

Our Lady of Charity

by María Ruíz de Lourdes Scaperlanda

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Our Lady of Charity, the Order's Pilgrim Virgin image for 2007-08.

Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Cuba (*Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre*) may not be as well known in American culture as Our Lady of Guadalupe. But one can find Our Lady of Charity's image in churches around the world. Wherever Cuban refugees have resettled, they have brought with them their devotion to la Caridad.

She is in a side chapel at the pre-eminent Marian shrine in the United States, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.

She stands to the right of the altar at the open-air Our Lady, Star of the Sea Church in North Padre Island, Texas.

And in Miami, just south of the downtown skyscrapers, there is a beautiful shrine built in her honor by exiles 40 years ago.

"La Virgen de la Caridad is the most profound symbol of the Cuban nation," said Auxiliary Bishop Felipe de Jesús Estévez of Miami, a member of Padre Felix Varela Council 7420 in Hialeah. *"The British have their queen, the Cubans have la Caridad. Even before Jamestown, El Cobre kept this gracious statue."*

"The lie of the Cuban revolution is its political imposition of totalitarianism," Bishop Estévez continued. *"As [Cuban] dissident Oswaldo Paya said so well, the people have the right to have rights. The devotion to Our Lady of Charity has a historical popularity that the [communist] party has not eroded. Its persistence in the soul of both exiled and islanders is an amazing affirmation that politics cannot become total, for the people have spiritual and cultural values that surpass it."*

Starting in September, Knights will spread devotion to Our Lady of Charity through a Marian Hour of Prayer program. This yearlong, rosary-centered event will be offered for the intentions of Pope Benedict XVI. Since 1979, the Order has sponsored Marian Hour prayer programs devoted to Mary under various titles; an estimated 12 million people have attended more than 70,000 K of C prayer services.

THE HISTORY



Pope John Paul II blesses the statue of Our Lady of Charity during his 1998 visit to Cuba.

The story of Our Lady of Charity is a rather simple one. Like many other Marian apparitions, it occurred in a nameless place and involved ordinary people.

Around the year 1600, three boys were sent to gather salt needed to preserve the meat of the town's slaughterhouse, which supplied food for the workers and inhabitants at the Spanish copper mines near Santiago, Cuba. Two of the boys were native Indians and brothers, Rodrigo and Juan de Hoyos, and the third was a 10-year-old black slave, Juan Moreno.

On their way back to Santiago del Prado (modern El Cobre) and halfway across the Bay of Nipe, they encountered a fierce storm that threatened to destroy their frail boat.

Suddenly, the waters calmed. In the distance the boys saw a white bundle floating on a piece of wood that they mistook for a sea bird. In reality, it was a small statue of Mother Mary holding the infant Jesus in her left arm and a gold cross in her right. Inscribed on the wooden board were the words, *Yo soy la Virgen de la Caridad* (I am the Virgin of Charity).

According to recorded testimony, despite the motion of the ocean waves and the storm, neither the image of Mary nor her white robes were wet.

The crowned head of the original 16-inch-statue is made of baked clay covered with a polished coat of fine white powder. Her feet rest on a brilliant moon, while angels spread their golden wings on a silver cloud. The child Jesus raises his right hand as in a blessing, and in his left hand he holds a golden globe. A popular image of Our Lady of Charity includes a banner above her head with the Latin phrase "*Mater Caritatis Fluctibus Maris Ambulavit*" (Mother of Charity who walked on the road of stormy seas).

The youths brought the statue back to their village of Barajaguas, where a chapel was built and the image venerated by all who heard the story. Much like Our Lady of Guadalupe for the Mayan Indians, Our Lady of Charity instantly became a pilgrimage site, a reminder for the underprivileged that their heavenly Mother cared and stood beside them. El Cobre was to be the first place in Cuba where freedom was won for slaves.

In 1688, the Archdiocese of Santiago, Cuba, initiated the first inquiry into the statue's mysterious origins in response to the extraordinary and faithful devotion demonstrated by the Cuban people. Surnamed El Cobre — the name of the mining town where her sanctuary was eventually built — Our Lady of Charity was declared the patroness of Cuba by Pope Benedict XV in 1916 at the request of the nation's bishops and the faithful, with a special appeal by the veterans of Cuba's War of Independence from Spain.

THE DEVOTION

"I have always honored her as our Mother. My father had a great devotion to La Caridad, and I pray my children will, too," said Gustavo A. Caballero, a Knight for 60 years from the first Hispanic council in Miami, Our Lady of Charity Council 5110. "La Virgen de la Caridad is our patron. She has always led our family and our people as our Mother."

It is no exaggeration to say that Cubans' beloved "Cachita" (their familiar nickname for Our Lady of Charity) has inspired people as a symbol of national identity for more than 400 years. Perhaps most importantly, the miraculous image of Mary that appeared to three ordinary boys continues today to unite the Cuban people — those on the island, as well as the millions in diaspora.

Bishop Estévez first realized the love of the Cuban people for La Caridad as a teenager. "There was a huge procession of Our Lady of Charity from [the province of] Oriente to Havana that first year of the revolution, with a huge Mass celebrated in Havana. This was to be the last massive public religious act to be allowed by the government until the Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II in 1998."

After the 1959 revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power, the first Cuban exiles in America sought an image of their Mother to be sent to Miami. On Sept. 8, 1960, on the feast of Our Lady of Charity, thousands converged at Miami stadium to receive an image smuggled out of the country by the Archdiocese of Havana through the Italian Embassy, which then passed it to the Panamanian diplomatic office, and finally to the United States.

Following her arrival, the image of Our Lady of Charity went on a tour of the camps housing Cuban children who had arrived in the U.S. through Operation Peter Pan, a Church-sponsored rescue mission that allowed parents to send their children to the U.S. without parental supervision; some 14,000 children participated.

Every year since 1961, exiled Cubans in Miami have gathered in September to celebrate Our Lady of Charity's feast day. And in 1967, the cornerstone of what would become an official shrine to Our Lady of Charity was laid; the chapel was consecrated in 1973.

In addition to the replica of Our Lady that once resided in Cuba's capital of Havana, the Miami shrine also lodges a vessel containing soil from all six of the original Cuban provinces which has been mixed with ocean water from the Florida straits — symbolic of the perilous 90-mile journey where hundreds of Cubans have died attempting to escape the island's totalitarian government.

For Cubans in Miami and elsewhere, the 40-year-old *Ermita* (Our Lady's Shrine) is "the most sacred space outside their longed-for *patria* (homeland)," said Bishop Estévez, himself a Peter Pan refugee. "A child is always at home with its mother. For a people suffering from being uprooted, expelled, *la Ermita* nears them to their land. For a diaspora dispersed throughout the whole world, *la Ermita* completes its identity... It is easy to understand why *la Ermita* causes such profound emotional and spiritual sentiments, since Our Lady of Charity is the heart of the Cuban soul."

PAPAL RECOGNITION

The original image of Our Lady of Charity was solemnly crowned in 1936 as part of the Eucharistic Congress that took place in the nearby city of Santiago. And in 1977, Pope Paul VI raised the prominence of the sanctuary in El Cobre to a basilica.

More recently, Pope John Paul II crowned the original image as queen and patron saint of Cuba on January 24, 1998, during his historic pastoral visit.

"From her shrine," declared the pope, "the Queen and Mother of all Cubans — regardless of race, political allegiance or ideology — guides and sustains, as in times past, the steps of her sons and daughters toward our heavenly homeland, and she encourages them to live in such a way that in society those authentic moral values may reign which constitute the right spiritual heritage received from your forebears..."

Bishop Estévez agrees.

"The moral and spiritual reconstruction of the new democratic Cuba will need the participation of the best talents of all. Our Lady of Charity and the Servant of God, Father Felix Varela [whose cause for sainthood has been presented], are the most enduring values of a legacy which embraces the huge diversity of the Cuban cultural reality.

"For some, the complexity of issues ahead leads them to fear," Bishop Estévez continued. "*La Caridad* is the best symbol of a unity which surpasses racial, economic, ideological and geographical differences."

On Sept. 8, 2000, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops pronounced Miami's Ermita de la Caridad (Shrine to Our Lady of Charity) a national sanctuary of the United States.

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