization of lay organizations of men, women, workers and students, collectively known as Catholic Action.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this study is to examine the social and political roles of the Catholic episcopal hierarchy and Catholic lay organizations, during the Batista regime and the first months of the Cuban Revolution. The Catholic hierarchies in other Latin American nations of roughly the same period, particularly in Brazil and Colombia, attempted to utilize Catholic lay organizations to respond to varying structural relationships with the state as a strategy to counter

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<sup>1</sup> Lay organizations within the Catholic Church were started in the 1930s as an attempt to mobilize 'lay' people (non-clerical) to act as faithful Catholics within secular and civil society. From Greek *laos* (people).

their loss of influence at the state level and to maintain Catholic influence in the social and public spheres in what has been called neo-Christendom.<sup>2</sup> The rupture between the Catholic Church and the military-authoritarian state in Brazil, for example, eventually forced a reluctant Church hierarchy to grant greater autonomy to Catholic Action and facilitated the rise of greater religious pluralism within the Church and the growth of liberation theology. A greatly different situation in Colombia in the 1950s, with a hegemonic institutional Church maintaining strong political links to the National Front regime contributed to the reduced autonomy and eventual marginalization of Catholic lay organizations, although, arguably, also contributed to greater levels of social violence.

Catholicism in Cuba had been traditionally weak, particularly in the eastern part of the island. Catholicism had also suffered during the wars of independence due to its identification with Spain, while Protestantism came to be seen by some as authentically Cuban and patriotic. After Independence, Protestant missions grew rapidly under U.S. cultural hegemony, thus placing traditionally weak Cuban Catholicism in a defensive role.<sup>3</sup> It was in this context that the Cuban bishops encouraged the development of Catholic lay organizations in the 1930s and 1940s. In the mid-1950s, the Cuban Catholic Church found itself faced with the dilemma of how to respond to General Batista's illegal seizure of power and dictatorship. The Cuban Episcopal hierarchy faced a particularly delicate task of navigating between militant opposition to Batista by Catholic lay-activists while at the same time attempting to maintain some level of institutional influence with the Cuban state by the hierarchy. During this same period, Church representatives wrestled with the need to interpret the Church's social teaching and to find a 'third way' between

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<sup>2</sup> Angela Randolph Paiva, *Católico, Protestante, Cidadão : Uma Comparação Entre Brasil e Estados Unidos* (Belo Horizonte, Brazil: Editora UFMG, 2003), 221; For a definition and discussion of neo-Christendom, see: Daniel H. Levine, *Religion and Politics in Latin America: The Catholic Church in Venezuela and Colombia*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 33, 304; Alexander Wilde *Creating neo-Christendom in Colombia*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Jason M. Yaremko, *U.S. Protestant Missions in Cuba From Independence to Castro* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000).

the materialistic individualism of capitalism, and ‘atheistic’ communism. Many of the articles in progressive Catholic magazines, in addition the letters and circulars of the Bishops of this period reflect this vacillation between capitalism and communism, between the Batista regime and the Revolutionary impulse.

The historical question that this study seeks to address is to what extent did Catholic lay organizations contribute to the development of the Cuban Revolution? A related question is to what extent did the Church hierarchy support the autonomy of the Catholic lay organizations and why? Finally, in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution with the wholesale departure into exile of a large portion of the Catholic Church hierarchy, what lessons did the Vatican draw from the apparent failure of the Catholic Church in Cuba? How did the Cuban Revolution of 1959 affect the direction of the Second Vatican Council’s decision to open the Church to modernity in 1962?

Much has been written about the role of the Church (and churches) in the political sphere in the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America. Particular scholarly attention has been given to Brazil and Chile in the period leading up to Vatican II, and Nicaragua and El Salvador after Vatican II, in the search for the precursors to liberation theology and the popular church. Although the majority of scholarship has been focused on progressive Catholicism, particularly the various branches of Catholic Action, more recent study has been directed toward the role of Protestant and Pentecostal forms of Christianity in Latin America. Compared to the volume of works written on Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Nicaragua, much less scholarship has been produced on the role of the churches, both Catholic and Protestant in Cuba.

Although most scholarly works on Catholicism in Latin America tend to focus either specific countries or specific aspects or trends within Catholicism, certain works may be helpful as theoretical background for understanding the Catholic response to both Protestantism in Cuba, and the Batista dictatorship. Scott Mainwaring’s comprehensive study of the Brazilian Catholic

Church in the twentieth century discusses the role of Catholic Action in Brazil as does Thomas Bruneau as well, although on a lesser scale. An interesting analysis of the social and political significance Catholic Action in Brazilian society as a creative force for social change and pluralism has been written by Brazilian sociologist Angela Paiva<sup>4</sup>

The Catholic Youth Workers movement was founded by Father Joseph Cardijn, a Belgian priest from a working class family, in 1923. Pope Pius XI had lamented that the greatest scandal of the 19th century was that the Church had lost the allegiance of the working class, and both Pius XI and Pius XII believed that recapturing working-class allegiance was vital to avoid further erosion of the Catholic influence. The movement continued its development, principally in France among the *padres operários* (worker priests) in the 1930s and 40s, and under the intellectual influence of the *humanismo integral* (integral humanism) of Jacques Maritain and later Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac. Lubac added the dimension of historical context and the role of the individual to Catholic social thinking.<sup>5</sup>

Catholic Action was influenced by the social thinking of not only Jacques Maritain, but also Emmanuel Mounier, the founder of the French Catholic personalist movement and director of the French magazine *Esprit*. Brazilian sociologist Angela Paiva points out that Mounier added a dimension of separation between religion and politics to his relational conception of faith as a social space for a new religious ethic. His thinking emphasized the compelling necessity of social engagement as a Christian duty, but one that should arise out of personal initiative. Dr. Paiva compares this view with the Puritan ethic for individual political action. She sees the personalism of Mounier as contributing to the ability to live religiously in an increasingly secular

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4. Scott Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916–1985* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 116; Thomas C. Bruneau, *The Church in Brazil : The Politics of Religion* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1982), 51; Paiva, *Católico, Protestante*.

5 Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza, *Do Vaticano II a um novo concílio?: o olhar de um cristão leigo sobre a Igreja* (São Paulo, Edições Loyola, 2004), 63; Mainwaring, *Church and Politics*, 118; Paiva, *Católico, Protestante*, 168-169.

world, allowing Catholic Christians to insert themselves into action in the world, in her words, “*resultando na autonomia da prática religiosa e na possibilidade de pluralidade de pertença religiosa*” (Resulting from the autonomy of religious practice and the possibility of a plurality of religious membership - Trans. from Portuguese by author).<sup>6</sup>

Several authors have carried out studies more specifically on the development and political role of Catholic Action. Among these is former activist in Catholic Action in Brazil, Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza. Gómez de Souza writes as a sociologist and political activist and describes the social and political role of the Catholic university movement in Brazil. Ana Maria Bidegain provides a valuable comparative study of Catholic Action in Brazil and Colombia from 1930 to 1950 from a historical perspective. Although her work is focused on Brazil and Colombia, it undoubtedly provides an essential background or framework for understanding the general and divergent role of Catholic Action in Latin America. Bidegain documents the key contribution of Catholic Action to the development of liberation theology in 1985.<sup>7</sup>

Much less is written on the political role of the Church in Cuba. For general background on the pre-Revolutionary period, there are several historical treatments that give a broad background on Cuban popular culture. Fernando Ortiz’s *Cuban Counterpoint* is essential reading for any student of Cuban history and culture as is Louis Pérez’s *On Becoming Cuban*. Pérez’s book has a section specifically dealing with the Church (specifically Catholic Action) and the North American connection to the Protestant Missions. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, also by Pérez, has an excellent overview of the 1950s and the Cuban Revolution, but

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Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1973), 35; Paiva, *Católico, Protestante*, 171

7. Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza, *A JUC: Os Estudantes Católicos e a Política* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1984); Ana María Bidegain, “*La Organización de Movimientos de Juventud de Acción Católica en América Latina: Los Casos de los Obreros y Universitarios en Brasil y en Colombia Entre 1930 y 1956*,” Ph.D. diss. (Brussels, Belgium: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1979); Ana Maria Bidegain, “From Catholic Action to Liberation Theology: The Historical Process of Laity in Latin America in the Twentieth Century,” working paper, Kellogg Institute for International Studies, (Notre Dame, IN, 1985).

unfortunately gives no attention to the political role of the Church. Robin Moore gives a good understanding of the social challenges of Afro-Cubans in the pre-Revolutionary period.<sup>8</sup>

A helpful book for background reading is *The Cuban Insurrection* by Ramon Bonachea and Marta San Martin, giving specific information about Baptist pastor's son and leader of the July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement, Frank País, and Catholic student leader José Antonio Echeverría of the *Directorio Revolucionario* (Revolutionary Directory). Although Bonachea and San Martin provide a good account of the Cuban insurrection, they demonstrate a remarkable disinterest in the political role of the Church and in particular the Catholic student lay organizations. A similar but more concise work is provided by Gladys Marcel García-Pérez, a Cuban historian. Although she avoids any criticism of Fidel Castro's role in the Revolution, García-Pérez's book provides a valuable overview of the development of the Cuban insurrection against Bastista with a primary focus on Matanzas.<sup>9</sup>

In some respects, more has been written from a scholarly perspective on Protestantism in Cuba than Catholicism. A comprehensive study was carried out by Marcos Antonio Ramos. Rafael Cepeda edited a report on an ecumenical Protestant gathering in Matanzas in 1984 with interesting material on Protestantism and social concerns. Samuel Guy Inman documents a similar gathering in Havana in 1929. Luis Martínez-Fernández studies the early beginnings of Protestantism in Cuba and Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century. Jason Yaremko carries forward historical study of the growth of Protestantism after Cuban independence and convincingly demonstrates the strong connection between Protestantism and North American imperialism and

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8. Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (London: Duke University Press, 1995); Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, & Culture* (New York: Ecco Press, 1999), 230–42 and 478, 487; Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform & Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 230–331; Robin D. Moore, *On Nationalizing Blackness* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997).

9. Ramón L. Bonachea and Marta San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection 1952–1959* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions Books, 1995), 39 and 44; Gladys Marel García-Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution: Armed Struggle in Cuba, 1952–1959*, trans. Juan Ortega T (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998).

documents the eventual rupture between Cuban Protestants and U.S. missionary overseers.<sup>10</sup>

Resources on progressive Catholicism in Cuba in the 1950s are relatively scarce. Manuel Fernández Santalices was the former editor of *Juventud*, the official magazine of Catholic Action and was the co-founder of the progressive Franciscan journal *La Quincena*. Fernández has written several books on the role of the Church in pre-Revolutionary Cuba. *Cuba: catolicismo y sociedad* is a simple chronology of the Church in Cuba containing no analysis or commentary. A better discussion of the period is found in *Religión y Revolución en Cuba*.<sup>11</sup> Roughly the first seventy pages deals with the pre-Revolutionary period and the rest of the book documents the growing tensions between Castro and the Church hierarchy after the fall of Batista.

Archives from *La Quincena* magazine, are available from the mid-1950s through February 1961 when it was closed under pressure from the Revolutionary regime. Although clearly anti-communist, *La Quincena* was a progressive journal published by the Franciscans and was equally critical of North American capitalism and was very supportive of the Castro regime in the early months of the Revolution. *La Voz de La Iglesia*, on the other hand, represents a primary source on the views of the Catholic episcopal hierarchy in the pre-Revolutionary through the post-Revolutionary period. This book consists of one hundred episcopal letters and documents written from the mid-1950s through the 1980s.<sup>12</sup>

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10. Marcos Antonio Ramos, *Panorama del Protestantismo en Cuba* (San Jose, Costa Rica: Editorial Caribe, 1986); Rafael Cepeda, ed., *La Herencia Misionera en Cuba* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial DEI, 1986); Samuel Guy Inman, *Evangelicals at Havana : Being an Account of the Hispanic American Evangelical Congress, at Havana, Cuba, June 20–30, 1929* (New York: Committee on Cooperation in Latin America, n.d.); Luis Martínez-Fernández, *Protestantism and Political Conflict in the Nineteenth-Century Hispanic Caribbean* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Yaremko, *Missions in Cuba*, 2000.

11. *La Quincena* (1956–61); Manuel Fernández Santalices, *Cuba: Catolicismo y Sociedad en un Siglo de Independencia* (Caracas: Honrad Adenauer Stiftung, 1996); Manuel Fernández Santalices, *Religión y Revolución en Cuba: Veinticinco Años de Lucha Ateísta* (Miami, FL: Saeta Ediciones, 1984).

12. Joaquín Estrada Montalbán, comp. and ed., *Iglesia Católica y Nacionalidad Cubana : Encuentros Nacionales de Historia* (Miami, FL: Ediciones Universal, 2005); Secretariado General Conferencia de Obispos Católicos de Cuba, *La Voz de la Iglesia en Cuba, 100 Documentos Episcopales* (México, D.F.: Conferencia de Obispos Católicos de Cuba, 1995).

A masters thesis study, carried out by Leonardo Falcon at Florida International University, deals specifically with the social role of the Catholic Church from 1902 through the Revolution of 1959.<sup>13</sup> Falcon finds that the Church endeavored to become more authentically Cuban, without sacrificing its spiritual mission or its loyalty to Rome. This endeavor was expressed primarily through efforts in health care and education, while placing a greater emphasis on the Cuban working class. In Falcon's view, these efforts produced some positive influence over the formation of the Cuban Constitution of 1940. The extensive bibliography and the brief but thorough overview of the organization of Catholic Action in Cuba may prove helpful in further study of role of Catholicism during the Batista dictatorship.

The only book that specifically focuses on Catholic Action in Cuba is *Con la Estrella y la Cruz* by Teresa Fernández Soneira,<sup>14</sup> who provides a history of Catholic Action drawn primarily from personal interviews, magazines (Bohemia), newspapers (Diario de la Marina) and from the archives of the magazine, *Juventud Católica Cubana*, in Havana. The book quotes at length from abundant primary text material in a series of stories with minimal editorial comment. The book provides footnotes but no bibliography.

There is a need for a comprehensive historical work on the history of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century that considers its complex relationship with the Cuban state, the growing Protestant presence, and its contribution and failures in the period leading up to the Cuban Revolution.

### Catholic Action in Cuba

The first antecedents of Catholic Action in Cuba were begun by a French priest, Hermano

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13. Leonardo Falcon, "Rethinking the Social Role of the Catholic Church During the Republican Period, 1902–1959" (Miami, FL: Florida International University, 2002).

14. Teresa Fernández Soneira, *Con la Estrella y la Cruz : Historia de la Federación de la Juventudes de Acción Católica Cubana* (Miami, FL: Ediciones Universal, 2002).

Victorino, in 1928, and was called the *Juventud Católica Cubana*. Dr. Herminio Rodríguez was elected as the first President. In the same year the first issues of the official magazine, *Juventud Católica Cubana*, began to be published.<sup>15</sup> Another similar lay-oriented youth organization, the *Agrupación Católica Universitaria* (ACU) was founded in 1931 by Father Rey de Castro, with the aim of mobilizing both university students and young professionals.<sup>16</sup> By 1938, the bishops were calling for the unification of the Cuban Catholic laity within one international umbrella organization, known as Catholic Action. Catholic Action was officially established in 1940 under the future Cardinal of Havana, Manuel Arteaga Betancourt, coinciding with the creation of the Cuban constitution of 1940. In December of 1945, Arteaga Betancourt was appointed the first Catholic cardinal of Cuba by Pope Pius XII.<sup>17</sup> Also by 1945, Catholic Action had been established in every diocese in the nation.<sup>18</sup> Monseñor Arteaga would play a key but ambivalent role in the attempt to maintain a balancing act between Batista and the revolutionary forces in the events leading up to 1959.

In January of 1947, a specialized branch of Catholic Action, the *Juventud Obrera Católica* (JOC), was established. As mentioned above, JOC owed its original inspiration to Joseph Cardijn, of Belgium, and was socially progressive. The first Regional Congress of JOC for the Caribbean and Central America was celebrated in Havana, in February 1952, with Father Cardijn as the key-note speaker. A few weeks later, on March 10, 1952, Fulgencio Batista overthrew Cuban President Carlos Prío Socarrás. Batista was immediately congratulated by Cardinal Arteaga

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<sup>15</sup> Ramón Suárez Polcari, *Historia de la Iglesia Católica en Cuba* (Miami, FL: Ediciones Universal, 2003), 336-337.

<sup>16</sup> Suárez Polcari, *Historia*.

<sup>17</sup> Fernández Soneira, *Estrella y la Cruz*, 38-39, 221; Falcon, *Social Role*, 72; Bohemia, December 30, 1945, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Suárez Polcari, *Historia*.

ga and who offered his respects to the new “president.”<sup>19</sup>

The establishment of Catholic Action in Cuba, coincided with the formation of the various branches of Catholic Action in other Latin American countries such as Brazil and Colombia. As has been documented elsewhere, the Catholic Church of this period was in the process of losing its unique influence on society through its previously privileged relationships with the state. In Brazil, a weakened Catholic Church under the leadership of Dom Leme, attempted to reestablish its diminishing influence through the mobilization of Catholic students in what was called “neo-Christendom” during the populist years of Getúlio Vargas. In Colombia, in the throes of a violent social confrontation between liberals and conservatives, the fortunes of Catholic Action waxed and waned according to the perceived political needs of the Colombian Catholic hierarchy. In both cases, Catholic Action was viewed as an instrument of the Catholic hierarchies’ for regaining waning social influence through the mobilization of lay activists<sup>20</sup>.

Catholic Action in Brazil was relatively successful in the 1950s in obtaining a large degree of organizational autonomy from the Brazilian Catholic hierarchy and consequently played a pluralizing and progressive role in Brazilian society, leading eventually to an increasingly progressive Brazilian Church and culminating in a decisive rupture between Church and state with the military dictatorship of the 1960s. The Brazilian Church, under the pressure of state repression and torture, opted for the poor, and to support the oppressed, eventually gaining moral authority within Brazilian society as a democratizing force and a moral critic of the state.

The Colombian Church, on the other hand, maintained a close alliance with the state, first under the Conservative regime of the early 1950s, and later with both the Liberals and Conserva-

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1918. “Envía su Eminencia, el Cardenal Arteaga un mensaje al Gra. Batista” *Diario de la Marina*, (Havana) 20 March 1952; Fernández Soneira, *Estrella y la Cruz*, 303; Fernández Santalices, *Cuba*, 51.

2019. Ana María Bidegain, “La Organización de Movimientos de Juventud de Acción Católica en América Latina: Los Casos de los Obreros y Universitarios en Brasil y en Colombia Entre 1930 y 1956,” Ph.D. diss. (Brussels, Belgium: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1979), 195.

tives under the National Front regime of 1956. In Colombia, a form of ‘Christendom’ endured through the 1970s with both the state and the Church in close alliance with the oligarchic political elites. The Colombian hierarchy therefore felt less need for the mobilizing services of Catholic Action and only allowed a temporary and greatly limited autonomy when facing external threats such as the Liberal Reform Constitution of 1936 and *La Violencia* of 1948. As soon as the Colombian hierarchy regained its sense of political confidence, it reigned in Catholic Action and kept it under clerical control. This reduced space for lay autonomy and progressive social action may have led the relatively reduced number of progressive priests and Catholic laymen to feel that more urgent and radical measures were necessary in Colombia culminating in the death of guerilla priest Camilo Torrez in 1966.<sup>21</sup>

The Church hierarchy in Cuba undoubtedly also viewed Catholic Action as a tool for gaining social and political influence. The Catholic Church in Cuba had been both institutionally and socially weak from colonial times and was further weakened by the anti-Spanish sentiment of the war for Independence. The Republican period saw an explosion of Protestant mission activity in Cuba further eroding Catholic institutional influence. It is no coincidence that Catholic lay organizations emerged during the turbulent years of the Machado dictatorship, and were strengthened at the time of the writing of the Constitution of 1940.

In many ways, the situation of the Catholic Church in Cuba resembled that of the Brazilian Church more than the Colombian. Both the Brazilian and the Cuban Catholic churches had been historically weak in their influence on their respective societies, and had been weak institutionally. Like the Brazilian and Colombian churches, The Catholic Church in Cuba was threatened by encroaching modernism and Protestantism and by communism in the atmosphere of the

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2120. Joseph Holbrook, “Church, State and Political Culture in Brazil and Colombia,” masters thesis (Green Library: Florida International University, 2006), 152.

Cold War.

Now, the Cuban Catholic hierarchy was forced to face the dilemma of supporting or opposing an oppressive dictatorship more than a decade earlier than the Brazilian Church. In the face of the clear illegality of the 1952 coup, the Cuban Church hierarchy vacillated (as did the Brazilian Church at first in 1964) and attempted to form good relations with the dictator with the hopes of maintaining some degree of influence with the state. Diverse groups within the Catholic Church of Cuba diverged in loyalties in 1952. The episcopal leadership attempted to influence and moderate the Batista dictatorship, while Catholic students, workers and progressive members of the clergy (as reflected in the editorial tone of the Franciscan journal, *La Quincena*) became sharply critical of the dictatorship and called for social justice. Unlike the Brazilian hierarchy in the 1960s which found itself forced to close ranks with its lay activists and progressive clergy in the face of military repression, the Cuban hierarchy continued to vacillate and attempted to placate both actors in the growing conflict between regime and the Revolution until the fall of Batista and the assumption of power by Castro.

The Batista coup took place in the larger context of the escalating Cold War and the Korean War. The editorial pages of the Cuban daily newspaper during the early 1950s were filled with references to the dangers of communism and the communist threat. A Holy Week editorial in the *Diario de la Marina* on 11 of April, just a month after Batista's overthrow of the Prío government illustrates the preoccupation with the threat of communism. Speaking of the Catholic Church, the writer asserts that the Church had never been more threatened, that the "implacable enemy" of the Church (and by implication of Cuba) was communism. The writer described an immense power that was accumulating behind the iron curtain to crucify, not the Son of God, but His Church. In defense of the Church, the editorial called upon lay people to mobilize the hearts

and minds of Christian masses.<sup>22</sup>

Within days after the coup, contact was established between Cardinal Arteaga and Batista. In the Cardinal's initial note, he gave his personal respects to Batista as the honorable Prime Minister and complimented him on his "worthy" government (*digna dirrección*). A few days later, the Minister of State, Miguel A. Campa, visited the Archbishop's residence to pay respects on behalf of Batista and was received by the Vicar General in Arteaga's absence. A month later, the Cardinal released a circular letter asserting the "apolitical" neutrality of the Church with regard to the coup. The letter noted the largely non-violent and orderly transition of power and affirmed that it was not the Church's responsibility to judge the "revolution." The next day, the newspaper ran an editorial describing Arteaga's circular letter as a "light and a guide" (*luz y guía*) for the Cuban people and mildly cautioning the "militants" and students of Catholic Action to heed the Cardinals words in the free exercise of their individual political rights.<sup>23</sup>

In response to the continuing anti-democratic oppression and corruption of the Batista government, a group of *Juventud Acción Católica* (JAC) leaders formed the MLR (*Movimiento de Liberación Radical*) with the intent of opposing the authoritarian regime. Catholic student leader, José Antonio Echevarria, was elected as President of the *Federación Estudiantil Universitaria* (FEU) in 1954, shortly after Batista was elected as President of the Republic in a rigged election.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the Catholic hierarchy's attempt to maintain cordial relations with the government, tensions began to grow between the Church and the regime as Batista tightened his grip on power. *Revista Bohemia* described in detail the disruption of a gathering of the *Juventud de Ac-*

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22 "Honremos y Defendemos la Cruz," *Diario de la Marina*, (Havana) 11 April 1952, 4.

23 *Diario*, 20 March 1952, 1; *Diario*, 23 March 1952, 3; *Diario*, 23 April 1952, 2; *Diario*, 24 April 1952, 4.

24 Fernández Santalices, *Cuba*, 54.

*ción Católica Cubana* (JAC) on May 20<sup>th</sup> of 1953 in Guanajay. Andrés Valdespino was speaking when the meeting was interrupted by Batista's police.<sup>25</sup> Just two short months after the Guanajay incident, political tensions in Cuba rose again with Fidel Castro's attack on the Moncada army barracks. Fidel and a handful of men survived the attack and fled into hiding. Mons. Eduardo Pérez Serantes, archbishop of Santiago, sought out Fidel and persuaded him to surrender, thus possibly saving his life.

In 1955, the instability and political tension continued to mount as Fidel Castro went into exile in Mexico and the 26th of July Movement gained momentum. The Revolutionary Directory was formed with the goal of armed insurrection against Batista. The Franciscans changed the name of their bi-weekly magazine from "*Semanario Católico*" to "*La Quincena*" and adopted a more contemporary format under the editorial direction of Father Ignacio Biaín, with the motif: "*Una respuesta cristiana a los problemas de hoy*" (A Christian answer for today's problems).<sup>26</sup>

In the *Quincena* interview mentioned above with the young secretary general of the *Juventud Estudiantil Católica*, González affirms that: "*La JEC ha llegado a su periodo mas importante*" (JEC has entered its most important period). The same interview introduces a certain Padre Solá, who was the spiritual advisor to the JEC and asserts that the JEC had grown in the nine years since its beginnings to include over twenty groups of anywhere from ten to fifty students from all over the island by 1956. In this same issue, the editorial, "*La Batalla por la Vivienda*" (The Battle for Housing), was a socially progressive call for state assistance in providing adequate housing for poor Cubans. In the news section (*15 Dias en la nación*), there was an explanation of three possible political positions in response to Batista: insurrectionism, electoralism, and abstentionism. Fidel Castro was identified with the insurrectionists. Castro was quoted

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<sup>25</sup> Revista Bohemia, (Florida International University: Government Documents, 1953); Fernández Soneira, *Estrella y la Cruz*, 373.

<sup>26</sup> Fernández Santalices, *Cuba*, 54.

as saying that the 26 of July movement had decided to unite in one single front, and would act decisively this same year: “*pues en 1956 seremos mártires o seremos libres*”. The overall tone of the news articles, the interview and the editorial were clearly supportive of Castro’s attempt to overthrow the Batista government.<sup>27</sup>

Castro, along with the men who accompanied him, nearly did become martyrs in December 1956, during a delayed landing at the wrong location on the south Cuban coast after a series of mishaps. Of the 83 men on board the “Granma,” only twelve (with eleven weapons) evaded death or capture in the first days in Cuba. Early in the campaign in the Sierra Maestra, there were a number of priests accompanying Castro and his guerrilla band, including Father Guillermo Sardiñas who eventually became a commander and a member of the revolutionary government.<sup>28</sup>

The Cuban clergy’s political views in the 1950s into three main categories: Those who supported the insurgency of Castro and the urgent need for social change, those who opposed it and feared the potential damage to Church institutions, and those that sought a middle way between both Castro and Batista. In the third position were Cardinal Arteaga and Monseñor Eduardo Pérez Serantes, although Pérez Serantes was becoming more favorably inclined toward Castro’s views.<sup>29</sup>

In 1957, more Catholics activists began joining Castro’s insurrection, especially after the failure of the DR (Revolutionary Directive) attack on the Presidential Palace in March. In this same student uprising, former Catholic student leader and activist, José Antonio Echevarria was tragically killed, thus depriving the Cuban Revolution of a Catholic and democratic alternative to

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27 *La Quincena* (August 1956), 33, 34-35, 37, 38.

28 Meier et al. 1995, 340; Fernández Santalices *Cuba*, 66-71; Fernández 2000, 72, cited in Falcon 2002, 80.

29 Falcon, “*Social Role*”, 80.

Fidel Castro.<sup>30</sup> Enrique Canto, President of Catholic Action in Santiago de Cuba, was appointed to be the national treasurer for the 26th of July Movement. Father Sardiñas, mentioned above, joined the guerrilla troops as a chaplain with permission from his bishop. He was soon followed by four more priests. It was in this context that Archbishop Pérez Serantes issued an open letter, “*Al Pueblo de Oriente*” in which he calls upon all Catholics to pray for a peaceful resolution of the Revolutionary violence.<sup>31</sup> At the end of July, Frank País, son of a Baptist minister and leader of the urban wing of the July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement, was killed in Santiago de Cuba. With the death of País and Echeverría, two out of three prominent leaders of the insurrection were eliminated, leaving only Fidel Castro to dominate the post-Revolutionary scene.<sup>32</sup>

In February of 1958, the *Juventud de Acción Católica* published a manifesto about the crisis of the country and called for a return to a state of law (*Régimen de Derecho*). Concurrently, three militants of the JAC and four from the ACU (*Agrupación Católica Universitaria*) were found dead with signs of brutal torture. Cardenal Arteaga and six of the leading bishops of Cuba, including Archbishop Pérez Serantes, issued a circular calling for an end to hostilities and the formation of a government of national union, as an alternative to the continuation of revolutionary violence. Sensing victory, their appeal is quickly rejected by Fidel Castro.<sup>33</sup>

In repeated circulars and letters Archbishop Pérez Serantes continued to appeal for a cessation of hostility on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, in August and again on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October in his circular

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30 Fernández Santalices Cuba, 56; Ramón L. Bonachea and Marta San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection 1952–1959* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions Books, 1995), 119.

31 “*A fin de que no se derrame más sangre en nuestro suelo, que cese el llanto y la angustia, y que en un ambiente de amplio y limpio espíritu cristiano, de unión perfecta y de amor, renazca la tan anhelada paz*” (in order that no more blood be spilled on our soil, and that anguish and weeping cease and that open and pure Christian spirit, of perfect union and love, the longed-for peace be reborn). Falcon, *Social Role*, 80; Yaremko, *Missions in Cuba*, 145; Obispos Católicos, *La Voz*, 39.

32 Bonachea, *The Cuban Insurrection*, 146; Yaremko, *Missions in Cuba*, 145.

33 Fernández Santalices, *Cuba*, 57-58; Obispos Católicos, *La Voz*, 39.

“*Paseo macabre*” in which he condemned the desecration of the body of a young rebel and appealed that such dehumanizing acts be repudiated in order to take steps “*en el camino que conduce a la paz tan anhelada...del espíritu genuinamente cristiano*” (in the path that leads to the deeply desired peace...in a genuinely Christian spirit – authors trans.). His final written appeal to end the war on December 24<sup>th</sup> 1958, was called “*Basta de Guerra*” (enough of war – Authors trans.) in which he expresses his concern about hunger and the damage being done to Cuba, and ends with a desperate call for an end to the violence: “*por piedad, por humanidad, por amor de Dios, por el buen nombre de la familia cristiana, procuren que no se siga desgarrando las entrañas de la madre, y que, por el contrario, traten de poner fin a esta dolorísima y muy prolongada pasión de nuestro pueblo.*” On New Year’s Eve, Fulgencio Batista fled Cuba.<sup>34</sup>

The first year of the Cuban Revolution, the Church continued to vacillate ambiguously in its response to the Revolutionary regime. Monseñor Pérez Serantes praised Fidel Castro in his circular “*Vida Nueva*” (new life) as an “exceptionally gifted man” and generally welcomed Castro and the Revolution. At the same time, the bishop of Cienfuegos, Eduardo Martínez Dalmau, fled from Cuba into exile because of his past association with Batista. The January issue of *La Quincena* celebrated the triumph of the Revolution and praised the Revolution as a “decisive and transcendental stage for Cuba”.<sup>35</sup>

The balance of 1959 and 1960 shows a clear record of ambivalence and vacillation on the part of the Catholic hierarchy and progressive Catholicism as expressed in *La Quincena*. In the Franciscan magazine, the Revolution is continually praised and Dr. Fidel Castro is always referred to respectfully – nevertheless, there is a continual criticism of Soviet (and atheistic) communism, juxtaposed along side of Papal criticism of the individualistic materialism of capitalism.

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34 (in the name of piety, in the name of humanity, for the love of God, for the good name of the Christian family, please don’t continue ripping the guts out of the mother, but on the contrary, try to end this extremely painful and prolonged suffering of our people) Obispos Católicos, *La Voz*, 48, 50-52; Fernández Santalices, *Cuba*, 58-60.

35 Obispos Católicos, *La Voz*, 53; Fernández Santalices, *Cuba*, 61-62; *La Quincena* (January 1959), 3.

Catholic social doctrine is positioned as a third way between the other two ideologies that have divided the world into two opposing camps. Over twenty open letters and circulars were written by the Cuban bishops from January 1959 through February 1961, primarily by Archbishop Pérez Serantes, but also by Evelio Díaz, bishop of Pinar del Río, and Alberto Martín Villaverde of Matanzas, attempting to encourage the Revolutionary leaders toward an autochthonous Cuban and “Catholic” form of socialism rather than a fully communist affiliation with the Soviet bloc. The Catholic magazine *La Quincena*, continued to show unwavering support and respect for “Dr. Castro,” although with growing concern, nearly until the last issue in February 1961.<sup>36</sup>

### Conclusion

The Catholic Church in Cuba was ambivalent in the 1950s and failed to address the turbulent political crisis in Cuba with one voice. On the one hand, the Church hierarchy under the leadership of Cardinal Arteaga attempted to maintain official links with the state during the Batista regime while proclaiming its “apolitical” neutrality. On the other hand, the progressive wing of the Church, represented by progressive and revolutionary clergy and militant student activists strongly opposed the Batista regime and gave active support to the 26<sup>th</sup> of July movement and the student Revolutionary Directory.

This division within the Cuban Catholic Church reflected a larger ambivalence within global and Latin American Catholicism. Catholicism, having lost its privileged political and social position with the demise of Christendom, found itself unable to embrace modernity, and unwilling to endorse either liberal, free-market capitalism, or “atheistic” Soviet communism. In the unfortunate context of the Cold War, the Catholic Church unrealistically desired a “third way” a form of humanistic and Christian socialism and at the same time strove to maintain as much influence with the state as possible. It was Cuba in the 1950s that this crisis first came to a dramat-

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<sup>36</sup> Obispos Católicos, *La Voz*, 53-170; *La Quincena* (January 1959- February 1961),

ic climax. The Cuban hierarchy vacillated between the regime and the Revolution and eventually lost both.

The Cuban case served as a benchmark and a warning for the Catholic Church in other nations. In the final years of the 1950s in Brazil, the Catholic Church at the national level veered toward a progressive view of social issues under the leadership of Dom Helder Camera and the CNBB (The National Council of Brazilian Bishops). The Brazilian Church eventually faced a similar challenge as the Cuban Church. Despite the initial ambivalence, the Church hierarchy eventually made a choice to take a principled stand against the growing repression and abuse of the military dictatorship. Most scholars credit the Brazilian Catholic Church with a significant role in maintaining social and political space for dissent under the military regime and with a primary role in the eventual re-democratization of the political system.

The lesson of the Cuban Catholic Church's ambivalence and eventual fate under the Revolutionary regime was not lost on the Vatican hierarchy. What began as a call for an ecumenical council under Pope John XXIII, was transformed into a major shift of paradigms for the Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council in the light of the Cuban Revolution and the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *La Quincena* (February 1959), 23.

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