



**ORDER OF MALTA
CUBA**

**REPORT ON THE STATUS OF
THE PROGRAMS OF THE CUBAN ASSOCIATION
OF THE SOVEREIGN ORDER OF MALTA
IN CUBA**



June 22, 2024

OUR WORK IN CUBA -- 2024

The work of the Cuban Association of the Order of Malta in Cuba began in 1999, a year after the visit of Pope St. John Paul II to Cuba. Our mission concentrates almost exclusively on aiding the vulnerable elderly, particularly with their nutritional needs and providing them a dignified setting where they can interact with others. This report covers the following subjects:

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OVERVIEW PRE-2020

We started with one *comedor*, a dining hall, and gradually expanded to over sixty points of service. All of these points of service are operated with institutions of the Catholic Church in Cuba, primarily parishes but including nursing homes operated by the Church. Pre-Covid, a *comedor* was generally open between two to five times a week, served a light breakfast and lunch and provided a place where the elderly can gather and socialize. Pre-Covid, *comedores* normally served between 30 to 50 and will provide at home food delivery for the home-bound.

In 2019/2020, with the assistance of the Global Fund for Forgotten People, we decided to shift our emphasis from *comedores* to *casas de abuelos*, Homes for Grandparents. These homes would operate five days per week, 8 to 10 hours per day and provide the elderly with enhanced daily care, including meals, exercise, entertainment, spiritual growth, medical treatment, fresh laundry, and anything else that is within our means to provide. One of the principal goals of the reform was to move our funding from *comedores* to *casas de abuelo* and to enhance the identity of those programs with the Order of Malta. That reform program was proceeding satisfactorily with three *comedores* converted into *casas de abuelo* with several more identified as candidates for such transformation in 2020. Covid stopped that reform program in its tracks.

We also decided that we needed to engage in securing food supplies for the network of *comedores/casas de abuelo*. To that end, we reached an agreement with the Benedictine Order which was developing a farm on the outskirts of Havana, Finca Epifania. The farm was intended to produce food that would be distributed to the various points of service of the Order in Havana. That relationship did not prosper, but, with the assistance of the Global Fund for Forgotten People and the Embassy of the Order we established a second test case, Finca Esperanza.

The Association has also provided aid to poor families who have lost their simple homes and essential assets in natural disasters. Among others, help was provided in the reconstruction of homes, beds, mattresses and emergency food, such as the damage caused by Hurricanes Mathew in the Santiago, Paloma and Ian areas, as well as the tornadoes that passed through Regla. The aid

arrived and was distributed in a timely manner, benefiting hundreds of families. Particular efforts were made to assist those that are affiliated with our *comedores* and *casas de abuelo*.

CURRENT SITUATION IN CUBA

Since the beginning of 2020, the Cuban Program has been faced with three basic challenges: The Covid pandemic and a deteriorating economic situation in Cuba which has resulted in a steep devaluation of the Cuban currency such that the value of any monetary transfer to Cuba will likely result in a loss of 90 percent of the purchasing power of any transfer of hard currency. In addition, economic dislocations have triggered a substantial decrease in the food supply produced domestically. And third, critical fuel shortages have crippled the transportation system making the distribution of in-kind aid very difficult, expensive and unpredictable.

The pandemic forced many of the points of service to either close, severely restrict their operations or shift their operations to either (i) the delivery food to the home or (ii) the outright payment of a cash subsidy to assist with their purchase of food. These last changes, delivery to the home or the payment of cash subsidies, do not comply with our requirements of affording the vulnerable elderly with a dignified space to socialize and be attended. Our program to shift from *comedores* to *casas de abuelo* also had to be suspended because making the required improvements to support the enhanced activities was impossible.

With respect to the food security program, the venture with the Benedictines failed because they refused to abide by the terms of our agreement which, amongst other things, required the program to be under the management of a trained agronomist mutually agreeable. With the help of the Fund for Forgotten People and the Embassy of the Order in Cuba, we have established a pilot program with an agronomist which is in fact delivering produce to the *comedores* in Havana.

The challenge of the drastic devaluation of the Cuban peso is being addressed on several fronts. First, the Cuban government is making it feasible to transfer hard currency to the Island in such a form that the recipient can purchase necessary items without incurring the consequence of the devaluation. Unfortunately, these mechanisms are of limited utility because of the limited points of sale where they can be used.

We have also attempted to send food in bulk, to date mostly Manapac (a rice fortified with proteins such as soy) from the exterior. We have accomplished three or four shipments with the food being donated by either Food for the Poor or Cross Catholic Outreach donating the food, and we funding the transportation to Cuba and distribution through-out the Island. The Embassy of the Order has provided one shipment this year with another expected in the next month.

In conjunction with the Global Fund for Forgotten People and the Embassy of the Order in la Habana, the Association is collaborating with a project to support local production of food at the Finca Esperanza. Finca Esperanza is operated by Manuel Perez, the agronomist who was hired to supervise the operations at Finca Epifania. It was a dairy farm comprising five caballerias (about 165 acres) located in San José de las Lajas in the province of Mayabeque. With funds from the Global Fund, the farm has been improved by the additional equipment, including a wind mill and water pump, and cattle, pigs and ostriches have been acquired.

The lack of agricultural production in Cuba has also stimulated an industry where those outside Cuba can purchase for delivery in Cuba food and other merchandise. The Cuban Association is exploring ways in which these mechanisms can be utilized to support the Cuban Program.

The Cuban Association considers it essential and necessary to support the vulnerable elderly in Cuba. All these projects have a common necessity: more resources and volunteers are needed, for which we continue to request the assistance of local parishes so that they may contribute and participate through the exercise of fraternal Charity.

SUMMARY OF THE CURRENT STATUS

Comedores and Casas de Abuelo. The Association is currently supporting 64 points of service throughout the Island. Through those 64 points of service, approximately 3,000 vulnerable elderly are assisted who receive approximately 650,000 food servings per year. There is significant variation on what the food servings consist ranging from lunch or breakfast served in the facilities to home delivery of a bag of food (javitas). Before the onset of COVID, the number assisted was much higher, over 5,000. As noted above, the operational structures required by COVID substantially reduced the level of services. Although the operational restrictions posed by the pandemic have been lifted, many of the points of service have maintained the reduced the level of services and the hours of operation because of the lack of food and the economic realities of the Island. Our response to the challenges posed by the Cuban reality is detailed below, but the consequence of the reduced services offered by the points-of-service and the economic situation is that we have been forced to decrease our monetary support to the points of service from a pre-COVID high of approximately \$250,000 per year to a current level of approximately \$105,000 per year. This decrease has been offset to some degree by the delivery of in-kind food donations, a program that is still in its infancy.



Our points of service span the whole length of the Island as is demonstrated by the following map:



The following chart summarizes on a diocese-by-diocese basis those that are receiving our aid in Cuba through our relationships with the various institutions of the Church in Cuba:

Diocesis	No. de Proyectos	No. Beneficiados	No. de Voluntarios	No. de Trabajadores	No. Raciones (trimestral)	APORTE ORDEN (trimestral)
Pinar del Río	4	151	21	6	2,972	\$1,200
San Cristóbal de La Habana	19	1,065	71	164	83,087	\$4,938
Matanzas	3	135	19	3	3,965	\$800
Santa Clara	8	339	34	19	18,101	\$1,850
Cienfuegos	1	20	10	0	1,564	\$250
Ciego de Avila	2	50	5	0	250	\$500
Camagüey	18	763	60	20	25,993	\$1,250
Holguín	3	220	6	6	16,542	\$850
Bayamo-Manzanillo	2	50	0	6	1,955	\$500
Santiago de Cuba	3	128	29	2	4,666	\$900
Guantánamo-Baracoa	1	79	4	2	5,149	\$300
	64	3,000	259	228	164,245	\$13,338

In Kind Distribution. As noted above, one of the responses to the challenges posed by the currency exchange rate and domestic food production issues, the Association has made efforts to send in-kind donations of food. Generally, the food is donated and the Association organizes the logistics of receiving and distributing the contributions and pays the costs of importing and distributing the contributions. In prior years, the Association has worked with both Cross Catholic connect and Food for the Poor.

This year, the Embassy of the Order arranged for one shipment of 20,000 kilos of food and is expecting to deliver another shipment in early fall. Unlike prior donations, which were limited to Mannapack, this shipment was comprised as indicated on the chart to the right.

The shipment was distributed to 17 *comedores* and *casas de abuelo* affiliated with the Order and to 18 other institutions operated by the Church, including nursing homes and childcare centers. The recipients estimate that the donations they received should meet their needs for the donated products for approximately three months. Because of the shortages of fuel on the Island, the distribution was limited to the western part of the Island, the Dioceses of Pinar del Rio and la Habana.

PRODUCTS	WEIGHT (KG)
Rice	6,000
Margerine	200
Chickpeas	1,000
Beans	1,000
Corn	1,000
Peas	1,000
Powdered Milk	5,000
Coffee	250
Chocolate Powder	100
Sugar	750
Salt	250
Various Soups	1,000
Tuna	500
Flour	750
Sardines	600
Varied Jams	600
Total	20,000



Finca Esperanza. To date approximately six (approximately 15 acres) of the initial 14 hectares (approximately 35 acres) selected for improvement have been cleared of Marabú), cattle, pigs and ostriches have been acquired and are breeding, chard, pumpkin, sweet potato, radish, bell pepper, lettuce, tomato, corn, banana, beets, melons and short cycle yuca have been planted and harvested. Unfortunately, in the spring of 2024 a large percentage of the in-ground harvest was damaged by a rare and severe hailstorm, that physically damaged many plants and their harvest. Notwithstanding, the Finca has delivered some produce to the Order's projects in the area.



Miscellaneous Support. The Association also responds to various requests for support from outside the program areas. For example, during 2023 a substantial effort was made to assist a teenager who had contracted Steven-Johnson syndrome which caused painful blisters and lesions on the eyes and surrounding skin and mouth resulting in an almost total loss of sight. The Association arranged for the visas and paid for the travel expenses for the child and his mother, arranged and paid for his treatment by numerous doctors, dentists, other medical professions, and Bascom Palmer Institute, facilitated access to necessary medications and arranged for their stay at Ronald McDonald House. As a result, the patient had significant improvement and relief from the blistering of the eyes and skin, recovered some eyesight and was identified as a candidate for some experimental procedures which may assist him in recovering even more of his sight.

In addition, the Association has paid for the delivery of wheat to the order of nuns in la Habana that bake all of the hosts for the celebration of the Eucharist in Cuba.

Supervision of the Programs. Currently the programs in Cuba are supervised by Rolando Suárez Cobián and Alina Pérez (both members of the Order). Jeannet Diaz works full time as Executive Director. Members of the Order from Miami used to visit Cuba various times during the year. These visits have been curtailed since the onset of Covid. Antonio Acosta-Rua, Counsellor of the Order's Embassy in la Habana, goes to Cuba periodically and visits the various projects, particularly the Finca Esperanza. He coordinates closely with the Cuban Association.

ACTION ITEMS

Existing Comedores and Casas de Abuelo. The funding for the current *comedores* and *casas de abuelo* needs to be reviewed and adjusted. Although many of the points of service have been able to reopen and reengage, there are many that do not function at levels that we would deem appropriate. Sixteen function only once per week, there are five that merely distribute food to the home instead of gathering the elderly and three simply distribute the funds received to the elderly. In addition, the Association is exploring the possibility of replacing cash payments to the *comedores* in Cuba with the purchase outside of Cuba for food for delivery on the Island to specific projects. This would in part address the issues relating to the currency exchange rates and lack of domestic food production.

Model Casa de Abuelo. The Jesuits have offered to the Order the possibility of purchasing a house from them located in Juanelo a very poor neighborhood of la Habana. The house is currently offering a breakfast service to 16 elderly and is operated by four nuns from the Order of Slaves of Christ the King. Initial estimates place the infrastructure and equipment costs at approximately \$5,000 and annual operating costs of \$12,000 to provide services to not more than 20 elderly. The objective would be to have a program which is fully funded and controlled by the Order that offers to the elderly breakfast, lunch and snack five days per week as well as other services. Dr. Suárez is working on a written proposal to be reviewed by the Association. The proposal would be based on an initial rental of the property as opposed to a purchase in order to test the viability of the program. In addition to reaching an agreement with the Jesuits for the use of the property, we would likewise reach an agreement with the nuns to maintain their continued presence in the project.



In-Kind Donations. The program for in-kind donations needs to be expanded. The Association does not have the funding to purchase food, but its program would consist of obtaining in kind donations of food with the Association being responsible for the organization, supervision and payment of the logistics and distribution costs of the donated food in the Island. The Association has been in conversations with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (“LDS”) pursuant to which the LDS would donate four to six containers of food per year. Initial conversations have also been started with Food for the Poor (“FFTP”) to resume their in-kind donations which they had ceased to make over perceived reputational risks of helping the Government of Cuba. These conversations are at too early a stage to be able to determine whether they will be fruitful. The Association also need to reengage with Cross Catholic Outreach (“Cross

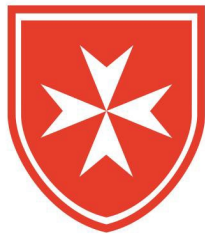
Catholic”) which has also make in-kind donations to the Association for Cuba. The initial goal would be that the Order, between the donations organized by the Embassy and those from the LDS, FFTP, Cross Catholic and others, deliver a 20 ton container of food to Cuba every two months.

Medical Volunteers. P. Troadio Hernández, our Chaplain in Cuba, has organized a team of three retired doctors that visit the elderly. The desire would be to develop a program to encourage medical professionals to follow their example and volunteer their services at the various points of service related to the Order.

Respectfully submitted June 22, 2024.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JTO', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

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