

Hierarchy, rebels reconcile

Paul Jeffrey/CNS

MANAGUA, Nicaragua — A Nicaraguan church leader has broken the ice on 24 years of strained church relations with the Sandinista political movement by blessing a celebration marking the anniversary of Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution.

"We ask the Lord to help all Nicaraguans, reconciled and sharing an embrace of peace, to construct a new future, forgetting the past and looking to the present," said Msgr. Eddy Montenegro, vicar for communications in the Managua Archdiocese, before tens of thousands of Sandinista loyalists gathered in Managua July 19.

It was the first such appearance by a top church leader since July 19, 1979, when then-Archbishop Miguel Obando Bravo of Managua appeared in the city's central plaza to bless the victory of the revolutionary Sandinistas over the U.S.-backed dictator, Anastasio Somoza.

But during the decade of Sandinista rule that followed, the relationship between the Sandinistas and several church leaders, especially Archbishop Obando Bravo, was marked by mutual accusations and acrimony.

The Sandinistas expelled a bishop and temporarily closed a church radio station. Archbishop Obando Bravo, elevated to cardinal in 1985, was widely seen as supporting the U.S.-funded contra rebels who waged a bloody war against the Sandinista government.

Former President Daniel Ortega asked forgiveness for his party's actions during his speech to the July 19 celebration this year.

"I have to admit that we committed errors and we ask forgiveness of the Catholic Church and its bishops. If we committed errors it was because of our deep love for Nicaragua and the defense of our country's sovereignty, and our profound love for the poor, the peasants and the marginalized," Ortega said.

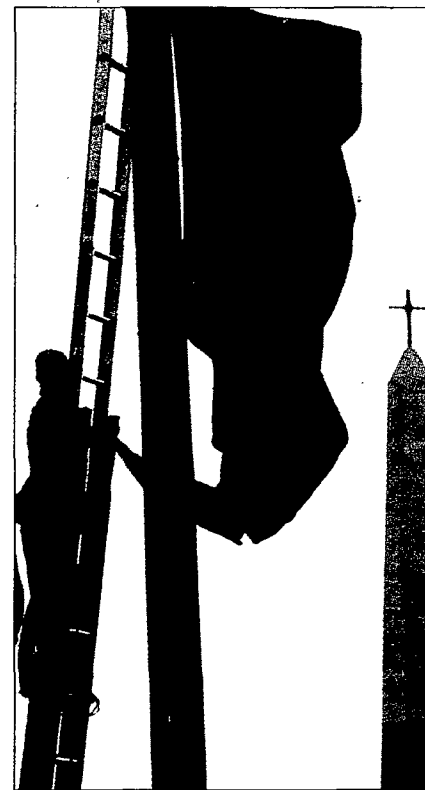
Ortega visited Cardinal Obando Bravo the day before the ceremony and invited him to attend. The cardinal declined, and delegated Msgr. Montenegro to appear in his place.

Msgr. Montenegro was seated on the podium beside Tomas Borge, the Sandinista commander who managed the country's internal security

system during the 1980s. Following the ceremony, Borge told the daily *La Prensa* newspaper that relations between the Sandinistas and the Catholic hierarchy "are better than yesterday, and tomorrow they will be better than today."

The Sandinistas lost power in the 1990 elections, and Ortega, the party's perennial presidential candidate, lost two later contests. Ortega is considering another run for office, and party officials recognize that lingering tensions with church leaders continue to plague the campaign. The public reconciliation on July 19 is likely to boost the candidacy of Ortega or any other Sandinista presidential candidate.

Asked by reporters July 20 if his blessing of the Sandinista gathering was playing into the hands of Ortega's campaign, Msgr. Montenegro responded, "I don't think the real intention of the Sandinista Front is to utilize us, but if they utilize you for good and as part of the search for the common good, then blessed be their utilization of us if it's going to benefit the nation."



Reuters/CNS

A supporter of the Sandinista National Liberation Front movement, known as FSLN, hangs a flag July 18 in preparation for anniversary festivities in Managua, Nicaragua.

Vatican combats legal gay unions

John Norton/CNS

VATICAN CITY — In a new document, the Vatican offers detailed arguments against legal recognition of same-sex unions and asks Catholic lawmakers to fight growing movements to legalize "gay marriage."

The 12-page document underscores church teaching requiring compassion for homosexuals, but it says legal recognition of gay unions is contrary to human nature and ultimately harmful to society, a senior Vatican official said.

The document, prepared by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was sent to bishops' conferences in June and was scheduled for public release July 31. In a brief statement July 28, the Vatican said the document's title is "Considera-

tions Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons."

The document, to be published in Italian, French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Polish, coincides with a growing movement in Europe and North America toward granting gay couples the legal protections and benefits of marriage. In late July, Massachusetts' highest court was widely expected to rule in favor of legalizing same-sex marriages; similar legislation was enacted in 2000 in Vermont. Also in July, Canada's government proposed a draft bill to legalize same-sex marriage; Belgium, Denmark and Netherlands already have legalized such unions.

Opposition to gay marriage, including opposition among white U.S. Catholics, has dropped significantly in recent years, according to a poll released in July by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. Just 41 percent of white Catholics today oppose legalized gay marriage, in contrast with 60 percent in 1996. Support for such measures among white Catholics has increased in the same period from 31 percent to 47 percent.

A senior Vatican official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the new document had been in the works

for at least a year and was meant to help combat growing pressure in some parts of the world to legalize gay unions.

"Because there is something of a movement in the direction of recognizing these kinds of unions, there is a desire to be helpful to the bishops, the universal church" and Catholic politicians, the official said.

The official said the document "offers arguments from human reason" about the foundational role of marriage in well-functioning societies and "the complete absence of an analogy between the marriage of a man and a woman and the union of two men or two women."

The document was intended to help local bishops present convincing arguments against legal recognition of gay marriages, to give direction to Catholic lawmakers, and "to help anybody who has to confront the matter," the official said. It warns Catholic lawmakers that it is "gravely immoral" to vote for such measures, according to APBiscom, an Italian news agency that published portions of the text July 25.

At the same time, the official said, the document "strongly insists on respect" for homosexual individuals and should not be interpreted as encouragement of "unjust discrimination" against gays.

CORRECTION

Some articles and fliers advertising the Aug. 9 Divine Mercy Conference list John Leary as an author and visionary. In accordance with instructions from Bishop Matthew H. Clark, he should be described only as an author.

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BISHOPS' A

ASSESSES IT

CHICAGO (CNS) — The National Council of the Bishops of the United States, established by Pope John Paul II last year, has reported that the church's influence and vigor are on the rise. The board said in a report released last week that the church's influence and vigor are on the rise. The board said in a report released last week that the church's influence and vigor are on the rise.

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BISHOP TIM SCRANTON

WASHINGTON

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