

## **With Pope Francis in Cuba**

Rev. David V. Skoblow



**Before the Holy Father arrived for his visit to Washington, New York, and Philadelphia, he visited the island nation of Cuba. I was very fortunate to have been invited to join a group of about 100 pilgrims from the Boston area to travel to Havana on Friday, September 18, to be with Pope Francis. This was only the second visit by a reigning pontiff to Cuba, the first being that of Pope St. John Paul II in January of 1998.**

**The pilgrimage was led by Seán Cardinal O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston, and Theodore Cardinal McCarrick, Archbishop Emeritus of**

**Washington and the first Bishop of Metuchen. Besides the Cardinals, and Cardinal Sean's secretary, Father Jonathan Gaspar, I was the only other priest on the journey. Acting as Cardinal McCarrick's secretary for the trip, I had a rare opportunity to participate in all the papal events in Havana.**

**We stayed at the modern Hotel Meliá Cohiba, located right on the shore with spectacular views of both the coastline and the city. Its name is not for naught, as it boasts a fine cigar smoking room and ladies who regularly sit and hand roll cigars of Cohiba quality. At the hotel we had a brief encounter with the crew of the Alitalia jet that had carried the Pope to Havana.**

**The formal program began Saturday morning with a briefing by the cardinals on the Church's relationship with the government of Cuba, a government that officially espouses atheism. The 1998 papal visit was certainly a turning point, but there is still a long way to go. Prior to the 1959 revolution that brought Castro into power, Cuba was a very Catholic country. Today about 60% of the population of 12 million is Catholic. There are only about 350 priests serving some 300 parishes. That's about 20,000 Catholics for each priest.**

**That afternoon, while some rested in their rooms or poolside, I enjoyed a tour of the city with one of the other participants. We hired a cocotaxi, basically a yellow fiberglass shell over a three-wheeled motorcycle, with two passenger seats. They take their name from the coconuts they resemble. Luckily, Havana drivers are very good and we survived our tour in this frail vehicle.**

**Havana was founded by the Spanish in 1519. Today it is a sprawling metropolis of some 2 million inhabitants. Old Havana is beautiful, but is desperately in need of continuing renovation. It was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982, attesting to its “outstanding universal value.”**

**On Saturday we visited Muraleando, a community art project in a Havana neighborhood, or *barrio*. The gifted artists rummage to find materials for their art, often using discarded metal of all sorts to create unique sculptures. Other artists carved beautiful pieces in ebony, cow bone, and coconut shell. Many in our group brought simple art supplies with them to donate.**



**On Saturday evening I had a rare opportunity to concelebrate a private Mass with Cardinals O'Malley and McCarrick and Father Gaspar in Cardinal Seán's hotel room.**

**Our lunches and dinners were hosted in *paradores*, small, privately operated restaurants that, along with taxis, are one of the few governmental concessions to private enterprise. The meals were**

excellent, with fresh seafood being the prime attraction on the menus. Mojitos and Cuba libres were popular drinks, made with the excellent local rum.

Sunday was the highlight of the pilgrimage. The group had good tickets for the papal Mass that was celebrated in the Plaza de las Revolución, dominated by the 360 foot José Martí Memorial, with a portrait of Che Guevara looking on from the side of the Ministry of the Interior.

As secretary to Cardinal McCarrick, I was one of 10 priests who joined about 40 bishops concelebrating the papal Mass from the raised stage. The other cardinal concelebrants included Jaime Cardinal Ortega, Archbishop of Havana, and Chibly Cardinal Langlois, Bishop of Les Cayes, Haiti. We vested in the lobby of the Teatro Nacional de Cuba which is right on the square. About 100 priests concelebrated from the front rows in the congregation. Raul Castro sat in the front row of the congregation, with Cristina Kirchner, President of Argentina, the Pope's native country, on his left. A large choir and orchestra provided excellent contemporary liturgical music. The Pope delivered a short but poignant homily stressing the need for us all to live

**a life of service, and ending with the observation that a life without service is a not a useful life.**

**That afternoon I joined Cardinals O'Malley and McCarrick for solemn vespers with the Pope at the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception. Built in the latter part of the eighteenth century in the Baroque style, the Cathedral is made of coral rock. The congregation was reserved to clergy, seminarians, and religious. Strategically seated on the center aisle, I was able to shake the Pope's hand as he processed in. In his homily the Pope prayed that we might be shepherds close to our people, and open to their ideas and problems. Conflicts and disagreements, said the pontiff, are to be expected and are a sign of life in the Church. While we attended vespers, the rest of the group joined 300 pilgrims from Miami at a reception hosted by the Jeffrey DeLaurentis, the Chargé d'Affaires of the recently re-established American Embassy in Cuba at the ambassadorial residence.**

**On Monday morning we joined the Miami contingent for Mass at the Convent of St. Teresa of Avila de Las Camelitas Descalzas, a convent of cloistered Carmelite sisters. The convent was built around 1700. There the sisters live a contemplative life of poverty and prayer. The sisters chanted the Mass propers and ordinary parts and sang**

**hymns. Their church boasted a magnificent silver tabernacle and altar faces. After Mass we donated medical supplies and clothing to the sisters for distribution to the poor.**

**After Mass we visited the parish of La Milagrosa. There we visited a senior citizen day care center where one of the guests sang for us. Then we crossed to another parish project, a school for autistic children. I had made it a point during the entire time in Havana to wear my clerics as a witness to the presence of the Church. When we entered the classroom of about twenty children, about half of the class, recognizing the collar, rushed up to me and hugged me saying “*sacerdote*” and “*padre*” (priest and father). It was one of the highlights of the pilgrimage for me. One of the boys embraced me and added that he wanted to be a priest when he grew up. It was a very moving moment. Since I am still within my first year of ordination, I asked the teacher if I could impart a first blessing. She asked if I could recite the Our Father with the children. Since I do not have the prayer memorized in Spanish, I prayed it aloud in Latin while the class prayed in Spanish. For a country where atheism is the official religion, these children certainly knew their Padre Nuestro. The La Milagrosa**

projects are funded by Caritas Cubana, the local version of Catholic Charities.

That night we celebrated our final meal together in grand style with dinner and dancing. The evening began with a surprise as we were brought to dinner in a fleet of some 20 antique cars. Most date to the Fifties and Sixties, but the vintage of the one Cardinal McCarrick and I rode in was 1929. Havana is noted for these cars, lovingly maintained. In the States these would all be considered classics, but in Havana they are basic transportation.

Tuesday we headed for José Martí International Airport for our departure. We watched on the screen as the papal jet left for Washington. Our visit was actually longer than the Pope's. At the airport I had another encounter that brought home the kindness and generosity of the Cuban people. I was looking for some coins to bring back for my godson. The lady at the counter of one of the souvenir shops not only searched her purse for coins but called over to other shops and stopped friends to make sure I had a good collection. Cuba uses two currencies, the national peso and the convertible peso. The convertible peso is nominally worth 25 times the local peso, but the local peso can be used by locals to buy staples. These coins were all

**denominated in local pesos. To a visitor like me they were worthless except as collectors' items, but to a local they were bread and butter. When I offered dollars in exchange, she refused, insisting that the coins were a gift.**

**So ended my pilgrimage to Cuba, a memorable voyage of gift and grace.**