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"Always Forward, Never Back!" – A New U.S. Policy For Cuba?

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The motto, "always forward, never back" originated from the 18th century pioneer missionary Blessed Junipero Serra and was adopted much later by President Barack Obama. The meaning of this thought may especially be apropos when discussing "Opening Cuba" for tourism and humanitarian initiatives. The 20th century exemplar of compassion, Mother Teresa, established several missions to care for "the poorest of the poor" throughout Cuba. Her Missionaries of Charity help the poor there including those devastated by the back-to-back "level 5" hurricanes "Gustav and Ike" that struck Cuba fiercely through last August and September. Just as people across our nation continue to garner support for struggling neighbors in Louisiana and Mississippi after the 2005 hurricanes "Katrina and Rita," many Americans also want to offer assistance to charitable organizations to help Cuban families recover from their similar 2008 natural disasters, but have been waiting for the U.S.-Cuba Policy to be reviewed and revised to allow them to do so legally.

The day after Easter Sunday, April 13th, 2009 when White House spokesman Robert Gibbs announced plans for a new U.S. policy for Cuba including the lifting of travel and other restrictions, many Americans received this information as a positive move forward. Even the *Miami Herald* reported this news as "The most significant U.S. gesture to Cuba in decades." It was a signal to visit Cuba as soon as possible, to travel to this neighboring island (only 90 miles off the coast of Florida), and to meet with Mother Teresa's nuns to ascertain the severity of the situation for helping "the poorest of the poor."

My 36 hours on the ground in Havana coincided with President Obama's first foray into this region as he attended the "Summit of the Americas" in Trinidad and Tobago. It was both educational and informative to actually be in "the eye of the storm" (figuratively speaking) while "US-Cuba Relations" was the hottest topic discussed amongst the heads of state present for this lively dialogue. Witnessing this historic discourse on CNN from the TV in my well-appointed room overlooking the sea at the Melia Hotel in Havana and hearing firsthand the feedback of many ordinary Cubans during my brief stay was enlightening. They conveyed warm feelings toward American people and hope that tourists from the U.S. would come to their country in the near future. Some Cubans I met commented that their government's statement, during that time of "all issues are open for discussion with the United States", was encouraging for them.

My sojourn was fully hosted by the Sol Melia Group from Spain, who answered my investigative questions on whether Cuba is ready to welcome and serve American tourists. These hosts shared a local media presentation showcasing an extensive range of hotels and resorts throughout the island. Because they are not an American-owned hotel company they have been able to invest in developing these properties while hoping for an eventual influx of U.S. tourists. More tourism would of course help provide more jobs and income for the Cuban people, most of whom I was told can barely survive financially. Other than the Old Havana section, which has been painstakingly restored to its former beauty by the respected Cuban historian, Eusebio Leal, the rest of Havana is in extreme disrepair and it appears that resources to improve the situation for the people living there are scarce and currently dependent on investment from everywhere except the United States; debatably, it is a missed opportunity for American hotel and development companies. Certainly the hurricanes had a dramatic effect on the condition of the buildings and caused an even greater housing crisis in Havana.

I was informed that there are 40,000 hotel rooms throughout Cuba. There is even a Franciscan monastery in Old Havana that was converted to a hotel. Being a follower of St. Francis, although the inn was tastefully restored, I felt seeing the staff in Franciscan robes was a bit sacrilegious. I was told, however, that the ability for Cuban residents and tourists to practice their faith is not an issue. The historic Church of St. Francis in Old Havana has disappointingly been converted to an "art museum", but I can report that the original magnificent Crucifix is still on display there with statues of St. Francis and of the Blessed Mother Mary. My guide was surprised that I recognized and could tell him the meaning of the large San Damiano Cross in the back of the "museum church." The story goes that while young and affluent Francis of Assisi gazed at that particular cross he was inspired to renounce all worldly possessions and he then founded the first mendicant order of the Franciscans in the 12th century in Italy.

My turn for a surprise was when we walked outside to "The Mother Teresa Garden," with a very real looking life sized bronze statue of her sitting there holding her hands in prayer. On the park wall there is a commemorative art piece of Pope John the XXIII. It was very interesting to see this dedication, given his quiet papal role as a "peacemaker" during the "Cuban Missile Crisis" according to the History of Vatican II, (Volume II) by theologian, Joseph A. Komonchak, PhD. I was informed that the Greek Orthodox Church adjacent to this park holds weekly services. Also, I learned that there are two active synagogues in Havana.

I then attended Saturday afternoon Mass at Our Lady of Carmel with Mother Teresa's nuns. This is where one of their homes for helping the poor is located, above the Church. It is in one of the poorest locales in Havana and the service was filled with the sisters and volunteers caring for many children. I met with the Regional Superior of the missionary order and they too are hopeful that more Americans will be able to visit as tourists and volunteer their time to help the poor. Not far from this spot is a 66-foot "Christ of Havana" figure overlooking the harbor, similar to the famous sacred edifice towering over Rio de Janeiro.

If one does look back to the past, the political and historic reasons for the "ban on travel" which generates money for Cuba is understandable, especially for Americans that recall the "Cuban Missile Crisis" of October 1962. I personally remember it as a significant emotional and spiritual experience. This time it was the Sisters of The Sacred Heart that were with me and my classmates as we prayed incessantly for there to be a peaceful solution to the imminent and real nuclear threat of world destruction on America's doorsteps. I can also empathize with Cuban-American families. My grandfather Billy Angelo lived in Cuba where he was a successful entrepreneur in the hospitality industry. He fled to Miami during the Revolution in January 1959, leaving his entire life savings and material possessions in Cuba and moving to Florida where he met my grandmother. When I was a teenager visiting them at their home in Hollywood, Florida, he would reminisce about his "happy life" in Havana, but he never held a grudge, only good memories. Like Junipero Serra, my grandfather taught "always forward, never back!" He felt blessed to live in the Sunshine State of Florida, and so privileged to be an American citizen. So whilst I understand the concerns of families who came from Cuba during and after the revolution and their desire to return and regain their possessions, I can honestly report from my brief visit and firsthand research, "Opening Cuba" for travel and humanitarian efforts is good for all concerned neighbors, both American and Cuban. There is a bi-partisan legislative effort currently underway by Congressman Delahunt (D) of Massachusetts and Congressman Blunt (R) of Missouri to move "U.S. - Cuba Relations" forward.

July 1st was a reminder of the Feast Day of the Blessed Fray Junipero Serra. This controversial yet dedicated monk pioneered opening missions throughout Baja California, Mexico and Alta California that led the way for future tourism and community outreach in what is now the State of California. In 1784, Serra was laid to rest at the Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo located in Carmel, California on the Monterey Peninsula. As a resident of this popular region for tourists, I was delighted to see a monument to this notable pioneer located in the heart of Old Havana, Cuba. On April 18, 2009, when I gazed upon the life size monument dedicated to Blessed Fray Junipero Serra at the Plaza de San Francisco de Assis, (named after St. Francis of Assisi), I immediately recalled his perhaps prophetic words for pioneering U.S.-Cuba relations, "always forward, never back!"