

Religion & Democracy

Newsletter of the Institute on Religion and Democracy

September 1984

The Church in Nicaragua: Decisive Test for Liberation Theology

Nicaragua's Sandinistas are failing in their efforts to repress and subvert that country's Roman Catholic Church. The crisis they have created now threatens to explode in ways that could overturn a strategy of Christian-Marxist collaboration that has been developing for decades and has influenced Christianity throughout the world -- with great effect right here in the United States.

Those who follow the IRD's publications may sometimes be perplexed by the attention we have given to church-state relations in the small and, today, forlorn country of Nicaragua. But what is happening there, we are increasingly persuaded, seems likely to have what Fidel Castro and his friends might describe as "world-historical significance."

Ever since the Sandinistas, by virtue of superior arms, seized control of the revolution against the Somoza dictatorship, there has been a quiet but desperate struggle in Nicaragua between democratic and progressive church leaders and the totalitarian directorate of the Sandinista

National Liberation Front. The Sandinista strategy has been to use their allies and front groups, -- many of them financed and supported by well-meaning Christians in Europe and North America -- to wrest control of the Catholic Church from Archbishop Obando y Bravo and those Nicaraguan Catholics who seek an independent church in a free society.

In the last few months the Sandinistas' subtler efforts to subvert the Nicaraguan Church have demonstrably failed. The government has begun increasingly to use naked persecution and repression. Now the conflict is in the open, and one side or the other is going to win. Much depends upon whether or not Christians around the world -- including those who previously supported the Sandinistas -- now come to the aid of the main target of this attack, the Nicaraguan bishops.

The main issues are these:

- * A few months ago, Father Luis Amado Pena was crudely tricked into handing a package -- which, without his knowing it, contained munitions -- to a Sandinista security agent. This popular parish priest and youth leader will soon be tried by a "popular tribunal" on trumped up charges of sedition. In a recent demonstration against him Sandinista mobs chanted "al paredon", meaning, "to the firing squad."
- * Ten priests who were active in evangelism have been summarily expelled from Nicaragua for "carrying out labors against the government."
- * The Vatican and the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference have insisted that Catholic priests may no longer serve as government functionaries after the end of this month.



Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo of Managua leads a July 9 procession on behalf of Father Luis Amado Pena. The Archbishop was the 1982 recipient of IRD's religious freedom award. (UPI/Bettmann Archive)

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IRD Campaign Continues

IRD's petition campaign on behalf of religious freedom in Nicaragua is building growing support from U.S. Christians. Over 1,000 individuals have signed the petition, including three Catholic bishops.

The petition asks only two things: (1) that all the churches in Nicaragua have restored to them their full religious and civil freedoms, and (2) that our own churches stop funding groups which support the Nicaraguan government until religious freedom there is assured.

IRD intends to continue this campaign until the Nicaraguan government ends its harassment and persecution of the churches. The next few weeks are crucial as the world watches Nicaragua pre-

pare for its November elections. Now more than ever the Sandinistas are vulnerable to international opinion.

Please consider publishing the petition (see page 3) in bulletins and newsletters, distributing it after church services, in classes and meetings, and please do copy it and circulate it to friends and colleagues. The most helpful thing of all would be for you to approach church leaders in your area to appeal to them to join in this campaign. Even if they don't immediately agree, your request can begin a long-overdue discussion.

Every signature -- and every day -- can make a difference for those who are denied freedom of worship in Nicaragua.

IRD Petition Provokes NCC Response

The IRD has published a brief paper on "U.S. Church Support for the Pro-Sandinista Network." (We were prevented from fully studying this matter because the office of information of the National Council of Churches, in violation of their own stated policy, refuses to provide us access to the records of their expenditures -- see page 6.) But we nevertheless have ample evidence that hundreds of thousands of our church dollars are going to organizations that support those who are persecuting Christianity in Nicaragua. Among these groups are:

- * The Evangelical Committee for Aid to Development (CEPAD)
- * The Antonio Valdivieso Center
- * The Central American Historical Institute
- * The Nicaraguan Institute for Social and Economic Research
- * The Latin American Evangelical Commission for Christian Education (CELADEC)
- * The Ecumenical Axis.

The National Council of Churches was so nettled by our paper that it responded with a memorandum of its own which concedes that Protestant churches and the NCC do support these groups. But -- while pretending not to

notice the hard evidence we provided of the support these groups give to the Sandinistas -- the NCC statement annoints them all as "genuine expressions of the Christian community in Nicaragua." The NCC statement, written by James A. Cogswell, also makes the remarkable claim that "the IRD is quite in error inferring that the Nicaraguan government has mounted an 'attack upon the Christian Churches of Nicaragua.' Protestant and evangelical churches in this country have received no evidence to substantiate such a claim" (emphasis added).

This statement -- from its presumption in speaking for all Protestant and evangelical churches to its categorical conclusions (that there is "no evidence" whatsoever of a government campaign against Nicaragua's churches) illustrates the difficulties we face in bringing mainline church agencies to their senses with respect to the current situation in Nicaragua.

Part of the problem is that many in church agencies simply will not give a hearing to any Nicaraguans who criticize their government. On July 11 the Nicaraguan Catholic clergy of Managua publicized a letter in which they declared that there is "a clear and determined program of persecution against the church." According to an Agence France Presse dispatch which appeared in Diario Las Americas (July 12,

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A Petition

to American Christians: Defend the Churches of Nicaragua

The Christian communities of Nicaragua face a grave crisis: the subjugation of their churches to the political purposes of the revolutionary Sandinista government. The sharpest threat at this moment is to the Roman Catholic Church, although many threats and acts of violence have also been committed against Nicaragua's evangelical and Protestant churches.

Until now, many of the Christian churches of North America have criticized only U.S. policy in Central America, and have given substantial financial and organizational assistance to groups in Nicaragua which support the Sandinista government. It is now time, by our words and our actions, to protest the abuses of religious freedom and human rights committed by the Sandinistas themselves. We urge all Christians and all those concerned with religious liberty to join us in this petition:

The Petition

We, the undersigned, call upon the government of the Sandinista National Liberation Front to end its attack upon the Christian churches of Nicaragua, and to restore to them their full religious and civil freedoms.

We urge all the Christian communities of North America to withdraw any financial or organizational assistance they provide to the Nicaraguan government itself and to church and educational organizations which support that government until it is proved that the Churches of Nicaragua are safe and free.

We authorize the Institute on Religion and Democracy to convey our concern to the Embassy of Nicaragua in Washington, D.C. and to appropriate officials of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States, and the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

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- * The bishops have demanded that, because the Nicaraguan army is controlled by the Sandinista party, not the government, Nicaraguan youth must be given the right of conscientious objection to military service.

The conflict may reach a climax in early September. A delegation of U.S. Catholic bishops visited Managua in mid-August to ask the government to accept the return of the ten exiled priests, but was rebuffed. The Sandinistas, it is rumored, are demanding that before the priests are readmitted the Vatican must rescind its order that no priests may hold government posts. The Sandinistas insist they will negotiate only with the Vatican -- not with Americans -- and will soon send emissaries to Rome. It remains doubtful that the Pope will accept such a surrender of the church's authority over its priests.

It can hardly be coincidental that, as the conflict grows in Nicaragua, the Vatican has begun to adopt a more explicitly critical stance toward the Marxist element that pervades so much of what is called "liberation theology." In a message to a conference of Southern African bishops in Zimbabwe which was released on August 22, the Pope declared that "The solidarity of the church with the poor, with the victims of unjust laws or unjust social and economic structures, goes without saying (But) the forms in which this solidarity is realized cannot be dictated by an analysis based on class distinctions and class struggle."

The importance of this papal statement is underscored by news that Father Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian, has been summoned to the Vatican on September 7 to discuss his use of Marxist analysis in theological writing, and the report that the Vatican has asked the bishops of Peru to appraise the writing of Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the foremost "liberation theologians."

The experience of the church in Nicaragua, it appears, may prove the undoing of the "strategic alliance" between Latin America's Christians and Marxists which Fidel Castro worked toward for so long. Che Guevara once proclaimed that "when Christians dare to give integral revolutionary witness, then the Latin American revolution will be invincible." The bishops of Nicaragua are now insisting that Christians must give an authentic Christian witness. Their hope is that social change in Latin America can be humane, peaceful and democratic -- in keeping with the spirit of Christ. □

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1984) Archbishop Obando y Bravo has said publicly that the situation of the church now is "worse than it was under Somoza. The Archbishop of San Jose, Costa Rica, the Bishops of Bolivia, Columbia, Chile, Mexico and Guatemala, and the government of Spain -- among these are voices which have spoken out courageously against abuses by right-wing governments -- have made strong protests to the Managua government. In an interview in the U.S. National Catholic Register (July 29, 1984) Archbishop Obando told reporter Joan Frawley that "this government is totalitarian . . . we are dealing with a government that is an enemy of the church"

These statements may not, in the eyes of the NCC, constitute proof. But they might at the very least be considered "evidence."

If the statements of Hispanic church leaders are not considered reliable, perhaps NCC leaders could consider some comment from normally circumspect U.S. Catholic bishops. Bishop James W. Malone of Youngstown, President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, has called the Sandinistas' actions "unjustified and detrimental to the cause of justice and peace." Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago endorsed Pope John Paul's condemnation of the "suffering of the Nicaraguan Church" and warned that "confrontation with ecclesiastical leaders is a mistaken and unproductive course"

Even more remarkably, the NCC's paper goes on to explain that this problem (for which it has just conceded there is no evidence) merely involves "relations between the government of Nicaragua and a sector of the Roman Catholic Church" (emphasis added). The NCC is here adopting the Sandinista proposition that the Nicaraguan Church is divided into two sectors -- the Church of the rich and the Popular Church. The NCC does not take pains to explain that one of these so-called sectors includes every single representative body of the Nicaraguan Church -- from the Episcopal Conference to the Confederation of Religious Workers (CONFER) to the Clerical Assembly of the Archdiocese of Managua. The other sector -- the one which has good relations with the government -- is made up of a few priests in government and the goon squads of the Sandinista State Security.

Nor, it must be added, are Catholic leaders the only Christians who face persecution in Managua. Some U.S. church leaders defend their silence toward what is happening in Nicaragua by arguing that only the Catholics face difficulty.

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But, when it has seemed opportune, the Sandinistas have seized or destroyed the churches of Pentecostals and other Protestants. For example, the official newspaper Barricada glowingly reported (11 August, 1982) that 20 churches of Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and Assemblies of God (the non-Catholic churches with the most significant popular following in Managua) were seized by mobs led by the Sandinista Defense Committees. Many Moravian churches have also been seized, and scores were destroyed by government troops during the forced removal of the Miskito Indians from Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast.

Other Protestant churches have been weaken-

ed by subversion, if not by physical force. To take but one example, an article by a highly respected Moravian missionary Margaret Wilde which appeared in the liberal Christian Century described how members of Sandinista State Security sat among delegates at the Moravian general assembly and made "suggestions" to them on votes and amendments to resolutions.

The NCC continues to portray pro-Sandinista organizations which receive substantial monies from the NCC and its affiliates -- and which assist in covering up the truth about religious repression in Nicaragua -- "as genuine expressions of the Christian community in Nicaragua." As events unfold, the hollowness of such claims grows ever more loudly. — Penn Kemble

BRIEFS

■ The Lutheran Church in America gave what one church official called "grudging endorsement" to a policy of nuclear deterrence in a statement of "Peace and Politics" adopted at its July convention in Toronto. An effort to amend the statement to say that "the strategy of nuclear deterrence cannot be embraced as one that adequately deters" failed by a vote of 319-354, after extended debate.

■ In July, the Rev. Fred Allen, staff member of the UM Board of Church and Society, testified before the committee of Catholic bishops which is drafting a pastoral letter on the U.S. economy. Unfortunately, Mr. Allen apparently neglected a UM church law which states that "Any individual member called to testify before a legislative body to represent the United Methodist Church shall be allowed to do so only by reading...the resolutions... adopted by the General Conference."

Instead of following this procedure, Mr. Allen chose to present a draft resolution on Economic Justice which his agency had submitted to the

1984 UM General Conference. The draft resolution pointedly criticizes "capitalistic countries," but neglects any judgment of socialist or communist systems. This imbalance caused the UM conference to strike out most of the resolution and replace it with a call for a church-wide study of economics under the auspices of the UM bishops, as suggested by the IRD-related UMs for Religious Liberty. Aghast at this development, sponsors of the resolution hastily arranged to have their amended resolution effectively withdrawn.

In an August 3 conversation with Religion and Democracy, Mr. Allen acknowledged his error in presenting this ersatz resolution to the Catholic bishops and indicated that he would clarify the United Methodist position in a letter to them. Four weeks later, nothing has been done.

■ Rumors abound that the election of Jose Napoleon Duarte as President of El Salvador and the Sandinista attack on Nicaragua's Catholic bishops may stir changes at the United States Catholic Conference. Some bishops are said

to believe that USCC staff has not been sufficiently concerned about the dangers of the extreme Left, nor aware of the opportunities for democratic progress in Central America.

■ The Evangelical Church in Germany has decided not to issue certified receipts (which allow the donor a tax reduction) to those who contribute money to the World Council of Churches' Special Fund to Combat Racism. According to the Ecumenical Press Service, contributions to the Special Fund have declined from a 1980 high. The Soviet-backed Southern Africa liberation movements, which continue to receive half of the Fund's annual grants, have been a major cause of criticism of the World Council.

■ Just off the press is The High Cost of Indifference, edited by Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals (Regal, 1984). This series of essays covers a number of domestic and international issues. The chapter on "International Religious Liberty and the Great Commission,"

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NCC Cover Up?

which includes a survey of types of religious repression and an action plan for fostering liberty, is by the Institute on Religion and Democracy's research director, Kerry Ptacek.

■ What the Religious News Service termed an "unusual assortment" of religious groups has signed a telegram urging Soviet officials to reverse the conviction of Aleksandr Yakir, a Soviet Jew, on charges of "draft evasion." Mr. Yakir was arrested on June 18, for refusing induction into the army after trying for seven years to emigrate to Israel. Soviet Jews refuse induction because, once drafted, they are told they can never emigrate because they have been exposed to "state secrets." Groups which signed the appeal included the Episcopal Church, the Washington Office on Latin America, the Church of the Brethren, the Maryknoll Fathers, the United Church of Christ, the Women's Division of the UM Church, and the American Jewish Committee. Some American Jewish officials called the appeal a "first step" in an effort to deepen Christian interest in the plight of Soviet Jewry. □

An August 21 Religious News Service (RNS) release reports that the NCC has renegeed on a decision to permit the IRD access to financial data -- data which was previously made available to the United Methodist Reporter in that publication's investigation of the NCC. The data in question, a computer print-out, is the only complete list of grants made by the NCC to other organizations.

According to RNS, Warren Day, the NCC information officer, said he believes that the UM Church is the only NCC denomination that makes available a line-item breakdown of grants made to outside organizations. "The Methodists spent literally millions on their disclosure document. It cost over a million to do it. They had to set up a whole computer system to do it."

But Betty Thompson, information officer for the UM mission board, said that the initial preparation of the board's financial disclosure document, which is made available to anyone who requests it, cost \$100,000. "It is important to be able to tell people where money has gone,

down to the last nickel," she said.

Early this Summer the NCC had responded positively to an IRD request to examine the computer print-out. An appointment was made for IRD's research director, Kerry Ptacek, to examine the data in the company of three NCC staff. The first appointment was rescheduled to August 7 due to another conflicting commitment by one of the NCC staff.

But during the intervening weeks, the IRD initiated its petition campaign calling for an end to Sandinista persecution of Nicaraguan Christians and a suspension of church funding to pro-Sandinista groups in Nicaragua. An IRD study reproduced pages from church financial reports showing NCC grants to several of the groups in question.

On July 26 the NCC informed the IRD that the August 7 meeting to examine its computer print-out had been cancelled. No explanation was provided. But one inevitably comes to mind: the NCC is afraid to let American Christians know how much of their money is going to supporters of the increasingly repressive Sandinistas. □

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