

Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, patroness of Cuba

Sometime around the year 1600, two native Indians, Rodrigo and Juan de Hoyos, together with a ten year old slave boy, Juan Moreno, went out looking for the salt they needed to preserve the meat from the Barajagua slaughter house, which supplied the workers and inhabitants of "Santiago del Prado", now known as "El Cobre". That day they were just able to reach Cayo Francés, halfway across the Bay of Nipe, where they encamped to escape the fury of a storm which would have torn to pieces their frail canoe.

Calm was restored with daybreak, and they took to the transparent sea. They saw at a distance a white bundle floating on the waves and approaching them slowly. First they took it for a sea bird, then it seemed to them to be a girl and at last they were able to determine that it was a statue of the Virgin Mary holding the child on her right arm and with a gold cross in her left hand. The statue was fastened to a board with the inscription "I am the Virgin of Charity." According to the sworn testimony of witnesses, despite the recent storm and the motion of the waves, neither the figure of the Virgin, nor her clothing, were wet.

The head of the statue is of baked clay, covered with a polished coat of fine white powder, possibly rice paste, and the recent thorough renovation of the image showed up the fine features which countless paint coatings had deformed. A well-shaped nose and a well-proportioned face with large, loving eyes convey a gentleness that invites trust and prayer. The Virgin is about 16 inches high and her feet rest on a brilliant moon whose ends pointing down surround on both sides the silver cloud where three cherubs spread their golden wings. The Child, at the left side of the statue, raises a hand as if in blessing, and in his other hand he holds a gold globe. The entire figure is covered by a heavy cloak which gives it the typical triangular shape.

The image's original clothing was white, but the faithful have given her gold and silver colored robes. Because Our Lady of Charity is a symbol of the Cuban nationality, popular statues give her a white robe, a blue cloak and have the Child dressed in red: the colors of the Cuban flag. Nowadays the Virgin's dress, a copy of a very early one, is of heavy lamé with gold threads, and has the national Cuban shield embroidered on the skirt.

The simple folk have gotten used to the image of their "Cachita" with a small boat at her feet and in it the "Three Juanes" who found her floating on the water. The detail is omitted in the oldest reproductions which copied the original statue. At the request of the veterans of the War of Independence, Our Lady of Charity was declared the patroness of Cuba by Benedict XV in 1916 and solemnly crowned in the Eucharistic Congress held in Santiago de Cuba in 1936. Pope Paul VI raised her sanctuary to the category of Basilica in 1977. The statue was solemnly crowned a second time by Pope John Paul II during his visit to Cuba at a Eucharistic celebration held at Plaza Antonio Maceo on January 24, 1998, where she was proclaimed as Queen Mother of the Cuban people.

(Advocaciones Marianas en la Religiosidad Popular Latinoamericana, Documentaciones Sureste, Oficina Regional del Sureste para el Ministerio Hispano)