

22 October 2023
Nicaragua Webinar
The Church and Nicaragua: Probing the Relationship

Remarks by Becca Renk

Hello and thank you so much for inviting me to speak today. I'd like to start by acknowledging that the topics of Church and religion evoke strong reactions, and to recognize that throughout history, many individuals and movements within the Catholic Church have made heroic and important contributions to peace and justice.

But the Catholic Church has been part of the power structure in Nicaragua for more than 500 years and as such, the Church and its hierarchy have often been used to further imperialism and to oppress the Nicaraguan people.

In recent years, some within the Church hierarchy and individuals within the Church in Nicaragua have instigated and actively participated in violence, broken Nicaraguan laws and manipulated the faith of the people for political ends.

First, I'd like to put the current situation in historical context. The Catholic Church first came to Nicaragua with Spanish colonizers. The Church – its hierarchy and most of its clergy – facilitated colonial conquest through conversion.

With colonization, Nicaragua's indigenous population of an estimated 2 million people was utterly decimated: most of the population was killed, died of disease, or were abducted and sold into slavery. With the notable exceptions of a few individual priests, the Church was not only complicit but actively participated in the horrors of colonization.

Post independence from Spain, the Church hierarchy and Nicaragua's wealthy elite ran the country together. For generations, each powerful family had one son who took over the family business and one son who became a priest.

In the 20th century, the Catholic hierarchy supported the bloody Somoza dictatorship during its 45 year rule, and only at the very end did some in the hierarchy support the people's liberation.

In 1979, the Sandinista Revolution overthrew the Somoza dictatorship, but unlike Cuba, the Nicaraguan revolution was never secular. In fact, there were priests in the government, but the Church hierarchy was openly opposed to the Sandinista Revolution.

When the Pope John Paul II visited in 1983, more than a million people came to mass in a country of 3 million in the midst of the Contra War. There had been an ambush the day before and the mothers of Sandinista soldiers who had been killed asked the Pope pray for their sons. He refused. The crowd began to chant "Peace, peace, peace" and the Pope shouted at them, "Silence!"

Following the loss of the elections by the FSLN in 1990, Nicaragua's elite families came back into power and the government-Church power relationship was once again solidified.

Under the 16 years of neoliberal governments, the Church encouraged participation in the democratic process. In Nicaragua, elections are held on a Sunday, and many people attend mass before going to vote. During neoliberal rule, priests around the country would use Election Day mass to tell people to go vote and some would suggest *how* they should vote as well.

For the elections in 2006, the Sandinista party formed a broad alliance which still remains in place and today includes 14 political parties. Remarkably, this alliance includes even the political parties of the former Contras; in fact, Daniel Ortega's running mate was a former Contra leader.

Upon winning the elections and returned to power in 2007, the FSLN Alliance formed the Government of Reconciliation and National Unity, and explicitly included the Church and big business, traditional opponents of the FSLN, in the planning and management of government programs. The FSLN maintained this inclusive tripartite model, despite obvious opposition to its government from within the Church.

As early as the municipal elections in 2008, broadly won by candidates from the FSLN Alliance, the Nicaraguan bishops conference claimed electoral fraud and priests began using their pulpits to encourage parishioners to spoil their votes or abstain from voting.

In Nicaraguan elections, once you have voted your thumb is placed in indelible ink as a measure to prevent people voting more than once. In the most recent Presidential elections, at election day mass, priests openly told the faithful not to vote, one priest said held up his thumbs and said "Look, I am clean, no stain."

At the Jesuit-run University of Central America, or UCA, faculty and staff were openly told, "We don't want to see any of you with stains on your thumbs."

In 2018, big business and the Catholic Church effectively ended the tripartite governing model when they conspired to overthrow the elected government and used their role in society to try to turn the people against the government.

On April 18, 2018, protestors took to the streets ostensibly to protest a social security reform, but it quickly became obvious that these protests were not really about social security reforms, but rather an attempt to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.

Around the country, armed opposition groups set up hundreds of roadblocks which paralyzed the nation and became epicenters of violence. The roadblocks lasted for nearly three months, some 253 people were killed, and many more injured.

While opposition sources blamed the government for nearly all deaths, investigations have shown that in fact the United States government was funding the violence through USAID, NED, IRI – all "soft arms" of the CIA.

Although the U.S. was *funding* the attempted ousting of Nicaragua's democratically elected Sandinista government, the Catholic Church hierarchy in Nicaragua was instigating it.

Some priests actually initiated violence, including in Ciudad Sandino, where I live, where my neighbors saw the parish priest encouraging the burning of the Sandinista party headquarters and the looting of the social security offices.

The Nicaraguan bishops conference was called on to broker peace talks, but it instead inexplicably stalled the talks for weeks while priests called for violence from the pulpit and orchestrated violence at roadblocks. At these roadblocks, Sandinista supporters were identified, beaten, raped, tortured and murdered – with priests watching and sometimes participating in the horrifying violence.

A video taken in León shows Catholic priest Father Berrios and evangelical pastor Carlos Figueroa present and doing nothing to stop torture of a young Sandinista, Sander Francisco Bonilla Zapata, which included dousing him with gasoline. One of them can be heard saying, “Take the photo but don’t post it.”

Masaya parish priest Harvin Padilla directed the terrorist gang that tortured police officer Gabriel de Jesus Vado Ruiz and set him on fire while he was still alive. Messages to the terrorists were found on Father Padilla’s phone, identifying himself and saying, “Hide these *\$%, even in the bottom of a latrine...try to get people not to upload photos and videos to Facebook of the one you are burning, so there won’t be a problem.”

In Diriamba, a young Sandinista man was tortured for three days inside the Basilica de San Sebastian there. He described how he was beaten frequently by Father César Castillo, and how snipers shot at Sandinistas from the church tower. When he told his story, the people of Diriamba stormed the church and found weapons stored inside, as well as supplies that had been stolen from a nearby health center.

What was the response of the Nicaraguan government to the violence? The National Police began investigating the incidents of violence and those responsible, including intellectual authors of crimes, were arrested, tried and convicted. No priests were arrested, tried or convicted.

In early 2019, the Government of National Unity and Reconciliation agreed to talks with opposition groups witnessed and accompanied by the papal nuncio. In June 2019, the Nicaraguan government declared a general amnesty, conditional on not re-offending, and released every single person who had been convicted for crimes related to the events of 2018, including torture and murder.

In 2018, one of the most prominent and vociferously anti-Sandinista members of the clergy in Nicaragua was Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Managua, Monsignor Silvio Baez.

In October of 2018, Baez met with a group of peasants in an attempt to rekindle the violence which had calmed after police removed the road blocks in July. In the recordings of the meeting – which Baez later admitted to – we can hear Monsignor Baez imply that the violent roadblocks were the Church’s idea, acknowledging that the bishops opposed the government, had alliances with drug traffickers and criminal organizations, and that they were plotting a second wave of violence to “get rid of” the FSLN. Speaking about President Daniel Ortega, Baez said, “We have every desire to take him before a firing squad.”

So how did the Nicaraguan people respond to this? By rejecting violence and seeking justice. The recordings of this meeting were leaked by a group of Catholics from the Christian Base Community Saint Paul Apostle, which then collected **586,000 signatures from Nicaraguans** – this in a country of under 7 million people – on a petition which was sent to the Vatican to request the removal of Baez for his role in supporting the attempted coup and his continued hate speech and calls for violence.

In response, in April 2019, Pope Francis recalled Baez to Rome. After Rome, Baez went to Miami and remains close to opposition groups there that continue to plot the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government.

For Catholics in Nicaragua, hearing their priests call for violence and seeing them participate in the violence is abhorrent. The Nicaraguan people have remained steadfast in their rejection of violence, and I've talked to many Catholics who no longer go to mass at all because their clergy continue to promote violence and seek political ends from the pulpit.

One of the members of clergy most notorious for this is the former Bishop of Matagalpa and Estelí, Rolando Alvarez who is widely known for his offensive rhetoric and openly calling for violence from the pulpit.

People from the town of Chagüitillo in Matagalpa told me about an incident when Álvarez came to give mass at the church that the people themselves had raised the money for and built with their own hands. During mass, Álvarez asked who in the congregation was Sandinista. When all the Sandinistas raised their hands, he pointed to the door and said, “Get out of my church.”

Álvarez had seven radio stations and two TV channels in Matagalpa which in 2016 began receiving U.S. funding earmarked for “regime change.” Álvarez used his media platform to call for violence and attempt to destabilize the Nicaraguan government. He persisted in this, even after 2018, despite the fact that these activities were in clear violation of the law and status as religious media. In 2022, these radio and TV stations were closed for legal violations by Telcor, the entity that regulates communications.

In August 2022, Álvarez was placed under house arrest while being investigated for a series of crimes, including undermining national integrity, promoting hatred and violence via information and communication technologies, aggravated obstruction of state functions, and contempt of authority.

In February of this year, the United States sent a plane to Nicaragua to transport 222 prisoners serving sentences for treason, money laundering and terrorism to the United States. Many of these people were from the wealthy elite of Nicaragua and had received significant sums of money from the United States to fund its coup attempt in 2018 and further destabilization attempts since, and this move was widely seen as the United States bringing its operatives home to Washington.

Former Bishop Álvarez, who was under house arrest awaiting trial, was originally included in the list of prisoners that the Nicaraguan government agreed to send to the U.S., but he refused to board the plane. Much to his surprise, Álvarez was not brought back to his mansion to continue house arrest, but was sent straight to

prison. He was tried and convicted later that week and sentenced to 26 years in prison for his crimes.

In recent months, a number of priests and laypeople have been taken in for questioning and several have been arrested in connection with ongoing investigations of money laundering and other illegal activities in several Catholic dioceses.

Back in May, police discovered more than half a million dollars in cash hidden in bags in buildings belonging to several Catholic dioceses, and subsequent investigations revealed that money had been illegally taken from bank accounts that had been ordered to be frozen, and the funds appeared to be part of a money laundering network in different dioceses.

Additionally, there is an ongoing investigation of real estate in the name of bishops, priests who acquired properties and then illegally transferred ownership. The investigation involves tens of thousands of acres of land around the country.

This brings up a lot of questions – why in the past few months are these priests, who have taken a vow of poverty, suddenly appearing with such wealth?

- 1) () Italian journalist Fabrizio Casari has explained that those 222 prisoners who were sent to the U.S. in February were stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship, forfeiting their properties and businesses in Nicaragua. Although their assets were frozen, these convicted criminals managed to illegally transfer the money and properties to friendly priests to be later exported to their foreign accounts. Nicaraguan police are continuing to investigate these illegal activities.

This week, in further efforts toward reconciliation, the Nicaraguan government agreed to send 12 Catholic priests who had been processed for a variety of crimes to Rome.

These included a priest who was convicted for the rape of a 12 year old girl, and another convicted of aggravated assault for beating his partner.

To conclude today, I'd like to talk about the recent nationalization of the Jesuit-run Central American University or UCA.

The UCA is one of a number of private universities in Nicaragua to be nationalized over the past few years, let me explain why. First, private education is not prohibited in Nicaragua, in fact, more than 30 private universities continue to thrive around the country.

All educational institutions, however, must comply with regulations to ensure that students are receiving quality education. In the case of private universities, most were set up as non-profit institutions and so additionally they must comply with laws governing non-profits.

During the neoliberal years, large numbers of universities were set up in Nicaragua, many of these institutions were not so much "higher education" as they were "education for hire" – they charged exorbitant fees to students in exchange for very little education, in flagrant violation of both educational and non-profit regulations.

Following thorough investigations over the past three years by the National Universities Council (CNU) governing body, some private institutions have had their legal status revoked for failure to comply with minimum educational standards. Others have had their legal status revoked for failure to comply with non-profit regulations.

This was the case of the [UCA](#), which had failed to provide annual financial reports for three consecutive years, as well as failure to elect a new Board of Directors when the previous one expired.

In accordance with Nicaraguan law, when a non-profit has its legal status revoked, its assets are transferred to the Nicaraguan government. It is important to note that none of the universities that have had legal status revoked in Nicaragua have ceased to operate – rather, the Nicaraguan government has taken over operation of the now-public universities without interruption to the studies of current students all *free of charge*.

Because of this policy, simultaneously with the announcement that the legal status of the UCA had been revoked, the CNU announced the opening of a new public university in its place, the Casimiro Sotelo University.

Despite the fact that the former UCA was receiving \$16 million dollars annually – a full one half of its budget –in subsidies from the Nicaraguan government, the fees the UCA charged its students amounted to nearly \$700 per semester, far out of the price range of most Nicaraguan families.

In contrast, fees at the new Casimiro Sotelo University will be limited to the standard [\\$5.50](#) per semester registration fee at all public universities. I cannot emphasize enough how popular this decision is with Nicaraguans.

In fact, I have yet to speak to anyone in Nicaragua who is against the nationalization of the now-defunct UCA. I have spoken to parents who are excited for their kids to have the opportunity to apply to study there. To former students who were forced to drop out due to cost and have now been contacted and invited to come back to finish their degrees free of charge. I have even spoken to one father of a current student who was hoping the university would be nationalized; he's thrilled that he no longer has to pay fees for his son to receive the same education.

Today in Nicaragua, unfortunately, we have ample evidence that 500 years on, the Catholic Church and many of its clergy are still aligned with imperialism, using their position in Nicaraguan society for political ends, even participating in illicit and violent acts.

The response of the Nicaraguan government has been to bring individuals who have broken the law to justice, to regulate institutions that break the law, and to seek peace and reconciliation at every turn.

The response of the Nicaraguan people has also been to seek justice, but also to practice their faith on their own terms. Across Nicaragua, the rift between the people and the Catholic Church is tangible. Recent polls show that only 37% of Nicaraguans today identify as Catholics, as opposed to 50% only a few years ago.

Some of these former Catholics are now active in evangelical or Pentecostal Christian Churches – public revivals regularly attract enthusiastic attendance in the tens of thousands.

So Nicaraguans have not lost their faith – we have vibrant Christian Base Communities celebrating mass without a priest. Even those Catholics who have stopped going to mass altogether continue to pray at home and take part in religious celebrations outside the Church.

August is patron saint festival season in Nicaragua, just a few weeks ago dozens of Nicaraguan cities and towns celebrated their Catholic saints in festivals supported economically and logistically by municipal governments.

My own village celebrated the Virgin of the Nancite, here is the Sandinista mayor or our city taking an active part in the celebrations.

In Nicaragua, not only is there no religious persecution, but the church of the people is in the street joyfully celebrating its faith.

