

# Half a Loaf and a Pinch of Salt: Peace interview

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Sister Beatrice Ganley, public relations coordinator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, was a member of the Witness for Peace delegation that visited Nicaragua in late 1985. The following is the first of several reflections she is writing about her experiences in that country.

By Beatrice Ganley, SSJ

Monsignor Bismark Carballo surveyed our group which was beginning to show signs of wear and overload as we began our 20th formal interview in eight days. Young, personable and cordial, this public relations representative for the diocese of Managua met frequently with delegations such as ours. He had just completed an interview with another group, then for 45 minutes he received our questions generously.

Toward the conclusion of the session, he grew pensive and paused before he addressed us. He warned us of the temptation to consider ourselves experts on what is in fact a very complex situation. He spoke of how Nicaraguans are beginning to feel like guinea pigs under the gaze of so many observers.

"I urge you," he said, "upon your return home, to be good advocates for the truth."

Relating, with fidelity to the truth, one's understanding of the Nicaraguan situation is one of the main elements of the Witness for Peace Covenant. Here at home in our approach to the task, we try to avoid the stance of expert or of apologist for the

there was a problem with his filing of the required forms. He offered bureaucracy and problems with subordinates as an explanation for the situation.

Of course, he felt that the government's reaction was extreme and unwarranted. It may well be. But it is not fair to him that this incident is being used here as evidence of the anti-religious intent of the Sandinistas and as sufficient cause for our proxy attempt through the contras to destabilize his society and bring down the government of Nicaragua.

Monsignor Carballo spoke with disapproval of the "ideological intervention of Russia and Cuba," and included in this disapproval the "grave and serious intervention of the United States in the affairs of his country."

The matter of the shutting down of the Church radio station is similar in its complexity and in the fact that the actions of Church officials have been read by some observers as consciously provocative. The Jesuit commentator Cesar Jerez says that in many of these instances "each side is at pains to maintain; if not in fact create, these problems" which seem to be between the officials in the government and the officials in the Church. At the popular level, it is a different matter.

The archbishop of Managua, Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo, is opposed to the policies of the Sandinista government. Carballo, for example, cited for us the

Cubans."

Before our meeting with Monsignor Carballo, we had spent most of our time in the rural mountain areas northeast of Managua. We were there during the rainy season, and the combination of fertile soil, daily rains, and warm tropical climate had caused the dead grey wood of the fence posts along the roadside to sprout in vigorous spurts of new branches. The green against the bone-gray stumps so much of what I experienced in Nicaragua.

It is the green of hope in a land of death. It is the "leaping greenly spirit" celebrated by e.e. cummings which I found in our conversations with rural priests who relate to their base communities in a spirit of mutual giving. Said one who is apparently working without any definite salary, "I give to my people and my people give to me. Some do not understand how this can work."

These priests from the base communities asked not to be identified in our stories. In the areas where Padre "X" or Padre "Z" are working, there are some contra sympathizers. They fear a retaliation if it is known that they are meeting with United States delegations who do not favor aid to the contras.

So we met Padre "X" in the home of some of his friends in a town other than where he works. He is a happy man, relaxed and cordial. "Even clandestinely," he said, "it is a pleasure for me to communicate to you the life of this country. I feel affirmed by your presence here. As a Nicaraguan, it is my responsibility to transmit the message of truth."

In his work he is responsible for several base communities. He facilitates the activities of the health workers, the social action workers, the delegates of the word and the catechists. Our genial friend expressed a real fear that he might be targeted for some kind of attack — it has happened to other clergy like him.

Padre "X" is no "communist" as the term is so often used to categorize and condemn so completely. That is, if the term is understood to mean someone committed to a dictatorship of the proletariat in a world order of godless totalitarianism. He is, however, one who at this time favors the process in which his country is engaged.

This concept of being pro-process came up

frequently in our conversations with people in Nicaragua. It conveys the idea of a force that cannot be stopped. It is something greater than any one political party or government that happens to be in power. It is, as the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote after his visit to Nicaragua, "a movement toward liberation by the companeros and companeras of the world by the wretched of the earth, which has been growing since before the French revolution. And Nicaragua is a part of it. It is an irreversible revolution."

We often hear the term, "popular Church" banded about. State department press representative Ted Taylor (who has been to Nicaragua only once, and then no farther than the Managua airport) used this term recently, speaking as it were about a movement broken off and separate from the mainstream of Catholicism, not quite "in" the total Church. He even went so far as to suggest that it was the creation of the Sandinistas, discounting in that allegation the years of work and dedication to Church renewal that followed Vatican II and the gatherings of the Latin American bishops in Puebla and Medellin in 1968 and 1979.

What we found in our travels was a Church that was indeed popular and meaningful in the lives of the people, irrespective of the leanings or political sympathies of the individual pastors. In Yali, on Sunday morning, the rosary was sung over the loudspeakers in the center of town at 5:30 a.m. Later that afternoon, at the Mass we attended, the church was filled to overflowing; people were standing in the streets. It was a special mass commemorating those who had been killed in fighting the Somoza forces and in the contra attacks.

With a limited knowledge of Spanish we were able to understand some of the homily and to recognize the tune and content of "Blowing in the Wind." Most moving, however, was the consciousness of the bond between us as we began to say the Lord's Prayer, some in Spanish and some in English. One of our delegation commented, "Could the bond we shared — belief in God — ever overcome the acts of aggression we, as United States citizens, were engaging in against these people?"

That morning we had met with the pastor, Padre Miguel Vasquez, a shy man, tending to

**'The disagreements between the Catholic hierarchy and the state are "an extension of a political struggle which undoubtedly originated in the Sandinistas' eagerness to create a 'Church in its pocket'" which would give it unconditional support.'**

**Barricada International interview with Luis Humberto Guzman**

Sandinistas. We admit the limitations of our knowledge, but we also claim the validity of our experience. What is offered, you might say, is half a loaf, but it is real bread. Season it as you will with your own salt.

As a consequence of our interview with Monsignor Carballo, I have become sadly aware of the need for the salt of common sense and wisdom in receiving any reports from Nicaragua. This Church official has been quoted to support positions that he does not endorse, and his experience vis-a-vis the Nicaraguan government has been reported with significant omissions and an appalling lack of context.

It is true that the office of his publication *Iglesia* was invaded by the authorities and that the first issue of the magazine was confiscated. But the fact is that this was not a totally unprovoked measure. While in Managua, we heard differing perceptions of the incident from a variety of credible persons. Carballo himself acknowledged that

"growing militarism, and the restriction of personal freedoms," but the main objection is, of course, Marxism. We are familiar with this objection, but I have yet to hear his complete position represented.

Monsignor Carballo's comment to us was, "Marxism excludes the rich in its option for the poor. Capitalism oppresses the poor in favor of the rich. The Church condemns the sin inherent in both of these approaches."

"We are tired," said Carballo, "of existing in the crossfire between the United States and the Soviet Union. We are tired of the ideological guns of the Russians which are influencing the political process in our country. And we are also tired of the real guns of the United States being aimed at us through their support of the contras." This echoed what we had heard earlier that day from Anna Maria Ruiz at the offices of La Prensa. "We in no way support armed intervention, not the intervention of Reagan, not the intervention of the Russians or



Monsignor Bismark Carballo (left), a representative of Nicaraguan Cardinal Obando y Bravo, asked Witness for Peace delegates (from right) Margaret Stoltman, Eric Wolf and Relton Roland to "be good advocates for the truth" when they returned.



A pastor in Yali for the past 13 years, Padre Miguel Vasquez (rear) agreed that the Sandinistas have in many ways improved life in the village. Also pictured is the parish's First Communion class.