

The Church in Nicaragua: Under Attack From Within and Without*

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On 19 July 1979, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, Nicaraguan dictator and head of the family that had ruled this Central American nation for over 43 years, was overthrown. After two years of bloody civil war, sparked by the murder of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, editor of the opposition newspaper *La Prensa*, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN — Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional), which had emerged in leadership throughout the revolution, took power.

Inspired by the legendary Nicaraguan hero Sandino, the FSLN has been, since its inception in 1963, a publicly Marxist-Leninist organisation. Its founder was the Communist Carlos Fonseca Amador, who was killed in 1975. During the 1960s the FSLN developed close links with Fidel Castro. Until 1978 the FSLN explicitly acknowledged its Marxist-Leninist commitment.¹ Circumstances in that year, however, persuaded the Sandinistas to adopt a more cautious ideological profile. Castro convinced them that they should merge their factions under a united leadership and seek alliances with many non-Marxist sectors of Nicaraguan society, all the while maintaining control of the military machinery. It was thus in 1978 and 1979, when the overthrow of Somoza became a real possibility, that the Sandinistas began presenting themselves as champions of a democratic programme which included a pluralist society, free elections, freedom of expression, a non-aligned foreign policy and a mixed economy. They added to their political and diplomatic staff moderates who were involved in the non-Marxist opposition to Somoza. They heralded their respect for religion, and promised to be a government in which revolutionaries and Christians would work together. The four Catholic priests appointed to high offices in the Sandinista administration after the revolution, and the wide distribution of Bibles allowed by the government, have given credence to this claim.

This apparent about-turn has stirred a good deal of controversy over the issue of religion under the Sandinistas. Many observers, noting the presence of priests in the government and other signs of co-operation between the Sandinistas and Christians, have found it difficult to assess

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the Sandinistas' true attitude toward religion.

To understand the Sandinistas' approach to religion one must realise that Nicaragua is a country where no government, no leader, no politician can boast of being anti-religious when trying to gain influence with the population. Nicaragua, according to many observers, is one of the most Catholic countries in the world. Religious devotion is fervent, and the bishops and the Pope are held in great respect, particularly among the peasants and the urban poor. In some ways, as a Catholic country, Nicaragua resembles Poland, where the Catholic faith is also deeply rooted in the lives of ordinary people.

When the Sandinistas came to power in 1979 they were very conscious of this religious commitment. They made a concerted effort to avoid betraying any atheistic ideological commitment or any intention of weakening the Churches. They issued several communiqués expressing great respect for religion and toleration of religious activities. There were indications of a hidden anti-religious agenda, such as the "Christmas memo", a private memo of the National Secretariat of Propaganda and Political Education of the FSLN, which accidentally became public in December 1979, just five months after the revolution ended. The memo clearly demonstrated the Sandinistas' intention to politicise the content of Christian belief while concealing any such policy.² But publicly the Sandinistas avoided an anti-religious profile.

The Sandinistas, in fact, presented themselves as revolutionaries who embodied Christian values far better than those who officially called themselves Christian. In their claim to be the true upholders of Christian values the Sandinistas could boast of the participation of "revolutionary Christians" in the government. In order to understand the Sandinista government's approach to religion, one must take into account the rise of this stream of revolutionary thought and action within the Churches.

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 Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 which gave rise to greater concern for justice and social involvement in the Catholic Church. Since then, Christians in Nicaragua and throughout Latin America have taken positions on these issues along roughly three lines. One line is conservative. The conservative Christians are distrustful of the new emphasis and rather sympathetic to the *status quo*. A second position might be called the progressive one. These Christians welcome the greater emphasis on social justice and promote and even champion the cause of human rights for the poor. They are aware, however, of the need to provide a distinctly Christian response — neither uncritically capitalist nor communist — to the immense economic and political problems facing Latin America. A third position is that of the radical or revolutionary Christians, who moved beyond the progres-

sives' position to the point of advocating Marxist revolution as the only way to true liberation. This third group took a more definite shape in Latin America in the early seventies under the name "Christians for Socialism". They claimed to be inspired by liberation theology.

In Nicaragua the conservative Christians included the pre-1970s Catholic hierarchy and some small Protestant groups. Some of the most renowned conservative personalities among Catholics, such as the Jesuit priest Fr León Pallais, were running educational institutions like the Central American University during the sixties. The emerging progressive Christians found a leader in the Rev Miguel Obando y Bravo, ordained Catholic Archbishop of Managua in 1970. A man of humble background and of Indian and mulatto ancestry, Archbishop Obando has come to represent the Catholic Church's break with its conservative past.

The revolutionary Christians began as a small group composed mainly of university students who became deeply involved with the FSLN guerillas. One of their leaders was Fr Uriel Molina. During the 1970s he organised "reflection groups", which adopted Marxist theory as the key to understanding and changing existing political and social situations. As the end of the Somoza regime drew near, more priests, including members of religious orders, began to subscribe to this approach, largely under the influence of the most radical branch of liberation theology.

When the Sandinistas came to power, both the progressive and the radical Christians welcomed the change. In a pastoral letter the Nicaraguan bishops, headed by Archbishop Obando, described the revolution as a "propitious occasion to make real the Church's option for the poor".³ They even expressed their approval of socialism insofar as socialism would mean an authentic redistribution of power and wealth to the people and insofar as it did not turn people into the instruments of arbitrary power.

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.

Soon after the triumph of the revolution, the revolutionary Christians began to receive aid and personnel from abroad in order to develop centres for "theological reflection" which advocated a synthesis of Marxism and Christianity. This string of well-equipped centres includes the following organisations: Centro Antonio Valdivieso (CAV) — Catholic, although with an ecumenical facade; Centro de Promoción y Desarrollo (CEPAD) — evangelical Protestant; Instituto Histórico Centroamericano (IHCA) — Jesuit; Centro de Promoción Agraria (CEPA) — also Jesuit; Eje Ecuénico (MED-CELADEC) — Protestant; Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Económicas y Sociales

(INIES) — officially non-confessional but led by a foreign Jesuit; Confederación de Religiosos de Nicaragua (CONFER) — Catholic; and the Consejo Ecueménico Blufileño de Iglesias Cristianas (CEBID) — inter-denominational.

Foremost among their teaching has been the claim that in order to be a complete Christian, one has to be committed to the Sandinista revolution. This has also been a claim made by the Sandinista leaders themselves. In its New Year's address in 1981 the government *junta* proclaimed that "the true Christians, the sincere Christians, embrace the option of the Sandinista revolution, which in Nicaragua today is the road toward the option for the poor." A political implication of this view is that those Christians not siding with the FSLN, are not, in fact, true or sincere Christians. Commitment to a political party, the FSLN, has thus become the ruling, all-important criterion for distinguishing real Christians from non-Christians. Whoever fails to make this commitment is not only an enemy of the people — whom the FSLN supposedly represent — but of Christ as well. The promotion of this view has helped the Sandinistas to disclaim charges of religious persecution when they have harassed or repressed non-Sandinista Christians. According to the official view — echoed by the revolutionary Christians — the non-Sandinista Christians are not true Christians, just reactionaries dressed up in religious garb.

The commitment to the FSLN that the revolutionary Christians preach is an absolute commitment. "There is no way for a Christian to show his faith in the kingdom more than by committing himself absolutely to a contingent project"⁴ — that is, the Sandinista revolution, wrote Fr Juan Hernández Pico, Spanish theologian of the Instituto Histórico Centroamericano. The Chilean, Pablo Richard, claimed in the same vein that the revolutionary commitment should not be judged from the standpoint of the Gospel but the other way around: it is from a revolutionary commitment, "which is assumed by itself, by its own rationality, that we want to rethink our faith".⁵

Alongside this consecration of revolution, central religious meanings and concepts have been replaced by socio-political ones compatible with Marxism-Leninism. Sin is identified with unjust social structures, namely, capitalism. Salvation, or deliverance from sin, is to be achieved by armed revolution. The revolutionary cadre, the Party, acts as the messiah, leading people to the true kingdom, socialism. Jesus sided with the poor, so Christians must side with them politically, fighting against their oppressors. As God incarnated himself in flesh, so Christians must "incarnate" themselves in a concrete and temporal political project, Marxist revolution. Jesus himself is reinterpreted as the first revolutionary, a zealot engaged in the political liberation of Israel. The revolutionary Christians claim that "Jesus Christ was not enough".⁶ For them Christianity needs the "mediation" of a theory and of a revolutionary

praxis, Marxism, in order to make the promises of the Gospel effective.

The fact that Marx and communism are avowedly atheistic has not troubled these Christian sympathisers. For the revolutionary Christians, belief in God is no longer of fundamental importance. In a statement to the press in 1980, Fr Miguel D'Escoto, a Maryknoll priest and Foreign Minister of the Sandinista regime, said: "There are people that call themselves atheist. From the Christian perspective, in fact, this does not have great importance. The important thing is the behaviour of people; it is the practice, not the theory." Referring to Alejandro Bermudez, a prominent Nicaraguan communist who died in 1979, Fr D'Escoto added that "despite the fact that theoretically he might have called himself an atheist, he was one of the most believing persons" — "believing" in the sense that this man had struggled for the revolution.

The pro-Marxist Christians have confronted the institutional Church and challenged the authority of its leaders. They have demanded that Christians give unconditional support to the revolution, not to the Church, thereby promoting a shift in loyalties. At the same time, the revolutionary Christians have also begun to talk about the existence of two churches — the church of the "poor", or the "people's church" (the pro-Sandinista Christians), and the church of the "rich" — the institutional church, especially as represented by the Catholic bishops.

Based on this dichotomy, and in concert with government spokesmen like Interior Minister Tomás Borge, in mid-1980 the revolutionary Christians launched a campaign to discredit the Catholic hierarchy. The campaign escalated from initially mild criticism ("The bishops are too conservative, too fearful of opening themselves up to collaboration with Marxism") to a full-fledged attack ("The bishops are the voices of the bourgeois, have fallen into the hands of Reagan's policies, are vain, authoritarian, and counter-revolutionaries: enemies of the people").

Some of the Protestant denominations have been targets for the attacks³ of both the revolutionary Christians and the Sandinistas. The Centro Valdivieso published pamphlets portraying them as Uncle Sam's puppets, sent to Nicaragua in order to destabilise the revolution⁷ — a charge the government would loudly repeat in order to justify the forcible seizure of many Protestant places of worship.

In contrast to the bitterness of the criticism against the Catholic hierarchy and all those Christians unwilling to accept the Marxist gospel, the advocates of the people's church have lent the Sandinistas their full, uncritical support. An apologetic literature, encompassing practically all policies of the regime, has been aired by the theological centres of revolutionary Christians. The denunciation of government injustices — which had been viewed as a foremost Christian duty during the Somoza regime — became overnight a most regrettable, un-Christian act, bordering on treason.

The revolutionary Christians have not only closed their eyes to mounting abuses by the Sandinista regime but have justified them: from the mobbing of dissidents to the repression of the Miskito Indians. When the FSLN-organised mobs took to the streets in April 1981 to attack members of the MDN political party (Movimiento Democrático Nicaraguense), after it had requested a legal permit to hold an outdoor meeting, the Centro Valdivieso described the attack as an expression of the poor's anger in the face of provocations from its enemies.⁸ CEPAD praised the compulsory relocation of thousands of Miskitos, which brought the Sandinistas criticism even from some of their friends, as a plan "to guarantee the right to life of the Miskito people".⁹

The government has carried on its programme of weakening and dividing the Churches through the help of the revolutionary Christians. The Sandinistas have achieved this partly by giving the revolutionary Christians exclusive access to the virtual state monopoly of the mass media, and denying media access to church leaders who take a different approach.

In July 1981, for example, the Sandinistas suspended the televised mass that the Archbishop of Managua had been celebrating for years. Later, tight restrictions were placed on the Catholic Church's only radio station, Radio Católica. The remaining independent means of communication, such as *La Prensa*, the newspaper which had served to defend the Church (and is the only independent newspaper in Nicaragua), were placed under heavy censorship. Finally the Sandinistas demanded that homilies and sermons of church leaders be censored as a precondition for broadcasting.

These measures enabled the revolutionary Christians to mount their attacks on the Catholic bishops and the other non-Marxist Christians from the television, radio, and newspapers of the nation, while the latter were unable to reply.

Further, pro-Marxist Christians, representatives of the so-called "church of the poor", have received generous international financial aid. The government, meanwhile, in a decree in August 1982, prohibited the Catholic Church and all private institutions from receiving foreign grants. One source of support for those who advocate the uniting of Marxism and the Gospel has been the World Council of Churches. In April 1983, for example, it gave US \$176,000 to the Centro Valdivieso. In 1981, for instance, the Church World Service of the National Council of Churches gave US \$365,329 to CEPAD, the United Methodist Committee on Relief gave them \$100,000, and the United Presbyterian Hunger Programme gave \$10,000. INIES received \$25,000 in 1982 from the Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church.¹⁰

The aid provided to the revolutionary Christian groups by Christian organisations in North America and Europe enables them to employ full-

time personnel, including theologians and lay workers. Most of the former are foreigners who came to the country after the triumph of the revolution; for example, Fr Hernández Pico S.J., Fr Teófilo Cabestrero, Fr Plácido Erdozaín (member of the FDR, the Marxist-led Democratic Revolutionary Front of El Salvador), and many others, mostly natives of Spain. The centres where they work have purchased printing and recording equipment and edit multilingual newsletters for distribution abroad, in addition to a vast array of pamphlets and books printed for domestic consumption. They have also been able to organise seminars and retreats with the participation of the most outspoken advocates of Marxist liberation theology — Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino, Enrique Dussel, Jules Girardi, and others.

By contrast the Catholic Church and those Protestant denominations not siding with the regime have hardly any communications centres or trained Christians devoted to dealing with the ideological issues. They have also been severely impaired in their capacity to make their needs and problems known to the outside world. The Nicaraguan government passed a law in the summer of 1981 stating that any Nicaraguan making declarations abroad that were detrimental to the Sandinista regime could be punished with three to ten years imprisonment.

Paradoxically, then, what is called by the revolutionary Christians the “church of the poor” has indeed become a rich church, and what they call the “church of the rich” is indeed a poor church. Furthermore, the “church of the poor” or people’s church is an élite of mostly foreign intellectuals with little or no popular backing, whereas the institutional church, said to represent the rich minority, enjoys the overwhelming support of the Nicaraguan poor.

The success of the Sandinistas’ strategy of using revolutionary Christians to divide and weaken the Churches has enabled them to turn against some of the non-Marxist Christians directly and aggressively. The first groups to become targets for attack were the weaker, more fragmented, and less socially influential organisations, particularly some of the Protestant bodies.

The first Christians to experience direct government hostility were Moravian missionaries based in the isolated Atlantic region — the area where the Miskitos and other Indian minorities live. During more than a century of missionary effort the Moravians had provided the Miskitos with the bulk of their churches, schools, and hospitals. Shortly after the triumph of the revolution, however, the Sandinistas began to persecute the Moravian missionaries in order to replace their leadership and influence with that of Sandinista militants, many of them Cubans. In the wake of the unrest that such action stirred among the Miskitos, the Sandinistas jailed several Moravian missionaries and killed some of them, alleging that they were inciting the Miskitos to rebel against the authorities and



that they were CIA agents.

For the rest of the Nicaraguan population, as well as for the rest of the world, it became extremely difficult to keep track of the events affecting Christians on the Atlantic coast. Travel to the region — which is accessible only by plane or boat — was banned and all sources of information were cut off.

The silence and isolation made the situation worse. According to Edgard Macías, former Vice-Minister of Labour in the Sandinista government, by mid-1982 the government militia had destroyed at least 55 churches in that part of the country — a tragedy of immense proportions, according to Macías, for these churches had been the sole organised source of social services for many of the Miskitos.¹¹

In January 1982 two Moravian church leaders, the Rev Fernando Colomes and Norman Bent, were forced to leave the Atlantic region and go to Managua. In May 1982 the Sandinista authorities announced the closure of CASIM, the Committee of Social Action of the Moravian Church, which was in charge of providing social and relief services to the Miskitos. They also arrested the Rev Santos Clevban, who was held incommunicado from 11 to 25 July.

In the rest of the country, meanwhile, pressures and harassment against both the Catholic and Protestant Churches began gradually to

increase. For the most part, the more remote the towns from the capital, the greater the pressures. Government-sponsored groups used to organise political meetings in front of Catholic churches at precisely the same time as Mass. At times, Sandinista militants would interrupt catechism classes to hand out political propaganda or to question the catechists.¹²

As mentioned, on 7 July 1981, the government suspended the televised Mass that the Archbishop of Managua had celebrated for many years. The reason given was that time had to be made available for more "progressive" priests. With this move, the government not only entered into the private affairs of the church but also took from the hierarchy of the Catholic Church its only remaining access to television. Meanwhile, public presentations by Marxist Christians, bitterly criticising the hierarchy, multiplied. Simultaneously, many religious billboards put up around the capital by groups of Catholics were destroyed or smeared.¹³ Reporting this fact cost the newspaper *La Prensa* its first temporary closure.

More ominous were physical attacks on Catholic bishops and priests. The first took place towards the end of 1981 when a Sandinista mob threw stones at the Bishop of Juigalpa, Paul A. Vega, while he was leaving a Mass. Several weeks later another mob in Managua destroyed the windows and tyres of Archbishop Obando's jeep.¹⁴

Shortly afterwards the attacks increased on many fronts. On 13 January 1982, five North American Catholics (three nuns and two priests) were expelled from the country. The government attributed the expulsion to a bureaucrat's mistake. It announced that the five could return, although not to their original parishes. Two of them returned. The Bishop of the Atlantic coast, Salvador Schlaefler, experienced a similar incident but in his case it happened three times.*

In March 1982, the government gave clear indications that they were preparing for a more generalised persecution of non-Sandinista religious groups, both Protestant and Catholic. On 3 March 1982, *Barricada*, the official newspaper of the FSLN, published the first of a series of reports on the Protestant denominations and sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. They were ridiculed as superstitious or fanatical and, inevitably, linked to North American imperialism. The newspaper campaign paved the way for more direct actions, which took place within a matter of weeks.

On a parallel course, the government launched a major offensive against freedom of expression. The Catholic episcopate's radio station, the director of which was Fr Bismarck Carballo, was closed down for a month for transmitting supposedly distorted information. Then, on

*At the end of 1983 the American-born Bishop Schlaefler, 65, led five hundred discontented Miskito Indians across the border to Tegucigalpa in Honduras — *Ed.*

15 March 1982, a State of Emergency was declared. Originally decreed for one month, but subsequently extended at each expiration date, the State of Emergency signalled the end of the remaining margin of liberty for the newspaper *La Prensa* and Radio Católica. Assured of the silence of its critics, the government then stepped up its attacks.

After May, churches of the Moravians, Adventists, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses were confiscated in rapid succession by the authorities. Each group was accused of working with the CIA.¹⁵ As in other instances, the charges were not supported with proof of any sort nor were the victims allowed to defend themselves in court.

In televised speeches, the Minister of the Interior, Tomás Borge, reiterated insults against the Catholic Church and pinned the title of "anti-Christ" on Archbishop Obando. Similar verbal assaults were hurled at Protestants. In addition to the usual accusations of CIA alliances, in a public address Borge accused Protestants of being allied with the Somocistas. The mob of FSLN militants listening to him began to chant "*que se vayan*" — "get them out". They then proceeded to attack and occupy Protestant churches and religious buildings.

On 20 July 1982, the Catholic bishops of Nicaragua sent the newspaper *La Prensa* a courteous, open letter, asking the government to clarify the situation of Bishop Schlaefer of the Atlantic coast, and to cease the anti-religious campaign. *La Prensa* was prohibited by the government censor from publishing the letter. The next day Sandinista mobs attempted forcibly to take over several Catholic churches in protest at the decision of the Archbishop of Managua to move Fr Arias Caldera, a Marxist priest whom the Sandinistas dubbed the "archbishop of the poor". The mobs, encouraged by the state-controlled mass media and enjoying the logistic support of government vehicles, attacked several priests. In one incident, the auxiliary bishop of Managua, Bosco Vivas, was beaten. The Nicaraguan Presbyterian Council protested against the attack, but the government's censor prevented the publication of their letter.

The culmination of government intervention occurred on 31 July 1982, when the Sandinista regime banned the publication of a letter from Pope John Paul II to the Nicaraguan bishops. It was only after three closures of *La Prensa* and vigorous protests that the ban was lifted, fully one month after the Pope's letter had arrived.

The Sandinista government made an even more dramatic attack on religion the following month. On 11 August the government publicly announced that Fr Bismarck Carballo, spokesman for the Catholic Archbishop's office, had been caught in a sexual incident. The following night the Sandinista television presented a documentary. In it, Fr Carballo was seen being removed naked and bleeding by police from a house in the residential neighbourhood of Las Colinas. A crowd mocked him from outside. The priest, who was visiting a female parishioner who had

insistently requested him to come, reported that when he entered the house a man armed with a pistol had appeared and demanded that both undress. As soon as he did so, police arrived and dragged him out to the street, where a crowd of about seventy people, including reporters from the Sandinista newspapers and a crew from the Sandinista television, were gathered. According to the government, they were there by sheer coincidence.

In their first report the Sandinista media did not give the name of the alleged offended husband, although a picture of him was published. When the government began the trial, however, the alleged husband turned out to be another man, not the man whose picture had originally been published. When the newspaper *La Prensa* sought to draw attention to this incongruity, the government censor prohibited it.

The censorship of this discrepancy, and the government's prohibition of any discussion of the incident by those friendly to Fr Carballo, indicate the government's intention to defame the priest. Later, in the face of domestic and international outrage, the government admitted that it had erred in *publicising* the incident, while still maintaining that Fr Carballo was guilty. However, the manner in which the government consistently suppressed evidence favourable to Fr Carballo demonstrates that the government did not seize on an instance of priestly misconduct but rather staged the incident as a way of undermining the Catholic Church through an attack on one of its leading spokesmen.

Miguel Bolaños, an agent in the Nicaraguan Intelligence Service who defected to the United States in May 1983,¹⁶ later provided evidence which indicated that the Sandinistas staged the incident to defame Fr Carballo. Among other things, Bolaños reported that Interior Minister Tomás Borge and Managua Chief of Police, Lenin Cerna, watched the whole Carballo episode from a van with tinted windows parked near the house where the event took place.

4 The Sandinista government's handling of the visit of Pope John Paul II to Nicaragua offered additional evidence of the kind of approach it intends to take toward religion. Leaving aside the points on which a consensus does not exist, the following list of events offers a description on which there is ample agreement by relatively impartial observers. The list is drawn from reports published in major media outlets, in particular *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and the major US television networks.

1. The Sandinistas did not allow Nicaraguans the freedom to assemble to greet the Pope. Traffic was halted throughout most of the country; only the Sandinista Defence Committees were entitled to transportation to the meeting places. Thousands of Catholics had to walk great distances from the surrounding cities in order to see the Pope. Many could not

make it. John Paul II, aware of the circumstances, greeted “the thousands of Nicaraguans who have not found it possible to come to the meeting places as they might have wanted”.

2. The Sandinistas prevented people from gathering ahead of time at the sites where the Pope was scheduled to appear. In Managua police fired automatic weapons over the heads of worshippers who attempted to get early places. Sandinista partisans were thus enabled to pack the front rows in the plaza.

3. An ABC-TV crew from the United States was detained and mishandled and their video tapes confiscated by the police.

4. John Paul II was interrupted during his sermon in Managua, and for the remainder of the Mass, by heckling and the chanting of slogans. During communion, to cite a single incident, a Sandinista agitator with a powerful sound magnifier cried: “Holy Father, if you are truly the representative of Christ on earth, we demand you side with us.” The police who were assigned to control the crowds frequently led the chants. Members of the papal entourage later stated that they had never before seen such behaviour on a papal tour.

5. Government technicians connected microphones distributed among pro-government groups to the main loudspeaker system, amplifying the cries of the agitators and the chants of “people’s power” so that the Pope’s words were often drowned out. He appealed for silence several times.

6. During the celebration of the Mass all nine members of the Sandinista National Directorate — including Tomás Borge and Daniel Ortega — joined the crowd in waving their left fists and shouting “people’s power”

7. The Catholic Church and the government had agreed that papal appearances in both Managua and Leon were to be wholly religious and apolitical. The Church itself warned parishioners against political activity and exhorted them not to carry partisan symbols or placards. Sandinista political supporters, however, carried political banners and posters and chanted political slogans through megaphones. The Sandinista leadership ended the papal Mass by singing the party anthem.

These incidents were not spontaneous outbursts of popular indignation but well-prepared actions carried out by FSLN partisans. They were not the excesses of some overly fervent Sandinistas but acts in which the full directorate of the FSLN participated.

More recent evidence on the incidents surrounding the visit of the Pope to Nicaragua was provided by the Sandinista intelligence defector Miguel Bolaños. He revealed that the government had planned all its actions — including the chanting of slogans — well before the Pope’s arrival.¹⁷ It is

significant to note, also, that on this occasion the Sandinistas acted in full view of the global media. People who are prepared to engage in such ugly treatment of a revered religious leader can hardly be expected to act with restraint when dealing with less well-known believers outside the glare of international publicity. The treatment of the Pope thus effectively symbolises the direction in which the Sandinista government intends to continue in order to pursue its struggle against religion.

Thus, as the fifth anniversary of the Nicaraguan revolution approaches, Catholics and Protestants face a difficult future in which they will have to deal with sharp internal divisions (supported by the government) and direct government harassment, abuse, and institutional pressures. Revolutionary Christians throughout Latin America have treated the Nicaraguan case as a pilot programme for the co-operation of Christians and Marxists on the basis of liberation theology. Given the efforts of revolutionary movements through Latin America allied with revolutionary Christians, it is quite possible that the Nicaraguan situation will be repeated elsewhere in the next decade. If so, the efforts of the Nicaraguan bishops and other orthodox Catholics and Protestants may also be viewed as a pilot project for Christians' ability to maintain theological, spiritual, and institutional integrity in the midst of internal and external opposition following a Marxist-led revolution.

¹See, for example, *Some Strategic Reflections*, Bulletin of the FSLN April 1978. Reprinted in *Los Sandinistas* by Gabriel García Márquez, et al. La Oveja Negra, ed. Bogotá, Colombia, 1979.

²Reprinted in my pamphlet *Una Iglesia en Peligro* (1983). Available from The Puebla Institute, P.O. Box 520, Garden City, Michigan, 48135 USA.

³*Compromiso Cristiano para una Nicaragua Nueva (Carta Pastoral*, November 1979), in *Revista del Pensamiento Centroamericano*, July-December 1980.

⁴"*Cristianos Revolucionarios II*" A popular pamphlet published by the Instituto Histórico Centroamericano, Managua, Nicaragua, n.d.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷! *Cristo Ya Ha Venido!!*, No. 2 in the "La Trocha" collection, a series of pamphlets published jointly by Centro Antonio Valdivieso, Instituto Histórico Centroamericano, and Instituto Juan XXIII.

⁸*La Media Docena*, No. 1 in the "La Trocha" collection.

⁹Quoted in the September 1982 issue of *Religion and Democracy*, a newsletter of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, Washington DC.

¹⁰All figures, *ibid.*

¹¹Edgard Macías Gómez, *Revolución Sandinista y Religión*, San Jose, Costa Rica, 1982, p. 5.

¹²Events like these were reported in a pastoral letter of 27 August 1980 from Paul Vega, bishop of the Juigalpa diocese.

¹³*La Prensa*, 7 July 1981, p. 1.

¹⁴*La Prensa*, 20 November 1981, p. 1.

¹⁵*Barricada*, 11 August 1982.

¹⁶*The Washington Post*, 19 June 1983.

¹⁷*Ibid.*