

NICARAGUA

Conflicts Have Church Factionalized

Managua, Nicaragua (NC) -- The institutions of Nicaragua reflect the difficult realities its people are living with, and none more so than the Catholic Church.

News stories appear daily which show dramatic divisions in religious thinking and practice. These divisions are inevitably heightened by the political pressures on this small Central American country of 2.8 million.

In two Managua neighborhoods at the beginning of November there were tense situations between the traditional parish authorities and the basic Christian communities, small groups begun in 1968 which organize around Bible readings and social action projects.

In Masaya, a half-hour's ride south from Managua, two missionary priests were expelled by the Sandinista government for "confusing the people about the new law of patriotic military service" and for using their positions of religious authority in a political manner.

Every day there are counterposing polemics between the pro-Sandinista papers Barricada and El Nuevo Diario on the one hand and the opposition La Prensa, which is identified with the church hierarchy, especially Archbishop Miguel Obando Bravo of Managua, a leading critic of the government.

This religious division is important for Nicaragua. The country is more than 90 percent Catholic and its people are deeply religious.

In many homes a picture of Pope John Paul II hangs side by side with that of a son or daughter fallen in the struggle against Somoza or more recently against U.S.-backed guerrillas. This juxtaposition of photos continued after the March visit of Pope John Paul when he antagonized many by not responding to requests by 17 mothers to pray for their sons killed in guerrilla attacks.

What are the reasons behind this deep division?

Support given by the Catholic bishops to the regime of Anastasio Somoza has not favored them in the eyes of many Nicaraguans, especially since the Sandinista-led revolution overthrew him in 1979. In general, the church leadership was pro-Somoza until the 1960s when popular sentiment, and the beginnings of active resistance, forced it to rethink its position.

From 1977 to 1979 the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference issued a series of pastoral letters condemning Somoza for human rights violations. This culminated in a statement giving moral approval to armed resistance.

On the other hand, there has been opposition among priests to the policies of Archbishop Obando Bravo.

In October 1980 the Sandinista National Liberation Front issued a statement promising religious freedom in expression and practice and recognizing the role of Christians in the struggle against Somoza.

Between 1980 and 1983 there was growing tension between the church leadership and the basic Christian communities, most of which support the government and are involved in government programs as part of their social action work.

Archbishop Obando Bravo began removing priests who were active in the basic Christian communities. In one Managua neighborhood many parishioners were excommunicated for protesting the removal of their priest, Msgr. Jose Arias Caldera.

Barricada once published a list of 16 priests and 21 nuns transferred or suspended since 1980 by the hierarchy and implied that the bishops are the ones doing the persecuting.

What is the position of the Catholic leadership?

The Catholic Church was trying to be "a voice for those who have no voice," said the archbishop's spokesman, Father Bismarck Carballo, last July to a group of visiting U.S. citizens. He said dialogue with the Sandinistas had been attempted since 1979 but had not worked.

As examples he cited that the pope's visit was boycotted and hindered by the Sandinistas and that since the visit "the Mass has been prohibited on television and Catholic Radio was censored."

The government had a different version. Officials said Mass could be televised on condition that a different priest celebrate it each Sunday, but the archbishop refused to share the time.

Despite fuel shortages, the Sandinistas say, they provided transportation to papal events, which were attended by 800,000 people, more than 25 percent of the population.

According to Father Carballo, the basic Christian communities are being politically manipulated by the Sandinistas.

The Sandinista government has its good points, however, said Father Carballo, citing improved education and health care programs.

The latest spark illuminating the church divisions has been reaction to the government's military conscription law, which requires men between 17 and 40 to register for the draft.

The bishops opposed the draft regulations, saying they are an attempt to defend the Sandinista ideology and not the country. The bishops called on Catholics to claim conscientious objection.

In a country being threatened by guerrillas and where the government fears a U.S. invasion, national defense has become a major concern, making draft regulations a sensitive issue.

The government terminated the residency visas of two missionaries after it said they had tried to undermine the draft registration by organizing protests, advocating dialogue with the guerrillas and supporting conscientious objection.

The missionaries, Fathers Luis Corral Prieto from Spain and Jose Maria Pacheco from Costa Rica, were also said to have ties to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

In addition to the government action, pro-Sandinista parishioners have asked church authorities to remove priests they say are opposed to the draft and the government. Parishioners say they are being left out of the decision-making in parishes where "reactionary" priest are in control because these priests are undermining their social action work.

Church authorities, however, have answered that they

cannot honor the requests for transfers.

The divisions have become the themes of many parish meetings and even resulted in parishioners physically removing priests from the church in an effort to get replacements.

The government, meanwhile, does not want a break with the hierarchical church. It cannot politically afford it at a time when it needs to protect its international image and its critics abroad are sifting information for evidence of human rights and religious freedom violations.

EL SALVADOR

Church Is Threatened By Dictators: Archbishop

Salvador, El Salvador (NC) -- The Catholic Church in Central America is threatened by totalitarian systems in several countries, said Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas of San Salvador Nov. 13.

"The church is, and will continue to be, persecuted as long as it does not accommodate itself to the caprices of totalitarian systems, whether of the right or the left," he said during a Sunday Mass homily.

Catholic priests in Guatemala and El Salvador are threatened by "irrational violence" while the Nicaraguan government harasses the church, he said.

The Marxist-influenced Sandinista movement rules Nicaragua. Guatemala has a military government. El Salvador, in the fourth year of a bloody civil war, has an interim U.S.-backed civilian government which hopes to hold elections next year.

In El Salvador, more than 220 people were killed in fighting between Nov. 4-10, Archbishop Rivera Damas said. Of these, 34 were civilians killed by anti-communist death squads, he added.

The death squads consider the government too lenient in its anti-guerrilla campaign and have been killing and kidnapping people they believe to be guerrillas or guerrilla sympathizers.

The archbishop and Auxiliary Bishop Gregoria Rosa Chavez of San Salvador have been among the people receiving death threats from death squads.

Prior to his Nov. 13 homily, Archbishop Rivera Damas told a local radio station that neither he nor Bishop Rosa Chavez would be intimidated.

The death threats accused the bishops of using homilies to spread pro-communist propaganda and further guerrilla aims.

'In the Name of God, No More Killing'

San Salvador, El Salvador (NC) -- "In the name of God, the father of life and death, enough," said Archbishop Arturo Rivera Damas of San Salvador Nov. 20 in asking for an end to the country's four-year-old civil war.

"No more killing, no more threats, no more kidnappings, and no more crimes which demoralize man made in the image of God," he added.

Archbishop Rivera Damas made his plea during a Sunday homily.

In October, death squads opposing Salvadoran guerrillas threatened the life of the archbishop, saying his homilies were supporting the guerrilla cause.



Street Scene

Young boys look through litter in Bogota, Colombia, for salvageable items. Above, a youngster sleeps in the street as pedestrians make their way around him. The government estimates that up to 10,000 street urchins, mostly boys between 9 and 18, live in the streets of the Colombian capital, begging, salvaging, stealing, coping just to stay alive. (NC Photo)

PANAMA

Foreign Birth Control Programs Hit by Pope

Vatican City (NC) -- Pope John Paul II has criticized birth control and sterilization programs in Panama which are funded from abroad.

In an address Nov. 17 to visiting Panamanian bishops, the pope said:

"The systematic application of plans conceived and financed from abroad, ranging from artificial birth control and sterilization to those aimed at legalizing abortion, have a negative effect on the health of the family."

The pope also stressed the need to develop diocesan programs to increase religious vocations and told the bishops that priests and Religious should avoid involvement in political activities which are the responsibility of the laity. He added that the role of the priest and Religious is to help the laity form Christian consciences.

In the talk, the pope also noted a need for "solid formation" of priests according to the directives of the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education.

MORAL RE-ARMAMENT

OUR LADY'S PATH TO PEACE - THE FIRST SATURDAY DEVOTIONS!

Her Request:

- Confession
- Holy Communion
- 5 Decades of Rosary
- 15 Minutes of Meditation on Rosary Mysteries
- All Done in a Spirit of Reparation
- On 5 First Saturdays of 5 Consecutive Months

Her Promises:

- Eternal Salvation
- Conversion of Russia

**These First Saturday Devotions will continue at
St. Mary's Church, 25 Center St., Waterloo
Saturday, Dec. 3 at a Noon Mass
— All Are Invited —**