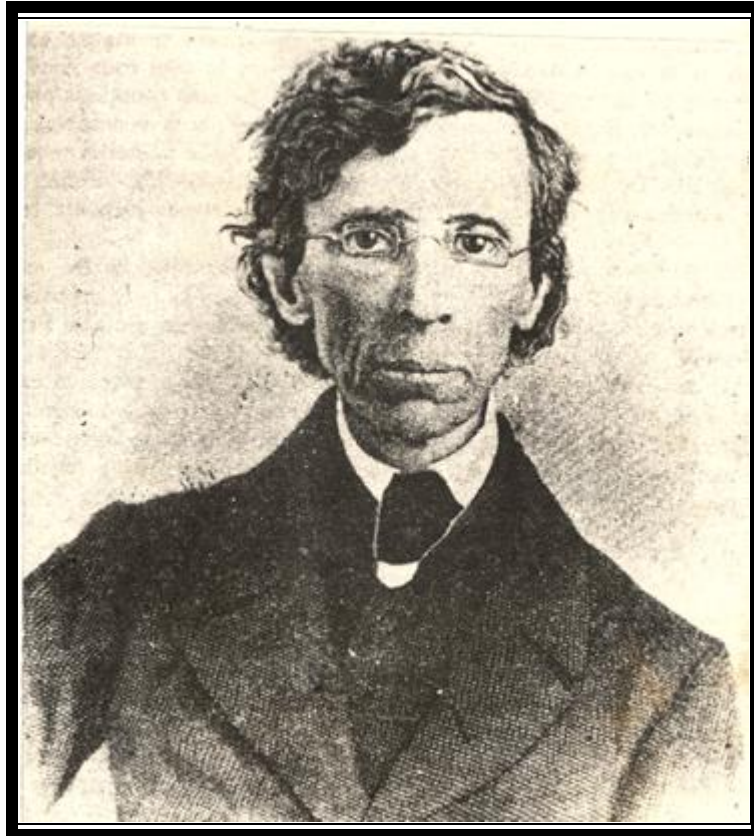


Félix Varela

(1788-1853)

Writer, educator, philosopher, novelist, Catholic Priest (Venerable Félix Varela Morales),
and active campaigner for Cuban independence
For Varela's place in Latin American *modernismo*, see: "Modernismo Notes"



FIRST PERIOD: 1788 – 1813

1788 Félix Varela was born in Havana, Cuba. He grew up in San Agustín (St. Augustine), Florida. His father wanted him to attend a military academy in Spain, but he refused. Instead he attended the academies (Catholic prep schools) of San Carlos and San Ambrosio in Havana.

1792 Varela goes with his grandfather, who was named Coronel of the Spanish garrison in Florida, to San Agustín (the Second Spanish Period of La Florida).

SECOND PERIOD: 1801 – 1823

- 1801 Varela returns to Havana, where he attends the Real y Conciliar Colegio de San Carlos y San Ambrosio. He learns to play the violin and he writes lyrics for popular Cuban songs (*décimas guajiras*).
- 1806 He earns the Bachillerato de Artes (Cuban high school degree), and he enters holy orders.
- 1808 He earns the degree of Bachiller en Teología (B.A. in Theology)
- 1810 He is ordained as a Catholic deacon.
- 1811 He wins positions as professor of Latin, Rhetoric, and Philosophy at the University of Havana; he officiates at his first mass in the Convent of Santa Teresa in Havana. Against the 600-year-old Neo-scholastic philosophy and theology of the Spanish empire, he teaches the new, rational philosophy (e.g., Kant and the French philosophers René Descartes and Victor Cousin, 1792-1867, whose philosophy was based on eclecticism).
- 1812 He publishes the *Elenco*, which served as the basis of the first of four volumes of philosophy in Latin titled the *Institutiones Philosophiae eclecticae*, in which work he modernizes the university's philosophy curriculum. Two philosophical works follow: *Lecciones de filosofía* (1818) and *Miscelánea filosófica* (1819).
- 1813 Varela was ordained as a Catholic priest in the Cathedral of Havana for the Diocese of San Cristóbal de La Habana
- 1814 At the diocesan seminary he taught philosophy, chemistry, and physics. One of Varela's students was Rafael María de Mendive, who was José Martí's teacher.
- 1817 He published the book *Miscelánea filosófica*.
- 1821 He represented Spain's Cuban colony in Madrid, the capital of the Spanish empire, where a liberal parliament (Cortes Generales) was meeting to adopt restore the 1812 constitution to turn Spain into a representative, constitutional monarchy. At the meeting he petitioned the king of Spain, Fernando VII—a truly despotic monarch—to give autonomy to Cuba, since all of the Spanish continental Americas were fighting for, and obtaining their independence. He also published an essay advocating the abolition of slavery in Cuba by the monarchy.
- 1823 The French monarchy of Louis XVIII invaded Spain with an army of 100,000 soldiers (“Los cien mil hijos de San Luis”) to return Fernando VII to absolute, non-constitutional, power. Fernando VII then sentenced Valera to death; however, he escaped and went to Philadelphia and New York City where he lived the rest of his life.

THIRD PERIOD: 1823-1853

- 1824 Varela founded the first (and revolutionary) Spanish language newspaper in the United States: *El Habanero*, in which he strongly advocated for Cuban

independence; when this newspaper failed after seven issues, he published other Spanish language journals and one in English. In these outlets he published many articles on education, modern (post-Scholastic) rational philosophy, human rights, religious tolerance, bi-lingual and bi-cultural understanding. Among the many Latin American intellectuals and writers whom Varela published in this newspapers is the Cuban poet José María Heredia.

- 1826 In Philadelphia he published *Jicoténcal*, whose authorship the Hispanic scholars Luis Leal and Rodolfo J. Cortina, establish definitively in their 1995 edition published in the Arte Público Press (Houston, Texas) series called Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project Publication. *Jicoténcal* is a long-lost Romantic novel about a Tlascalan (non-Aztec indigenous Mesoamerican state) hero who opposed the destruction of the native peoples of Mexico by Hernán Cortés, who had Xicoténcal (historical figure) killed. The same year Varela published a translation of Thomas Jefferson's *Manual of Parliamentary Practice* and Davy's *Elements of Chemistry Applied to Agriculture*. He continues to serve as a priest from the moment he arrives in the United States, including being vice-rector of St. Peter's Church in New York City.
- 1835 Varela publishes the first volume of *Cartas a Elpidio* [Letters to Elpidio], and he founds an orphanage. The second volume appears in 1838.
- 1837 He was named Vicar General of the Diocese of New York (the entire state and part of New Jersey). After learning the Irish language, one of his major tasks was assisting the first wave of Irish immigrants to the United States.
- 1840 He served as one of the theological consultants at a meeting of American Catholic bishops who were writing the Baltimore Catechism, which served the American Catholic Church well into the 20th century.
- 1841 He earned a doctorate in theology from St. Mary's Seminary (Baltimore).
- 1850 He retired to St. Augustine, where he had spent his youth. He died in St. Augustine and was buried there in the Tolomato Cemetery.
- 1933 His remains were sent to Cuba where he was re-buried in the Aula Magna at the University of Havana.

Varela was a prolific writer of one novel, *Jicoténcal* (a Romantic revisionist history of the conquest of México and a virulent anti-Cortés palinode). According to professors Leal and Cortina, this novel is "the first *indigenista* novel," which preceded *Netzula* (1832) by José María Lafragua, which traditionally was considered the first novel of this genre. (The Cuban writer Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda published her historical novel, *Guatemozín, último emperador de México*, in 1846.) He also published a number of volumes of philosophy and many essays about politics, religion, education, and culture. He is one of the great Cuban men of the Latin American Romantic period. The Cuban award known as the Orden Félix Varela given to Cubans that the Cuban government believes have made outstanding contributions to Cuban and international

culture. In 2012, the Archdioceses of New York and Miami successfully asked the Vatican to elevate Varela to the status of Venerable. In 2015, the Archbishop of Havana, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, named Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia to act as the Postulator to the Vatican for the beatification and canonization of Varela.

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