

The Miami Diocese and the Cuban Refugee Crisis of 1960-1961

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In 1959, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Miami was less than a year old, yet it grasped the reins of public service leadership when the Cuban refugee crisis paralyzed the established social welfare systems of the city. Diocesan leaders did not seek this role; it was thrust on them by events in Cuba. Initially their coreligionists in Cuba supported the revolution, but soon Catholic prelates and laity became leaders of the counter-revolution, and when that movement failed, they became refugees. Having urged and supported the counter-revolution, the Church had a moral obligation to aid its vanquished warriors, and this burden fell on the Catholics of Miami.

This story begins in Cuba, where in early 1959, the leaders of the Catholic Church hailed the revolution as a new beginning for the poor and oppressed of the island.¹ When the revolutionary government declared a land reform act, Cuban Church leaders praised it as a document which breathed the spirit of the papal encyclicals.² One Catholic intellectual compared the philosophy of Castro to that of the French Catholic social thinker Jacques Maritain.³ Cuban Catholic leaders, however, were not guileless. They knew that there were Communists in the Castro government, but they were not going to surrender the soul of the revolution without a fight. However, for many reasons, including the growing animosity of the American Government toward the revolution and Catholicism's four hundred year alliance with forces of oppression in Cuba, the Church could not co-opt the revolution. Furthermore, the revolutionaries understood that they had to destroy or at least seriously weaken the Church because in Cuba it remained the only institution with powers of ideology, propaganda and organization equal to their own.

Within a year of Castro's triumphant march into Havana, disillusionment erupted throughout the island, and the Catholic Church in Cuba became the focal point of the rapidly developing counter-revolution. By the summer of 1960, sporadic conflicts had broken out in various parts of the country. Those actively opposing Castro chose the Christian fish as the sign of their movement and this symbol began appearing on walls throughout the city of Havana as a sign of protest against the revolution.⁴ The Catholic urban and middle class represented the core of the rapidly developing counter-revolution.⁵ As one historian has pointed out, "At first the anti-Castro movement was amorphous, but as the tempo of the revolution increased and communists gained in strength, the counter-revolution took definite form. The Church provided the framework for student anti-communist activities, offering them a doctrinal alternative to Communism."⁶

In April 1960, the leader of the Communist party in Cuba, Juan Marinello, declared war on the Catholics, threatening to attack those Catholics who opposed communism as traitors to the revolutionary regime of Fidel Castro. By May, conditions had deteriorated to the point that José Rasco, founder and leader of the Christian Social Democratic Movement, fled Cuba under a death threat, and in June, the Christian Social Democrats announced that the termination of free speech in Cuba had ended their effectiveness and forced them to suspend their activities as a political movement.⁷ Relations between the Government and the Church finally reached a breaking point on May 20, 1960, when the Archbishop of Santiago, Perez Serants, who had long been a close friend of Castro and who had saved his life in 1953, publicly denounced the infiltration of Communists into the Castro regime. He warned Catholics not to cooperate in any way with communism. "We can no longer say that the enemy is at our door," declared Perez, "because he is now inside and speaking loudly as though settled in his own domain."⁸ On Sundays, churches became scenes of political clashes between pro-Castro and anti-Castro forces. In Havana, violence erupted after a number of masses following a three hour speech by Castro in which he denounced the "Fascist priests of Spain."⁹

The summer of 1960 represented the bloody last stand of the Church in Cuba as an organized counter-revolutionary force. In August, Cuban bishops collectively and publicly denounced the Communist takeover of the Cuban revolution and the government's

suppression of Catholic radio and television programs in Santiago and Havana. This letter, which was read in all the churches of Cuba, marked the first time that the bishops had made a joint statement against the regime since Castro had come to power.¹⁰ For many young Catholics, the bishops' declaration represented a call to arms, as bloody street fights erupted throughout the summer between predominantly Catholic anti-Castro forces and the pro-Castro militia. In August, pro-Castro militants shot a priest and severely beat six students who were attending the first annual meeting of the National Catholic Youth Conference.¹¹

Government officials arrested the injured priest and brought him before a military tribunal on charges of inciting a riot.¹² In reaction to the violence and faced with official government indifference, the archbishop of Havana threatened to close all the churches in Cuba and considered declaring Cuba a church in silence.¹³ Official war against the Church was declared on August 11, 1960, when Castro issued a blistering attack calling on "good Christians to root out those who are turning churches into counter-revolutionary trenches."¹⁴ Early in December, the bishops delivered another pastoral letter of protest against the Castro government. They accused Castro of promoting communism, conducting an all-out anti-Catholic campaign on radio and television, suppressing the Catholic press and television, and disrupting liturgical services. They also accused him of secretly attempting to create a new national church. Castro responded with another three-hour speech against the Church in which he branded the cardinal of Havana a Judas, and a supporter of the Batista regime. Priests were arrested for reading the bishops' anti-communist pastoral letter, and three churches were bombed.¹⁵ In the same month, Cuban militiamen occupied ten Catholic churches and four seminaries, jailed five priests, and closed the Catholic periodical *La Quincena*, the last Cuban periodical to speak out against the government. For two years, from the summer of 1960 until mid-1962, when machine gun bullets rained down on a group of Catholics who attempted to hold their traditional procession to Our Lady of Charity, the Castro government waged a war of words and blood against the Church. By that time, Castro's victory seemed complete. There were less than fifty priests left in Cuba and laws restricted them to saying mass only. The government did not go so far as to forbid church membership, but those who did practice their religion could not participate in government activities nor receive any government benefits.

For those middle-class Catholics who had first supported and now fought Castro, there was nothing left to do but flee Cuba, and when they left, they carried with them a deep feeling of betrayal. Dr. Ruben Dario Rumbault, the intellectual leader of the Catholic Social Action movement in Cuba, joined those who fled Cuba that summer. He admitted supporting Castro "because he spoke in terms of Humanism, even Christian Humanism," but by the middle of 1959, Rumbault declared, "Castro replaced that (Christian Humanism) with a new national chauvinism."¹⁶ By the summer of 1960, the Church had lost the war for the soul of the Cuban revolution. Its soldiers, the priests, religious, and laity who had dreamed of a different vehicle to social justice, created a Cold War Dunkirk as they fled their homes weary and beaten, and in fear for their lives. For the first time in the Cold War era, the United States became the initial country of asylum for political refugees, and by the accident of geography, Miami became the port of entry. Few cities could have been less prepared for such a human catastrophe than Miami. The state of Florida rivaled Mississippi as the state spending the least on welfare. And in Dade County, what little welfare existed was available only to those who had lived in the county for five years. Jim Crow still ruled society in Dade County: laws prohibited interracial high school athletic events, and suburban communities such as Coral Gables prohibited Blacks from spending the night there.

Cuban presence in Miami is as old as the city itself, and refugees from the most recent revolution had been trickling into the city since the fall of 1958. But until 1959, Cuban émigrés had always kept a low profile. They were usually bilingual, American-educated and well connected in the community. There was an attempt to maintain this image during the first days of the refugee crisis. Families that came from Cuba, normally on visitor's visas, had enough resources or connections in Miami to maintain a respectable presence. But with the collapse of the resistance to Castro in mid-1960, the collective face of the refugee changed. If not the sheer number (between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand, depending which statistics are cited), the fact that refugees were no longer able to take anything with them when they left, transformed the image of Cuban refugee from wealthy Latin visitor on a weekend shopping spree, to the confused and desperate refugees that many had only previously seen coming out of East Berlin. And the European immigrants appeared on television news reports originating in far away places, not on Wayne Fariss' evening report of the local news.

Initially, the Cubans took care of their own. Budgets were tightened, living rooms became dormitories for extended family, and vacation apartments became permanent family dwellings. In extreme cases, as reported in Senate hearings, there were as many as nineteen people living in a single family residence.¹⁷ But in the summer of 1960, as Bryan O. Walsh, Director of Catholic Charities, recalled many years later, “the roof fell in,” and desperate families had to swallow their traditional



Sister Nikoletta, who headed the staff of the Centro Hispano Católico, 1967. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Miami Archives.

pride and seek outside help in a place where little existed. Doors were closed everywhere, but there was an old Church, Gesu, in the center of the city that offered a glimmer of hope, for there, on the side of the old paint peeled building was a sign in a familiar language that promised help. The sign read “Centro Hispano Católico.” In 1960 it represented the only source of welfare private or public, large or small, that could speak the language of the refugees.

The Spanish colonized Florida, and for most of the state’s 430 years since the Euro-African encounter, it has been populated primarily by Spanish-speaking people. But little evidence of that culture existed in 1960s Miami. Of

the population that approached one million, less than 5 percent were Hispanic, the majority of whom had assimilated into the dominant North American culture. Aside from two or three hours a week of Spanish on a local radio station, a few scattered Cuban pastry and coffee shops, and a weekly Spanish newspaper, the Latin presence in Miami remained minimal and for the most part ignored.¹⁸ The only institution that paid any attention to the Hispanics was the Catholic Church. Since 1953, Bishop Joseph Hurley had been inviting Spanish priests into the southern half of his St. Augustine diocese to minister to the migrant Hispanic community of mostly poor Mexicans who arrived annually to harvest crops.¹⁹ In 1957,

Hurley appointed a young, recently ordained Irish priest, Bryan Walsh, as director of Catholic Charities in the Miami area and the Latinos became one of his initial priorities. A year later when the southern half of the St. Augustine diocese became the new Diocese of Miami, Walsh convinced the new bishop, Coleman Carroll, to address the needs of his Hispanic flock, transient as they may have seemed.

Coleman Carroll, the son of William J. Carroll of County Offaly and Margaret Hogan Carroll, of County Carlow Ireland, was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1906. He was the second of three sons all of whom entered the priesthood and made an important mark on the American Catholic Church. Bishop Carroll's brother, Walter, was a Vatican diplomat during the Second World War and continued in the Vatican State Department until his death in 1950. Another brother, Howard, served as Bishop of Altoona-Johnstown, Pennsylvania. After receiving his doctorate in Canon law from Catholic University of America, Carroll headed the philosophy department for four years at Duquesne University. Returning to parochial duties in 1943, he organized a new parish before serving as auxiliary bishop of Pittsburgh until 1958, when he was named bishop of the new Diocese of Miami by Pope Pius XII. A philosopher, who had the practical experience of starting a new parish and of working within the bureaucracy of a major university and the Catholic hierarchy, a man whose brother dined with the top luminaries of the Church in the Vatican and at the same time was the son of immigrants, Carroll was particularly prepared to be the first bishop of the new Diocese of Miami.



Bishop Coleman Carroll entering Centro Hispano with Sister Myriam, the director of the center. Directly behind Carroll is Father Bryan O. Walsh, director of Catholic Charities, November 1959. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Miami Archives.

After listening to Walsh explain the needs of the Hispanic members of the diocese, Carroll, the son of immigrants, responded by establishing “El Centro Hispano Católico” in the four story school building of Gesu Church. Located at 130 NE Second Street in a traditionally transient neighborhood, the center was created to provide a variety of social services for poor Latinos living in the area. But between the years 1960 and 1962, Centro Hispano provided medical care, child care, legal aid, employment service, food, clothing, and cash to over 250,000 Cuban refugees and during that period it became the focal point of Cuban refugee activity. Through services offered at Centro Hispano, the new Diocese of Miami became the first institution to address the Cuban refugee problem. Although a relative newcomer among Miami’s welfare agencies, the new diocese assumed leadership in addressing the refugee crisis. The refugee crisis presented three major hurdles for the diocese. The first challenge was the immediate relief of seventy-five thousand refugees who had flooded into Miami in the summer of 1960. Most came with only the clothes on their backs and the allotted five dollars in their pockets. Secondly, the diocese had to awaken the rest of Miami’s com-



Food Distribution at Centro Hispano, 1961. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Miami Archives.

munity leaders to the seriousness of the problem and to mobilize them. Finally, together with local leaders, the diocese had to convince the federal government that the Cuban refugees represented a national, not a local, problem.

The immediate challenge remained the spiritual and material welfare of the immigrants. Although it was originally planned as a modest pastoral center for all Hispanics, Centro Hispano quickly became the Cuban refugee center in the summer of 1960. This center collected and distributed food, helped refugees find apartments and work, started a high school and a day care center, and with help from volunteer doctors and

lawyers, established medical and legal clinics.²⁰ In the first year, the Church, through its own resources and private donations, financed the entire operation. In addition to providing immediate emergency assistance, the Centro Hispano kept records, which provided the only statistics available on the first Cuban immigrants. These figures became extremely important in facing the bureaucratic and statistical challenge of convincing the federal government of the seriousness and enormity of the refugee problem.²¹

Everyday hundreds of refugees would pass through the doors of Centro Hispano. Some came to leave their young children while they went off for a few hours of menial labor, others for a medical exam, or in search of a few cans of food. Others simply needed bus fare to get to a job. Whatever human challenge tested these new immigrants, the center attempted to solve it. By the summer of 1960, the Centro Hispano was attending to over four hundred people a day. In its first two years, the Centro Hispano recorded over 250,000 visits and spent over half a million dollars. And when costs of medical care and education were included, the diocese spent over a million dollars that first year.²² To put that amount in perspective, it represented about 6 percent of the entire city of Miami budget for 1959.²³



Lunchtime at the Day Care Center of Centro Hispano, 1962. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Miami Archives.

The most dramatic episode related to the Miami diocese's care of Cuban immigrants is the story of the fourteen thousand Cuban children who arrived unaccompanied in Miami. When people discovered that young children were put on airplanes alone from Havana to Miami with no expectation of who would meet them, the first question asked by many, including the children involved, was, "How could parents have done it?" The explanation and the story begins in Cuba, where rumors began to spread that the Cuban government was planning to take children away from their parents at the age of three. The words "*Patria Potestad*," which referred to the proposed government proclamation,

were on the lips of every parent in Cuba in 1960–61. Although denounced as a forgery by Fidel Castro himself, parents continued to believe that at any moment the document being circulated by the Cuban underground would become law.²⁴ Another proclamation insisting that Cuba would send children to Russia for training in language and economics actually occurred.²⁵ Finally, there were many young people, especially Catholics, who were involved in the counter-revolution and their parents wanted to get them out of Cuba before they themselves were arrested.²⁶

The movement of children, whose code name was “Operation Pedro Pan,” began in December 1960, when Bryan Walsh, head of Catholic Charities, received a visit from James Baker who had been head of a school for Americans and wealthy Cubans in Havana. Baker asked Walsh if Catholic Charities could help find homes for children in Miami. Baker initially viewed Catholic Charities as one part of a complex conspiratorial plan whose goal was to get children out of Cuba and away from the Communists. Walsh’s response was that the Church would not take part in a haphazard scheme, that this was a job for a social agency that would take complete care of the children from the moment they arrived, or the Catholic Charities would not participate.²⁷ Baker accepted the priest’s caveat, and, overnight, under the leadership of Walsh, the Catholic Church became responsible for the welfare of all unaccompanied children migrating from Cuba. The financial backing for the project came from American businesses whose executives had recently left Cuba.²⁸ The first children arrived by plane on the day after Christmas 1960, and the exodus continued for the next two years, until there were fourteen thousand children under the care of Catholic Charities. Local convents, camps and boarding schools soon overflowed with children, and eventually the Miami diocese secured the aid of 130 Catholic Charities offices throughout the United States. “The Catholic Welfare Bureau was the source of our confidence in accepting this challenge,” recalled Walsh, “and history would testify that this confidence was not unfounded.”²⁹ No children were lost in what for many agencies would have been an organizational nightmare. Many letters came into the Chancery office in the next few years regarding these children. “Dear Reverend Carroll,” one began, “I would like to inquire about the whereabouts of a niece and nephew...they were sent from Havana, Cuba, to Miami.” Within ten days Walsh had written a letter explaining

that the children were in the care of a family in Detroit and could be reached through Catholic Charities in that city.³⁰ The entire story of Operation Pedro Pan, which included smuggled documents, late meetings at the State Department in Washington, spies and subterfuge cannot be told completely or fairly in this essay.³¹ Not every child was happy to be taken from their homes and placed in a foreign country in foreign surroundings. Although Church leaders in Miami did not instigate this migration of children, they alleviated many of the consequences of the decision. And as a result of diocesan action, fourteen thousand children found shelter and security in forty-seven different dioceses in thirty states. This was a monumental task for any agency, let alone one that was less than two years old.³²



Future City of Miami Mayor, Maurice Ferre, with children from Operation Pedro Pan, 1961. The Ferre family donated their house on Brickell Avenue to be used as a shelter for the unaccompanied refugee children. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Miami Archives.

Members of the Miami press knew about the movement of children from Cuba, but they kept quiet about the story at the request of Walsh, who feared reprisals against parents and children in Cuba. Finally, in 1962, a reporter from the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* broke the pledge when he included the story in an article on Cuban children being sent to Russia. After that story broke in February, the *Herald* reporters followed with an avalanche of human interest stories on the children of “Operation Pedro Pan.”³³ And as expected, the Castro government used the story as propaganda against the Church, the United States and the counter-revolutionaries still in Cuba. As recently as the Pope’s visit in 1998 to Cuba, Walsh was asked by a reporter about the “lost children” of Pedro Pan, to which he responded, “give me the name of one lost child.”³⁴

After caring for the immediate material and spiritual needs of the refugees, a second challenge facing the new diocese in Miami was to mobilize the community. Outside of the group of nuns and priests working at the Centro Hispano there were few in the Miami community

that knew a crisis was brewing in late 1959 and early 1960. When it exploded in the summer of 1960, and there was no system in place to deal with it, the young Diocese of Miami filled this vacuum, and mobilization began in the Catholic community. The bishop called together Catholic Hispanics in Miami and enlisted their aid in putting together a group to find jobs and solicit donations for the new immigrants.³⁵ At the same time, he organized another group of leaders from the English side of the bilingual fence for the same purpose.³⁶ It is an interesting commentary on Miami at the time, as well as the political savvy of Carroll, that he never brought the Hispanic leadership together with the English-speaking leadership. He convened the groups separately, except for public meetings, and he remained the lynchpin between the two.³⁷ Finally, using the moral suasion of his position, Carroll wrote an open letter to business and civic leaders of Miami. "The Church is contributing \$100,000 a month to aid Cuban Refugees," he announced, "but the Church cannot do it all." He called on corporations, especially those who formerly did business in Cuba, to contribute to help ease the plight of the refugees.³⁸

One reason bishops are selected is for their political prowess, and Carroll did not disappoint those who had put their faith in him. Within a few months of having nothing with which to address the Cuban crisis, the Church had mobilized the civic leaders of Miami, had collected significant donations and captured the attention of the federal government.³⁹ In November 1960, President Eisenhower sent the bishop a letter thanking him and the diocese for their work with the Cuban refugees. He also sent Tracey Voorhis, the former director of the Hungarian refugee program, to Miami as his special envoy to report on the crisis in Miami.⁴⁰ Voorhis was taken to the Centro Hispano where he was shown both the physical and the statistical evidence that documented the human tragedy. He returned to Washington with a report that convinced Eisenhower to immediately release one million dollars in order to establish a Cuban refugee relief program. In a letter to Carroll, Voorhis wrote "I want to express my admiration for all that you and the diocese did to help the refugees and the community of South Florida as they dealt with this crisis."⁴¹

At the end of January, and under the auspices of the federal government, the diocese organized the "National Resettlement Congress." Ostensibly, the diocese instigated Congress to promote national interest

in the resettlement of Cubans, but knowing full well that the majority of Cubans wanted to stay in Miami, the real reason for the Congress was to draw national public attention to the drama unfolding in Miami.⁴² The event was attended by the national leaders of the National Catholic Charities as well as by the new Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Abraham Ribicoff, who was also taken on the obligatory tour of the Centro Hispano.⁴³ The national publicity reaped benefits when in the next few months the initial \$1 million contributed by the Eisenhower administration grew to a monthly federal stipend of \$2.4 million.⁴⁴ The Bishop continued to exercise his political clout. When the AFL-CIO Executive Committee held its annual meeting in Miami Beach, Carroll urged them to issue a statement calling for more aid for the Cuban refugees.⁴⁵ The culmination of the attempts to mobilize the government came at the end of 1961, when a subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee held public hearings on the refugee problem in Miami.

When Carroll testified, he reminded the Senators of some very important facts. First of all, during the first two years of the immigrant crisis from January 1959, until the Voorhis visit in December of 1960, the refugees received no public assistance whatsoever. During this period, the Diocese of Miami organized and financed the entire welfare program for refugees. Secondly, the Bishop pointed out that although President Eisenhower authorized the expenditure of one million dollars, it was only for resettlement to other loca-

tions; no money was provided for distribution at a local level. He also noted that since only people living in Florida for five years are eligible for any local relief, Catholic hospitals had to provide all medical relief



Abraham Ribicoff, Secretary of Health Education and Welfare in the Kennedy Administration, visiting Centro Hispano with Sister Miriam, the director of the Center, and Father Bryan Walsh, director of Catholic Charities. The Miami diocese was instrumental in bringing national attention to the refugee crisis, 1961. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Miami Archives.



The clinic at Centro Hispano provided free medical care for refugees, July 1961. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Miami Archives.

for the refugees, including prenatal care, surgery, and maternity care at no charge to the patients. Finally, no bishop when talking to those who control the public purse strings can forego an opportunity to bring up the subject of education. Carroll informed the senators that 3,858 Cuban Children were attending Catholic Schools in Miami at a savings to the Government of \$1.2 million a year. He reminded the Senators that these children were invited to the United States, that many were accustomed only to Catholic education, and therefore it would be prejudicial against them not to assist their Catholic education. "The Cuban people cannot

understand why," chided the bishop, "in a country that has shown such goodness and charity by assisting them in every other welfare department, in the field of education there should be such discrimination."⁴⁶

The national mobilization instigated by the Diocese of Miami bore fruit. By 1976, the National Cuban Refugee Fund had pumped in \$1.6 billion into the Cuban community in Miami. Additionally, other traditional government sources of disbursement, such as the Small Business Association, targeted Cubans as recipients of benefits; as Professor Raymond Mohl has pointed out, of the one hundred million distributed by the small business association in the early seventies, over half went to Hispanics, the great majority of whom were Cuban.⁴⁷

The young Diocese of Miami led the way in providing aid to the Cuban refugees. Individuals such as Bryan Walsh and Coleman Carroll remain heroes in the Cuban community and their names are spoken with reverence. But there is another side to the story. When Cubans began arriving in Miami in 1959, the Diocese of Miami was only three months old. According to a 1960 census, 331,000 Catholics lived in the new diocese that stretched north into Palm Beach and west to Naples. Of that number, 231,000 were under 44 years old. All but

30,000 were under 64 years old and 120,000 were children of school age. The Catholic population was young and growing in a very different direction than the one that became its destiny.⁴⁸ Although the Cubans arrived to find the South Florida region in an economic depression, the area had just experienced a tremendous construction boom. In the fifties, hundreds of young families with Veterans Administration loans catalyzed stimulated the creation of new suburbs, as thousands of acres of former Everglades swamplands became bedroom communities. Carroll came to Florida as a “bricks and mortar” bishop. The local diocesan newspaper reported a new groundbreaking every week. The people that populated these new churches came from the Northeast and the Midwest. They brought with them their faith and their prejudices. Although geographically Cuba was only one hundred miles to the south, the problems of the Caribbean island were intellectually light years away from the average Miamian at the time of the revolution. North American transplants from the Midwest and Northeast, many of whom had grown up in families who had quickly assimilated into the American culture, could not understand these new immigrants who seemed overly excitable, loud, and altogether too different. A letter to Coleman Carroll complained about “these Cubans who use the mass as a public congregating hour and speak whenever they please during the mass.” Another wanted to know why the priest had to interrupt his sermon to allow a Cuban to translate for him.⁴⁹ In an interview, Monsignor Walsh stated that he received many personal threats for his role in bringing Cubans to Miami.⁵⁰ Even the clergy of Miami were not totally in favor of the rapidly changing face of the Church in Miami. Walsh remembers giving a talk in October of 1962 to a conference of clergy on the new immigrants. In it he informed his audience that it should not be the role of the church to force assimilation, that the culture



For these children the Diocese implemented a high school program. Here Father Walsh is looking at the degree of one of the graduates, June 1961. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Miami Archives.

and tradition of Cuban Catholics ought to be respected. His talk at best was received with cordial indifference, and one priest expressed the thoughts of many when he told Walsh that he had given a nice talk “but that [acceptance of the Cuban religious heritage] will never happen in my parish.”⁵¹ The official policy of the diocese was expressed by Coleman Carroll on July 27, 1961: “It is hoped that they (refugee priests and laity) will learn the language and within six months be of some service to the Diocese.”⁵²

Wayne Farris, a nightly reporter on a local television station, summed up the thoughts of many South Floridians when he commented on the air that Miamians view the Cubans as “house guests who have worn out their welcome, who feel it is now time to move on. The Cubans are a threat to our business and our tourist economy.” Farris continued, “It would appear that the hand that holds Miami’s torch of friendship has been overextended.”⁵³ Across the Florida straits in Cuba the actions of the Miami Church were noticed and also criticized. Castro accused the Miami Church of being in league with the Kennedy government in supporting counter-revolutionaries, and when Cardinal Spellman donated fifty thousand dollars to the refugee program, Castro called him a “protector of criminals and gangsters.”⁵⁴

By 1962, when the Bay of Pigs failure and the missile crisis had become a part of the sad history of conflict that continues today between Havana Cubans and Miami Cubans, the new Diocese of Miami began to enter a second phase of its short history. The first stage dominated by the immediate care of the Cubans continued, but thanks to the Church’s efforts, that obligation was now primarily in the hands of the federal government. Another reality was setting in: the Cubans were not temporary visitors. The Church was the first institution to recognize the refugee problem, and it was also the first to realize the eventual permanence of the Cuban refugee community. In 1962, Carroll established the Latin American Chancery. In 1966, another important step in the acceptance of the rapidly developing bicultural Church in Miami occurred when Saint Vincent de Paul Seminary became the first and only bilingual seminary in the country.⁵⁵

The Church anticipated correctly, the Cubans did not go home as the television commentator had suggested, and in their process of relocation, they transformed the Miami Diocese in ways that the Vatican or clerics could not have imagined in 1958. A diocese of some

300,000 primarily English speaking Catholics from the Midwest and Northeast spread over about twelve counties became, by the 1980s, a diocese reduced geographically to three counties, but one containing a population of 1.1 million, 62 percent of whom are Hispanic. The diocese boasts a bilingual seminary, a weekly paper that is printed only in Spanish, a diocesan radio station broadcasting in Spanish, and an auxiliary bishop who is Cuban. On Sunday, more, or as many, masses are said in Spanish in most parishes as English, and the dominant language in the Archdiocesan offices (outside the archbishop and chancery offices) is Spanish. A diocese that some feared could not survive in 1958, is now the tenth largest Archdiocese in the United States.

The transformation of the Diocese of Miami, which reflected the transformation of the city itself over those years, was the most radical to occur in the diocesan history of the American Church. When historians begin to examine more carefully the causes of the massive Cuban migration, the role of the Catholic Church will become central. First, it



Mother Theresa visiting Centro Hispano Católico in 1974. Courtesy of the Archdiocese of Miami Archives.

was the Catholic Church in Cuba that became the focal point for the Cuban counter-revolution, providing it with organization, philosophy and leadership. Second, when that counter-revolution failed and the flight to Miami began, the Catholic Church became the first institution to welcome the refugees. In this role, the Church provided food, shelter, and most importantly a political voice. Finally, the Diocese of Miami was the first organization to recognize the permanence of the Cuban migration and began very early on to adjust its institutions to this social reality. In the midst of an indifferent if not hostile Miami community, the early Cuban refugees found comfort, sustenance and voice within the Catholic Diocese of Miami. Without the initial support of the Church, the story of the Cuban migration to Miami may have been a completely different one.

Endnotes

- ¹ Jaime Fonseca Mora, "Catholics View Castro With Guarded Approval," *The Voice*, April 10, 1959, 16.
- ² Gustavo Pena Monte, "Havana Bishop Endorses Castro Plan To Break Up Cuba's Larger Estates," *The Voice*, June 5, 1959, 9.
- ³ Jaime Fonseca Mora, "Castro Seen Influenced By Christian Humanism," *The Voice*, June 12, 1959, 8.
- ⁴ *The Voice*, February 10, 1961, 2.
- ⁵ Bryan Walsh, "Cuban Refugee Children," *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs*, Volume XIII (July-October, 1971), Nos. 3 & 4, 384; Jaime Suchlicki, *University Students and Revolution in Cuba, 1920-1968*, (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1969) 95.
- ⁶ Jaime Suchlicki, *University Students and Revolution in Cuba, 1920-1968*, (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1969) 95.
- ⁷ "Sale de Cuba Jose Rasco," *The Voice* (Spanish Section), May 6, 1960, 20.
- ⁸ "Castro Aims To Replace Church With Communism," *The Voice*, October 7, 1960, 1.
- ⁹ "Castro Calls Prelate Judas As Attacks On Church Mount," *The Voice*, December 23, 1960, 3.
- ¹⁰ "Cuba Bishops Blast Reds Demand Religious Rights," *The Voice*, August 12, 1960, 1.
- ¹¹ "Violence Mounts As Red Curtain Falls On Cuba," *The Voice*, August 26, 1960, 1.
- ¹² "Wounded Priest May Face Military Tribunal In Cuba," *The Voice*, September 2, 1960, 4.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ John Sheerin, "Castro Lights Way For The Reds," *The Voice*, August 26, 1960, 7.
- ¹⁵ "Castro Calls Prelate Judas," *The Voice*, December 23, 1960, 3.
- ¹⁶ "Castro Branded As Betrayer By Cuban Freedom Fighter," *The Voice*, August 19, 1960, 1.
- ¹⁷ "Testimony of Bryan Walsh, Executive Director of Catholic Charities, Diocese of Miami," *Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected With Refugees and Escapees*. Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Eighty-Seventh Congress, Second Session, part 2. December 2, 3, & 4, 1962, 231. (hereafter Senate Hearings)
- ¹⁸ Francis Sicius, "The Miami Havana Connection: The First Seventy

Five Years," *Tequesta*, LVIII (1998), 28-29.

¹⁹ Interview, Francis Sicius with Monsignor Personal Interview, Bryan O. Walsh, Former Director Of Catholic Charities Miami Diocese, Miami Florida, November 16, 1999.

²⁰ *The Voice*, May 27, 1960, 14; "Testimony of Bishop Coleman Carroll," Senate Hearings, 15.

²¹ Interview, Bryan Walsh.

²² "Carroll Testimony," 15.

²³ Sicius, "Miami Havana Connection," Senate Hearings, 36-37.

²⁴ Yvonne Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Story of the Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 40-43; Walsh, 382.

²⁵ Walsh, 383; "Children to Moscow," *The Voice*, January 27, 1961, 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 384.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 392.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 390-391.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 393.

³⁰ Letter, Henry Boyle to Bishop Coleman F. Carroll, May 30, 1961; Letter, Bryan Walsh to Chancery Office, June 10, 1961. Archdiocese of Miami Chancery Records, Letters of Coleman Carroll Box "A-Z Laity Prior 1962."

³¹ This entire story is told in much greater detail in Walsh's article (op. cit) and Conde's book (op.cit).

³² Walsh Testimony, Senate Hearings, 226; Walsh Interview.

³³ Walsh Interview; Conde, 43.

³⁴ Walsh Interview.

³⁵ "Lay Committee Organized to Aid Centro Programs," *The Voice*, February 5, 1960, 14; Among those joining lay committee to aid Centro Hispano were the Fanjuls, who were the largest producers of sugar in Florida and the Caribbean, and the Ferres, who owned the largest construction material factory in South Florida, as well as Dr. Nestor Portocarrero, Horacio Aguirre publisher of *Diario Las Americas*, Rafael Riero Cruz president of the Latin American Bar Association, Pierre Perez Inter American division of the City of Miami Publicity department, Eduardo Morales Metropolitan and Manuel Gonzalez Central Bank"

³⁶ Among this group were Congressman Dante Fascell, Clyde Atkins, president of the Florida Bar, Franklyn Evans president of the Dade

Country Medical Association, John Fitzpatrick, the Archdiocesan attorney, Wendell Rollason, Miami Inter American Affairs Commissioner, and H. Franklin Williams, head of the Miami Welfare Planning Council. Harold Buell, Protestant Chairman of the Miami Latin Center. *The Voice*, October 7, 1960, 1.

³⁷ Walsh Interview.

³⁸ *The Voice*, February 24, 1961, 11.

³⁹ The owner of a local dog racing track((\$6,000), Texaco Oil Company (\$50,000) and Cardinal Spellman (\$10,000) to name a few; Carroll Letters, Diocese of Miami Chancery office archives.

⁴⁰ "President Praises Inspiring Refugee Relief By Diocese," *The Voice*, December 16, 1960, 1. The story noted that: "President Dwight D. Eisenhower expressed his gratitude to the Diocese of Miami for the inspiring work on behalf of the Cuban refugees of South Florida..."

⁴¹ Letter from Tracey Voorhis to Bishop Coleman Carroll, February 17, 1961, Archdiocese of Miami Chancery Records, 'Laity, 1961 file V.'

⁴² Walsh Interview.

⁴³ *The Voice*, February 3, 1961, 1.

⁴⁴ Sicius, 36; "Senate Hearings," 4.

⁴⁵ *The Voice*, March 3, 1961, 1.

⁴⁶ "Senate Hearings," 18.

⁴⁷ Raymond Mohl, "Race Ethnicity and Urban Politics in the Miami Metropolitan Area," *Florida Environmental and Urban Issues*, 9 (April, 1982), 24.

⁴⁸ "331,668 Catholics In The Diocese," *The Voice*, July 29, 1960, 1.

⁴⁹ Letters from Bishops Secretary to "Mrs. Carrier," February 24, 1961; to "Mrs. Flynn," January 22, 1961, Archdiocese of Miami Chancery Records, "Letters, Laity 1961 and prior."

⁵⁰ Walsh Interview.

⁵¹ Msgr. Bryan O. Walsh, "A Many-splendored people, Reflections on the evolution of a multicultural Church: 1958-1991," in Ana Rrodriguez-Soto, ed., *A People Called...*, (Miami: Archdiocese Of Miami, 1992), 28-36.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Wayne Farris, *Crisis Amigo*, WCKT Channel 7 Special Report" (December 5, 1961, 8:30-9:00 pm).

⁵⁴ *The Voice*, December 30, 1960, 2.

⁵⁵ According to Bryan Walsh, this may have been clever politics rather

than cultural sensitivity since the decision was made at a time when the Vatican was closing seminaries and Carroll kept his open by pointing to its uniqueness as a bilingual seminary. Walsh, "A Splendored People," 34.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 33. In 1959 the diocese of Miami had been created out of Bishop Joseph Hurley's Diocese of St. Augustine. At that time Hurley feared that the Catholic population of South Florida would never be large enough to support a diocese. Walsh Interview.