

Gracias a Dios: The People's Church in Nicaragua

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"We are not typical Catholics," explains Yamil Ríos of the Saint Paul the Apostle Christian Base Community in Managua. "Because we don't have a priest here, thanks be to God." Around the room parishioners chuckle on their folding chairs which are set up in a half circle. At the front of the room, musicians shift their instruments, gearing up for another upbeat number.

In today's Nicaragua, there is a rupture between the Catholic hierarchy and its abandoned base. The politicized official church has long collaborated with U.S. imperialism and, as a consequence, is losing the community of faith comprised of the poor and working people of Nicaragua.

Christian Base Communities with a preferential option for the poor

Christian Base Communities in Nicaragua, like St. Paul the Apostle, flourished during the insurrection in the 1970s and after the 1979 overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. This bloody dictatorship was supported by the Catholic Church hierarchy during its almost 45 years of rule. These communities were places where lay people led liberation theology bible studies, celebrated mass and helped their neighbors.

Unlike Cuba, the Nicaraguan revolution was never secular. Nicaragua's Revolution was so influenced by liberation theology that in the 1980s there was a popular saying: "Between Christianity and revolution there is no contradiction." Foreign minister Father Miguel d'Escoto, a Maryknoll priest, often said: "You can't be a follower of Jesus and *not* be a revolutionary."

Father Miguel was not the only priest in government. At that time, several others were also at the cabinet level working to improve the lives of the poor majority. But they were not the priests of the Church hierarchy, which was openly opposed to the Sandinista Revolution. [Pope John Paul II](#) himself came to Nicaragua to chastise the priests in government, and the Vatican later censored them.

Thanks to relentless antagonism from the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, few faith

communities like St. Paul the Apostle are still active in Nicaragua today.

“This community is a lay community in the sense that we are the ones who carry out our own religious rites. We don’t consider that those who are ordained – priests – are above us or have more power or more authority,” explains community member Eduardo Valdez.

“In the early 1990s after the Sandinista party was defeated at the polls, the Catholic hierarchy didn’t look favorably on communities like ours,” Valdez continues, “due to our belief in the preferential option for the poor. They wanted to impose silence on us, they wanted us to quit singing our songs of commitment, and there was a time of conflict and rupture with the priests. Since 1994 we have not had a priest; so we are lay people, women and men, who carry out our own religious celebrations.”

At the community’s Sunday service, three women sit at the central table and lead mass with prayers and readings from the Bible in an order familiar to Catholics everywhere. When it’s time for the homily, however, the floor is opened to the parishioners. The mic is passed around as young and old – and mostly women – give their interpretation of the gospel as it relates to them and their lives in their working class neighborhood of Managua. When it’s time for communion, the lay women explicitly invite everyone to take communion, no matter what religious tradition they come from. “Everyone is welcome,” they insist.

The musicians strike up a song from the Nicaraguan Peasants Mass. “Let’s go to the Lord’s cornfield,” they sing. “Jesus Christ invites us to his harvest of love, the corn shines in the light of the sun, let’s go to the cornfield of communion.” In place of communion wafers are delicious traditional corn cookies. After everyone has taken communion, the basket of leftover cookies is passed around and everyone munches on more.

Rupture of Nicaraguans from the Catholic hierarchy

While the St. Paul the Apostle Community is the oldest such community in the country, tracing its roots back to the 1960s, its members are not by any means the only faithful to break with the traditional Catholic Church. Recent polls show that only [37%](#) of Nicaraguans today identify as Catholics, as opposed to [94%](#) in the mid-90s and [50%](#) only a few years ago. What has caused this recent rupture?

During the [U.S.-led](#) coup attempt in 2018, violent criminals held the entire country hostage for months through thousands of road blocks which, in addition to crippling the country’s economy and causing the loss of thousands of jobs, were centers of terrible violence.

Although the U.S. was funding the attempted ousting of Nicaragua’s democratically elected Sandinista government, the Catholic Church hierarchy in Nicaragua was [instigating](#) it. In several cities around the country, priests called for violence from the pulpit. Some actually initiated violence, including in Ciudad Sandino where a parish priest was [seen](#) encouraging the burning of the Sandinista party headquarters and the looting of the social security offices.

At the “roadblocks of death,” Sandinista supporters were identified, beaten, raped, tortured and murdered – with [priests watching](#) and sometimes participating in the horrifying violence. Video evidence shows priests [storing weapons](#) in churches, [beating](#) people, dousing people in [gasoline](#), and directing gangs to [disappear bodies](#). Parishioners saw what

the priests did with their own eyes, and unsurprisingly, have turned away from the Church as a result.

Bishop Rolando Álvarez

“What happened here in the Nicaraguan Catholic Church was really horrible,” says peasant farmer [Benjamín Cabrera](#) of Ciudad Sandino. “Because the messages that the priests give during mass are just full of hate...Father [Rolando Álvarez](#), what an onslaught, how he expresses himself, how he turns on the people, how he sickens the hearts of the people.”

Former bishop of Matagalpa and Estelí, Álvarez is one of the most reviled figures in the Nicaraguan church, known for his offensive rhetoric, openly calling for violence from the pulpit and directing violence in 2018. In the town of Chagüitillo, during mass at the church that the people themselves had raised the money for and built with their own hands, Álvarez asked who in the congregation was Sandinista. When all the Sandinistas raised their hands, he pointed to the door and said, “Get out of my church.”

Since 2016 radio stations and tv channels in Matagalpa run by Álvarez received US funding channeled for undermining the government. Despite government warnings that these activities were in [violation](#) of the law and status as religious media, he never ceased his destabilizing efforts even after 2018. Eventually, seven radio stations and two TV channels were closed for [legal violations](#) in 2022 by Telcor, the entity that regulates communications.

Álvarez ignored invitations to [dialogue](#) and he and colleagues [barricaded themselves](#) into cathedral in Matagalpa for several days. Last August, Álvarez’ was placed under house arrest and investigated for a series of [crimes](#), including undermining national integrity, promoting hatred and violence via information and communication technologies, aggravated obstruction of state functions, and contempt of authority. Recently, the Nicaraguan government approved deporting Álvarez, along with [222 convicted traitors](#), to the U.S.

Álvarez refused to board the plane to the U.S. without first speaking to the Nicaraguan bishops. He also demanded that the 11 priests and seminarians who had already boarded – co-conspirators of his who had already been convicted of crimes – deplane to speak with him. Because the decision to deport Álvarez was made by the Nicaraguan government and had nothing to do with the Church, his demands were refused.

Álvarez was told he could choose to board the plane or not; he [chose to remain](#) in Nicaragua. Much to his surprise, Álvarez was not brought back to his home to continue house arrest, but was sent straight to La Modelo prison. He was tried and convicted later that week and sentenced to [26 years](#) in prison for his crimes.

People keep their faith, but few go to church

“I don’t know what happened to the Church,” Cabrera throws his hands up. “It hurts me because I’ve always been a Catholic, I was a Delegate of the Word. But how can I now support these priests? How could I look at them? The Church has fallen. People keep their faith, but few go to church...Maybe where you’re from they tell a different story, but that’s not true. If you go out and ask people, ‘What happened to the Church?’ The story that we’re telling you, you will hear it from a lot of other people too. The church was one of the primary bases of the coup.”

In light of the actions of hatred and violence of its priests in Nicaragua, a country where [77%](#) of the population support the Sandinista government, perhaps the Church should be less surprised by its empty pews.

Unlike the shrinking Catholic Church, Pentecostal protestant churches continue to grow – a recent outdoor vigil in the northern border town of Somotillo drew a [crowd](#) of thousands. The popularity of personal over institutionalized religion is growing: people praying and worshipping in their homes and lay communities, continuing their faith in what [Edwin Sánchez](#) calls a “close and quality relationship with [God rather than] a hollow and distant one.”

Today, Nicaragua remains a profoundly spiritual country with thriving religious communities, but they are not the religious communities that the traditional church would like to see. Their existence challenges the very foundations of the Church and it is therefore unsurprising that they draw the ire of its priests.

“A real option for the poor can’t be purely spiritual, just an empty concept where the poor continue being poor and miserable,” explains Valdez of the St. Paul the Apostle Community. “That option for the poor has political implications, it has implications for power. It means that we the poor have to access power to make that option a reality, and we see the hand of God in that political struggle, in the liberation of the people. That is why we are Sandinistas. We are a Sandinista and anti-imperialist community because of our faith.”

As Father [Miguel d’Escoto](#) said, “You cannot be a follower of Jesus if you are not a revolutionary, and that, inevitably, implies being a recalcitrant anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist.”

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