

Convocation – 9-14-20 – Erick Alvarez Gil

Good morning Tigers. I am Mr. Alvarez, the new math teacher at Jesuit . . . the Cuban. I want to tell you about my journey from Havana to Jesuit, a journey of faith. It is not a coincidence that today we celebrate the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross. That journey began in the heart of my mom, because “when God places His altar in the heart of a mother, the whole house is His temple”. My mom is a Cuban doctor who was one of the few women that remained loyal to the Church in the worst decades of religious persecution under the communist regime of Fidel Castro. I was baptized in secret without the consent of my dad, a teacher and a great father who wanted to protect his family.

Cuba is a totalitarian regime with a government monopoly over every aspect of the life of the country and its people, a one-party system, fake elections, a crushing propaganda machine used for brainwashing, an educational system used for mass indoctrination, and a world-class intelligence apparatus used against its own people. In this socialist utopia, all essential concepts for a functioning democracy were replaced by empty slogans such as "Long live [delete “to”] the Revolution" and "Socialism or Death". In this workers' paradise, my parents had a salary of 30 dollars per month, they took their first plane when they were over 50, and they are not starving today only because of me and my sister, although we cannot compensate their loneliness. Yes, it is true that in Cuba we are all equals, no matter your race or your education -- we all are equally miserable, equally powerless, and equally forced to show conformity, so that we must break the law just to put food on the table. Driven by fear, most people become puppets of the state while they try to escape that open-air prison. And those few “crazy” independent journalist and artists, human right activists, and free minded students and dissidents, endure persecution, aggressions, repudiation, moral assassination, expulsions from universities and jobs, confiscations, jail and death. This is just part of the price of Castro’s promises of free stuff and equality for all.

It is not easy to live a Christian life in this environment. My mom told me in my first day of school, “nobody should see the cross on your chest, nobody should hear you saying the name of Jesus; but, you will show His cross and say His name by being the best student your teachers have ever had. And if someone ask you, “Don’t be afraid”, remember Peter and never deny your faith.” That was a lot of pressure for a 6 years old boy; but practicing this silent testimony gave me discipline, ownership, responsibility, and strength of character. I never missed one day or arrived 1 minute late, no matter if there was a storm or if I had a mild fever. I never missed a deadline because my baseball practices ended late or there was a power outage at home. Dr. Gema did not believe in “reasonable” excuses. She had a motto: “strive to do things right, but most importantly, strive to do the right thing.” I put the name of my school on the national stage by winning competitions in Math and Physics. No one ever questioned my faith.

However, while studying engineering I felt that my testimony could no longer be silent. Following the call of John Paul II in Cuba, I became a missionary, an organizer of Catholic groups, a leader of Catholic students, a writer for Catholic publications, and a volunteer for humanitarian projects. I cannot describe how these experiences shaped my faith and my character, and how many men and women of God touched my life, some of them Jesuits, but also my best friend Harold, and my wife Anabel. The Church in Cuba was small, poor and had been attacked for decades, just like the first Christian communities; but the living God was there. It was the Church of the free, intellectually brilliant, willing to stand for the poor, brave in telling the truth, working for national reconciliation, providing an environment where young people like me could find meaning and purpose in the middle of the general corruption, existential emptiness and mediocrity of the society.

Years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the visit of JP II, religious practices were “normalized”. Now you could be a Christian more openly, show your cross and pray in public. It seemed that we finally had gained religious freedom and many people returned to the Church. It was even fashionable to be a religious person as long as your faith did not inform your public life, as long as you continued to praise Castro, as long as you named Jesus but not the daily injustices around you. I found this divorce between faith and public life unacceptable and even dangerous for the soul of religion and the core of our Catholic identity, an intellectual battle that we fought inside the Church, sometimes in tension with the hierarchy.

By 2009, I had spent years seeking freedom and detachment, and studying Catholic Social Doctrine. I was ready to break the last chain. “Who stands firm?... the responsible person whose life does not wish to be but an answer to the question and to the call of God, who is responsible for this?” I felt compelled to answer God: “I want to take responsibility for this.” And I did it. I entered the Christian Liberation Movement, led by Oswaldo Paya, the most prominent leader of the opposition. I risked everything: my career, my freedom, my life. And I knew that this time, I wouldn’t have the support of anyone, not even my mom. I had put my family at the brink of destruction. My father blamed my mom and accused me of being selfish and reckless. It was painful and scary; but I rejected the idea of being paralyzed by fear. I needed a sign and God answered. My spiritual director told me: “I cannot tell you what to do; but I can tell you that it has never been easy to carry the Cross. Be concerned when following Christ becomes easy.” This was a confirmation for me. God loves those who walk with freedom of spirit in an attitude of abandonment and trust.

Working with Oswaldo was the honor of a lifetime. We designed proposals of law, developed grassroots campaigns, founded publications, taught leadership workshops, and expanded the movement. But on July 22, 2012, I received a call from Oswaldo's daughter. "The State Security has killed my father," she told me. Oswaldo was an international symbol for human rights. I thought that he was untouchable; he wasn't. My friend, Harold, the witness of my wedding two months before, was murdered too. I had to pick the phone and call his mom. Many leaders left the country afraid of massive incarcerations. My wife and I faced another big decision: we could travel to the US as refugees or stay in Cuba. We stayed, we helped to reorganize the movement, we launched the Cuba Decide campaign for a National Referendum, we opened the Forum Loyola in partnership with the Jesuits, and advocated across the Western World. And we paid the price: my wife was fired, my mom was forced to resign, and I had to quit school (?). I could not enter an educational institution again. We were under total surveillance and I was kidnapped at airports and interrogated.

In 2016, the State Department invited me to study as a Master of Public Affairs. My wife told me: "You must go." She knew how passionate I was about public policy and the importance of this formation opportunity. She stayed behind in Cuba with our three-year old daughter. During my first semester at the University of Texas, I missed about 40% of the information Professors delivered. I was also behind in American history, government, and politics. Academic standards were very high and my expectations even higher. I did not come here just to survive. I came here to learn and excel. The challenge was monumental. I worked as if everything depends on me and trusted God as if everything depends on Him. I read an insane number of documents, newspapers, and books; I spent hours watching news channels, and practicing English with my roommate. By April 2018, mission was accomplished. I had As in all courses, won an academic competitive award, taught Math and Public Finance, and I was ready to graduate with honors and fly back to Cuba.

Again, another unexpected call. My wife had fled Cuba to tell me that I cannot return. The Communist Intelligence had raided our house, confiscated sensitive information, and swore to put me in jail if I came back. The message was clear: they will not tolerate a dissident with my credentials returning from America. My world was upside down. But now, we had the American dream in front of us: we spoke the language, understood the country, had a great education, some savings, relatives and friends. For me and Anabel, it was a nightmare. We do not know how many Christmases we will spend away from our parents or if we will ever see our grandparents again. We had never been richer, and we had never felt so miserable, because we had lost all sense of purpose and belonging in life. And for the first time I had no idea of what God wanted from me. However, He had saved me and my family from absolute catastrophe once again.

I soon realized that it is not easy to live the Gospel here either. There is so much noise, distractions, complacency, and forces that want to push religion out of the public square. JP II stood up against the absolutist atheism that prevailed in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Benedict XVI denounced the dictatorship of relativism spread in the West that questions any objective truth and the Judeo-Christian values that founded our civilization. Pope Francis has warned about the culture of discarding and the inability to forgo immediate gratification for a greater good. I can tell you: happiness does not lie in money, pleasures, power or fame; it lies in finding meaning and purpose, in filling that hole that only God can fill, in finding answers to the existential questions that make us live, and ultimately, in living the life God wants you to live.

We might not understand God at times; but He always surprises us in a big way. Here I am, two years later, doing what I find more fulfilling and enjoyable: teaching and forming “Men for Others.” This is a great country, with generous people who have opened so many doors for me and my family, and we are grateful. But I must confess that I have a dream that a day will come in which I will walk free through the streets of Havana. You guys are blessed for being Americans and being able to chase your dreams in your homeland. You must be passionate about improving the world around you; just be very mindful and start with yourself. Before helping others to carry their crosses; make sure you take up yours as well. Again, today is the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross, the triumph of life, hope, love, and the Truth that makes us free. Thank you and God bless you!