



SOURCES

Foundation of the College of Belen at Havana (1872)

Editors of *Woodstock Letters*

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[Editorial Note: The following document, “Foundation of the College of Belen at Havana,” first published in the *Woodstock Letters*—constitutes one of the earliest narrative accounts of the re-establishment of the Society of Jesus in Cuba and the origins of the Royal College of Belen. Written less than two decades after the events it describes, the text offers an important contemporaneous perspective on the political landscape, ecclesiastical support, and social expectations that shaped the foundation of Belen in the mid-nineteenth century. It preserves, in characteristic *Woodstock Letters* style, a blend of institutional memory, edifying tone, and historical detail, capturing both the fragility and promise that marked the Jesuits’ return to Spanish territories after decades of suppression. As a historical source, it sheds light not only on the complex relationship between Church and state in colonial Cuba that surrounded the educational endeavor of the Jesuits on the island, but also on the transatlantic dimensions of Jesuit restoration marked by the reactivation of long-dormant apostolic networks.

This republication invites readers to engage the text anew in light of Belen’s subsequent history—most notably its forced exile from Havana in 1961 and its re-establishment in Miami, where the school continues its mission today. To that end, we accompany the original article with a contemporary reflection by Fr. Guillermo “Willie” García-Tuñón, S.J., the current President of Belen Jesuit Preparatory School, who traces Belen’s history from the vantage point of a community shaped by exile, resilience, and faith. His meditation interweaves institutional memory with personal narrative, recalling how the school’s forced departure from Havana in 1961 became the seed of its rebirth in Miami and how successive generations—including his own family—found in Belen a spiritual and educational home. Fr. García-Tuñón underscores the

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centrality of Belen's chapels past and present as visible hearts of the school's mission, and he situates that mission within a broadened horizon marked by cultural diversity, global engagement, artistic and scientific creativity, and the ongoing Ignatian task of discerning how to humanize new frontiers such as artificial intelligence. Set alongside the nineteenth-century account that follows, his reflection highlights the remarkable continuity of Belen's identity across rupture and relocation, inviting readers to consider how Jesuit schools renew their founding spirit by holding memory and innovation, rootedness and openness, in a dynamic and faithful tension.]

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Foundation of the College of Belen at Havana (1872)

The Royal College of Belen (*Bethlehem*) in the city of Havana traces back its origin to beginnings which, though unpretending in themselves, were, nevertheless, not unattended by such difficulties as are wont to embarrass undertakings of some moment. As the Spanish Government was anxious to lay firm and solid foundations for the education of youth in its possessions beyond the seas, and as for a long time back it had been contemplating the erection of a central college in the Island of Cuba, under the title of Royal College of Havana, after mature deliberation it resolved to carry out so praiseworthy a design, and to confide the Institution to the charge of the Society, which had been banished from the kingdom since 1835. In furtherance of this plan, P. Domingo Olascoaga, who was afterwards appointed Provincial, set out from Belgium for Spain in 1851, and thanks to his zeal and activity, it came to pass after a short time, that the Government of Her Majesty threw open the gates of the Peninsula to the Society, founded at Loyola a mission-house and novitiate, and charged itself with the support of thirty novices who would furnish subjects for the houses to be founded in the colonies.

At that time the Most Excellent Sr. D. Francisco Fleix y Solans was Bishop of Havana, and at his solicitations, the first three subjects whom the Society sent to Cuba, embarked for that Island. These were F. Bartolome Munar, Superior, F. Cipriano Sevillano, and Br. Manuel R. Rubia. On their arrival at the port of Havana, April 29, 1853, they were welcomed with every mark of esteem by the civil and military authorities, as well as by the principal inhabitants, but especially by the Rt. Rev. Bishop, in whom they ever found a most tender father and generous protector.

Many were those who claimed the honor, as they called it, of showing hospitality to the Fathers; but they yielded to the entreaties of D. Bonifacio

Quintin de Villaescusa, Rector of the Collegiate Seminary of San Carlos, who had prepared accommodations for them. Several reasons impelled the Fathers to prefer this dwelling-place; but the chief one was that this very Seminary had been a house founded by the old Society, and possessed by it for more than fifty years, under the title of St. Ignatius' College. Thus by a special and loving disposition of Divine Providence, it was brought about that after nearly a century of interruption, the Fathers of the Society commenced their apostolic labors in the same church and residence, which had witnessed the glorious toils of our forefathers in religion.

After a few days had gone by, as it did not seem prudent to detain the Fathers in Havana, exposed to the dangers of yellow fever during the sultry heats of summer, they were sent by the Bishop to the beautiful country seat of San Antonio de los Baños, twenty-three miles distant from the Capital, and one of the most healthy and picturesque spots on the Island. Here they remained for five months, during which time they devoted themselves to preaching, hearing confessions, preparing the children for first confession and communion; and then terminated their stay at the villa with a nine days mission, an exercise then almost forgotten in those regions, and from which they gathered most abundant fruits.

Meanwhile, excavations were being made for the erection of the new college at Havana, in the field called Penalvar. The Fathers having received timely notice from His Excellency, the Captain General, Don Valentin Cañedo, presented themselves anew in the city, on the 10th of October, of the same year, 1853. This was the day appointed for laying the first stone; the solemnity took place in presence of the authorities, and of the most prominent inhabitants; there was besides a vast assemblage of people, and all were filled with joy on beholding the reestablishment of the Society in their midst. The work then went on with great speed, so that at the end of a few days, three or four feet of solid masonry arose above the deep foundations; but it was not carried on with equal earnestness after this, and when a few months had gone by, the work was entirely suspended, under the pretext that it would cost too much to carry out the original plan.

As the hot season was now over, the Fathers established themselves permanently in Havana. They occupied in the Calle de las Virtudes a modest dwelling house, rented and furnished at the expense of the Government. They applied themselves to the labors of the ministry and to the spiritual direction of the students in the Episcopal Seminary, and patiently awaited the decision of the authorities in regard to the College. Deterred by the obstacles encountered in the prosecution of the work which had been undertaken, the Government renewed a proposition which had previously been made, to open the classes in the old Convent of Mercy, but the

Fathers, who already understood the wants and the desires of the Cuban people, firmly declined to accept the offer. And it was not without good reasons. For, in the first place, this building was in so ruinous a state, and the rooms were so few, narrow, low and damp, that it was useless to think of lodging there the staff that would be required for a College. In the second place, the house was tenanted by some venerable old men, survivors of the ancient community of the Order of Mercy, who had no desire for anything else in this world, except to end their days, and to be buried in the peace of the just, beneath the shadows of the sanctuary which had witnessed their birth in the religious life; and it is clear, that it was neither just nor becoming to deprive them of this last and natural consolation, by wresting away from them this cherished home. Finally, the people of Havana, who justly valued the merits of these holy religious, and who as yet did not know the Fathers of the Society, would have become ill-affected towards the College, were it established in the Mercy Convent, to the prejudice of the ancient and lawful occupants. These and other weighty reasons the Fathers laid before Her Majesty's Government, which deemed it proper to lake them into consideration.

But in spite of the favorable attitude of the Government at Madrid, it is very probable that matters would have remained at a stand-still, had not the reply of the Cortes coincided with the appointment of a new Captain General, the Marquis de la Pezuela. This nobleman reached Havana towards the end of the same year, 1853, and on his arrival, the aspect of things changed on all sides. He forthwith set enquiries on foot so as to find out which of the public buildings could be most conveniently transformed into a good college; and as the Fathers showed a preference for the Convent of Our Lady of Bethlehem, in which Gen. Segundo Cabo with a battalion of troops was then quartered, he issued a command for the immediate cession of a portion of the building to the Fathers, promising to place the whole of it at their disposal, as soon as accommodations could be provided elsewhere for the soldiers who were then stationed at Belen. In this manner every obstacle was overcome, and thus the Society entered into possession of the spacious, beautiful and solid building of *Nuestra Senora de Belen*, at present a Royal College for Secondary Instruction.

The year 1854 began under these favorable auspices. On the 17th of January, FF. Munar and Sevillano, and Br. Rubia removed to the unoccupied portion of the building, along with FF. Jose Cotanilla and Nicasio Eguiloz lately arrived from Guatemala.

Hereupon, so urgent were the requests of many parents, that it was necessary to open several classes without delay, and to admit some pupils as day-scholars, until such time as they and other students could be trans-

ferred to the class of boarders, after such alterations had been effected as were required for carrying out the plan of studies.

As the intention was to found in the Convent of Belen a complete system of secondary instruction, both in the elementary and higher branches, and to raise the standard of studies step by step up to the grade of those systems which prevail in the European schools of highest repute, and to establish a College that would reflect honor on the Island of Cuba, and which might vie with any houses of instruction whether at home or abroad, it was indispensable to enlarge the capacity of the building to the utmost of its powers, and to introduce all the improvements of which it happened to be susceptible. Various changes had to be made in its internal arrangements; rooms had to be widened; vigilance, good order and discipline had to be facilitated by giving more openness to some of the yards and passages, and by constructing commodious and spacious dormitories. All these improvements were brought in as soon as the Convent was evacuated by the military troop which had been holding it. The Fathers took possession of the whole edifice on the 10th of August 1854. Before this time, at the end of May of the same year, they had been put in charge of the Church of the Convent, which till then had been under the direction of an ex-cloistered religious congregation, to whom another Church and residence not far from Belen were now assigned.

At this point, we cannot refrain from offering a testimony of our most affectionate gratitude to the noble Marquis de la Pezuela, from whom the Society received such great marks of esteem, and who, in so providential a manner, assumed the Government of the Island of Cuba, at a time when his full support and protection were essential for the College of Belen. The Society of Jesus and the whole Island will be forever grateful to this worthy gentleman and gallant soldier, who, after overcoming innumerable obstacles, brought it to pass during his short term of office, that so magnificent an educational establishment, should be thrown open to the Cuban youth.

It also seems opportune here, as an historical remembrance and as a testimony of love for our brethren, to give some brief account of what the Convent of Belen was, of its foundation and of the Religious of Bethlehem who bequeathed to us so splendid a residence.

This edifice so firmly built, so vast in its proportions, was erected towards the end of the seventeenth century by that renowned benefactor of mankind, D. Juan Francisco de Carvallo, who died Jan. 16th, 1718. It was meant to be a hospital for convalescents, under the patronage and protection of Our Lady of Bethlehem and of St. James. The East wing of the building, which is entirely of cut stone, is divided off into immense, vaulted halls; it has besides several inner court-yards surrounded by galleries and

arches, an elegant cloister, and three stairways of great artistic merit. That all might admire, and that the intelligent might understand, the structure and disposition of these staircases, and of a plain stone arch which is above the porch, the Corps of Royal Engineers gave orders that the plaster which covered them should be removed, and forbade that they should ever in future be covered up. This is attested by a marble tablet let into one of the arches. The Church which fronts eastward terminates the structure on the northern side. It is Greco-Romanesque in style, with a single nave in the form of a Latin cross, and although not very large, still it is finely finished with heavy pointed arches, and has a majestic and elegant cupola—the whole being made of very good stone. Its construction dates from 1687, and is due to the illustrious bishop of Cuba, Dr. D. Diego Evelino de Compostella, who dedicated it to St. James of Alcalá, as is testified by two statues of this Saint, one of stone on the second story of the front, and another finely carved in wood, which is venerated at the high altar. The date of erection and the founder's name are marked by the following inscription above the sacristy door:

HANC . BASILICAM
IN . EXTREMO . CIVITATIS . POSITAM
A . FUNDAMENTIS . EREXIT
DIDACUS . EVELINUS . DE . COMPOSTELLA
ANNO . DÑI . MDCLXXXVII

Beneath the large chapel or presbyterium is the Pantheon around the sides of which are ranged the last resting places of the Bethlehemite Brethren, and in the middle fronting the altar rises a modest but neatly carved sarcophagus in which repose the remains of the chief patron of the house, D. Juan Francisco de Carvallo.

For our own Society this beautiful church is not wanting in sweet memories which make it still more worthy of our love and veneration. Here rest the ashes of nine of our ancient brothers in religion, who in their passage through Havana, as they were proceeding to Europe from different provinces of America, on the general expulsion from all the dominions of Spain in the time of King Charles III, were received and ministered to in the Hospital of Ntra. Sra. de Belen and of San Diego, and thence passed to a better life. Their names are written on a tablet, which in remembrance of Our Brethren and for our example was inserted in one of the walls of the temple.

A. (XP) Ω

CINERIBUS
 NOVEM . E . SOCIETATE . JESU . SODALIIUM
 ANTONII . CEPEDA . FRANCISCI . IGUARRATEGUI
 JOSEPHI . MUÑOS . MARTINI . ALCOCER
 MICHAELIS . BENJUMEA . FRANCISCI . LARRETA
 SACERDOTUM
 JOSEPHI . BARROTE . FRANCISCI . VILLAR
 ANTONII . ORREZ
 SACERDOTII . EXPERTUM
 QUI . EXEUNTE . AN . MDCCLXVII
 EX . DIVERSIS . AMERICAЕ . PLAGIS
 CUM . SOCIIS . EXULANTES
 MATURIOREM . ET . FELICIOREM
 AERUMNOSAE . PEREGRINATIONIS . EXITUM
 INVIDENDA . MORTE . OBIERUNT
 ET . HEIC . A . BETHLEMITICI . ORDINIS
 FRATRIBUS
 HONORIFICE . CONDITI . SUNT
 SOCIETAS . JESU POST . LXXXVI . ANNOS
 IN . SODALIIUM . BENE . MERITORUM
 SEPULCHRUM . SUCCEDENS
 AD . POSTERITATIS . MEMORIAM
 PONENDUM . CURAVIT

Not less worthy of special mention is the Venerable Father, Manuel del Rincon, Superior of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri at Havana, who was a man remarkable alike for virtue and learning, enriched during life with wondrous gifts of God, and after death renowned for prodigies; our Church has the honor of possessing his body, which is buried at the foot of St. Anthony's altar. This venerable servant of God did not belong to the Bethlehemite community, but being persecuted and calumniated by envious men when there was question of elevating him to the episcopal see of Santiago de Cuba, he was by royal orders sent as a prisoner to the Convent of Belen. There, after enduring many sore afflictions with heroic patience and magnanimity, after giving striking proofs of virtue and sanctity, he was overtaken by death, whilst waiting for the decision in the suit which his enemies had preferred against him before the Supreme Council of Castile. The case was decided in favor of Father Rincon, but it was then too late. In atonement for whatever obloquy might chance to rest upon his memory on account of the imprisonment, the Council ordered that his funeral obsequies should be celebrated with the most imposing display, and at the

public expense, that all the Government officials should honor them by their presence, and that a monument should be erected to his memory in the church of Belen.

Directing now our attention to the Bethlehemite Religious for whom the building which the Society now possesses was originally erected, we know that they remained in it until 1845, constantly devoted to the care of the sick and the gratuitous instruction of youth. In the abovementioned year, their number having become greatly reduced, the Community was dissolved, and the few remaining members were thenceforward pensioned by the State.

There is now but one survivor of those who formerly belonged to this Convent; five have died since 1853, and the funeral ceremonies of all these took place in our Church, in accordance with a resolution of the Fathers who took possession of the College. *Ours* always took great pains to visit them frequently and help them in sickness; they on their part always came with pleasure to the College, being delighted that it had been granted to the Society, instead of being converted to profane uses, or perhaps destroyed.

The Founder of the Mendicant Order of the Bethlehemites was the Venerable Pedro de Bethencourt, who was born May 21st, 1626, at Villafior, a town of the Island of Tenerife, and he established his first house in the ancient city of Guatemala, to which place became in 1650. In 1655, having assumed the habit of the Third Order of St. Francis, he hired a small house in a retired quarter of the city, and dedicated himself to the teaching of children, instructing them chiefly in the Christian Doctrine. Shortly afterwards, the owner of the house having made him a gift of it, he converted it into a hospital for the poor, and built alongside of it an infirmary of boards, thatched with straw, so that he might be able to receive a greater number of the destitute and needy. He himself waited on them in their sickness, and allowed them to want for nothing, as he collected plentiful alms to supply all their necessities.

As the reputation of Bethencourt gradually spread, the civil and ecclesiastical authorities looked favorably upon his enterprise, charitable persons aided him with their means, and enabled him to erect a large hospital, at the building of which he labored with his own hands along with the workmen. A stately edifice quickly arose, with wards, cloister and oratory, and after it was completed, Pedro admitted some companions who had offered themselves, and formed with them the Bethlehemite Congregation, so called from the name of the hospital which was dedicated to Our Lady of Bethlehem. The care of the sick did not make Pedro forget the instruction of children, for he founded a school for them in the hospital. After his death, which happened in 1667, the constitutions drawn up by the founder

were adopted by the congregation, some slight modifications being introduced by his immediate successor. Houses of the same institute for female religious were afterwards established in order to take care of sick women. These Hospitallers of Bethlehem subsequently spread through Mexico and Peru, and in conformity with the founder's instructions, a school for boys was established in every hospital. The Institute received the confirmation of King Charles II, and was approved by Pope Innocent XI, in a Bull dated March 26, 1687, which placed it under the rule of St. Augustine.

Clement XI, in 1707, granted to it all the privileges of the Mendicant Orders. These religious added to the three essential vows a fourth, by which they bound themselves to the care of the sick, and also to the instruction of children in catechism, reading, writing and arithmetic.

There is a large oil painting which fills the entire front wall of the choir in our church of Belen, in which are depicted these duties of the Bethlehemites; namely to teach youth, to wait upon the sick, to transport them on their shoulders to the Convent Hospital, and the religious women are seen fulfilling the same duties towards girls and the sick of their own sex.

Although in the beginning, they employed the services of secular priests, they afterwards obtained faculties to have two priests of religious orders attached to each convent, and three priests as chaplains for each of the mother-houses at Guatemala, Mexico, Havana and Buenos Ayres. In these four houses the novices were formed, the principal house always being that of Guatemala, as it ranked first of the Order in time of foundation. In the kingdom of Mexico, or New Spain, they had ten houses, and seventeen in Peru; and, although attempts were made to plant the order at Madrid and at Rome, still the institute never passed beyond the limits of America.