

VITRAL MAGAZINE AND THE CENTER FOR CIVIC AND RELIGIOUS FORMATION: BUILDING A NEW CUBA INSIDE THE SHELL OF THE OLD

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In November, 2006, the President of Cuba's National Assembly, Ricardo Alarcón, responded to a question about the lack of an independent press in Cuba by pointing to the existence of the magazine *Vitral*. "Read the magazine *Vitral*," Alarcón suggested, "unlike the moderate posture of the Catholic Church, the magazine is harshly critical of the Revolution. Still the government has not interfered with its circulation nor have we sanctioned those Cubans who subscribe to it" (Montoya 2006). *Vitral* had, indeed, remained independent and uncensored (up to that point), but this was due more to the tenacity of its staff than to the tolerance of the Cuban government.

The magazine's director, Dagoberto Valdés, an agronomist who was once the director of a Cuban state tobacco company, was ordered to cease his involvement with the publication in the mid-1990s. When he refused, he was punished by being reassigned the unenviable job of spending his days collecting tobacco leaves. Undaunted, Valdés patiently performed this new task each morning for ten long years, continuing to direct the magazine after hours. Vindication came a few years ago when he was reinstated to his previous management position. Up until April of this year (when the magazine was censored by Pinar del Rio's new bishop), you could find him in his office, where he would proudly show you the tobacco collectors pouch that still hung on his overstuffed bookshelf.

This helps explain the quote pasted across the door to the magazine's headquarters: "Don't ask for a light load; ask instead for a strong back." This is precisely what the magazine's staff did when they founded the Center for Civic and Religious Formation as part of the Catholic Diocese of Pinar del Río and soon thereafter began to publish *Vitral*. The aim of the magazine was as straight-forward as it was audacious. In a country where a single party holds monopoly control over the media and where independent associations and businesses are illegal, *Vitral* aimed to plant the seed of a vigorous, pluralistic, civil society in the shell of post-revolutionary Cuba.

While such a vision has clear political implications in the Cuban context, *Vitral's* project was not primarily political. Whereas most government critics seek immediate institutional change in the country's economic and political system, *Vitral* has sought to create independent ways of thinking, learning, debating, and acting. The magazine's very title denotes Cuba's colonial era stained-glass windows that filter light through a prism, refracting the full spectrum of colors. Thus, the magazine sought to serve as a critical medium where Cuba's multiple points of view are reflected. Indeed, ordinary Cubans have grown tired of the so-called "doble moral" (double morality), forced to live one life in public and another in private. To them, the open debate found in the pages of *Vitral* was a welcome relief.

Up until the spring of 2007, the magazine offered a humanistic, grass-roots approach to Cuba's many problems, inspired by Christian ethics and Catholic Social Doctrine, aimed at the formation of truly free persons who recognize their rights and responsibilities as citizens not subjects. It sought to replace the mutual fear and suspicion that underlies relations among Cubans in the public sphere with the seeds of hope and trust, leading to the rebuilding of civil society. In order to achieve these goals, the Center offered a host of courses and workshops on provocative subjects like ethics and values, political pluralism and participation in Cuba, human rights, starting a small business, and, as is the focus of this panel, deep, collaborative reflections on the state of the Cuban economy.

While visiting *Vitral's* headquarters in Pinar del Río in January 2007, I found Valdés to be a wise and good humored survivor driven by a progressive Christian faith and a strong sense of Cuban nationalism—in the tradition of Cuba's 19th century patriot, Father Félix Varela. Indeed, Valdés has often been quite critical of the Cuban government, but his criticisms betray no trace of hatred; rather, they issue from tolerance and hope—two values sorely lacking in Cuban circles on both sides of the Straits of Florida. Valdés has also been uniquely consistent in his opposition to U.S. policies like the embargo and travel restrictions that only serve to further insulate Cubans from the free flow of ideas while strengthening the government's control over them. In fact, when chief U.S. diplomat Joseph Sullivan visited *Vitral* back in 1995, Valdés had to exercise caution and preserve his hard-won independence. Clearly impressed with what he found at the Center, Sullivan declared, "This is just the kind of independent voice that the U.S. should support. What we can do to help?" To which Valdés replied, "If you really want to help us, I ask you not to help at all."

Let me know briefly turn my focus to the document we have been discussing. Upon my visit to the Center for Civic and Religious Formation in Pinar del Río back in January, Dagoberto and his gracious staff were sure to load me down with a veritable library of their publications (magazines, CD-ROMs, books, a

biography of Félix Varela, compilations of articles, as well as the very document we are discussing today), for which they absolutely refused any payment from me. The only thing they asked of me was that I read the materials and share them with my colleagues back in the U.S.

Along with the other panelists, let me also praise the more than 200 members of the 15-month collaborative process that went into producing such a document. The innovative methodology used in creating the document shows that its value lies as much in the fact that it exists and the manner in which it was produced, as anything it might contain. I say this because the seven weekend-long meetings that went into producing the document were conducted in an open, democratic, civic, collaborative, process—in an environment of antagonism and hostility.

As such, the document is filled with words and ideas that are truly a shock to the authoritarian, paternalistic, and top-down system of Cuban politics and "policy-making." For example, the document's introduction declares that their "reflection" on the Cuban economy is based on the values of "solidarity, efficiency, subsidiarity, social justice, openness to the world, and the common good." The document also bravely declares that one of its primary aims is that of promoting ways in which Cuban citizens themselves can become protagonists in their own history and in the formation of economic priorities and solutions in the country. Furthermore, the concluding section of the Itinerario celebrates the fact that participants uncovered a "new way" of doing politics over the course of the 15 months of meetings that went into producing it. For example, on page 69 we find the following observation:

The best thing about this process has been the exercise of systematic participation, training ourselves in the dynamic of listening, criticizing, disagreeing, proposing new motions, learning to discern one's own point of view and ethical vision, exercising the right to choose, reject, modify, and enrich.

It has been an experience of freedom of expression, of the fraternal exercise of different points of view, and of putting in practice various group dynamics such as: "parliamentary debate," "brainstorming," the

search for “group consensus,” and the “creation of assertive thinking.” All this taking place in an environment of friendship, mutual respect, serene discussion, and communal learning, as should correspond to all Cubans of good will who want for their country a climate of dialogue, gradual if definite transformations, liberty with responsibility and subsidiarity with solidarity.¹

Given that a large portion of the contents of the Itinerario has already been discussed here today, I will limit myself to the areas that I feel I can make the best contribution: corruption, the black market, and the informal economy; and *trabajo por cuenta propia* (self-employment), micro-enterprise, and small and medium sized enterprises. While the issues of private property and economic liberty underlie the entire document, there are two places where the document is especially sharp in focusing on the daily negative consequences of the systematic violation of the principles of private property and economic liberty.

In the section of the document entitled, “Primera Etapa,” the authors lay out their vision and analysis of the current economic reality of Cuba passing through six stages (already touched on by Carmelo Mesa-Lago). These are: (1) economic policy; (2) methods of implementing economic policy; (3) the results of this implementation; (4) the priorities on which these policies are based; (5) the positive outcomes or achievements (only seven) of existing policies; and (6) the negative fallout of current Cuban economic policies and priorities (eighteen).

First, in those areas that have to do with the underground economy, the black market, micro-enterprise, and self-employment, the document makes the following incisive points:

- Economic policy in Cuba can be characterized by: (1) an overriding tendency to “estatizar”

(state-ize) all spheres of the economy with economic decisions being made by an elite in the name of the people; (2) a demonstrated preference for closing down independent businesses leading to the social marginalization of the economically active population; (4) a refusal to recognize rights to private property or reward private initiative; (7) a generalized internal blockade against private initiative that impedes economic independence.

- The methods use to implement economic policy are such that: (1) politics always trumps economic growth; (3) recent recentralization of the economy; (4) propaganda only highlights the most negative aspects of economic liberalism.
- As a result: (1) salaries are insufficient to satisfy minimum basic needs of the population; and (7) the growth of the underground economy to a point where it nearly becomes the only economic alternative for economic survival.
- The priorities on which these policies are based, include: (3) presenting an image of an “improvement” in the economy based on fictitious statistical methods; and (4) avoiding at all costs the economic independence of the Cuban people.
- Among the limited number of positive outcomes or achievements of existing policies are: (2) a generally high level achieved in the area of social security; while the many negative consequences of current Cuban economic policies and priorities include: (10) places obstacles in the way of the development of private initiative; (11) taxes of the self-employed are based on gross income not net profits; and (16) general stimulation and incentive for people to turn to the black market.

Second, the final or “Séptima Etapa” of the Itinerario, entitled, “Who and How to Become Protagonists in the Remaking of the Cuban Economy,” closes

1. The original Spanish text reads: “lo mejor ha sido el ejercicio sistemático de participación, el entrenarse en la dinámica de escuchar, criticar, discrepar, proponer nuevas mociones, aprender a discernir con criterio propio y visión ética, ejercer el derecho de elegir, de rechazar, de modificar, de enriquecer. Ha sido una experiencia de libertad de expresión, de fraterno ejercicio del criterio, de la puesta en práctica de las dinámicas de grupo como: ‘el debate parlamentario,’ la ‘tormenta de ideas,’ la búsqueda de ‘consenso en grupos,’ la ‘creación de pensamiento asertivo.’ Todo en un clima de amistad, respeto, discusión serena y aprendizaje comunitario, como corresponde a cubanos y cubanas de buena voluntad que desean para su País un clima de diálogo, transformaciones graduales y concertadas, libertad con responsabilidad y subsidiaridad con solidaridad.”

with a revealing subsection where participants are asked to vote for their top priority in undertaking a renovation of the existing economic system in Cuba — that could have “a direct, immediate, and effective impact” on the standard of living in the country. The specific question asked was: “¿Qué sectores y categorías sería conveniente priorizar para que un proyecto económico con estas características tuviera un impacto en la población: directo, eficaz e inmediato?”

Significantly, the results of this simple survey of the participants in the Itinerario indicate that both Maslow and Raul Castro were right about the Cuban hierarchy of needs during the special period. The clear leader among priorities expressed was the economic sector, “Alimentación” (“food,” with 18 votes), followed closely by, “Libre trabajo por cuenta propia” (“the freedom to form one’s own business

or micro-enterprise,” with 12 votes). Of course, these two priorities are closely connected to one another since the bulk of new enterprises formed in Cuba over the past 14 years (both legally licensed and clandestine ones) have been in the food service sector.

On September 28, 1994, Raúl Castro stated this problem clearly, “Today, the political, military, and ideological problem of this country is looking for food... We must be clear about one thing: if there is food for the people, the risks do not matter.” However, it now appears evident that this surprisingly bold declaration from the most excruciating years of the special period no longer applies to the political risks presented by private enterprise—in spite of its promise as a way to begin to address the most basic problems of the Cuban economy.