NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Obama in Puerto Rico

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 15, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

President Obama?s visit to Puerto Rico yesterday was consequential not only for the politics of next year?s presidential race but also for the politics of the island. Perhaps more importantly, if yesterday?s visit proves to be seminal, leading to a greater understanding of and dialogue with Puerto Rican culture, the President may help his party ? and his country ? understand how the changing demographics stateside might look in the future. Puerto Ricans have spent the last century experimenting with issues of how a Latino culture born out of the mixing of the Catholic faith with indigenous culture intersects with U.S. culture. In short, their past may hold keys to the nation?s future.

To the casual observer, Puerto Rico has become thoroughly Americanized. The road from San Juan to Luquillo, Route 3, used to be largely agricultural. As soon as one got past the airport, the roadside was dotted with farms. Now, you drive past Kentucky Fried Chicken, Burger King and an outlet mall. Most Puerto Ricans speak English. San Juan is a metropolis with hotels, congested traffic, and high-rise apartment buildings. If you come only for the beach, and stay only on a resort, you might think you were in south Florida or Hawaii.

But, once you get beneath the surface, Puerto Rican culture is decidedly different, despite the efforts, conscious and otherwise, to Americanize the population. After America invaded Puerto Rico in 1898, the U.S. government encouraged Protestant missionaries to come to the island to bring ?true Christianity? to the Catholic population. That is pretty conscious. The effects of capitalism, with its focus on efficiency and the bottom line, have been obvious if less conscious in their homogenizing consequences. Still, if you spend some time with the people of Puerto Rico, you discern the differences quite readily.

In Puerto Rico, family remains the focal point of society and culture. Go to a birthday party for a friend?s three year old and you will find dozens of extended family members gathered. The party will go all day and it will include young and old and everyone in between. There are no ?kiddie tables? at a Puerto Rican party or in a Puerto Rican home: Children are not shunted aside to be watched by baby-sitters so the adults can talk about the stock market. Once at a New Year?s Eve Party, I kept wondering when the small children would be sent to bed. At around 2 in the morning I stopped asking that question and just enjoyed watching the children dance the night away.

On Good Friday, religious processions wind their way through the streets of San Juan, Bayamon, Ponce, and other cities. Some people are dressed up as Roman centurions. Huge floats with statues of Christ and the Virgin are carried in procession. In San Juan, the procession goes past a brothel, and the ladies of the evening come out onto the balcony to throw flowers onto the float carrying an image of the crucified Christ. This might scandalize in the States. In Puerto Rico, it is seen, properly, as a beautiful testimony to the fact that Christ died for all.

On the weekends, the quiet beach where my family stays is transformed as families come and spend the day swimming, walking the beach, playing games, making sand castles. Puerto Ricans know how to have a good time and surveys of public opinion have repeatedly shown that Puerto Ricans are the happiest people on the planet. They are not rich, to be sure. The island suffers from 16 percent unemployment and the median income is far lower than it is in the States. But, wealth is not as important as enjoying time with family, surrounded by

nature?s bounty which belongs to everyone, even the poor. In Puerto Rico, by law, there are no private beaches.

In the States, the American family has been under near-constant attack for the past century. First, the nuclear family replaced the extended family as the focus of social organization as people moved to the suburbs and away from familial and urban neighborhood ties. The declining value of wages requires two income families. Liberal divorce laws, undoubtedly liberating for many, nonetheless changed our cultural conception of marriage from a sacrament to a contract, from a gift to a right, all long before same-sex marriage came along as an issue. Most importantly, America?s hyper-individualism, combined with all the attractive, alluring temptations of consumer society have created a culture in which personal self-expression, and self-assertion, are the dominant norm, not commitment to family, to Church, and to nation. In Puerto Rico, the culture has done a better job withstanding these threats, not least because of the influence of Catholicism.

I do not imagine that President Obama had enough time, or enough access to the culture, of the island to notice any of this. I wish he had. Puerto Rico has more than a century of experience seeing what happens when American and Latino culture intersect and co-mingle. I believe that the demographic explosion of the Latino population is the single most hopeful sign in contemporary American life and in the life of the Church in the U.S. Yes, there will be some assimilation but Latinos will also change American culture as Irish-Americans and Italian-Americans and Polish-Americans have changed American culture. Puerto Ricans have maintained a religious posture that is decidedly non-defensive towards the mainstream culture, a welcoming, embracing attitude, a focus on the family that is real and vibrant, and a commitment to the beliefs that beauty is more important than profit, that family is more important than work, that faith is more important than success. Puerto Ricans are not utilitarians. In a historical reversal from the early efforts by Protestant missionaries in Puerto Rico, I hope that today Puerto Ricans and other Latinos will be missionaries in the States, spreading a Christianity that is still capable of generating culture. And, Mr. President, next time you go to the island, try the mofongo!

Source URL (retrieved on *09/04/2015 - 10:17*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/obama-puerto-rico