The Catholic Church and Social Change in Nicaragua

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MANZAR FOROOHAR

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Introduction

The role of the Catholic Church in the contemporary sociopolitical upheaval in Nicaragua has been a highly controversial issue. Some have called the Church a revolutionary institution supporting a leftist movement with strong Marxist tendencies and a declared plan for socialization of the country. Others have called it a conservative establishment standing in the way of social change and the radicalization of the revolutionary process. Both analyses share a fundamental misconception in viewing the Church as a monolithic institution with internal cohesion and a well-defined political line. A brief look at the history of the Church in Nicaragua, and its development within a concrete social and political framework in any given historical period, provides a different picture; the Church, as any other institution in the society, has been affected by its surrounding environment and has reflected the social divisions and political conflicts in its own structure and ideology.

At the beginning of its history in Nicaragua, the Church, as a Spanish institution, clearly took sides with the colonial power, and it acted in close collaboration with the conquerors to convert the indigenous population to faithful vassals of the Catholic monarchs. The first conflict and internal division in the Nicaraguan Catholic Church was a clear reflection of the political conflict among the colonialists, the Spanish monarchs seeking to consolidate their direct power over their new subjects, and the encomenderos trying to maintain their absolute power over the indigenous population entrusted to them for exploitation. The power struggle dictating the political events in the colonies deeply affected the Church. The majority of the clergy some of whom were themselves encomenderos, while others were employed in encomiendas closed their eyes to the
cruelty of the system and took sides with the encomenderos to defend the institution against the wishes of the crown. On the other hand, a few priests and bishops, including Bishop Antonio Valdivieso, took sides with the crown, and strongly opposed the abusive, cruel, and inhumane encomienda system.

During the rest of the colonial period, the strength of the colonial government was reflected in the continuous activities of the Church to fulfill its mission to Christianize the natives, and, by preaching fatalism, to prepare them for a total submission to the colonial system.

In the early nineteenth century, when the legitimacy of colonial power came under question, and the Nicaraguans began to plan a future free of Spanish domination, the Church once more became involved in a division between those priests who supported the independence movement and those who remained faithful to the Spanish crown.

For more than a century after independence, Nicaragua was torn apart by constant fighting between the Liberals and Conservatives, and by foreign interventions on behalf of one group or the other. Throughout this period, the Catholic Church, threatened by the anticlerical policies of the Liberals, chiefly supported the Conservative side in the political conflict. However, the foreign interventions, first by William Walker in the 1850s and later by the U.S. Marines from 1912 to 1933, divided the clergy and caused a political clash in the Church.

One important social element common during the colonial period and the first century of independence was the total absence of the Nicaraguan masses as conscious agents in the historical development of the country. Lacking valuable mineral resources and suitable soil and climate for profitable export agriculture, most of Nicaragua was abandoned by the colonial power; thus, the majority of native Nicaraguans continued to live in their ancient social structures for the most part, isolated in remote areas with no communication system and totally out of the mainstream of the sociopolitical life of the country. The primitive economy and a precapitalist social structure were the main hindrance to development of a clear class stratification and class consciousness in Nicaragua. On the other hand, the absence of the majority of the
people in the national life had limited the political development to a few urban centers, and had reduced the sociopolitical conflict to a power struggle between the Liberals and the Conservatives. The simplicity in social structure and the reduction of the conflict to a factional power struggle with occasional foreign intervention was reflected in the division within the Church, which was chiefly political rather than social.

In the 1950s and 1960s, however, social and economic developments converted the majority of Nicaraguans from subsistence farmers to seasonal plantation workers or wage laborers concentrated in working-class neighborhoods. Many joined the marginal population in the slum areas of the large cities. The new social stratification and the gradual awareness of emerging realities culminated in the creation of political groups proclaiming class representation. Terms such as popular classes, proletariat, bourgeoisie, and class struggle entered the Nicaraguan political vocabulary.

Although independent from the changes in Nicaragua, profound innovations in the ideology and structure of the Catholic Church were introduced by Pope John XXIII and by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. In Latin America, the new social teachings of the Catholic Church came into a head-on clash with repressive military governments of the 1960s. The result was a sharp radicalization of the Catholic Church in Latin America which culminated in deepening the new social commitments of the Church at the Second Conference of the Latin American bishops at Medellín in 1968, and in the development of liberation theology.

The Nicaraguan Catholic Church, led by an ultraconservative hierarchy, was shocked by the social developments in Nicaragua and by the structural and theological innovations in European and Latin American Catholicism. The wave was rapid and sweeping. The younger generation of priests and nuns, affected by the poverty and misery of the lower classes, angered by political repression, and aroused by new theological directions, revolted against the Church hierarchy and its close relations with the rich and the powerful. Once more the Nicaraguan Church was divided; this time the issue was not only political but social. The focus of the debate was the class option and the future direction of the Church. The progressive
clergy which was taking sides with the poor and which was participating in the social conflict, felt closer to those political groups that represented the poor than to the Church hierarchy that supported the rich. The division was real and deep.

However, in the 1970s, high-level government corruption and an intensified repression which drove almost every social sector, including the bourgeoisie, into the camp of the political opposition, blurred the lines between class struggle and an antidictatorial movement. Both the bourgeois dissidents and the radical opposition called for the overthrow of Somoza. The lines became even more obscure in religious circles when a new archbishop was assigned to Managua in 1970. Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo, a vocal critic of the repression and violation of human rights, led the conservative hierarchy as it distanced itself from the dictator. The Catholic hierarchy for the first time in Nicaraguan history appeared to be taking sides with the people against the repressive government. Obando's early statements as archbishop, in which he quoted extensively with Medellín documents, created high hopes among the Nicaraguan people, and particularly the progressive clergy, for implementation of the Medellín teachings urging a preferential option for the poor on the part of the Church.

The intensified armed struggle in the 1977-78 period, led by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, added a new dimension to the political picture: a feasible triumph for the radical opposition, targeting both the dictatorial regime and the economic structure of dependent capitalism. The reformist bourgeoisie, hoping for a termination of the Somoza's personal rule in a rapid and peaceful manner which would leave the basic structures of the regime intact, clashed with the revolutionaries. The lines began to become distinct between the two groups and the two programs; and the people, in their daily political behavior, began to choose between the two alternatives.

The Catholic Church did not remain unaffected by the tremendous social movement and political debate. Indeed, the progressive clergy, deeply committed to liberation theology, became an important factor and an active participant in the ongoing struggle. Many priests, nuns, and lay persons increasingly allied themselves with the radical forces opting for the poor and aiming at the destruction of
the existing structures through a revolutionary process. They advocated the creation of a totally new order that included the participation of the poor. On the other hand, the hierarchy, still highly critical of the dictatorship, followed the lead of the reformist bourgeoisie, and saved a major part of its political attacks for the radical movement. The public statements and the documents issued by the Church hierarchy in the 1977 period manifest an amazing similarity with the statements and the documents of the bourgeois opposition.

Somoza's intransigence in the face of the compromise proposals of the bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and the National Guard's savagery in crushing all forms of opposition, on the other hand, forced many reformists away from their illusion about the possibility of a peaceful removal of Somoza. The split in the bourgeois opposition was inevitable. An increasing number of organizations and individuals left the reformist camp and began backing the FSLN.

The new political support made the possibility of revolutionary triumph even greater, and this resulted in a growing fear among the reformists. This fear was the cause of a sharp move toward ultraconservatism and an alliance with the North American government to stop the revolution. In the intense planning and attempts to reach a compromise with Somoza, the Church hierarchy, particularly Archbishop Obando, had an important, if not leading, role. However, the popular upheaval was strong enough to survive the orchestrated attempt by the ultraconservative bourgeoisie, the North American government, and the antirevolutionary Catholic hierarchy to crush the movement.

To understand the present-day involvement of the Nicaraguan Church in politics, and the sharp internal divisions in its ranks, we have to study the history of the Church in the social and political context of the country. Since the triumph of the revolution in 1979, many scholars have devoted their time to the study of Church-State relations in revolutionary Nicaragua. However, there is a lack of scholarly inquiry into the historical development of the subject. The present book is an attempt to fill the void and to provide a historical depth to the ongoing discussion of the Church-State relations in Nicaragua. I have focused on the period prior to the establishment of the revolutionary government. In the epilogue, I will briefly
discuss some of the developments that followed the triumph to show the continuity in the historical pattern of the Church's involvement in politics, and the ongoing conflict inside the Church over political and social issues.

While analyzing the Catholic Church institution from a historical perspective, I have also extended my analysis to the development of new elements in Catholic thought, known as liberation theology. This is a very important and a difficult subject to study. Largely a product of Latin American social and political development, liberation theology is a subject open to scientific historical inquiry. However, the nature of the subject, a theology based on a belief in forces beyond human history which transcend socio-economic and political structures of human society, creates a strong obstacle to a thorough analysis based on historical methodology. To understand liberation theology as a historical force we have to overcome this obstacle by demythologizing religious terminology and by placing theological categories in their social and political context within human history. With an unprecedented openness to some tenets of non-Catholic theologies and nonreligious philosophies, liberation theologians have opened the way to secular historians and social scientists for a scientific study of the subject.

Throughout the present work, I have treated theology from a historical point of view. The use of social science categories for clarifying religious terms is not owing to any disrespect for religious beliefs; rather, it is an attempt to explain their historical, social, and political importance to readers who do not necessarily share the same beliefs.
Chapter 1
The Catholic Church in Nicaragua

Historical Background

As in most of the rest of Latin America, Catholic priests arrived in Nicaragua almost simultaneously with Spanish conquerors. The first priest, Father Diego de Agüero, reached the area with Captain González Dávila in 1523.

The role of the Catholic Church in colonial Latin America has been generally interpreted as that of providing an ideological justification for the conquest of the New World. The priests, especially the high-ranking clergy who were appointed to their holy offices by the Iberian kings in accordance with the Royal Patronage, were generally faithful to the monarchs. However, from the beginning, the social and political conflicts in Spain and its colonies in Latin America were reflected in the Catholic Church.

A major political conflict in Spain at the time of the conquest of Latin America was the rivalry between the local rulers who were striving to maintain their political and economic independence, and the absolute monarchs who were trying to increase their political power and to establish a central government. In this power struggle, the kings were supported by the emerging capitalist class. In the new colonies, this rivalry was manifested by the attempts of the encomenderos to maintain the quasi-feudal encomienda system, and by the
efforts of the kings to impose their total political power and to put the indigenous population under the direct control of the state.

In this political struggle, the high-ranking clergy was divided between those who took sides with the encomenderos, closing their eyes to the social ills of the system and the inhumane treatment of the indigenous population (as previously mentioned, some of the high clergy were themselves encomenderos), and those who voiced their opposition to the existing structure and took sides with the kings for abolition of the encomienda system. In Central America, the most famous champion of the indigenous rights was Friar Bartolome de las Casas, who denounced the brutality of the conquerors as early as 1533.

The political conflict between the Spanish kings and the encomenderos finally resulted in the declaration of the New Laws (Leyes Nuevas) by the monarch in 1542, which provided for the gradual abolition of the encomienda system. It also prohibited the enslavement of the indigenous population. At the time of the declaration of the New Laws, Nicaragua was governed by Rodrigo de Contreras. An encomendero, Contreras joined the other encomenderos in Nicaragua in opposition to the New Laws.

In 1543, a Spanish Dominican bishop, Antonio de Valdivieso, was appointed bishop of León. He was another famous champion of the rights of the indigenous population, and his beliefs and his activities brought him into a sharp conflict with Contreras. Following an unsuccessful attempt to oblige the governor to obey the New Laws, Bishop Valdivieso took his grievances to the Spanish authorities and asked for an investigation of the abuses committed by the encomenderos, including Governor Contreras. 2

On July 15, 1545, the bishop wrote to the king, once again complaining about the continuation of Indian slavery in Nicaragua and the lack of justice because of corrupt administration by Contreras. In addition, on October 19, 1545, Valdivieso joined Fray Bartolomé de las Casas to publish a document defending the poor and condemning the lack of justice in Central America.3 The constant pressure from Valdivieso to implement the New Laws created a high tension between the bishop and the governor.

To defend himself against the Bishop's charges, Contreras travelled to Spain and took his case to the Council of the Indies.
Following an investigation and a hearing, the Council ruled against Contreras. When the news reached Nicaragua, encomenderos, led by Contreras's sons, Pedro and Hernando, rebelled against the Spanish authorities. They assassinated Bishop Valdivieso, and looted the city of León. One of the participants in the assassination was a former Dominican friar, Pedro de Castañeda. 4

The revolt did not last long and the official government institutions consolidated their power and gradually implemented colonial laws. The consolidation of the government was reflected in the smooth operation of the Church, which continued to Christianize the natives and to prepare them for the acceptance of the system.

The Nicaraguan Catholic Church and the Independence Movement

By the beginning of the movement for independence in Latin America, the Nicaraguan Church was divided once again over political issues. The high-ranking Catholic clergy took sides with the Spanish rulers, while some of the low-ranking priests actively participated in the movement.

In December 1811, Nicaraguans, especially in León, were demanding change. The provincial governor, José Salvador, who had governed León for eighteen years, was no longer able to control the opposition, among them Father José Antonio Moñino, a Franciscan friar, and Father Benito Miguelena of the Merced order.5

On December 13, the people of León rebelled against the governor, demanding a change in the authorities, cuts in taxes, suppression of monopolies, abolition of slavery, and freedom for prisoners. The rebels submitted their demands to the bishop of León, Monsignor Nicolás García Jerez, in a letter written by Father Miguelena, whose residence had been converted to a meeting place and storage house of arms for the rebels. Father Miguelena also played an important role in spreading the movement to other parts of Nicaragua, including Granada, Chontales, and Segovia.6

The rebellion in León was strong and Bishop García Jerez, a Spanish monarchist, had to agree to the demands of the rebels. Astutely, he proposed an election in each barrio to choose deputies in order to form a junta to deal with the new situation. As he hoped, the majority of the elected deputies were priests under his control,
and he was chosen as the head of the new junta as a substitute for the
governor. When the movement lost its initial fervor, Bishop Jerez dissolved
the junta, proclaimed himself governor, and issued a decree establishing the
death penalty for rebellion. He sent Father Miguelena to El Salvador, where
he was arrested and taken to a jail in Guatemala. 7

Another rebellion began in Granada on December 22, 1811. The rebels of
Granada were Conservative and in favor of the preservation of the colonial
structure. However, they were strongly against the peninsulars (Spanish-born
officials) and wanted to replace them in the government. The first act of the
_Cabildo Abierto_ (Open Town Council) of Granada was the ousting of all
Spaniards from government positions. Among the creole deputies of the
cabildo was a priest, Benito Soto, who proposed the abolition of slavery on
January 10, 1812. Influenced by Bishop Jerez, Soto later changed his position
and joined the monarchists against the movement. He was sent to Masaya by
Jerez as the commander of the army to pacify the rebellion.8

Although the rebels of Granada had accepted the new authority in León under
the leadership of Bishop Nicolás García Jerez, the Bishop sent troops to
Granada to break the rebellion. When they reached Masaya, the soldiers, most
of them creoles, refused to ally with the peninsulars against the creole rebels
of Granada.

The uprising spread to other cities, and in many of them the same pattern of
Church division between the supporters of independence and the royalists was
repeated. In 1812, the vicar of Granada, José Antonio Chamorro, issued a
proclamation against the popular revolt and denounced the antimonarchist
rebels as anti-Christian.

_The people have disobeyed the Spaniards. The kings of Spain are Spaniards.
Therefore, the people have disobeyed the kings of Spain, and in this manner,
they have been violators and offenders of all laws. The people have removed
the employees without due process, and promulgated absolute laws. Therefore,
the people conceive that they have more power than God, the Church, and the
King. We can conclude that the insurgents are traitors to God, to the religion,
and to the King of the country._9

Facing the rising level of the rebellion in Nicaragua, José