



VARIETIES OF FAITH: RELIGION  
IN CONTEMPORARY NICARAGUA

Margaret E. Crahan

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Margaret E. Crahan is currently Luce Professor of Religion, Power, and Political Processes at Occidental College. She is also a member of the Department of History, Herbert H. Lehman College, City University of New York. Dr. Crahan received her doctorate from Columbia University and has done field work in Peru, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Spain, and Switzerland on topics that span the seventeenth to twentieth centuries in Latin America. Her publications include studies of Spanish colonial administration, church-state relations, religion and politics, twentieth century Cuba, and African cultural heritage in the Caribbean. Dr. Crahan has served on the Executive Council of the Latin American Studies Association, as Vice-President of the Latin American Foundation, and on the Board of Directors of the Washington Office on Latin America. Her most recent book is Human Rights and Basic Needs in the Americas (1982). This paper was originally presented at the conference on "The New Church in Latin America," sponsored by the Kellogg Institute, April 22-24, 1983.



## ABSTRACT

The current ideological struggle in Nicaragua between the Sandinistas and their opponents is focused, to a considerable degree, in and on the Catholic Church. Shedding their traditional conservative image in the 1970s, Catholic clerics and laypeople became heavily involved in the movement to overthrow Somoza and establish a more equitable society. Drawing on the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Latin American Bishops Conference at Medellin, Colombia in 1968, progressive churchpeople helped mobilize support for the Sandinista movement. Such efforts were strongly legitimized when in June, 1979 the Nicaraguan bishops publicly declared their support for the insurrection on the grounds that the Somoza government was not licit given its frequent violation of civil/political rights, as well as social and economic rights.

Since the overthrow of Somoza in July, 1979, political and ideological differences within the Catholic Church have reasserted themselves, particularly over the Marxist tendencies of some of the Sandinista leadership. Certainly tension is high not only between the Catholic hierarchy and the government, but also between progressive and conservative churchpeople. The former continue to support and cooperate with the government and include several priests who hold high public office. They also include a good number of foreign missionaries. The conservatives include most of the bishops and Nicaraguan clergy. The outcome of the current conflicts involving the Catholic Church is not yet clear. What is, however, obvious is that while the Catholic Church is no longer a staunch ally of the status quo, neither is it unified in support of revolutionary movements.

## RESUMEN

La presente lucha ideológica en Nicaragua entre los Sandinistas y sus opositores está focalizado, en gran parte, en la Iglesia católica. Abandonando su imagen tradicionalmente conservadora, en la década del 70 los católicos (clérigos y laicos) se fueron comprometiendo fuertemente en el movimiento para derrocar a Somoza y construir una sociedad más justa. Basándose en las conclusiones del Segundo Concilio Vaticano (1962-65) y en la Conferencia del Episcopado Latinoamericano de Medellín (Colombia, 1968), los católicos progresistas se constituyeron en soporte del movimiento Sandinista. Tales esfuerzos fueron plenamente legitimados en junio de 1979, ocasión en que los obispos nicaraguenses declararon públicamente su apoyo a la insurrección basándose en la ilegitimidad del gobierno somozista, a la luz de sus frecuentes violaciones de los derechos civiles, políticos y sociales.

Desde el derrocamiento de Somoza, en julio de 1979, las diferencias políticas e ideológicas dentro de la Iglesia católica se han reafirmado, particularmente en lo que respecta a las tendencias marxistas de algunos dirigentes Sandinistas. Las tensiones son fuertes, no solo entre la jerarquía católica y el gobierno, como también entre los sectores progresista y conservador de la Iglesia. Los primeros continúan apoyando y cooperando con el gobierno, llegando algunos sacerdotes a ocupar altos cargos gubernamentales. Un importante contingente de misionarios extranjeros forma parte, también, del sector progresista, pero la mayoría de los obispos y sacerdotes son conservadores. El resultado del presente conflicto en el interior de la Iglesia católica es aún imprevisible, pero sin duda ella ha adquirido una nueva identidad. Ha dejado de ser un firme aliado de los sectores dominantes, aunque esto no implique que apoye unificadamente a los movimientos revolucionarios.



The ideological and political struggle currently underway in Nicaragua is focused, to a considerable extent, on and in the Catholic Church. This is the result of the relative strength of the Catholic Church as an institution in a society that until recently did not have very high organizational levels. It is also due to the historical role of Christianity as a key element of Nicaraguan cultural identity and to the rapid expansion of grassroots activities on the part of the Catholic Church since the 1960s. The latter involved church people not only with the Sandinista movement during the struggle to overthrow Somoza, but also with popular sectors of society targeted by the Government of National Reconstruction as the potential backbone of the current revolutionary process. Competition, however, for the ultimate loyalty of the masses in Nicaragua is not strictly between the government and the church, but rather between pro and anti-government coalitions, both of which incorporate church personnel. Hence the current ferment within Nicaraguan society has attenuated differences within the Catholic Church over how best to fulfill the church's repeatedly expressed preferential option for the poor. This debate has its roots in ecclesial responses to pressures for change dating back to the 1920s and 1930s and the consequent redefinition and refinement of the Catholic Church's mission emanating from Vatican II (1962-1965) and the Latin American bishops' conferences in Medellín, Colombia (1968) and Puebla, Mexico (1979).

It is a serious miscalculation to ascribe openness to socialism or the Sandinista movement by substantial minorities within the Catholic Church in Nicaragua to Marxist penetration. There are only a handful of church-people who are uncritical of Marxism, although a good number use aspects of Marxist analysis in their evaluations of contemporary socioeconomic conditions. For most, the Marxist materialist interpretation of life remains antithetical

to Christian beliefs. What has happened is that a good proportion of church-people, including moderates and traditionalists, have lost their faith in the ability of capitalist development to substantially improve the lot of the poor in Latin America. In addition, there has been a strong diminution of trust in traditional governing elites, particularly in the face of the utilization of repression to limit change or defend certain models of development. This has led to the church to modify traditional alliances.

In the past the strategy of the church leadership in Latin America was to cultivate and maintain good relations with political and economic elites in order to benefit from their resources and control over society. This identification with governing elites became more and more questioned on moral and strategic grounds in the context of popular pressures for structural change in the post World War II period. With the increase of repression and violations of human rights by the state, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s and as new generations of professionals entered the church bureaucracy, the argument began to be made more frequently that to maintain its moral legitimacy, fulfill its universal salvific mission, and survive as an institution, the church should identify itself with the masses. This reflected an acceptance of the necessity of substantial changes in societal structures, as well as those of the church.

The church's most public acknowledgment of the relegation of its traditional strategy of cultivating political and economic elites to a secondary position, in favor of identification with the masses, is contained in the preface to the documents emanating from the Latin American bishops' conference at Puebla. There the bishops criticize themselves for sins of omission for not having spoken out more forcefully in the past against socioeconomic injustice or

committed themselves--progressives, liberals, moderates, conservatives alike-- to a preferential option for the poor. This was the result not only of the long process of adaptation to generalized pressures for change, but also to actual and potential losses to political and religious competitors for the ultimate loyalty of the people.

Having embarked on a strategy of cultivation and expansion of the grassroots church, the church has become deeply involved in the debate over how best to effect socioeconomic change. It has also witnessed the development within the church of new theologies, pastoral practices, and definitions of the church that challenge traditional authority. Involvement in the type of ideological debate and political struggle currently underway in Nicaragua presents real threats to the Catholic Church as an institution. In such circumstances, while the institutional church remains strongly anti-Marxist, the desire of the hierarchy to identify with the broad-based popular insurrection against Somoza and subsequently to avoid exacerbating internal divisions led initially to pragmatic policies of compromise and even strategic retreat. More recently the bishops have attempted to reassert episcopal authority and doctrinal and political orthodoxy becoming increasingly critical of the "popular" church and the Sandinista government. In this the bishops are supported by Rome and the leadership of CELAM (the permanent coordinating body of the national bishops conferences in Latin America).

Such attempts are extremely difficult in the face of the politicization of the Nicaraguan church that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, largely because of the attempted implementation of the preferential option for the poor via introduction of such innovations as grassroots Christian communities (CEBs), lay preachers and of social action programs. The presence of such groups and programs in rural and urban areas previously devoid of organizational bases, provided such communities with mechanisms for political and economic

demand-making that resulted in the mid-1970s in their increasing repression by Somoza's National Guard.

The church defended its institutions and members against such attacks, while the bishops remained somewhat uneasy about grassroots progressivism and autonomy. The bishops are largely conservative, although some like the Archbishop of Managua, Miguel Obando y Bravo, took no pains to hide his public distaste for Somoza and his government. In fact, in August 1978 the prelate publicly called upon him to resign. By 1979 it is estimated that 85% of the approximately 120 priests in the country, plus the majority of nuns were strongly opposed to Somoza.<sup>1</sup> The Jesuits, Maryknollers, and Capuchins were in the forefront of clerical opposition to the regime, but it was not until the late 1970s that a good number began cooperating with the FSLN. During the final stages of the struggle in 1978-1979 church groups not only provided humanitarian and other assistance, but served to publicize the issues involved in the struggle outside Nicaragua and mobilize international support for the opposition.

One month before the final toppling of Somoza, the Nicaraguan bishops came out in favor of the insurrection on the grounds that they could not support a system and structures that resulted in grave inequalities between classes and citizens. Failure of the government to guarantee civil and political rights, as well as promote the fulfillment of basic needs undercut, in the bishops' minds, the legitimacy of the government. The existence of prolonged denial of the fundamental rights of the individual justified the insurrection, as witnessed by its broad-based popular support. The bishops cautioned, however, that care must be taken in any process of reconstruction to overcome political partisanship, ideological differences and special interests. Furthermore, the bishops warned that the maintenance of political pluralism was indispensable and that socio-economic improvements must be



linked to popular participation.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after Somoza's fall, the bishops issued another pastoral letter urging that Nicaraguans beware of all "imperialisms" and freely mold their own political and social structures. These should incorporate those human values that implied authentic liberation and were free from the domination of state idolatries. The government in raising the political consciousness of the people should be careful not to encourage massification. Furthermore, belief in God must not be excluded from the task of national reconstruction for this "would newly enslave the people, not liberate them."<sup>3</sup>

At the same time the bishops were expressing their preoccupations with the possible direction of the new government several priests were incorporating themselves into it. The Maryknoller, Miguel D'Escoto, was named Foreign Minister; a Trappist trained diocesan priest, Ernesto Cardenal, became Minister of Culture, while the Jesuit Xabier Gorostiaga was until 1982 head of national planning. Cardenal's brother Fernando, a Jesuit, was made director of the national literacy campaign and is now director of the Sandinista Youth. Father Edgard Parrales served as Minister of Social Welfare. A number of other priests also accepted official positions. Their actions pointed up the fact that among the clergy there was less caution in supporting the Sandinista government.<sup>4</sup>

Episcopal disquiet over possible Marxist inroads was expressed in a November 17, 1979 pastoral letter that continued to affirm support for the Government of National Reconstruction. The bishops were, however, clearly worried that the creation and expansion of Sandinista organizations and other mechanisms such as the literacy campaign would be used to inculcate atheism and lead to the ultimate abandonment of the church by the people. This fear placed a premium on maintaining unity within the church which

encouraged the maintenance of somewhat ambiguous positions in order to incorporate a fairly wide spectrum of opinion. Nevertheless, in November 1979, the Episcopal Conference urged recognition of the "risks, the dangers, the errors of this revolutionary process while being conscious of the fact that in history there are no absolutely pure human processes. Therefore, we must give importance to a freedom of expression and criticism as the only way of indicating and correcting errors in order to perfect the achievements of the revolutionary process."<sup>5</sup> The bishops further asserted that their commitment to the revolutionary process should not be interpreted as signifying "naivete or blind enthusiasm." Moreover, "dignity, respect, and Christian liberty are irrenounceable rights within an active participation in the revolutionary process."<sup>6</sup>

Coming as it did at a time of increasing criticism by Nicaraguan conservatives, the cautionary words of the bishops were interpreted by some as support for those elements. The episcopacy wanted to establish the legitimacy of the church as a critic of the revolutionary process and as a non-partisan actor whose actions stemmed from concern for individuals of all political persuasions. The bishops did compliment the revolutionary government on its accomplishments and urged it to continue in its attempts to satisfy basic needs and reduce injustice. This, the prelates asserted, could only be accomplished through the transfer of power to the common people thereby encouraging them to assume responsibility for the realization of the Christian obligation to perfect the world.<sup>7</sup>

Motivated, in part, by the November pastoral letter the Sandinistas prepared a position paper on religion that was intended to reassure the Catholic leadership that they would respect religious liberty and recognize the role of the church within Nicaraguan society. The bishops reacted by preparing a

detailed criticism of the Sandinista statement. It reflected fear of the emergence of a single party state that propounded an atheistic ideology and what the bishops called massification of society. It also denied the government the authority, which the Sandinistas had asserted, to decide if political parties or individuals were trying to convert religious activities into political events.<sup>8</sup> Reflecting the distance between episcopal opinions and that of many of the clergy and laity the bishops' statement was criticized as harmful to the process of national reconstruction by a number of CEBs, youth and student organizations, the Jesuits, the national conference of religious (CONFER), and some social action and study groups.<sup>9</sup>

A good number of the latter have promoted efforts to increase Marxist-Christian dialogue and Christian participation in the revolution. In September 1979, a seminar was held at the Universidad Centroamericana in Managua to explore ways the church could contribute to the revolution. Participants include junta members, priests, Protestant ministers, and CEB leaders. It resulted in the mobilization of the University's Instituto Histórico under the direction of the Jesuit Alvaro Argüello to assist in the analysis of the role of the church in national reconstruction. The Instituto represents some of the most progressive elements in the church and as the result of the criticism from within the University has tended to seek a somewhat independent identity. In August 1979, the Centro Antonio Valdivieso was created to help promote support for the revolution among Christians and assist ecclesiastical leaders to understand the process. It had the further objective of countering rightist influences on the churches. Headed up by an ecumenical team of a Franciscan and a Baptist minister, it aimed to work with church leaders, as well as the CEBs. There is some evidence that the strength of the latter has been somewhat reduced in areas

where Sandinista organizations have expanded.<sup>10</sup> This has confirmed the fears of some Nicaraguan Catholics.

As ideological and political debate sharpened within Nicaragua, so did divisions within the Catholic Church. In addition, there were increased attempts by all sides to utilize church personnel and institutions to legitimate particular stances. Given the varieties of opinion within the church, it has been possible for both pro and anti-government forces to adduce support. The "battle of the quotations" from church leaders and papal documents in the pages of La Prensa and El Nuevo Diario testifies to this. Increasingly the episcopacy, and particularly Archbishop Ovando y Bravo, identified with anti-government elements. For its part the government generally tried not to alienate the prelates, although it was increasingly preoccupied and angered by critical statements of the hierarchy and their identification with anti-government elements. The rapid reversal of the expulsion of two priests and three nuns from the Atlantic Coast area in early 1982 for allegedly counter revolutionary activities indicated a continued commitment to avoiding an open break. Subsequent detentions of religious workers, particularly from Protestant fundamentalist denominations have, however, occurred.

Among liberal and progressive sectors in the Catholic church there is increasing tension with the episcopacy, and particularly with Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo. The prelate's distaste for Somoza and public support for the insurrection in June, 1979 garnered him considerable popularity in Nicaragua, a fact which was not lost on the Sandinistas, who sought initially to use him to legitimate the Government of National Reconstruction. The presence of clerics in very visible positions in the government reinforced this and was accepted originally by the episcopacy as a means of influencing the course of the new government. However, as anti-government

attitudes among the bishops hardened, the prelates increasingly lent their support to opposition forces. The frequency with which the episcopacy's and especially Obando y Bravo's activities and statements appear on the front page of La Prensa testifies to this. While this contributed to the government's limiting Obando y Bravo to one televised mass a month, instead of four, not all the episcopacy reportedly were unhappy about this having resented the Archbishop's monopoly. Well before Obando y Bravo's upsurge of national popularity during the insurrection, there existed some criticism of him within the episcopacy. However, as the bishops became more unified in their criticism of the government, internal divisions have been reduced, as well as collegial competition. This has allowed them to present a stronger front to the government, as well as appeal to the people with more unity. Hence, the impact of their positions and statements has been increased.

As the episcopacy became more critical of the government, it also began to attempt to rein in the more progressive sectors of the church. Obando y Bravo, or his assistants, allegedly instigated the removal of some progressive priests or religious from working class parishes or base communities which resulted in sit-ins in a number of churches in 1982. While the archbishop has on a number of occasions denied involvement, there is conflicting evidence from some of the religious superiors involved. Obando agreed to enter into discussions with representatives of the protesters, but this did not defuse the situation. In fact, by July 1982 dissension had reached such a point that when the auxiliary bishop of Managua, Monsignor Bosco Vivas Robelo, went to the church of Santa Rosa to retrieve the blessed sacrament during a sit-in, a scuffle ensued. Obando y Bravo responded by placing the parish under interdict and excommunicating those who were alleged to have roughed up the bishop.<sup>11</sup> This incident marked a low point in relations between the hierarchy and progressive grassroots elements within the church.

Grassroots elements argue that there are no grounds for charges that they are intent on establishing a parallel institution and that the progressive clergy and religious form a parallel magisterium. The national conference of religious (CONFER), student and youth groups, the Instituto Histórico and Centro Antonio Valdivieso, have all been intent on combating such charges arguing that they believe in one church, led by the episcopacy, but with greater dialogue to resolve differences and misunderstanding. Progressive elements within the Church have repeatedly asserted their respect for the hierarchy and rejected charges that they were intent on flouting established church authorities. As early as October, 1981, the base Christian communities in Managua issued a public statement holding that of all of the allegations against them:

What grieves us most is that we are accused of not being in communion with the hierarchy that represents Jesus Christ here on earth, insinuating that we are separated from Christ Himself. The Lord is aware of the pain that these falsehoods cause us, because we truly recognize the bishops as His representatives. The Lord knows that we have always been in communion with our parish priests and that we always wish to be in communion with our bishops. It grieves us that we have not understood how to express this communion in a more visible manner, but we will continue trying to do so by means of intraecclesial dialogue with our archbishop and with all of the bishops. 12

Such efforts do not, however, appear to have had much impact on diminishing the growing distance between progressives and the hierarchy.

Criticism of progressive elements within the church has been stimulated by La Prensa, the businessmen's organization COSEP, and the allied Centro de Estudios Religiosos, which is staffed by La Prensa editors and journalists. In November, 1981 the Centro published a survey that suggested that most Nicaraguans opposed the continued participation of priests in politics, Ovando y Bravo's being limited to one televised mass per month, and strongly support religious education in schools.<sup>13</sup> It did not, however, offer data establishing broad-based opposition within or without the church to the government.

In July 1982 the Nicaraguan government decided to no longer allow into the country U.S. foreign aid in support of private business, educational and church groups. Of the several million dollars involved, \$115,000 went to the archbishop of Managua for overhead for existing programs, the creation of small ecclesial communities, and leadership training. The latter two were regarded as means to compete with main progressive grassroots communities and lay leaders. In testimony before Congress Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Thomas O. Enders, and AID official Otto Reich affirmed that the funds were intended to support groups in opposition to the present government of Nicaragua.<sup>14</sup>

Although between 80-90% of Nicaraguans are Catholics, there has been considerable growth over the past twenty years by Protestant groups, particularly pentecostals. These groups have also become much more involved in political struggle within Nicaragua. The Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventists have increasingly been involved in conflicts with the government, in large measure due to their opposition to military training and public education. They are also strongly anti-Marxist and have identified with the opposition to the present government. As a result, the government has restricted the activities of these churches and their ministers, expelling some of the latter from the country. These problems are akin to those encountered by these denominations in other countries both under leftist governments (e.g., Cuba), and under rightist ones (e.g., Brazil).

The Moravian Church which is centered on the Atlantic Coast is a special case. Established in the nineteenth century by German and U.S. missionaries, the church is closely identified with the Mesquitos (pop. @ 120,000) and Criollos (population @ 80,000). These peoples, together with the Sumo and Rama Indians long enjoyed considerable autonomy from the central government and maintained a strong cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identity different from Nicaraguans

on the Pacific Coast. Efforts by the Government of National Reconstruction to incorporate this area more firmly into centralized administrative structures, insensitivity to local organizations and customs, and preoccupation with escalating counterrevolutionary military attacks in the region have led to a series of confrontations. The arrest of Steadman Fagoth Mueller, and other leaders of MISURASATA (a coalition of indigenous groups) led to a shoot-out in which four Miskitos and four soldiers were shot. The subsequent incorporation of Mueller, and allegedly some Moravian ministers, into anti-Sandinista forces in Honduras increased tensions.

Hostilities along the border with Honduras resulted in the removal of several Indian communities into the interior of Zelaya Province in early 1982. This action was highly controversial within and without Nicaragua and strongly criticized by the Catholic hierarchy as resulting in grave violations of human rights. The bishops alleged that there had been insufficient consideration of the weak, elderly, women and children, unjust destruction of homes, goods and livestock, and some deaths. The latter was not substantiated. They called upon the inhabitants of the area to conserve, cultivate and defend their Christian faith. For their part, the bishops promised to intensify efforts to evangelize the region and called upon the government to assist them in relief efforts.<sup>15</sup>

The government reacted strongly to what it regarded as unjust accusations and lack of appreciation of the military situation in the area where there has been increased fighting with anti-Sandinista elements based in Honduras. Beyond this the government criticized the bishops for not having accepted its invitation to inspect the new settlements and for failure to use the means of communication established to maintain dialogue between the leadership of church and state. The government categorized the episcopal document as political rather than pastoral, and a calculated effort to undermine national



unity in line with U.S. objectives. The government asserted that the bishops' failure to condemn the climate of terror created in the region by the actions of counterrevolutionaries, including some ex-national Guardsmen from the Somoza period, impugned the bishops motives. Finally the government pointed out that the bishops had said nothing about the fact that some Moravian pastors and Catholic deacons had been providing support for the counter-revolutionaries. The gulf between the government and the bishops was confirmed by the formers' call for a Vatican mission to discuss Nicaraguan church-state relations.<sup>16</sup> The Vatican did not accept this suggestion and gave indications of accepting the Nicaraguan episcopacy's increasingly negative view of the government.

The leadership of the Moravian Church assumed a more tempered view of the removal of the inhabitants of thirty-nine villages along the Honduran border. The local Moravian Bishop, John Wilson, asserted that while the move was painful, it was necessary.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, he viewed the situation as a challenge to the churches to help deal with a conflict of cultures in the face of considerable turmoil precipitated by rapid and substantial change.<sup>18</sup>

In early August, 1982 the U.S. based Executive Director of the Board of World Mission of the Moravian Church, Graham H. Rights, expressed the opinion that the dialogue initiated to resolve differences between the government and his church was jeopardized most by "outside threats to Nicaraguan national security. The Miskito people and the Moravian church are hostages in an international situation not of their making, which severely hinders their efforts to defend ethnic and religious freedom in their own country." With respect to U.S. policy, he argued that "attempts to destabilize Nicaragua are mischievous, and probably self-defeating: more likely to hasten than to halt the erosion of economic pluralism and political freedom in the country as a whole. From the viewpoint of the Miskito, the result has been catastrophic; it has wrought terror and destruction, divided families and left many homeless,

and brought down on all of them the hostility and suspicion of the authorities.<sup>19</sup> He then called upon U.S. Christians to urge their government to end support for Nicaraguan insurgents as a means to stabilize the region in order to pursue dialogue and reconciliation.

Since mid-1982 internal divisions within the Catholic Church in Nicaragua have become more acute, as has the generalized polarization of society. Increased U.S. political, military, and economic pressure has exacerbated the situation with the hierarchy being widely regarded as a center for counterrevolutionary, pro-American support. The bishops have the support of the bulk of the native-born diocesan clergy with progressive sentiment being strongest among the foreign born religious, particularly Jesuits and Maryknollers. Lay support of the hierarchy cuts across classes, with some coming from elements of the rural proletariat. It is difficult to establish the actual strength of the pro and anti-government sectors, but it does appear that a majority are inclined to accept the bishops' lead.

On June 29, 1982 Pope John Paul II in a letter to the Nicaraguan bishops reinforced their anti-government and anti-"popular church" stance. The Pope urged the Nicaraguan laity to beware of systems, movements, parties or organizations that promoted the divisiveness of class hatred. The letter also denounced churches characterized as non-institutional, non-traditional, or alternative. These themes the Pope reiterated in his March 4, 1983 homily during the public Mass in Managua. The Pope's criticism of the "popular church" rests on the belief that it undercuts the authority of the bishops and their role as interpreters of the church's official positions in doctrine and morals. John Paul also criticized the "popular church" on the grounds that it is heavily ideological and radical. The Pope inveighed particularly strongly against those who would accept violence to achieve certain ends as contrary to the will and salvific

plan of Jesus Christ. Therein, he warned resides great potential for the disruption of church and society.<sup>20</sup>

Progressives within the church by and large responded mildly to the June letter arguing that discord within the church was the result of disagreements over politics, not over the faith and insisted that their ecclesial communities were striving to be truly Christian and supportive of Catholic and Nicaraguan unity.<sup>21</sup> The mildness of the reply reflected the tendency of pro-government forces to continue to attempt to avoid an open breach and insist upon their legitimacy as an integral part of the institutional church.

Further tension was produced in late 1982 by the government's announcement of a draft elementary and secondary school curriculum which would apply to both public and private schools. Twenty-five to thirty percent of Nicaraguan students attend church schools which are partially funded by the government. In a December 8, 1982 pastoral letter, the bishops expressed concern that under the new curriculum schools would promote a single conflictive interpretation of life which would exacerbate existing tensions between classes. It was also criticized for potentially undermining Christian values. The government's response was that under the new system religious schools would have more time than ever to incorporate their own materials and that government subsidies made it possible for Catholic schools to accept more students.<sup>22</sup>

It is notable that Catholic school students and their parents have increasingly identified themselves with the opposition to the government with one serious outbreak of violence occurring in Masaya. Government control of education has become an extremely volatile issue prompting John Paul II to devote one of his major addresses in Nicaragua to the right of parents to choose the type of education they desire for their children and of confessional schools and teachers to freedom in discharging their responsibilities.<sup>23</sup>

The Pope's visit to Nicaragua was, itself, fraught with controversy from the outset, in part as a result of Archbishop Ovando y Bravo having announced it prior to the Papal Nuncio officially informing the government. Well aware that the Pope's presence could be used to promote the position of the Archbishop and other critics of the government, the Sandinistas treated the visit as a major propaganda offensive. Extraordinary amounts of government time, energies, and monies were spent organizing the visit in the hopes of diminishing its negative impact. Special efforts were undertaken by both the government and the church to disseminate their respective views of the import of the visit. The hard-line that John Paul hued to during his one day visit appeared to take the Sandinista leadership aback, as well as progressive elements within the church. The latter were critical of the language and tone of the Pope's speeches on the grounds that they

"seemed admonishing and negative, lacking any connection with the people he addressed. In its religious aspect this language was political. The theological subjects dealt with were beyond the scope of comprehension...of the great majority of the people."<sup>24</sup>

In addition, the Pope's

"admonitions about unbelief and atheistic education sounded strange to us, as we experience the presence of Christian motivation in the revolutionary process. The Sandinist Revolution, for the first time in the recent history of revolutions, has proclaimed the right to religious liberty and the freedom of apostolic action by the Churches. We feel the same way about his allusions to a division in the Church due to theological reasons, because frictions that occur in the Christian community are rooted in socio-political options. There is a constant effort not to break the Church's unity of faith. Perhaps some of us Christians committed to the revolutionary process have not always known how to safeguard the complete identity of the faith in our temporal commitments, but we regret that the Pope has never referred to the brazen use that groups opposed to the Revolution in Nicaragua have made of the faith. Tensions will continue."<sup>25</sup>

Anti-government forces were reportedly overjoyed by the Pope's statements.

As the Washington Post reported:

'The Pope has helped us a hell of a lot,' said a wealthy business opponent of the government. 'That's the best thing that could have happened to us.'

His comment reflected a widely held assessment that the church hierarchy increasingly could become the focus of political opposition in this overwhelmingly Catholic country. Under Ovando y Bravo's uncompromising leadership, it is considered more able to attract mass following than the alliance of conservative parties and business groups that constitutes the Sandinistas' tolerated political opposition.<sup>26</sup>

Coming as it did after an upsurge in attacks across the Honduran border by anti-Sandinista forces, the visit and the Pope's statements appear to have bolstered conservative elements within the church, as well as the country. The visit increased rather than decreased polarization. The hierarchy has followed the Pope's lead and become more critical not only of the government, but also more active in attempting to impose episcopal authority on progressive clergy and laity, including the priests serving in government.

Without doubt the visit weakened attempts by progressive elements to insert the church into the revolutionary process. The sense that the church and the Sandinista revolution are antithetical has been heightened and competition between the government's mass organizations and episcopal sponsored groups increased. The possibility of grassroots conflicts between such groups is good, as well as between the bishops and CONFER, the Instituto Histórico Centroamericano, Centro Ecueménico Antonio Valdivieso and some CEBs. An expanded religious offensive calling into question the legitimacy of the Sandinista leadership is likely. The bishops have already initiated a series of social welfare programs, aimed at diminishing the impact of similiar government efforts.<sup>27</sup> The episcopacy and the government are engaged in a competition for the ultimate loyalty of the Nicaraguan people.

This has augmented the possibility of a direct church-state confrontation and an open breach within the church. Avoidance of this would probably require the government to make some concessions in terms of its general ideological orientation, as well as on some specific items such as the proposed curriculum reform. It is unclear if the current warfare in the northern and southern

parts of the country will encourage the Sandinistas to compromise or become more hard-line.

The Nicaraguan case raises some important questions concerning the nature and depths of the transformation of the Catholic Church since the 1960s. Frequently styled in recent years as the prime institutional support of political and economic change in Latin America, the Nicaraguan case suggests that when faced with a Marxist revolutionary situation, the episcopacy as well as a good portion of the clergy and laity, will oppose it. Support for such an option continues to be a minority position. The unity forged within the Catholic Church during periods of right-wing repression tends to disintegrate once that problem has been resolved with old ideological and political divisions re-emerging in the context of the generalized societal conflict and tensions generated by the revolutionary process. This confirms the hypothesis that the frequently expressed preferential option for the poor on the part of the church is not rooted in any internal church agreement over how best to achieve greater socioeconomic justice. In fact, the commitment has not caused the institutional church to abandon its historic acceptance of traditional Western-political and economic structures. In the struggle between Marxist-Leninist socialism and capitalist based liberal democracy, the Catholic Church has not established its claimed political neutrality. Rather in situations of direct ideological confrontation, such as Nicaragua, the Catholic Church is one of the prime actors in the struggle. In fact, the response of the Catholic Church in the Nicaraguan situation bears some similarities to its response to the Cuban revolution.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that the post-Vatican II church may not have been as profoundly changed at its institutional core as has been thought.

The Catholic Church in Cuba in 1959 was institutionally, pastorally, and numerically weaker than the Nicaraguan church in 1979. Of the 70-75% of the population who identified themselves as Catholics in Cuba in the mid-1950s

only 3-4% were active in the church, with 85% of church personnel and activities being concentrated in Havana. Rural Cuba was virtually unevangelized and the image of the church was that of a foreign (Spanish) institution servicing the bourgeoisie and allied to the Batista regime. Concern over social issues was limited and the church was largely uninvolved in the struggle to overthrow Batista. The deep-rooted conservatism of the Cuban church was such that by mid-1959 it had become the institutional base for the counterrevolutionary forces.

In Nicaragua the Catholic Church in 1979 had penetrated all sectors of society to a much greater degree with between 85-90% of the population identifying themselves as Catholics. More importantly, the level of involvement in church activities was much higher, particularly as a result of post-Vatican II efforts of the church to involve itself in the daily life and concerns of the people. The participation of churchpeople in the insurrection against Somoza, as well as in the Government of National Reconstruction reflected the greater political and ideological diversity within the post-Vatican II church. While the majority of the priests in Nicaragua in 1979 were also foreign, their attitudes were eminently more progressive and open to cooperation with a radical revolutionary process than in Cuba. However, anti-Marxism continued to be a generalized sentiment, not one found just among the episcopacy. In Cuba in 1959 nothing comparable to a "popular church" nor CEBs existed and, hence, there was little base for pro-government support from within the church. As a consequence, the conflict with the Castro government was a confrontation with a united rather than a divided church as in Nicaragua.

The consolidation of the revolution in Cuba, after an initial period of turmoil, prompted a mass exodus of the Spanish clergy and religious, reinforced the conservatism of those who remained and caused the church to withdraw into itself refusing to respond to the revolutionary process.

This situation lasted until the late 1960s when the church in an effort to deal with its existential situation, began to seek a limited rapprochement with the government. The Catholic Church in Cuba has not, however, attempted to reinsert itself into the mainstream of Cuban society and remains a relatively marginal institution.

Like Cuba, under the direction of the episcopacy the institutional church in Nicaragua has become a focus of counterrevolutionary sentiment.<sup>29</sup> This development appears to be rooted in the continuing strong belief among the church hierarchy that Marxism and Catholicism are ultimately antithetical. This is in spite of the initiation of some dialogue, and occasional cooperation, between Marxists and Catholics particularly during periods of rightist repression. The fragility of such initiatives on the part of the institutional church and their potential for dividing it has been amply demonstrated by the Nicaraguan situation. The Catholic Church has not come to terms with Marxism and remains profoundly ill-disposed to Marxist governments.

In Cuba the involvement of the church in the counterrevolution ultimately resulted in its marginalization in the face of the consolidation of Castro's government. The consolidation of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in spite of strong external and internal threats could have like consequences for the institutional church. If that occurs, there is a possibility that progressive sectors currently within the church will pursue an independent course of integration into an ongoing revolutionary process. Thus Nicaragua would be faced with a church weakened by division, in contrast to Cuba's united but weak church.

The challenge posed to the legitimacy of the Sandinista government by ecclesial opponents appears to be greater than that posed by church opposition to the Castro government. Cuba in 1959 was a more secular society in which the rural and urban poor did not expect much from the Catholic Church. The image and reality of the church was as a support of the status quo, rather



than as a champion of human rights and social justice. Hence the moral impact of the Cuban church's challenge to the Castro government was more limited than that of the Nicaraguan episcopacy to the Sandinista government. The pre-occupation of the Sandinistas with such a challenge appears well-founded. The potential for sharper conflict than in Cuba is greater, for the Nicaraguan hierarchy has more capacity to mold attitudes and mobilize substantial portions of the populace. In Cuba a full-scale confrontation was avoided in part because the church did not have the ultimate loyalty of a good proportion of the people and those who were active in the church tended to migrate abroad.

The reforms stimulated by Vatican II as well as those Latin American developments signalled by Medellín in 1968 and Puebla in 1979, do not appear to have necessarily better equipped the institutional church to confront Marxist revolution. The commitment to social justice and human rights continues to be limited by adherence to traditional Western political and economic systems, albeit with modifications. Dialogue with Marxists, and the utilization of some aspects of Marxist critiques of capitalism, have not meant acceptance by the institutional church of Marxist governments. In fact, anti-Marxism continues to strongly influence official policy. New theological developments, particularly liberation theology, while influential have also contributed to a reassertion of hierarchical authority and attempts to reimpose doctrinal orthodoxy, thereby heightening divisions within the church. The presence of the church among the rural and urban poor while resulting in the latter's greater formal religious involvement has also radicalized grassroots clergy and religious, frequently placing them in opposition to the hierarchy.

Clearly the Catholic Church is much more present in the modern world than it was prior to Vatican II. As a result, it is much more divided by the current worldwide ideological and political struggle spearheaded by the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Insertion into the world poses, therefore, a substantial threat

to the institutional survival of the church as presently constituted. It appears that the church leadership in Nicaragua and elsewhere, may, as a result, lessen its strong commitment to change thereby departing from the course initiated at Vatican II. Whether the bulk of the faithful in areas such as Latin America will follow remains to be seen.

N O T E S

<sup>1</sup>Sergio Mendez Arceo, Bishop of Cuernavaca, Mexico, "Introduction to Pastoral Letter of the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua," November 17, 1979, Managua, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, Presencia Cristiana en la Revolución: Dos Mensajes--Momento Insurreccional 2 de junio 1979; Iniciando la Reconstrucción, 30 de julio 1979 (Managua: Cristianos en el Mundo, Comisión, Justicia y Paz, Documentos, 1979), p. 4-8.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 30 de julio de 1979, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>The 1980 Vatican directive that priests should not hold political office was not insisted upon by the Nicaraguan bishops until June of 1981. In resisting pressure from Rome, as well as from the local episcopacy, a number of priests holding high office claimed in June 1981 that their obligation to the Nicaraguan people overrode their responsibility to accept episcopal authority. At a two-day meeting in mid-July 1981 a compromise was reached between the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference and the priests. The latter would retain their political offices, but would not in any way use their clerical status to support the government. The priests also committed themselves to remain obedient to and in close communication with the hierarchy. Acceptance on the part of the episcopacy of the continuance in office of the priests reflected the bishops desire to avoid a breach not only with the lower clergy but also with the government. Christopher Dickey, "Nicaraguan Priests to Stay in Office Under Compromise," The Washington Post, July 17, 1981, p. A24.

<sup>5</sup>Pastoral Letter, November 17, 1979, Managua, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>8</sup>"La iglesia en Nicaragua," CELAM, xix, 158 (enero de 1981), pp. 11-21.

<sup>9</sup>National Catholic News Service, November 7, 1980, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Dodson and Tommie Sue Montgomery, "The Churches in the Nicaraguan Revolution," Paper presented at the Latin American Studies Association National Meeting, Bloomington, Indiana, October 16-19, 1980, pp. 29-32. Published in Thomas Walker, ed., Nicaragua in Revolution (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982), pp. 161-180.

<sup>11</sup>Interview IW 2848.

<sup>12</sup>Comunidades Eclesiales de Base, Managua, Nicaragua. "Managuan BECs Defend Their Church Identity," LADOC, xii, 5 (May/June 1982), pp. 5-6.

<sup>13</sup>Centro de Estudios Religiosos, Encuesta de opinión, Agosto, 1981: Analisis de Métodos, Resultados y Conclusiones (Managua: La Prensa, Noviembre de 1981). The Centro de Estudios Religiosos was formed by individuals linked to the antigovernment newspaper La Prensa to combat the impact of progressive individuals within the Catholic Church who support the Sandinista revolution, as well as such institutions as the Centro Antonio Valdivieso and Instituto Histórico Centroamericano. While the results of this survey are interesting it reflects chiefly the attitudes of urban middle class elements.

<sup>14</sup>Interviews IW2848 and IW 2898.

<sup>15</sup>Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, "Documento de la Conferencia Episcopal, 17 de febrero de 1982," Informes CAV, 11-12 (marzo, 1982), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup>Secretaría General de la Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional, "Respuesta a la Conferencia Episcopal: Miskitos tienen el derecho a la vida, al progreso y la paz," Casa de Gobierno, Managua, Nicaragua, 22 de febrero de 1982, Informes CAV, 11-12 (marzo 1982), p. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional, Verdad vivida y no mensaje político (Managua: JGRN, 1982), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup>John Wilson, "Apreciaciones de Iglesia Morava," in Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional, Respuesta a la Conferencia Episcopal: Miskitos tienen el derecho de la vida, al progreso y la paz (Managua: JGRN, 1982), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup>Graham H. Rights, Executive Director, The Board of World Mission of the Moravian Church, "Memorandum to Moravian Ministers of the Northern and Southern Provinces, Other Christian Clergy and Lay People in North America, U.S. Government Officials and Congressional Representatives re New Fighting in Nicaragua;

Reprisals Against the Miskito Indians and the Nicaraguan Moravian Church," Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, August 3, 1982, pp. 1-4.

<sup>20</sup>John Paul II, Letter to the Nicaraguan Bishops, June 29, 1982 (Rome) and "Threats to the Church's Unity," Origins: NC Documentary Service, 12, 40 (March 17, 1983), pp. 633; 635-636.

<sup>21</sup>Católicos de Nicaragua, "Carta a Juan Pablo II, 15 de agosto de 1982, Managua, Nicaragua," Informes CAV, 15-16 (septiembre de 1982), p. 7.

<sup>22</sup>Central American Historical Institute, "Greater Resources for Education in Nicaragua: The New Curriculum Stirs Public Response," Update, 2, 3 (March 3, 1983), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup>Juan Pablo II, "Laicado y Educación," 4 de marzo 1983 (León, Nicaragua).

<sup>24</sup>"Christian Reflection on the Pope's March 4 Visit to Nicaragua by a Theological Reflection Group," Translated from "Imperialismo, Enemigo del Pueblo y la Paz Dicen Intelectuales Cristianos," El Nuevo Diario, March 6, 1983, pp. 1-2.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>26</sup>Edward Cody, "Tension Grows in Nicaragua: Sandinistas Take Harder Line," The Washington Post (March 5, 1983), pp. A1; A10.

<sup>27</sup>Ana Maria Ezcurra, "La jerarquía católica nicaragüense y EU contra la Revolución Sandinista," Testimonios y Documentos (21 de febrero de 1983), pp. 8-10.

<sup>28</sup>For a detailed analysis of the impact of the Cuban Revolution on Catholic and Protestant churches see Margaret Crahan, "Salvation Through Christ or Marx: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba," in Daniel H. Levine, ed. Churches and Politics in Latin America, Preface by John P. Harrison (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980), pp. 238-266.

<sup>29</sup>In contrast to Pope John Paul II's support of the Nicaraguan bishops in the current struggle, in the early 1960s John XXIII repeatedly urged the Cuban hierarchy to seek dialogue and avoid exacerbating tensions. By and large the Cuban church leadership ignored Rome.

