

Joe Lemna

**Graduation Year:** Junior

**College:** Arts & Letters, Business

**Major(s):** Marketing, Theology

**Minors(s):** N/A

**Scholar Group Membership:** No

**Did you received other funding for this project?:** CUSE

**Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding?** No

**More details on CUSE funding assistance?**

**Project Title:** Cuba Fall Break Immersion

**Project Location:** Cuba

**ND Faculty Mentor:** Peter Casarella

**Project Type:** Conference - Attendance, Scholarly Immersion/Discernment

**Why did you undertake this project/experience?** Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Career discernment and/or preparation, Internationalize your Notre Dame experience

**Did your funded experience help you:**

**[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]:** Yes

**[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]:** Very Much

**[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]:** Yes

**[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]:** Very Much

**[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:**Very Much

**Tell us about your experience.**

While in Cuba, we visited many different historical sites, met with people who work with the Catholic Church and the United States government, attended an academic conference about Pope Francis' visits to the Americas, and interacted with Cuban students. We visited the Felix Varela Cultural Center and met with someone who spoke about the outreach that they do there, we spoke with a bishop in Havana about Cuban house churches, and we met with an employee at the United States Embassy who spoke to us about the U.S. relations with Cuba. I learned a lot about the complicated relation between the Catholic Church and Cuba's government and how it has affected its people. The faith is definitely not as prominent in Cuba, as the government has not allowed it to be practiced freely for over 50 years. It was very interesting to see how the government represses its people's freedom yet how they find happiness in the midst of it. I came back with a lot of questions about the pros and cons of communism, what the Catholic Church is supposed to do next, and what the United States and I myself are called to do about it.

**Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.**

This project had a deep impact on me and my classmates. Traveling to Cuba and getting to see the country and its people firsthand was an extremely unique yet important experience. I got a much better feel for what the situation is like there and how the Church works in the midst of the government. Being able to talk to many priests and religious about the situation and the struggles they have with getting young people involved in their faith was very interesting. I think my classmates and I all took different things out of Cuba since we came in with different backgrounds. We interpreted the situation differently, and thus our nightly reflections made for very interesting discussions. We all came back with a deep respect for the Cuban people, yet we felt for them in the midst of all that they have been and continue to go through.

**Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.**

This experience connected with my plans as a student because it helped me choose a topic to write a final research paper for my class Between God and the Party. I am exploring the use and effectiveness of house churches in Cuba and what their future could be. I also really enjoyed speaking to the priests and learning more about the Catholic Church in Cuba because I think that becoming a priest or doing similar service could be very appealing in the future. I got a chance to see what work they do and what it is like to be a missionary priest in a foreign country. I really enjoyed the experience and seeing firsthand the need of the people and the help that priests can provide.

**What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?**

The best advice I could give to other students would be to simply say to go for it. Projects in which you go to a new land and really dive into the life there completely change your perspective on life. Be willing to give up your phone for a week and really immerse yourself into the people and the culture. The interactions are what make the experience, so go out of your way to introduce yourself and talk to as many people as you can. You've got to take risks in order to grow, so don't be afraid to try something crazy.

