

Superiors ask pro-Sandinista Franciscan to leave Nicaragua

By Barb Frazee
NC News Service

A pro-Sandinista Nicaraguan priest has been asked by his religious superiors to leave the country "for convenience" sake after several years of conflict with the church hierarchy.

Franciscan Father Uriel Molina said Jan. 21 in a telephone interview with National Catholic News Service that the special assistant to the Franciscan superior general for Latin American affairs told him in December that Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo of Managua had asked the Franciscans to "resolve the conflict" with the priest.

A well-informed Franciscan priest told NC News in Rome said Father Molina's superiors had suggested a "sabbatical year" — a year off to study and read outside Nicaragua.

The Franciscan said Father Molina rejected the idea but offered no alternative. He

also emphasized that there has been no order for Father Molina to leave the country.

He said the friction between Father Molina and the cardinal was "more ideological than dogmatic" and involved the Nicaraguan priest's extreme support of the Sandinistas.

The Franciscan said the vice provincial in Guatemala would have to make a decision about what to do, and the Franciscan leadership in Rome will support whatever decision he makes.

Speaking through an interpreter, Father Molina said the superior general's assistant, Franciscan Father Ireneo Wilges, told him that "after consulting with many people, we believe it would be better for convenience's sake for you to leave the country."

However, Father Molina, who heads the Antonio Valdivieso Ecumenical Center in Managua, Nicaragua, said he had received no written notice from the order.

Father Molina also said that Franciscan

superiors might compromise, limiting his functions to celebrating Mass and allowing him to stay in a house run by the order in Nicaragua.

The ecumenical center "operates within the theology of liberation," according to the Rev. Jim Goff, a U.S. Presbyterian minister who works there. Mr. Goff also said the center is a "critical supporter of revolutionary social change."

Cardinal Obando Bravo, contacted by NC News during a visit to New York Jan. 21, would say only that the case was being handled by Father Molina's superiors. He said he doubted that Father Molina would leave the country and suggested that the priest would have to make a decision concerning that.

Father Molina said he has several reasons for not wanting to leave the country.

"I cannot understand how a citizen of this country can be invited to leave," especially

when four of the country's 10 bishops are foreigners and many clergy are foreigners, he said.

He also said his 80-year-old mother "has a rather delicate health," and his father and sister died in 1985.

"My third reason is based on a conviction of faith," he said. "I consider that my role as a priest is to accompany my people...through this war."

He also said he saw "no substantial doctrinal reasons" for Cardinal Obando Bravo to want him to leave.

Father Molina said his "conflict" with the cardinal began in 1979, "when the (Sandinista) revolution triumphed." As an archbishop and as a cardinal, the Managua prelate often has accused the Marxist-influenced Sandinista government of human rights violations. The cardinal brought his complaints to the United Nations Jan. 21.

Father Molina said the conflict grew after Pope John Paul II's March 1983 visit to Nicaragua.

"The pope maintains that I am the head of a so-called 'popular church,'" Father Molina said.

The priest said the confrontation became sharpest at a meeting of diocesan clergy when Auxiliary Bishop Bosco Vivas Robelo said an unsigned, pro-Sandinista document looked like it had been written by the Valdivieso Ecumenical Center.

"That was when some of the priests attacked me verbally, rather crudely, and accused me of being a spy of the Sandinista Front," he said.

Father Molina said after his superiors rose to his defense, he had two "very cordial" meetings with the auxiliary bishop.

"Bosco Vivas said to me that I had to respond to the will of the pope and that I had to give up my own personal ideas...in order to maintain the communion of the church," he said.

"He said that the base of the conflict with me is that they could not give me the faculty to celebrate the Mass and the sacraments because I was not in agreement with the pastoral program of the bishop of the diocese," Father Molina said.

"It is not my intention to appear as a rebel to the bishop," Father Molina said. "I am not going to be disrespectful of the wish of the cardinal because he is my superior in my parish."

Contributing to this story were Tracy Early in New York and John Thavis in Rome.

Cardinal seeks U.N. help in dealing with 'persecution'

By Tracy Early and Jeff Endrst

United Nations (NC) — Cardinal Miguel Obando Bravo of Managua, Nicaragua, appealed to U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar Jan. 21 for help in dealing with "persecution" of the church by the Sandinista government.

In a meeting at the secretary general's office, Cardinal Obando Bravo said the Nicaraguan bishops want a "constructive dialogue with the government of Nicaragua," and said he thought the United Nations could help.

A statement he read during the meeting consisted primarily of quotations from two letters from the bishops to Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

A Dec. 6 letter from the bishops to Ortega cited a desire to resolve problems through "dialogue." But the letter noted that "on three different occasions we have directed ourselves to you in writing without having obtained even an acknowledgment of the receipt of our requests."

"There is a general cry," the letter said, "from the faithful in the country and the city...that the whole nation is concerned, even to the point of thinking, in many cases, that we are in a state of persecution."

Among the "attacks on the Catholic Church" alleged in the letter were threats against foreign priests said by the government, to "meddle in politics;" interrogation of Nicaraguan priests by the National Direc-

torate of State Security and Police Procedure; pressures including imprisonment to make the laity "collaborate as informers" against the church; "harassment of church institutions;" forcing Catholics to "sign documents containing falsehoods and calumnies against the honor of church persons" and "harsh censorship."

Cardinal Obando Bravo also quoted from an early January letter of the bishops to Ortega asking reconsideration of the closing of Radio Catolica, the "only means of communication" operated by the Nicaraguan bishops' conference.

The station was closed Dec. 30 for failing to broadcast a speech by Ortega. Under Nicaraguan law, radio and other media are required to carry certain speeches and announcements when the government gives prior notice. Msgr. Bismarck Carballo, director of the station, said failure to broadcast the message was due to a technician's error.

The cardinal released the text of his statement, but he declined to hold a press conference or give interviews.

A source close to the cardinal said the U.N. meeting was set up at the initiative of the secretary general. While in New York, the cardinal also spoke to an invitation-only gathering at the Americas Society.

Cardinal Obando Bravo's statement to Perez de Cuellar made no reference to the raids into Nicaragua carried out by the

guerrillas (contras) operating from bases in Honduras with U.S. support. The Sandinistas governing Nicaragua have defended their actions against opponents, including declaration of a state of emergency and limitation on civil rights last Oct. 15, as a necessary response to the armed attacks.

In an interview published Nov. 16 in the Jesuit weekly, America, Maryknoll Father Miguel D'Escoto, Nicaragua's foreign minister, said the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency was using Cardinal Obando Bravo "as a symbol." The CIA, Father D'Escoto said, regards the cardinal as "their most valuable asset in Central America, and in Nicaragua in particular."

The Vatican has suspended Father D'Escoto's priestly faculties because of his violation of canon law against a priest occupying a governmental post.

Informed U.N. sources said Perez de Cuellar would be in a difficult position to do anything about the situation in Nicaragua except bring the cardinal's concerns to the attention of the government. The U.N. charter bars interference in what member-states consider internal affairs.

U.N. observers speculated that letters such as those submitted by Cardinal Obando Bravo could become the basis of an effort by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, which has been looking into rights concerns in El Salvador, Guatemala and Chile.

Citizens, Church extend welcome to Guatemala's civilian president

By Michael Tangeman

Guatemala City (NC) — They waved, shouted, clapped, danced and chanted in their excitement.

From the balcony of Guatemala's National Palace, one could see 15,000, perhaps as many as 20,000 people jammed into the main plaza, braving the bitter cold to hear the words of Guatemala's first civilian president in 20 years, Vinicio Cerezo.

Highland Indian women with children in hand mixed with middle-class couples dressed in their finery and with the urban poor, who turned out to hear the new president's address to the people Jan. 14.

Later that day, Guatemala City Archbishop Prospero Penados del Barrio welcomed Cerezo during his homily at a Mass.

The archbishop said that "all Guatemalans, particularly the poorest and the marginalized, (those) who have suffered first-hand the arbitrary exercise of power and have been victims of institutionalized violence, see in your (Cerezo's) ascension to government the dawn of a new day, in which respect, justice and the possibility to aspire to a more dignified future are hoped for."

Archbishop Penados said the church, in Guatemala will continue to be a "prophetic voice" against attacks on liberty and human dignity. Since becoming archbishop in 1983 — after serving as a bishop for 17 years in the province of San Marcos, an area of great social conflict and violence — Archbishop Penados has moved the Guatemalan church

toward its current role as advocate of social justice.

Speaking above the roar of the crowd in the plaza, Cerezo echoed what he had said four hours earlier in his inaugural address: that Guatemalans had "returned home" to a democratic government and together they would "put the house in order."

Cerezo, a 42-year-old Christian Democrat who won the Dec. 8 presidential election runoff, was frank in admitting just how much house-cleaning would be required for the first truly democratic government since President Jacobo Arbenz was ousted in a 1954 coup. Except for a civilian government in the mid-1960s — which was widely viewed as a thin veneer of democracy for the military generals — the armed forces have virtually controlled Guatemala for 30 years.

Cerezo said the country was an "economic disaster" and the foreign debt was four times greater than the annual revenue from exports.

Cardinal O'Connor postpones trip to Lebanon

New York (NC) — The Archdiocese of New York announced Jan. 15 that Cardinal John J. O'Connor's trip to Lebanon has been postponed on the advice of Lebanese church officials.

The announcement said the trip had not been canceled but merely postponed until later.

"His eminence John Cardinal O'Connor regretfully announces that on the advice of high church officials in Lebanon his intended trip will be temporarily postponed until a later date. The trip is not canceled but postponed. New dates for the trip to Lebanon will be announced when they are determined," the statement said.

Cardinal O'Connor had announced Jan. 7 that he would go to Lebanon Jan. 19 as president of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. He had said he planned to visit the various humanitarian programs that the agency supports for Lebanese "of all religious persuasions."

While not directly implicating the military government of Gen. Oscar Mejia Victores, Cerezo condemned "the absence of morals and principles, which appears to have become all-pervasive, bringing about widespread corruption and encouraging the habitual solution of problems through the abuse of power."

At a post-inauguration reception, Archbishop Girolamo Prigione, apostolic delegate in Mexico, told National Catholic News Service that the new government would be "positive for Guatemala. If this experiment is successful, as we are all hoping, it could provide an example for all Latin American nations."

The solution to regional problems, he said, is through "the way of democracy, in justice and liberty. This is also the basis for avoiding violence, because violence always has its root in justice. To eradicate violence, you always have to begin by eradicating injustice."

Philippine generals pledge not to stage coup

Manila, Philippines (NC) — Cardinal Jaime Sin of Manila said he has received assurances from top generals that they would not stage a coup if they did not like the results of the Feb. 7 presidential election.

The cardinal told a meeting of businessmen Jan. 13 that he had met with the generals at his house in December.

"When it comes to the armed forces, the most feared act of violence is a military coup," he said. The officers swore they would not lead a coup, "and I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of their promise," he said.

"On several occasions I have met privately with the top generals of the army, the navy, the air force, the marines, the Philippine Constabulary and the Integrated National Police," he added.

Opposition leaders have said if President Ferdinand Marcos loses the election, they believe he will declare martial law or the military will stage a coup.

Cardinal Sin has refused to endorse either Marcos or opposition candidate Corazon Aquino, widow of murdered opposition leader Benigno Aquino. The church must maintain the separation of church and state, he said.

However, Mrs. Aquino and her former

chief rival, Salvador Laurel, met separately with the cardinal before agreeing to be running mates. The cardinal said Dec. 10 he thought most Philippine bishops saw Mrs. Aquino as the moral alternative to Marcos.

Although the cardinal frequently has criticized the Marcos government, he embraced Marcos during a birthday celebration for the president in September. The cardinal later said he has a dual role as critic and seeker of reconciliation among Philippine factions.

Documentary on Synod

Last November's extraordinary Synod of Bishops is profiled in a new television documentary entitled "Report on the Extraordinary Synod." The documentary, funded in part by the Catholic Church Extension Society, traces the preparatory work of Bishop James Malone of Youngstown, Ohio, the chief U.S. representative, from early consultations to the synod itself.

The documentary is available on videotape from the Communications Department of the Catholic Church Extension Society, 35 E. Wacker Drive, Chicago, Ill., 60601, or by calling (312)236-7240.

Jail Ministry Training

Rochester Interfaith Jail Ministry, an organization serving pre-trial prisoners in the Monroe County Jail, invites prospective volunteers to a four-part training program at the Downtown United Presbyterian Church, 121 North Fitzhugh St. Sessions will be Monday, Feb. 3, Wednesday, Feb. 5, Monday, Feb. 10, and Thursday, Feb. 13, from 7-9:30 p.m.

Information about the ministry's goals and philosophy as well as the jail and criminal justice system will be presented. Participants will also act out possible visiting situations.

For more information or to register, call (716)325-1942.