



Watching El Papa in Havana con mi Mama

By Patty Vila, SouthFloridaReporter.com, Cuba Expert, Sept. 20, 2015 - Hola from Fort Myers,

FL—I live in Miami but I am writing today from the city of Fort Myers, Florida visiting my mom at her home.

If I was not going to be in Havana for the visit of Pope Francis I wanted to be with her. Mom and I have been on this journey of Cuba since I was a little girl.

Some History—In 1998 I covered the visit of Pope John Paul II for CNN. From a journalistic point of view, covering a story of this magnitude is not an easy task. I, along with Bureau Chief Lucia Newman, cameramen Rudy Marshall, Ben Gonzalez, Vice President Larry Register and others started planning the network's coverage one year in advance. The money that is spent covering a news story like this is expensive. I alone, in December of 1997, hand carried \$100,000 in cash in my purse for the initial expenses.



I wanted to pray at the Cathedral in July. It was closed for renovations in preparation for the Pope's visit

Saturday, September 19, 2015--Pope Francis landed in Havana with his *seguito*, known in Italian as the "following." Mom and I watched "Shepherd One", his Alitalia plane, taxi on the run-way with the Cuban and Vatican flag flying out the window of the cockpit. My eyes got teary and mom stayed strong although I know she was moved.



Pope Francis waves as he boards a plane at Fiumicino Airport in Rome September 19, 2015. REUTERS/Giampiero Sposito

As we watched the reporters disembark from the back of the plane we waited anxiously to see the Pope. There he was! Stepping out, waving to the crowd. As he walked down the steps his white skull cap flew away. At the same time, mom and I said "Oh no, Pobrecito!" We both noticed he looked a bit tired but he quickly became energized by the crowds.

By the way, reporters that travel with the Papal party pay their own airfare and help "finance" the chartering of the plane. Reporters must, also, stay for the entire trip ("bell to bell") or else risk never being invited again.

Back to the main event-Pope Francis was greeted by President Raul Castro and a group of Cuban children. I noticed that the first group of children were a bit shy. The fourth child in line to greet Francis gave him a tight hug. After that every child gave him a hug. The first few children that missed their hug quickly came back. They knew it was OK. Then Raul Castro and Francis exchanged words.

When the band played the national anthem of Cuba, mom sang along. We both got chills.



People react after the arrival of Pope Francis outside the airport in Havana September 19, 2015. REUTERS/Claudia Daut

Mom loves to hear the Cuban anthem. It is something about those words and sound that always move her to the core. At times I wonder if it takes her back to her childhood and she just does not say. Remember, my mother left when she was 13 years old and she never saw her father again. That's hard on any child, no matter what country you are from.

Raul praised the Pontiff for his leadership on issues of climate change and poverty and thanked him for his role in brokering the talks between Cuba and the U.S. Francis said he was in Cuba "to support and encourage the Cuban people in their hopes and concerns."

Just like in 1998, the workers in Havana have been paving the streets and painting. The cathedral has been renovated as well as the airport terminal. Watching Pope Francis traveling in the Pope mobile brought back so many memories for me. Giving a moment of happiness to the Cuban people and remembering the famous words of Pope John Paul II "May Cuba open itself up to the world, and may the world open itself up to Cuba."

Bravo! Mom and I have been watching the coverage and switching back and forth from Univision and

Telemundo. I would like to state that Cuban TV are doing an outstanding job providing pool video for all the media around the world. I have been very impressed with the quality of their coverage, hard work and their professionalism!

What's in store? Only time will tell how this story will unfold. What the majority of people I know want is for the Cuban people to have a better life and opportunity. The big story my former cameraman Ben and I discussed, today, is, where will Cuba be one month from now, six months from now, one year from now? Will there be change in people's lives?

From the Crux: [Fun facts and more about life aboard the papal plane](#)

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