

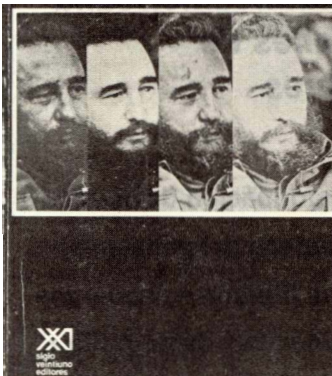
FIDEL CASTRO ON RELIGION

Frei Betto, Fidel Castro and Religion: Conversations with Frei Betto, Siglo XXI

A new Latin American best seller, second only to Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez's **Love in the Times of Cholera** was recently published in Mexico. In **Fidel Castro and Religion: Conversations with Frei Betto**, the author transcribes 23 hours of conversation between

FIDEL CASTRO Y LA RELIGIÓN

Conversaciones con Frei Betto



the Cuban president and Frei Betto, a Brazilian Dominican friar and militant Catholic with deep Christian convictions.

The conversations between the two took place in May of last year and cover a broad range of religious topics. Other issues are dealt with along the way, such as Castro's childhood and education, and the assault he led on the Moncada military headquarters in 1953, which signaled the beginning of the end of Batista. They also talk about love as a revolutionary quality, the nature of Cuban democracy and the Latin American foreign debt.

The long dialog between the revolutionary and the friar is friendly and straightforward, yet always intellectually precise. They seem to warm up to each other as the interview unfolds, and the tone is stronger and livelier as the hours—and the pages—pass.

By the third interview Frei Betto's questions are more forceful and sometimes even provocative. The interesting thing is that Castro does not elude the friar, but instead goes into greater detail in ideas that had formerly been glanced over, or gives his views on touchy subjects that are particularly important today. This is an additional angle of interest for readers of this 369 page document.

Throughout the confrontation both characters display a wealth of knowledge and self-confidence. Each is sure of his own convictions yet at the same time interested in establishing closer ties that can be helpful to the Latin American people. Their positions are firmly

grounded, but there is a reaching out toward each other from the very heart of both Christianity and Marxism. Neither gives an inch, yet they seem to reach deep understandings on such important subjects as morality, contemporary political and economic problems, as well as on the need to unite Christians and Marxists in the struggle for a better world.

The book gives us an important insight into Fidel Castro's ethical groundings. We learn about the influence his formal schooling had on him, particularly his experiences in grade school and high school at the best Catholic parochial institutions in Cuba. The highly principled ideas of Varela, Luz Caballeros and Jose Marti are obvious influences in Fidel's early development. This ethical component may be one of the more unusual aspects of the dialog.

Two of humanity's most important historical currents of thought and emotion, Christianity and Marxism, seen as irreconcilable by some, find new and surprising paths of understanding in these conversations. The issues are of interest for everyone sincerely concerned with the future of mankind, regardless of personal philosophies or beliefs.

These are some of the aspects that explain the book's success in Latin America. Instead of seeking simplistic solutions to complex problems, Latin Americans seem

open to exploring possible alternatives in order to develop their own point of view on the issues.

Unfortunately, what I consider the first part of the book (the part ending with the second interview) is marred by repetitions on the different subjects. Though this is faithful to the original conversations, it goes against the overall pace of the book.

With the way this book has been selling, Latin American readers are saying once again that the only taboo is closing one's eyes to the issues and not fully exploring the diversity of points of view before making key decisions that affect us all. ★

Pantxika Cazaux

ON FREI BETTO

Frei Betto is a Brazilian Dominican friar who was born in the city of Bello Horizonte in 1944. He was active in the student movement by the early age of 13, and was in the national leadership of the Catholic Student Youth movement between 1962 and 1964. He studied journalism and was first jailed for his political activities in June of 1964, shortly after the military takeover. He entered the Dominican order the following year.

Along with studies in philosophy and theology he worked as a journalist and was active in the

odds and ends

resistance movement against the Brazilian military regime. He was arrested again in 1969 and sentenced to four years in prison. As of 1974 he has been dedicated to organizing Ecclesiastic Base Communities.

He is currently an advisor to the Sao Bernardo do Campo Workers' Pastoral, which is located in Latin America's most important steel-producing region. He is also a member of the Popular Education Center of the Sedes Sapientiae Institute. He is part of the International Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, and has



Frei Betto.

published at least twelve books, some of which have been translated into several languages.