

"OPERATION PEDRO PAN" THIRTY YEARS LATER.

By: Monsignor Bryan O. Walsh

I am writing these lines in response to a request from the Florida Catholic that I share my thoughts on the 30th Anniversary of "Operation Pedro Pan." This was a program that I was instrumental to founding in December of 1960, to help parents in Cuba who wished to send their children to the United States to escape communist indoctrination. We began with a list of two hundred children. Twenty one months later, during the October Missile Crisis, we had more than 14,000 safely out of Cuba, living with friends and relatives, or with foster families and in children's homes throughout the United States under the auspices of Catholic Charities.

On Saturday, November 24th, I had the privilege of being the principal celebrant at a Mass of Thanksgiving in the Shrine of Our Lady of Charity, Patroness of Cuba, in Miami. The six concelebrants included a priest, Fr. Luis Perez, who had worked as a chaplain with the children in Miami, another who had worked as houseparent, then went on to become a psychiatrist and later entered the priesthood, Fr. Sergio Garcia-Miro. But what was most rewarding to me were the four other concelebrants, all Pedro Pan kids, who answered the call to priesthood, Frs. Juan Sosa, Fr. Alberto Rodriguez, O.P., Fr. George Garcia, and Fr. Felipe Estevez, all pastors today in Miami. Three others were unable to be present

because of their parochial duties, Fr. Ricardo Castellanos, Fr. Alex Foyo, O.S.B., and Fr. Alejandro Roque, O.M.I. They are among thirty-five priests working in the U.S. today who came to this country as teenagers in "Operation Pedro Pan."

In the congregation of some four hundred were "Pedro Pan" children, now adults, many with their own children, some of their parents, former houseparents, and Ramon Grau and his sister Polita. They were the principal underground organizers of "Operation Pedro Pan" in Cuba. They paid the greatest price, many years in Castro's infamous prisons. Polita served 14 years and Ramon 24 because, according to a high official of the regime, of what they had done to the youth of Cuba.

In my homily, I expressed my thanks to so many, mostly unknown to me, who made "Operation Pedro Pan" work. I thanked the parents who had such confidence in the Church and the word of a priest, that they sent their children into exile among foreigners and gave me and so many others the opportunity to care for them. I thanked the U.S. Government who trusted me with a "carte blanche" to bring the children to the U.S. without visas. Then the same Government gave me the funds, over five million dollars a year between 1961 and 1966 to care for them. I thanked the Catholic Charities in forty states and over one hundred communities who took the children into care when I asked. I thanked the Miami media, who kept our operation secret for a year and a half so as not to jeopardize the project. I thanked the hundreds of

American families who opened their hearts and their homes to these little refugees from atheistic communism. The list is endless. Highly qualified social workers from many parts of the country came to our help and enabled us to cope with the influx.

Names and faces came back to me, Dorothea Sullivan, a professor of social work from Catholic University, who took a leave of absence, which lasted several years to work with us; George Guarch, a Cuban-American who met almost every plane from Cuba and was usually the first to greet the children and calm down their fears; Fr. Luis Ripoll, S.J., and many other exiled priests, religious brothers and sisters who staffed our shelters; Cuban houseparents like Alberto Cuartas and German and Carmen Porto, themselves going through the trauma of exile; Jim Baker, former headmaster of Ruston Academy in Havana, who was my first contact with the Graus and the parents in Cuba; Frank Auerback, head of the Visa Section in the U.S. State Department who cut through all the red tape because he wanted to save the children; Senator Abe Ribicoff, then Secretary of HEW who never said no to our pleas for funds and accepted all our explanations when we were audited.

However, the greatest satisfaction I have are the many fine families that these refugees of yesterday are rearing today. Some are among the rich and famous, most have made rather successful careers in their adopted country, others struggle with life's difficulties, a few have fallen by the wayside. I witness their marriages, baptize their children, and for some I have offered the Mass of the Resurrection and

comforted their loved ones. When I said yes to Frank Auerback that December day in 1960, little did I think that I was taking on a lifelong responsibility.

After the Mass, a group of the one time child refugees pledged to work together to raise funds for the care of dependent children in the Archdiocese of Miami. What better way could they find to express their thanks for what they had received some thirty years ago?

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