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## **Church, State, and Society during the Nicaraguan Revolution**

**John-Paul Wilson<sup>16</sup>**

The course of the Church's history in Nicaragua had changed from an institution led by a martyred Bishop protecting Indian rights before Rome and the Spanish King to one largely concerned with protecting its own interests following Nicaragua's independence to one that had come to terms with its mission to save souls and to serve its people. However, many of those who took the initiative to bring the Church toward a more humanitarian orientation in modern times had allowed themselves to become the tool of a revolutionary political movement whose aim was to perpetuate its own power. Ironically, those who truly wished to serve God and His people found themselves oppressed by those who claimed that they were doing the same. After a long struggle, a free election in 1990 brought to power a series of democratic governments allowing freedom of the Church to fulfil its mission.

**Keywords:** Governors, Popes, Dictators, Christians, Marxist, ecclesia

Throughout the centuries, the Catholic Church was created to propagate the basic Christian message (evangelisation) and to provide for God's people according to their spiritual and material needs. The primary role of the Church's clergy has been to prepare souls for the coming of the kingdom of God and to aid the less fortunate, both Christian and non-Christian. In principle, there need be no conflict between secular authority and the Church. Jesus gave clear instruction to his followers to 'render to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God' (Mark 12:17). Even so, the Church still recognizes that spiritual matters transcend the secular. State demands for societal coherence and Church moral teachings are the usual domains of Church/State conflict.

Historically, the extent to which the Church has been involved in the lives of the people has often been dictated by its relationship to the state. Attitudes

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toward the Church's influence over society have ranged from benevolent patronage, allowing the Church to evangelise and expand its activity,<sup>17</sup> to the most severe attacks of anti-clericalism for which a defensive posture starting with apologetic approaches to underground operations in the extreme.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the course of church/state relations in Latin America, the Church has had to redefine its commitment to people in ways that are sometimes compatible with current political systems and at other times requires an offensive posture including aggressive evangelisation and non-violent confrontation on moral issues. At times, the Church has made intermittent defensive alliances with various political forces to prevent its loss of influence over society. Consequently, as an imperfect institution, the Church has, at times, found itself inadvertently serving the interests of party politics, the state, or even itself. Yet, at various points, the Church has fully realized its position and redirected itself back toward its original mission in a process of renewal through various Episcopal Conferences, Ecumenical Councils and papal proclamations.

The Catholic Church of Nicaragua has been unique from the standpoint that in its redefining of its commitment to God's people following the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), forces were unleashed that altered the course of Nicaragua's political and social history. In response to Vatican II, a dispute emerged among members of the clergy. There was a unanimous agreement on the definition of the Church's mission, yet parties differed in the means by which that mission could be fulfilled. One group of revolutionary Christians believed that the needs of the people could best be served through an ideology of human liberation based on a Marxist critique requiring an armed insurrection. Another found it necessary to work within the confines of the establishment. A third group of new bishops appointed in the early 1970s by Pope Paul VI avoided the trappings of politics.

A series of pastoral letters, written to clarify the Nicaraguan Church's position as an offensive thrust against a repressive Liberal government, incited retribution against the progressive wing of the Church. This group, after suffering under the prior establishment, would later be deemed reactionary; and a new revolutionary government would thus renew the earlier suppression of Church activities. Nevertheless, a reactionary political uprising, resulting in a free election monitored by an international team lead by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, would eventually bring to power a new democratic government more closely aligned with the Nicaraguan bishops by 1990.

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<sup>17</sup> Christianity was used for coherence within the Roman Empire under the Edict of Milan (313).

<sup>18</sup> As within the first two centuries of the Roman Empire and many twentieth century Marxist states.

## **The Development of Church/State Relations**

As a result of the Papal Bull *Inter Caetera*, the Church had granted the Spanish monarchy full power and authority over the western portion of newly-discovered lands in the Americas (Alexander VI, 1493); and in deference to this papal gift, the King's authority in these lands would be used to preserve indigenous identity, culture, and practices as they pertained to the strictures of medieval serfdom. The crown would assure the Church's social prominence through the running of its own courts, schools, hospitals, and charitable services; and it would guarantee that the Church would have ample resources through its extensive land grants and other privileges (Williams, 1989: 13; Dobson, 1993: 122-123). This relationship would, in fact, facilitate the creation of *Patronato Real* where the Spanish crown put newly discovered lands under the complete social administration of the Church; and a symbiotic relationship thus developed in which Spanish colonial endeavours were integrated within the proliferation of Catholic culture. The role of the Church tended to 'undermine the Indian potential for resistance and rebellion' and this would later help to integrate the Indian population into the framework of colonial economics (Mechum, 1966: 11; Dobson, 1993: 123).

This system of regal paternalism, however, could be easily corrupted, leading to abuses. There were clergy who actively sought to protect the Indians from exploitation by colonial landowners. For example, Rodrigo de Contreras, governor of León, was deposed by the local Bishop, Antonio de Valdivieso, over Indian issues as reported by Bartolomé de las Casas (1951: 453). Valdivieso was assassinated for his defence of the Indians by Pedro and Hernando de Contreras, the sons of the deposed governor (Foroohar, 1989: 2-3). Following las Casas' reporting on Indian suffering to the Spanish Court and Rome, an offensive manoeuvre with Paul III's Papal Bull *Sublimis Deus* (1537) defended Indian rights after which Emperor Charles V promulgated the Anti-Slavery Laws of 1542 (Donovan, 1974: 6-7).

By the end of the 16th Century, the Roman Catholic Church had accumulated vast amounts of wealth through property ownership and had emerged as one of the most powerful institutions in colonial society. However, with the decline of the Hapsburgs, the Spanish government quickly lost control of its colonies. The establishment of the Bourbon dynasty, as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, sought to restrict the banking and bureaucratic practices of the clergy, which began a steady decline in the Church's economic clout into the 19th Century. By the time of Central American independence, native-born elites soon took the place of colonial officials. As a result, the Church's relationship to the state changed: It now had to rely on a 'legal bases of privilege ... to insure influence in society' (Vallier, 1970: 7; Gismondi, 1986: 20-21; Dobson, 1993: 124-125, 165).

In 1823, the Central American provinces of the short-lived Mexican Empire broke up into several new Latin American governments. Many of these governments were dominated by the Liberal Party that represented those who had not benefited from the crown's centralized control of exports and production. Its leaders proved to be anti-clerical in the sense that the Liberal Party sought to check the Church's authority independent of the state. Consequently, the Church was pushed into the arms of the Conservative Party that had hoped to retain the rights of the clergy. A violent struggle ensued between Liberals and Conservatives in the decades following Independence that impeded the development of Nicaragua's agro-export economy (Gismondi, 1986: 20-22; Williams, 1989: 13-15).

The domination of the Liberal Party in Nicaragua was cut short by its alliance to the American 'filibuster' William Walker, who seized power for a short time until the Conservatives drove him out in 1855. During the next 35 years, policy favoured the expansion of Church authority (Williams, 1989: 16). For instance, in 1862, the *Concordato* was signed between the Conservative government and the papacy that defended papal rights to nominate ecclesiastical authorities and obligated the state to support the Church financially. However, when the Liberal Party regained the leadership of the country in 1893, President Jose Santos Zelaya introduced the *Estado Liberal*, a new constitution that effectively nullified the *Concordato*. Moreover, new anti-clerical laws were introduced in 1899 that called for the ban of clerical dress and the nationalization of Church property (Williams, 1985: 343-345; Gismondi, 1986: 23).

Zelaya's triumph over the Conservative oligarchy proved to be short-lived. In an attempt to revive the economy, the Liberal president initiated several contract loans from U.S. banks and British sources. However, the economy did not improve and the government went increasingly into debt. The United States thereafter intervened into Nicaraguan financial affairs in order to protect the country from European retribution and forced Zelaya from office (Williams, 1989: 16-17). Between 1912 and 1932, U.S. marines invaded this Central American state on numerous occasions in the name of North American interests. In each case, the hierarchy of bishops never openly supported the U.S. in their actions. However, when the marines were called in to help suppress a nationalist and anti-imperialist rebellion begun by Augusto César Sandino in 1928, the Church hierarchy broke their silence and spoke out against the rebels. To the bishops, Sandino was seen as 'an atheist and a bolshevist' and a danger to Nicaragua (Williams, 1985: 343; Williams, 1989: 16-18).

Upon the suppression of Sandino's rebellion, President José María Moncado sought to maintain cordial relations with the Church in appreciation of its support against Sandino. Moncado took the first step by repealing many of the anti-clerical laws of the *Estado Liberal*. Opposition to Sandino was the crucial factor that also began to bridge the gap between Liberals and

Conservatives. In fact, with Anastasio Somoza Garcia's rise to power in 1936, any distinction between the two had faded almost completely (Williams, 1985: 343-344).

Somoza established a regime through direct control over the Presidency, the Liberal Party, and an internal police force (*Guardia Nacional*). But more importantly, Somoza broke with Liberal tradition by cultivating a good relationship with the Church (Gismondi, 1986: 24-25; Shepherd, 1993: 280-282). The Church was given tax exemptions as well as a continued central role in education. In return, the Church provided a source of legitimization to a regime that 'relied primarily on force and intimidation of the countryside' (Shepherd, 1993: 283). As the nature of the state became increasingly determined by the actions of the *Guardia Nacional*, the Church took an increasingly offensive stance against the Somoza dynasty that would intensify as a result of six new Bishops appointed by Paul VI in the wake of Vatican II.

### **Revitalization and Institutional Change**

The rise of modern industrialisation resulted in urbanisation and new fissures in society, giving credence to new social theories affecting global society. Industrialists with new-found wealth replaced the ancient aristocracy but the workers supporting industry suffered from low wages and harsh living conditions. Karl Marx's economic and social theories advocated that the wealth of the industrialist was gained from the excess labour of the workers and proposed a new system abolishing private ownership of the means of production under the banner: 'From each according to their ability and to each according to their need' (Marx, 1875). The convergence of Marxist and Christian thought is usually in comparison with the early Christian community in Jerusalem where 'everything they owned was held in common...and distributed to all according to their need' (Acts 4:44-45). The transition from a capitalist to a Marxist society requires, according to Marx, a political transition period of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in which Vladimir Lenin requires an authoritarian 'vanguard' to spearhead the revolution (Lenin, 1903). The Marxist society is necessarily brought about by coercion whereas the Jerusalem Christian community had been a free choice.

A Christian approach for dealing with the modern industrialised world began with Pope Leo XIII's papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII, 1891). The underlying framework on the rights of ownership and of individual workers to form associations, and duties of citizens and rulers had been taken from St Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* (Leo XIII, 1891: 7, 11, 13). *Rerum Novarum* rejects the extreme unfettered capitalism subject only to market forces and the socialist tendencies that deny the right to personal property. The role of the State is to ensure the dignity of the workers and their right to free association while encouraging adequate production for the common good. At

the beginning of the pontificate of Pius XII, a collaboration of priest and laity in 'Catholic Action' was called to work for human dignity (Pius XII, 1939: 8-11, 14). In *Anni Sacri*, Pius XII (1950) laments those who deceive and provoke hatred, rivalry and rebellion leading to a continuing series of riots and revolts causing 'ruin of economies and irreparable harm to the common good'. He again calls for Catholic Action associations to combat these evils through prayer, teaching, and bringing justice to the poor (Pius XII, 1950: 1-2). The Nicaraguan Church responded with *Acción Católica* associations formed to emphasize lay participation in the defence of the Church against Communism and to advocate social change (Williams, 1985: 347; Williams, 1989: 22).

During the course of its close relationship with the Somoza regime, the Catholic Church in Nicaragua had become dispirited, lacking any clear orientation beyond its assigned role. Nevertheless, with the creation of Vatican II, a process of renewal had begun which would galvanise the Universal Church. This event had the effect of further reorienting the Nicaraguan bishops' defensive position toward an offence facilitating change. Pope John XXIII set the theme of socio-economic structural change through a series of encyclicals that included *Mater et Magistra*, again emphasizing the rights of ownership and free association as means of social and economic change (John XXIII, 1961: 4). In *Pacem in Terris*, John XXIII (1963: 2-5) gives clear definition of rights and duties of individuals, society, national states, and international relations; stressing the need for decent standards of living, education, and political participation. This theme was fully realized over the course of Vatican II, where the emphasis was placed on lay participation in the acquisition of equity and freedom.

The social teachings of Vatican II were synthesized and further discussed by Pope Paul VI in the post-conciliar document, *Populorum Progressio*, including endemic poverty and injustice as well as the vast disparities of wealth and power supported by social, national, and international structures maintaining the status quo (Vatican II, 1965a: 2-4; Paul VI, 1967: 1-4). Vatican II's *Apostolicam Actuositatem* hoped to resolve these 'immense inequalities' and advocate a 'commitment to the poor' with a renewed call to Catholic Action (Vatican II, 1965b: 5-7). Both Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* and Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* emphasized that the world and its goods are given to all mankind and that great disparities are not justified (Vatican II, 1965a: 37-39). *Gaudium et Spes* reaffirms the ancient teaching that 'When a person is in extreme necessity he has the right to supply himself out of the riches of others' (Vatican II, 1965a: 39-40). Consequently, these very issues soon became the centrepiece for an Episcopal Conference that would have an even greater impact on Nicaragua and the rest of Latin America.

In 1968, the *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM, 1969) held their Second General Conference in Medellín, Colombia. This historic gathering of clergy had been assembled to address the issues brought up during Vatican II in

a way that was relevant to the needs of Latin America. Dom Helder Camara, CELAM Secretary General, was a moving force sighting the need for transforming the current capitalist socio-economic structures while avoiding Marxist options with its associated class warfare as 'both systems militate against the dignity of the human person' (CELAM, 1969: 4). Camara pleaded for the development of grass-root communities to form networks for a non-violent confrontation with the prevailing unjust socio-economic systems (Camara, 1971: 81-82). At Medellín, the Church's relationship to political authority was redefined to take on a proactive role in the remodelling of societal structures and to demonstrate 'a special commitment to the poor'. This new social doctrine encouraged the establishment of *Comunidad Eclesial de Base* (CEB or Christian Based Community) aimed at defending the rights of the impoverished masses and creating awareness of social injustices, but more importantly, it encouraged a theology of human liberation based on analysis of class conflict that attempts to employ the gospel as a means of resolving concrete problems (Camara, 1971: 37-9; Dobson, 1993: 128-9).

Vatican II had ushered in a greater concern for humanity, particularly the material conditions of the poor, the marginal, and the excluded. Liberation theology was created as a result of existing doctrines and institutions failing to serve the real needs of the people. According to their chief author, Peruvian priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973: 137), the key to analyzing the problem and creating a solution lay in the recognition of class struggle that is part of current Latin America society and inherited from colonialism. Camara and Gutiérrez both struggled for an appropriate Christian response to this problem. Gutiérrez (1973: 48, 53-58) believed that only through social revolution could Latin America change its present condition. For Marxist Christians, unjust social structures such as capitalism and Western imperialism became associated with sin. Perhaps the most elegant examples are found in the writings of the Trappist priest Fr. Ernesto Cardenal (1993: 351-78) who lead the Marxist Christian community in Nicaragua, for example, his poems such as *Like the Waves* (*Cantiga* 35) and *The Grave of the Guerrilla* (*Cantiga* 36). Historically, Christ could be interpreted by Cardenal as the ultimate political figure and revolutionary. Cardenal made use of traditional Christian imagery with the 'New Jerusalem' replaced by the 'New Havana' described in *Cantiga* 19 (Cardenal, 1993: 191). In this case, there could be no neutrality; one had to take up the 'option of the poor' and be committed to Marxist revolution in order to be a Christian (Gutiérrez, 1973: 108-109, 137-140; Belli, 1988: 209-211). While there is some convergence of Marxist and traditional Christian ideals, they differ on the roles of private property, democracy, human solidarity, and especially revolutionary violence.

To establish Marxism as a tool against oppression within the Christian community, the traditional theology of the Church is presented as a bourgeois/imperialist theology that perpetuates unjust conditions (Gutiérrez,



1973: 108-109). Only a new theology developed from within the underclass relevant to their experience can serve the poor for which the current Church hierarchy with its bourgeois perspective does not comprehend (Girardi, 1989: 74-75, 92-99). According to Gutiérrez (1973: 307), 'we will have an *authentic* theology of liberation only when the oppressed themselves ... are the protagonists of their own liberation [emphasis added]'. Furthermore, Gutiérrez (1973: 111-112, 274-278) stressed that a classless society where private ownership of production is prohibited is the only acceptable Christian response.

The Nicaraguan bishops could not ignore that something extraordinary was happening within the Latin American Church, yet they had little enthusiasm for changing the traditional role of Christianity. Nevertheless, a small group of clergy had been inspired by the issues addressed at Medellín and Vatican II. This avant-garde movement of religious was eager to play a more active role in promoting social change through pastoral experiments aimed at creating awareness of unjust social conditions in Nicaragua as the first step to overcoming them (Williams, 1985: 22-24; Bahktiari, 1986: 18-19). In 1965, Fr. Ernesto Cardenal, established the first CEB on a small island in the middle of Lake Nicaragua called *Nuestra Señora de Solentiname*. With the assistance of Spanish priest, José de la Jara, Cardenal hoped to create an 'intermediary structure' wherein the laity was encouraged to participate in Bible discussion and reflection preparing a basis for a new theological understanding. Cardenal hoped to put into practice Marxist analysis to help solve the social problems facing Nicaragua. He was particularly inspired by the accomplishments of Fidel Castro and his 'love for one's fellow man' (Cardenal, 1974: 321-322). In 1966, José de la Jara followed Cardenal's example by establishing the first of many CEB's throughout the *barrios* of Managua.

In January 1969, one hundred members of the Nicaraguan clergy attended the *Primer Encuentro Pastoral* in which various religious groups reported on the progress of how the proposals of Medellín were being used to promote change in society. One discourse by Fr. Noel García, a Jesuit priest, praised the work done at the *Solentiname* community while criticizing the majority of the clergy for their preference toward landowners and businessmen who provided economic support for the work of the Church. García explained that at the root of the bishops lack of commitment to social change was the fact that bishops 'were *not in touch* with the lower clergy and the laity on a grass-roots level [emphasis added]' (Williams, 1985: 349-351; Bahktiari, 1986: 18).

### **Polarization and Division**

Growth associated with the economy during the 1950's was the outcome of a cotton boom that helped to lessen the country's sole dependence upon coffee production. This development resulted in Nicaragua's entry into the Central American Common Market. Nevertheless, the country's newfound economic

prosperity did little to alleviate the sufferings of the poor as the majority of the profits ended up in the coffers of Anastasio Somoza Garcia and his supporters. Rising to power in 1967, Anastasio Somoza Debayle followed in the footsteps of his father displaying insatiable greed. He tried to take direct control of the economy, ultimately alienating the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, the new dictator had eliminated all channels of participation, thus exacerbating public discontent (Gismondi, 1986: 24-25; Williams, 1989: 24). With the absence of a vent for the growing social frustration, the CEB's were transformed into channels for political activism, in turn, compelling the laity to adopt a more radical stance (Bahktiari, 1986: 19).

In the early 1970's, Fr. Uriel Molina, a faculty member at *Universidad Centroamericana* (UCA), founded a 'university community' in which students could gather and discuss the Bible; but in reaction to the increasing repression of the Somoza regime, those students became involved in popular protest. Many of the students who were committed to social change were products of the Catholic middle and upper classes that were once loyal to the *Somocistas* but had found themselves alienated from the regime as a result of its growing corruption. In 1971, the students, led by Fr. Molina, held a massive protest over the lack of popular political participation in Nicaragua and the government's ill treatment of political prisoners (Williams, 1989: 45-47). Grassroots political protests such as this became prevalent throughout the 1970's; yet this particular instance was the first in which Catholic priests were directly involved.<sup>19</sup>

The most important factor in the politicization of the lower clergy was the emergence (1960-1967) of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN). Fr. Cardenal was inspired by this popular movement that he believed was destined to become the successor to the Castro Revolution. In turn, the *Sandinistas* saw the potential within the politicized clergy and laity to become the powerbase in which to replace a corrupt and archaic political system through revolution. Moreover, the revolutionary cadre saw an opportunity to expand its power base and sanitize the movement through its collaboration with Christians.<sup>20</sup> Hence, the FSLN adopted a policy of religious tolerance and even allowed revolutionary Christians into their ranks. Within this collaboration, it was believed that 'true' Christians were the ones who joined into this struggle (Gutiérrez, 1973: 275; Belli, 1988: 212-215).

The revolutionary Christian interpretation of Vatican II and Medellín was not the only view taken by those who responded to its call for social reform. In March 1970, Monsignor Miguel Obando y Bravo was appointed by Paul VI as the new Archbishop of Managua. The Obando

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<sup>19</sup> One of Fr. Molina's students, having accepted armed struggle, was among the first revolutionary Christians to experience revolutionary killing by running down a hospital security guard with his car while delivering weapons to the east *barrios* of Managua (Girardi, 1989: 97).

<sup>20</sup> Tomás Borge met with Ernesto Cardenal in 1969 and Uriel Molina in 1971 (Belli, 1985: 250).

appointment would be followed by five additional new bishops over the next few years. Obando had distanced himself from the Marxist/Christian union and their interpretation of liberation theology in his criticism of 'unreasoned insurrectional or armed protest' of revolutionary groups (Williams, 1985: 352; Shepard 1993: 285). Nonetheless, he stressed a true commitment to the poor and to the protection of human rights. This new voice of moderate opposition became the catalyst for the Church hierarchy's formal break with Somoza. Soon after his appointment, he was given a Mercedes Benz as the usual gift from Somoza. The Archbishop sold it and offered the money to the poor. He went even further by stating that he would abstain from the up-coming elections due to his belief that they were being used to perpetuate the *Somocistas* (Williams, 1985: 352-353).

Obando's actions encouraged some of the other bishops to take his lead. On 29 June 1971, a pastoral letter from the *Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua* (CEN) was published describing the Church's duty in the political realm (Williams, 1985: 353). It stressed the need to allow the citizens to decide the system of government that best suited their needs. A 19 March 1972 pastoral letter criticized the 'inadequacies of the current social structure' and stated that the Church supported changes (CEN, 1972).

In December 1972, Managua experienced a devastating earthquake that wrought damage all across the capital. Soon after, Somoza began a reconstruction campaign to rebuild the city. *Somocista* industries, however, controlled the vast majority of the loan contracts over labour and materials enabling the dictator to use the disaster to enrich his own coffers from foreign charity. A year after the ordeal, a mass was celebrated by Obando in Managua to commemorate those who had lost their lives during the earthquake. The Archbishop in his homily stressed the 'need to construct not only new buildings, but a new morality, and that this could only be accomplished through peace, not a peace imposed by repression'. At this point, Somoza, who was in the congregation, walked out, and members of the *Guardia Nacional* were ordered to forcibly disconnect the speakers (Williams, 1985: 354).

A series of droughts combined with lingering effects of the earthquake proved too much for many to bear. In response to the continued graft and corruption on the part of the regime, CEN (1974) published a pastoral letter citing abuses and offered to negotiate change. Furthermore, the *Sandinistas* seized the opportunity to return to the offensive amidst the chaos (Williams, 1985: 355-356). However, following a series of successful guerrilla operations, the dictator retaliated by declaring a state of emergency to root out the source of dissidence and unrest. Between 1975 and 1976, Nicaragua experienced an unprecedented level of repression bringing an investigation by the Organization of American States (OAS, 1978). With the press heavily censored, the *Guardia Nacional* was sent out into the countryside to summarily torture and execute any insurrectionist on the slightest pretence. The

*Solentiname* community was raided and its founder, Fr. Cardenal, was arrested. In January 1977, the bishops condemned the state of terror; yet they were careful not to condone the violence committed on the part of the armed opposition (CEN, 1977; Williams, 1985: 356-357).

As a result of the national scene being dictated by ‘institutionalized violence’, a clear break had occurred within the Church between those firmly implanted within the opposition against Somoza and the small minority that still supported the regime. The opposition camp, however, was divided in its approach on how to affect change. The majority favoured the moderate non-violent opposition typified by Archbishop Obando who agreed that Somoza had to go, but would not go so far as to support the *Sandinistas*. Outside of this majority remained a smaller, but highly organized, group of lower clergy and laity who had been radicalized by Somoza's brutal policies. Operating out of the CEB's, this group actively worked toward a *Sandinista* victory through armed revolution. Those following this latter tendency realized that without the organized support of the moderate opposition, the overthrow of Somoza was out of the realm of possibility (Bahktiari, 1986: 20). As a result of the government's armed assault, the FSLN had disarticulated into three distinct factions following the death of its leader, Carlos Fonseca, in 1976. Both the *Tendencia Proletaria* (TP) and the *Guerra Popular Prolongada* (GPP), staying strict to the founding principles of Marxism-Leninism, refused to collaborate with the forces of the ‘petty bourgeois’ but the third tendency, the dominant *Terceristas*, was able to temper the extreme tendencies of the FSLN to make the movement appear more attractive to the prospective moderate opposition (Black, 1981: 92-97).<sup>21</sup>

Following the FSLN's October Offensive at the end of 1977, the leaders of the radicalized Christian opposition, Maryknoll priest, Miguel D'Escoto, and Jesuit priest, Fernando Cardenal (younger brother of Ernesto), published *Los Doce*, a document calling all Nicaraguans to ‘find a national solution to the country's problems’. Obando, with the support of the Democratic Union of Liberation (UDELA), attempted to mediate a dialogue between the FSLN and the *Somocistas*. But even though the *Tercerista* faction, led by Daniel Ortega, accepted the proposal for a dialogue, Somoza would only participate if the FSLN first put down their arms. For a time, it seemed as if a compromise might be reached. However, the assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro (the conservative publisher of *La Prensa*) and the events that followed diminished any possibility of a peaceful settlement (Gismondi, 1986: 26; Williams, 1989: 33-34).

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<sup>21</sup> At this juncture, Fidel Castro communicated two requirements on the FSLN for future arms shipments: first, that the three factions needed to reunite; second, that the factions needed to convey ‘a democratic profile’ as he had done in the Cuban insurgency to allow collaboration with moderates prior to entering Havana. After power was consolidated, the rosary beads around his neck during the insurgency came off and a Marxist-Leninist state was declared (Belli, 1985: 41-42).

In response to the murder of Chamorro (which was widely believed to involve Somoza), Obando all but justified the use of force against the regime that has brutally repressed every other form of protest. On 2 August 1978, a pastoral letter reiterated Obando's feelings, stating that 'silence in the face of injustice would be tantamount to complicity' (CEN, 1978). The bishops went so far as to declare themselves in solidarity with the 'popular clamour arising from the depths of poverty' (Williams, 1985: 359-360). Even so, Somoza began a campaign to silence the church with intimidation and violence against the clergy (OAS, 1978: Chpt VI, 17).

Notwithstanding the hesitancy of the bishops toward violence, a turning point had been reached in the opposition to Somoza. Soon after the Chamorro assassination, the FSLN introduced their platform of government aimed at addressing the political agendas of both the broad based coalition of mostly moderate opposition, the *Frente Amplio Opositor* (FAO), and the hierarchy of bishops. The document proposed 'a government without leftist rhetoric, the creation of an anti-Somoza front with non-Marxists, the creation of mass support for the FSLN, the radicalization of the moderate opposition, and a unification of all factions of the FSLN'. For the non-Marxist participants, the platform's most attractive features were the guarantees of 'political pluralisms, the "mixed" economy of state and private enterprise, and international non-alignment' (Christian, 1985: 37). Ultimately, a united front was forged between the disaffected members of the bourgeois and the *Tercerista* faction of the FSLN. Obando, however, never felt comfortable with either the radical ideology of the Sandinistas or their collaboration with members of the lower clergy. According to the Archbishop, Christian arguments were being used by Marxists to persuade others to take up the revolutionary struggle (Bahktiari, 1986: 25).

As a result of close collaboration between the FSLN and the CEB's, the revolutionary Christian laity had prepared the peasant masses in the countryside and the *barrios* for an armed insurrection. The FSLN and their Christian allies alike were convinced that organized, collective, political action was the answer to improving peasant conditions. Hence, the Association of Rural Workers was created in 1976 to facilitate the training of peasant leaders in political organization. Not surprisingly, these radicalized peasant communities often became sanctuaries for *Sandinista* guerrillas to receive first aid and comfort. Later, under the guidance of Fr. Gaspar García, these peasants began to assemble bombs and store arms to sustain *Sandinista* forces through the revolution (Bahktiari, 1986: 21-22).

By the spring of 1979, the political and military status of the Somoza regime was deteriorating rapidly in the face of virtually unanimous opposition to the regime. The Jimmy Carter administration had cut-off sales of munitions to Somoza weakening the government's military posture (Kagan, 1996: 83). All attempts to reach a peaceful settlement had failed due to the dictator's unwillingness to resign. In May, the FAO began to work more closely

with the FSLN through the coordination of a nation-wide general strike. Nonetheless, the bishops were determined to make one last desperate attempt to negotiate with Somoza.

By this time, it had become obvious that Somoza's obstinacy would never be overcome, in which case the hierarchy of bishops gave their blessing to the armed struggle taking place against the regime in the final months of the campaign (CEN, 1979a). The bishops had failed in their moderate reformist approach by allowing the FSLN to take the initiative. As a result, the *Sandinistas* had become the vanguard of the revolution (Williams, 1989: 36-38).

### **The Catholic Church and the *Sandinistas***

At the conclusion of the final offensive, Somoza fled the country, allowing the *Sandinistas* to enter Managua on 20 July 1979. The members of the newly formed *Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional* (JGRN, an FSLN/FAO collaboration) now faced the difficult task of rebuilding Nicaraguan society (Williams, 1989: 65). The FSLN enjoyed widespread praise for what they had accomplished from every section of the country. In fact, the bishops published a pastoral letter on 17 November 1979 recognizing the role of the *Sandinistas* in delivering the Nicaraguan people from the dictatorship and opening the possibility of a new more just society (CEN, 1979b). The letter, however, was not a blanket endorsement of the FSLN, speaking clearly on future hopes but remaining sceptical of the guarantee of rights of free association and political participation. In the months following victory, there was concern over the dominant role that the *Sandinistas* were creating for themselves within the new government. Even though the FSLN platform had stressed the tenets of 'non-alignment, political pluralism, and mixed economy' and a respect for religion, many were beginning to realize that these guarantees had been made to facilitate the *Sandinistas* seizure of power so as to create an appearance of legitimacy. Indeed, when the 'marriage of convenience' had run its course, the FSLN soon revealed its true colours (Belli, 1984: 9-13; Christian, 1985: 124-126).<sup>22</sup> Yet, for the time being, the new government would tolerate political and economic pluralism, as the *Sandinistas* were determined to exploit their connections to various Christian tendencies and factions to further a program of socio-economic transformation.

Throughout the course of the revolution, the CEB's were unwavering in their support of the *Sandinistas*. In turn, these radicalized groups of clergy and laity were asked to participate in the new regime. Five priests were appointed to high-ranking government offices and ministries. These

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<sup>22</sup> 'After the victory, [Humberto] Ortega recalls, "we [the National Directorate] radicalized our model to look more like Cuba. Whether *Terceiristas* or not, we wanted to copy in a mechanical way the model that we knew—which was Cuba—and we identified ourselves with it... We didn't want to follow the other models.'" (Kagan, 1996: 122).'

priests believed their positions to be 'manifestations of their obedience to God' (Williams, 1989: 69). They surmised that their positions better served the interests of the poor and considered their actions as that of 'conscientious objection', in conflict with Church canon law yet insisting on their continued loyalty to the Church (Williams, 1989: 68-70).

Other members of the radicalized lower clergy and laity were given the task of going into the countryside to begin a series of humanitarian projects that would help provide for Nicaragua's poor, both materially and spiritually. In practice, however, these projects focused largely on the raising of political consciousness rather than matters of the soul. The CEB's were attempting to formulate a new value system based on revolutionary ideals and a secularized Christianity (Belli, 1985: 138). In this, the *Sandinistas* were promoted as ideal Christians. Theoretically speaking, the atheist Marxist revolutionary was closer to Christianity than a non-Marxist Christian (Gutiérrez, 1973: 175-178; Cardenal, 1993: 351-358). Nevertheless, in a country as thoroughly religious as Nicaragua, overt anti-religious policies would be unwise. Instead, the *Sandinistas* preferred to work with the radicalized Christians toward bringing the country's churches under the submission of the state (Belli, 1985: 169-170).

The first step toward undercutting Nicaragua's religiosity was to directly suppress the minority sects whom the *Sandinistas* thought that they could not convert. Nicaragua's only synagogue was confiscated and Jewish personal property was seized (Belli, 1985: 192). Protestant missionaries were singled out as being 'Uncle Sam's puppets' sent to destabilize the government. These attacks culminated in the persecution of Moravian missions on the Atlantic coast. The *Sandinistas* torched 49 *Miskito* villages including their churches (in one church 13 *Miskito* trapped inside by *Sandinista* soldiers died) and either imprisoned or executed the missionaries (Belli, 1985: 110, 194-195). However, the most elaborate plan of attack was for the Catholic Church hierarchy of bishops who had begun to criticize government policies and abuses of power (CEN, 1983; Belli, 1984: 40-43). The *Sandinistas* appointed Fr. Arias Caldera as the 'Archbishop of the Poor' to lead the radical Christians who were now referring to themselves as the 'Popular Church'. This was an attempt by the FSLN to undermine the authority of the Church. Christians were then urged to support the 'Church of the Poor' rather than the 'Church of the Rich' led by Archbishop Obando. There is little wonder that the first visit of John Paul II would mainly address questions of Church unity (John Paul II, 1983). Still and all, Obando enjoyed the overwhelming support of the poor, attracting large crowds almost everywhere he went, whereas Caldera struggled to find an audience. In response, the *Sandinistas* attempted to tip the scales against the Church by denying it access to the media. In July 1981, the annual televised mass celebrated by Obando in Managua was suspended. This action was followed by heavy censorship (and later banning) of *Radio Católica* and *La Prensa*. By contrast, the 'Popular Church' was given free reign to launch a

series of media attacks to which the bishops were unable to respond. These actions were then coupled by *Sandinista* policy that withheld foreign grants to all 'reactionary' organizations, supplying the 'Popular Church' with even more contributions (Belli, 1984: 40-45).

The popularity of Obando and the church hierarchy with the masses was no mystery. The Archbishop had hailed from the peasantry and had spent his entire life living among the people he was committed to serve. On the other hand, the leaders behind the 'Popular Church' were products of the upper class. Fr. Miguel D'Escoto lived in a luxurious home and drove a Mercedes Benz, whereas Sr. Geraldine Macias (a nun who was exiled in 1982) referred to Fr. Ernesto Cardenal as an 'upper-class hippie' who donned peasant clothing (Belli, 1985: 174-180). Such people from affluent backgrounds did not win the popular support of the masses. Furthermore, the peasants had realized that the radical groups were not so much willing to tend to their needs as they were to politically indoctrinate them (Belli, 1985: 178-180).

In the face of religious persecution, the bishops continued their offensive by speaking out on violations of human rights or 'policies that denied basic Christian principles about man and society' (CEN, 1983; Belli 1985: 173). Yet, the Sandinistas perceived such protests as a betrayal to the revolution and an endorsement of bourgeois ideals. Some of the more vocal clergy were exiled from the country on the slightest pretence. But the FSLN vanguard was later prompted to use the mass organizations as a weapon against the Church. At first, activities ranged from demonstrations outside churches to interrupting catechism classes to hand out propaganda leaflets. However, these relatively benign activities soon progressed to random acts of violence. In March 1981, Bishop Pablo A. Vega was harassed by an organized mob during a demonstration and then stoned as he tried to escape. That same year, Catholic billboards (some proclaiming, 'love your enemy') were vandalized and Archbishop Obando's jeep was destroyed. In 1983 alone, 26 Catholic churches across Nicaragua had their windows and doors smashed while 'divine mobs' beat up parishioners (Belli, 1984: 47-49). But perhaps the most disgraceful incident involved the public display of a naked Fr. Bismarck Carballo, head of *Radio Católica*. Students immediately took to the streets in protest to this gross violation of human dignity. As a result, one hundred people were arrested and the university was seized. By December 1982, the bishops had released a flurry of letters critical of the policies and abuses of the FSLN. Yet the protests were to no avail (CEN, 1982; Belli 1984: 50-52; Gilbert, 1988: 141-142).

In March 1983, Pope John Paul II arrived at Sandino Airport for a papal visit. Ever since his attendance at the CELAM III Conference at Pueblo (Mexico) in 1979, John Paul II had condemned the 'transcendence of religion beyond politics that surrenders the primacy of spirituality' (CELAM, 1979) as he had grown dismayed for the refusal of the priests in the *Sandinista* government to step down. During his visit, he celebrated a mass in Managua. It



was there that the Pope made a call for unity among the members of the Church (John Paul II, 1983). In defiance, the FSLN vanguard led the crowd to chant 'Power to the People!'. It was discovered later that the congregation at the papal mass had been hand picked by the *Sandinistas* to taunt the Pope, while many of the faithful were turned away. John Paul II later wrote a letter denouncing the Popular Church and reaffirming the authority of the bishops (Daw 1983: 632).

With the escalation of the contra war and the presumed possibility of U.S. intervention to overthrow the regime, relations between the Nicaraguan bishops and the Sandinista government reached its nadir between 1983 and 1987. The bishops criticized the government-established National Reconciliation Commission which required 'only surrender and disarmament' as the single option for a 'negotiated' settlement. A new Commission was proposed, consisting of representatives from the Church, the regional Red Cross, opposition leaders, in addition to members of the revolutionary government to promote a ceasefire, democratization, and free elections (CEN, 1987).

Archbishop Obando and Bishop Vega began to tour around the country on an anti-*Sandinista* campaign that found much support. Fr. Miguel D'Escoto attempted to counter these activities by organizing month-long fasts and demonstrations to protest suspected Church complicity in the U.S. aggression against the government. However, by the late 1980's, it was obvious that participation in the CEB's was dwindling. The Church hierarchy was producing a new generation of traditional priests that were undermining the radical clergy (Gilbert, 1988: 140-150). By the end of the decade, the FSLN found it necessary to compromise their position by easing censorship, giving back portions of confiscated properties, and agreeing to free elections with international oversight if the revolution was going to survive.

The *Sandinistas'* effort to re-strengthen their eroding support base was not enough to spare them from political defeat by conservative candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro in what the OAS refers to as the first free nationwide democratic election held in 1990 (OAS, 2005). During the Day for World Peace celebrations that year, prior to elections, two nuns were killed and an Auxiliary Bishop and priest were seriously injured in an ambush in northern Zelaya (CEN, 1990). In the wake of serious economic distress and continued hardship, the people of Nicaragua wanted a change and an international team lead by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter certified the election results (monitoring over half of the voting precincts). John Paul II made a return visit to Nicaragua at the invitation of the new President that he fulfilled in 1996 to deliver a message of unity and to dedicate the new Cathedral in Managua (John Paul II, 1996a).

Peace was the desire of John Paul II's 1983 visit and at the homily in the new cathedral he notes, 'Thanks to Divine Providence, peace has returned to your country' (John Paul II, 1996b).

## **Epilogue**

The course of the Church's history in Nicaragua had changed from an institution led by a martyred Bishop protecting Indian rights before Rome and the Spanish King to one largely concerned with protecting its own interests following Nicaragua's independence to one that had finally come to terms with its mission to save souls and to serve its people. Many of those, however, who took the initiative to bring the Church toward a more humanitarian orientation in modern times had allowed themselves to become the tool of a revolutionary political movement whose aim was to perpetuate its own power. Ironically, those who truly wished to serve God and His people found themselves oppressed by those who claimed that they were doing the same.

After a long struggle, a free election in 1990 brought to power a series of democratic governments allowing the Church the freedom to fulfil its mission. The fifth General Conference of CELAM (2007: 16) held in Aparecida (Brazil) was guided by the new Pope Benedict XVI resulting in 'an abundance of timely pastoral guidelines, explained in a wealth of reflections in the light of faith and of the contemporary social context...The focus is the impact of globalization on culture, faith, and socio-economic factors'. The Pope has often pointed out that globalization 'brings with it the risk of vast transnational monopolies and of treating profit as the supreme value'. (CELAM, 2007: 16) Obviously, bringing justice within such a complex system is daunting and requires technical understanding. A possible hindrance to a just resolution is public and private corruption, even within democratic institutions. Nevertheless, the advancement of social justice must be a focus of the Church (CELAM, 2007: 19-20); and this can only be done through international cooperation and formal agreements guided by moral teachings.

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State demands for societal coherence and Church moral teachings are the usual domains of Church/State conflict. Historically, the extent to which the Church has been involved in the lives of the people has often been dictated by its relationship to the state. A series of pastoral letters, written to clarify the Nicaraguan Church's position as an offensive thrust against a repressive Liberal government, incited retribution against the progressive wing of the Church. SUBSCRIBE TODAY! Subscribe to Questia and enjoy The revolutionary Christians in Nicaragua include both Catholics and Protestants. Their presence in the Catholic Church can be traced to the Second Vatican Council and the Latin American bishops' conference in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 which gave rise to greater concern for justice and social involvement in the Catholic Church. The radical Christians, however, had a different understanding of the ideal society. They looked to Cuba as an inspiring model of social change and did not object to the totalitarian features of Marxist governments. Working together with the Sandinistas, they have become the spearhead of a strategy to politicise the gospel and divide the churches. Pre Revolutionary Church State Relations The Catholic Church has a long history of close relations with the state and government in power. In the Colonial period, the Church acted as a check up on conquistadors who pursued their own feudalism. During the period of Sandinista rule (1979-1990) the Nicaraguan Catholic Church was divided between the pro-Sandinista "popular church" of which they were a patron, and the anti-Sandinista hierarchy. The Church was united in its opposition toward the corruption of the Somoza dynasty but the clergy's opinions about the Sandinistas diverged once the revolutionary government took power. "Revolution and the Church in Nicaragua and El Salvador." "Journal of Church and State" 28:1 (1986), 15-42] \*Chasteen, John Charles.