

Priests of tomorrow

TAKING a break from his studies, seminarian Pedro Garcia told visiting ACN staff why he was training to be a priest.

He described how he had been a Marxist until he happened to watch a film about John Paul II which rekindled memories of the Pontiff's landmark visit to Cuba in 1998.

Pedro said he was deeply moved by the late pontiff's commitment to justice and peace and his trust in God.

He then read ACN books including its little catechism, *I Believe*.

ACN gives ongoing help to 56 diocesan and religious seminarians based at SS Charles and Ambrose seminary, in the capital, Havana.

The seminary has recently moved to new purpose-built premises outside the city centre, a move part-funded by ACN as the old building fell into disrepair and became increasingly unsafe.

The new seminary was opened in the presence of President Raúl Castro.

Running the seminary – providing books, paying lecturers' fees, buying food, and lighting – has become more expensive as costs have increased across the island.

Writing to ACN recently, Fr José Miguel Gonzales, the seminary rector, thanked you for your continuing support, adding: **“Please be assured that your help will be invaluable as the young men prepare to become ministers in Cuba.”**



Thanks to you, seminarians are able to realise their vocation in Cuba

Storms and Sanctuary: Our Lady of Cobre

The shrine to Our Lady of Cobre, Patron of Cuba

THE story of the origins of Cuba's national patron could be a metaphor for the modern history of the Church on the island.

A statue discovered floating on the storm-tossed ocean waters and brought to a place of sanctuary mirrors the history of the Church in Cuba which has survived the storms of change and oppression.

In deciding to make a personal pilgrimage to the shrine in March 2012, Pope Benedict XVI has learned the remarkable story of Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity of Cobre).

In the 17th century three young men later known as 'The Three Juans' prayed feverishly to Our Lady after a storm threatened to capsize their boat.

Suddenly the skies darkened and they saw what turned out to be a statue of the Virgin and Child coming towards them on a piece of wood.

Bringing the statue ashore, they got the authorities' permission for a shrine to be erected in the south-east town of El Cobre and people began coming from far and wide to venerate the iconic image.

Since 2010, Aid to the Church in Need has supported a nationwide scheme enabling Our Lady of Cobre to be taken in procession around all the 11

dioceses across the island, an initiative supported by calendars and catechetical programmes promoting veneration of Cuba's patron.

The vehicle used to transport the replica of Our Lady of Cobre received funding from ACN (see front page picture).

For the faithful of Cuba, seeing Our Lady of Cobre being carried through the streets of their towns and villages was a miracle in itself – never before in the past half-century have the authorities approved an outdoor religious ceremony of this kind.

And the re-birth of Christian faith and worship continues this year.

Thanks to you, ACN is sponsoring a series of pilgrimages giving the chance for faithful from each part of Cuba to travel to the shrine to make their own personal act of faith in honour of Our Lady and the Christ Child.

When they arrive in El Cobre, pilgrims will see the shrine which has been restored and renewed with help from ACN.

In a special message to ACN, Archbishop Dionisio Garcia of Santiago de Cuba (the diocese of the shrine of El Cobre) wrote: **“I would like to thank you – the benefactors of ACN – for all your efforts on our behalf in helping us to restore and expand our national shrine.”**

Cuba: Springtime of Faith



Festival of faith: Crowds throng the streets in devotion to Our Lady of Cobre, Patron of Cuba

CUBA'S FAITHFUL are on the threshold of a new era of hope, fulfilling dreams unimaginable to earlier generations.

Reports from the communist country show how frosty Church-State relations on the Caribbean island have given way to a new rapprochement – although there is still much work to be done.

Following a relaxation of certain restrictions, the faithful now find it easier to bear witness to Christ.

During 2012, the focus of this springtime of faith is the 400th anniversary of Cuba's national patron, Our Lady of Cobre.

In a sign of the new spirit of cooperation between the Church and the State authorities, massive and unprecedented festivities have been organised, promoting devotion to the island's icon of faith.

Pope Benedict XVI, in a rare pastoral visit outside Europe, travelled to Cuba in March 2012 and played a major part in the celebrations.

Now, at a key crossroads in the nation's history, the Church is faced with huge pastoral challenges amid reports of many people returning to the Church and others discovering the Faith for the first time.

Amid continuing poverty, a range of problems – both old and new – continue to make it hard for Cuba's Christians and many others too.

Following on from an Aid to the Church in Need project assessment trip to Cuba, this report looks at the changing face of the Church on the island.

Supporting faith education, helping people to receive the Sacraments, reaching out to the poor and sick

and encouraging devotion to Our Lady of Cobre are top priorities for the Church.

Bishops and religious superiors have appealed to ACN for help, remembering the charity's steadfast determination to stand by the faithful through the darkest days.

As one priest put it in a letter to the charity: **“Times and seasons may change for this island but the Church will always be thankful to the friends and benefactors of ACN, who have always been there for us when we have reached out in faith.”**



Pictured is the rosary, especially commissioned by the Vatican rosary makers, to commemorate Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Cuba in March of this year. If you would like to receive the complimentary Cuban Papal rosary please tick the box on the response coupon that accompanies this Mirror newsletter.



Aid to the Church in Need

PO Box 7246 Baulkham Hills NSW 2153 Tel/Fax 02 9679-1929
Email: info@aidtochurch.org Web: www.aidtochurch.org
Report by John Pontifex (2012) Photographs by ACN unless stated



A12/6/1

Helping the suffering
Church today



Aid to the Church in Need
www.aidtochurch.org

Times of change, times of hope

BISHOPS, priests, Sisters and lay people have spoken of a springtime of faith across Cuba as relations have thawed between the Catholic Church and the regime of Raúl Castro.

Since Raúl succeeded his brother, Fidel, to the presidency in February 2008, dialogue has intensified at the highest levels between the Church and the government.

One important fruit of this new-found cordiality was Pope Benedict XVI's decision to visit Cuba in March 2012.

Things have come a long way since 1961, when Fidel Castro's regime carried out a mass confiscation of Catholic churches, schools and other institutions and expelled many Catholic priests.

A key moment of change came in January 1998 when Pope John Paul II visited Cuba, a trip which coincided with a relaxation of restrictions on Christian worship and practice, including the celebration of Christmas.

Changes for the better are many and various. However, violence and oppression continue and a number of restrictions on Church activity are still in place.

A statement of seminal importance from the Catholic Church in Cuba concludes: **"The Catholic Church has a new way of interacting with the authorities on the island."**

And, while recognising that a number of Cuban communists remain unsympathetic to the Church, the document states: **"Together with the initial reforms, the intention of the Cuban president [Raúl Castro]**

Thanks to you, ACN is responding to many new requests for help. They include:

- 90,000 booklets for a nationwide programme introducing people to Christianity
- New roofs and basic improvements to small countryside chapels
- Minibuses, cars and other vehicles for priests and sisters ministering in remote regions – including repairs and fuel
- Repairs and restoration of the Shrine of Our Lady of Cobre
- Complete renovation of parish centres and buildings used by priests and sisters who care for



Many churches were confiscated by the communists in the 1960s

is to overcome the ideological conflicts that the Marxists always had with Christianity."

At a time of greater freedom for the Church, the bishops are turning to ACN for help to realise possibilities for pastoral development and outreach impossible in former times.

the poor and sick

- Diocesan publications including magazines which are the only way to reach a larger audience due to problems accessing the media
- Basic essentials for sisters who teach the Faith and minister to the sick and elderly
- Mass offerings for priests serving remote communities
- Support for seminarians preparing for the priesthood

ACN's support – your support – is deeply appreciated. As one bishop wrote: **"Your willingness to help the Church in Cuba spurs us on to encourage more people to hear the Good News of Christ."**

Hunger for the Faith

"THERE is a hunger for faith in Cuba today. It is the same in so many places on the island.

"What you find is that there are people coming back to the Faith or discovering it for the first time."

Such is the testimony of Fr Miguel from south-east Cuba, who met ACN staff visiting the island. He took them to meet faithful who regularly come together in a little chapel deep in the countryside.

This place of worship is little more than a roof of leaves and grasses supported by four pillars.

Fr Miguel comes here often to say Mass, give catechism classes and hear confessions.

The energetic priest explained that he has 48 other communities in his vast parish and visits them in a pick-up truck.

A priest celebrating Mass in a rundown chapel in Cuba



ACN provides Mass offerings for Fr Miguel and priests all across the island.

One such priest, Fr Juan, wrote a letter of thanks to ACN: **"The strength that comes from Christ's body and blood helps sustain me in my ministry and gives hope to all those who suffer.**

"We are all grateful to the brothers and sisters who have helped us and say to them 'thank you'."

Benedict XVI's visit to Cuba coincided with the 400th anniversary celebrations of Our Lady of Cobre

Helping the suffering Church today

www.aidtochurch.org



Keeping faith... in their final hours



A sister ministers to the sick

THE faces of Cuba's Sisters of Mercy are sometimes the last thing seen by poor and lonely people before they die.

The Sisters, based in the south-east city of Camagüey as well as in Havana, Holguín and Matanzas, go out to hospitals and people's homes, caring for the terminally ill day and night.

The small religious community reports that many people they visit are destitute, living in terrible conditions in remote areas cut off from the outside world.

Although healthcare is better in Cuba than in many parts of the Caribbean and elsewhere in Latin America, there are many who are unable to get proper help.

The Sisters – the Servants of Mary, Ministers to the Sick – are reliant on help from ACN.

In a recent letter appealing for aid, Sr Maria wrote: "We need money to maintain the bus and buy the fuel so that we can visit the sick people.

"We also have to purchase clothes, shoes, cleaning products, food and medicine."

Sr Maria continued: "Our ministry is beautiful in itself but no less exhausting.

"We thank you for all your help over the years, sustaining our mission and encouraging us to continue this work, which is dependent on our willingness to be guided by love."