CUBAN CATHOLICS
IN THE
UNITED STATES,
1960–1980

Exile and Integration

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INTRODUCTION

The flight of tens of thousands of Cubans during the 1960s from a radical revolution that eventually became an orthodox Marxist state along Soviet lines produced militant nationalist communities abroad dedicated to an eventual return. These refugees followed a long tradition of political exile in Cuban history. Throughout the island’s turbulent history highly politicized populations have fled political repression but more often than not remained engaged with the destiny of their homeland. Cubans departed with strong national feelings and deep connections to their patria that influenced community and family life, institutions, and attitudes characterized by a powerful sense of exile identity. Certainly not all Cubans yearned for their homeland in the same way during all periods, but the phenomenon has been present throughout with differing degrees of intensity.

In 1992, a wide cross-section of Cuban Catholics representing religious and laity, diverse generations, and competing political perspectives met in St. Augustine, Florida, and issued a document known as CRECED. Catholic leaders described themselves “as essentially exiles and not mere immigrants of an economic kind” and interpreted their overall experience as similar to the biblical Babylonian exile. Central to this affirmation of exile was the idea of return. “The great prophets of the exile . . . devoted a great deal of their activity to preparing for the return with programs and slogans that would help the restoration of the dispersed of Israel as the People of God returned to the promised-land.” Though the time had not yet arrived for Cubans to return home, “we would be remiss in our duty if we did not begin, right now, to prepare with prayer and concrete plans.”

“The spiritual climate of the Babylonian exile,” they declared, “is the yearning for the fatherland, both bitter and sweet at once; together with it, as the years go by, the urgency of preparing for return is a part of that climate.” Any thought of return, of course, required maintaining a genuine sense of Cuban identity and nationality. “We have been in exile for over thirty years and we have not forgotten or set aside the Cuban issue,” and this should continue as a pastoral challenge; to form “men and women with a Christian outlook on life, capable of sacrificing themselves to rebuild a nation as envisioned by the Apostle of our Independence, José Martí.”
These characteristics so clearly articulated in the early 1990s in fact emerged and developed during the first twenty years of exile, a period now often referred to in the Miami Cuban community as the “historical exile.” Their powerful sense of exile and desire for return, even as they established a formidable economic, political, and sociocultural presence in Florida and other states quickly defined the Cuban community in the United States. This is a story of the Cuban-born exile generation of the 1960s and 1970s: those arriving as already formed adults, young adults who completed their maturation in exile, and adolescents and children whose formation occurred outside Cuba. They all struggled over time to translate their exile and emerging ethnic realities into coherent actions that would honor their commitment to their homeland while facilitating their integration into other societies. This book explores their exile from Cuba and their integration into the United States, mostly in south Florida but also in other places, and considers the relationships between exilic and ethnic identities and the place of Cubans in the broader society.

Unlike immigrants who arrived without any intention of ever returning home, Cuban refugees in the 1960s and 1970s more often than not remained engaged with their island nation, intent eventually on reclaiming losses and redressing grievances. Since loss of culture also meant disintegration of traditional identity and claim on the homeland, exiles did what they could to retain and cultivate their way of life. This psychological orientation informed almost everything in their daily activities, giving their preoccupation with return at least equal if not more importance than strategies of integration. At the same time Cubans evolved an ethnic identity through which they engaged North American society. Though Cubans rejected the idea of assimilation, reflecting the conviction that their situation was temporary and that they would eventually return home, they had to contend with the reality of integrating into new societies. For Cubans, assimilation meant turning their back on their heritage while integration sought ways of adjusting without losing their Cubanness. Exile and integration remained distinct ideas for Cubans, but they inevitably influenced each other.

Cuban Catholics lived within a larger Cuban community imbued with a strong secular tradition, but the interest here is to examine the particularly Catholic influences that affected their thinking and action during this era of dramatic change in their country, church, and the world. Though a di-
verse population, Cuban Catholics usually remained tied to their religious traditions, which invested their disrupted lives with a measure of coherence. Catholics sought direction from their church, theology, and leadership, as well as their own consciences, as they tried to make sense of the significant changes in Catholic thought emanating from the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and papal encyclicals of the 1960s and 1970s. Cuban refugees rarely came to the same conclusions about their obligations as exiles to their land of origin or their adopted homes, but most practicing Catholics did take seriously the tenets of their faith in the Catholic Action tradition of “seeing, judging, and acting.” They routinely looked to the principles of their faith to determine the best options in their new environment, though they did not always agree with their church nor even act in unison.

While Catholics represent only a small slice of the Cuban exile story, they offer a microcosm through which to explore in some detail and understand many of the themes relevant to the exile experience generally. Initially conceived as a study of the Cuban community in south Florida, in time the examination narrowed to Catholics when it became evident that one version of the exile story could be told in considerable detail from their point of view. Though most Cuban refugees may have been nominally Catholic, only a small segment practiced their religion on a regular basis and lived their lives in relation to Catholic faith and tradition. This book is mostly about them, though the voices of others who shared the journey also appear.

“Catholics” in this book refers to those serious practitioners of their religion whose thought and action were informed by the spiritual inspirations and theological teachings of their faith. Obviously, to what extent an individual was motivated by faith, or other considerations such as class interest and personal ambition, is not always easy to discern, and certainly all these elements existed. For this reason, in identifying Cuban Catholics, determining the content of their hearts was less a concern than simply identifying whether their actions responded to some commitment to Catholic ideals and whether they seemed to live their everyday lives within the general context of their religion. Many of the voices that appear here are confessional Catholics, people who projected their faith in their writings, speeches, and other communications, who grappled with Catholic thought and attempted to live by its principles. Others are nominal or lapsed.
Catholics, though influenced by its traditions. Still others are people not identified as Catholics at all but who operated within the political and social circles here considered. According to estimates, perhaps only 5 to 10 percent of Cubans fell into the category of practicing Roman Catholics in the 1950s. A significant percentage of these, however, fled the island during the 1960s, concentrating the island's Catholics in a relatively few cities, especially influencing Miami. Some have suggested that in Miami, the largest and most important exile community, Catholicism had a greater influence on Cubans after they left home than when they lived in Cuba.

This book examines all these facets among Catholics mostly in south Florida, though Cubans across the United States, Latin America, and Europe also enter the story. The personal papers of exiles, newspapers, books and pamphlets, government archives, and personal interviews provide the historical data for this book. Though future studies need to explore sources neglected here, including parish records, the archives of the apostolic movements, the personal papers of the many actors included here, and archdiocese of Miami archives, this project does provide a step toward a history of Cuban exile Catholics that engages the many critical themes necessary for understanding their place in United States immigration and ethnic history. The themes, woven throughout this narrative, which spans the 1960s and 1970s, include their life at home before departing; the causes, motivations, and manner of their exodus; their resettlement and creation of exile identity and community, and ultimately their adjustment to and integration into their new society.

The conventional wisdom about Cubans in the United States holds that they are conservative and staunchly hard-line exiles obsessively preoccupied with overthrowing the Castro regime using all available means. The majority did become convinced Cold Warriors, routinely reaffirming the church's traditional anti-communist teachings and suspicious of those who persisted in supporting revolutionary politics in Latin America and the United States. Cuban Catholics did indeed participate in developing and maintaining numerous strategies for trying to dislodge the regime in Cuba, including organizing armed incursions to establish guerrilla operations on the island, international diplomacy and propaganda, and lobbying in Washington, DC. Religion often played an influential role in justifying and sustaining hard-line attitudes among Cuban Catholics.8

The story, however, is more diverse and complex. It is also the case that a significant minority of exile Catholics revealed pragmatic sensibilities, ad-
vocating dialogue and advancing diverse options to difficult problems. Catholicism of the 1960s and 1970s spoke to many aspects of the exile reality and for some provided the logic for pragmatism and openness that eventually carved its place in the hearts of a significant Catholic exile sector. This study explores the evolving attitudes and debates that framed the exile journey to secure a return home. As Cuban-American theologian Fernando Segovia has noted, “The human world . . . forged in exile is . . . a world of pessimism, where evil is seen as reigning largely undisturbed.” At the same time, exile also included “a world of optimism, where de-liberate measures to disturb evil are nonetheless constantly planned and undertaken—despite the known odds, the meager hopes for victory, and the ever-present conviction that any victory or disturbance is in the end but apparent and short-lived.” “Such a world,” Segovia suggests, “is beyond reformation and crying for reformation, beyond justice and well-being and in dire need of them, fatefully resigned and yet outright defiant . . . a world of profound ambiguity, with a logical discourse that goes back and forth endlessly.” Perhaps pessimism encouraged a hardened intransigence while optimism birthed a vision of what might yet be.

Exile identity not only influenced attitudes about the homeland but also provided Cubans with a foundation for an ethnic consciousness focused on maintaining national identity and culture as they integrated into the United States. Cubans arriving in south Florida during the 1960s created a self-sustaining community with remarkable economic, cultural, and political autonomy from the dominant society. Cubans established a strong foothold in the economic structure of south Florida, influenced its cultural environment, and established political dominance. They created institutions and cultural traditions that reflected and reinforced their exile and ethnic realities, and Catholics utilized their faith to guide family and community through these turbulent times.

Ethnic consciousness also manifested itself among Cuban Catholics in relation to other Hispanic ethnic groups in the United States, especially Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. Historically, the United States society’s attitude toward Latinos was ambivalent at best and brutally racist and segregationist at worst. Despite the rhetoric of the melting pot and the “Americanization” programs of the 1920s and 1930s, Euro-Americans did not welcome Latinos on equal terms. Certainly racial concerns about what was generally considered a nonwhite population fueled Euro-American animosity toward these “alien” people. The history of race and slavery in the
United States promoted segregation and separateness toward non-European minorities, provoking them eventually to an affirmative and sometimes militant embrace of ethnic and minority perspectives. Added to this, the constant arrival of Hispanic immigrants maintained ethnic communities in touch with their cultures of origin and even broadened their territorial reach, giving them the possibility of maintaining an ongoing ethnic world even after several generations had grown up in the United States.

With the Civil Rights Movement and immigration reform of the 1960s, as political barriers dropped and even more immigrants arrived, Latinos became more integrated into society at the same time that they reaffirmed their cultures and identities, reinvigorating the traditional cultural expressions of many second- and third-generation U.S. Hispanics. During the 1960s and 1970s this influenced Hispanic Catholics who, rather than seeking integration into a culturally Anglo-American church, sought space for their own forms of worship. They demanded respect for their traditions, language, and religious practices, which the church cautiously accepted within a paradigm of the new pluralism.13

This generally familiar story has been told without reference to Cubans, who also participated, though in their own way and with their own rationale. Conventional perceptions that Cubans shared few affinities with Latinos and remained apart from their struggles are here challenged. Cubans, too, consciously rejected the idea of assimilation and insisted on maintaining their language and culture, but not for the same reasons. Except for the initially small percentage of mulattos and blacks, Cubans did not generally experience the racialized exclusion felt by other Latinos in the United States. They did, however, experience a cultural alienation that inspired them to make common cause with other Hispanics. This study reveals the enthusiasm with which Cubans engaged other Latinos and traces their contributions to the national Hispanic Catholic movement of the 1970s. While Cubans generally may not have shared in the radical articulations and activism of the Chicano movement, for example, many Cuban Catholics certainly made common cause with Hispanics in defending cultural traditions and advocating the maintenance of the Spanish language.

Cuban Catholics arriving in the United States in the 1960s became stridently anti-communist in reaction to their experience of displacement and eventually became in their majority aligned with the increasingly conservative Republican Party, but this too is not the entire story. The detailed
and nuanced narrative presented here challenges popular perceptions of Cubans as an exclusively insular and homogeneous community of right-wing ideologues. Cubans remained closely aligned with Cuban, Latin American, and Spanish values and traditions, developing diasporic communities that often looked as much to the south as to the north. This contributed to the emergence of international perspectives among Cubans whose exile identity kept them in relation with the Hispanic world outside the United States. This book highlights the avenues of contact and relationship with the world that provoked changing attitudes and perspectives in many Cubans. Cuban Catholics possessed a traditional commitment to the social doctrines of their church that routinely challenged them to think about more than opposing communism. Though interpretations varied, many Cuban Catholics nevertheless remained cognizant of the importance of social consciousness within the traditions of their faith, necessarily influencing their thinking about a number of issues.

By tracing in some detail the historical trajectory of Catholic personalities and actors, revealing their ideas and aspirations, and analyzing the meaning of their actions, this book aims to further the goal of writing the history of Cubans as exiles while also exploring their place in the broader landscape of U.S. history during the 1960s and 1970s. Without losing sight of Cuban exiles as a heterogeneous population with divergent views and experiences, the fundamental intent is to explore how one group—Catholics—coped with exile, maintained a commitment to their homeland, integrated into a new society, and transformed over time, guided by their church and faith.