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400 Years Later, Still Revered in Cuba (and Miami)

By LIZETTE ALVAREZ

MIAMI — As the statue of La Virgen de la Caridad, Our Lady of Charity, completed its 30-minute journey across a stretch of the Biscayne Bay for her 400th anniversary celebration here on Saturday, a rainbow burst into view to frame her arrival.

In this city long devoted to La Virgen, the patron saint of Cuba, it was yet another dazzling display of her munificence and mystery. Mexicans may have La Virgen de Guadalupe, but among Cubans, Cachita, as she is endearingly called, reigns supreme.

“Viva Cuba Libre!” shouted the Cuban exiles who greeted the statue at the slip and who, over the decades, helped transform this once sleepy town into a playground of guayabera shirts, Cuban cafecito and rhythmic congas. “Viva Cuba Libre!”

Inside the American Airlines Arena, at least 13,000 people awaited the entrance of La Virgen, in her sparkling gown of gold lamé, to attend a Mass in her honor. And, this being Miami, a raucous party followed with a lineup of Cuban musicians and singers. A similar scene played out in Cuba, where for the first time a simultaneous celebration of the Virgin took place and was shown on Cuban national television, a sign of burgeoning religious tolerance on an island that once shunned Roman Catholics and their rituals.

“For 400 years she has been not only a religious icon, but a symbol of Cubanía, or the Cuban identity; she makes Cubans feel more Cuban,” said Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami, who presided over the Mass on Saturday, the 400th anniversary of her feast day.

La Virgen’s history is inextricably linked with Cuba’s. In Santiago de Cuba, she has a sanctuary in El Cobre (her full name is La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre); in Miami, she has her own popular church, a shrine on Biscayne Bay, La Ermita de la Caridad, that points directly to Cuba. She has inspired a teeming trove of songs, paintings, sculptures and poems. Houses are stockpiled with her medals and other emblems.

Cubans have always turned to her for sustenance and stability. In the late 19th century, Cuban revolutionaries, or Mambises, fighting for independence from Spain placed her in their camps for spiritual fuel; Cuban rafters prayed to her during their perilous journeys across the Florida Straits aboard flimsy inner-tube boats.

She has served as a potent touchstone in many moments of crisis — when Cuban inmates took over prisons in Atlanta and Louisiana to demand their release and after Elián González, a young Cuban boy, arrived here on a makeshift boat only to get tossed into the political tempest that separates Cuba and Miami.

Even her arrival in Miami on Sept. 8, 1961, was auspicious. A crowd of 30,000 Cubans who hoped their stay here would be counted in months, not decades, gathered at a baseball stadium to pray for Fidel Castro's ouster and the safety of their relatives. Suddenly, La Virgen entered the stadium.

A replica of the statue, 16 inches tall, had been smuggled out of the island that day by a refugee with political asylum papers. It had boarded the plane with him in a blue carry-on case, after first bouncing from a carpenter's workshop to a private Havana house to the Italian Embassy to the Panamanian Embassy and finally to the stadium.

"She is an exile, like us," said Regina Gutiérrez, a retired schoolteacher who left Cuba for Miami in 1970 and attended the festivities. "Our prayers to her from here were always about freedom."

The Virgin's official residence is her shrine in Miami, completed in 1973 on church-donated land on the bay with the coins and dollars of new Cuban arrivals.

Auxiliary bishop Agustín Román, the community's spiritual leader who died this year, would haul "huge sacks of pennies" to the bank, said Julio Estorino, a journalist and volunteer. "Back then it was just us," he said. "We washed dishes. The first time we were paid, we donated to build La Ermita."

It has been more than 400 years since an image of the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to three Cuban farmers caught in a three-day maelstrom on the Bay of Nipe off Cuba. The men prayed for calm and, just after the storm cleared, something bobbed their way. It was a figure of the Virgin Mary, bone dry, atop a board, with a sign that proclaimed, "Yo Soy La Virgen de la Caridad" — "I am the Virgin of Charity."

On her right arm, she carried Jesus; in her left hand, she clutched a gold cross. The men brought her back to Cuba, where a shrine, now a national sanctuary, was built for her in El Cobre in Santiago de Cuba, an area abundant with cobre, or copper.

"No matter where she is, despite all our differences — ideological, political — and the great distance between us, she unites Cubans wherever they are found," said the Rev. Juan Rumín Domínguez, the rector of the shrine in Miami.

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