A former “church-in-silence” is babbling anew. After the silence of most of the 1960’s, religious Cuba is speaking out. Many of us may not be ready for what we hear.

Our unreadiness flows from a variety of sources. One is that the United States policy of isolating Cuba not only isolates Cuba but also isolates us from it. Another source may be the traditional expectation that a church in a Communist country stands in unrelenting opposition to the government—or else retreats into the catacombs. Many Protestants, Roman Catholics and Jews in Cuba have rejected (or are rejecting) the two traditional alternatives of sabotage or withdrawal to silence, even though both alternatives were tried, to one degree or another, for the bulk of the past decade. The new role—a visible, functioning church in a Communist society which chooses to participate in and collaborate with that society—is something for which many, perhaps most, remaining religious Cubans were not ready, and for which many of us may not be ready either.

A new book, Religion in Cuba Today: A New Church in a New Society (Alice L. Hageman and Philip E. Wheaton, eds.; Association Press; 317 pp.; $7.95), a collection of articles, interviews and statements, both informs us and poses sharp questions. It makes clear that bishops, clergymen and laymen in Cuba are struggling to come to grips with the problem and the challenge of the Cuban Revolution.

If we were to date the second coming of the Cuban Church, it would be April 20, 1969. On that date, a pastoral letter of the Cuban Roman Catholic hierarchy was read in all the Catholic churches of the country. It was the first public statement of the hierarchy since December, 1960, and it was signed by all the Bishops, including some who had played a prominent role in the break with the government earlier in the decade. The letter was read (intentionally or not) on the Sunday of the week of the eighth anniversary of the Bay of Pigs debacle.

Although distinguished as well as obscure Protestants and Jews had made previous significant statements, the numerical weight (and political significance) of Protestants and Jews in Cuba pales before the position of the Catholic Church. The fate of religion in Cuba, by and large, rests with the Catholic Church; the basic tone and style of Church-State relations are shaped by the relations of the Catholic Church with the State. Thus, the shift in the position of the Catholic hierarchy of Cuba was the critical turning point.

The pastoral letter of the Catholic hierarchy was theologically timid. One should probably not be surprised at the timidity of a Church that speaks out after more than eight years of silence, not altogether certain of the reaction it will arouse. The letter is clothed in statements from Pope Paul, the Latin American Bishops’ meeting at Medellin in 1968 (which was the ostensible reason for issuing the letter) and Vatican II. It says, basically, three things. The first is that the Church must re-examine its social morality “in the light of the responsibilities we face regarding the problem of development.” Consequently, “such morality demands today from each man the duty to fulfill his vocation toward development . . . [and] to a universal human solidarity.” The Bishops insisted that this broad principle specifically applied to Cuba, to the Cuban Christian who is “immersed in such a reality as ours, where the basic motivation he faces is the problem of development.” The second main point, supported by generous quotations from Populorum Progressio, flows from the first: work is good and it is good to work.

After reflecting on the “excesses [which] are due to the concrete condition of isolation in which we have been living for so many years,” and on the “burden” thus imposed on the ordinary citizens of Cuba, the
Cuban Catholic hierarchy made its third main point: "we denounce the unjust conditions of the blockade, which is contributing to unnecessary sufferings, and to making all efforts at development more difficult."

The political implications of this statement are overt. The Bishops were, indeed, pointing to one of Cuba's serious difficulties. They are on sound ground when they argue that the "little people" suffer from the consequences of the prevalent international conflict which surrounds Cuba. Yet it is also clear that this overt statement contributed to establishing the credibility of the new Catholic Church within the Cuban social system. The Church—perhaps the only remaining autonomous institution in Cuba—joined the government's efforts in international politics, not only out of its honest evaluation of the Cuban condition but also probably to gain some kind of political breathing space right inside the Cuban Revolution.

The call on Catholics and men of good will in Cuba to strive for development, and the homily on the holiness of work, have also clear though indirect political implications. The strength and the following of the Catholic Church of Cuba have rarely been underestimated. Most observers have been struck with its weaknesses, both before and after the coming to power of the revolution in January, 1959. But it is too easy to underestimate its strength. At the very least, several hundred thousand Cubans are still active Catholics, and there are more on whom the Church has at least a marginal but nonetheless significant impact.

In the spring of 1969, the Cuban government was preparing for the major effort of the production of 10 million tons of sugar in 1970. During 1968, the Cuban government had been seriously troubled by political difficulties. The year 1968 began with a major purge within the Communist Party and with a serious international conflict with the Soviet Union. During the course of the year, the conflict between Cuba and orthodox Communists in Latin America heated up. Internally, the government was concerned that the revolution was slowing down and that its enemies were becoming more active. Thus, there was a renewed wave of nationalization of remaining private property, a renewed effort to hunt down the internal enemies of the regime through the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, and an increase in the role of the armed forces in the Cuban economy.

International confrontation did not do the internal economic job. In 1967, the sugar harvest topped 6 million tons; the 1968 sugar harvest was barely above 5 million tons; the 1969 sugar harvest fell below the previous year. The task for 1970 appeared more dramatic in the light of this experience. The government sought to focus on economic production for 1970. External conflict was reduced. By late 1968, the conflict with the Soviet Union was well on its way to a resolution; Cuba supported the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and gradually withdrew from the guerrilla field in Latin America, which pleased not only governments there but also the orthodox Communist parties. The government still had to minimize sabotage and internal opposition. All Cubans, regardless of ideological conviction, were needed for the national effort. The economic job called for political and social integration in addition to continuing internal political mobilization. Nothing could achieve that more effectively than a public reconciliation between the government and the Catholic Church. This, then, was the political context of the second coming of the Catholic Church of Cuba; it rejoined the political system at a time that was crucial for that system. The Church called upon all good Catholics to do what the government wanted them to do: work toward development in Cuba. Whereas counterrevolutionaries may have thought that the "basic motivation" of Cuban Catholics was the overthrow of communism, the Bishops argued that it was development. This reordering of Catholic priorities undoubtedly pleased the Havana government.

The statements of the Catholic hierarchy on development and work, though they have political implications, flow out of the recent concerns of the Catholic Church stimulated by Popes John and Paul and by the Vatican Council. The Cuban Bishops cluttered their letter with quotations which made this evident, and which point to their probable motivation in "coming out."

The Catholic hierarchy of Cuba fell silent in December, 1960. The individual Bishops followed suit shortly thereafter. The theological and ethical tenor of the Church was, at best, of 1950's vintage, while the transnational Church had moved briskly into a new world. The political tenor of the Church was of tough "cold war" vintage, while the transnational Church had entered into an entirely different set of relations with Communists and Communist countries. The Catholic hierarchy of Cuba, therefore, was probably looking for four things. I have mentioned the first: political reinsertion or breathing space in the prevailing system. Another is doctrinal reintegration into the post-conciliar Church. A third is transnational interaction within the Church. And the fourth is ecumenical dialogue.

Although the Cuban Catholic Church had expressed, frequently and consistently, its concern for the poor, the sick, the weak and infirm, it had failed to articulate the concerns about development which flowered in the international Church during the 1960's. Its people were theological orphans in a rapidly changing Church. This reason alone justified the need to speak again. Moreover, at a time when there was an increasing effort within a transnational
Church to increase the dialogue among different parts of the Church, the Cuban Church was a non-participant. The 1968 Medellin Conference of Latin American Bishops evidently stirred the conscience of the Cuban Church to resume its responsibilities for dialogue within and toward the transnational Catholic Church. It could best contribute by reflecting on the condition of the Church in a Communist society.

The ecumenical dialogue, the fourth thing the Cuban Church was seeking, can often be considered under one or another of the previous headings. Yet, in the context of a church in a Communist country, this dimension assumes a life of its own. Catholics and Communists have entered into many kinds of dialogues and relations throughout the world. Cuba has been left behind. In the Cuban context, the life of the Church required some positive steps to identify those elements in revolutionary Cuba which could bridge the gap between politics and religion, not only to permit political reinsertion, but also to open up Marxism (and the government) to a possible future Catholic critique, and to open Catholicism to a possible future Marxist critique—provided both sides make the assumption of mutual respect. The purpose of the ecumenical dialogue, therefore, goes beyond politics in order to enter the area of substantive mutual, respectful criticism.

There were two other practical considerations which made it possible for the Church to give priority to these four concerns. A paradoxical effect of the revolution has been that the Church has been relieved of its "earthly burden" of property through nationalization. It is a Church which worries less about income flows and balance sheets for its schools and properties and more about the function of religion in the midst of a not altogether friendly environment.

A paradoxical effect of the isolation from the United States has been the Cubanization of the Church in two senses. It has been cut-off from the United States as a reference group; and it has been cut off from Cuban exiles who have a commitment to maintain an insurgent, or at least silent, Church which would remain loyal to an increasingly distant and improbable exile "tomorrow." Here, then, stands the Catholic Church in Cuba: protected from earthly concerns by a government which took its property, and protected from its former friends by an isolation which it condemns.

In short, both the Church and the State had reasons of their own to propel and to welcome the second coming of the Church. The revolution did not forget Marxism; the Bishops did not sell out. There was, instead, a shift from a zero-sum perception of Church-State relations, where the gains of one side were perceived as losses for the other, to a variable-sum perception of such relations, a perception that both sides compete for advantage but also benefit from cooperation in certain areas.

Despite the shift toward reconciliation, at least on a limited basis, there are some serious issues which remain between Church and State. One such issue is the government-induced organizational decline of the Church. One indicator of the decline is the sharp drop in the number of priests in Cuba. This decline has been more severe than those which occurred in other revolutionary experiences in Latin America. The most significant, systematic attack by a government on the Catholic Church in a Latin American country, prior to the Cuban Revolution, took place in Mexico in the 1920's and the 1930's. James Wilkie has shown that from 1926 to 1940 (when the main attacks subsided) the number of priests in Cuba had fallen by 14 per cent, and the number of inhabitants per priest had risen from 3,443 to 5,088. In Cuba, the number of priests dropped by 69 per cent from 1960 to 1970, and the number of inhabitants per priest rose from 8,900 to 33,700. A fair proportion of the loss came through government-forced deportation. Thus the Catholic Church of Cuba faces the government from a position of severe weakness which has no previous parallel.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are serious problems pertaining to human values which the Church is not likely to ignore altogether. One example is the situation of political prisoners in Cuba. The exact number of bona fide political prisoners is not known. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, for example, has focused on the allegedly abusive treatment received by some, perhaps a great many, political prisoners. The line between a political prisoner and other kinds of prisoners is difficult to establish. But there is one "solid" statistic which can establish the minimum magnitude of this problem. In Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel, Lee Lockwood found that the number of political prisoners listed officially by the Cuban government in 1964 was 15,000; in 1965, those sentenced by revolutionary tribunals who were in prison at that time amounted to 20,000. If we take the minimum statistic as 15,000, this would give a rate of two prisoners per one thousand population in the middle of the past decade.

The time, as well as the statistics, is important. The middle of the past decade was sufficiently removed from the early conflicts of the regime, the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the Missile Crisis, that one would expect a decline in the rate of imprisonment. The time is also sufficiently removed from the increase in internal security controls in 1968. In short, the middle of the decade may have been an all-time low for political prisoners. It is important to establish the minimum statistic at the optimum time because the Cuban government accepts it. There may well be more political prisoners in Cuba. Our purpose here is not to debate those statistics but to consider a "confession" which the Cuban government is willing to
make. Such confessions are not forthcoming when higher numbers are used.

It is difficult to see how a morally sensitive Church, which is no longer silent, can justify the kind of selective pastoral pronouncement which may call attention to the positive features of the revolution without pointing to those which are dehumanizing. The sustained imprisonment of persons for political activities at a time when the security of a state is minimally threatened is difficult to justify. Moreover, although the presence of any political prisoners would present a normative problem, the number of prisoners in Cuba is quite high. At the same rate, there would have been some 400,000 bona fide political prisoners in the United States, if comparable conditions were to obtain.

There is another kind of comparison which we can make. The government of Brazil, which is also allegedly engaging in abusive treatment toward prisoners, has "confessed" to holding approximately 500 political prisoners in 1970. The International Commission of Jurists has charged that up to 12,000 persons have been arrested for political reasons at one point or another during the course of the military government. If we continue to take the minimum statistic for Cuba and use the maximum statistic for Brazil, given the disparities in population, the Cuban rate of political prisoners is 13 times greater than the Brazilian rate of political prisoners. In short, though both situations are intolerable, the Cuban situation is absolutely and relatively more so.

Communism, Cuban-style, has lacked some of the harsh features of Communist styles in other countries. One area in which the difference is clearly evident is in Church-State relations. Although Cuba adopted a strong pro-Arab line in the Middle Eastern conflict, it did not follow the lead of the Soviet Union in breaking relations with Israel. Such relations have continued, and diplomatic personnel are mutually posted. In contrast to the experience of other Communist countries, the Cuban government has never broken diplomatic relations with the Vatican. The relations between the Papal Nuncio and Prime Minister Castro have been cordial. They range from exchanges of courtesy visits to substantive steps which have led to considerable freedom for clergy to travel to and from Cuba, and which culminated in the emergence from the catacombs in 1969. The Nuncio was the effective head of the Cuban Church during the past decade, until the deaths of Cardinal Artiga, Archbishop Díaz and Archbishop Pérez Serrantes opened up the route for new local leadership.

Substantively, as suggested by the path-breaking pastoral letter, there is much that the Church can cheer for in the Cuban Revolution. There has been an astonishing expansion of the educational system at most levels, even if the quality often leaves a lot to be desired. The Church is rightly troubled by the rather crude ideological indoctrination which often takes place—and often has backfired on the government. The Church, nevertheless, must be impressed by the magnitude and the seriousness of the educational commitment of the Cuban government.

In the area of public health, the results are less striking. In the early years of the revolution, the nationalization of health facilities was not carried out well and there was a consequent exodus of medical personnel. This led to an increase in the rate of reported infectious diseases, which peaked in 1962. The continued government assignment of priority to the field of public health—to make up for losses—has brought many, though not all, of these rates of disease under control. The level at the end of the 1960's, while substantially better than in early revolutionary years, was not much better than in the prerevolutionary years. Nevertheless, the Church has reason to be impressed by the direction and size of the commitments which have been made in this area, and which are having significant results since 1962.

It is also reasonable that the Church's concern for social justice would lead it to applaud many of the policies which the government has pursued to redistribute income. It appears that the Church will not fight the battle of nationalization of property of 1960 all over again. If so, then the policies since then would meet with a measure of approval. In this area, however, the results have not been unambiguous. While one can show that the standard of living of residents of the rural areas has risen, one can also show that the standard of living of many residents of the urban areas—especially in Havana—has declined. Such a decline is not limited to the rich: industrial workers have also lost ground. This is reflected in the fact that they left Cuba in the late 1960's at an annual rate which was higher than would be expected from their share of the workforce.

The Cuban government's efforts to promote economic growth during the 1960's failed. The pastoral letter shows, however, that the Church, once again, took note of the direction and the effort which went into that noble failure. The Church called upon Catholics to dedicate themselves to the task of development in the forthcoming years. It is, obviously, in an area such as this that the government would most welcome collaboration.

At the level of ideas, the Cuban government, and especially Prime Minister Castro, has been visibly impressed by the new social concerns articulated by the Church throughout the world. The government has, obviously, been most pleased by the actions of revolutionary priests, such as the late Camilo Torres of Colombia. The government's new perception of the Church became an instrument of ideological criticism which the Cuban government used against its Communist enemies elsewhere in Latin America. The traditional Communist parties had become a new ec-
clesiastical bureaucracy, it was alleged, while the Church had made a renewed commitment to transform the world. In turn, the Church can celebrate the commitment of the government to the development of a "new man," motivated by moral rather than material considerations. One would also expect, however, that the Church would be alert to the use of coercion, under the guise of morality, against those who fail to follow the governmental line.

There is, therefore, despite the obvious difficulties which could be recited, considerable common ground. This is the promise. But the problem is the proper response that the Church may make, given not only this promise but the persistence of conflict. In a second pastoral letter leading the Church out of the catacombs, the hierarchy, under the leadership of the new Archbishop of Havana, Francisco Oves, took an important step in responding to this problem. It followed *Pacem in Terris* in making a distinction between an ideology and the man who believes in it. It concluded: "We should not exclude his honesty in taking a position, which can be very sincere, nor should we avoid collaboration in the practical order of our terrestrial realizations. For example, in the undertaking of development, in the promotion of all men, and all of man, there is an enormous area of common perseverance among all people of good will, be they atheists or believers." The hierarchy further instructed its priests "to help the integral evolution of man in today's world... to orient, with fidelity, the insertion of our Christians in that new pluralistic world which is being constructed to the spirit of the gospel, so that they can give a true testimony as such to all their brothers. That they know how to admit with serene objectivity the healthy elements of criticism of religion that can operate as a purifier of the faith. . . ."

As I noted, the credibility of the Church within revolutionary Cuba requires its political reinsertion. The Church must be credible in the context of the revolution by supporting those features of the revolution which it finds just, if it wishes to emerge completely from the catacombs. And it must come out of such catacombs unless it is ready to preside over the slow disintegration or ossification of religion in Cuba. What is to be done? The main contribution of the Church, argues the leading Protestant theologian inside Cuba, Sergio Arce Martínez (President of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Matanzas), is prophetic witness. Arce argues that the Church must first prophesy against itself; it must destroy its own idols of the past. The Catholic hierarchy, in welcoming criticism from all sources, evidently agrees. Arce, the Catholic hierarchy and others would also agree, because of their statements and actions, with the Cuban Catholic theologian, Carlos Germán Renés, who says: "The function of the church is, before all else, to serve and to encourage. . . . This obliges her to speak out clearly in favor of all that represents significant progress for man." The problem appears as one moves beyond this point: At what time does the Church criticize the existing government, and in what ways?

The Student Christian Movement argued in a public statement issued in 1968 that Church criticism of "dehumanizing elements which occur within the process of change... cannot be carried out if the creative participation of the Christian community within the society has not been first realized." Arce's essays point to a similar position. He summarizes it with a quotation: "The task of the Christian is to be engaged with the Revolution." It is not easy to determine the position of the Catholic hierarchy. But their pastoral letters have typically refrained from criticism. They have criticized the government less than it has criticized itself. Self-criticism has played a continuously important role for the Cuban revolutionary leadership. The most recent dramatic example was Fidel Castro's public analysis of economic failures in his speech of July 26, 1970. In the past, as in March, 1962, the Prime Minister has aimed public criticism even at those Communist Party sectarians who would deny the freedom of individual religious belief. Yet there is only a single sentence in the pastoral letter of April, 1969, which is more critical than not: "There are internal difficulties, due to the fact that these problems are new and involve complex technical demands, although they are also a product of the deficiencies and the sins of men." This sentence, however, is buried in the striking section where the Bishops call for an end to the economic quarantine of Cuba.

Triumphalism of the Left? Can the Church be but a cheerleader? The credibility of the Church, as well as its prophetic witness, should lead it in justice to endorse, promote and support a number of features of the Cuban Revolution. Yet it is inconceivable that the Church would identify itself totally with the revolution. Moreover, the argument that the Church should engage in sequential criticism is not satisfactory. The demands of prophesy—the need for criticism—cannot wait. There is a need for simultaneous criticism, of Church and State, tempered with credible support. The Church should not lag behind the government in its willingness to criticize the government! To abandon the unswerving commitment to prophetic criticism would compromise the Church's credibility before its members and would also give up a part of the Church itself.

The Church's criticism, obviously, must be conscious of the political risks which may be incurred. Within the available political room, it can be bolder. It is, in fact, possible that a more critical stance could be welcomed, for the government has accepted criticism within the framework of the political system. The Church can offer criticism from which the
government might benefit. It can comment upon the wisdom and the prudence of demanding extraordinary efforts time and again from an exhausted people. It can defend the needs of men and women for privacy, for a time they can call their own in a society which demands total publicity and mobilization of life. It can call for more restraint in the exercise of wide government discretion concerning personal mobility and freedom. These are issues which lend themselves to religious criticism and these are issues which, at one point or another, have been raised by prominent members of the government.

In short, the Church can address itself to the problems of the political system, within the terms permitted by that system, but from a religious perspective. On the other hand, it is clearly impossible for the Church to address itself to such crucial matters as the fate of the political opponents of the government. While not articulating them publicly, these concerns must remain in the conscience of the Church, informing her attitude toward public affairs. This remains a central roadblock to closer identification between Church and State beyond the limited existing reconciliation.

The Catholic Bishops concluded their September, 1969, pastoral letter with the following exhortation: "This is an hour in which, like all hours, we must know how to discover the presence of the Kingdom of God in our midst, in which we should be able to discern the positive aspects of the crisis through which our world is passing in this turn of its history. It is a crisis of maturity and of growth and in no way simply a crisis of agony." Indeed, the Cuban Church must strive in this fashion. In responding to the "signs of the times" in the context of the Cuban Revolution, the Church should be cognizant that not all the signs point in the same direction, and that the service of its people and of its country requires more than the identification of the good in its midst. The Church's critical prophesy cannot be exercised sequentially, because the Church risks losing its soul to save its skin.

Finally, outsiders can help the Church in Cuba in a number of ways. First, and most important, they can learn not to be scandalized by the Church's decision to serve its people now, nor by the Church's findings that the Kingdom of God can be found, alas, even in the Cuban Revolution! Second, the Church would be helped if those who falsely claim its endorsement for insurrectionary purposes, especially some groups of exiles, would keep their distance. The Cuban Church has come into the world again, and it must be allowed to work out its position under conditions which are difficult enough without such external pressure. I have argued that the wisdom of the basic decision is irrefutable, and I would emphasize that as I mention a third point: In order to proceed, the Church must support those features of the revolution which are worth supporting. This must be done not only to maintain political credibility, but also out of a commitment to justice.

The Church can benefit from the end of isolation. It can benefit from the support of theologians outside Cuba who try to think about its problems. It can benefit from financial support, in cash or in kind, which would have to be channeled through third parties because of current United States policy. And it can benefit from exchange with bishops and priests of other countries to which there are still intellectual and emotional attachments.

The Church in Cuba is changing; the Cuban Revolution may change too; but such change is unlikely as long as the current state of international siege continues. The worst features of the Cuban Revolution, the crudest elements of its mass mobilizations and its political repressions, are sustained at least to a significant degree by the international confrontation with the United States. The windows have been shut for so long that it is difficult to open them. The air has become very stale but for so long that the intended victim has become used to it. The policy of isolation may have had its uses; they are much less obvious now. Cuba is not being incrementally hurt by these policies; it has gotten used to them by maintaining a political system with coercive features which are subject to change as the international situation changes. In short, the current policy of the United States may be doing the opposite of what it intends: perpetuating a coercive form of revolution based on mass mobilization which responds to international pressure. International confrontation and internal confrontation have been linked. If one prop is removed, the other may slowly be removed too—if pluralistic external and internal forces, including all the Churches, try to create a fresh opening up of the Cuban political system.