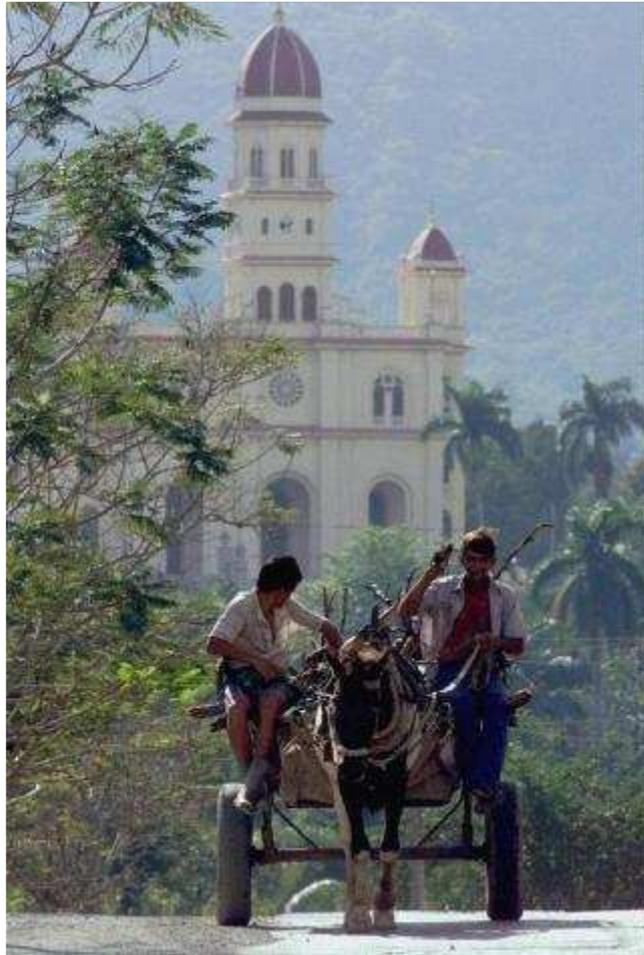


Celebrating the 50-year-old 'miracle' of Cuba's patron saint  
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Never before had 30,000 Cubans gathered outside the island.

Yet on the night of Sept. 8, 1961, they came by the thousands to then Bobby Maduro Stadium in Miami to commemorate the annual day of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (the Virgin of Charity).

With Fidel Castro having taken over the country two years earlier, the emotional event was a meeting of disheartened people coming together to pray for their former homeland, their families left behind and their uncertain future.

Then came the miracle.

Minutes before the Mass began, a group of men entered carrying a statue of Cuba's patron saint — it had been smuggled out of Cuba and had arrived in Miami that same day in time for the Mass. Joy filled the stadium.

"Watching her enter was something spectacular, everyone stood up applauding and

shouting, “Long live La Caridad del Cobre! or “Long live Our Lady of Charity!” “Down with Communism!” recalled Pedro Luis Pérez, one of three Cuban priests who organized the Mass through Archdiocese of Miami.

“We thought it was a special aura of the Lord, a message that we would soon be back in Cuba,” he said.

Thursday marks the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the statue, which helped give birth to the famed Ermita de la Caridad del Cobre shrine in Coconut Grove. The shrine, lovingly called “La Ermita,” stands as a symbol of the Catholic faith for Cubans and Miamians of all nationalities.

The ceremony will begin at 6:30 p.m. at the University of Miami’s BankUnited Center.

In a special reunion, Luis Gutiérrez Areces, the man who carried the replica statue from Cuba five decades ago, will lead the offering procession. He is now 74 years old. He will be accompanied by a student from Belen Jesuit Preparatory School, which also celebrates its half-century in Miami.

Cuban-born Monsignor Agustín Román, 83, retired auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Miami and first rector of the Ermita, said that the statue’s arrival was the foundational event of Hispanic Catholicism in South Florida. Until then, he recalled, there had been no Catholic services in Miami churches held in Spanish.

“On that day of the Mass, the Church in Miami realized that the preaching of the Mass should begin to be done in Spanish and the Archbishop began to name Hispanic priests in the various parishes to serve those newly arrived faithful,” said Román. “The Mass demonstrated the great devotion of people who, in pursuit of freedom, abandoned their country leaving everything behind except the love for their Celestial Mother.”

Since 1959, approximately one million exiles have maintained this devotion in the United States. Among the first ones to arrive in Miami toward the end of 1960 was Gina Nieto, who was 34 years old. She came with her now late husband Tarsicio and their children Lourdes, 4, and Manuel, 13. With little money, the family rented a small apartment near downtown Miami. She heard of the first Bobby Maduro stadium Mass from neighbors who told her Archbishop Coleman Carroll had summoned Cubans to meet and celebrate Mass in Spanish to honor the arriving virgin.

“We thought we would be a small group. We had no idea of the large number of Cuban Catholics living here at that moment,” said Nieto, now 85, of Pembroke Pines. “When we saw so many people at the stadium, we were surprised. We didn’t know where so many Cubans had come from that day.”

Nieto has not forgotten the emotion she felt when she saw the statue surrounded by flowers carried into the place.

“We were all stunned, full of an immense emotion, with people shouting, weeping,” she said. “We felt kind of more protected.”

Two months before the Mass, Father Armando Jiménez Rebollar had arrived in Miami. At that time, he was one of the many Cuban priests who had to flee from the persecution of Catholics launched by Castro’s government. He had asked his mother in Cuba to try and find a way to send him the replica statue he had ordered from a cabinetmaker for his parish in Guanabo, east of Havana.

Friends of the desperate priest contacted the owner of the newspaper El Mundo, Amadeo Barletta. He, in turn, asked for help from the Italian Embassy in Havana in getting the statue out of the island.

The Italian ambassador sent a limousine to retrieve the statue, which was later delivered to Elvira Jované de Zayas, chargé d'affaires of the Panamanian Embassy.

At the embassy, a Cuban man seeking political asylum happened to be awaiting approval from the Castro government to leave the country. That man was Gutiérrez, who was then 24. He had been a member of the resistance against Castro.

Coincidentally, the government approved Gutiérrez' travel on Sept. 6, 1961.

The following day, Jované de Zayas handed the statue to Gutiérrez, who took it to Miami — a mission he considered an honor.

Gutierrez remembers thinking: "They'll have to kill me to take the virgin away from me."

So on Sept. 8, at about 1 p.m., Gutiérrez, carrying the statue, boarded a Pan Am flight to Miami. At 7:30 p.m., half-an-hour before the Mass, the virgin was dressed, crowned and surrounded with beautiful flowers.

Why is the virgin so cherished by Cubans? In the early 1600's, three farmers aboard a boat on the Nipe Bay in Cuba were caught in the middle of a deadly storm. As they prayed for their lives, an image of the virgin appeared before them and guided them to safety.

Cuban historian Salvador Larrúa said that in the early 18th century, the virgin had already become the principal religious devotion of the Cubans as well the island's highest symbol of Catholic identity. She also became the insignia of the fighters for independence. The first version of the Cuban flag was made with the fabric over the altar of an image of Our Lady of Charity that was worshipped in the house of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, who initiated the first independence war.

"A large majority of Cubans firmly believed that the virgin would grant them their independence," said Larrúa, author of dozens of books on the impact on the Catholic church in the island.

Since then, Cubans have written songs about La Caridad del Cobre; her image is present in most Cuban homes or cars; millions of girls have been named in her honor and Cubans often ask for a blessing by uttering her name.

On May 10, 1916, Pope Benedict XV pronounced the virgin as Patron Saint of the Republic of Cuba. A decade later, the National Sanctuary of the Virgin was inaugurated in El Cobre, where the original 14-inch tall figure resides. It has become a popular tourist attraction.

"In exile in Miami, the Ermita de la Caridad del Cobre chapel is the meeting point of all Cubans," he said.

The order to build the current chapel by Biscayne Bay came from Archbishop Carroll, who on Sept. 8, 1966, appealed to the exile community to build a place of worship for the statue.

The archdiocese donated the land next to Mercy Hospital in Miami. In 1967, Román was named the Ermita's spiritual director and the image was transferred from the San Juan Bosco Catholic Church in Little Havana to the Ermita.

Cuban exiles took to heart the mission to build a home for the statue. The faithful contributed what they could amid their hardship.

Román said the construction money did not come from wealthy benefactors but from thousands of hard working Cuban who had to start their financial lives over in the Miami-Dade.

"We collected bags and bags of pennies that we had to take to the bank everyday," Román said.

By 2002, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops had raised the status of the Ermita to national sanctuary.

Through the years, the Ermita has been a spiritual landmark for Cubans in Miami. When the exile community is in pain or turmoil, it turns to the Ermita for comfort.

"It has served as a wall of sorrows" for Cubans for the last 52 years, Román said.

Today, current rector Father Juan Rumín Domínguez said the Ermita, where the Our Lady of Charity statue is visible in front of a giant mural depicting the history of Cuba, is expanding her appeal and attracting new followers from across Latin America.

"But Our Lady of Charity will always be in the heart and soul of the Cuban people – and on Thursday, her day, we will celebrate her arrival in Miami," he said.