

Discovering Cuba – A Merton Pilgrimage

By Susan Du Moulin

“I told myself that the reason why I had come to Cuba was to make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Cobre. And I did, in fact, make a kind of a pilgrimage. But it was one of those medieval pilgrimages that was nine-tenths vacation and one-tenth pilgrimage.”¹ Not since those medieval pilgrimages about which Thomas Merton speaks in *The Seven Storey Mountain* has the idea of sacred travel been as popular as it is today. The Thomas Merton Society of Canada’s pilgrimage program to Cuba, marking the seventieth anniversary of Merton’s own visit to the island, was full almost before it was formally announced. I thought I was among the first to register but in fact I was the last person to secure a space. TMSC program director Judith Hardcastle says every Merton pilgrimage program, whether to New York, France, Italy or Cuba, attracts enthusiastic participants.

The pilgrimage to Cuba in January of this year, led by Donald Grayston and Judith, included twenty-three people (18 Canadians, 3 Americans, and 2 British). We met in Havana on January 16 to begin fifteen days of travel in Cuba, mostly following in Merton’s footsteps from Havana to Matanzas to Camaguey to Santiago and back again, a distance of more than two thousand kilometres. A week before departure we received a message from Judith encouraging us to travel lightly, both physically and spiritually. I discovered soon after our arrival it was good advice. If a journey is indeed a pilgrimage, it will be “rigorous,” according to pilgrimage guru Phil Cousineau, author of *The Art of Pilgrimage*, and it will evoke “emotion *and* commotion.”² True to his words, there was emotion and commotion on the trip from the very first day – lost luggage; three visits to hospital emergency rooms, with one pilgrim admitted to hospital in Havana; long days of “riding in a wild bus through the olive-grey Cuban countryside, full of sugar-cane fields” (*SSM* 281); occasional short tempers because of sub-standard (for us wealthy North Americans) accommodations; language and cultural differences. Peppered amongst these challenges, however, were many, many moments of grace. But then that is the nature of pilgrimage: it is demanding; it transforms the most ordinary trip into a sacred journey; it is life-changing.

I was unsure when I set out on pilgrimage how I would be changed by the experience. I am not a Merton scholar yet I felt drawn to go on this trip for some inexplicable reason. It was difficult re-arranging my ministry commitments and my financial resources; in other words, this pilgrimage did not fall into place easily. However, when we gathered for our last session in the conference room at Hotel Ambos Mundos in Havana on the morning of January 30 to reflect on our time together, I understood with gratitude the boon, or the gifts, of my Cuba pilgrimage. We started our journey as a group of strangers and quickly became a community in which everyone cared for each other. As fellow travelers



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Larry Culliford , Brad Holt

and Merton scholars Brad Holt and Larry Culliford reflected, “We started out as pilgrims, many of us strangers, and now we’re soul companions.” The second gift from my pilgrimage is very significant: I understand Cuban culture now as I had not understood it before; I experienced a place where people live values that I aspire to as a Christian, a counter-cultural way of life. Castro’s Cuba is far from perfect but there are many good things about it.

Dragging my luggage from our bus through the pedestrian square to our hotel on my day of arrival (the hotel where author Ernest Hemingway lived during his extended stay in Havana), I was struck by the vibrancy of Old Havana. I heard music – traditional Cuban music made famous by the Buena Vista Social Club – wafting from neighborhood bars, houses and street corners. I heard school children laughing, and animated conversations. Before I reached the lobby of our hotel I watched brilliantly costumed young people perform street theatre on stilts, gyrating to the deafening beat of drums and encouraging bystanders to join in the fun. No matter what time of day or night we walked the streets of Havana, the sights and sounds that surrounded us delighted our senses. As Merton had reflected in 1940,

Added to the noise of all this is the noise of almost any conversation, for conversations between more than two people are liable to involve a great amount of shouting and laughter and excitement. Then the noise of maracas shaken by some vendor: the clang of the trolley-car bells, the tooting of horns the loudest of which are usually on bicycles, the noise of radios playing in the houses with their wide open doors and windows and everywhere the little clanging and clattering handbells carried by the kids who go about with a box slung over their shoulder selling some kind of frozen candy.³

A few months before our departure, Don sent us suggested readings to prepare for our journey, including *The Seven Storey Mountain* (particularly the section on Cuba: pp. 278-85), the *Cold War Letters*,⁴ and *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters*⁵ by James W. Douglass. At our first session, Sandra Michaels, a participant from Vancouver, British Columbia, observed: “Merton was young and naive, only 25 years old, when he visited Cuba. He was a newly converted Catholic who was on a spiritual honeymoon. He was excited about visiting a culture which was outwardly Catholic – but he didn’t understand the culture at all.” As interesting and as enthusiastic as Merton’s impressions of Cuba seem in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and in *Run to the Mountain*, we agreed that the truly catholic Merton of the 1960s would have been keenly interested in the people, the culture, and the politics of Cuba. Don Grayston reminded us that when Merton visited Cuba in the spring of 1940, the country was a dictatorship, a virtual fief of the United States, and a playground for the Mafia and their friends. He suggested that Merton’s visit is as notable for what he did not see – colonialism, political oppression, Santería – as for what he did. Our itinerary would take us to places that Merton visited to see something of what he saw, but on this

pilgrimage we would also attempt to see some of what Merton did not see.

Most of us attended Mass at Havana's Cathedral on Sunday morning, the day after our arrival, before setting out to explore the city on foot. Merton wrote: "The Cathedral is the only Church in Havana that has any real historical or architectural interest. It has an interesting baroque facade flanked by unequal towers, one of them rather svelte and pretty, the other heavy and squat and full of great bronze bells" (*RM* 192). Later we visited four historical plazas in Old Havana, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, including San Francisco Square where Merton attended Mass at the Church of St. Francis and experienced "Heaven . . . right here in front of me" as the children's choir cried out "*Creo en Diós*" – "I believe in God" (*SSM* 284-85). Altogether we were in Havana for four days, hardly enough time to drink in the rich culture of this vibrant city! However, some highlights for me were: private dance lessons with Grupo Dulce Maria (Sweet Maria Group) on the roof of her apartment building where we danced the cha cha cha, the salsa, and the rumba under the stars, accompanied by her band who played traditional Cuban acoustical music; our visit to Convento de Nuestra Señora de Belen (Convent of Our Lady of Belen), a humanitarian health project in Old Havana where we offered gifts such as medical and school supplies that each of us had brought with us from home; the Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts) that is dedicated exclusively to housing Cuban fine art spanning three centuries; and our unforgettable evening as guests of a local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). CDRs are responsible for the well-being, education, sanitation and safety of people in their neighborhood. After the singing and dancing and speeches were finished, we mingled with our hosts and shared food and drinks with them.

From Havana we made our way to Matanzas, which was founded in 1693 and is located on Cuba's northern coast between Havana and Varadero. Matanzas is often called the "City of Bridges," of which there are seventeen, crossing the three rivers that traverse the town. Alternatively, it is called the "Venice of Cuba" and the "Athens of Cuba" for its poets and cultural variety. We arrived at Matanzas Evangelical Theological Seminary in time for morning worship, and afterwards Judith and Don shared their reflections about the significance of Thomas Merton's writings with the students and faculty. Both the Vice-Principal, Rev. Dr. Pablo Oden Marichal Rodriguez (Episcopalian), and Rev. Dr. Ofelia Ortega Suarez (Presbyterian), Professor of Theology and President of the World Council of Churches in Latin America and the Caribbean, were very familiar with Thomas Merton. They were excited about the possibility of the TMSC co-sponsoring a Merton event with them at the seminary in 2012. The TMSC had



Havana Cathedral



Matanzas Evangelical Seminary



Church of La Soledad: Camaguey

arranged a seminar with Dr. Marichal Rodriguez, who is also an elected representative in Cuba's National Assembly, in the afternoon, at which he engaged us in discussion about Cuba and candidly answered questions we had about Cuban politics, economy, culture and religion.

Our next stop was Camaguey. Merton had written in his journal: "Camaguey is an old city, and a big railway junction in the middle of a plain rich in sugar and cattle, and a city full of activity and a city full of churches. But it is the last thing in the world from a tourist resort: it is a working town" (*RM* 203). Not much has changed in seventy years! We explored Camaguey on bicycle taxis, racing along the maze of winding alleys and streets, and ending up at a market where we sipped cool orange juice to stave off heat exhaustion. Merton seemed somewhat disappointed in Camaguey, calling it "a grimmer sort of a place than Havana" (*RM* 204), but I thought it was quite interesting, a Cuban city where ordinary people seemed to go about their business without the intrusion of tourists. I found his comments about the Church of the

Virgin of La Soledad ironic because this important church, in the middle of town, the busiest part of town, was locked up tight the afternoon we were in Camaguey, just as it was seventy years earlier when Merton stopped by for a visit. Merton thought the church had closed up for good because it seemed to be in a terrible state of disrepair. We discovered the church was restored recently to its original beauty when we visited it the next morning. I must say I was tickled to read in Merton's journal that Sir William Van Horne, a Canadian capitalist and railroad man, built himself a big house outside of Camaguey and "got the Cubans to build a railroad on the island" (*RM* 205). Sir William Cornelius Van Horne is a Canadian icon: he oversaw the major construction of the first Canadian Transcontinental Railway.

Finally we arrived in Santiago de Cuba on day eight of our journey. Santiago is a city of an eclectic cultural mix of Spanish, French, African, and indigenous peoples. Cuban poet, writer, and national hero, José Martí, is buried in a graveyard there. The city is considered the birthplace of the Cuban Revolution. Merton stayed at the five-star Grand Hotel in Santiago de Cuba, which is situated on the city's largest and most beautiful square, steps away from the Cathedral de Nuestra Señora de la Asuncion. He wrote his famous poem, "Song for Our Lady of Cobre," as he ate lunch on the hotel's terrace in April 1940 (*SSM* 283).

Visiting the Basilica de Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre outside Santiago was a thrilling experience. Our bus was careening along a mountain road when suddenly it turned a corner



Interior of La Soledad: Camaguey



Our Lady of Cobre

and from the forest of green rose the pink Basilica. As it is the custom of locals to offer flowers to Our Lady of Cobre, the driver stopped so that we could purchase sunflowers from one of the many vendors who had set up shop along the road. Each year on the eighth day of September the statue of Our Lady of Cobre, a black Madonna who is clothed in yellow silk and precious jewels, is paraded along the main street of town where tens of thousands of pilgrims gather. Merton wrote of her: “There you are, Caridad del Cobre! It is you that I have come to see; you will ask Christ to make me His priest, and I will give you my heart, Lady: and if you will obtain for me this priesthood, I will remember you at my first Mass in such a way that the Mass will be for you and offered through your hands in gratitude to the Holy Trinity, Who has used your love to win me this great grace” (*SSM* 282). Legend has it that in the early 1600s, two Indian children, together with their ten-year-old African slave companion, journeyed well beyond their village seeking salt necessary to preserve meat for the town abattoir that supplied villagers with sustenance. En route they suffered the forces of a tremendous hurricane. As they were nearly swept into its vortex an apparition appeared before them whispering, “I am the Virgin of Charity. I will save you, sons of Cuba.” The three boys survived. They returned with precious salt, and their epic tale. Their black savior, Our Lady of Charity, also figures prominently in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería. She is associated with Ochun, the Yoruba goddess of love.

While I have focused on the places Merton saw in Cuba, we visited most major towns on our north/south pilgrimage: Santa Clara, Bayamo, Ciego de Avila, Trinidad de Cuba, Topes de Collantes National Park in central Cuba’s Escambray Mountains, and Cienfuegos. Probably the most significant learning for me on my journey came from witnessing the resilience and determination of Cubans to preserve their culture and to find ways to live a sustainable lifestyle. Ongoing trade sanctions by the United States and the break-up of the Soviet Union in the 1990s have caused immense hardship for Cubans – yet they continue to thrive, proud of their independence and their ability to triumph over adversity. The Thomas Merton Society of Canada’s Cuba pilgrimage program was more than I ever thought it would be. It was truly a life-changing journey.



Interior of Our Lady of Cobre



The Pilgrims

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 279; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.
2. Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage: A Seeker’s Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (Newburyport, MA: Red Wheel/Weiser, 1998) xxvii.
3. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 187; subsequent references will be cited as “RM” parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
5. James W. Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).