

Religious Persecution in Nicaragua

Testimony Before the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

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By
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I would begin by affirming the importance of this commission's work for the people of Nicaragua. Your extensive reporting has amplified the voice of the Nicaraguan people, and for that we thank you.

My testimony will concentrate on three major points:

- (1) Number One: the brutal and systematic **persecution** against the Catholic Church being conducted by the Ortega-Murillo government;
- (2) **Two, I will counter** the fallacious contention that the current repression in Nicaragua is “political and not religious”.
- (3) and Three, **without being excessively prescriptive**, we can note the direction that U.S. policy should, and largely is, taking, in the current context.

I. We begin with A Panoramic Overview of the Religious Persecution:

- From 2018 to the present, the Nicaraguan government has been implementing a policy of severe, systematic physical, rhetorical, and institutional aggression and intimidation against the Catholic Church in Nicaragua. In 2018 Archbishop Timothy Broglio and I travelled to Nicaragua to express the U.S. bishops' solidarity with the Nicaraguan bishops. Priests showed us pictures of blood-stained churches, desecrated statues, and bullet holes on church walls, testament to the ferocity of the government's violence against the Church and civil society.
- In 2019, Bishop Silvio Baez was called to Rome by Pope Francis, as the bishop's life was threatened by government partisans. In

2020 a regime partisan, a terrorist, detonated an incendiary device in the Managua Cathedral; these are only major headlines; the number of attacks is around 200 since 2018. This year the Sisters of Charity were expelled from the country; scores of priests have been either exiled or have fled, and many face major obstacles in entering and leaving Nicaragua. Catholic radio stations have been forcibly closed because of their criticism of the government's human rights abuses.

- In the last six months, the government has kidnapped—and I say *kidnapped*, because arbitrary detention without due process likens any government to a criminal entity—has kidnapped 11 priests on spurious charges. In August Bishop Rolando Alvarez and his collaborators, after weeks trapped in their diocesan buildings, were taken by the regime. The world saw in horror the images of the peaceful bishop kneeling on the street, with his hands raised, in front of armed regime forces. **The bishop remains under house arrest, and forcibly cut -off from the rest of the world by the government.** Six of the bishop's collaborators will be put on a sham trial in early December. El Chimbote, the prison where the persecutors take their political and religious prisoners, is, make no mistake, a horrific place of torture and disappearance.
- Egregiously, government partisans have even broken into sacred spaces and committed acts of sacrilege on the eucharist, thus striking at the very heart of the people's Catholic faith. **The intent behind these attacks is clear, and it serves a perverse rationality: The regime intends to terrorize the Church, now the last independent civil society institution in Nicaragua, into silence through violence, terror, and institutional harassment.**

II. On Classifying the Orteguista Repression

- My office has encountered skeptics that claim that the repression is entirely political, and not religious; this betrays a profound conceptual misunderstanding of religious freedom. **The parameters encompassed by religious freedom extend beyond worship.**

- The Catholic Church, like many other religious traditions, has a systematic corpus of Social Teaching that applies theological principles to social and political realities. When the Church preaches about social or political morality, she is preaching the Gospel in a dimension of its incarnate reality. **The contention, then, that the Nicaraguan bishops “got political” and are now facing the consequences, is simply reductive and, ultimately, fallacious.**
- The roots of Nicaragua’s religious persecution lie deep in the fabric of Ortegismo itself. Since the 1970s the movement has vested itself in a mantle of political messianism that usurps the rhetoric and symbols of the Catholic Church for its own political ends. When we hear Rosario Murillo accusing Bishop Alvarez of “crimes against spirituality,” she means to accuse him of objecting to the spiritualization, and thus consolidation, of her power. This “political messianism” has reduced the political space in Nicaragua into a rigid “us versus them” dynamic, labeling anyone who opposes the regime as “evil,” and “offspring of the devil.”

III. So where do we go from here?

- The expulsion of the nuncio, Archbishop Waldemar Sommertag, in March, signaled, disturbingly, that the regime is now less interested in dialogue.
- The Holy See and the local Church in Nicaragua remain committed to finding a peaceful resolution to the crisis. More than that, the Nicaraguan bishops, as pastors of all Nicaraguans, want reconciliation and a restoration of the rule of law.
- President Biden’s trade-related Executive Order last month, which expands the U.S. sanctions program with sectoral sanctions powers, is a step in the right direction: **The United States must continue to demand that the Nicaraguan government ends its persecution of the Church.** The Government must be made to realize that the Church is open to dialogue, and to build-up and restore Nicaragua to peace and the rule of law.

I hope to be able to answer any questions you might have. Thank you.