

Chewers by Masticadores

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“My Second Middle Name” by Matias Travieso-Diaz

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San Lázaro no quiere palabras, quiere hechos.
Popular Cuban refrain

A few hours after I was born, my parents had a conversation regarding my name. The usual practice in Cuba, as in many other countries, was that a baby would have two given names apart from his surname: a first or principal name, and a second or middle name. In my case, there was little controversy as to what those names should be; my parents had agreed that Matías would be my first name, in honor of my late paternal grandfather. Once I was born, the chosen middle name was Félix, since I was born on February 21, the feast day of St. Felix of Metz. However, my mother – still recovering from a difficult delivery – demanded that I bear a *second* middle name, Lázaro (Lazarus), which she justified as being a fulfillment of a *promesa* (vow) she had made to the saint of that name. My father could only give in to her demand, though double middle names were not used in my family.

It took me several years to extract from my mother an explanation for her insistence on the odd second middle name, which I disliked as a grace note that added nothing to my identity. Little by little, I was able to gather an explanation from her.

My stillborn older brother had perished as a result of a household accident when my mother was close to term. She was depressed for months by the loss and, when she

became pregnant with me, was fearful that another miscarriage would occur or that I would be born suffering from some infirmity or defect, a fear that was aggravated by some complications during her pregnancy, whose nature I never learned. Luckily, I turned out to be a healthy baby, which my grateful mother dedicated to Saint Lazarus in thanks for his protection.

A bit of an explanation is needed to understand her choice. Saint Lazarus, perhaps the most popular saint venerated in Cuba, is a composite of three figures: one, a person named in a canonical Gospel narrative; another, a figure in a biblical parable; and a third, a figure of the Afro-Cuban religious canon named Babalú Ayé. *The first Lazarus* is referenced in the Gospel of John (John 11:1–44), where it is said that he was a brother of Mary and Martha who lived in Bethany, near Jerusalem. Jesus heard of Lazarus’s illness, came to visit, and found that Lazarus had died and been entombed four days earlier. Jesus then called him forth from the tomb: “Lazarus, come out.” Lazarus emerged alive, still wrapped in burial cloths. *The second Lazarus* is a figure in a parable from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 16:19–31). That mythical Lazarus was a beggar, covered in sores that were licked by dogs, who died in poverty and was carried by angels to Abraham’s bosom. *The third Lazarus* is a figure from Cuba’s Santería rite (Regla de Ocha) and related Afro-Cuban traditions, where San Lázaro is syncretized with Babalú Ayé, an orisha (god or spirit) associated with epidemics, diseases, disability, and healing.

Worship of this composite San Lázaro was practiced by many people in Cuba, particularly those in the lower strata of society. His assistance was sought to ward off or cure disease and overcome poverty. The way such help was solicited in the Santería religion was by proposing a bargain or promesa. If the saint would grant your wish, you would undertake some action – pilgrimage, gift to charity, or other palpable means of payment. My mother promised to San Lázaro three things: I would be named after him; she would periodically place a bouquet of red roses before an image of him; and she would intone a prayer of thanks to San Lázaro every December 17, his name day. In exchange for those promises, San Lázaro would see to it that my birth was successful and would protect me later in life.

My mother kept her part of the bargain: my Cuban birth certificate proclaims that MATÍAS FÉLIX LÁZARO TRAVIESO Y DÍAZ was born in Marianao, Cuba, on February 21, 1943. On the other hand, the Catholic Church –


which frowned at the San Lázaro worship as idolatrous – would only baptize me under the name MATÍAS FÉLIX, refusing to endorse the popular culture myth. Nonetheless, my mother persevered in her gratitude and credited San Lázaro protection for my health through life and my material successes, such as they were.

I must confess I committed a sacrilegious act, for which I remain unrepentant: the Lázaro portion of my name disappeared on the flight from Cuba to the United States; it has never been used in any official or unofficial papers of mine and, except for its survival in my mother's devotions, disappeared from the face of the earth after her death. I am resurrecting it briefly here, this December 17th, 2025, as a tribute to the memory of my mother, who would spare no effort (physical or devotional) to see to it that I was healthy and successful in life.

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MIDDLE NAME, MOTHER