

## THE NEW YORK-TO-CUBA AXIS OF FATHER VARELA

CUBA experienced during the early 19th century an intellectual explosion whose impact has reverberated into the 20th century.

It was sparked by a shabby, ascetic little priest with luminous eyes and an eloquent smile, who, while laboring for 25 years as a missionary in New York, kept the lines of contact open with his forward-looking followers. He believed in dignity, social justice, and freedom, under God and His Church, for every people, and he did not consider these obtainable for Cuba under Spanish rule. A Cuban scholar in our times has designated him, "Forger of the Conscience of Cuba."<sup>1</sup>

Félix Varela y Morales was born in Havana in 1788 (some authorities say 1787) at a time when Spain controlled not only the West Indian islands but also much of South America, Louisiana, and Florida. As a small boy, he lived in the ancient citadel of St. Augustine, where his father was a minor officer with a Spanish regiment and his maternal uncle was Governor. He early chose the religious life in preference to the military. He was educated in Havana at the College of San José, known as the College and Seminary of San Carlos since 1767 when King Charles II of Spain had expelled its Jesuit founders. Upon his ordination in 1811, Varela was appointed to the chair of philosophy in his alma mater.

Education and self-expression in the spirit of the Age of Reason had been fostered in Cuba during the late eighteenth century by an enlightened governor, Luis de las Casas y Arragorri. In the seminary, Father José Agustín Caballero, although he preferred Descartes to the disputations of Scholasticism, published a book of readings from Scholastic philosophy. The Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País (Royal Patriotic Society), established by Las Casas and active into our own generation, has vitally affected the island's destiny. Also patronizing public welfare projects was the man who served as Bishop of Havana from 1799 to 1832, Juan José Díaz Espada y Landa (commonly called Bishop Espada), of whom it is said that he "spent the ample revenues of his bishopric for the benefit of education and the public health, and no charitable undertaking ever sought his help in vain. Espada seconded the efforts of the Patriotic Society for the increase of the number of

---

<sup>1</sup> Antonio Hernández Travieso, *El Padre Varela: biografía del forjador de la conciencia cubana* (Havana, 1949).

schools.”<sup>2</sup> The Bishop drained marshes, provided for cemeteries, gave pastoral approbation to the newly discovered vaccination against smallpox, and encouraged wide educational innovations at San Carlos.

Such was the intellectual climate in which the young priest, Félix Varela, began his labors. His entry into the Sociedad Económica, says one twentieth-century writer, signalized momentous changes for Cuban education.<sup>3</sup>

Varela's decade as professor at San Carlos was marked by prodigious innovation and creativity. Endowed with a keen mind, a balanced comprehension, and an intense spirituality, he made all knowledge his province while reserving the crown for theology. Instead of using the traditional Latin of scholarship, he inaugurated a new era by preparing lectures and texts in the Spanish vernacular. He valued observation, reasoning, and meditation above the memorizing of the pre-formulated syllogisms of Scholasticism. He inaugurated courses in physical and chemical science, using laboratory techniques. To serve the new learning he needed books, which he turned out single-handed: *Institutiones Philosophiae Eclecticae ad usum Studiosae Juventutis*, in four volumes, two in Latin and two in Spanish; *Lección Preliminar*, extolling the methods of experimental science; and *Los Apuntes Filosóficos sobre la Dirección del Entendimiento Humano*, a series of classroom notes on logic. For younger students he prepared a reader, *Colección de Máximas Morales y Sociales*, on request of the Economic Society. His *Leciones de Filosofía*, which steered a steady course between irreligion and intellectual immobility, was studied by generations of Cubans and Mexicans, and he personally supervised the preparation of five editions of the work between 1818 and 1841.<sup>4</sup>

Bishop Espada solidly supported his enterprising young philosopher, in spite of the complaints of the old-school Thomists. Varela was an eclectic, choosing what seemed best from both medieval and recent systems of thought. From Condillac, whom he most closely resembled, he borrowed the combination of sense-learning and freedom of the will; from Locke, the importance of reflection; from François Bichat and Francis Bacon, the scientific approach; from the Scholastics, the nature, rights, responsibilities, and relationship of the human being to God. In

---

<sup>2</sup> Havana, Diocese of,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, VII, 154.

<sup>3</sup> A. Hernández Travieso, *Varela y la reforma filosófica en Cuba* (Havana, 1942), pp. 91 ff.

<sup>4</sup> For a list of Varela's writings, see the account by Richard J. Purcell in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIX, 224 f.

his synthesis, he represented to his limited circle in Havana what the Angelic Doctor did to the whole of thirteenth-century Christendom. In his progressive outlook, he might be called the Hans Kueng or the Cardinal Bea of an awakening Cuba. Yet more, he was leading, albeit unwittingly, a renaissance of Scholastic influence in all life; for up-to-date relevance, he found he had to go beyond the high points of the medieval synthesis through the methodology of the new "Science."

Not the least of Varela's achievements in Havana was the development of a corps of devoted disciples. He had on his students the magnetic effect of the born and educated teacher. Long after political events had sent him into permanent exile, his followers kept in touch with him, learning from him and pursuing the roads which he had opened. Like other dynamic teachers, he might have been surprised, had he lived a hundred years, to see whither his instruction had led.

During Varela's tenure of the chair of philosophy at San Carlos, most of the regions of Latin America were throwing off the bonds of colonialism; but Cuba, progressing satisfactorily under virtual home-rule and fearing civil strife more than the lax control of war-weakened European monarchs, remained loyal to the Spanish crown. When in 1820 King Ferdinand VII was forced by a junta to restore the Constitution of 1812, the Royal Patriotic Society in Havana, with a nod from Bishop Espada, sponsored the formation of a Department of Government at San Carlos. Father Varela was selected to set up a course in constitutional law. He protested, but the Bishop overruled him, giving him half a year to get ready and assigning his pupil, José Antonio Saco, as assistant to him. Varela, after intensive study, wrote a textbook entitled *Observaciones sobre la Constitución de la Monarquía española*. His class opened with more than 150 students.

But destiny did not permit him to bring the course to a conclusion. The Cortes had been reinstated in Madrid, and Cuba was allotted three representatives. Elected thereto were Leonardo Santos Suárez, Tomás Gener, and Félix Varela. The priest demurred: he had work pressing in Havana; but again the Bishop insisted. Varela was never to see his native island again.

His two years in Spain were an enlightening and a shattering experience for the "presbyter" Varela. He found himself at home in the company of continental philosophers and political liberals. He prepared a plan for partial self-government for his native island and heard it approved in committee. He drew up a report on the necessity of

abolishing slavery in Cuba, with detailed suggestions as to the means of accomplishing emancipation without injury to the rural white population.<sup>5</sup> His proposals were brought to naught by the Holy Alliance, that compact of monarchs sworn to suppress unrest and progress: for French armies aided Ferdinand to overthrow the Cortes, and Varela and his compatriots were driven into exile. All the members of the assembly were declared guilty of treason.

The three Cuban delegates, thus proscribed, reached New York City on the sailing ship, *Draper*, on December 17, 1823. Don Cristóbal Madan, a former pupil employed at the counting house of Goodhue & Co., on Water Street, took the priest in hand, acquainted him with the ways of the metropolis, and became his trusted long-term friend and supporter.

Félix Varela, who had delivered an eloquent encomium of Ferdinand VII in Havana in 1818 at a public session of the Economic Society, and a funeral oration the following year for the abdicated Charles IV, now had reservations about the suitability of Spanish suzerainty over Cuba. The Monroe Doctrine had guaranteed independence to the self-proclaimed new nations of Latin America. Florida and Louisiana had been absorbed by the United States. Only Puerto Rico and Cuba remained to Spain of her once extensive American possessions; and after Ferdinand's restoration of absolutism in the Peninsula in 1823, freedom was drastically curtailed also in the Caribbean islands. José Saco, carrying on for Varela as professor of philosophy to packed classes at San Carlos, presently found himself *persona non grata* to the new authorities and fled to join his mentor in the United States.

After a short sojourn in New York, Varela journeyed to Philadelphia, from which city he issued a second edition of his *Lecciones de Filosofía*.

The Quaker City was then the headquarters of a secret and active Freemason organization, anti-Catholic, anti-Spanish, anti-monarchist, and pledged to promote public education and the "religion of reason." Masons both in Britain and in America had been exerting themselves to liberate Latin Americans from "ignorance and superstition" (the Church) and from "despotism" (Spain). The Philadelphia group was

---

<sup>5</sup> This report is given in full in a documentary volume published by the University of Havana, entitled *Los Restos del Padre Varela en la Universidad de la Habana*, por una comisión técnica integrada por los profesores universitarios, Julio Morales Coello, presidente . . . (Havana, 1955), pp. 189-209. Slavery was not finally abolished in Cuba until 1886.

particularly interested in Cuba, supplying both propaganda and money to the movement there: it was rumored that Bishop Espada was in league with them. From this city, Father Varela in 1824 published under his own name the first issue of *El Habanero*, a short-lived but politically bristling magazine which he later issued from New York. José Antonio Saco, then studying chemistry in Philadelphia, may have collaborated with him. The work was entirely in Spanish, and it was smuggled into Havana for clandestine distribution.

*El Habanero* billed itself as a political, scientific, and literary paper. It covered, especially in its early numbers, some scientific topics, which might be translated as follows: "Temperature of sea-water at great depths"; "Action of magnetism on titanium"; "Propagation of sound"; "Notes on a machine invented to measure the course of a ship." For the most part, however, it was a study of political unrest and oppression in Cuba and an analysis of means to correct unbearable conditions there, as witness the titles of some of its other articles: "Thoughts on the actual state of the island of Cuba"; "Secret societies in the island of Cuba"; "Religious conditions in the island of Cuba"; "Love of Americans for independence"; "Revolution involving a foreign army"; "Revolution accomplished without foreign aid"; "Reflections on the situation in Spain"; "Persecution of this paper in the island of Cuba"; "Is it necessary for the island of Cuba to unite with any of the governments on the American Continent to free itself from Spain?"; and, in its sixth number, the "Royal Order of Ferdinand VII suppressing *El Habanero*."<sup>6</sup>

Many of the ideas in *El Habanero* have a decidedly modern ring. Varela deplored the lack of unity among Cubans; the secret, ineffectual societies; the hollow bravery of words that substituted for deeds; the valuing of economic over ideological benefits; the encouragement given to informers who generally were seeking personal advantage; and the failure of true patriots to realize that now or never their services were needed by the fatherland. The admission he ascribed to "Independiente" (Lover of Independence) might be read as his own sentiment: "If you call revolutionary all those who work to change an order of

---

<sup>6</sup> In 1945 the University of Havana reissued *El Habanero*, including some photostatic reproductions of the original printings, and adding illuminating commentaries. Its title: *El Habanero: papel político, científico y literario, redactado por el Dr. Félix Varela, Catedrático de Filosofía y de Constitución en el Seminario de San Carlos de La Habana; seguido de las apuntes sobre El Habanero; estudios preliminares por Enrique Gay Calbó y Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring.* (References will be to this edition.)

things contrary to the welfare of the people, then I glory to count myself among those revolutionaries.”<sup>7</sup>

The magazine declared that, whether the Spanish king liked it or not, Cuba would one day be free.<sup>8</sup> Since independence for the island was both necessary and inevitable, the people should prepare so as to effect it with a minimum of misery.

It was a call to rebellion. Ferdinand VII heard it in Madrid, and his deputies in Havana engaged an agent to do away with the bold exile. Varela referred to the planned assassination in Numbers 3 and 4 of *El Habanero*.

In asserting the right of subjects to free themselves from an unjust ruler, Varela was not, from the point of view of Catholic political philosophy, being an iconoclast. He was following the line laid down earlier by the orthodox Scholastics, Vitoria, Bellarmine, and Suárez. That he was doing so did not make his ideas any more palatable to Ferdinand, King of Spain.

*El Habanero* ceased publication after six numbers. When it was reprinted in 1945, the table of contents for the seventh and last number was included but no copy of the issue was to be found.

Félix Varela was essentially a priest, his dedication to freedom and progress following from his concept of man as God's noblest creature. Even though the road back to his native land, to his interrupted career there, was more firmly than ever barred, the Master's work could be done in other areas. Varela, the political exile, became Father Varela, missionary priest.

The diocese of New York State and northern New Jersey, then a vast mission territory served by a handful of foreign-born priests under an aged Irish prelate, was in critical need of churches, money, and clergy. On the invitation of Bishop John Connolly (who died early in 1825), Varela decided to settle in the metropolis. He was attached to St. Peter's in Barclay Street, mother church of the entire diocese. There was only one other Catholic church in the city at that time—St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mulberry Street.

The Cuban priest had been studying English. Soon he was hearing confessions, writing articles on Christian doctrine for the newly estab-

<sup>7</sup> “Dialog held in this city between a Spanish partizan of Cuban independence and his fellow-countryman, who was anti-independence,” *El Habanero*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>8</sup> Varela's words are: “Quiera o no quiera Fernando, sea cual fuere la opinion de sus vasallos en la isla de Cuba, la revolucion de aquel pais es inevitable”; in his article, “Tranquilidad de la isla de Cuba,” *El Habanero*, p. 60.

lished diocesan organ, *The Truth Teller*, and projecting a bi-lingual magazine for young people. St. Peter's, whose cornerstone had been laid by the ambassador from Spain in 1785 after the defeat of the British, had escaped the historic hostility of the Anglo-Saxons to all things Hispanic; and it numbered among its leading parishioners several Spanish-speaking merchants. With them and with the pastor, Father John Power, a man of Maynooth, able, sensitive, and dynamic, Félix Varela soon found himself at home in New York.

Bishop Jean Dubois was installed at old Saint Patrick's in November, 1826. Like Varela, he had fled despotism in Europe, having escaped as a young priest from the mob violence of the French Revolution. Like the Cuban philosopher, Dubois was a scholar and an educator: he was founder and first president of Mount Saint Mary's College and Seminary, Emmitsburg, Maryland, and patron of Mother Seton in the beginnings of her religious establishment. The new prelate, who found both clergy and laity in his episcopal see hard to handle, came to lean heavily on the refugee from Havana. The predominantly Irish Catholic population of the diocese had wanted John Power to become bishop, and they resented the selection of the French-born Dubois. The resultant tension, says Reverend John Talbot Smith, "Father Varela's personality did much to soothe."<sup>9</sup>

During the prelacy of Bishop Dubois (1826-1842), the Reverend Félix Varela led two lives. As devoted missionary pastor and erudite Catholic apologist, he became almost as illustrious in New York as he had been in Havana. And he continued to hold the torch for Cuban progress, proclaiming, like many of his compatriots, that love of one's country and service to her was a cradle-to-grave obligation. "Our fatherland," he wrote in *El Habanero*, "owes us nothing, but all her sons owe her their services; and, when they deserve well of her, it is only to demonstrate that they have fulfilled their obligation."<sup>10</sup>

Varela managed this dual career by laboring day and night, allowing neither rest nor comfort to his frail body as the creative spirit drove him on. "Yes, my friends," he commented in a letter to Havana, "I fly when all sleep and toil when all repose. I enjoy life when all leave behind enjoying it, and alone I see myself free when society importunes to lie down in chains. All is tranquil, and I am sure to be able to write, for my mind finds nothing which distracts it."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *The Catholic Church in New York* (2 vols.; New York and Boston, 1905), I, 78.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in the original Spanish, in *Los Restos*, p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> Dated New York, February 28, 1832, and addressed to the editors of *Revista*

Since St. Peter's little red brick church was inadequate for the growing crowds of worshippers, Bishop Dubois assigned Father Varela to establish a new parish farther north. The Catholics of New York City at that time lacked both money and status. In Cuba it was the custom for well-to-do patrons to provide churches for the people. Félix Varela accordingly drew on his own inheritance and the generosity of four Spanish-American friends. He purchased Christ Church in Ann Street from the Episcopalians for \$19,000 and converted it into a Catholic edifice. A few years later, when the west wall of the Ann Street building began to buckle ominously, he personally raised \$55,000 to buy the Reformed Scotch Presbyterian Church in Chambers Street. This new home of his congregation was consecrated in March, 1836, as the Church of the Transfiguration; but to New Yorkers it was known as "Father Varela's church."

Earthly possessions had little meaning for Félix Varela. The deed to Christ Church he turned over to his bishop in 1827. Since New York State laws, sensitive to the American "democratic" principle, generally vested ownership of church property and control of church finances in elected lay bodies, Bishop Dubois was subjected to much criticism from his fractious flock for taking title to the Ann Street property. When he bought Transfiguration, Varela followed the letter of the law: a board of trustees was chosen by the pewholders. For the first few years, Father Varela was a member of this governing board. Then the laity took exclusive charge, and they bungled matters so badly that their pastor had to turn again to his Spanish-speaking friends for donations. In 1844, the lay board begged Father Varela to become sole trustee. To save his church from bankruptcy, he consented. In April, 1850, he made over the deed to the forceful new bishop, Right Reverend John Hughes, who was pooling the assets and the liabilities of his debt-ridden diocesan churches.

Father Varela's selfless devotion became legendary. It was the time of cholera epidemics, and of the simultaneous incursion of the hungry and the persecuted from Ireland and North-Central Europe. While others fled the stricken city, he ministered to the diseased and the dying—as did also the venerable Bishop Dubois, who insisted on returning to the metropolis from a pastoral visitation at the height of the scourge. Like Bishop Espada, the gentle priest from Havana never

---

*Bimestre Cubana*; quoted in José Antonio Fernández de Castro, *Medio siglo de historia colonial de Cuba; cartas a José Antonio Saco ordenadas y comentadas (de 1823 a 1879)* (Havana, 1923), p. 37.



turned a beggar away empty-handed, giving, when funds were short, his coat and his household effects. His charity proved infectious: ladies of the parish formed a mutual-aid sewing society and helped him to conduct the first Catholic day-nursery for the children of working mothers and to found the city's first half-orphan asylum.

The influence of Father Varela on his parish was profound. His love for humanity grew out of his devotion to the Mystical Body of Christ. A unique feature of life at Transfiguration parish was the "missions"—as they would now be called—which he conducted personally during the weeks preceding the feast of Corpus Christi and other holydays.

During most of the 19th century, there was a racial clannishness evident in American Catholic churches, particularly in the immigrant haven of New York. Irish parishioners, for example, walked out on the French-accented sermons of Bishop Dubois, and newcomers from Germany insisted that their native tongue be spoken not only by their pastors but by the teachers of their children. Many of the city's churches retain to this day the distinctive characteristics of their congregations' ethnic origins. Father Varela's churches, by contrast, were markedly cosmopolitan. At Christ Church, founded with Spanish money, he was assisted by an Austrian ex-Jesuit, Father Joseph A. Schneller; and the two priests collaborated in publishing the *New York Weekly Register and Catholic Diary*, which specialized in news of interest to the Irish. Among the first trustees at Transfiguration were John P. Garcia, Michael Burke, the Swiss restaurateur John Delmonico, and François C. Everard. Sharing his pastoral duties at the Chambers Street church and the hospitality of his residence on Reade Street were Father Schneller; the Reverend Dr. Charles Constantine Pise, poet and novelist, son of an Italian father and a Philadelphian mother; a Polish priest named Terhykowicz; a Portuguese, Father Freitas; and a Father Llana, probably Spanish. From 1842 to 1846, he was joined at Transfiguration by a holy Italian Carthusian, the Reverend Alexander Muppietti, who, like Varela, was considered by the people to be a saint.

The Church of the Transfiguration carried the stamp of Father Varela well into the 20th century. Its congregation was transferred, soon after the founder's death, to the edifice of Zion Church (originally Lutheran, then Episcopalian) in Mott Street. Here its international cast persisted, although with a difference. For a time, most of the parishioners were Irish. At the turn of the century, Italians predominated, and in 1902 the Salesian Fathers of Saint John Bosco took charge; but Félix Varela's

sanctuary lamp continued to burn there, his silver crucifix hung above the altar, his picture remained above his old desk in the presbytery. Today, situated in the heart of New York's Chinatown, Transfiguration has as its pastor Father William P. Mulcahy of Maryknoll and is again a "mission" church.

Although Father Varela came to be remembered in New York chiefly as a holy and humanitarian priest, his impact was felt far beyond his own parish. The Church was then under violent attack by Protestants whose historic religious monopoly in America was being threatened by Catholicism's growing numbers and vitality. The prevailing principle under the Constitution of 1789 was that of religious toleration; but splinter groups used techniques ranging all the way from verbal abuse to church burnings to prevent the spread of Catholicism. Bishop Dubois lost to fire, between 1831 and 1835, the Church of St. Mary in Sheriff Street, the school of the Sisters of Charity in Mulberry Street, and the newly constructed seminary at Nyack, designed to be the first in the diocese and constructed with the proceeds of a tedious fundraising journey to Europe. The so-called "disclosures" of Rebecca Reed and Maria Monk blackened the reputation of religious orders, while the hierarchy was attacked as dictatorial and anti-American and the Pope as anti-Christ. "We must take the sling and the whole armour of God, to meet the uncircumcised Philistines," proclaimed *The Protestant*, a magazine initiated in 1830 specifically to combat Papistry in America. The American Bible Society, the American Home Mission Society, the American Tract Society, the American Protestant Association—these and their local affiliates, with an undercover assist from Freemasonry, sought with earnest intensity to tear away the faith of Catholics and save their souls.

In scholarship and logic, Félix Varela was more than a match for the enemies of the Catholic Church. He was among the first to unmask the Maria Monk "revelations" as a wholly unjustified, sensationalist smear upon convent life. He engaged Protestant divines in public debate on Catholic teachings and left them pondering the extent of their previous misinformation. He exchanged articles with them, on matters of faith and doctrine, in the Protestant and Catholic periodicals. He expounded the views of the Church and the results of his own study of comparative religion and Scriptural scholarship through the columns of the *Truth Teller* and of three successive periodicals which he sponsored—the *New York Weekly Register*, the *Catholic Register*, and the *Catholic Expositor*. He also explored Christian doctrine in his several

religious magazines for young people, probably the first of their kind in the diocese.

The tenor of the Reverend Félix Varela's "dialog" with other Christian clergymen was intellectual and restrained. For example, in the *Abridger and Annotator to The Protestant*, which he published in 1830, he made it initially clear that the calumniators of Catholicism represented only a small segment of the community. *The Protestant* was inveighing against "Romish corruptions" and "monkish inventions," against the revival of the Jesuits, the doctrine of infallibility, the Church's position on heretics. Varela chided its editors gently for their "slandorous" assaults and then set out to educate them. Detailing the historical origins of the sects, he defended the Church of Rome as the one church founded by Christ, and showed the Pope to be the genuine successor to Saint Peter. He admitted the justice of Martin Luther's complaints against the sale of indulgences. He declared that the infallibility of the Pope was not (at that time) an article of faith, and that it never would be except when the pontiff spoke as head of the Church on points of faith or morality. He disclaimed belief in the consigning of unbaptized infants, or sincere non-Catholics, to eternal torment: those were matters for which God in His goodness would provide. He demonstrated the divisive consequences of the doctrine of individual judgment. "If, after the coming of the Son of God, each man might have had his own personal religion, it was entirely useless for Him to preach one."<sup>12</sup> He concluded the first volume of his *Abridger* with a plea and a prayer that men realize the difference between fallible human opinion and divine faith, "as infallible as God Himself."<sup>13</sup>

Bishop Dubois appreciated the work that his Cuban philosopher was doing as parish priest and expounder of the Faith. When the prelate went on a two-years' journey to Europe in 1829 to solicit money, priests, and teachers for his struggling diocese, he selected Fathers Power and Varela to govern in his absence as Vicars-General. Varela sensibly left the spotlight to the popular John Power while he himself labored diligently in the vineyard. In 1837 Dubois, whose health was failing, sent Varela as his representative to the Third Provincial Council in Baltimore; and the Cuban held the title of Vicar-General from that year to his death in 1853.

---

<sup>12</sup> The Reverend Félix Varela, *The Protestant's Abridger and Annotator*," number 1 (New York, 1830), p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

“After his appointment as Vicar-General in 1837,” says John Dawson Gilmory Shea, “he was frequently sent to distant parts of the State to settle difficulties, to examine charges brought, and represent the Right Reverend Bishop in most delicate questions.”<sup>14</sup> North to Albany and far west to the transport interchange at Buffalo he journeyed, “to settle ecclesiastical questions and to bring the spirit of peace with him wherever he went.”<sup>15</sup>

One mission entrusted to the cultured Cuban involved a visit to intensely anti-Catholic Boston, where memories of the burning of the Charlestown Ursuline Convent (1834) smouldered bitterly. Bostonians of that day, says Shea, could exonerate the destroyers of convents, but they hanged pirates.<sup>16</sup> A captured Spanish ship-captain, Don Gilbert, and nine of his men had been sentenced to death for piracy. At the request of Bishop Benedict Fenwick, Varela was dispatched from New York to bring the condemned men spiritual consolation. He walked with them to the gallows and, as the noose was adjusted, they heard his final words of hope: “Spaniards, ascend to Heaven!”<sup>17</sup>

The name of Félix Varela had been submitted to the Pope for ecclesiastical preferment. But the humble intellectual Cuban did not aspire to power or to glory: he never worked harder, says his biographer, than he did in Baltimore in 1837 to escape episcopal honors.<sup>18</sup> Serving the Church through pulpit, press, and confessional was more in his line.

The Very Reverend Félix Varela y Morales now regarded New York City as his home and the United States as his beloved country. But, with that tenacious love of fatherland which is essentially Cuban, he remained a citizen of his native island, having made, as he said, “a firm resolution to become a citizen of no other country, after the occurrences which have torn me from my own.”<sup>19</sup> To Cubans he continued to be the teacher, the inspirer, who had opened the doors of their minds and let in the fresh draughts of right thinking. If he could not return

---

<sup>14</sup> John Dawson Gilmory Shea, *Catholic Churches of New York City* (New York, 1878), p. 689.

<sup>15</sup> *Souvenir History of Transfiguration Parish, Mott Street, New York, 1827-1897* (New York, 1897), p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (4 vols.; New York, 1886-1892), III, 487.

<sup>17</sup> Germán Arciniegas, *Caribbean, Sea of the New World*, trans. Harriet de Onís (New York, 1946), p. 356.

<sup>18</sup> José Ignacio Rodríguez, *Vida del presbítero Don Félix Varela* (2d ed.; Havana, 1944), p. 222.

<sup>19</sup> *The Catholic Church in New York*, I, 78.

to Havana, then they would come to him; and come they did, in a steady stream, whether traveling by choice or forced into banishment. Heading the list were his pupils and successors in the professorship at San Carlos, José Antonio Saco and José de la Luz y Caballero; the journalists Gaspar Betancourt and Domingo del Monte; the ex-delegate to the Cortes, Tomás Gener; and the young poet José María Heredia, exiled the same year as Varela and familiar to Americans for his ode, *Niagara*. It may never be known just how much of Cuban history was made in Varela's successive New York residences on Murray, Greenwich, William, Ann, and Reade Streets; but his publications and the words of his disciples give evidence of his continuing influence on Cuban thought.

After the demise of *El Habanero*, Varela and Saco published from 7 Nassau Street, for Cuban readers, *El Mensajero Seminal*, a compendium of world news and notes. Less radical than its predecessor, it carried on for three years, 1828-31, until it, too, ran afoul of the Spanish authorities. Then Saco returned to Havana and took over the editorship of *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, influential journal of the Economic Society. Varela's articles for *Revista*, composed in the quiet hours he stole from sleep, were given a place of honor in the publication. One of them dealt with the education of women, another with grammar. Repression again interrupted Saco's journalistic activities in 1834, when he was provided with an involuntary passport to Spain.

Father Varela had given up writing about the necessity of revolution in Cuba. Other works by him from New York for the benefit of his compatriots included translations of Humphrey Davy's volume on the use of chemicals in agriculture and Thomas Jefferson's *Manual of Parliamentary Procedure*. He also prepared revised editions of his *Leciones de Filosofía*, in 1828, 1832, and 1841. This three-volume work was for several generations in wide use as the textbook in logic, metaphysics, ethics, and natural science, in colleges throughout Latin America.

Liberty of thought in Cuba, as in Mexico and the South American republics, was breeding two opposed tendencies which Félix Varela considered dangerous. Many young liberals were so enamoured of the new freedom that they kicked over the traces altogether, discarding religion in favor of the French Revolution's goddess of reason. On the other hand, some highly placed churchmen, fearing for the established order, were allying themselves with the despotic conservatism of entrenched interests. In Havana, after the death of the humanitarian

Bishop Espada, reaction took over the episcopacy, with the resultant alienation from the Faith of progressive intellectuals. Aware of this situation, Varela wrote a three-volume series of essays, *Cartas a Elpidio, sobre la Impiedad, la Superstición, y el Fanatismo en sus Relaciones con la Sociedad*. It delineated the evil effects both of irreligion and of stand-pat fanaticism. "Elpidio" may have been José de la Luz, or the scholar José María Casal, or, perhaps, all the young men of Cuba whom his exile had precluded him from teaching. This work was published in New York and in Madrid, and it made a considerable stir both in America and in Europe.

In his disciples, as through his writings, the teachings of Félix Varela found enduring life. José Saco, who had initially opposed abolition because of the bloody revolution it had produced in Haiti, came around to his mentor's point of view on this subject and wrote a monumental *History of Slavery* in six volumes. Luz carried on the tradition at San Carlos, stressing the need for social justice and freedom. He later established a secondary school for boys, Colegio del Salvador, and at his death in 1862 was given a remarkable public funeral by the Governor in Havana. Luz taught and inspired Rafael Mendive, who in turn tutored José Martí, *El Apóstol* as he is known. Martí inherited Varela's belief in human dignity, equality, and justice, he abhorred political and racial oppression, and by his life, his writings, and his death in battle, led Cuba finally to independence from Spain.<sup>20</sup> However, this passionate patriot, forgetful of the admonitions of the author of *Elpidio*, tended to lump the Church and Spain together as objects of his antagonism.

The wide-reaching exertions of Father Varela for Catholicism in New York and enlightenment in Cuba eventually took their toll of his frail physique. He had long suffered from respiratory ailments which he was too busy to notice. Now he could ignore them no longer: asthma, as it was then diagnosed, made it impossible for him to lie down or to sleep, and he was rigid with pain. Friends took him to St. Augustine, Florida, his boyhood home, where the mild climate was considered salubrious. After a desperate attempt to resume his labors at Transfiguration parish, he returned to the Union's oldest city and there waited out his last exile, exercising his priestly functions in the Church (later

---

<sup>20</sup> Diego González Gutiérrez, *La continuidad revolucionaria de Varela en las ideas de Martí*; discurso leído por el Académico de Número en la sesión pública celebrada el 25 de febrero de 1953, para conmemorar el centenario de la muerte del Pbro. Félix Varela (Havana, 1953).

the Cathedral) of St. Augustine in an aura of sanctity that drew men, through him, to God.

At Christmas time, 1852, one of his Cuban followers, Lorenzo de Allo, stopping off by chance at St. Augustine, found him lying in a bare room in back of the schoolhouse. He could no longer read nor write; he did not even recognize his disciple. Allo sent word to Cuba that the beloved teacher was dangerously ill, poverty-stricken, and alone in St. Augustine. From the New York diocese, on which he had expended his patrimony and his lifeblood, he was receiving no succor. Friends in Cuba raised a subscription for him and sent one of his disciples, José María Casal, to bring him home. But when the Cuban scholar arrived, Félix Varela was already dead, having passed away in late February 1853, in the full possession of his light of reason and proclaiming his Holy Faith.<sup>21</sup>

Félix Varela was buried in the ancient Tolomato Cemetery on the western boundary of St. Augustine. There his devoted Cubans, disappointed of their hope of receiving him back to his native land, erected a chapel to his memory. Its mahogany altar was a replica of the altar in the Cathedral of Havana before which in 1811 he had been ordained by Bishop Espada.

Twenty-five years after his death, a definitive biography of Varela was written by Dr. José Ignacio Rodríguez.<sup>22</sup> It epitomized him as an outstanding philosopher and teacher and a holy priest. At that time, the sodalities which he had founded at the Church of the Transfiguration still commemorated him in their prayers; a circle of women in St. Augustine walked in solemn procession every Monday evening around his memorial chapel; and a grateful old parishioner made an annual pilgrimage from New York to his grave in Florida.

Cubans have not forgotten their great *pensador*. They consider it symbolical that in the year of his death, 1853, was born *El Apóstol*, José Martí, who brought close to reality the dream of a free Cuba. In 1911, the centenary of Varela's ordination, the *Cuba Libre* which he had anticipated obtained his mortal remains from St. Augustine and placed them in an urn atop a monument in the Great Hall of the University of Havana. His *El Habanero* was republished by the University

<sup>21</sup> There is disagreement as to whether Varela died on February 18, or February 25, 1853. Cf. Antonio L. Valverde, *La muerte del Padre Varela . . .* (Havana, 1924).

<sup>22</sup> A second edition was published in 1944 by the Library of Cuban Studies, Havana, under the title of *Vida del presbítero Don Félix Varela*, cited *supra*, n. 18.

of Havana in 1945, with a prologue which made a great point of its revolutionary character. *El Padre Varela: biografía del forjador de la conciencia cubana*, by Dr. Antonio Hernández Travieso, appeared in 1949.<sup>23</sup> Travieso cast some doubt on the authenticity of the remains in the Great Hall: a previously unpublished document indicated that Varela's vault in the Tolomato chapel had been opened in 1876 to place there the corpse of Augustin Verot, first Bishop of St. Augustine. This discovery caused great agitation in Cuban intellectual circles, and not a little annoyance at the careless Americans whom their philosopher had served for a quarter century. Verot was a Frenchman, a Sulpician, and an ardent defender, on Scriptural grounds, of the abominable institution of slavery. The urn in the University hall was therefore opened in 1954; the bones were examined by technical experts, who verified them as those of Félix Varela and no other.

A hundred years after his burial in the chapel in St. Augustine, the priest's remains were recommitted with fitting ceremony to the place of honor in Havana's seat of higher learning. "May the worthy priest rest in peace, while the recollection of him grows and spreads throughout the Cuban fatherland, and may our beloved University guard always with respect, honor, and reverence his mortal remains . . . while his immortal spirit continues to guide our course and point for us the way."<sup>24</sup>

It is a matter of faith with the people of Cuba, as José Martí has said, that "whoever is capable of greatness and dies without being summoned to fulfill his promise, dies in peace, for he knows that somewhere his hour will come."<sup>25</sup> Father Varela achieved in his lifetime much of his potential, but his final hour has not yet struck. In the Church of the Transfiguration on Mott Street in New York his missionary spirit carries on. Catholics and Protestants in America are approaching a better understanding of their common heritage in Christ. In Cuba, many of the evils against which he warned have come to pass: overly conservative churchmen moved too belatedly in relating Catholic Action to the social problems and basic needs of the populace, while the growing irreligion of the intelligentsia paved the way for Marxism, atheism, and the loss of hard-earned freedoms.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *supra*, n. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Conclusion of the report (in Spanish) of the University's investigating commission. *Los Restos*, p. 62.

<sup>25</sup> Wyatt MacGaffey, Clifford R. Barnett, in collaboration with Jean Haiken and Mildred Vreeland, *Cuba, Its People, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven, 1962), p. xx.



But lovers of independence and social justice for Cuba may today take inspiration from the wisdom, the far-sightedness, and the dedication which led Father Félix Varela to labor for God in New York while awaiting the day of liberation for his native land.<sup>26</sup>

JOSEPH J. McCADDEN

*Hunter College,  
Yonkers, New York*

---

<sup>26</sup> In addition to the references mentioned in the previous footnotes, the following sources were most useful for the purposes of this study: *Catholic Expositor and Literary Magazine*, eds. Félix Varela and Charles Constantine Pise (New York, 1814 ff.). *New York Weekly Register and Catholic Diary*, ed. Félix Varela (New York, 1833 ff.). *The Truth Teller*, eds. William Denman and George Pardow (New York, 1825 ff.). *El Mensajero Seminal*, ed. Félix Varela (New York, Philadelphia, 1825-1831). William Blakeslee, C. S. P., "Félix Varela, 1788-1853," in American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia, *Records*, XXXVIII (1927), 15-46. José Ignacio Rodríguez, "Father Félix Varela, Vicar-General of New York from 1837 to 1853," in *American Catholic Quarterly Review*, VIII (1883), 463-476. Minutes and other documents found in the rectory of Transfiguration Church, Mott and Park Streets, New York City.