

# The Church and Castro

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## Religion Is Tolerated, but Churchgoers Are Suspect

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Chicago Daily News Service

HAVANA — In a class on Marxist ideology at the University of Havana, one student raised a question based on religious grounds. The others protested loudly.

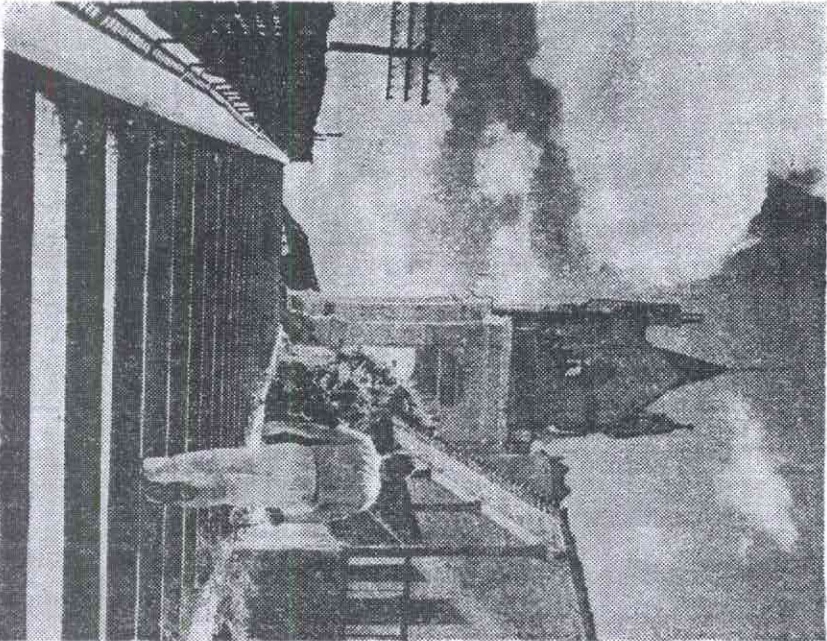
The student then asked the professor whether, in Cuba today, there is room for dialog on ideological questions.

"For the present, yes. In the future, no," he replied. "Eventually, all must be absorbed into one idea."

Younger children come home with materialist ideas learned in the classroom. For religious parents, if belief in God is to survive in their children, there is a delicate conflict.

The children can be torn between religion and materialism. A child who raises a religious question at school might lead zealous revolutionaries to suspect the parent as anti-government.

THERE IS great competition for the interest of chil-



Cuban churches such as the Aroyo Arena parish church near Havana have been taken over by the government.

dren. Sunday mornings, at church time, there are always scheduled recreational events, and perhaps free movies.

The position of the church here, and of any person who avows Christianity, is that of a dwindling minority.

There is freedom of religion, but the price of exercising that freedom is to jeopardize your security.

A religious person cannot speak openly against the revolution without risking jail. There are no official sanctions against churchgoers. The churches are open and worship freely allowed. Attending, however, marks you as different.

The people who attend church now do it out of conviction and not because of habit or social pressure.

To speak of the church here usually means to speak of the Roman Catholic Church, although there are also many Protestant ones and some synagogues.

Before the revolution, Cuba

was regarded as 85 per cent Catholic but only 10 per cent of these were believed to be informed and active members.

Then, some 700 priests served about 200 parishes. About one-fifth of the priests were Cuban. Most were Spanish. Now, six years later, the same 200 parishes are being served by about 230 priests. Many priests have gone into exile or been expelled.

The Catholic Church, whose relations with the government are described as being in a state of "peaceful co-existence," now hopes it can gradually increase the number of priests.

Part of these will come from the two Cuban seminaries, the Good Shepherd in Havana and El Cobre in

Oriente Province. Some 100 young men are studying there now.

**ALL PAROCHIAL** schools and churches have been closed or taken over by the government. Religious services are confined to the church itself, or to adjacent buildings.

The church recognizes the basic conflict with this society, but it is trying to find a positive approach that preserves its own beliefs without causing open political clashes.

"The result has been that priests or ministers turn more to Bible fundamentals," said the churchgoer. "They can quote the Bible without getting into trouble."

### **Young Minister Explains Problem**

A good insight into the effects of the revolution on religion is offered by the Rev. Israel Batista, 23, pastor of the University Methodist Church in Havana.

"I live in Cuba. This is a Marxist situation. The Marxists need God, too. I must know these people and why they believe those things," he explained.

**THE REV.** Mr. Batista's basic problem—like that of all

ministers or priests here — is to find a way for his church to function and his people to live as Christians.

"Some people say that in a few months or a few years this situation will pass away, that the United States will come. But really, it seems to me we will have Marxism for many years to come.

"The government is stronger now than it was two years ago. There are economic problems,

nistic, but they do not live here.

"It is a problem of here and now."

### **Christians Must Set Example**

"We see a great need to emphasize the importance of the home," the Rev. Mr. Batista said. "One of the greatest tragedies of the situation here has been divided families, both by exile and by political thinking.

"It is necessary for a Christian family to know how to educate its children. Schools teach materialism. At home, children need the direction of their parents."

Above all, he tries to help members meet their daily challenges as Christians without forcing themselves into political conflicts that might disrupt their lives.

"They must know what they believe, and they must carry their beliefs with them wherever they go. If a worker feels he must volunteer to cut cane on Sunday, then I tell him to go and cut cane and by his work and words be a Christian example, a good testimony for the church."

**HE TOLD** the story of a young student who worked hard to set an example. One day a group of Marxist students came to him.

"Juan," they said, "you are

not a Marxist but you are an interesting person. We must talk with you."

The Rev. Mr. Batista said now the boy was in a position to be of influence. "He is a Christian and he is doing a good work."

Government permission must be asked to hold meetings away from the church. These requests often are made for activities by young people. Sometimes permission is given.

The church membership includes persons who hold responsible positions in the government.

"For those who do not live here," the minister concluded, "it might be difficult to understand. There is no tried and tested solution. We are trying to create the role of a Christian in a Marxist society, and it is not an easy thing."