



OPINION

Does Pope Francis care about Nicaraguan Catholics?

by Teo Babún

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More than two dozen member states of the Organization of American States last month approved a resolution condemning the authoritarian government of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua for its crackdown on civil society, the independent press, and, notably, Catholic clergy and institutions. This is a welcome development, given a shocking intensification in Ortega's persecution of the Catholic Church.

In April 2018, when the Ortega regime violently cracked down on mass protests throughout Nicaragua, Catholic leaders defied the regime by criticizing its human rights abuses and opening their churches to those fleeing deadly attacks by security and paramilitary forces. This, in turn, provoked a government campaign of systematic church repression and the demonization of its clergy (state media outlets regularly call priests "terrorists" and "devils in cassocks"). All hopes of democratic reform were dashed when Ortega locked up his political opponents in 2021 and stole the November elections.

This year has seen an all-out war against Catholic leaders. In March, the Ortega regime expelled Archbishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, the apostolic nuncio since 2018, giving him a week to leave. In May, police and paramilitary groups prevented Rev. Harving Padilla and parishioners in Masaya from leaving or entering a church for three days. Later in May, Rev. Manuel Garcia was detained after he

wielded a machete as he tried to fend off pro-regime thugs taunting and insulting him outside his parish. He was later sentenced by a court to two years in prison, making him the first priest imprisoned since the 2018 protests.

In its zealous persecution of the Catholic Church, the Ortega regime has also gone after the church's educational and charitable institutions. This year alone, the regime has forcibly closed more than 1,000 civil society organizations, many of which are Catholic. In June, the regime canceled the legal status of the Missionaries of Charity, an order founded by Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and expelled the nuns, escorting them to the Costa Rican border.

One priest who has particularly drawn the Ortega regime's ire is Monsignor Rolando Alvarez, bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa, who is one of the most vocal critics of the regime's human rights abuses. Earlier this summer, he went on a hunger strike to protest his treatment and the closure of seven Catholic radio stations that he directed. Then, a few weeks ago, he and 10 others, including seminarians and lay persons, were placed under house arrest in the episcopal offices. The police announced an investigation of Alvarez and other Catholic leaders for using communications platforms and social media to organize and incite acts of hatred and disturbing the peace.

The bishop has remained firm, insisting he has no intention of leaving the country and using his plight to urge the faithful to be courageous in the face of an antagonistic and brutal regime. He regularly transmitted video messages offering words of encouragement and assurance to his sympathizers. He said simply, "Our lives are in the hands of the Lord."

The OAS resolution demonstrates the seriousness in which regional stakeholders view the tragic and unacceptable situation in Nicaragua. The U.S. government joined in condemning the Ortega regime's

actions: Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom Rashad Hussein called on the regime to “end repression of Catholic clergy.”

Troublingly, one important voice has remained largely muted — that of Pope Francis. The silence from the Vatican for weeks since the crackdown on Nicaraguan Catholic leaders provoked cries of frustration: A group of Nicaraguans in exile penned a letter to Pope Francis urging him to speak out against the Ortega regime. This silence was especially painful given the Vatican’s, and particularly the pope’s, tremendous moral authority in Latin America.

Finally, on Aug. 21, Pope Francis expressed “concern” about the situation and said he desired to see a “sincere and open dialogue” between the government and the opposition. This statement demonstrates either an inexcusable ignorance about the true nature of the Ortega regime, which is incapable of engaging in the kind of dialogue that is needed to bring positive change, or a disappointing timidity. What the Nicaraguan faithful need now from the pope is a clear denunciation and expression of solidarity. They need to know that the leader of their church is firmly on their side.

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