

Experiences from My First Trip to Cuba

Background: The Roots of an Exodus

My parents made the difficult decision to leave Cuba in late 1960, shortly after the government declared its intention to follow a Marxist-Leninist model. That decision, which would change the course of our lives forever, was promoted by my uncle Florentino Azcoitia S.J., a Jesuit of deep faith who understood that our religious freedom as practicing Catholics was in imminent danger.

At that time, I was just a nine-year-old boy, a fourth-grade student at the prestigious Belén School. My parents were not wealthy people, but we lived with dignity in a rented apartment in Miramar. My mother dedicated her life to caring for our home, while my father worked as general manager of the Cubaneleco Yacht Club, so close to our residence that he could walk there every morning. With sacrifice, he had made a down payment to buy an apartment under construction in Miramar, money that would be lost forever in the whirlwind of political changes.

The departure was staggered. My father left first, facing the uncertainty of exile alone. Then my older brother and I followed, leaving our childhood behind. Finally, my mother departed with my younger brother, closing the last chapter of our Cuban life. Although my mother never agreed with Batista's dictatorship, the advent of communism accelerated our departure in a way we never imagined.

Our initial destination was New York, where we had relatives willing to receive us. For a year and a half we lived in Brooklyn facing economic hardships we had never known in Cuba. My mother, with her unwavering strength, cared for children in our own apartment, while my father worked in a store. Neither of them spoke English, but their determination surpassed any language barrier. My brother and I attended public school, adapting to a new world. I vividly remember playing racquetball in a neighborhood park, where I beat all my opponents who were older than me thanks to the skills I had developed playing children's squash in Cuba. Each victory was a small triumph that connected me to my lost homeland.

After a year, we moved to Puerto Rico, the Island of Enchantment, where my uncle Father Florentino was at a seminary. Our uncle was more than a relative; he was the spiritual and emotional axis of our family. He encouraged us to settle in Puerto Rico, where we would live for many years until it was time for me to leave to study in Chicago, opening another chapter in my immigrant life.

Reflections: The Call to Return

Throughout her entire life, my mother insisted that I not visit Cuba while she was alive. "I will worry so much about your safety," she would repeat with a trembling but firm voice. However, she authorized me to do so after her departure to heaven. When my dear mother turned one

hundred years old and passed away in 2024, I felt that the time had come to honor her memory by returning to the land where I was born.

In September 2025, I decided to visit the Homeland where I lived the first nine years of my life. It would not be a simple tourist trip; it would be a semi-religious and humanitarian pilgrimage, an encounter with my roots and an opportunity to serve the people who never stopped beating in my heart.

The First Day: Facing Reality

The first day of my arrival was not easy. The Cuba I found greeted me with a power outage that lasted several hours. My wife and I stayed at a Hotel-Convent administered by the Brigidines nuns, where we remained for four days immersed in a deeply moving religious atmosphere. We shared this space with other people who, like us, came to help the people by bringing much-needed material goods: medicines, food, hope.

Encounters with Faith in Action

My first visit was to the Varela Center, where I met with Father Yosvany, an extraordinary man who keeps an impressive work alive. From a preschool that cultivates young minds to workshops for Cuban entrepreneurs struggling to open small businesses in a context of limited opportunities, the Varela Center is a beacon of hope. I gave the father a significant monetary contribution from the organization Bridges of Friendship (Puente de Amistad), presided over by Manela Diez in Washington DC. Seeing the gratitude in his eyes reminded me that every gesture of solidarity is a seed of transformation.

Another memorable visit was to the Jesuit Parish of Reina, where I met with Father Roque, who directs the Loyola Centers with admirable dedication. These centers help the Cuban people with numerous social collaborations and material aid, keeping the flame of human dignity alive in difficult times.

Walking Through Memory and the Present

My wife and I walked through all of Old Havana and its emblematic plazas. The colonial architecture remained beautiful, but our eyes could not ignore the poverty that overflowed in the side streets: the deterioration of century-old buildings, the accumulation of garbage and waste. Each corner told a story of past grandeur and present need.

One day I decided to tour the places of my childhood, those sacred spaces where my identity was forged. I visited the area where I lived, remembering afternoons at La Concha beach and at Coney Island Park, which no longer exists. I entered the Jesús de Miramar church, where my mother took me every Sunday. I passed by the place where my father worked as general manager of the Cubaneleco Yacht Club, now closed and silent, a mute witness to other times.

Another memorable day I visited my grandmother's house in Santo Suárez, that place where my mother would take me weekly and where I would play without worries in the park across the

street, now sadly abandoned. The following day I met with two elderly first cousins of my mother, who delighted us with endearing stories of my childhood. Their faces lit up as they remembered, and I was able to reciprocate their love by bringing them some resources. I was shocked to learn that they had been without water for several days, depending only on water stored in tanks on the roof. In that moment I understood that what is routine for us is a scarce luxury for them.

Varadero: Beauty in the Midst of Adversity

I had always heard about, though I didn't personally remember, the legendary beauty of Varadero beach. We decided to visit it for one night, staying with Loly Márquez, an extraordinarily kind host who received us at her beautiful property facing the sea. Loly is a member of the music group Our America (Nuestra América) and is deeply connected with the Catholic Church. Her personal story is a testimony of resilience: her family had their home expropriated during the early years of the revolution, but she managed to keep a small residence facing the sea where she now receives visitors with open arms.

During our entire stay, we decided to eat exclusively at private restaurants, a conscious way of helping entrepreneurs and the people, always paying with dollars to contribute directly to their economy. Our transportation was facilitated by an incredibly kind local taxi driver, a man with deep Christian values and an unshakeable love for his family. In every conversation with him, I discovered the dignity of the Cuban people that persists despite circumstances.

Farewells that Leave Their Mark

During our last day, we visited the imposing Capitol, the Art Museum, and the historic National Hotel. But the most significant things were not these monuments, but the personal farewells that broke our hearts. We said goodbye to our friend Giancarlo, who had helped us discover the secrets of Old Havana with enthusiasm and knowledge. We gave him clothes and medicines for his family, knowing that these simple resources would mean a world of difference for them.

We also left part of our belongings to an elderly man without shoes who always received us with his radiant kindness at the entrance of the Hotel-Convent. His toothless but genuine smile was a daily reminder that human dignity does not depend on material possessions.

Epilogue: Lessons from the Heart

Our visit brought back vivid memories of the first nine years of my life. In that regard, it was deeply emotional, a reconnection with the roots that formed me. But the most moving thing was being a direct witness to the daily struggle of a noble people who suffer and remain stagnant, without access to the basic services necessary to have a dignified quality of life. The people there face countless needs without having tangible hope for a better future, living day to day with a resilience that inspires and hurts at the same time.

The question that constantly assails me is: will I return again? The answer is not simple. Perhaps it will be possible, but only if I can contribute significantly to improving the quality of life of a

people who suffer with dignity. I don't want to be a mere tourist of nostalgia; I want to be an instrument of hope and concrete change.

This experience has taught me that the true return home is not only physical, but also spiritual. It is a commitment to justice, solidarity, and practical love. My mother, who protected me all her life, now guides me from heaven to live my faith with concrete actions.

Final Reflection: Faith and Action

I conclude with these words that summarize the call I feel in my heart:

"What good is it for someone to claim to have faith if they have no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose others have nothing to wear and lack daily food, and we tell them only in words: 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but do nothing about their physical needs. What good is that? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

James 2:14-17

This biblical passage came to life during my journey. I saw with my own eyes what it means to have faith without action: empty words in the face of real hunger, real thirst, real needs. But I also saw the opposite: men and women like Father Yosvany and Father Roque, like Loly Márquez, our kind taxi driver and Manela Diez with Puente de Amistad, who live their faith by transforming it into concrete action, into tangible hope, into love that can be touched.

Cuba reminded me that it is not enough to feel nostalgia for the past or indignation about the present. The true tribute to my roots, the true honor to the memory of my centenarian mother, is to live with a heart that not only feels, but acts. A heart that not only remembers, but serves. A heart that not only laments, but transforms.

My first return trip to Cuba was not the last chapter of my story with the island, but the first of a new commitment: to be a bridge between two worlds, to be an instrument of hope, to be living faith in action.

"The true homeland of man is childhood."

And I add: the true legacy we leave is love converted into service.