

7/16/2008

Adeste Fideles

By Mañanita Ochoa

A few weeks ago I attended Pope Benedict XVI's mass in a baseball stadium transformed into a major league cathedral. The great mass came with epistle, gospel, and heart felt words of atonement for the sins committed by impulsive priests with diminished Christian values. The Papal message was charged with hopeful openings to the spirit of civility, piety, sanctity and universality. They were really unforgettable moments, even for the hard-line atheists in the crowd. The magnitude of the spectacle, including the Panis Angelicus sung by Tenor Plácido Domingo, and Pope Benedict's holiness, transcended suspicions that the intellectual backwardness and intransigence of such a traditional and orthodox figure would put off parishioners. The apparent apathy of the catholic authorities towards women's right to being ordained as priests, or towards the anachronism of celibacy and other evils, in a time in which we live so long and the balance provided by a real family when making decisions is so important, would have led me to believe that the Pope's trip would not be so successful. I was wrong. The Pope's visit to the U.S. strengthened the bonds with the Latino population, helped with reducing sexual abuse and pedophilia cases amongst the priesthood, and promoted spirituality and humanity as some of the healthiest and longer lasting principles of Christianity.

Watching the Pope made me remember a conversation I had with Fidel Castro, some 11 years ago. It happened a year or two before Pope John Paul's successful visit to La Habana. But way before that, I was a suggestible youth when Commander Fidel Castro descended from the mountains to take over Cuba's reign. As for any other impressionable youth, the image of a guerilla fighter offered the same appeal as the pages of Playboy to readers anesthetized by life's routines.

Luckily, my infatuation with guerilla soldiers ended when I had to make an honest living. In time, many of the guerilla warriors died in haphazard and destructive battles, or simply became disenchanted with the guerrilla life. Totalitarian political systems also perished along the way, overwhelmed by the competition and creativity of hard working, functional citizens from the free world who were open to the benefits of global trade. That is why, when I was able to sit down with Fidel in La Habana – a conversation that would last three hours – I was legitimately curious about some aspects of his life: did he still like his job; did he have an exit strategy; did he understand how similar his regime was to that of the Vatican; and when was the last time he had signed a check.

Fidel disarmed me with his answers. Yes, he was pretty tired of his job. It had become repetitive and a bit inconsequential. Despite being isolated and uninformed of the opportunities democratic life gives us to reinvent ourselves, or maybe because of his own isolation, he had not thought of an exit strategy. I suggested that the Vatican might be an ideal place to retire: good food, beautiful Italians, and surrounded by a highly dictatorial and lifelong political system; he would feel he had found his soul mate. Fidel laughed. He has a good sense of humor despite his political short-sightedness and occasional trip up. He admitted he had never thought of the parallel between his government and the political system in the Vatican. He said he though the church's punishments were unusually barbaric. Eternal damnation for adultery seemed a bit harsh. I agreed. Purgatory was enough for adultery. In fact, that is where adulterers reside while still living, I told him. They must like it. Heaven can be a bit monotonous and treacherous. It can make us feel too safe. Our exchange was so meaningful that I was able to convince

7/16/2008

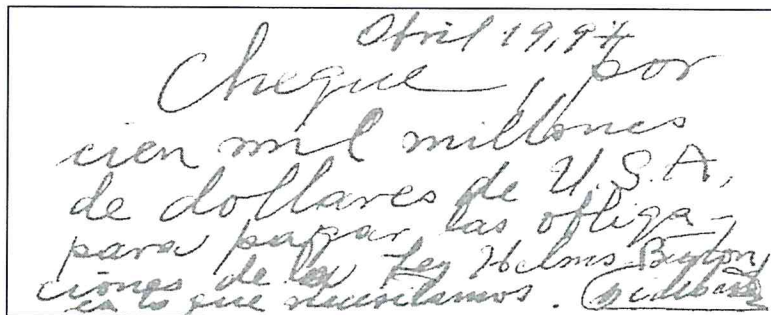
him of the importance of allowing the Pope to visit La Habana, without sabotaging the visit with any of his impulsively harsh remarks, and without Raúl giving drunken orders to shoot down pamphlet dropping pilots.

A year or more after our conversation, the Pope arrived in La Habana and Fidel received him with open arms. I watched him on television proud of the unexpected and even unusual brotherhood, and immodestly and daringly I thought that maybe, just like Forest Gump, I had had something to do with the passionate reception the Pope received from Fidel. Both were lifelong leaders of totalitarian systems. But before some of my readers become enraged – I beg for your patience – that is as far as I would take current similarities.

Neither the church nor the Vatican have armies. They lost their military power, thank God or modern constitutions, several centuries back, after having abused it wholeheartedly. They lost it after the horrifying and criminal crusades. Nowadays, the church can no longer burn someone at the stake or end the literary career of great thinkers. They also abused this power in the Middle Age. The Inquisition was abolished only in the 19th Century. Jerónimo Castellón y Salas was the last of the inquisitors. Other totalitarian governments continue to have military power and the ability to destroy the physical, spiritual, and emotional integrity of anyone that crosses their paths. Fidel's Cuba is one of these. Sadly there are many more in that category.

I would love to conclude from observing human behavior through history, that we must take away the weapons or cut short the mandate of any organization or person of a totalitarian nature. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Neither the Pope nor Fidel are an exception to the rule. And neither are any of the other incompetent and abusive leaders that take hold of power from time to time.

P.S. On the matter of the check, Fidel told me the last one he had signed was when he was still a lawyer, before taking to the mountains. In order for him to feel the pleasure of signing a check, I gave him a piece of paper and suggested that he sign it for 100 billion dollars in order to pay for the debt incurred because of the Helms-Burton decree. He happily signed the check. I keep it in my office to remind me that Fidel is faithful to his beliefs because it has always suited him. He has no idea what he missed out on by not moving to the Vatican, but then again La Habana has a better climate and Cuban women are also beautiful.



A handwritten note in Spanish, dated April 19, 1997, enclosed in a rectangular border. The text reads: "Cheque Abril 19, 97 por cien mil millones de dolares de U.S.A. para pagar las obligaciones de la Ley Helms Burton en lo que necesitamos. Fidel Castro". The signature "Fidel Castro" is written at the bottom right of the note.

Fidel's Last Check

“Check for US\$100 billion to pay for the obligations under Helms-Burton, which is what we need” –Fidel Castro, April 19, 1997.