



SOVEREIGN MILITARY HOSPITALLER ORDER OF ST. JOHN
OF JERUSALEM, OF RHODES AND OF MALTA

CUBAN ASSOCIATION

TUITIO FIDEI AWARD 2011

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On the evening of October 1, Ethics and Public Policy Center Distinguished Senior Fellow George Weigel was given the Tuitio Fidei [Defense of the Faith] Award by the Cuban Association of the Sovereign Order of Malta, an international Catholic order founded in 1099. The Cuban Association of the Knights of Malta was founded in Havana but now finds a home in Miami, while working extensively with the Catholic Church in Cuba. Weigel's remarks on reception of the Tuitio Fidei Award follow.

Remarks by George Weigel

Thank you for honoring my work with the *Tuitio Fidei* Award.

While it has been my privilege to work for over thirty years for the freedom of oppressed people throughout the world, there has always been a special place in my heart for Cuba.

My father, who would have marked his 90th birthday today, spent his honeymoon with my mother in Havana. I grew up in Baltimore with several Cuban and Cuban-American cousins, who planted in me an enduring hope for *Cuba libre*. In my role as biographer of Blessed John Paul II, I visited Cuba in January 1998 and had a chance to talk and pray with brave Cuban Catholics in Camagüey, Santiago, and Havana. More recently, I had the honor of working with lawyers in Washington, D.C., and with Vatican officials in Rome in efforts to secure the release from prison of a true 21st century confessor of the faith, Dr. Oscar Elías Biscet.

All of this makes me, not a son of Cuba, but perhaps a cousin. And it is as a member of the extended family that I would like to share a few thoughts with you tonight.

Twenty-eight years ago, Sir Michael Howard, the Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, said to me that there had been two great 20th century revolutions. The first had taken place in November 1917, when Lenin's Bolsheviks expropriated the Russian people's revolution and created the world's first totalitarian state. The second, Sir Michael said, was the transformation of the Catholic Church from a bastion of the *ancien régime* to the world's foremost institutional proponent of human rights and democracy.

The Catholic human rights revolution reshaped the map of world politics in the late 20th century, in venues ranging from Poland to Chile to Central America to the Philippines to South Korea. Each of these situations was different, distinctive, even unique. There is no one pattern, no one template to apply, when, in a specific situation of tyranny, brave men and women work to apply the Church's teaching about the dignity of the human person, religious freedom, and the moral superiority of democracy to other forms of government. Poland was not the Czech Republic. Slovakia was not the Philippines. Chile was not Nicaragua. The leaven of Catholic truth worked in all these situations, but it worked through distinct instruments in each distinct place.

There are, however, some common lessons we can draw from the experience of democratic transitions in the recent past.

As Dagoberto Valdés, who helped found the diocesan magazine *Vitral*, in Pinar del Río, Cuba, has said, a democratic transition is something like a jig-saw puzzle. In the final analysis, it doesn't matter where you start putting it together. What matters is that you start, and that all the pieces are there. This image suggests to me that it is the task of Cubans in Cuba to start putting the jig-saw puzzle of democratic transition together, and that the role of Cuban-Americans in the United States and elsewhere is to do whatever you can to make sure that as many pieces of the puzzle as possible are on the table.

You do that already, of course, by your charitable work in Cuba and by your support of the Church there. Permit to me suggest, very briefly, some priority puzzle pieces on which you may wish to focus in the immediate future.

Your medical and nutritional work is a crucial part of your work for a democratic transition in Cuba. In caring for the sick and feeding the hungry, and doing so as Catholics, you are helping rebuild a Church battered by a half-century of communist tyranny - and you are doing so by demonstrating that the Catholic way of life, the Christian way that St. Paul calls the "more excellent way" [1 Cor. 12. 31b], the way of supernatural charity, is the more humane way of life. That demonstration is how Christianity won out in the Roman Empire: it didn't win by winning arguments; it won by displaying a more humane way of life in a society marked by brutality and cruelty. Pope Benedict XVI has suggested that demonstration of a "better way" is how Europe will rediscover the faith. Let me suggest here tonight that many such demonstrations are what will accelerate the re-evangelization of Cuba and its transition beyond the Castro regime in the 21st century.

So please do understand that the charitable work you are doing is not just palliative, important as the relief of suffering and hunger is. It is also a major part of putting crucial pieces of the jig-saw puzzle of democratic transition into play.

Then there is the question of civil society. Democracy without a robust civil society - the institutions that nurture the kind of people who can make freedom work - rests on shaky, and ultimately unstable, foundations. Therefore, anything you can do to strengthen the basic institutions of civil society - the family; free and independent educational institutions; a free media, including the new social media; entrepreneurs with the social space to create wealth and genuine trade unions that protect workers' rights - is a way of rebuilding the foundations of the Cuban house of freedom.

Then there is the question of the public moral culture essential for democracy. This was a favorite theme of Blessed John Paul II, who knew that living freedom well was not just a matter of mechanics, of getting the institutions of democracy and the free economy right, but of virtue: a matter of a people's habits of heart and mind. Communism, we know, not only shatters the institutions of civil society; it erodes the moral fabric of a people. We all rightly admire Poland, which led the way toward the liberation of central and eastern Europe. Yet as many knowledgeable Poles have said to me over the past twenty years, there is still a lot of *homo Sovieticus* to be found behind the old Iron Curtain. And those bad habits of mind and heart are obstacles to the rebuilding of civil society and the achievement of a mature democracy.

In rebuilding the moral fabric of Cuban civil society, nothing is more important than fostering a deep respect for the dignity and value of every human life from conception until natural death. Therefore support for pro-life work in Cuba, including help for women in crisis pregnancies and support for the elderly poor, is an essential piece of the puzzle of democratic transition that you can help put on the table.

Support for religious education - in seminaries, among adults, with young people - is also crucial, both for the New Evangelization in Cuba and for a successful democratic transition. I would call this religious education "catechism plus:" for it ought to include support for education in the skills needed to rebuild the infrastructure of a 21st century free Cuba, and support for moral education. As the great Servant of God Father Félix Varela taught generations of Cubans during another time of oppression, the people of Cuba must be educated for freedom and responsibility, so that they can exercise well their right to participate in public life and be self-governing.

Rebuilding civil society in Cuba through the New Evangelization in Cuba also means support for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. Vocations to active ministries are important; but so are vocations to contemplative life, for as John Paul II said to young people in Camagüey in 1998, the Church in Cuba needs "contemplative souls who will obtain from God grace and mercy for his people." A rebirth of contemplative life in Cuba will, I suggest, provide the spiritual reactor core of the energies needed to make this long-oppressed island into a true home of freedom.

Cuba has spent fifty years walking the Way of the Cross. My hope for you, and for the people of Cuba, is that all of you will believe, with John Paul II, that "the Cross has borne fruit" during this half-century of suffering. The harvest of that fruit is yet to come. But the fruit is ripening. Your work in putting the pieces of the jig-saw puzzle of democratic transition on the table in Cuba will help ensure that there are ample and well-prepared workers to bring in the harvest.

2012 is, of course, the 400th anniversary of the finding of the image of *Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre*, whom I had the privilege of venerating in procession in Santiago on January 24, 1998, and whose image has been in my study at home ever since. As you continue the works of charity in Cuba - works that are essential to Cuba's democratic transition - let us commit that good work to her maternal protection, in the words of Blessed John Paul II in Santiago, almost fourteen years ago:

Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Patroness of Cuba! Hail Mary, full of grace!

You are the beloved Daughter of the Father, the Mother of Christ, our God, the living Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Your name, O Virgin of Charity, evokes thoughts of the God who is Love, recalls the new commandment given by Jesus, invokes the Holy Spirit: love poured into our hearts, fire of charity sent on Pentecost over the Church, gift of the total freedom of the sons and daughters of God.

Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus! You came to visit our people and wished to remain with us as Mother and Lady of Cuba, throughout its pilgrimage along the paths of history. Your name and image are sculpted in the mind and heart of every Cuban, both within and outside the country, as a sign of hope and a focus of fraternal communion.

Holy Mary, Mother of God and Mother of us all! Pray for us before your Son Jesus Christ, intercede for us with your maternal heart, filled with the Spirit's charity. Increase our faith, enliven our hope, augment and strengthen love in us. Shelter our families, protect young people and little children, comfort the suffering. Be the Mother of the faithful and of the Shepherds of the Church, the model and star of the new evangelization.

Mother of reconciliation! Gather together your people scattered throughout the world. Make the Cuban nation a home of brothers and sisters so that this people will open wide its mind, its heart and its life to Christ, the sole Saviour and Redeemer, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever.

Amen.