

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 Charity.

"Today is a day like any other," said Luis Gutierrez. "The fact that *el caballo* has died means nothing."

Gutierrez used the Cuban slang — *caballo*, or horse — 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, Raul 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 1976 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 patroness, 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



Archbishop Thomas Wenski celebrates Mass at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Charity (La Ermita de la Caridad) in Miami with members of the Cuban community Nov. 26, the day after former Cuban leader Fidel Castro died. (PHOTOS BY TOM TRACY | FC)

her feast day, Sept. 8, 1961. Nearly 10,000 exiles welcomed her that night during an emotional Mass at Bobby Maduro 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 Cuban 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 Marizol and Alfredo Mendez, who also come 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 Mendez of Castro's passing. He and Marizol left Cuba for Spain and arrived in the U.S. five years later, in 1978. They have never gone back.

As for Fidel's death, Marizol Men-

dez noted, "We got rid of the horse but the saddle remains."

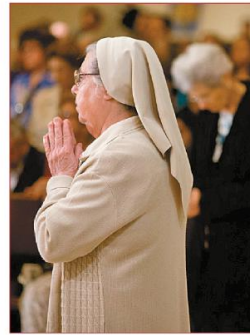
MEMORIES OF EXILE

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 Mendez recalled the violent, early days of Castro's revolution, when priests and religious were persecuted. He personally sheltered one of them: Father Feliciano del Vals 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, Mendez 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 Mendez's family.

After a futile search for asylum in a foreign embassy, he was re-arrest-



One of the sisters who works at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Charity in Miami folds her hands in prayer during the Mass Nov. 26.

ed, put on a ship and sent into exile in Spain with more than 100 other priests — including Miami Auxiliary Bishop Agustin Roman, the shrine's longtime rector, who died in 2012.

"I followed that bus the whole way," Mendez said, referring to the exiled priests. Then, with resignation in his voice, "We have to keep waiting."

It's those memories, that pain, that hurt that Father Fernando Heria, the shrine's newly appointed rector, spoke of during his homily at the Mass. His uncle was killed by a Castro firing squad Sept. 16, 1961.

"Today is not a typical Saturday," Father Heria said. "It's not that we rejoice at the death of any human being, because that would be a sin. But it's that, on this day, we want to turn over to God the pain we have carried around for more than 57 years."

"We have to begin to heal," Father Heria continued. "We have to go to the Almighty and turn all our pain over to him. Be not afraid to tell the Lord, 'I have a pain that only you can

take away.'"

FIDEL AN OBSTACLE

Father Heria also spoke about the need for unity among the Cuban people, reminding them that Our Lady of Charity was "the first Cuban *'balseira'* (rafter)."

"Don't forget," he added. "Charity unites us. The maternal love of the daughter of God, of the wife of God, of the Mother 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, at the age of 43. His father 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. "And it was as if nothing had happened. I received the same tenderness 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 patroness of Cuba, Our Lady of Charity, asking her for peace for Cuba and its people," the archbishop said. "May our holy Lady of Charity listen to her people and hasten for Cuba the hour of its reconciliation in truth, accompanied by freedom and justice." ■

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



A woman is interviewed by a local television station while wearing a T-shirt that reads "Esta es tu casa, Fidel," and shows a tombstone. (TOM TRACY | FC)

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 communist dictatorship 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 open tensions 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, but had I known about it last night

I would have been here then too," said Elena Suarez, a member of St. John Neumann Parish in South Miami and daughter of the late Roberto Suarez de Cardenas, 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 nem-

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esis, Castro.

"The first thing I did was go and meet my mother and convince her to go to breakfast at Casa Cuba in South Miami, and so we started the celebration there. And then my neighbor came and got me because I just needed to be here," Elena Suarez said of the Little Havana street party Nov. 26.

Local police had to close the area to traffic several times throughout the weekend as the street and those in two other predominantly Cuban neighborhoods — Hialeah and Westchester — were overrun by impromptu gatherings. The focal points were Cuban restaurants situated on Miami's famed Calle Ocho or Eighth Street west of downtown, Bird Road in Westchester, and West 49th Street in Hialeah.

Castro's death marked a moment that had been anticipated for decades, though often frustrated over the years by false reports of his passing.

"I have always said that when this happened I would come to Eighth Street. I had to be here," Suarez said. "My father passed away six years ago and I am very emotional that he is not here to celebrate. It is surreal. Only my mom and my aunt are left from that generation. My father would be out here smoking a cigar."

Local Cuban-American leaders on Sunday said they were planning even more local events to mark Castro's passing. Cuban-born pop singer Gloria Estefan, a leading voice of the Miami Cuban cultural community, issued her thoughts over the weekend on her Instagram account, noting that "although the death of a human being is rarely cause for cel-



A son waves the Cuban flag while his father drinks a Cuban cafecito in front of the iconic Versailles Restaurant on Southwest Eighth Street. Local Cubans poured out into the streets of Miami's Little Havana district Nov. 26. (PHOTOS BY TOM TRACY | FC)

ebration, it is the symbolic death of the destructive ideologies that he espoused that, I believe, is filling the Cuban exile community with renewed hope and a relief that has been long in coming."

Estefan noted that although the grip of Castro's regime will not loosen overnight, "the demise of a leader that oversaw the annihilation of those with an opposing view, the indiscriminate jailing of innocents, the separation of families,

the censure of his people's freedom to speak, state-sanctioned terrorism and the economic destruction of a once-thriving and successful country, can only lead to positive change for the Cuban people and our world."

Similar sentiments were expressed by Andy S. Gomez, retired assistant provost, dean of International Studies and Senior Fellow for Cuban Studies at the University of Miami. Gomez traveled to Cuba



Both those old enough to have lived through the early days of the Cuban revolution, as well as those who only heard about it from their parents and grandparents, gather in Little Havana.

with pilgrims from Miami for Pope Francis' visit there in September 2015.

"The death of Fidel Castro ends a very painful history for Cubans in exile and on the island," Gomez said. "However, let's not forget that nothing has changed in Cuba. The Cuban people continue to be denied their liberty and freedom under Raul Castro. The government remains a totalitarian regime with no changes."

Elsewhere, Cuban-Americans in Miami sought to gather in a more subdued and spiritual setting, including the National Shrine of Our Lady of Charity, where Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski celebrated Mass the evening of Nov. 26.

The archbishop offered prayers for the people of Cuba, invoking their patroness, Our Lady of Charity, and asking her for peace in Cuba and for its people. ■

ARCHBISHOP WENSKI'S STATEMENT

Pray 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 God will judge, since a time is set for every affair and for every work" (Eccl 3:17). Fidel Castro has died. Now he awaits the judgment of God who is merciful but also 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 patroness of Cuba, the Virgin of Charity, asking for peace for Cuba and its people.

"To Jesus through Mary, Charity unites us." May Holy Mary, Our Lady of Charity, hear 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 Mambisa," the Cuban people know how to traverse that narrow road between fear which gives in to evil, and violence which under the illusion of fighting evil only makes it worse. "Our Lady of Charity, cover us with your mantle."

PARISH

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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. "We are not one parish, we are six missions, six sending-forths, six mandates to evangelize that area."

San Juan Bautista was the first mission, founded in the Wynwood neighborhood and dedicated to the patron saint of Puerto Rico. Then came Nuestra Señora de Altgracia, in the heart of the Dominican community in Allapattah. It shares the grounds with Radio Paz, the archdiocesan radio station. The third mission, San Francisco y Santa Clara, is in Edgewater, in the midst of a predominantly Central Ameri-

can community. The fourth is La Milagrosa, located at 1860 N.W. 19 Terrace, whose population also is mainly Puerto Rican.

In 2009, 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 Claretian 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 RCIA and mission choirs. 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 Biscayne Boulevard meant speaking about drugs and prostitution. Wynwood 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. Wynwood 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.

Thinking about their needs, San Francisco y Santa Clara Mission began celebrating Sunday Mass in English at the beginning of December. The Tridentine Latin Mass which was celebrated there moved to La Milagrosa.

Apart from the missions, the entire Corpus Christi community works together on activities such as the parish carnival and devotional feasts, especially processions.

PROCESSIONS

When devotion to Spain's "la Macarena" Virgin began to spread in 1998, "there were only three of us who wore the Spanish-style mantilla in the procession," Bianchi said. "Now it's more than 20 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 the other communities.

Located on the grounds of Corpus Christi proper, at 3220 N.W. Seventh Ave., the colonial-style structure houses "the largest collection

of colonial art in the United States. And when it's finished we will have the most beautiful baroque colonial church in the U.S.," Father Menendez said.

Construction on the church began 11 years ago, and approximately \$1.5 million worth of work remains to be done. The structure is complete but the main altar still needs to be gold-plated. Some of the side chapels also are being built out of hand-carved cedar.

For Father Menendez, the most valuable aspect of La Merced "is the love with which it's being done. Everything else is material."

For Msgr. Castañeda, Corpus Christi's greatest accomplishment has been "to reach people who did not know the Church; to reach those who are not evangelized or have fallen away."

The parish celebrated that reality with a 75th anniversary gala Dec. 3 and a Dec. 12 anniversary Mass, celebrated by Archbishop Thomas Wenski. ■

Look for coverage of the Mass online at www.miamiarch.org.