

Interviews in Nicaragua

'The Nicaraguan Church must meet the great challenge of rediscovering its mission in the revolutionary context. I see both the Church and in the revolutionary state commitments to dialogue, the authenticity of which I have no right to doubt.'

Cesar Jerez, S.J. The Church and the Nicaraguan Revolution, 1984.

be more conservative and traditional than the other priests we had met. He has been in Yali for 13 years, and recalled that before the revolution the town was remote, but now it seems to be more important and growing. People are at work on a new church and town plaza. Some of the funds and materials for the church building are coming from the government.

Padre Miguel was careful to let us know that he is in good standing with his bishop. He and six other priests of the region meet once a month with their bishop in order to give each other mutual support. He is not necessarily in sympathy with the philosophy and methods of the Sandinistas, but he confirmed the general impression we had that many practical benefits have come to the people in the wake of the revolution, in particular the benefits of health care, education, and a sense of personal dignity.

"Since the revolution," he said, "there has been more emphasis on one's duty as a Christian."

We referred to some incidents recounted in one stateside publication that we had brought with us that supposedly illustrated the anti-religious tendencies of the Sandinistas. "What about this?" we asked.

"I have not heard of such things," he replied.

I am grateful in this reporting for my detailed notes from the interviews. It has been four months since our return and I too have absorbed the continuous repetition in our media, from our state department and from our president of material that seems to contradict my recollections. Without these notes taken on the spot, without the concurrence of other members of our delegation, I tend to doubt the accuracy of my own recollections. How could my experience be in such direct contradiction to the official policy and press releases from the state department?

I begin now to understand the heavy sigh and the touch of cynicism with which Padre "Z" concluded our meeting. We told him that we were committed to presenting the truth of our experience to people back home.

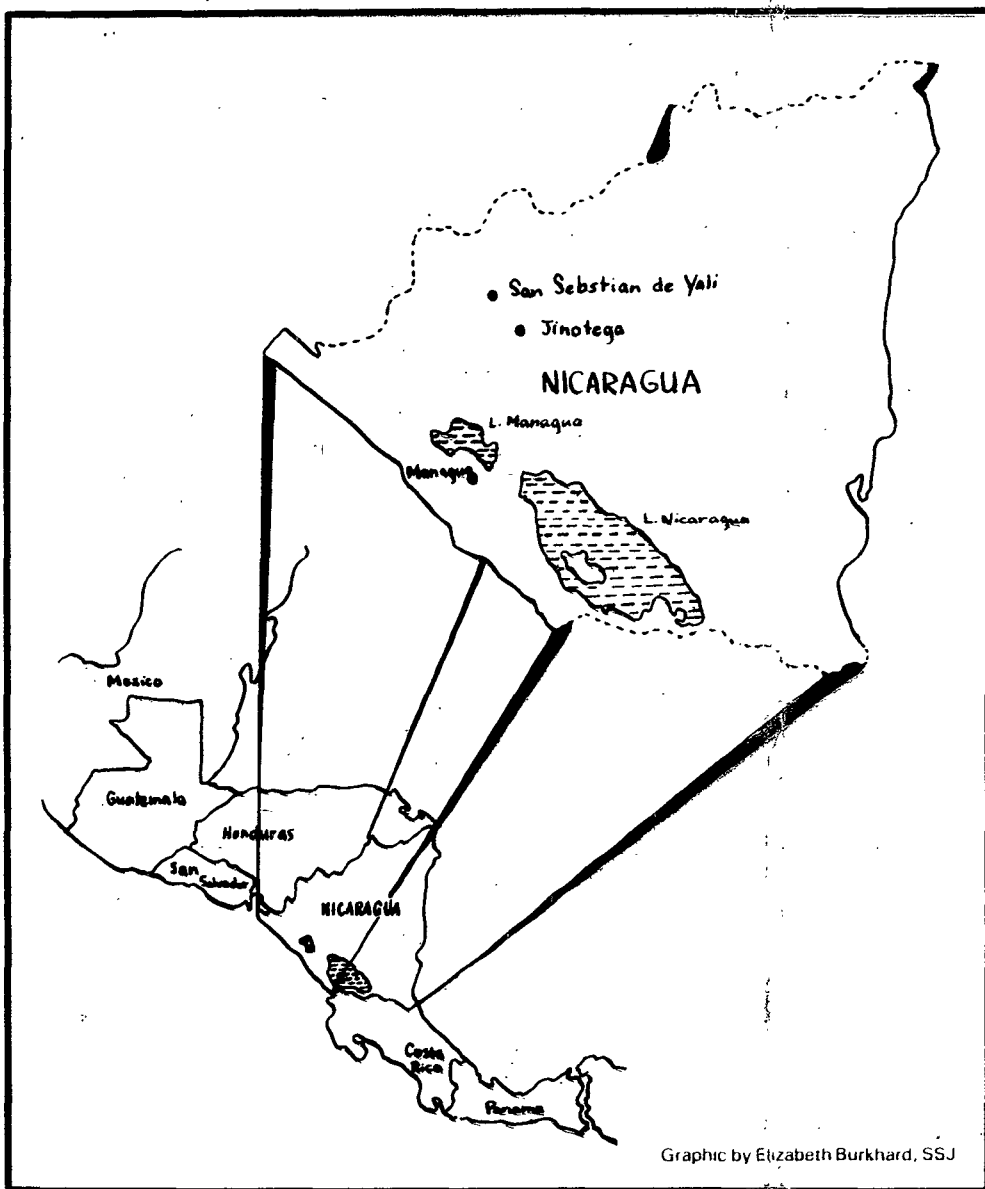
We were enthusiastic about our mission and perhaps naive in our beliefs in our media's commitment to full reporting, and in the effectiveness of our democratic process. Padre "Z" commented sadly, "How difficult for them to hear the voice from Nicaragua. I do not even think they would hear if one were to rise from the dead."

What an appropriate allusion he provided for us. Nicaragua is a country of resurrection. People are rising from the deadness of years of a less-than-human existence. Green is sprouting from bone-gray decay, green is taking over the "bare ruined choirs" of the cathedral shell in Managua's Plaza Nacional.

For all the talk about the differences within the Church in Nicaragua, there is much more that is similar in the Church representatives whom we met: Monsignor Carballo, spokesperson for the Church hierarchy, Padre Miguel, a man of unquestioning loyalty to his bishop and to the Church, completely apolitical in his stance, and Padres "X" and "Z" representing a belief in their country's political process. These men are quite alike in their love of their country, their care for the people and their commitment to the Church and the Gospel.

They were alike too in their comments on the present situation in Nicaragua. Each one of them was in agreement with Monsignor Carballo's concluding words to us, "A solution imposed by Russia or the United States is no solution at all. It must be a Nicaraguan solution."

Besides being a country of lively green, Nicaragua is a country of wood. The smell of wooden fires and growing trees incenses the air as one alights from the plane at Managua's Sandino airport; wooden rockers and large high-backed wooden chairs grace the tiled porches of the houses; wooden saddles are on the horses. During my stay in Nicaragua I was more conscious of the greenness, the hope, the new life in the society, but since I have returned from that country I am more conscious of wood. It is the wood of the cross that has become symbolic for me now.



Graphic by Elizabeth Burkhard, SSJ

The voices of so many United States citizens are saying in effect, "Do not continue to assault this country through the proxy of the contras. Respect the will of the majority of the Nicaraguan people, and let it be a Nicaraguan solution." It is painful to realize that these voices are not being represented in the media, nor are they being heard by the makers of our nation's policy.

The president will persist in calling the contras "freedom fighters," and incomplete versions of the conflicts between the Church and the government will continue to be presented as examples of repression or persecution, and therefore "proof" that the elected government of Nicaragua ought to be overthrown by whatever means, even in defiance of international law and treaties which we have signed.

The media will probably continue to operate in conformity to a kind of self-imposed censorship which dictates a policy articulated by Richard Cohen of the Washington Post on December 11, 1985: "It is necessary when writing about Nicaragua to follow certain rules and I will do so. First you must condemn the Sandinista regime, point out that it is anti-democratic, abuses civil

liberties, censors the press, is avowedly Marxist, has close ties to both Moscow and Havana, is increasingly corrupt, and has betrayed its own revolution. And then you have to say that the United States could never tolerate Soviet MIG's or missiles of any kind in Nicaragua."

So it is painful for me to present this material, knowing the Goliath at which this little shot of personal narrative is directed. But I am encouraged by the counsel of some of the sisters at our motherhouse with whom I have been sharing some of my reflections. Says one, "History is painful in the making," and another reminds me, "In the end truth will surface."

They are right. The "dearest freshness" known by Gerard Manley Hopkins, the "leaping greenly spirit" that amazed e.e. cummings, and the final triumph of Dylan Thomas' "force that through the green tuse drives the flower" are more powerful than any media shortcomings, independent of politics. It is this life-giving force that eventually will overcome whatever millions of dollars of lethal aid are aimed at this tiny nation of less than 3,000,000 persons, one half of whom are under 15 years of age.



A picture of Sandino is displayed in a Jinotega museum.



Rochester's Witness for Peace delegation paused longer than expected in Jinotega when their van suffered a flat tire. In the foreground is Helen Krog.

agreed that the parish's First