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MARY RESCUES US FROM THE STORM

The Story of the Virgin of Charity

Oh sinner, be not discouraged but have recourse to Mary in all your necessities. Call her to your assistance, for such is the Divine Will that she should help in every kind of necessity.

—St. Basil the Great

A Stormy Flight

I returned to Cuba through the eastern province of Holguin. That is where Christopher Columbus made landfall and encountered this beautiful island known as the Pearl of the Antilles. It's where I sat, thousands of feet above the coastline, peering out of a tiny plane's window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the land below. Late afternoon had turned to evening, and the plane was bouncing about as we approached

the airport in a storm. The turbulence outside causing the plane to jump was nothing compared to the atomic butterflies in my stomach. Nevertheless, the apprehension I felt about the unknown was soon replaced by excitement and then a calm acceptance of everything I was going to experience. The winds had abated by the time we landed, but a soft rain fell as we walked across the tarmac. I remember thinking it was as if stars were falling from the sky. The tarmac was poorly lit, but we could see the lights from the airport shine through the falling rain.

Our intrepid little group, my mother and her sisters and I, piled into a church van with my waiting uncles, and we were swept away into the Cuban night. Everyone was talking at once, but I was feeling a bit out of time—as if I was experiencing everything in slow motion. It's only in retrospect that I see the poetic connection: Mary returned me to Cuba, saving me from a storm and bringing me to the safety of loved ones I'd longed to see. It's what she does.

The Story of Our Lady of Charity

Some four hundred years earlier, along the same coast, heavy waves crashed against a little rowboat, terrifying the three men attempting to cross the Bay of Nipe, located in the eastern part of Cuba. The sudden storm caught them unprepared. Unable to get back to shore safely, and unlikely to ride out the storm without capsizing, they turned to the Blessed Virgin Mary in their anguish and fear, begging for her intercession.

The storm ceased, and the waters calmed. In those first few moments of relief as the men tried to compose themselves and steady their course, they saw something near the side of their boat. Thinking it was a piece of driftwood churned up in the storm, they looked closer. Their discovery would not only change their lives but be a witness and companion to a people and a nation in centuries to come.

The men pulled from the water a board with a small statue lashed to it. Along the board, they could see writing: *Yo soy la Virgen de la Caridad*. "I am the Virgin of Charity." The message confused them. They were not familiar with this title of Mary, but having just prayed for her intercession, they were certain this was a gift from heaven. Even more confusing, the board and the statue were not wet. The men were curious and perhaps a bit apprehensive. Convinced that the Blessed Mother had calmed the storm, they took the message of the statue as confirmation that Mary had in fact appeared to protect and care for her children.

Their safe return with the statue would launch decades of mystery, intrigue, and deep devotion. So powerful was the impact of this little statue's appearance that myths and legends quickly grew around its discovery and installation in Cuba. That little Lady of Charity tells a story about the indigenous people of Cuba, the African slaves working in the copper mines, and the Spanish settlers governing the island and its people.

But most of all, it tells a story about faith.
It was faith, after all, that saved the men.

A New Land and a New Evangelization

The story of faith and home that my family tells begins in the early years of the sixteenth century. The world was in turmoil. The world, it seems, is always in turmoil, ever since that fateful day in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve first sinned against God. Now Europe was facing a violent and deadly state of constant war with invading Saracen forces. Christianity was threatened, but the New World offered opportunities for evangelization. It was also a time of discovery and expansion into the Western Hemisphere, as Europeans explored the islands and continents they had not known existed.

The Spanish colonizers who settled in the Caribbean were often accompanied by Catholic missionaries. As a result, the newly established colonies tended to have vibrant religious structures in place, with churches and priests participating quite actively in the daily life of these settlements. The presence of the Church led to many conversions among the native peoples, as Dominican and Franciscan friars began the earliest education efforts through evangelization. When African slaves were brought to Cuba, evangelization efforts increased.

The Franciscans maintained a presence in Cuba for centuries. Two of my Spanish-Basque great-uncles served in Cuba as missionaries. One was a secular priest, and the other a Franciscan friar. The friar spent many years in Cuba, continuing the long

tradition of his order. This tradition was part of a lovely family connection to Franciscans: I was born in the city of Santa Clara, named for St. Clare of Assisi, and I was baptized in a Franciscan parish that was, no doubt, the fruit of those early missionaries.

One of my favorite moments during my trip to Cuba was attending Mass in that church. Today, after years of atheism promoted by a Communist government, Franciscan friars have returned to resume the work of evangelization they began some four hundred years ago.

A Land in Need of Love

The intersection of Cuba's native people—the Arawak peoples (Taínos and Siboney)—the African slaves, and the Spaniards created a small melting pot in the settlement Santiago del Prado. The Spanish crown commissioned a royal mining entity to extract copper from this area rich in natural resources. To paint a picture of peaceful coexistence would be disingenuous. The native population was beset with disease and abuse through forced labor. The African slaves brought to supplement this workforce did not fare much better. Many attempted to escape to the mountains. Those who were not successful suffered under harsh conditions. Many perished. Thus, the labor force was in a constant state of replenishment from the slave trade.

Almost a century of this forced coexistence passed. By the early 1600s, Santiago del Prado was a bustling and productive center for copper mining. The royal mining company flourished under

the management of Francisco Sanchez de Moya in the late 1500s and early 1600s. Sanchez de Moya believed in more benevolent care of the workers, and although they were still enslaved, they were given greater access to food and medical care. Some slaves were paid wages, and others were allowed the use of land to grow their own crops. Sanchez de Moya also made it possible for the friars to actively engage in evangelization, even designing a system for bringing these fledgling Christians to Mass. Meanwhile, devotion to the Blessed Mother was growing, too.

That Fateful Storm and the First Shrine

As a way to make the colony self-sustaining, the mining company expanded its reach to include farms and cattle. Many laborers worked in sugarcane fields, and others became cowhands. The business of slaughtering and preserving meat grew. Two Native American brothers, Rodrigo and Juan de Hoyos, were expert ranchers and adept at collecting the salt necessary for the preservation of the meat.

One day, Rodrigo and Juan went out to gather salt in the salt marshes of the Bay of Nipe. They took with them Juan Moreno, an African boy. That was the day they encountered the storm, invoked the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and found the statue of Our Lady of Charity. The men returned by way of the town of Barajagua, where they took the small statue and built a shrine for veneration. They were moved by their experience and felt compelled to share their story.

The original statue was moved from Barajagua to a church in El Cobre as the devotion grew. A short time later, the statue disappeared from the church in El Cobre and reappeared—wet—at the shrine in Barajagua. This happened a number of times, and the locals believed that the Blessed Mother was indicating her desire to remain in the area where the statue was found. In a way, no matter where the statue was moved, she did remain there, as devotion to Our Lady of Charity continued to grow and spread in the area.

I visited Barajagua during my pilgrimage in 2015. The devotion to Our Lady of Charity that began there more than four hundred years ago still permeates the area today. I imagined myself traveling along the path the men took when they built that first shrine, a humble building made of palm fronds. Construction of a new shrine had just begun some months before I visited, but it was already a welcoming sanctuary from the dusty dirt highway and the business of life outside its walls. The new shrine was finished and dedicated in October of 2017, a fitting and beautiful moment in the history of the devotion as a replica of the original statue was enthroned above the altar. A life-sized replica of the statue also stood in front of the building, reminding all those traveling through town of Our Lady's presence—not just a historical reference but a reminder of the Blessed Virgin Mary's accompaniment of all of us as we journey through life.

Cachita, Our Mother

Eventually, the “disappearing” statue was placed in the small chapel of the hospital at the copper mines in Santiago del Prado. There, the veneration of Our Lady of Charity continued to grow. It was here that she would eventually be known by the title of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre.

In 1687, Juan Moreno related the details of his adventure to an official court reporter for Church records. Marian devotion in the area had increased in the decades since that fateful day, and Moreno, now at an advanced age, recorded his whole experience for posterity. The statue was subsequently placed in numerous churches in the area until finally, in 1926, the beautiful National Shrine of Our Lady of Charity was built. It was elevated to a basilica on December 2, 1977.

Our Lady of Charity emerged from the depths of her children’s need. Cubans saw in Mary, under this title, a mother to them all. It’s important to note that in the hospital chapel, Our Lady of Charity was accessible to everyone working in the mines—no pilgrimage into the town to the cathedral was necessary. Mary was with her children. They needed her, and she was present. This reality, the presence of Mary through the ages, served as a consolation in those days and continues to comfort us today.

I’ve heard many nicknames for Our Lady of Charity, sweet diminutives full of affection, such as my mother’s use of *virgencita*, “little virgin.” Sometimes we use *Cachita*, derived from the Spanish *Cari-dad*, or “Charity.” Frequently, she’s called *morenita*, a

description of her Creole complexion. The features on the statue are racially ambiguous, representative of the comingling of the various cultures in that area. Under this title of Our Lady of Charity, Mary drew the early Cubans to herself as her children and, thus, as brothers and sisters in Christ. Four centuries later, we still call her our mother.

My Virgencita

Perhaps the loveliest characteristic of Our Lady of Charity is that she teaches us about Jesus with her presence. Where Mary goes, there is Jesus, her Son. This is clear in the imagery we see in Our Lady of Charity. She holds her Son in one hand and the foreshadowing of his passion, a cross, in her other hand. Salvation history is held in her arms; we merely need to contemplate the image to see the Incarnation and the Passion.

Modern depictions of Our Lady of Charity show her rising above the turbulent seas, three men at her feet looking up to her. This image, engraved in the psyche of the Cuban people, has evolved over the centuries.

As word spread and locals came out to see this miraculous statue that survived a storm without getting wet, the story grew and the details were embellished.

While it's certain that a young African boy, Juan Moreno, was one of the occupants of the boat, the identities of the other two men evolved over the years, creating a subtly different narrative. Some artistic depictions show white Europeans or

mixed-race men, in a desire to be inclusive of all of Mary's children. The men's identities morphed into the "Three Juans," although records indicate possibly only one or maybe two actually had that name. This subtle shift in the narrative coexists with the documented history contained in Church records. This new narrative reaffirms the Blessed Mother as a mother to all.

This is the image of the Blessed Mother that I know and the story I've heard, with variations here and there, throughout my life. When I pray for her intercession, I am on that boat with the Three Juans, looking up at her dazzling white robe and blue mantle the color of the sea. Her smile comforts and calms me.

My knowledge of faith and family, and even Cuban history, was taught and reinforced with extemporaneous oral histories inspired by whatever was happening in the moment. A familiar scent, a special meal, or a letter from Cuba became opportunities for joyful stories even as they were often tinged with melancholy. The story of Our Lady of Charity is intimately woven into my story alongside other family tales about shipbuilding and deep-sea fishing from my father, as well as my mother's descriptions of afternoons on the farm.

I relished my parents' recollections. Not only did they help me connect to relatives I knew only by name, but also they developed my identity with roots in Cuba, roots that were as much Catholic as familial and cultural. Those three aspects of my identity are one. To love my parents is to also love