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People light candles in honor of Cuba's patron saint, the Virgin of Charity of Cobre, at her shrine in El Cobre, Cuba, on Feb. 11. The Vatican-recognized Virgin, venerated by Catholics and followers of Afro-Cuban Santeria traditions, is at the heart of Cuban identity. (AP/Ramon Espinosa)

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El Cobre, Cuba and Miami, Florida — March 18, 2024

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Ramon Nieblas fixed his tearful eyes on the small golden statue, a beloved icon of Cuba's patron saint. Whispering, he asked the Virgin of Charity of Cobre for a miracle: Please save his sick son.

"I came to pray for his health," said Nieblas, a Cuban living in Brazil who traveled thousands of miles to the basilica in eastern Cuba, a pilgrimage site nestled in the shadow of the Sierra Maestra mountains.

He sat in Mass, wrapping his arm around 26-year-old Hernando Nieblas, a physician undergoing treatment for leukemia. They were among the thousands who visit the shrine each year, seeking intercession from the Virgin Mary for their most desperate concerns and giving thanks for their blessings.

The Virgin of Charity has been crucial to Catholicism in Cuba, which repressed religious practice after becoming an atheist state following the 1959 revolution. It turned into a secular state in the early 1990s and has become more tolerant of religion over the past quarter century.

But the Vatican-recognized Virgin, venerated by Catholics and followers of Afro-Cuban Santeria traditions, is more than a religious icon. She is at the heart of Cuban identity, uniting compatriots from the Communist-run Caribbean island to those who were exiled or emigrated to the U.S.

"The Virgin is deeply entrenched in our culture," said the Rev. Rogelio Dean Puerta, the basilica's parish priest who also has celebrated Mass at the sister shrine in Miami. "You can't talk about Cuba without talking about the Virgin of Charity."

A replica of the Virgin was smuggled to Miami by exiles six decades ago, who later built the National Shrine of Our Lady of Charity just south of downtown. It remains a powerful symbol of unity despite decades-old political divisions among Cubans.

"Cachita," as she's affectionately called, is etched in tattoos, street murals, cartoons and other artwork on the island. She is revered in makeshift home altars, songs — and at her shrine some 500 miles (805 kilometers) east of Havana.

Many of the offerings left behind decorate Cuba's ivory-colored shrine with soaring red domes: college diplomas, crutches, stethoscopes, handwritten notes, baby clothes, military insignia and more. Mementos left by the shrine's famous visitors include baseball jerseys, Olympic medals and other accolades.

Fidel and Raul Castro's mother once left a small golden figure of a guerrilla when her sons were fighting dictator Fulgencio Batista before the revolution. And Ernest Hemingway, who lived in Cuba for two decades, had a replica of his 1954 Nobel Prize for Literature placed at the Virgin's feet to thank Cubans for inspiring "The Old Man and the Sea" and other works.

Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI visited the basilica during their papacies. And Pope Francis said he would pray to the Virgin of Charity for Cuba during his visit to the island.

Some people visit more than once. Years back, Ramon Nieblas and his wife went to the shrine to pray for their family. This year, his wife also has cancer, and they have a two-year-old boy. "We once came here to ask the Virgin to let her have that baby. Today, I prayed that she could be blessed to see him grow up," he said.

Juan Gonzalez, who lives near the shrine, prays to the Virgin every day. His home altar is adorned with statues of Afro-Cuban Santeria deities, whose followers know the Virgin as "Ochun," the goddess of female sensuality and maternity.

"They're the ones who bless humanity - that's why I believe in the Virgin of Charity of El Cobre and the great power of God," he said.

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A SAINT BECOMES A NATIONAL SYMBOL

The Virgin of Charity of Cobre dates to 1612 when two Indigenous brothers, Juan and Rodrigo de Hoyos, along with Juan Moreno, an enslaved African boy, are said to have found the statue of the Virgin holding the infant Jesus in the Bay of Nipe. It was floating on a wooden board inscribed with the words, "I am the Virgin of Charity," according to the basilica.

Over the past four centuries, the Virgin of Charity's significance has grown. She became a symbol for injured soldiers in Cuba's fight for independence from Spain, and veterans of that war petitioned the Vatican to make her Cuba's patron saint.

"She became this national symbol," said Michelle Maldonado, an expert on the Virgin of Charity and provost at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania.

The cult of the Virgin of Charity became part of Cuban nationalism in late 19th century. Among the Cuban diaspora in Miami, it has taken on a strong political significance, also in rebuke to the Cuban government's history of religious repression, said Jorge Duany, director of the Cuban Research Institute at Florida International University.

Many of the early worshippers at Our Lady of Charity fled or were expelled by the Castro government – and reached safety in Florida on rickety rafts like the one featured behind the Virgin's statue in the Miami shrine's mural.

Looking at the ocean separating him from his homeland, the Miami shrine's vicar, the Rev. Angel Andrés González, sees how the Virgin has been "the connecting thread" of his life.

"It's like the heart of Cuba, here in the United States," he said.

Like many of the Cuban exiles who built, and still worship at, La Ermita, as the Miami shrine is known, González's devotion to the Virgin preceded his Catholic faith – and anchors his life in the United States.

Though his family was largely non-practicing, his mother still made him recite Hail Marys during thunderstorms to a print of the Virgin. It had hung behind his bed since he was baptized in the Cobre sanctuary.

THE MIAMI SHRINE REMAINS A BEACON FOR MIGRANTS

La Ermita welcomes both long-term Miami residents for whom the church is a symbol of resistance to Cuba's government and new arrivals who want to make a video call to their mother in Cuba from a familiar place.

At the Ash Wednesday celebrations marking the beginning of Lent, both political refugees and "santeras," or Santeria practitioners, brought their petitions to the Miami Virgin – who, as a mother, has a gift for all her children, as visitors are told by

Sister Inés Espinoza.

The Havana native and member of the Daughters of Charity order, which was expelled from Cuba in 1972, ministers to the material and spiritual needs of growing numbers of migrants from across Latin America, including Cuba, who make the Ermita their first stop. In just the past few years, U.S. border authorities encountered more than half a million Cubans.

During an Ash Wednesday Mass, as the prayers of the faithful were recited, attendee Rafael Madlum Payas loudly called out a petition for freedom in Cuba.

The 81-year-old political refugee fled to the United States nearly 20 years ago, he said, and finds comfort in La Ermita because "it means that the Virgin is with us wherever we are."

In this, he was of one spirit with Yenise Hoyos, a santera who came to the Ermita during the same Mass, carrying a figure of her Yoruba religion's deity, who she considers a "sister" to the virgin.

"What you are, your idiosyncrasy, your religion, never, never gets lost wherever we go," said Hoyos, who came from Cuba four years ago. "It's an incredible peace that one breathes when one gets here."

To clergy, the Virgin allows the Miami shrine to remain a beacon to migrants. The Biblical exhortation to welcome the stranger is the theme the rector, the Rev. José Espino, chose for this Lent.

"This is always the place of giving thanks to the Virgin for a safe arrival," Espino said. "She has always accompanied the dreams of the Cuban people."

This story appears in the **Marian Shrines and Devotions** feature series. [View the full series.](#)