

ON CHRISTMAS EVE, 1960, Father Bryan Walsh was alone in the office of the Miami diocese's Catholic Welfare Bureau when a call came from Frank Auerbach of the State Department in Washington, D.C.

The U.S. embassy in Havana, Auerbach said, had entry-visa applications for 200 unaccompanied minors. Their parents, members of Cuba's middle class, were afraid the children would be shipped to Russia for "re-education"—part of the process of fashioning a new generation of communists. The United States wanted

to grant the visas, Auerbach added, but needed a reputable agency to look after the youngsters. Would the diocese help? He needed a quick answer.

The notion of a state confiscating children appalled the young priest. But he had no authority to speak for his bishop. Never mind: he would worry about that later. "Sure," Walsh told Auerbach, "get the kids out of there."

Then 30 years old, Father Walsh had grown up with a strong sense of family. One of five children of a prosperous grocer in Limerick, Ireland, he had entered the Catholic



## Operation Pedro Pan

When the young Miami priest promised to help 200 children flee from Castro's Cuba, little did he know what incredible consequences his mission of mercy would have

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priesthood immediately after college. His first assignment was in central Florida, and then to the Miami diocese.

**"Take All They'll Send."** As Father Walsh drove home that Christmas Eve, it suddenly struck him: 200 kids! What if they all arrived at once? In the next day or so? Where would he put them? How would he feed them? How would he educate them? And how would he explain all this to his bishop?

On Christmas morning, Walsh hurried to the airport. Immigration officials agreed to help him identify refugee children. They also promised to keep quiet about the program. There was no need to call Castro's attention to the fact that many Cuban families were shipping their children to freedom.

However, there was a need to explain things to Bishop Coleman Carroll when he called, saying, "Someone from the State Department is trying to reach you. He said you'd agreed to take 200 kids from Cuba—"

"Uh, about that, Bishop—"

"Why only 200? Take all they'll send. Bryan, I want you to handle the whole thing. Look after them."

Castro's secret police clamped a tight surveillance on the American embassy, and during that first week, only 22 children got out. Then, on January 3, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Castro. With the Havana embassy closed, no visas could be granted. Without them, there was no way

for the youngsters to leave Cuba.

Walsh hurried to Washington to meet with Auerbach and Robert F. Hale, director of the State Department's visa office. A special visa "waiver" was designed—a letter from Father Walsh indicating that the State Department had authorized entry into the United States for the bearer. In the following months, some 50,000 visa waivers were shipped into Cuba in the diplomatic pouches of several friendly nations. These were delivered to the underground, which got them into the hands of parents who wanted their children out.

A secondary route was also established. The British government agreed to grant Cuban children entry visas into Jamaica, where the Catholic bishop of Kingston would shelter them overnight. Then the U.S. consul would provide visas for them to travel on to Miami.

**A Rising Flood.** To pay air fares, the underground collected U.S. currency remaining in Cuba and sent it to Walsh. A number of major American companies also contributed generously. Walsh bought money orders in Miami. These were delivered to the Henry Smith Travel Agency in Havana, which then issued tickets.

Soon the children began to flood in—by the scores, then by the hundreds. Incredibly, despite all the activity at the Havana airport, Castro's officials never questioned the exodus.

However, there was no way to

keep the secret from the Miami media. Walsh briefed reporters, stressing the need for secrecy. They christened the effort Operation Pedro (Peter) Pan, named for the boy who could fly in the James Barrie play. For nearly a year and a half no word of Pedro Pan leaked out.

The young refugees arrived in Miami heartbroken and frightened, many with only the clothing they wore. Typical was 12-year-old Armando Codina, who knew only two words in English: "hamburger" and "Coke." He couldn't help wondering, *What's to become of me?*

Brothers and sisters were kept together, sometimes with imaginative help. The age limit for incoming children was 18. But one young woman, shepherding six younger brothers and sisters through immigration, listed her age on the immigration form as 19. Legally, that meant she would have to be deported back to Cuba. An alert immigration official laid a burning cigarette on that line of her form. "How clumsy of me!" he exclaimed. "Now we must do it all over again." He helped her fill out a new form, and in a voice that brooked no argument, he recalled the exact month, day and year of her birth—two years later than she had indicated on the first form.

Walsh was able to place half of the children with their relatives and family friends around Miami. For the others, he set up living facilities and created "families" of ten to 25 youngsters, recruiting middle-aged

couples from the city's large Cuban community as houseparents.

**Sense of Security.** The Dade County Welfare Department lent a group of buildings in southwest Miami that had been used to house dependent and delinquent children. The diocese donated a 150-acre camp, 18 miles south of the city. Walsh also leased a block of apartment buildings in nearby Florida City, even fencing off the streets so they would be safe for play. As the kids continued to flood in, the federal government turned over some renovated World War II barracks northwest of the city.

The hundreds of incoming children swelled to thousands, and Father Walsh was soon running a support staff of 300 people. He also enlisted the help of hundreds of federal and state agencies nationwide. Directors of Catholic Charities around the country poured into Miami and returned home with busloads of kids and houseparents. One priest from Rockford, Ill., who arrived saying there was no room in his program, left with 20 boys.

Walsh kept close track of all his children—their health, morale, grades, behavior. He soothed their fears and assured them they were there because of their parents' great love for them. "You've come to a place where people care about you," he told them. "There's nothing to worry about. Until your parents come for you, you'll have a home with us."

He knew that the way to instill in the children the same sense of security they had known in their own homes was to treat them as a loving father would. He laid down the law: "All you have to do is go to school, study, do your best and behave as you know your parents would want you to. If you don't,

The gravest sin was skipping school. For that infraction, Walsh kept a leather paddle, and was not reluctant to use it. But he tried other approaches too. Once, two boys, 14 and 15, declared they were fed up with school and refused to leave their room. Walsh had a friendly judge send police to collect

the boys in a squad car and deliver them to a juvenile-detention center. There, they got a firsthand look at hardened criminals their own age. Walsh retrieved them that evening and had no problem extracting from them promises that there would be no more nonsense about avoiding school.

In April 1962, a newspaper insisted on breaking the sto-

ry. Unwilling to allow what he deemed an undeserved news scoop, Walsh released the story to the reporters who had been sitting on it for a year and a half. But even that didn't end Operation Pedro Pan. What finally finished it was the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis, and the resulting break in all air traffic between Cuba and the United States.

In October 1965, Castro agreed to allow thousands of dissident Cu-



*Monsignor Bryan Walsh late last year with two of his "boys": Dr. Moises Hernandez (left) and Ralph Sanchez*

there will be consequences."

The children got the message. Teen-ager Moises Hernandez sometimes sneaked out a window at night and returned as late as 4 a.m. Once, he found Father Walsh waiting for him in his room. "I'll never do it again," Moises promised. Walsh just stood there, looking at Moises, saying nothing. The next day he grounded the youngster and suspended his weekly allowance. Moises learned his lesson.

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bans to immigrate to this country. As part of the deal, parents of the Pedro Pan children received first priority. Overnight, South Florida was awash in tears of happiness as families were reunited. But a few children, whose parents had died or were political prisoners, would remain with Walsh for up to ten years.

IN ALL, Father Bryan Walsh managed to bring more than 14,000 children out of Cuba. Today, as a monsignor, he heads up the Miami archdiocese's Catholic Community Services, a \$25-million-a-year social-service agency. And he remains in close contact with many of his Pedro Pan children. He has officiated at hundreds of their weddings, baptized scores of their babies.

"He was just like a father," says Ralph Sanchez, now a wealthy businessman. "On free days he would take us to the beach or buy us hamburgers. When you had a problem, he would help you straighten things out."

Moises Hernandez, the boy who stayed out until 4 a.m., is now a prominent Miami physician. He remembers the priest as "a towering

figure," both in size and authority. "He was tough about living by the rules, but at the same time I always felt protected. It was good to know someone cared that much about me. He cared about everyone."

**Land of Opportunity.** Large numbers of the Pedro Pan children went on to college. Many entered the professions. Following in Father Walsh's footsteps, 27 became priests. Five are now pastors of large parishes in the Miami area. ("Be nice to your altar boy," Walsh laughs. "He may grow up to become your bishop!") Others became highly successful businessmen. One is Armando Codina, the youngster who arrived in Miami with no money and two words of English. Today, at 40, Codina is one of South Florida's most active developers and civic leaders.

Codina considers his adopted country a land of unparalleled opportunity. "Where else in the world," he asks, "could a young kid go alone, with nothing, and grow up to do the things I have done? There is no other place!"

And for Codina—as well as all the other Pedro Pan children—there is also no other man quite like Monsignor Bryan Walsh.



*Identity Crisis.* In a parking lot, I was surprised to see a woman trying to open the door of my car. As I approached, she went to the other side, put her key in that lock and looked bewildered. "Excuse me," I said, "but that's *my* car." She looked around questioningly, and then spied her vehicle a short distance away. "I'm *glad* this one isn't mine," she replied. "I can't get the damn doors open!"

—Contributed by Emily L. Snipes