After Fidel: ‘We have to keep waiting’

For Miami’s Cuban exiles, painful memories mix with relief at Fidel Castro’s death

ANA RODRIGUEZ-SOTO
Florida Catholic Staff

MIAMI | While many celebrated loudly on the streets, the death of Fidel Castro triggered a more subdued reaction among the Cuban exiles who attended the noon Mass Nov. 26 at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Charity.

“Today is a day like any other,” said Luis Gutierrez. “The fact that [cubanos] has died means nothing.”

Gutierrez used the Cuban slang — cubano, or home — for Castro, whose death had been announced earlier that morning. The 90-year-old reportedly died late at night Nov. 25. But his 57-year-old regime continues to rule Cuba, with his younger brother, Raúl Castro, now at the helm. That is why, despite the joy on the streets of Little Havana, Westchester and Hialeah, the death of Fidel Castro in 2016 means much less than it would have in 1956 or even 2006. An oppressive regime still shackles basic freedoms on the island, keeping a stranglehold on a beleaguered economy.

“He’s been out of it for 10 years. It’s his brother and the clique that surrounds him,” said Gutierrez, noting that he has been coming to noon Mass at the shrine every Saturday for decades.

“She brought me,” he said, referring to Cuba’s beloved poetess, Our Lady of Charity.

Gutierrez is not exaggerating. He is the man who, at the age of 22, smuggled her image out of Cuba on her least day, Sept. 8, 1961. Nearly 10,000 exiles welcomed her that night during an emotional Mass at Boby Madonna Stadium in Miami (since torn down).

Her presence provided a spiritual boost to the early exiles and ultimately resulted in the construction of the shrine — known as La Ermita — along Biscayne Bay. It remains a beacon of Cubans faith and patriotism, and also a place where exiles and immigrants from all the nations of Latin America come to give thanks or seek Mary’s intercession.

“I pray the rosary every day,” Gutierrez said, adding that his prayers that day remained the same: “I pray for my family and for freedom in Cuba.”

His feelings were echoed by Marisol and Alfredo Mendoza, who also came to the shrine every Saturday, out of devotion to Mary and to spend some time “in peace,” as he put it. “It’s a relief, a new dawn,” said Alfredo Mendoza of Castro’s passing. He and Marisol left Cuba for Spain and arrived in the U.S. five years later. In 1976, they have never gone back.

As for Fidel’s death, Marisol Mendoza noted, “We got rid of the horse but the saddle remains.”

MEMORIES OF EXILE

For the Mendezes and all the others celebrating on the streets or marking the day quietly at home, Castro’s death caused memories to surface: of lives interrupted or ended, of courage and sacrifices made, of parents and grandparents who longed to see this day but died before doing so.

Alfredo Mendoza recalled the violent, early days of Castro’s revolution, when priests and religious were persecuted. He personally sheltered one of them: Father Feli- ciano del Val of the church of San Juan de Letran in Havana’s El Vedado neighborhood.

The priest was among thousands arrested in the days prior to the Bay of Pigs invasion, Mendoza said, and held for two weeks in miserable conditions at the Blanquita Theater in Havana. After the invasion, the priest found refuge for 40 days with Mendoza’s family.

After a futile search for asylum in a foreign embassy, he was arrested and taken away.

FIDEL AN OBSTACLE

Father Henry also spoke about the need for unity among the Cuban people, reminding them that Our Lady of Charity was “the first Cuban revolution’s failure.”

“Don’t forget,” he added. “Charity unites us. The maternal love of the daughter of God, of the wife of God, unites us.”

In that sense, said Carlos Perez, Castro’s passing is cause for hope, if not joy. “He was an obstacle to reconciliation among Cubans. He sowed distrust among Cubans. He sowed the separation of families,” said Perez, who left Cuba 20 years ago, and that is what left the island when Carlos was 11 and died in the U.S. The two never saw each other again.

Perez spent 17 years in Chile and Bolivia — where he met his wife — before coming to Miami eight months ago. The move here allowed him to reconnect with his family.

“America was an if nothing had happened. I received the same tender- ness as always, the same love as always,” he said.

Later that evening, Archbishop Thomas Wenski celebrated the 8 p.m. Mass at the shrine. In his homily, he echoed the words in the statement he had issued earlier that day, when the news of Castro’s death first broke.

“The death of Fidel provokes many emotions — both in and outside the island. Nevertheless, beyond all possible emotions, the passing of this figure should lead us to invoke the patronage of Our Lady of Charity, asking her for peace for Cuba and its people,” said the archbishop.

Little Havana revelers seek new future for Cuba

Passing of dictator is historic moment for exile community, but comes too late for many

TOM TRACY
Florida Catholic correspondent

MIAMI | South Florida Cuban-Americans poured into the streets of Little Havana throughout the weekend, almost immediately after learning that former Cuban leader Fidel Castro had died Nov. 25.

Though there was an undeniable sense of glee and Latin dancing in the streets, many of the revelers were quick to say they were celebrating the end of the principal symbol and founder of the Cuban community rather than an individual’s death.

Cuban media announced Castro’s death sometime late Friday night, ending the decades-long influence of Latin America’s iconic socialist revolutionary, who withstood years of tension with some 11 U.S. presidencies. Many here didn’t know about the locally momentous development until Saturday morning.

“I was listening to the news as I was waking up and I didn’t know if it was real or if I was dreaming,” said Elsa Suarez. “I still haven’t processed it.”

She would have been here too, said Elsa Suarez, a member of St. John Neumann Parish in South Miami and daughter of the late Roberto Suarez de Cadenas, publisher and founder of El Nuevo Herald, the Spanish-language edition of The Miami Herald newspaper.

The Havana-born Roberto Suarez, who started work in the mailroom at The Miami Herald loading newspapers in distribution trucks and inserting supplements by hand into the body of the paper, died in 2010. Like many of the original generation of Cuban exiles, the elder Suarez passed away before his remembrances were published.
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small communities and, with the support of their mother church, built mission churches. All of them are small but designed in the classic style, with a bell tower and an attractive name. They did not call them chapels, as in Latin America.

"From the beginning, we wanted to name them missions, because they have a mission to fulfill in those barrios," Father Menendez said.

San Juan Bautista was the first mission, founded in the Wyndwood neighborhood and dedicated to the patron saint of Puerto Rico. Then came Nuestra Señora de Altaracra, in the heart of the Dominican community, also named for one patron saint. It shares the grounds with Radio Paez, the archdiocesan radio station. The third mission, San Francisco y Santa Clara, is in Edgewater, in the midst of a predominantly Central American community. The fourth is La Milagrosa, located at 8800 NW 19th Terrace, whose population also is mainly Puerto Rican.

In 2005, when St. Robert Bellarmine Parish was merged into Corpus Christi, it became the fifth mission, located at the extreme western edge of the parish boundaries.

OPEN TO ALL PEOPLE'S NEEDS
Creating the missions enabled Corpus Christi to open itself to the needs of our people, not only because of the difficulties they had in getting here, but also because people like to celebrate the liturgy with their own rhythms and songs," said Clarissian Sister Carmen Alvarez. "I think it was the people's needs that compelled us to go out." 

Sister Carmen has spent the past 40 years at Corpus Christi, heading up the ministries of catechesis — with 500 students enrolled — as well as the RCA and mission schools. When the parish school was open, she also directed the religious education of its students.

In time, Corpus Christi has evolved, along with its neighborhoods. "Before, to speak of Wyndwood Boulevard meant speaking about drugs and prostitution. Wyndwood was crime-ridden. Allapattah was poor, and the best part was in the west, where St. Robert Bellarmine was, Now it's all reversed. Edgewater or Biscayne North is full of skyscrapers, Wyndwood is called Midtown or the Art District," Father Menendez said.

Most of the population continues to be Hispanic, but some areas of Edgewater now have young people, second-generation Hispanics, Americans, and above all South Americans who speak English. The income levels are higher.

Procesiones
When devotion to St. "La Merced" Virgin began in 1998, "there were only three of us who wore the Spanish-style mantilla in the procession," Bianchi said. "Now there are more than 30 women. It was something we were able to do and others began joining in. They understood why we wanted to maintain the tradition. It's a way of evangelizing, processing with the images and praying.

Another devotion that is quite ingrained in Corpus Christi is 'el Señor de los Milagros' (the Lord of Miracles), whose image the Peruvian community takes into the streets in October.

One of the accomplishments of the parish as a whole is La Merced Church, formerly known as Museo Peru (the Peruvian Museum). Although it originated with Peruvian parishioners, support for its construction came from all other communities.

Located on the grounds of Corpus Christi proper, at 2200 W. Seven

ARCHBISHOP WENSKY'S STATEMENT
Fray to Mary for true freedom, peace in Cuba

Archbishop Thomas Wenski issued the following statement Nov. 26, the day after the announcement that Cuba’s longtime leader, Fidel Castro, had died the night before.

In the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes, we read "both the just and the wicked will judge, since a time is set for every affair and for every work" (Ecc 3:17). Fidel Castro has died. Now he awaits the judgment of God who is merciful but just. His death provokes many emotions — both in and outside the island. Nevertheless, beyond all possible emotions, the passing of this figure should lead us to invoke the paternal care of Cuba, the Virgin of Charity, asking for peace for Cuba and its people.

"And to Jesus through Mary, Charity unites us," May Holy Mary, Our Lady of Charity, hears her people’s prayers and hasten for Cuba the hour of its reconciliation in truth, accompanied by freedom and justice. May, through the intercession of the "Virgen de la Merced," the Cuban people move to traverse that narrow road between fear which goes in to exil, and fear which goes in to the illusion of fighting evil only makes it worse. "Our Lady of Charity, comfort us with your mantle."

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