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The Catholic Church in the Nicaraguan Revolution: Interdependence and Social Movements

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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION:
INTERDEPENDENCE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

by

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B.A. May 1997, Baylor University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Old Dominion University
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MASTER OF ARTS

HISTORY

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
May 2001

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ABSTRACT

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION: INTERDEPENDENCE AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Eric W. Frith
Old Dominion University, 2001
Director: Dr. Robert H. Holden

In July 1979, Anastasio Somoza García fled Nicaragua, signaling the beginning of a true revolution, in every sense of the word. The triumph of the Nicaraguan Revolution hinged primarily on the development of a broad-based opposition coalition that included workers, peasants, the bourgeoisie and conservative upper-classes, students, and Catholic Christians. For centuries the Catholic Church in Nicaragua had maintained a mutually supportive relationship with the State. In the mid-1960s, however, a social movement began to sweep through the Church at the grassroots, causing the foundations of the Church-State relationship to shift dramatically. This social movement manifested itself in a common sense of injustice and emerging solidarity among Catholics, based on a revised interpretation of common Christian symbols, themes, and concerns. It spread through novel base organizations and pastoral methods, capitalizing on political opportunity offered not only by the regime but also by the hierarchy of Nicaraguan bishops. By the late 1970s elements the Catholic Church had fostered and participated in both the radical vanguard of the Revolution and its more cautious support, contributing to the momentous changes that engulfed Nicaraguan society throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Yet the origin of this key Catholic social movement was not Nicaraguan. In fact, all of its basic components were imported from the movement in the worldwide Catholic Church known as Liberation Theology. Only by using the analytical tools of both social
movement theory and interdependence theory can we fully understand the changes in the Nicaraguan Church, and how those changes redounded to changes in Nicaraguan society.
Today it does not suffice to study one country, nor much less one diocese—already there are no closed compartments, there are no Chinese walls that isolate and defend the cities. Today the ideas, the problems, and the conflicts that prevail in one country have repercussions in others, and we could apply this with still greater force in Latin America, over which such extraordinary influences act.

— Bishop Julián Mendoza
First Secretary General of CELAM (1956-1965)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ............................................... 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY .............................................. 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>INTERDEPENDENCE THEORY .............................................. 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT ............................................. 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>THE CHURCH IN THE REVOLUTION ........................................ 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CONSEQUENCES OF THE REVOLUTION .................................... 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE NICARAGUAN CHURCH, 1523-1936 .................................. 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE NICARAGUAN CHURCH THROUGH THE 1960S .......................... 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CHANGES IN NICARAGUAN ECONOMY AND SOCIETY ....................... 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT IN THE CHURCH: FORMING COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES .................................................. 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE CURSILLOS .................................................................... 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ECCLESIASTICAL BASE COMMUNITIES .................................... 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RURAL PASTORAL PROGRAMS .............................................. 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE NICARAGUAN HIERARCHY AND EMERGING POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY .................................................. 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RESOURCE MOBILIZATION: RADICALIZING CHURCH ORGANIZATIONS .................................................................. 61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CYCLES OF CONTENTION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRISTIAN CONTENTION IN THE REVOLUTION ....................... 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A NATIONAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND INTERDEPENDENCE ....... 81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>THE REVOLUTION IN THE CHURCH ........................................... 83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL ........................................ 83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CELAM .............................................................................. 91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE MEDELLÍN MEETING ................................................... 96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>CONCLUSIONS ....................................................................... 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>THE LIBERATION THEOLOGY MOVEMENT IN NICARAGUA .......... 102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NICARAGUAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LIBERATION THEOLOGY MOVEMENT .................................................. 110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SUMMARY AND REFLECTION ON THEORY ................................ 112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WORKS CITED ...................................................................... 117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VITA ................................................................................. 127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

As with any true revolution, the enormous complexity of the Nicaraguan Revolution can be daunting. Its triumph in July 1979, readily identifiable as the greatest single instance of change in the life of the nation, demands a coherent, narrative interpretation of the whole process—a task that has not yet been accomplished. For the less ambitious student of history, however, this same complexity offers promising opportunities for more focused analysis. Distinct elements of the overall revolutionary process can be culled, dissected, and described with an eye toward fine detail instead of dramatic sweep; toward interpretive nuance rather than broad generalities. This essay is such a project. In it I endeavor to understand the Catholic Church as one factor in the development of the Nicaraguan Revolution. In order to do so I will work backward—first characterizing the Revolution and its triumph; then establishing the Church’s contributions to the Revolution; next asking what internal dynamics led it to make those contributions; and finally determining the extent to which those dynamics were either imported to Nicaragua or indigenous.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Sadly, much of the scholarship on the Church’s role in the Revolution lacks such attention to detail. In large part this is because that role excited such passionate emotions, particularly among both Christians and Marxists. Perhaps the best known and

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The format for this thesis follows current style requirements of Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, Sixth Edition.
most widely cited study of the topic is Phillip Berryman’s *The Religious Roots of Rebellion*. Berryman was a lay pastoral worker in a Panama City *barrio* during the 1960s and early 1970s, and served as the Central American representative to the American Friends Service Committee from 1976 to 1980. By 1984, when he published *The Religious Roots of Rebellion*, the “theology of liberation” that animated the progressive Church in Central America suffered under the wrath of the Vatican. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published “Ten Observations on the Theology of Gustavo Gutiérrez” in March 1983, condemning the movement’s most prominent spokesman for replacing the first principles of Christ with those of Marx. One year later Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, prefect of the Congregation, personally published a critique of the entire theology, just months before the Congregation’s famously scathing “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’” appeared. In fact this reaction from Rome was to some degree prompted by the prominent role that liberation theology played in Sandinista Nicaragua. Berryman’s study, then, was partially an attempt to vindicate a theology and a pastoral program whose popular roots he had witnessed firsthand. Thus in his conclusion he attempted to summarize not what happened and why, but “what is ultimately *at stake* from a Christian point of view.”

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4Berryman, 375. Emphasis mine.
and the fact that Berryman was ultimately more interested in the reaction to a movement than in its origins, it is not surprising that he generalized about developments in the Nicaraguan Church prior to 1979. His personal connections with Central American Christians only exacerbated the problem, as is evident in his undocumented descriptions of pastoral methods and occasional references to “interview with priest, Managua.”

Nevertheless, Berryman’s account remains useful to virtually all students of the topic because it is so intuitively insightful and concise. The same compliment cannot be paid to some other works on the topic. Like Berryman, Laura Nuzzi O’Shaughnessy and Luis Serra seem to have been motivated by ideology to publish their essays in *The Church and Revolution in Nicaragua.* Unlike Berryman, they fail to assume even the pretense of objectivity. O’Shaughnessy’s essay, “The Conflicts of Class and Worldview,” focused on the Nicaraguan hierarchy’s post-triumph defection from the Revolution, and traced its origin rather casually to the bishops’ excessive attention to the maintenance of their authority, as well as the preference of “many Christians” for reform over true revolution. Luis Serra’s essay, “Religious Institutions and Bourgeois Ideology in the Nicaraguan Revolution,” was by far the worst of the two. His purpose in writing, as he put it, was to “contribute to the elaboration of suitable responses to the imperialist offensive in this ideological area.” He glibly asserted that religion in Nicaragua, like all

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5Ibid., 59, 405.


ideologies, was an expression of class interests. Thus Serra was not surprised that the Church, which included members from many classes, became fragmented following the triumph of the Revolution.  

Michael Dodson and Tommie Sue Montgomery, by contrast, did manage to maintain a reassuring tone of scholarly detachment in their essay, "The Churches in the Nicaraguan Revolution." The interviews and news reports they rely upon, however, are far too few to warrant their assertions about the fears and hopes that motivated Christians during the insurrection and after the Revolution's triumph. Dodson and Montgomery were among the first scholars to address the role Christians played in the Revolution, but in retrospect their contribution to the topic was minimal.  

Only a decade after Somoza's fall was the Church's role in the Revolution treated objectively in scholarly monographs that used an acceptable amount of primary documentation. Two studies published in 1989 form the core of the literature on the Nicaraguan Catholic Church during the Revolution. The first is Manzar Foroohar's *The Catholic Church and Social Change in Nicaragua.* Foroohar drew extensively on original sources, including many of those used in this thesis. Her analysis was the first to incorporate all of the major elements of interest: the traditional role of the Nicaraguan Church, the process of change at the grassroots and within the hierarchy, the relationship

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9Ibid., 101.

of the Church to the wider Revolution, and the importance of liberation theology. Foroohar failed, however, to demonstrate convincingly that there was any causal relationship between liberation theology and the events in the Church. In part this is because she interprets the facts in a relatively rigid—though not nearly as dogmatic as Serra’s—framework of class relations. Class conflict may be a key to understanding the later split in the Church, but it does little to illuminate the origins and processes of change.

The other important study published in 1989 is Philip Williams’ *The Catholic Church and Politics in Nicaragua and Costa Rica*. Williams, a political scientist, supplied his comparative study with ample documentation but was somewhat less thorough than Foroohar. His greatest contribution was recognizing the significance of international factors, especially the emerging Cold War, in the development of progressive Christian movements in both Central American countries. The comparative structure helped him recognize that domestic factors were equally important, but he was unable to explain the relationship between domestic and international factors.

In 1990 Michael Dodson and Laura Nuzzi O’Shaughnessy, whom we have already discussed separately, co-wrote *Nicaragua’s Other Revolution: Religious Faith and Political Struggle*. Dodson and O’Shaughnessy relied almost entirely on secondary sources for their argument that religious faith played a similar role in both the Nicaraguan and the American revolutions. This role, they claimed, was basically to affirm

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individuals’ rights and to encourage popular dialogue. They also attributed even more causal significance to the events in the worldwide Catholic Church. While these observations are in some superficial sense true, they are not at all surprising. In an apparent bid for theoretical innovation, Dodson and O'Shaughnessy argued that the “democratizing effect” of Catholicism is not necessarily inferior to that of Protestant Christianity. They even claimed that the changes in the Nicaraguan Church were “Reformational.”

In 1992 John Kirk published a comprehensive analysis of the Church’s role in Nicaraguan political history. Although Kirk did manage to synthesize earlier research with his own extensive use of primary sources, his attention to the Catholic hierarchy’s role in the 1990 demise of the Revolution clouded his objectivity. His concluding chapter in effect presents the Nicaraguan bishops with the stark options of “prophetic stance or political accommodation.” Nor did Kirk’s study result in any particularly groundbreaking theoretical developments. His main conclusion seems to be that “the idea of an apolitical Church, devoted solely to spiritual matters, is absurd and ahistorical.” While this is undoubtedly true, and may have constituted an effective rebuttal to the most reactionary of the Nicaraguan bishops, it is a rather uninspiring historical insight.

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14 Ibid., 240.


16 Ibid., 210.

17 Ibid., 212.
The most recent scholarly attempt to analyze the Catholic Church in the Nicaraguan Revolution was Debra Sabia’s *Contradiction and Conflict: The Popular Church in Nicaragua*. Sabia offered a more extensive bibliography than any of the other authors listed here, including a long list of personal interviews and a broad range of theoretical models. Unfortunately, she rarely cited any of her sources in the text. She also gives much less attention than previous authors to the international origins of the changes in the Nicaraguan Church. Instead she focuses on characterization of the domestic social milieu, not by quoting at length from her interviews, but by describing four “ideal types”: the Marxist type, the revolutionary Christian type, the reformist Christian type, and the alienated Christian type. This process yields the somewhat puzzling conclusion that there is no difference between the grassroots and the institutional Churches in Nicaragua. Rather, she suggests, “one universal (Catholic) church still exists in Nicaragua. Within this institution, however, we shall see that several competing tendencies and internal divisions are clearly evident.”

In general, scholarly examinations of the role of the Catholic Church in the Nicaraguan Revolution have been either careless in their documentation, or unimpressive in their application of theory, or both. In his 1990 review of the literature, Daniel Levine concluded:

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19Ibid., 3.

20Ibid., 4-5.
Studies are too often conceived in function of narrow or short-term interests. The rush to judgment and publication clouds our vision and makes it hard to grasp how and why things came to be the way they are, and what the future is likely to hold. Work like this is easily overtaken by events. Such is the sad fate of much recent writing on liberation theology and Nicaragua, where mis-statement, exaggeration, thin description, and open distortion abound.\textsuperscript{21}

He continues with suggestions for proper study of the theme. "The methods of intellectual history are . . . not adequate to the task. Analysis has got to move out of the library and start listening to popular voices and asking how movements start, grow, and survive."\textsuperscript{22} This study attempts to do just that. It proposes new models for understanding the movement in the Nicaraguan Church, including both its domestic and international aspects. More importantly, it rigorously tests the validity of these models against the available evidence.

The cornerstone of this investigation, of course, must be careful historical research in the relevant documentary evidence of the time. Fortunately, published collections of personal interviews and public documents abound, thanks in part to the same passionate sympathy (or antipathy) that undermined so much "academic" discourse. This research can be further illuminated by placing it, for the first time, within appropriate theoretical frameworks. Social movement theory, from the academic disciplines of sociology and political science, and interdependence theory, from the field of international relations, provide the most useful theoretical tools for interpreting the role of the Catholic Church in the Nicaraguan Revolution. Some attention to the key arguments and terminology of these theories is therefore required here.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

In his influential book *Power in Movement*, Sidney Tarrow describes the relationship between "contentious politics" and "social movements." "Contentious politics," he explains, "occurs when ordinary people, often in league with more influential citizens, join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents." He makes it clear, however, that not all instances of contentious politics qualify as true social movements. That term is reserved "for those sequences of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames, and which develop the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents."23

Tarrow’s study of social movements is largely synthetic, drawing especially upon resource mobilization theory and political process theory.24 He reconciles the many elements that various forms of social movement theory have in common, and finds four key components of any true social movement. The first is "common purpose," or the widespread desire to see something change. Second is the formation of "collective identities" or "solidarities." This involves not only maintaining frequent formal and informal relationships, but also sharing to a greater or lesser degree a common vocabulary or set of symbols. Third is "sustaining contention," also known as "mobilizing resources." This requires controlling or having access to sufficient physical and social capital to weather opposition as the movement evolves. Finally he identifies

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22Ibid., 231.


24On classical resource mobilization, see John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Social Movements in an Organizational Society* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 1987). On political process theory, especially the theory of developing insurgent consciousness, see Doug McAdam, *Political
changing “political opportunities” as the most crucial element in a developing social movement. Not all theorists would agree on this point; Doug McAdam and political process theorists, for example, would argue that political opportunity is wasted without a well-developed “insurgent consciousness,” a concept roughly akin to “solidarity” but obviously more proactive. Tarrow’s own contribution to the theoretical literature, however, is the argument that an increase of political opportunities, or a reduction of political constraints, prompts “early risers” to pursue contentious politics. This includes framing issues or grievances in culturally familiar and viable forms, as well as mobilizing social capital—preexisting networks of personal relationships, social groups, and organizations. These collective actors, Tarrow argues, implement inherited “repertoires of action”—a concept borrowed from Charles Tilly’s work—to challenge authority and galvanize sympathetic action. The first instances of contentious politics create new political opportunities and lower the initial costs of collective action, resulting in ever-broader “cycles of contention.” As these cycles expand, new manifestations of contentious politics develop, social networks broaden, and cultural symbols evolve. It is this new and expanding repertoire, Tarrow argues, that sometimes enables social movements to expand beyond the locality and become truly national phenomena.

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25 Tarrow, 5-7.

INTERDEPENDENCE THEORY

If the best of social movement theory explores history from the inside out—that is, how local phenomena become national—the best interdependence theory might be said to explore history from the outside in—how global phenomena become national.\textsuperscript{27} Although the concept of interdependence first emerged in Wendell Willkie’s \textit{One World} as an economic concept, it was quickly adapted to integrate world politics and society as well.\textsuperscript{28} David Mitrany, in particular, made the astute suggestion that even transnational cooperation can erode national sovereignty.\textsuperscript{29} Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, the first professional theorists to espouse interdependence, saw in the economic and policy literature a ready-made critique of realism, the dominant school of international relations thought at the time. They proposed the construction of “another ideal type, the opposite of realism. We call it \textit{complex interdependence}.”\textsuperscript{30} Political realism was based upon the assertion that international politics, like all other politics, is essentially a struggle for power. Unlike in domestic politics, however, in international politics this struggle is based on states’ virtual monopoly of violence and the constant condition of anarchy among them.\textsuperscript{31} Thus realism’s most influential proponent, Hans Morgenthau, asserted

\textsuperscript{27}This section owes much to Kenneth W. Thompson, \textit{Schools of Thought in International Relations: Interpreters, Issues, and Morality} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1996). In particular, see pages 9-70 on realism, and 120-124 on interdependence—with which he is rather unsympathetic.


\textsuperscript{31}For the fundamentals of political realism, see the works of Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, especially \textit{Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace}, 6th ed. (New York:
with Kenneth Thompson, "All history shows that nations active in international politics are continuously preparing for, actively involved in, or recovering from organized violence in the form of war." Keohane and Nye accurately summarized the three key assumptions of the realist school. "First, states as coherent units are the dominant actors in world politics. . . . Second, realists assume that force is a usable and effective instrument of policy. . . . Third, partly because of their second assumption, realists assume a hierarchy of issues in world politics, headed by questions of military security: the 'high politics' of military security dominates the 'low politics' of economic and social affairs."  

Keohane and Nye, among others, sought to establish "complex interdependence" as a middle ground between traditional realism and a so-called modernist school, which saw "telecommunications and jet travel as creating a 'global village' and [believed] that burgeoning social and economic transactions [were] creating a 'world without borders.'" Keohane and Nye did not go quite so far, but they did present realists with a strikingly fluid model. They suggested:

Complex interdependence has three main characteristics:

1. **Multiple channels** connect societies, including: informal ties between governmental elites as well as formal foreign office arrangements; informal ties among nongovernmental elites (face-to-face and through telecommunications); and transnational organizations (such as multinational banks or corporations) . . .

2. The agenda of interstate relationships consists of multiple issues that are not arranged in a clear or consistent hierarchy. This **absence of hierarchy among**

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32Morgenthau and Thompson, 36.


34Ibid., 3.
issues means, among other things, that military security does not consistently dominate the agenda. Many issues arise from what used to be considered domestic policy, and the distinction between domestic and foreign issues becomes blurred. . . .

3. Military force is not used by governments toward other governments within the region, or on the issues, when complex interdependence prevails. It may, however, be important in these governments’ relations with governments outside that region, or on other issues.35

These propositions, of interaction along multiple channels and a lack of hierarchy among issues, led Keohane and Nye to the question that concerns us here: if nations act in their own self-interest, “which self and which interest?”36

Relationships of complex interdependence—that is, situations where these precepts obtain—entail mutual costs. The costs may or may not outweigh the benefits, and the cost-to-benefit ratio may be much higher for one partner than for the other. Keohane and Nye call this “asymmetrical” interdependence. In virtually all cases of interdependence, though, the associated costs amount to the same thing: vulnerability.37 This vulnerability is of a different sort than that which Morgenthau saw in the anarchic global arena; it is vulnerability to the flow of money, people, and ideas. Ideas matter, as Judith Goldstein and Keohane put it, because “the principled or causal beliefs they embody provide road maps that increase actors’ clarity about goals or ends-means relationships,” and because they can “become embedded in political institutions.”38

35Ibid., 24-25. Italics in the original.
36Ibid., 34.
37Ibid., 8-10.
OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT

This study is an attempt to understand developments in the Nicaraguan Catholic Church in the decades prior to the triumph of the Revolution. As we shall see, the Nicaraguan state and the Nicaraguan Catholic Church maintained an intimate relationship from the colonial era through the first half of the twentieth century. I will show, however, that the nature of their relationship began to change in the 1960s and 1970s, and that these changes were the result of a social movement within the Nicaraguan Catholic Church.

After characterizing the Nicaraguan movement, I will argue that it originated in places far from Nicaragua, and evolved without significant Nicaraguan contributions. I will then show how the movement was carried from its points of origin to Nicaragua essentially whole and intact, where it bore unique fruit in Nicaragua’s revolutionary milieu. Social movement theory provides me with the methodology to examine the movement’s development within Nicaragua, and enables me to trace its lineage to the broader movement in the international Catholic Church. Interdependence theory accounts for the transmission of ideas to Nicaragua in the first place, and helps situate the process in a global context. Nicaraguan history, in turn, will provide a test case for the convergence of these theories, and will allow me to identify some ways that they might be refined.
CHAPTER II

THE CHURCH IN THE REVOLUTION

CONSEQUENCES OF THE REVOLUTION

On July 17, 1979 Anastasio Somoza Debayle fled Nicaragua for exile. His departure marked the end of a family dynasty that had ruled the country since 1936. Two days later, the leaders of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) marched into Managua and inaugurated one of those most rare of historical phenomena: a true revolution, in every sense of the word.

Although the common perception is that modern Latin American history has been rife with revolutions, the vast majority have in fact been mere exchanges of political power, usually from one group of elites to another. Mere political violence, in the absence of wholesale change in social and economic structures, does not constitute revolution. Those few uprisings that historians do commonly classify as “revolutionary”—Guatemala from 1945 to 1954, Bolivia from 1952 to 1964, Peru from 1968 to 1975, Chile from 1970 to 1973—were relatively gradual, circumscribed, and ineffective. Mexico’s upheaval from 1910 to roughly 1945 was extremely tumultuous and far-reaching, but ended up institutionalized and unresponsive.

By contrast, the victorious Nicaraguan revolution set out to transform all aspects of the nation: political, military, economic, social, and cultural. Though most of the revolutionary regime’s plans by no means conformed to Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, there can be little dispute that somocismo fell with Somoza. In politics, a Governing Junta of National Reconstruction, initially formed from exile in San José, Costa Rica,
replaced the Somoza dictatorship. The junta comprised Daniel Ortega Saavedra, Alfonso Robelo Callejas, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, Moisés Hassan Morales, and Sergio Ramírez Mercado. For a revolutionary vanguard, they represented a surprisingly wide variety of constituencies and political programs.¹ Ortega, of course, was the FSLN Tercerista commander who later became Nicaragua’s president. Robelo was founder and director of the Nicaraguan Democratic Movement (MDN), a business and professional opposition party. Chamorro was the widow of martyred opposition newspaperman Pedro Joaquín Chamorro and perhaps the nation’s most prominent conservative. Hassan headed the United People’s Movement (MPU), a coalition of twenty-two opposition organizations with memberships ranging from students and youth, teachers, and intellectuals to peasants and urban workers. Although the majority of these constituencies came from the lower socio-economic classes, Hassan himself was a scientist educated in the U.S. Ramírez, who eventually became vice-president, was—and is—a successful novelist and intellectual. More importantly, though, he represented Los Doce, a group of twelve businessmen and intellectuals, including one Catholic priest, which played a key role in the crystallization of multi-class support for the FSLN. A legislative assembly called the Council of State, also with broad representation, was convened in May 1980. Prominent members of the opposition to Somoza, from a variety of social and political backgrounds, were selected to head executive ministries. Much of this middle- and upper-class cooperation did evaporate shortly after the triumph, in part because the Sandinista National Directorate seemed to be wielding excessive power over the government. Robelo and Chamorro were among the first and most prominent to

defect; Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo and the Catholic hierarchy were not far behind. Yet much of this multi-class coalition remained intact even after the insurrection, during the reconstruction.\(^2\) In short, there can be little doubt that the Revolution did not merely replace political leaders; it began a transformation of Nicaraguan politics.

By definition, however, social revolutions transform more than just politics. FSLN commander Humberto Ortega recognized that it would not suffice to make "changes in the regime without touching the basic strings of power: the tremendous economic and repressive power of the National Guard."\(^3\) Seeking to overhaul that powerful institution, the FSLN instituted training programs to bring volunteers up to the level of more seasoned guerrillas, severed the police force from the army, and invited foreign experts from Panama and Costa Rica to conduct specialized police training.\(^4\) Interior Minister Tomás Borge, himself a victim of torture at the hands the Guard, strictly enforced human rights standards, and a popular militia of more than one hundred thousand members supplemented the professional Sandinista Popular Army (EPS).\(^5\)

The Government of National Reconstruction also embarked upon a complete reconstruction of the devastated economy—which had still not recovered from the

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\(^2\)For some examples, see Denis Lynn Daly Heyck, ed. *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 1990).


\(^4\)Booth, 197, 210.

earthquake of 1972, much less the civil war. Yet the Revolutionary Ministry of Planning sought not just recovery, but "reconstruction of the economy in a new form." The "new form" was a partially planned, nationalized economy. Somoza’s vast properties were confiscated, and all domestic financial institutions were nationalized. The Ministry of Agricultural Development and the National Agrarian Reform Institute undertook agrarian reform that included controlled rents, managed credit, state-provided technical assistance, and export levels subordinated to domestic demand. For the first time the government organized public utilities, health care, housing, and the exploitation of primary resources.

Mass organizations, from neighborhood "Sandinista Defense Committees," to student, peasant, women, and workers groups, sprang up throughout the country. Some of these organizations, especially the youth and student groups, participated enthusiastically in a nationwide Literacy Crusade that reduced the illiteracy rate from roughly fifty to thirteen percent in just twelve months. Social and cultural mores, including domestic relationships, religious festivals, and community life metamorphosed.

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7Ibid., 209. Also see Booth, 203-4.


9See FitzGerald, as well as Thomas John Bossert, "Health Care in Revolutionary Nicaragua," and Harvey Williams, "Housing Policy in Revolutionary Nicaragua," both in Nicaragua in Revolution, ed. Thomas W. Walker (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982).

Perhaps most important is that these transformations did not just take place at the
direction of the FSLN, but with the consent of the multi-class coalition. Although many
sectors of society found themselves alienated within a few short years, for a time there
was widespread—if often tacit—approval of the reconstruction process.

Only the Cuban Revolution, which became a model for most subsequent Latin
American revolutionary programs as well as President John F. Kennedy’s unsuccessful
Alliance for Progress, equaled the thoroughness of the Nicaraguan revolutionary
program. If this kind of sweeping revolution was so rare in Latin America, what brought
it about in Nicaragua? Historians agree that the broad-based, multi-class nature of
opposition to the Somoza regime was essential, during both the insurrectionary phase and
the period of "the Revolution in power."\(^{11}\) As we shall see, much of the Catholic Church
contributed substantially to this temporary but crucial alliance.

THE NICARAGUAN CHURCH, 1523-1936

This is quite surprising, given the Church’s traditional role in Nicaraguan politics.
Certainly the Church has never been a monolithic institution; individual members have
often been courageous dissidents. Nevertheless, as a whole the Church has tended to
back the party in power. During the colonial era its ideological support usually
buttressed the interests of the Crown against those of the criollos. In fact, the Church’s
own interests were closely tied to those of the Crown through the system of \textit{patronato}

\(^{11}\)Valerie Miller, "The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade," in \textit{Nicaragua in Revolution}, ed. Thomas W.

\(^{12}\)See, for example, Rose J. Spalding, \textit{Capitalists and Revolution in Nicaragua: Opposition and
Everingham, \textit{Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition in Nicaragua} (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh
This arrangement entitled Spain’s monarchs, rather than the papal curia, to appoint senior Church officials in the Spanish colonies. This generally had the effect of ensuring ecclesial endorsement of imperial policy. The Church, in turn, was rewarded not only with official protection for the Catholic faith (in part through state sponsorship of the Inquisition), but also with special land and tax privileges and a virtual monopoly over education, printing, and the celebration of festivals.  

In the wake of independence from Spain, the Nicaraguan Church maintained a close relationship with the conservative oligarchy of Granada and surrounding provinces. For several decades this was a tenuous position; liberals had the upper hand in perpetual factional strife. By 1838, however, conservatives were again dominant, withdrawing Nicaragua from the Central American confederation and reestablishing the mutual endorsement of Church and State. The Constitution of 1838 formally recognized Catholicism as the official state religion.  

Nevertheless, civil war in Nicaragua continued throughout the 1840s and 1850s, creating a situation of virtual anarchy for the nation. In 1858, with the defeat of the North American filibuster William Walker, Nicaraguan conservatives returned to power, and the Church-State relationship remained close for the next thirty-five years. In 1862 the government signed a concordat with the Holy See that recognized Roman Catholicism as Nicaragua’s official religion and once again guaranteed the Church’s right to supervise education and to censor books and other printed media. The state also


13Philip J. Williams, 13-14; Foroohar, 1-3.

14Philip J. Williams, 15.
promised to support the Church financially. In return, the government obtained the right to present its own candidates for appointment as bishop and had its authority endorsed by the Church hierarchy.\textsuperscript{15}

In 1893 the Liberal Party, led by General José Santos Zelaya, overthrew the conservative government and initiated a period of liberal rule that seriously threatened the Church’s interests. Other religions were tolerated, Church properties were confiscated, and initiatives for the secularization of marriage and education were pursued. Opposition to Zelaya’s rule, which lasted until 1909, cemented the Church’s alliance with traditional landowning interests. When Zelaya was toppled and a new conservative regime installed, the Catholic hierarchy quietly supported the occupation by United States Marines in order to shore up the weak conservative government. When Augusto César Sandino’s rebellion in May 1927 against the marine occupation and the government’s collaboration threatened the Church hierarchy, the bishops condemned Sandino as a bolshevist and an atheist, apparently because they feared his ties to the anti-clerical government in Mexico.\textsuperscript{16} Archbishop José Antonio Lezcano y Ortega even asked clergy throughout Nicaragua, especially in the war zones, to lend Church assistance to the pacification of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{15}Foroohar, 8-9; Philip J. Williams, 15-16.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16}The irony here is that although Sandino did indeed adopt some of the tenets of communism while he was a Huasteca oilfield worker in Tampico, Mexico, he was by no means orthodox. In fact, he also identified strongly with the older and better established anarcho-syndicalists and Freemasons in Tampico, and with a whole litany of occult philosophies including theosophy and a unique blend of North American Spiritualism and orientalism imported from the Magnetic-Spiritual School of the Universal Commune in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was, in part, this very inclusive brand of heterodoxy that helped pave the way for the FSLN’s own unique brand of communism and “wait and see” attitude toward other factions of the opposition. See Donald C. Hodges, \textit{Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 4-7, 23-71.}
the country, and Bishop Canuto Reyes y Valladares of Granada once blessed the arms of a U.S. battalion on its way to fight Sandino.17

As soon as the marines withdrew from Nicaragua in January 1933, Sandino agreed to negotiate peace with President Juan Bautista Sacasa. Later that same year, though, while Sandino was in Managua finalizing the details of the peace agreement, he was assassinated by Anastasio Somoza García, Jefe Director of the new National Guard. The powerful Somoza held Sacasa’s government hostage for two more years, before he openly seized power and had himself elected President in 1936. He ruled Nicaragua for the next twenty years.

THE NICARAGUAN CHURCH THROUGH THE 1960S

The Church’s relationship with Somoza was not much different than its relationship with previous governments, despite his status as a Liberal. In part this was because Somoza did not pursue the aggressively liberal agenda of Zelaya or his predecessors: there was no anti-clericalism, no confiscation of Church lands, and no Church taxation. Perhaps most important, Somoza’s new state-run public education system operated alongside, not instead of, traditional Church-run schools, and the regime did not meddle with public religious festivals or ceremonies. Philip Williams asserted that in comparison with other Central American nations of the 1930s and 1940s, the Church in Nicaragua enjoyed a relatively privileged position in society.18

In return, the Church endorsed the ruling regime—just as it had so often in the past. According to Pablo Richard and Guillermo Meléndez, “The greatest historical

17 Forooah, 21-23; Philip J. Williams, 17-18.
significance of the pre-Council Nicaraguan Church consisted in the moral legitimization of the somocista dictatorship." In November 1941, for example, in a ceremony that took place in Managua’s cathedral, Archbishop Lezcano y Ortega placed the golden crown from the statue of the Virgin of Candelaria on the head of Somoza’s only daughter, Lilian Somoza Debayle, and proclaimed her “Queen of the Army.” The Somoza regime did not miss the opportunity to capitalize on the Church’s pomp; the entire fall issue of the magazine Guardia Nacional was dedicated to the event. During the ceremony the Archbishop referred to the Guard as a “magnificent institution... fundamental to the social order and well-being of the country.” When a young poet named Rigoberto López Pérez assassinated Anastasio Somoza García in September of 1956, Pope Pius XII sent a public letter of condolence, and the Nicaraguan bishops published a circular condemning the action. Worse, the Nicaraguan Church gave Somoza the honorary posthumous title of “Prince of the Church,” and offered two hundred days’ indulgence for those who attended the funeral in Managua. In a pastoral letter he issued in August 1959, the new archbishop, Vicente Alejandro González y Robleto, provided the customary rationalization for this mutually beneficial relationship. “All authority

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18Philip J. Williams, 18-19.

19Pablo Richard and Guillermo Meléndez, eds., La Iglesia de los pobres en América Central: un análisis socio-político y teológico de la Iglesia Centroamericana, 1960-1982 (San José: Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones, 1982), 144. The term “pre-Council” used here refers to the time before the Second Vatican Council, which lasted from October 1962 until December 1965. Vatican II, as the Council is known, marked a watershed in the Church’s approach to modernity generally and to social questions in particular. The nature and consequences of the Council will be further explained in chapter III.

20Berryman, 55; Richard and Meléndez, 144-45; Philip J. Williams, 19.

21Philip J. Williams, 185.

22Guardia Nacional, Año XXIV, nos. 286-87 (September-October 1956), 12-13; quoted in Philip J. Williams, 19.
comes from God and... he who resists the authority resists God."\(^{24}\) This letter from the Archbishop recalled not only Paul’s epistle to the Romans, but an earlier pastoral letter signed by all of the Nicaraguan bishops, which affirmed: "For all Catholics there is a certain exalted doctrine: all authority comes from God. God is the author of whatever exists, and from the author comes the authority... When Catholics obey the government, they do not degrade themselves, but their act fundamentally constitutes compliance with God."\(^{25}\)

It should be noted that the Bishop of Matagalpa, Octavio José Calderón y Padilla, differed from the other bishops. Two weeks after publication of the Archbishop’s letter he issued his own, confirming the principle of divine authority but adding qualifications. "The authority is null," he wrote, "when there is no justice."\(^{26}\) His dissent, including calls to free political prisoners and denunciations of the Guard’s brutalities, continued under Somoza García’s sons, Luis Somoza Debayle, who ruled from 1957 to 1968, and Anastasio Somoza Debayle, who ruled from his brother’s death until his own overthrow in 1979.\(^{27}\)

Generally speaking, though, the Church served to legitimate the Somoza dynasty and its regime. Foroohar points out, "The [Church] hierarchy was present in every official ceremony, in every presidential inauguration following every fraudulent election.

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\(^{24}\) Richard and Meléndez, 145; Berryman, 54-55.

\(^{25}\) *Carta Pastoral Eclesiástica de Vicente Alejandro González y Robleto* (Managua, 3 August 1959), 13; quoted in Philip J. Williams, 21.

\(^{26}\) *Pastoral Colectiva de Episcopado Nicaragüense* (Managua: Editorial Católica, 1950), 5, quoted in Foroohar, 38. Also see Berryman, 55.

\(^{27}\) *Sexta Carta Pastoral del Octavio José Calderón y Padilla* (Managua, 12 August 1959), 13-14; quoted in Philip J. Williams, 22.
and in every religious celebration, to pray for the health and success of the dictator and his family." Both Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle recognized and appreciated this endorsement. Of the years following the Anastasio Somoza García's death, Williams wrote: "Looking through various years of correspondence between the Somoza government and clergy, one can find numerous instances of priests and bishops being granted 'favourites'. These ranged from free airline passes for travel abroad, to gifts of automobiles, to outright cash advancements." Perhaps the most condemning testimony came from Ernesto Castillo, a professor at the Jesuit-run University of Central America in Managua. In a presentation solicited by the bishops, clergy, and religious who gathered at the Primer Encuentro Pastoral in 1969, Castillo reprimanded his Church:

Nor did the social doctrines of the Church that would have contributed to dignifying the oppressed classes, and making them conscious of their rights, arrive to [Nicaragua], principally because the Church of Nicaragua has always identified itself with the dominant classes, and consciously impeded the diffusion of the social doctrines, assuming, moreover, condemnatory attitudes toward any and all budding social unconformity.  

The Church supported the Liberal Somoza family for the same reason that it had backed the Conservatives before them: fear of the alternative. The alternative to Conservative rule had been classical liberalism in the style of Zelaya, including its nationalizing and anti-clerical tenets. Although to some extent it may have been

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27Philip J. Williams, 23; Foroohar, 75.  
28Foroohar, 40.  
29Philip J. Williams, 186. He goes on: "In May 1965, for example, the Archbishop Mons. González y Robleto was sent a 'special contribution' of $1500.00 towards his expenses while he was in New York for a week to have an eye operation. Of course, his airfare had already been covered. . . ."  
30Ernesto Castillo, "Realidad Humana en Nicaragua," in De Cara al Futuro de la Iglesia en Nicaragua: Primer Encuentro Pastoral, Managua, 20-25 enero, 25-1 febrero (León, Nicaragua: Editorial Hospicio, 1969), 142-43. The Primer Encuentro Pastoral was the Nicaraguan Church's first organized attempt to address the changes in the worldwide Church wrought by Vatican II and its Latin American
necessary for the Church to placate the Somozas in order to maintain its status in a liberal regime, communism seems to have been the real fear. "It became clear," Richard and Meléndez observed, "that the Church considered the Marxist philosophy of communism as a serious threat."31 Williams elaborates: "As early as 1935, the bishops of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama wrote a collective pastoral letter warning against the growing spread of communism within their countries. They condemned communist doctrine as atheist and as a permanent threat to the social order, rejecting the view that a Catholic could simultaneously be a communist."32 This fear of communism was by no means confined to the hierarchy. The University of Central America (UCA), whose faculty consisted mostly of Jesuit priests and lay religious, was originally established in 1961 by entrepreneurs in the Somoza business group as a place where students could learn a business-oriented curriculum and be freer from leftist influence than the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN).33 In 1961, Luis Suárez, a Dominican priest who taught at the University of León, wrote a letter to President Luis Somoza in which he described his ongoing struggle against communism. He claimed that he had "organized some eighty Catholic students to infiltrate communist groups at the university,

31Richard and Meléndez, 145.

32Philip J. Williams, 20.

33Everingham, 69; Richard and Meléndez, 145-46. The "Somoza business group" refers to a widely recognized pattern in Nicaraguan society in which the capitalist elite—of both Liberal and Conservative persuasion—established business and financial networks based largely on personal and family relationships. Harry W. Strachan's study of business groups in Nicaragua confirmed that the two most powerful groups in Nicaragua were centered on the Banco Nicaragüense (BANIC) and the Banco de América (BANAMER). Of those Strachan interviewed for the study, however, 65 percent identified a third business group: the "Somoza group." The activities of this nascent group became especially important following the earthquake of December 1972, as discussed below. Harry W. Strachan, Family and Other
and... spoke to parents of communist students, convincing them to send their children abroad.” In this way he replaced such dangerous ideas with “Catholic inspired social doctrine.” He concluded, “Today no one is sympathizing with Fidel.”

We see clearly, then, that Nicaraguan Church and State supported one another, and that both benefited by this relationship. It is also clear that there were some costs. The Somoza regime tolerated vocal dissidents within the Church, such as Bishop Calderón y Padilla, and allowed the Church hierarchy to maintain a public voice and significant executive control over education. In turn the Church accepted curtailment of its traditional privileges and inevitable estrangement from those faithful who felt oppressed by the Church-State alliance. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, this relationship began to change. The process was rather gradual, and changes did not propagate through either the Church or the State uniformly. In order to understand the origin of these changes, we will begin by examining the underlying developments in Nicaraguan society up through the 1970s and the State’s response to them, before taking up parallel developments within the Church.

CHANGES IN NICARAGUAN ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

Nicaragua’s economy and society had been on a roller coaster since Somoza formally took power in 1936. The Depression, not surprisingly, had devastated the prices of Nicaragua’s most important export commodities, like coffee and sugar. The recovery that began with the Second World War and lasted through the mid-1940s was based

almost entirely on growing foreign exchange reserves, little of which could be spent importing capital goods because of wartime shortages of such equipment.\textsuperscript{35} Instead, these surpluses were converted into a highly successful agricultural diversification—most importantly into cotton and beef. Indeed, cotton and cotton-related products accounted for more than twenty-five percent of total Nicaraguan export earnings by 1954, and occupied about forty percent of cultivable land.\textsuperscript{36} Because both cotton and cattle require access to extensive amounts of land and capital, Somoza enjoyed newfound leverage against the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie in the early 1950s. He used this control over the government’s land and trade policies—and a short-lived alliance with organized labor—to co-opt both Liberal rivals and the Conservative opposition in a 1950 deal known as the “pact of the generals.” The deal secured Conservative toleration of Somoza’s regime in exchange for one third of congressional seats and “commercial liberty,” and reinforced Somoza’s political power over both parties.\textsuperscript{37}

This elite rapprochement and commercial diversification seemed to signal modernization for Nicaragua’s political economy. As Jeffrey Gould showed, however, the changes inherent to modernization also undermined the traditional Nicaraguan social order.\textsuperscript{38} The vast tracts of land required for cotton cultivation on a commercial scale dislocated thousands of small farmers along the Pacific coast, without providing nearly

\textsuperscript{34}Luis Suárez, letter to Luis Somoza, 23 January 1961, Archivo Nacional de Nicaragua, Secretaria de la Presidencia, Serie B, Caja no. 40, (29) Clero, 1961; quoted in Philip J. Williams, 185-86.


\textsuperscript{36}Bulmer-Thomas, 112, 355; Booth, 66.

\textsuperscript{37}Booth, 63-65.
enough jobs to absorb them all. Those who could work suddenly became a sort of rural proletariat instead of small private or cooperative landowners. Meanwhile Somoza discarded his short-lived populist rhetoric and repressed both rural and urban organized labor. Throughout his reign he continued to grow enormously wealthy by using the legislature, the military, political patronage and sanctioned corruption to stack the odds in his favor. As Booth put it, “Somoza had sealed the pressure cooker with the National Guard and corruption and had turned up the fire with economic growth and increased inequality.”

Upon Somoza’s death in 1956 his eldest son, Luis Somoza Debayle, succeeded him in the Presidency while his younger son, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, officially took command of the National Guard. Luis was a better politician than his younger brother, and managed to maintain the capitalist alliance that his father had forged. Thanks in part to the stability Luis Somoza maintained, and in part to the establishment of the Alliance for Progress and the Central American Common Market, the Nicaraguan economy continued to grow rapidly for a decade, roughly 3.5 percent per year from 1955 to 1965.

The relatively placid political atmosphere and neoliberal economic growth of Luis Somoza’s presidency, however, were underpinned by the repressive National Guard, electoral fraud, and continued corruption. The regime’s dirty work was by and large left to Anastasio Somoza Debayle while his brother tried to smooth relations with the elite. When Luis Somoza died of a heart attack in 1967, his brother Anastasio succeeded him.


39 Booth, 69.

40 Ibid., 82.
Anastasio, however, was much more blatantly corrupt and self-serving than either his brother or his father had been. He continued to repress popular activism and grew personally rich, but by the early 1970s the younger generation of Somozas had alienated virtually every sector of Nicaraguan society, and Anastasio Somoza was headed down the path of his demise.

Opposition to somocismo in these economically turbulent times took a wide variety of forms. In the Nicaraguan upper class, Conservatives began to defect from the collaboration of the past and form independent opposition parties; wealthy Liberals sponsored activist special interest groups like the Superior Council of Private Initiative (COSIP) and the Nicaraguan Development Institute (INDE). The Nicaraguan press also frequently opposed the regime, especially La Prensa, the newspaper owned by Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, from the nation’s most prominent Conservative family. Labor became more vocal as Somoza’s patronage dissipated, and loosely organized peasant groups began to emerge. Students, always an active group compared to most of the Nicaraguan polity, marched for university autonomy and political enfranchisement. Perhaps most important, three students who had become disillusioned with Nicaragua’s orthodox communist party—Carlos Fonseca Amador, Tomás Borge, and Silvio Mayorga—founded the FSLN in 1961.

The Nicaraguan Catholic Church also became an integral part of this rising tide of opposition. As we begin to look at Nicaragua the mid-1960s, however, it becomes clear that we should not refer to the “Nicaraguan Church” as if it were a single entity. The behavior of individual Catholics in the face of mounting repression and resistance varied

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41Ibid., 97-106.
enormously. Doubtless most Catholics—bishops, clergy, and laity alike—continued to
defend the status quo. Others, however, at every echelon of Church power, found
themselves caught up in mounting “cycles of contention,” to use Tarrow’s social
movement terminology. It is in these “progressive” Christians that we are interested. I
will focus on them because it was they who altered the Church-State relationship as they
engaged in the construction of a national social movement.

THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT IN THE CHURCH: FORMING COLLECTIVE
IDENTITIES

From roughly the 1930s until the 1960s, part of the Nicaraguan Church’s reaction
to the burgeoning threat of Marxism—and of Protestantism, for that matter—was to plan
and undertake a systematic “‘defense of the faith,’ animated by the pastoral line of acción
católica, and linked to the missionary impulse.”\(^43\) Williams explains that this new
pastoral orientation sprang from the reformist social doctrines expressed in the papal
encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), and focused on “the
organization of catechism courses, liturgical studies and charity projects, all in an effort
to overcome religious ignorance and to spread the Catholic social doctrine.”\(^44\) After these
initiatives were reaffirmed and formalized at the First Conference of the Central
American Episcopate, held in San José, Costa Rica in 1956, the Nicaraguan Church
established national chapters of *Radio Católica* to disseminate religious instruction, and
*Cáritas* to provide economic relief to the poor.

\(^{42}\) Gould, 85-269.

\(^{43}\) Richard and Meléndez, 145.

\(^{44}\) Philip J. Williams, 20.
THE CURSILLOS

Though the nature and intent of this "defense of the faith" was moderate and reformist—or, one might argue, reactionary, given the continued endorsement of Somoza's oppressive regime—its most important effect overall was to involve both clergy and laity in social action at the grassroots. Some of the most productive activities to emerge from acción católica were the cursillos, or short weekend courses of instruction for the Catholic laity. Cursillos varied from parish to parish, but generally emphasized traditional Catholic social values. The Cursillos de Cristiandad, which first appeared in the early 1960s, attracted primarily middle-class participation and focused on scripture reading and catechetical instruction. The later "Family of God" Cursillos, which in Nicaragua first appeared in the mid-1960s in the San Pablo Apóstol parish of Managua, stressed family values and the relation of families to the larger Christian community.

It seems, though, that it was not so much the content of these cursillos that mattered. It was the method. First, cursillos were conducted in the form of Socratic dialogues, with participants encouraged to both examine and contribute their own experience. Second, the cursillos encouraged parishioners to meet together in a venue outside the traditional mass. In fact, one key topic of discussion in the cursillos was implementation of the liturgical reforms enjoined by the Second Vatican Council in

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45 Berryman, 59-60; Philip J. Williams 44.

46 Berryman, 59-60.
Finally, the *cursillos* encouraged participants to address social issues, like machismo and family involvement in the Church community, by looking to the Bible.\(^{48}\) These rather unconventional methods changed the way many Christians thought, both about the Church and about society. They were a key step toward the formation of other, more socially active movements.

Several Nicaraguan revolutionaries, for example, attested to the effect *cursillos* had on them. María del Socorro Gutiérrez de Barreto, who became the General Secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Human Settlement in the Revolutionary government, worked in *acción católica*’s Christian Family Movement between 1963 and 1965. In 1966 she attended Managua’s first *Cursillo de Cristiandad* specifically for women, and shortly thereafter began to lead a *cursillo* herself. Like many *cursillistas*, she came from the middle class: her father had been a doctor, she and her husband owned a business, and they enjoyed certain “advantages and privileges.”\(^{49}\) But the *cursillos* she helped lead brought her into contact with new problems, and changed the way she considered her surroundings. “And one starting point for me,” she says, “was the *Cursillos de Cristiandad* in which I began discovering more fully God the Father and Christ, who

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\(^{48}\)Cleary, 6-8; Berryman, 60; Philip J. Williams, 44.

became incarnate with effective love. From that love, we endeavored to analyze the real things of life, the concrete and needy neighbor. . . .”50

A Cursillo de Cristiandid made a similar impact on Humberto J. Solis, a Doctor of Law and Notary Public who became presiding Judge of a regional appeals court following the triumph of the Revolution.51 He too “was born into a Christian family,” but all his adolescence and youth “was quite routine in the question of faith.” That was true “until, . . . in the year 1968, I was invited to a Cursillo de Cristiandid and it was there that an intersection in my life took place. There I saw quite well, I think, what was the message of Christianity and the commitment of faith that I had to make for it: that it wasn’t a question of forms, but of life. There I began to want to change, to search for change with sincerity.”52

Teodulo Baez Cabezas relates a similar experience with cursillos. Like Maria del Socorro and Humberto Solis, he came from a middle-class background. He studied chemistry and pharmacology at the Jesuit-run University of Central America, and inherited his father’s farm. He also served for a time in the National Geologic Service, and finally took a position in the Nicaraguan Energy Institute after 1979. Despite his Catholic education, he explained derisively, his “Christian life was one of custom and tradition. . . . I thought I could do anything and that, in going to Mass and reciting a rosary I was really good as a Catholic, I believed I was done. I didn’t know the Gospel, I never opened it.”53 In February 1969, however, he attended a Cursillo de Cristiandid.

50Ibid., 165.
51Ibid., 247.
52Ibid., 250.
53Ibid., 60-61.
“After I did my cursillo,” he continued, “all that ended. The Lord, not I, protected my will and gave me the ability to form a Christian home. . . . Since then, I have gone to twenty-eight Cursillos de Cristiandad, as a leader.” As with de Socorro, though, Baez’s experience gradually changed his understanding of society. “. . . I realized that wasn’t everything. To be faithful to my wife, to form a domestic church with my children, . . . all that, yes, a little piece of heaven, . . . but I said to myself: ‘is that being a Christian?’” Baez goes on to describe his efforts to engage poverty in his neighborhood, and his growing conviction that “[we] are all children of the same Father.”

Again, Miguel Ernesto Vijil relates a similar story. After a Catholic education, he became an engineer for a private construction company. In 1966, he recalled, “I was invited to participate in a Cursillo de Cristiandad. . . . And there, in that cursillo, I began to change my religious conception. . . . I began to discover Christianity . . . as the motivation for my actions.” In Vijil, however, the process of change quickly accelerated. “In the measure in which I became more convinced of the necessity of being an authentic Christian,” he remembered, “I separated myself more from my social group. I lived a Christian conversion with a logical and decisive break with my class.”

Maria del Socorro also began to equate her religious experience with social reality. “I began to see with my own eyes, moved by Christian faith and spurred by the cursillo, all those real and terrible things of life, which I had never before analyzed: concrete poverty, . . . unjust poverty and unjust privilege, abuses, organized injustice.” For Baez, the positive learning experience of the cursillo was quickly overtaken by the realization of its

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54Ibid., 62.
55Ibid., 324-25.
inadequacy to effect real change. After buying a meal for a poor worker on one occasion, he began to congratulate himself. "At first I was satisfied with myself: 'I was really good with the Lord!' But I came to see that he was telling me: 'these are superficial operations, this is cursillo stuff if you leave it at this.'" Baez began to understand his faith as an imperative to address the more structural issues of poverty. "And since then, for me there's only one way: to have done with all that which is a cause of hunger and with all that which attempts to justify and institutionalize inequality and privilege." Moreover, this experience with cursillos eventually led Baez to a sort of dialectical-materialist interpretation of Nicaraguan society. "I convinced myself that clearly, if the world in which we're living, Nicaraguan society, formed two groups of people, those who have everything and those who have nothing, those who gorge themselves and those who die of hunger, we necessarily have to live a struggle between those two groups that live in our society."57

Thus a Church strategy originally designed to combat Marxism by re-engaging the faithful and promoting traditional values led, in some cases at least, to social activism and even radicalization. Doubtless thousands of Nicaraguans who participated in cursillos did not undergo a process of politicization or even of spiritual renewal. Their stories are not recorded, partly because their stories are not as dynamic and partly because of the ultimate outcome of the Revolution. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing two things common to the cursillo experiences recounted above. First, in each case the awakening described seems to have been sincerely religious and deeply personal, not primarily political. Second, each account evolves toward a desire for action.

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57Ibid., 165.
ECCLESIASTICAL BASE COMMUNITIES

While acción católica and the cursillo movement brought middle- and some upper-class Christians into contact with the Church’s social doctrine vis-à-vis Nicaragua’s poverty, Ecclesiastical Base Communities (CEBs) primarily incorporated poorer Nicaraguan believers. Father José de la Jara, a Spanish priest, seems to have founded the first widely acknowledged CEB in Nicaragua—“an experience with an ecclesiastical base community which has continued to this day.” Originally, in the San Pablo Apóstol parish in 1966, Father de la Jara’s project was a “Family-of-God” cursillo not unlike the Cursillos de Cristiandad. Like other cursillos, Father de la Jara’s encouraged the Christian laity to engage the scriptures, Church doctrine, and one another directly, with minimal guidance from the parish priest. This objective developed because of the severe shortage of priests not just in Nicaragua, but throughout Latin America.

Father de la Jara’s CEB in San Pablo also emphasized many of the traditional family and community values of the cursillos. The innovation of Father de la Jara’s CEB, and the success of others after it, lay in placing great emphasis on the process of concientización, which roughly translated means “consciousness-raising.” Rather than begin with a part of the Catholic catechism or the scriptures and try to extract lessons for daily life, as the cursillos so effectively did, in CEBs the poor were encouraged to address the social issues most important to them, and then try to understand what the Bible had to say about

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58Father Uriel Molina wrote, “The Ecclesiastical Base Community did not resemble in any way the traditional apostolic movements, like the Legion of Mary, Congregation of Mary, Apostolate of Prayer, etc. Nor had it anything to do with the Cursillos de Cristiandad. These took place in the midst of the upper- and middle-classes. The did not clearly posit the Faith-Politics relationship.” See Uriel Molina Olivi, "Una Experiencia de Dios entre los Pobres: La Comunidad Eclesial de Base del Barrio Riguero,” Amanecer: Reflexión Cristiana en la Nueva Nicaragua (July-August 1984): 29.
them. Richard and Meléndez wrote, "Toward 1968 their pastoral message began to be occupied with themes like the dignity of the human person, the posture of the Christian before the political reality and the promotion of activities of popular political participation." Very shortly after his work began, several nuns of the Asunción and Maryknoll orders joined Father de la Jara’s project. In September 1968, two more Spanish priests, Mariano Velazquez and Félix Jiménez, began to work in the parish’s Catorce de Septiembre neighborhood. San Pablo Apóstol quickly became a center for renovation in the Nicaraguan Catholic Church at the grassroots. In 1968 the community there organized two pastoral meetings for similar Christian communities in Condega, Somoto, and Pueblo Nuevo. Félix Jiménez also records that “other parishes in Managua and other places asked San Pablo for help in forming Christian communities as they had created them.” In response the parish of San Pablo “organized the communities of Santo Domingo, Miraflores and La Tejera.” A priest named Father Vidal even carried his enthusiasm for the San Pablo project to distant Waspán, in the isolated department of Zelaya.

Among other things, the CEB in San Pablo created Nicaragua’s first “popular mass” in 1967. Despite swift condemnation from the Nicaraguan hierarchy, this liturgy circulated among several other Christian communities throughout the country. Among

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50 Richard and Meléndez, 152-53.
51 Ibid., 153.
52 Foroohar, 70.
54 Richard and Meléndez, 153.
those communities that adopted the mass was one founded at about the same time as San Pablo, in the Solentiname archipelago in Lake Nicaragua.

*Nuestra Señora de Solentiname* was without a doubt Nicaragua’s most famous Christian community. When Father Ernesto Cardenal Chamorro founded the community in Solentiname in 1966, he intended it to be a sort of contemplative artists’ colony. He arrived at Solentiname with fellow poet William Agudelo and Carlos Alberto, both from Colombia.\(^\text{65}\) They discovered an abandoned adobe church and set up their community there, gradually incorporating the local *campesinos*, most of whom were primarily attracted by the unexpected presence of a priest among them. The *campesinos* did not originally belong to the community, but lived in their homes and periodically made day-trips there. Although Cardenal allowed a great deal of artistic experimentation—including ceramics and weaving, among other things—and invited famous Central American artists to teach the *campesinos* their techniques, one *campesina* member remarked that “painting was what worked.”\(^\text{66}\)

As the painting progressed, the Solentiname community began to change. Agudelo challenged the quasi-monastic atmosphere and asked to bring Teresita Builes, a local girl with whom he had developed an intimate relationship, into the community. Since Cardenal had from the outset intended to found a contemplative community where “there weren’t going to be any rules,” Builes and several other local women who had been learning to paint were invited to join the community full-time.\(^\text{67}\)

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\(^{64}\)Molina Oliú, “*Una Experiencia de Dios,*” 30; Richard and Meléndez, 153.


\(^{66}\)Ibid., 59.
Guevara, who had never painted but worked for the community as a day laborer, was also invited to live and work there full-time.\textsuperscript{68}

The most significant change in Solentiname, however, seems to have arrived in 1967, with the visit of an unnamed “Spanish priest who worked in the east end of Managua.” Community member Alejandro Guevara recalled that Cardenal’s arrival in 1966 had already made a dramatic impact on the religious life of the people, who had for years seen a circuit priest only occasionally.\textsuperscript{69} Instead of emphasizing art or celebration of the mass, however, the visiting Spanish priest—who could have been de la Jara, Velasquez, Jiménez, or someone else—focused on concientización. Agudelo remembered:

He was involved in raising the consciousness of the people. It was like catechizing, but it was more than that... Some Maryknoll priests had begun that work. It was taking up a religious practice, but beginning from your own surroundings, your neighborhood, the people around you, the life you lived with them... This influenced us to begin to change our own work with people. The community threw itself into this work.\textsuperscript{70}

As in San Pablo, the Solentiname community began to reconsider the conduct of their meetings. According to Cardenal, “The first reforms we made were in the liturgy. The Latin mass had been abolished by then so we started to have a dialogue with the congregation, making everyone participate. After the mass we had communal meals, talked a lot about social problems, but still had a rather reformist mentality... But our ideas were changing.”\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{67}Ibid., 45, 66-67.

\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., 57-58.

\textsuperscript{69}Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{70}Ibid., 73-74.
Solentiname’s changing ideas attracted the attention of like-minded Christians in Nicaragua. Guevara recalled that after the shift toward *concientización*, de la Jara began visiting Solentiname more often. “Father de la Jara, who was active in the Christian base communities in Managua, gave us the idea of taping the commentaries and told us how to do it.” Later on, “Fernando, Ernesto’s brother, came and wanted to tape us and make a book with the tapes. Because our commentaries concerned theological questions, it was important to write them down. After we did the taping, we saw how we were developing politically.”72 *The Gospel in Solentiname* was the result of these recordings. Collected in the early 1970s and published in the mid-1970s, these dialogues of the Solentiname community were widely distributed in the Latin American Catholic Church and partially account for the community’s fame as well as Cardenal’s.73

Just as Father de la Jara had asked the hierarchy’s permission to implement a new pastoral program in San Pablo Apóstol, Father Uriel Molina Oliú asked in October 1965 to undertake pastoral work in *Nuestra Señora de Fátima* parish in Managua’s Riguero district. El Riguero was a poor, working-class neighborhood of approximately twenty thousand people, including many displaced *campesinos*. Molina later wrote, “The pastoral work in that marginalized zone had been reduced to the sporadic visits of some priest who arrived to say mass or to celebrate the offices of Holy Week.”74 Molina’s work with El Riguero’s poor began as a sort of “Bible school,” which addressed fundamental questions of belief in a simplified format. Molina explained, “It wasn’t an

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easy task. The simple people, weary from the labors of the day, unable to read or write and accustomed to a folkloristic Catholicism, could not properly approach a biblical study. But they demonstrated much will and . . . there awakened in them a great interest to know the Bible.”75 As in many of Nicaragua’s *cursillos* and in San Pablo parish, Molina’s discourse with the poor of El Riguero gradually turned from catechism to social questions. As the community engaged in the familiar Socratic dialogues of other CEBs, Molina recalled that “the community learned thus to discover a God not of the Catechism, a commanding God, but a God of the poor, who listens to the clamor of the oppressed.”76 Antonia Cortéz recalled that, “before Father Uriel arrived, religion was practiced in a very ritualistic way. . . . But at the same time injustices were growing. Only a few priests felt the people’s suffering, and perhaps that’s why they began to work here, raising the consciousness of the people, opening our eyes to the fact that it was not just a matter of praying but also of knowing our rights.”77

Molina was not the parish priest of Fátima, which included Riguero, but the assistant priest. Thus he had time to teach classes in the Bible and theology at the UCA in Managua. Molina recognized the disparity between his two “flocks,” one of poor and marginalized workers, the other of wealthy bourgeois students.78 He saw the opportunity to reconcile them in November 1971, when several young men, mostly students from the University, visited his house. They proposed an “experiment with a form of communal

75Ibid., 30.
76Ibid.,
77Randall, 131.
life.” Most of them had been involved with student movements at the University before, but had decided to make a more radical commitment. Joaquín Cuadra explained:

The *compañeros* who took part in the community had something in common. Almost all of our families were from the same class, the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie. We had all been living at home with our parents and that put limits on our freedom of movement. There were always family commitments to meet, you were always subject to a certain social influence. And also the criticisms. For example, our families didn’t like it if we went around on motorcycles or on the bus instead of cars. We started to discuss our way of life. The problem for us was that we had new ideas but still lived in a traditional manner. It didn’t make much sense. So during the holidays we finally decided to go and live outside the influence of our families for a time. We’d even earn our own living because we didn’t want our experiment to be financed by our parents, by the bourgeoisie. We wanted something more pure.

That’s when we met Uriel. We went to speak with him about a new community. We established the basis of the relation, how it would be, what we would bring, this and that.\(^79\)

They chose Riguero, Roberto Gutiérrez explains, “because it had all the conditions which would allow us to live the way we wanted. First, it was a working-class neighborhood. . . . Secondly, we found Uriel, who came to play a very important role in our lives.”\(^80\) Accoring to José Miguel Torres, the group chose Molina not only because of the progressive theology he taught at the University, but also because “his preaching in the El Riguero barrio. . . . [was a sign] of the most consistent, most solid work being done here [in Nicaragua].”\(^81\)

Naturally, the merger of the neighborhood and student groups was gradual. One member of the CEB, Coco Guerrero López, recalled:

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\(^80\)Ibid., 128-29.

\(^81\)Ibid., 128.
We, the people in the neighborhood, had been in the Christian base community for some time. We knew the Gospel pretty well. When the students came to introduce themselves it was clear they were a well-to-do group from rich families. They told us they wanted to leave behind some of the life they had led in order to live a bit of our lives. They wanted to integrate into our neighborhood, our poverty, our need. . . .

The idea was welcomed by most of the community at large. The compañeros went to the houses, visited the workers. . . . They joined the work of the community. Molina described how the group expanded:

The analyses of the structure of the society and the economy were quite interesting. More and more students came to visit and things got so intense—it was becoming a movement. . . . And I used to say to myself that it was fate that brought them here, these young people who had everything but who chose to live in this house. The community they created was not anything I could have even imagined in my dreams. We treated each other as true brothers.

Coco Guerrero López agreed, “Many others also left everything behind and joined the neighborhood. It was a true integration.”

Elsewhere Molina described the kind of conscientización that resulted from this mix of politically-minded students and the “poor, sometimes without employment, occasionally underemployed:”

One day, for example, it turned out that the milk had gone up considerably in price. This fact that affected the poor was submitted to the consideration of the community. The University students, armed with their socio-political analyses, arrived at the conclusion that the injustice had to be overcome through the tasting of consciousness and the organization of the poor class.

He then goes on to describe how this reflective conclusion was applied in the community’s biblical studies. “The Bible also says, ‘insist to the rich so that they share

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82Ibid., 132-33.
83Ibid., 133.
84Ibid.
their goods with social feeling.' The social analysis carried us to the proof of a badly organized society, a function of the privileged minorities. The rich had to be urged so that they would convert.”

Though the process of Christian *concientización* is most famous—and best documented—in its Riguero, Solentiname, and San Pablo Apóstol manifestations, similar processes were underway throughout Nicaragua. Molina was aware of rural communities founded among the *campesinos* of the Pacific coast by teams of priests and lay persons. Richard and Meléndez described another CEB movement led by Father Vilchez in the diocese of Matagalpa, which “provided the impulse for an intense rural activity that covered more than seventy valleys, organizing communities and forming *campesino* leaders.”

RURAL PASTORAL PROGRAMS

In rural Nicaragua, especially the enormous east-coast department of Zelaya, which encompasses more than half the country's territory, similar pastoral work was being undertaken by different means. In 1968, in the Apostolic Vicariate of Bluefields, U.S. Capuchins of the Franciscan order officially established a program called *Delegados de la Palabra*, or Delegates of the Word (DPs). The first DP training course, held west of Bluefields in Ciudad Rama, taught lay persons “to serve Christ in their brothers, organizing celebrations of the word, preparing Christians for the baptism of their children

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86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Richard and Meléndez, 153-54.
and for marriage; visiting the sick and burying the dead."\textsuperscript{90} As the Delegates traversed the countryside of Zelaya, they held dialogues with the faithful quite similar to those held in Managua’s CEBs and in Solentiname. When the results of these dialogues were reported to the Bluefields Vicariate’s Capuchin administrators, they organized new programs specifically designed to address the communities’ material concerns. Smutko, himself a Capuchin from the U.S., wrote that this resulted in “the formation of programs of health leaders, agricultural leaders, of literacy teachers and finally of rural schools.”\textsuperscript{91} The campesinos nominated to lead such programs for their communities were brought to attend courses in “Siuna, Muelle de los Bueyes, Paiguas, Rama, and other places in Zelaya.”\textsuperscript{92} By 1975, at least five hundred individual Delegates were able to attend a special meeting in Ciudad Rama.\textsuperscript{93}

Either inspired by the DP program in southern Zelaya or independently, the group of CEBs established by Father Vilchez in western Zelaya and rural Matagalpa founded a similar program known as \textit{La Pastoral Misionera de Río Coco}. Each village was invited to elect its own “evangelizer,” who would be sent to the diocesan seat for training. “If the person elected didn’t know how to read, someone with a certain studiousness should be named to advise him.”\textsuperscript{94} New evangelizers were provided with a Bible in the native Miskito, and brought back for refresher courses every other month, to constantly renovate


\textsuperscript{90}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{91}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{92}Ibid., 51-52.

\textsuperscript{93}Ibid., 52.
their training and to encourage them in their mission.” Like DPs further south, these evangelizers were authorized “to preside over the celebration of the Sunday office, to prepare baptism, marriage, and to encourage the youth.” Moreover, they “were supposed to participate in the activities of socio-economic development of their community and stimulate all the Christians to do the same.” Richard and Meléndez recorded that the number of evangelizers in the region, including several nuns from Waspán, reached 120 by 1970.

The influence of these rural lay-pastoral programs was widespread. During interviews with the Capuchin leadership of El Jicaro parish in Nueva Segovia, Philip Williams found that similar DP programs had been operating there. Jeffrey Gould, who conducted extensive interviews with campesinos—and the growing numbers of rural proletariat—in the Pacific coast department of Chinandega, found similar results. DPs in Chinandega, who were frequently elected by the CEBs themselves, “often preached where priests had never set foot.” He cited a report from an unnamed “hamlet” in Chinandega:

> The first communities showed tremendous enthusiasm for the evangelical message. They left their homes to go to the celebration no matter . . . the distance, the time, nor the physical conditions . . . usually one hundred adults and children attended. Most Sundays the celebrations lasted up to . . . eight hours, due to the

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94 Richard and Meléndez, 154.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98Philip J. Williams, 49.
99 Gould, 243.
abundance of personal testimonies, songs, games, dinner, and finally the explanation of the Bible by the Delegate.\textsuperscript{100} According to one Delegate, those who attended such meetings “began to see that among our people there was a great deal of injustice, and that there was a man or better yet a system who [sic] caused this inequality.”\textsuperscript{101}

Edgardo García, the only rural worker interviewed by Cabestrero, also participated in the DP program in Diriajmba, in the department of Carazo. His first experience with Church-based popular organizations was through “a movement of Celebrators of the Word, campesinos [all of us] who received some theological training.” Like the cursillos, this little-known program emphasized “preaching that broached social problems.” When the teenaged García finally “came to have determined his own criteria, it was within this line of commitment, of a disposition to struggle at the side of the workers, of the poor.”\textsuperscript{102} Later, as a DP, García mediated a process similar to that in CEBs and rural programs throughout Nicaragua. “First,” he recalled, “everything consisted in learning good handling of the Bible, knowing the Word of God. And later, conducting meetings, celebrations, religious acts. Trying to read a message where concrete orientations or historical accounts that refer us to the reality that we live are given.” As he became more comfortable in his leadership, however, he said that “they always reinforced the project of unity of organization of the communities. They had to

\textsuperscript{100}Jorge Cáceres et al., Iglesia Política y Profecía: Juan Pablo Segundo en Centroamérica (San José, Costa Rica: n.p., 1983), 89; quoted in Gould, 273.

\textsuperscript{101}Cácares et al., 93; quoted in Gould, 273.

\textsuperscript{102}Cabestrero, Revolucionarios, 150.
confront the causes of sin, of exploitation, of backwardness. And to support the projects of development.”

By no means are these the musings of a revolutionary. Like the preceding testimony, however, they clearly show that Christian social and political consciousness was changing in Nicaragua in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Catholic clergy and lay people alike were becoming aware, along with much of broader Nicaraguan society, of pervasive social tension and injustice.

In Nicaragua this constituted the beginning stage of what Tarrow generically labeled “framing contention.” The process of framing contention involves two distinct elements. First is defining or recognizing—or both—the base upon which collective action frames can be built: Tarrow calls this base either “collective identity” or “solidarity.” Second is the construction or modification of “collective action frames,” the symbols that social actors use to interpret reality and mobilize resources. We can recognize the former—collective identity, or solidarity—in the nascent process described thus far. In a historically Catholic country, many Nicaraguans characterized their faith prior to the mid-1960s as ritualistic and occasional. In part this was due to the severe shortage of priests; in part to the priests’ concentration in urban settings, middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, and non-pastoral professions (like schools and universities). Gradually, however, through the early cursillos, CEBs, and lay pastoral programs, this perception of the Church and Christian faith began to change. The liturgy became more

103 Ibid., 152.
104 Tarrow, 106-122.
105 Ibid., 6, 118-20.
106 Ibid., 109-112.
accessible; lay Bible reading was encouraged; discourse supplemented or replaced traditional homilies; lay people even began to perform certain sacraments. The gradual process of *concientización* capitalized on “natural” or “inherited” identities, and at the same time sought “to change the meaning of these identities,” that is, to make them relevant to daily life.\(^{107}\) In other words, the 1960s saw the simultaneous restoration and renovation of Catholic identity in Nicaragua.

Collective identities, however, do not yield social movements on their own. As late as 1970, despite the changes underway in the Church, no widespread transformation of Catholic symbols was discernible in Nicaragua; no Christian “collective action frame” was apparent. In order to understand why this was the case, and how the situation changed in the 1970s, we must understand the hierarchy’s response to and role in the broader Nicaraguan political and social ferment of the 1960s and 1970s. As Tarrow put it, “changes in political opportunities and constraints create the most important incentives for initiating new phases of contention.”\(^{108}\)

THE NICARAGUAN HIERARCHY AND EMERGING POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY

Throughout the late 1960s, the Nicaraguan hierarchy remained inured to the grassroots Church movement. Molina recalled that while the Riguero community “went about feeling always more like the Church of Christ,” the bishops took no notice. “Many times [the Riguero community] expressed its pastoral feelings to the bishop, sending him letters that manifested its degree of consciousness of its pertinence to the Church. Lamentably, the bishop never dialogued with the community except indirectly, through

\(^{107}\)Ibid., 119.
its priest [the parish priest, not Molina].” Elsewhere he expressed the sense he had that “in that moment there formed two currents in the Church: one . . . whose central preoccupation was to give an answer to the urgent problems of evangelization, . . . and the other, pulled by intra-ecclesiastical controversies.” Foroohar’s analysis corroborates Molina’s experience. “By the late 1960s,” she wrote, “the Nicaraguan Catholic Church, as an institution, . . . was still . . . close to the ruling circle, and many clergymen were on the payroll of the government, serving as ambassadors and public employees.” Bishop Donaldo Chávez Núñez and Archbishop González y Robleto maintained close, even friendly, relations with both the State and the Somoza family itself. Rev. Carlos Borge y Castrillo, the auxiliary bishop of Managua, “devoted a good part of his last years to business activities,” a task not easily accomplished without Somoza’s endorsement.

That the hierarchy should be rather conservative, even despite social changes within the Church and without, is not entirely surprising. In 1968 González y Robleto had been Archbishop of Managua for sixteen years and had been a bishop since the establishment of the diocese of Matagalpa in 1913. He was born in 1884, before Pope Leo XIII published Rerum Novarum, the Vatican’s first modern expression of support for the laboring classes. In 1968 Marco Antonio García y Suárez had been bishop of Granada for fifteen years; Isidro Augusto Oviedo y Reyes had been bishop of León for twenty-two years; Mateo Niedhammer y Yaeckle had been bishop of the Apostolic

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109Ibid., 7. Emphasis mine.


111Foroohar, 67.
Vicariate of Bluefields for twenty-six years. In short, this was a relatively entrenched hierarchy, not quick to respond to new ideas. Nor had the bishops’ relationship with the government changed very much: the hierarchy’s youngest bishop, Donaldo Chávez Núñez, publicly defended the Guard after it brutally attacked opposition demonstrators in Managua during the 1967 presidential campaigns, killing forty and wounding at least one hundred.

Nevertheless, the bishops could not ignore the increasingly visible activities of the lower clergy and laity. In 1968 seven priests who had been involved with the new pastoral work published a letter calling on “the authorities” to put an end to “the climate of tension and violence that we are now living.” Specifically, they asked that the authorities “abandon methods so condemnable as are torture, illegal prisons, exiles, and the suppression of human lives. In one word,” they concluded, “we ask for liberty.”

As Dodson and Montgomery put it, the seven priests who signed the letter, including Ernesto Cardenal and Uriel Molina, “took great pains to avoid being political.” “We don’t speak as politicians,” they wrote, “but rather as priests.” Nevertheless, they presented the findings of their experiences among Nicaragua’s poor. “But finally we want to signal that the deepest root of all social ill is the lack of economic justice. Economic progress should not be restricted to a small privileged minority, but rather it

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should be shared more equally and enjoyed by the popular classes. Only then will we have the true peace and the tranquility yearned for by all."

In response, Somoza labeled this group “The Seven Brothers in Marx.”

Clearly the hierarchy could no longer afford not to respond. The nature of its relationship with the State and with the people was at stake, and the unity of authority within the Church could not have been far from their minds. For whatever reason, in January 1969 the bishops agreed to hold Nicaragua’s Primer Encuentro Pastoral, or First Pastoral Meeting. The 148 members of the conference included three of Nicaragua’s nine resident bishops, along with numerous priests, religious, and lay persons. In Foroohar’s words, “At this meeting the differences between the conservative hierarchy and the radical priests came into the open, and for the first time the bishops were sharply criticized by the progressive sectors.”

Among the most scathing critiques was “La Realidad de la Iglesia en Nicaragua,” in which Noel A. García, S.J., a researcher at the University of Central America, presented the results of a survey he had conducted. Ninety percent of the priests and lay persons interviewed, García said, agreed in their criticisms of the hierarchy:

Stiff in the joints, conservative, static, advanced in age, apathetic, negative, disunited, little accessible to the people, part of which it does not recognize and ignores. It represents immobility; it is compulsive repetition [sic] and frozen in old frameworks. It does not succeed in visualizing anyone of aggressive and

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115 "Dodson and Montgomery, 164.


117 Richard and Meléndez, 149.


119 Foroohar, 71.
visible independence who makes a diocesan or national plan, with clear and constructive directing lines. The Church in Nicaragua lacks the true spiritual leadership of its pastors.  

“These phrases,” he concluded pointedly, “synthesize the general opinion of the representative group of priests and laity who answered the inquest.”

The same group also attested that diocesan clergy were far too scarce to be effective. Even so, many were “marginalized by the hierarchy and by the people.” Worse, he claimed, “there are complaints that a good number of them only look for their own economic interests,” and “little social sensitivity before the problems of their faithful is noted.” The respondents also recognized that “the majority of religious are working in schools,” where they find “isolation enough and little work in teams.” Among religious women the isolation was even more notable, and devotion to social issues minimal.  

In the parishes, García continued, the only faithful who ever saw the priest were those few who attended mass on Sundays. “Nevertheless,” he acknowledged, “ultimately the movements of Cursillos Cristianos and the Christian Family Movement are beginning to bear fruit,” but even these relatively moderate pastoral programs, he continued, “do not have much acceptance in some dioceses.” Rather, “the Catechism continues to be reduced to a pure memorization without feeling.”

In conclusion, García made a personal observation:
the exposition made on the human, socio-economic situation of Nicaragua, I can conclude by saying that the Nicaraguan Church [should] cast off a considerable deficit and needs a revitalization and agility that permits it to complete its apostolic and salvific mission. . . . And I ask myself if it can arrive at that goal, at that approach and understanding among bishops, priests and laity. It is said that for the development of a community one needs . . . the change in mentality and attitude of the hierarchy, because the process of development in this case—given the hierarchical structure of the Church—should be from the top down.\textsuperscript{124}

In his presentation entitled "Realidad Humana en Nicaragua," Dr. Ernesto Castillo offered the members a less pastoral, more political analysis of Nicaraguan reality. He criticized the Church for its role in Nicaraguan history, and for its failure to recognize the imminent reckoning made inevitable by the confluence of modernity and "feudal residues" in Nicaragua. He described the country’s deplorable health care, housing, employment, and land distribution. He devoted special attention to the problem of education in Nicaragua, asserting, "Development is not possible without education,"\textsuperscript{125} but that "for everyone it is obvious that religious education in Nicaragua is almost totally at the service of the upper classes."\textsuperscript{126} He specifically admonished the bishops and priests, "It is time that the hierarchy and the priests realize that they have the grave obligation to condemn the dictatorial regime, to abstain from collaborating with a government sustained by violence, to renounce every class of honors and privileges in order to support the oppressed forcefully in their struggle to conquer a political change."\textsuperscript{127} But Castillo applauded the progressive pastoral projects underway in the Church. "In this last decade, fortunately, the students, workers and some young priests have already assumed their responsibilities and taken consciousness of the need for a

\textsuperscript{124}Ibid., 42-43.

\textsuperscript{125}Castillo, 149.

\textsuperscript{126}Ibid., 152. For Castillo’s analysis of the other problems listed, see pages 144-49.
change toward a socio-economic order in which there is integral participation for all Nicaraguans.\textsuperscript{128}

Naturally, the hierarchy was not enthusiastic about these challenges. Pablo Antonio Vega, Prelate of Juigalpa (and, in the 1980s, Nicaragua’s most ardently anti-Sandinista bishop and the hierarchy’s chief ideologue), who edited the published proceedings of the Primer Encuentro, inserted his own commentary immediately after Dr. Castillo’s presentation. “We have presented complete and textual the lecture of Dr. Ernesto Castillo. . . . His points of view, his judgments, the options proposed, are his. It is his personal responsibility; as a layman, not as a priest. . . . Many of the points of view of Dr. Castillo, and perhaps even some of his facts, are subject to revision and discussion.”\textsuperscript{129}

In the final section of the proceedings, Vega compared the nascent pastoral projects and social criticisms to a child’s “logical but ingenuous question:"

The children ask: Why, if this automobile can run up to two hundred kilometers per hour, do you never drive at full speed? . . .

One cannot always ingenuously press on the accelerator. . . .

Steering wheel, brake, and accelerator are indispensable for good driving. . . . The external circumstances indicate the other norms of prudence.”\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{127}Ibid., 156.

\textsuperscript{128}Ibid., 143.


The Primer Encuentro Pastoral seems to have failed in its quest to establish a definitive, nation-wide pastoral plan. Certainly no such plan is outlined in the published proceedings, where Vega enumerates only vague principles of effective pastoral activity: evangelization, liturgy, and charity. Yet despite its extremely skeptical attitude toward the challenges of the progressive clergy, the hierarchy did make a few concessions. The bishops agreed to analyze Nicaraguan social and economic reality before addressing pastoral methods or theological precepts. Charity was not narrowly defined, but included all of the Church’s activities that add to the ferment of the “temporal city,” among them the search for equality, justice, peace, and the “common good.” This certainly did not constitute whole-hearted sympathy for the progressive pastoral programs of the time, but neither was it condemnation. It left open a significant window of opportunity for those who did advocate such programs.

There was still, without doubt, tension between the hierarchy and the progressive Church. In January 1970, for instance, the National Guard raided an FSLN safe house in Managua. When the local priest, Father Francisco Mejía, intervened physically to protect the lives of the arrested youths, he was himself arrested and, according to La Prensa, beaten. Upon hearing of the incident, bishops Borge Castrillo and Chávez Núñez scolded the priest for not wearing his clerical garb in public. Calderón y Padilla, as usual, took the contrary line and protested Mejía’s ill treatment in a letter to La Prensa. In this case, however, he was not the sole dissenter. His young auxiliary bishop, Miguel Obando y Bravo, joined him in protest.

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131 Ibid., 228-40.
132 Ibid., 219-59.
Obando y Bravo’s appointment as Archbishop of Managua on 5 March 1970 marked a watershed for the Nicaraguan Church. Following González y Robleto’s death in 1968, the Archbishopric of Managua had lain vacant for nearly two years while the Italian Julián Luis Barni Spotti served as Administrador Apostólico pleno iure. According to Williams’ interviews with the Nicaraguan bishops, Chávez Núñez had been for some time expected to succeed González y Robleto upon the latter’s death, but Chávez Núñez’s close ties to the Somoza family and widely rumored corruption had become an embarrassment to the more liberal Vatican under Pope Paul VI. The search for a bishop without close ties to the regime left only Calderón y Padilla, who was too old, and his auxiliary in the Diocese of Matagalpa, Obando y Bravo. Despite his youth and limited experience, the Vatican selected the young bishop who was serving under the Church’s most outspoken critic of Somoza.

The change in tone was noticed immediately. In one of his first public statements, Obando said that one of the Church’s missions was the social progress of the people. There is also a widely reported story, apparently documented only in La Prensa, that Somoza gave Obando a Mercedes Benz as a personal gift upon his appointment, and that Obando accepted, sold the car, and gave the money to the poor. More certain is the story that Obando refused to attend the celebration for the so-called Kupia-Kumi pact in March 1971, in which Somoza and Conservative Fernando Agüero signed an unconstitutional agreement that established a triumvirate meant to rule until 1974, when Somoza could

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133Richard and Meléndez, 154-55; Philip J. Williams, 25.
134Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, Miembros Integrantes.
135Philip J. Williams, 26.
again run for election. Shortly after Chávez Núñez did attend, Obando dismissed him from his duties as auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Managua.\footnote{Ibid., 26-27. Also see Berryman, 62.}

The shifting orientation of the hierarchy is reflected in the theme and tone of its pastoral letters. The letter published in June 1971 tentatively addressed the Nicaraguan political order. Besides urging priests to help their congregations develop a civic consciousness, the letter urged Catholics to examine the socio-political structures of the nation, and not settle for \textit{continuismo}.\footnote{\textit{Philip J. Williams, 27; Berryman, 62.}} The next significant pastoral letter, titled “Sobre los Principios que Rigen la Actividad Política de Toda la Iglesia como Tal,” was promulgated on 19 March 1972.\footnote{Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, \textit{Carta Pastoral de los Obispos de Nicaragua Sobre los Principios que Rigen la Actividad Política de toda la Iglesia como Tal} [letter published on-line] (Managua: 19 March 1972); available from http://www.tmx.com.ni/~cen/documentos/1972/Carta-19-03-1972.html; accessed 1 April 2001.} By this time just three bishops remained of the nine who had held office in 1968; there had, in effect, been a changing of the guard. The bishops justified their attention to the subject in the introduction. “It is evident that, beneath an appearance of stability, the political and social tensions throbb with growing intensity.”\footnote{Ibid., 1.} Moreover, they referred specifically to the illicit Kupia-Kumi pact: “The established political process has been interrupted to give way to a new constitutional order.”\footnote{Ibid.} The bishops went on to assert, “If we examine our reality and the historical process of our Fatherland, we have to admit that its political structures do not respond to the demands of our time.”\footnote{Ibid., 4.} The bishops reprimanded those who had persecuted
"priests, and even bishops, who fulfilled their duty of denouncing injustices or propitiating peace."

They affirmed that the Church, including hierarchy, priests, and laity, had proper roles to play in politics, conceived broadly as the right of a community to seek the common good. "As pastors, the bishops and priests can see themselves as obligated to abstain from intervening in partisan politics, but never when they try to struggle for a more just order." To the laity, on the other hand, "corresponds in a special way the political development of the country. Within the plurality of possible ideological and practical options, it should always seek the promotion of the common good." Perhaps most important, the letter affirmed that the Church’s greatest proof of faith was its service to mankind, “especially to the poor and oppressed, whose promotion is in our charge.” Finally, the bishops recognized and approved the Christian pastoral efforts, whether open or clandestine, organized in the countryside, the cities, and the universities, for the promotion of human and civil rights.

Clearly the Nicaraguan hierarchy was beginning to distance itself from the Somoza regime. The Christian intellectual José Coronel Urtecho called the letter “the most important document the Church has put out since Father Agüero said the first Mass on Nicaraguan territory in 1523.” The hierarchy was still not unified in its opposition to dictatorship. Williams pointed out that the only bishop who did not sign the pastoral

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142 Ibid.
143 Ibid., 3.
144 Ibid., 4.
145 Ibid., 2.
146 Ibid., 4.
letter, Marco Antonio García y Suárez, was duly rewarded with gifts from the
government after he applauded the triumvirate arrangement as an instrument for finding
peace. Nevertheless, there was no longer any doubt that Obando’s appointment
signaled greater flexibility in the Church structure, a flexibility the progressive clerical
and lay movements that had been forming over the past half-decade would take
advantage of.

RESOURCE MOBILIZATION: RADICALIZING CHURCH ORGANIZATIONS

They did so by moving decisively from the reformist into the revolutionary camp.
The process of radicalization was uneven, but it had begun as early as 1968 and was
gaining momentum. In Solentiname, Cardenal steered the community toward the
political and social dialogues that form the core of The Gospel in Solentiname. The
dialogues still began with biblical readings, but the members of the community
increasingly interpreted the Gospel in the light of their own experience: poor people
struggling against oppression. Thus Somoza was compared to Herod; the National Guard
was like the Roman legion; Christ’s own poverty and his struggle on behalf of the poor
transformed him into the first true revolutionary, until, like Sandino, he was
assassinated. Cardenal returned from a trip to Peru, Chile, and Cuba in 1971 more
committed than ever before to the political nature of the community’s dialogue.

Teresita Builes recalled that “we read the Bible several times over,” but added, “we read

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147 José Coronel Urtecho, “Comentarios Sobre la Pastoral,” Revista Conservadora, 139 (April
1972), 27-28; quoted in Berryman, 63, and Philip J. Williams, 28.

148 Philip J. Williams, 28.

149 Cardenal, passim.
Fidel's speeches. We read lots of things, modern history, the diary of Nestor Paz, the diary of Che Guevara." 151 Olivia Silva agreed:

We continued our dialogues. We discussed the Bible in terms of the injustice of the rich and of the Guard and tried to learn more about what was happening throughout the country. Ernesto brought us newspaper clippings of the massacres and crimes being committed by the dictatorship. We started to follow the events happening in the north through La Prensa.

We were beginning to understand how far a person must go in their commitment to the people. They didn't put it to me in so many words, but I knew that we had to help. 152

As Manuel Alvarado said, "We arrived at the conclusion that the system we were living under was bad and had to be changed." 153

The Riguero community had also begun to be more proactive politically. Alvaro Baltodano recalled, "We organized many political discussions. We would read the Bible and talk about the need to liberate people." Yet "while this was talked about most of the individuals involved only went to church. Even the groups were isolated from one another. So we got the idea of organizing a leadership in the barrio that could coordinate the work of the different groups. Creating that structure and coordination laid the basis for people with organizing abilities to develop as leaders of the community." 154 David Chavarría Rocha, a worker in the community, remembered the same trend. "Things changed when the university comrades came in 1972 [sic]. We began to take up more concrete tasks: support for strikes against the rise in milk prices and bus fares, and

150 Randall, 117.
151 Ibid., 74-75.
152 Ibid., 79.
153 Ibid., 68.
154 Ibid., 147.
participation in the movement for release of political prisoners. . . . We saw mass actions and political organizing as absolutely essential."\textsuperscript{155}

In 1972 Molina left Nicaragua and went to Allende’s Chile for several weeks. He noted that this had two effects. “One was that I gained experience in a society that was building socialism . . . for the first time I saw that Christians weren’t being criticized for ‘meddling in politics . . .’ The other was that I left the house free so that the people from the Front could meet there. I later found out that the whole top leadership was in my house having discussions with the others.”\textsuperscript{156}

The rural pastoral programs also became more politicized after 1970. Smutko wrote, “From the year 1971 we augmented the \textit{concentización} . . . The object of these \textit{concentización} programs was to help the \textit{campesinos} to value their own dignity as children of God and to better know their rights according to the Political Constitution of Nicaragua, to discover their capacity to forge their own destiny, (to the measure possible), above all working together.”\textsuperscript{157} But he cautioned the reader:

This process of \textit{concentización} promulgated by the Capuchin Missionaries was not oriented to move the \textit{campesinos} to take up arms against the Dictatorship. Better, it was oriented to develop critical judgment and enable them to work more united to forge their own lives, overcoming fatalism. In fact some did take up arms and fight against the National Guard, others supported the Guerrillas with food, lodging, and serving as guides, and others tried not to involve themselves.\textsuperscript{158}

Gould’s research in Chinandega found a similar process of radicalization. “During the early 1970s,” he wrote, “two progressive priests, Padre Alvarez Ortiz in

\textsuperscript{155}Ibid., 151.

\textsuperscript{156}Ibid., 156.

\textsuperscript{157}Smutko, 52.

\textsuperscript{158}Ibid.
Tonalá and Padre Lovo in Rancherías, found fertile ground for Christian activism.\(^{159}\) Ortiz and Lovo undertook a program of *concientización* similar to that underway in Zelaya and Matagalpa. They found that “many Chinandegan campesinos, who had [already] politically awakened to notions of the people’s necessities and sacred rights, found that the radical interpretations of the Bible legitimated and reaffirmed their own beliefs.” One man who worked with the community in Rancherías remembered, “Then the campesinos said to us, ‘Well now I know all about my dignity and know they are stomping on me. Now what? When is Moses going to liberate us?’”\(^{160}\) In many Chinandegan CEBs of the early 1970s, there was a point in the liturgy when individuals would stand under the crucifix and voluntarily pledge specific forms of commitment to their community.\(^{161}\)

The FSLN, which by this time had emerged as the single most significant threat to the regime, noticed the political mobilization taking place in the Christian communities. Solentiname was the first Christian community to attract the attention of the FSLN. In 1969 Tomás Borge Martínez had sent a letter by courier to Ernesto Cardenal, asking that they meet to discuss common interests. Borge recounted the story of his apostasy from the Catholic Church, and his newfound hope for its regeneration, kindled by the new theology and by the example of Camilo Torres and Ernesto Cardenal.\(^{162}\) Cardenal went to the meeting and agreed that “we had the same goals as the Sandinista Front, as the

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\(^{159}\) Gould, 275-76.

\(^{160}\) Ibid., 276.

\(^{161}\) Ibid., 277.

guerrillas, and that Christians and Marxists had to be allies." Later Cardenal made his famous trip to Cuba, where he had “a long conversation with Fidel Castro about the problem of Christianity in the revolution and Christianity and Marxism.” Upon his return he wrote his long poem *En Cuba*, and publicly defended Marxist revolution. Father Molina joined Borge and Cardenal in their next meeting. Within a few years most of the younger members of the Solentiname community had been recruited by the FSLN. When Cardenal began to fear for the safety of the community and considered moving the more radical members to Costa Rica, the FSLN convinced him not to do so.

The FSLN sent word that I should try to stay here as long as possible, that the area had political, military and even strategic importance. I remember once it was suggested that Commander Wheelock visit Solentiname but he said he didn’t want Solentiname to be seen as being connected to the FSLN. The Front didn’t want to compromise our position. We were too useful.

Similar contacts took place in El Riguero. The real moment of crisis in Managua, however, came from a totally unexpected quarter: an earthquake that struck the capital city on the night of December 23, 1972. Downtown Managua was devastated. Foroohar cites a government report that estimated the damage:

8,000-10,000 dead; 20,000 injured; 51,000 unemployed; 101,700 displaced; 50,000 houses destroyed and 24,000 damaged (cost: $103 million); 4 hospitals with 1,650 beds destroyed; 340,000 square meters of public and private office buildings destroyed; 400,000 square meters of commercial and storage buildings destroyed; 95% of small factories and workshops destroyed; 162.1 million dollars lost in infrastructure; 1,163.2 million dollars estimated total damage.

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163 Randall, 80.
164 Ibid., 81.
165 Foroohar, 118.
166 Randall, 83.
At five o’clock on the morning of the twenty-third, the governing triumvirate declared a national state of emergency and imposed martial law. In other words, Somoza once again ruled directly and openly through the National Guard. Somoza was also declared head of the National Emergency Committee, whose functions and limitations were not set out in the decree that established it. A number of other institutions, virtually a parallel government, were established directly under the control of Somoza’s National Emergency Committee. Foroohar summarized, “During the twenty-three months of the State of National Emergency—December 23, 1972, to December 1, 1974—the director of the National Guard exercised absolute power, while the Junta of the National Government (the Triumvirate) and the Constituent National Assembly both acted as rubber stamps for Somoza’s decisions.”

Those decisions were brazenly self-serving. Foreign capital that poured into Nicaragua from international relief campaigns was either pocketed and never seen again, or awarded exclusively to Somoza-owned companies in exorbitant contracts. Somoza also ensured that the city would be rebuilt primarily on lands he owned, thus driving up its value. The National Guard first severely restricted movement in Managua and the surrounding countryside, then looted the city for weeks. The Guard continued to run much of Nicaragua’s black market, selling many of the ransacked goods along with food and equipment from the relief organizations. Complete control of the national media allowed Somoza to continue pillaging without significant repercussions on his international support.

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108 Foroohar, 87-88.
109 Ibid., 88.
Perhaps the earthquake’s most important effect was to turn the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie against Somoza. For several years Somoza had been consolidating his own “business group,” challenging the two older groups and individual rivals like the Lacayo family. Yet the national bourgeoisie had also prospered under some of Somoza’s neoliberal reforms, including the Central American Common Market and tightly controlled labor groups. Following the earthquake, though, Somoza’s blatant corruption and heartlessness—as well, perhaps, as the business opportunities he intercepted—drove wealthy Nicaraguans like the Chamorros and Robelos squarely into the opposition camp. It was in the years immediately after the earthquake that middle- and upper-class organizations like COSIP and INDE became more critical of the government.

The earthquake dramatically affected the political stance of the Catholic Church as well. Like the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie, much of the Catholic hierarchy was incensed by Somoza’s behavior during and after the crisis. In the months after the earthquake, the Secretary General of the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua recorded a historical note in the conference’s records. It is useful to quote the note at length. After briefly describing the devastation wrought by the earthquake, the note read:

On this occasion the Government of Nicaragua demonstrated itself to be hostile to the Church. It scorned her as many times as it could. It impeded the exercise of her ministry of charity for and with her neighbors. It closed the door on all sides making it seem by the end like the enemy of the poor and of those who in this hour suffer bitterly.

The person of his Excellency the Archbishop was ridiculed — outraged — calumnied — scorned and offended a great many times by the personalities of the pro-Somoza radio stations as by the official press, Novedades.

170 Although all histories of the Nicaraguan revolution devote significant attention to the earthquake, the most succinct treatment can be found in Foroohar, 87-93. Also see Booth, 75-78, 85, 122-124; and Millett, 236-40.
The foreign aid that came so quickly, full of love, to alleviate the needs of the people, was hoarded by the National Guard who threw a great party sharing it among themselves, besides that which they sacked and despoiled in the ruins of the city. This is absolutely not calumny; everyone including the most humble knew and saw with their own eyes these occurrences.

Later came the problem of the reconstruction: unbelievable, fabulous sales were made and the necessity to exploit the people even in their first and urgent needs was approved.  

Clearly the regime had alienated the hierarchy. During a mass to commemorate those killed in the earthquake, Archbishop Obando’s sermon so angered Somoza that he walked out before the benediction while the Guard unplugged the speakers.  

La Prensa reported that within days of the speech, Somoza tried to convince Nicaragua’s Papal Nuncio to remove Obando as archbishop.

Nevertheless, the hierarchy had by no means engaged in open confrontation with the regime per se. Although the two pastoral letters issued in 1974 affirm the universality of human and civil rights, including the right to dissent and to organize opposition parties, the bishops shied away from any specific commentary on justice in the social and economic system. They did, on the other hand, pointedly and repeatedly emphasize the value of peace and due caution.  

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172 Dodson and Montgomery, 168.

173 Philip J. Williams, 29.

grew over the next several years, however, the bishops' did so as well. In January 1977, with tensions in Nicaragua near the breaking point, the bishops drafted a pastoral letter condemning the current “state of terror” which they claimed “obliges many of our campesinos to flee without hope from their own homes and cultivated lands, in the mountains of Zelaya, Matagalpa and the Segovias.” The letter also denounced the fact that:

The accusations and consequent arbitrary detentions from old quarrels or personal envies follow their course.

Investigations continue against suspects using ridiculous and inhumane methods. From tortures and violations to executions without prior judgment: neither civil nor military.

It is verified that many towns have been practically abandoned. Houses and personal effects burned and the fugitives hopeless and without aid.175

More importantly, the letter directly confronted socio-economic inequity and injustice in the country:

As a practical consequence of these events, disorder and the evils of the nation grow, verifying that:

For one part the accumulation of lands and riches in the hands of a few increases.

And on the other, humble farmers are despoiled of their lands with threats and legal stratagems, thus increasing the number of those without land, and without possibilities to live by natural resources.176

Even this letter scrupulously avoided any hint of endorsement for armed or violent opposition to the government; an option, Williams pointed out, then supported by numerous progressive clergy and Christian communities.177

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Only on 2 June 1979, after extensive negotiations with Somoza had failed utterly and an FSLN victory seemed inevitable, did the bishops finally justify armed resistance. “The extremes of the revolutionary insurrections hurt and affect all of us, but that cannot negate their moral and juridical legitimation ‘in the case of tyranny’ that is evident and prolonged, that gravely attenuates the fundamental rights of the person or damages the common good of the country.”

The effect of the earthquake on the lower classes, and on the Christian communities within them, was no less significant. As before, it is important to recognize that in taking an opposition line itself, the hierarchy created crucial political opportunities for the more radical base communities.

Naturally, the earthquake galvanized Christian groups in Managua’s barrios most dramatically. When the first tremors struck, sixty-six Christian students, including many from the Riguero community, were going on their second month occupying the Cathedral. The occupation was an effort to secure the release of several political prisoners, including Doris Tijerino and Germán Pomares, an FSLN commander. José Miguel Torres and Luis Carrión led the occupation and concurrent hunger strike, along with Father Fernando Cardenal, S.J.—Ernesto Cardenal’s brother. Fernando Cardenal had returned to Nicaragua in 1970, after living in Colombia for nine months. He worked briefly as the vice-rector for students at the UCA, but almost immediately fell afoul of the senior administration because of his political commitment. After one particular student

\[176\text{Ibid.}
\[177\text{Philip J. Williams, 32.}
\[178\text{Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, Mensaje al Pueblo Nicaragüense: Momento Insurreccional [letter published on-line] (Managua: 2 June 1979); available from}
demonstration, he, together with Molina and Father Edgard Parrales (one of the original "Seven Brothers in Marx"), held an enormous outdoor mass, effectively endorsing the students' complaints against the University's Jesuit administration. Within six months of his return to Nicaragua he had been dismissed from the UCA.179

Members of the FSLN had already noticed his opposition, though. In 1970 Oscar Turcios, a commander in the FSLN, approached Fernando Cardenal and asked him to be a member of the national administration of the Front. The conversation did not immediately convince him to join the Sandinista Front, he recalls, "but it did influence me so that my work began taking on a greater sense of commitment, knowing in a manner each day more profound and realistic that in the country there no longer remained more options than one, which was the armed struggle."180 As in Molina's case, members of the Christian student movement also sought Fernando Cardenal out and incorporated him into their political activism. When the semi-successful operation he led was unexpectedly cut short, however, Cardenal quickly became more actively involved with the poor and more politically radical:

The Jesuit house where I lived was completely destroyed [by the earthquake]. I would spend the days distributing food in the streets and then go to the house to sleep. It occurred to me that this was the time to carry out my dream of joining the students in working with the people and I went to live in that community in Uriel Molina's barrio. Before a week had gone by I was living there as one of them.

In order to earn enough to live on we went out every day to sell bread. We had a common fund, and three of us would work every day, taking turns, selling bread

179Teófilo Cabestrero, Ministros de Dios, Ministros del Pueblo: Testimonio de Tres Sacerdotes en el Gobierno Revolucionario de Nicaragua, Empresa Nicaragüense de Ediciones Culturales (Managua: Ministerio de Cultura, 1985); Randall, 57-60.

180Ibid., 68.
in the streets. During that time I participated in the founding of the Revolutionary Christian Movement, which was so important later. That’s how I became part of that marvelous experience.\textsuperscript{181}

Fernando Cardenal founded the Revolutionary Christian Movement (MCR) in 1973 in an effort to bring the students of El Riguero together with those he knew in other communities—including San Judas, Ducuali, Larreynaga, La Fuente, Catorce de Septiembre, and Nicaraо—undertaking similar projects.\textsuperscript{182} Shortly thereafter, he was once again approached by the FSLN—this time by Eduardo Contreras—and immediately agreed to join the Front. From that time forward he had close relations not only with the MCR and its support base in El Riguero, but with senior members of the Sandinista Front—Borge, Humberto and Daniel Ortega, Bayardo Arce, and Contreras.\textsuperscript{183} Most of the MCR’s work, which involved mobilizing Managua’s CEBs on specific issues like drinking water, electricity, public transportation, and health care, was carried out clandestinely because of connections with the FSLN. Roberto Gutiérrez recalled:

\begin{quote}
The repressive conditions in Nicaragua forced us to work secretly, underground. We recruited many of those involved in the base communities to the Front and others became collaborators by lending their houses, etc. This experience was particularly important because at the beginning the Christian movement had been a petit bourgeois movement. This was changing as a result of the work in the barrios, which was more and more under the leadership of the FSLN.\textsuperscript{184}
\end{quote}

Salvador Mayorga recalled the coincidence of the earthquake, the foundation of the MCR, and the community’s increasing radicalization and cooperation with the FSLN. “It was a very important moment. The feverish activity of the church sit-ins for the release of political prisoners combined with the political impact of the earthquake. In the days

\textsuperscript{181}Randall, 161.
\textsuperscript{182}Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{183}Cabestrero, Ministros de Dios, 69.
and weeks following the earthquake there was a lot of organizing done and it was during those months that the link between the Christian movement and the Sandinista Front was solidly established."

Indeed, relations between members of the FSLN and the MCR became very close. José Miguel Torres accompanied Comandante Humberto Ortega on a trip to Cuba. Joaquín Cuadra became the leader of a revolutionary "cell," and began to rise rapidly through the FSLN ranks, as did Luis Carrión. In late 1973 Cuadra recruited David Chavarría Rocha, a younger member of the Riguero CEB who sold car parts in the neighborhood. Later Chavarría remembered:

> When I started working with the FSLN the first test they gave me was to use my house as a safe house for two comrades. . . . The comrades came and lived with us, but soon my mother found out they weren’t just classmates of mine. . . . By then [1974] I had been integrated into the Front and was being assigned other jobs. The transport of comrades, keeping them in my house, organizing, recruitment, propaganda, painting slogans on walls, putting up banners. . . .

Later he began smuggling weapons back and forth across the city. When he was arrested, he wrote Father Molina, recounting his torture on scraps of toilet paper, and insisted that Molina read the letters at mass. "What was important was for the community to use my capture as another means of denouncing the repressive and murderous regime of Somoza." In 1975 what remained of the aboveground MCR published a statement in *Gaceta Sandinista*: "Being situated in the process of liberation of our people, the *Movimiento cristiano* identifies with the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*-

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184 Randall, 163-65.
185 Ibid., 159.
186 Ibid., 185.
187 Ibid., 190.
FSLN. Two members of the Riguero community, Monica Baltodano and Oscar Pérez Casar, went to León and helped organize similar activities there. Monica Baltodano remembered being recruited by the FSLN by Ricardo Morales, one of the students who had already left the community to fight with the FSLN full-time. According to her:

After the earthquake there was more communication between us and the FSLN and we were then recruited as a group. When we joined we thought our work would change, but it didn’t. The FSLN told us to keep being leaders in the Christian movement, to go to masses, everything. They were interested in linking the work that we were already doing with the FSLN. They had certain needs: safe houses, means of transportation, places to hide arms. And people. Our new tasks were to recruit people and to get houses. We were also involved in consciousness-raising. . . .

It was a great transition period. In fact, the whole Christian movement was being oriented in one way or another by the Front. There were many, many of us who belonged to the Front.189

Cooperation between the FSLN and the Christian communities was by no means limited to El Riguero and the MCR. Barrio OPEN-3 (Operación Permanente de la Emergencia Nacional) was Somoza’s solution for several hundred families displaced when Lake Managua flooded in 1969. Following the earthquake, OPEN-3 and poor shantytowns like it were overwhelmed with refugees from the devastated city center. As in San Pablo and El Riguero, CEBs in OPEN-3 mobilized in the early 1970s to obtain social services like electricity, fair water prices, and a cemetery. By 1977 members of the OPEN-3 community were joining the FSLN, and parish buildings were being used for meetings. The National Guard began to harass the Maryknoll sisters’ house in the

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188“Movimiento cristiano y la revolución popular sandinista,” Gaceta Sandinista 1, no. 4 (December 1975); quoted in Randall, 130.

189Randall, 165-66.
neighborhood, and on at least one occasion the sisters as well as the parish priest were badly beaten by the Guard.\footnote{\textit{Foroohar,} 139, 227.}

In rural Zelaya the Capuchin fathers published at least four thousand copies of \textit{Educación Cívica}, a pamphlet containing simplified versions of the Nicaraguan constitution, summations of international standards for human rights, and editorial commentary. Distribution of the pamphlet and associated efforts at \textit{concientización} spread throughout Zelaya and into surrounding departments. The effect, according to Smutko, was to unify and galvanize the \textit{campesinado} so isolated in decades past. “Thus, as Comandante René Vivas indicated, many of the communities of Zelaya, fed up with the injustices of the National Guard, came to be the best allies of the Sandinista Guerrillas and their collaborators in the Liberation struggle of their beloved fatherland.”\footnote{Smutko, 53.}

In Solentiname, Ernesto Cardenal received a letter from Humberto Ortega. The FSLN was planning an attack on San Carlos and needed volunteers from the community. “. . . Humberto told me to find the young men who were able to participate in the armed struggle. And young women too, because the Sandinistas always sought the participation of women. . . . I called them all together and explained that they needed to be prepared to fight in Solentiname and San Carlos.”\footnote{\textit{Foroohar,} 139, 227.} The younger members of the community, many of whom had been asking to join the FSLN for some time, left immediately for training in Costa Rica. Just before the attack, which was part of the broader October offensive, those who could not fight also left Solentiname and joined the FSLN in Costa Rica. William and Teresita Agudelo helped broadcast revolutionary propaganda on Sandinista
Cardenal recalled that by the time he left on 5 October 1977, “they [the remainder of the community] were already in a military frame of mind. The place had practically turned into an army camp. That’s when I went to Costa Rica.”

Olivia Silva reacted with Christian stoicism when her son told her he would participate in the attack on San Carlos. “I had to accept it. I couldn’t disappoint him or say ‘Don’t go.’ Because I knew that it was a matter of victory or death. Besides, the Gospel tells us that. The Bible says that he who gives up his life will be saved, but he who wants to save it for himself will lose it. Frankly, it had to happen.” Her son Alejandro died in the attack. Later Defense Minister Humberto Ortega likened the unsuccessful San Carlos action to Castro’s attack on the Moncada in 1953. It enabled the Front to “strike, pull back, accumulate forces, and strike once again.”

CYCLES OF CONTENTION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRISTIAN CONTENTION IN THE REVOLUTION

This role Christians played in the triumph of the Nicaraguan Revolution is widely recognized. In the 7 October 1980 issue of Barricada, the FSLN’s National Directorate published a formal statement on “The Role of Religion in the New Nicaragua.” The statement affirmed:

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192Randall, 84-85.

193Ibid., 87-88.

194Ibid., 87.

195Ibid., 89. Silva’s words here are among the best illustrations of the potential impact of reinterpreting symbols, or “framing contention.” Meditating on the life to come through a very familiar passage of scripture galvanizes Silva politically, rather than paralyzing her.

196Ortega, 60-61.
Through their interpretation of their faith, many FSLN members and fighters were motivated to join the revolutionary struggle and therefore the FSLN. Many gave not only their valiant support to our cause, but were also examples of dedication, even to the point of shedding their blood to water the seed of liberation. . .

But the participation of Christians was not limited to serving as fighters in the Sandinista Front. Many Christians, lay people and clergy, who never participated in the ranks of the FSLN although some were linked to it, professed and practiced their faith in accord with our people’s need for liberation.

Because of their brave participation in the struggle, the Catholic church and Christians in general suffered persecution and death.

To a degree unprecedented in any other revolutionary movement in Latin America and perhaps the world, Christians have been an integral part of our revolutionary history.197

The document listed numerous Christians martyred for the Revolution, including several Delegates of the Word and Father Gaspar García Laviana, the Spanish priest who took up arms with the Sandinistas and died in a skirmish near the Costa Rican border in 1978.

Borge said that the example set by García Laviana “represented the highest synthesis of Christian vocation and revolutionary consciousness.”198

After his transition from the CEB in El Riguero to the MCR to the FSLN, Luis Carrión became a commander of the Revolution, a member of the nine-man National Directorate, and Vice-minister of the Interior. During a 1986 interview with Marta Harnecker he noted, “In many cases the leaders of those barrios, the community leaders,


198Ibid., 106. The true experience of García Laviana became so mythologized in Revolutionary Nicaragua that it is difficult to use as evidence of the broader movement. It is uncontested fact, however, that many Nicaraguan Christians and revolutionaries identify his story as a source of inspiration and example. For a treatment of his memory in southern Nicaragua, see David Gullette, Gaspar: A Spanish Poet/Priest in the Nicaraguan Revolution (Tempe, Arizona: Bilingual Press, 1994).
the leaders of the youth movements, emerged from those university *muchachos* we threw into the *barrios*. The Christian origin of a great number of the leaders is very clear."

Perhaps it is not surprising that both Christians and Sandinistas should speak favorably of the alliance between certain sectors of the Church and the Revolution, particularly after the triumph. Many other participants, however, recount similar stories—despite differing perspectives. Arturo Cruz Sequeira grew up in a wealthy neighborhood of Granada and studied in the United States. In the late 1970s he fought with the Sandinistas. By 1982, however, he had defected from the Revolution and joined Edén Pastora and many former National Guardsmen as a "counterrevolutionary," or "contra." In his memoir he recalled the process recounted above. Many young people from the bourgeois circles he grew up in, he wrote, "were being radicalized by the Nicaraguan Jesuits... Many of these children, including my cousins the Carrións, Joaquín Cuadra, Alvaro Baltodono, and Oswaldo Lacayo, became powerful Sandinistas." Later he suggested that these young Christian revolutionaries helped legitimate the FSLN. "These were the children of the better families in Nicaragua, the kids with whom I had grown up. The FSLN could no longer be viewed as a band of outcasts or outsiders. Rather they were the children of the country’s bourgeoisie." Of the hierarchy’s relationship with Somoza he opined, "The Catholic Church [like the FSLN] was making its own generational leaps. The old Church hierarchy had been tolerated by the Somozas because they knew they could manipulate the bishops like chess

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201Ibid., 61.
pieces."\textsuperscript{202} He also credited the Solentiname community with taking part in a crucial hostage-taking operation in 1974, although no members of the community confirm this.\textsuperscript{203}

Another very distinct perspective was offered by Lawrence Pezzullo, the United States Ambassador to Nicaragua in the final weeks before the fall of the Somoza regime. Though he was not present during the development of the Revolution, it seems likely that he was aware of Christian involvement at the time. He recounted the birth and radicalization of the MCR, Cardenal’s community in Solentiname, and the successes of the Jesuits’ Ecclesiastical Committee for Agrarian Progress (CEPA), a rural cooperative organization which became radical in the late 1970s. He even mentioned the founding of the first CEB, although he credits “Father José de la Lara,” and he quoted in its entirety Gaspar García Laviana’s famous letter justifying his position to take up arms against Somoza.\textsuperscript{204} Given his social position, however, it is not surprising that he devoted much more attention to the role of the Catholic hierarchy, especially Archbishop Obando y Bravo. He recounted the same stories about Obando’s symbolic opposition to Somoza, and added the detail that Somoza officials would privately refer to Obando as “Comandante Miguel.”\textsuperscript{205} He also devoted significant attention to the Church’s human rights campaign and its effect on the Carter administration.

Yet perhaps the most compelling testimony of the Church’s role in the revolution came from Somoza himself. In his memoir, \textit{Nicaragua Traicionada}, he claimed that his

\textsuperscript{202}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{203}Ibid., 69-70.

\textsuperscript{204}Pezzullo and Pezzullo, 103-04, 114.

\textsuperscript{205}Ibid., 103.
troubles with the Church began with Obando’s appointment as Archbishop and were exacerbated by Obando’s greed and pride during the earthquake recovery effort. Like Pezzullo, he noted the hierarchy’s influence on his relationship with the Carter administration. He believed, however, that his most serious problems with the Church came from the lower clergy. He accused Ernesto Cardenal and other Communist priests not only of rejecting the Church’s traditional injunction against engaging in partisan politics, but of brainwashing Nicaragua’s impressionable youth. He reiterated, “Never could there be too much emphasis placed on the role that the communist priests represented in the Sandinista movement. I return to repeat that the influence exercised over their young students was greater than that which anyone who doesn’t know things well can imagine.”

He argued, however, that the progressive—or radical—Church’s influence extended well beyond youth programs. When Carlos Fonseca Amador died in 1971, “the FSLN, or as they call them, the Sandinistas, remained without direction.”

In that opportunity the leftist priests assumed the management in order to fill the void. They continued the labor of Carlos Fonseca but this time at a more elevated economic level. In the high schools the Jesuits planted the seed of discontent, and basically, the seed of communism. Those doctrines spread among the young people of powerful families, and were accepted by many of them. Take for example the young people like the Carrión Cruzes or the Lang Sacasas, who became avowed communists due to the preparation that the Jesuit priests gave them.

He even seemed to believe that his regime was the victim of a Church-wide conspiracy. He wrote, “I have the opinion that Nicaragua had been chosen as the key Latin American

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206 Anastasio Somoza and Jack Cox, *Nicaragua Traicionada* (Boston: Western Islands, 1980), 60.


government to be destroyed, and that the Jesuits participated prominently in that plan."209

Yet he generously credited the rest of the Church as well: "There everything appears. It should be clarified, of course, that at the priestly level, the communists have successfully infiltrated other Catholic religious orders besides that of the Jesuits."210

A NATIONAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND INTERDEPENDENCE

It seems indisputable, then, that the Catholic Church contributed substantially to the victory of the Revolution. Moreover, all the elements that constitute a classic social movement are clearly present. There was "common purpose"—a latent sense of injustice and dissatisfaction with the oppressive Somoza regime—that cut across localities as well as social sectors. A reformatted liturgy and renovated pastoral strategies fostered a sense of "collective identity" or "solidarity" among Nicaraguan Catholics. "Political opportunities"—a generational shift in the hierarchy, exacerbated socio-economic dislocation, even the election of a Christian U.S. president attentive to human rights issues—cued accelerated radicalization within the nascent movement. "Movement entrepreneurs" were able to sustain their contentious politics by "mobilizing resources" that belonged to the Church. Finally, the movement within the Catholic Church began to create new opportunities for other like-minded groups and to profit by the opportunities those groups created. The result was a self-perpetuating "cycle of contention," in which the costs associated with contentious politics diminished geometrically.

209Ibid.

210Ibid., 109.
Yet the social movement in the Nicaraguan Church did not, as Tarrow would predict, start as a series of local contentions that eventually organized nationally because they shared a common purpose. Rather, repertoires of contention and renovated symbols were borrowed from outside Nicaraguan society. Where these ideas and resources came from, and how they found their way into Nicaragua, are the subjects of the next chapter.
CHAPTER III

THE REVOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

During the years that the Nicaraguan Church was helping to buttress the Somoza regime, a profound theological and pastoral renewal ultimately known as the Liberation Theology movement was in fact sweeping through the broader Catholic Church. Like the developments in Nicaragua during the 1960s and 1970s, Liberation Theology is best understood as a social movement.

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Although this movement had deep social and theological roots, these were most fully and powerfully expressed between 1962 and 1965 at the Second Vatican Council. The Council was convoked by Pope John XXIII, who explained to the Roman curia that the Church needed to undergo an “aggiornamento,” or “bringing-up-to-date.”¹ In order to do so the Council adopted sixteen separate documents treating the major topics of Church pastoral doctrine. *Lumen Gentium*, or the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, sought to orient salvation history within temporal history, thus uniting Augustine’s two ancient cities. It called the Church a “People of God” in pilgrimage, struggling alongside humanity and human history rather than against it.² *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, reaffirmed the teaching authority of the magisterium, but also called for “easy access to sacred Scripture . . . for all the Christian faithful.”³


²Abbott, 31, 63, 95.
Sacrosanctam Concilium, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, sought to simplify the liturgy, making it more accessible and relevant to the common believer, and to encourage "active participation by the faithful." The homily, too, was primarily to comprise "scripture applied . . . here and now." Inter Merificum recognized the power of modern communications technology and its significance for the Church; Christus Dominus, Presbyterorum Ordinis, Optatum Totius, and Perfectae Caritatis sought to explain the ramifications of modern life for the bishops, priests and priestly formation, and monastic life, respectively. Unitatis Redintegratio, Nostra Aetate, and Dignitatis Humanae dealt with ecumenism, non-Christians, and religious freedom. Missions and the Church’s role in education were taken up in Ad Gentes and Gravissimum Educationis. All of these documents admonished the Church, more or less forcefully, to “present Christian doctrine in a manner adapted to the needs of the times, that is to say, in a manner corresponding to the difficulties and problems by which people are most vexatiously burdened and troubled,” and to “manifest the Church’s maternal solicitude for all men, believers or not,” especially “the poor and lower classes to whom the Lord sent them to preach the gospel.”

Two documents in particular, though, were especially important to later developments. The first was Apostolicam Actuositatem, the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity. This Decree asserted that “modern conditions demand that [the lay] apostolate

3Ibid., 125.
4Ibid., 143.
5Ibid., 150.
6Ibid., 405.
be thoroughly broadened and intensified,” and that “Christ’s redemptive work, while of itself directed toward the salvation of men, involves also the renewal of the whole temporal order. Hence the mission of the Church is not only to bring men the message and grace of Christ, but also to penetrate and perfect the temporal sphere with the spirit of the gospel.” In doing so the Church “should cooperate with all men of goodwill.” The activity of the laity was in fact declared “so necessary within church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is generally unable to achieve its full effectiveness.”

The second document of special importance, indeed, the most important—and controversial—produced during the entire three years, was promulgated on the last day of the Council. *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, reaffirmed the basic themes of Vatican II. It recognized that “this community realizes that it is truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history,” and consequently addressed itself “without hesitation, not only to the sons of the Church and to all who invoke the name of Christ, but to the whole of humanity.” It described how “the People of God, . . . motivated by this faith, . . . labors to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose in the happenings, needs, and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age.” While “rejecting atheism, root and

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7Ibid., 490.
8Ibid., 495.
9Ibid., 500.
10Ibid.
11Ibid., 200.
12Ibid., 209.
branch,” it affirmed that “the Church sincerely professes that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which we all alike live.” This passage hints at the real novelty of Gaudium et Spes. It not only located the Church within human history, but specified the social ends for which Christians should strive.

By “scrutinizing the signs of the times” (in response to the challenge Pope John XXIII never tired of issuing), the Council noted that modern society found itself in a “crisis of growth,” where humanity enjoyed an unprecedented “abundance of wealth, resources, and economic power, . . . yet a huge proportion of the world’s citizens is still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. Never before today,” the bishops claimed, “has man been so keenly aware of freedom, yet at the same time, new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance.”13 While the alleviation of individual suffering was a common goal for the Church, Gaudium et Spes placed much less emphasis on charity and much more on structural problems. “For excessive economic and social differences between the members of the one human family or population groups cause scandal, and militate against social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person, as well as social and international peace.”14 It even stated, “If a person is in extreme necessity, he has the right to take from the riches of others what he himself needs.”15 This concern over societal structure and inequality was not limited to individuals, but extended even to the world economic system: “Nations on the road to progress . . . desire to participate in the goods

13Ibid., 201-02.

14Ibid., 228.
of modern civilization, not only in the political field but also economically. Still,” the bishops lamented, “. . . their dependence on wealthier nations deepens more rapidly, even in the economic sphere.”¹⁶ In large part this was not seen as a matter of initiative or fitness, but as a consequence of the fact that “the structure of affairs is flawed.”¹⁷

Denouncing flaws inherent in the world economic system, rather than merely warning against its excesses, was a major step. Even more startling, though, was the Council’s prescription of remedies in Gaudium et Spes. “When circumstances of time and place create the need, she [the Church] can and indeed should initiate activities on behalf of all men.” This included “today’s social movements.”¹⁸ Nor was the Church’s attention to the social order limited to purely social and economic issues. It also included judgments on politics. “The political community exists for that common good in which the community finds its full justification and meaning.”¹⁹ Moreover, “It is in full accord with human nature that juridical-political structures should, with ever better success and without any discrimination, afford all their citizens the chance to participate freely and actively in establishing the constitutional bases of a political community, governing the state, determining the scope and purpose of various institutions, and choosing leaders.”²⁰ Indeed, while people should obey the established authorities, “it is lawful for them to defend their own rights and those of their fellow citizens against any abuse of this

¹⁵Ibid., 278.
¹⁶Ibid., 207.
¹⁷Ibid., 224.
¹⁸Ibid., 241.
¹⁹Ibid., 284.
²⁰Ibid., 285.
authority” because “it harms humanity when government takes on totalitarian or
dictatorial forms injurious to the rights of persons or social groups.”

Still, Gaudium et Spes continued on to suggest pastoral remedies for unjust situations. In order for priests
to diagnose properly and care for the faithful in such situations, “appropriate use must be
made not only of theological principles, but also of the findings of the secular sciences,
especially of psychology and sociology.” Indeed, in order for all citizens to “make their
contribution to the political community, . . . civic and political education is today
supremely necessary for the people, especially young people.”

To be sure, the general tone of Gaudium et Spes was reformist, at times even conservative. Much of its
commentary on war and peace seemed directed toward the superpowers’ Cold War, and
much of its social commentary must be seen as an attempt to abolish the most severe
situations of poverty and misery before communists were able to flourish in them.

Nevertheless, we should also remember that this statement was issued in 1965, when
Archbishop González y Robleto and all the Nicaraguan bishops but one still staunchly
supported the political and social order in Somoza’s Nicaragua.

Vatican II was primarily a European council. As the Dominican priest Edward
Cleary recalled, “The Latin American Church did not go to the council as a pacesetter. It
grew rather as a learner.” Berryman agreed, “With the exception of the document on
the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes), Vatican II dealt almost exclusively
with internal church concerns, according to an agenda set largely in Europe. Latin

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21Ibid., 285-86.

22Ibid., 269.

23Ibid., 287.

24Cleary, 19.
Americans had relatively little input into the council.” This was true even of issues which should especially have concerned them. According to Étienne Fouilloux’s examination of the bishops’ responses to Pope John’s call for a council, “Few Latin American bishops dwelt on the already critical problem of the impoverishment of an increasingly large part of the population.” Later he writes, “The evidence cannot be denied: the concrete situation of Spanish-speaking America did not figure among the concerns which its bishops wanted to bring to Vatican II.”

There were, however, significant exceptions to the rule. Fouilloux described the “short but quite nonconformist response,” of Hélder Câmara, bishop of Recife, Brazil, which “suggested that Latin not be the language of the Council and that the Church commit itself there to the formation of a better world first of all in economic and social areas, but also in esthetic, scientific, and political areas.” Even among the periti, or “experts,” who played such a renowned role in the development of the documents promulgated by the bishops, Latin America was severely underrepresented. Of the 224 conciliar experts listed in attendance at the Council, just one, a Brazilian, was from Latin America. In contrast, eighty-four were from the Vatican’s Roman offices or institutions, and fifty-nine were from various European countries. Bishop Manuel Larrain of Talca, Chile was another standout among the generally uninvolved Latin American episcopate.

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27Ibid., 115.

28Ibid., 126.
Together with Câmara, he visited two prominent French churchmen during the opening days of the Council and “was given an attentive hearing.” Larrain also played an influential role in changing the focus of the debates on liturgy. He argued that “the gospel was to be proclaimed to the poor,” and that “justice could only be done to this fact if the poverty praised in the gospel were respected.” In a phrase that presaged later developments in Liberation Theology, Larrain further insisted that “the Church was obliged . . . to show in both word and deed that it took the side of the poor while ensuring at the same time that its riches did not give offense in places dominated by poverty.”

Larrain and Câmara, co-vice-presidents of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), also helped organize unofficial meetings of representative episcopal conferences from around the world. Bishop Marcos McGrath of Santiago de Veraguas, Panama was one other active Latin American bishop; he influenced key drafts of both *Christus Dominus* and *Lumen Gentium*, the cornerstone document of the Council.

Perhaps the most significant Latin American contribution to the Council, however, was due to Helder Câmara’s passionate and tenacious response to one of the challenges Pope John issued to the Church. Hilari Raguer recorded, “In his radio message of September 11, 1962, a month before the opening of the Council, John XXIII said: ‘Confronted with

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32Ibid., 145.

the underdeveloped countries, the Church presents itself as it is and wishes to be, as the Church of all, and particularly as the Church of the poor.”^34 This challenge resonated with a group of bishops who became known during the Council as the “Group of the ‘Church of the Poor.’” Although the group was most often represented by several prominent European bishops, its real legitimacy came from the relatively large number of bishops from Third World countries included among its ranks. Helder Câmara and two African bishops were, according to Raguer, “this group’s great spokesmen at the Council.”^35 Despite the predominance of European bishops and theologians, the support of this “Group of the ‘Church of the Poor’” and the few Latin Americans in it did affect the final contents not only of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, but of *Gaudium et Spes* as well.

**CELAM**

Indeed, what little theological and pastoral influence the Latin American bishops did wield at Vatican II pales when compared to the effects of their organizational innovation. The Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM), founded in 1955, was the first international episcopal organization of its kind. Its original purpose was to deal more effectively with the problems that plagued the Church in a supposedly “Catholic” continent. The stated object of CELAM’s First General Conference in Rio de Janeiro was “the study, in concrete form and with practical resolutions, of the most fundamental and urgent points of the religious problem of Latin America from the double

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[^35]: Ibid., 205.
aspect of apostolic defense and conquest.” The precise origin of the idea for CELAM is unclear. Although virtually all the secondary sources credit Helder Câmara, Alberto Methol Ferre’s contribution to CELAM’s official *Elementos de su Historia* categorically stated, “All agree in pointing out that the idea of CELAM was the initiative of Mons. Antonio Samoré.” Samoré was the Papal Nuncio in Colombia in 1952, and Ferre reported that he carried the idea through the arduous staffing process at the Holy See, finally receiving approval from Pope Pius XII and establishing CELAM’s headquarters in Bogotá. Whatever the case, there can be no doubt that the organization was in fact modeled on Brazil’s national conference of bishops, which Câmara undoubtedly conceived and headed as secretary general from 1952 until 1964. Smith explains that “in its first years, CELAM was a relatively weak instrument for change. But with the changes of Vatican II, CELAM was to grow into a very important institution, [enabling] the Latin American bishops to speak with a more unified, coordinated voice.”

Indeed, CELAM’s most important moment had its genesis in 1965, during the final session of Vatican II. As the members of CELAM present at the Vatican met together on the first day of the session, Bishop Larrain suggested that they begin to make provision for the upcoming meeting of the Conference. As the question was discussed, the bishops agreed with Larrain’s suggestion that the meeting address two specific

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38Ibid., 75-76.

objectives: the "revision of the conclusions of the General Conference of Rio de Janeiro, among which the most of important was the creation of CELAM," and the "actualization of the application to Latin America of the Constitutions of Vatican II."

The two-year planning period for CELAM's second extraordinary meeting, known as CELAM II or "Medellín," after the city in Colombia that hosted it, took its bearings from Vatican II. Among the most important tools adopted was the unique methodology—"facts – reflection – recommendations"—that had characterized the drafting of *Gaudium et Spes*. Cleary explained, "The change in methodology was monumental: it represented a shift from a perspective that was dogmatic, deductive and top-to-bottom to one that was exploratory, inductive, and bottom-to-top." The bishops also brought back from Rome the practice of relying heavily on the support of *periti*, priests or sometimes lay experts and advisers. Just as at the Vatican, these experts not only attended the sessions with their bishops, but they also drafted the preparatory documents called *ponencias* which were promulgated prior to the opening of the Medellín conference. In this way the bishops who had been most inspired by the ferment of the Council were able to shape the conference according to their preferences even before it started.

The planning cycle also incorporated other currents. One of the most important was the growing influence of economics and sociology in the clerical community.

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41Ibid., 83.


43Parada, 42.

44Cleary, 22; also see Berryman, 27.
CELAM had always been influenced by the economic thought of Raúl Prebisch and the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin American (CEPAL). The first publication of *Latinoamérica*, CEPAL's journal for the study of Latin American economics, preceded CELAM’s foundation by just a few years. Prebisch’s structural analysis influenced a whole generation of Catholic sociologists in Latin America, among them Larrain, who insisted on “the necessity for intimate collaboration between Theology and Sociology.”

More active and well-known as sociologists were the Uruguayan Dominican priest L. J. Lebret (who is famous for his later statement that the Church would have to baptize Marx just as Aquinas baptized Aristotle), the Chilean Roger Vekemans, and Frenchman François Houtart. All of these Catholic thinkers in one way or another incorporated the economic thought of CEPAL, which was enormously influential for years to come. In fact, Ferré asserted that “in CELAM, and in its surroundings, in intellectuals or experts of all types, a ‘Latin American’ generation of Catholics began to be trained, parallel in interpretations to that of CEPAL, despite very distinct roots and logic.”

Hernán Parada reported, in fact, that CELAM collected base materials for Medellín from CEPAL and UNESCO. Later the Jesuit order encouraged Jesuit priests in each Latin American nation to establish “Centers for Social Research and

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44Parada, 50-52.

45Methol Ferré, 85. CEPAL’s economic doctrine argued that the benefits of free trade that accrued to developed countries like those in North America and Europe could not be assumed to be available to less developed countries. Rather, simple division of labor along lines of comparative advantage dictated that the “periphery” would continue to export primary commodities to the “center,” which in turn sold higher-price, higher-margin manufactures back in a cycle that would be reinforced, not escaped, by pursuing free trade. See Joseph L. Love, “Raúl Prebisch and the Origins of Unequal Exchange,” *Latin American Research Review* 15, no. 3 (fall 1980): 45-72.

46Methol Ferré, 82.

47Parada, 45.
Action (CIAS).” Though only a few were founded, in the 1960s their thought was widely distributed among theologians and intellectuals, clerical and lay alike.48

In the mid-1960s the emergence of dependency theory transformed Latin American economics. Dependency theory, which built on Prebisch’s concepts of core and periphery but also adopted Marxist overtones regarding empire and rejected the viability of import-substitution industrialization, provided a lens through which many Catholic intellectuals were able to interpret Latin American reality.49 Dependency theory became one of Latin America’s “most original contributions to late twentieth century social theory, exerting a strong influence on research in history, sociology, political science and anthropology as well as economics.50 Smith explained that while monographs by writers like Cardoso, Faletto, and Frank were read, “dependency” traveled most rapidly by word-of-mouth, and thus became in many cases simplified. His interviews with Pablo Richard, Julio de Santa Ana, Edward Cleary, and Phillip Berryman, who were working in Latin America at the time, confirmed this.51 The dependency model also affected a group of young theologians, including Gustavo Gutiérrez, Renato Poblete, and Juan Luis Segundo, who served as experts to Medellín. Their intellectual formation had largely been accomplished in Europe, especially at Lyons and Louvain, and all were heavily influenced by the “integral humanism” of Jacques Maritain. At Lyons, Gutiérrez also became acquainted with Paulo Freire, the

48 Smith, 144.


51 Smith, 147-48.
Brazilian educator whose methods of *concientización* later became so important in Nicaragua. By 1967 their theology centered around one concept: “liberation.”\(^{52}\) This, too, profoundly affected both the preliminary documents and the conclusions of CELAM II.

Thus the ferment that went into Medellín blended several strains of thought and action, from powerful European and energetic South American bishops at the Second Vatican Council to Chilean sociologists, Argentine economists, Brazilian educators, and Peruvian theologians. What came out of Medellín, in turn, revolutionized the Latin American Church and had unimaginable repercussions in Nicaragua.

**THE MEDELLÍN MEETING**

The progressive bishops who had met in Rome three years earlier, and the eager theologians they recruited to shape CELAM II’s preliminary documents, met together with the other, less organized Latin American delegates in Medellín, Colombia from 26 August until 8 September 1968. Unlike Vatican II, the meeting lasted just two weeks, primarily because the cadre that organized it had already done so much work. Like Vatican II, CELAM II published the conclusions of its labor in separate documents, each addressing a specific topic. There were sixteen such documents in all, covering such issues as mass media, formation of the clergy, religious life, lay movements, and the liturgy—again, much like Vatican II. Another similarity was that not all of these documents had much impact on the direction of the Church. Rather, certain standouts took hold of those observing the Latin American Church—from within and without—and

dominated the tone of the entire meeting and the reaction to it. These were the
documents titled “Justice,” “Peace,” and “The Poverty of the Church.”

The “Justice” document describes a “misery that besets large masses of human
beings in all of our countries.” Growing “dependence” on “international business
enterprises,” coupled with unjust distribution of income and opportunity, yields not only
“political instability” but also “unjust structures” that facilitate both a “lack of solidarity”
and “serious sin.” 53 In order to attain “authentic liberation” and “new and reformed
structures,” the bishops who approved the document on justice proposed certain changes
in pastoral practice and planning. 54 The first of these was nothing less than a wholesale
political reorganization of many of the Latin American countries of the time, including
Nicaragua, along democratic lines. The bishops “make an urgent appeal” to businessmen
to “radically modify” their businesses to conform with “the guidelines supplied by the
social teaching of the Church” in order to create a “truly human economy.” 55 Land
reform and workers’ unions followed. The document’s position on political participation
warrants quoting at length:

The lack of political consciousness in our countries makes the educational activity
of the Church absolutely essential, for the purpose of bringing Christians to
consider their participation in the political life of the nation as a matter of
conscience and as the practice of charity in its most noble and meaningful sense
for the life of the community. . . . We must awaken the social conscience and
communal customs in all strata of society. . . . The task of “concientización” and
social education ought to be integrated into joint Pastoral Action at various
levels. 56

53Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, The Church in the Present-Day
Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council: Conclusions, 2d ed. (Washington, D.C.:
USCC, Division for Latin America, 1973), 40-41.

54Ibid., 41-43.

55Ibid., 45.

56Ibid., 48.
Moreover, “it is necessary that small basic communities be developed in order to establish a balance with minority groups, which are the groups in power.” Finally, “The Church—the People of God—will lend its support to the down-trodden of every social class so that they might come to know their rights and how to make use of them.” For the bishops to publish a document like “Justice,” recognizing a struggle between social classes, was startling enough. What is more important for us is to take note of how closely the specific remedies prescribed correlate to the movement that grew up in the Nicaraguan Church in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In “Peace,” the bishops at Medellín took the radical step of confirming that the entire “situation” in Latin America was not only unjust, but also sinful. By making sin a structural phenomenon rather than merely individual, the bishops raised the stakes for questions of development and peace. The document went on to list different ways in which the Latin American situation was sinful: various forms of marginalization; inequality among social classes; oppression; neocolonialism and dependency; and excessive debt. The theological reflection on these facts asserted that “peace is, above all, a work of justice.” On the question of violence, “Peace” reaffirmed the traditional Christian “faith in the productiveness of peace.” They argue, however, that “in many instances Latin America finds itself faced with a situation of injustice that can be called institutionalized violence.” This condemnation of “institutionalized violence” allowed them to cite Pope Paul VI’s encyclical Populorum Progressio: “Revolutionary

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57 Ibid., 49.
58 Ibid., 54-58.
59 Ibid., 59.
insurrection can be legitimate in the case of evident and prolonged "tyranny that seriously works against the fundamental rights of man, and which damages the common good of the country." The pastoral conclusions of the document on Peace, like that on Justice, admonished the faithful to denounce injustice, to awaken political consciousness, to encourage grassroots organization, and to collaborate in these tasks with believers and non-believers alike.

The third key document, "The Poverty of the Church," began with the most passion of the three:

The Latin American bishops cannot remain indifferent in the face of the tremendous social injustices existent in Latin America, which keep the majority of our peoples in dismal poverty, which in many cases becomes inhuman wretchedness.

A deafening cry pours from the throats of millions of men, asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else.

This dreadful situation, coupled with the relative wealth of the Church, led many of the poor to "feel that their bishops, or pastors and religious, do not really identify themselves with them, with their problems and afflictions." The reflection upon these facts led the bishops to recommend that "the poverty of the Church and of its members in Latin America ought to be a sign and a commitment—a sign of the inestimable value of the poor in the eyes of God, an obligation of solidarity with those who suffer."

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60 Ibid., 61.
61 Ibid., 62-63.
62 Ibid., 64.
63 Ibid., 188.
64 Ibid., 189.
65 Ibid., 191.
As Smith pointed out, the Conclusions of Medellín—like those of Vatican II—were rather ambiguous. They contained conservative and reformist as well as liberationist elements. Nevertheless, with a progressive CELAM leadership offering the institution’s resources and endorsement to progressive or even radical experts and theologians, the liberation theology movement was well underway. The key books on liberation theology appeared almost immediately—Gutiérrez’s Toward a Theology of Liberation and Hugo Assman’s Theology for a Nomad Church foremost among them. These theologians and other progressive Catholic intellectuals were, for the next several years, able both to foster and to dominate discourse within the Latin American Church on everything from economics to sociology to new theologies, despite the fact that the majority of Latin American priests and bishops did not sympathize with their relatively radical interpretation of the gospels and of history. Gutiérrez, Segundo, Miranda, Assman, and the others who led the way to a full fledged “theology of liberation” did so by executing a classic social movement: given a “common purpose”—creation of an independent and effective Latin American theology and pastoral strategy—they formed an “insurgent consciousness” by reading progressive European theologians and studying at progressive European schools, then reshaping those ideas to fit what they knew of Latin American sociology, economy, politics, and pedagogy; they took advantage of “political opportunities”—Vatican II and the progressive Latin American bishops’ response to it; and were able to “sustain contentious politics”—in this case the politics of cultural or symbolic capital—by drawing on the resources of a sympathetic leadership in the Latin American episcopate.66 These “movement entrepreneurs” were extremely effective. Liberation theology changed the nature of religious discourse not just in Latin

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66 See Smith for a very convincing portrayal of liberation theology as a social movement.
America but in the cultural centers of the European church as well. For the first time an authentically Latin American theology had more influence, and attracted more attention on both sides of the Atlantic and in both the northern and southern hemispheres, than did European and North American ones.\footnote{For samples of several very prominent European theologians to the liberation theology movement, see Jürgen Moltmann, “An Open Letter to José Míguez Bonino (March 29, 1976),” and Gregory Baum, “German Theologians and Liberation Theology (May 1978), both in Liberation Theology: A Documentary History, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990). Also see Hennelly’s introductions to both letters, pages 195 and 220.}

Yet the glory days of the liberation theology movement lasted only four years, from Medellín in 1968 until CELAM’s annual meeting in 1972 at Sucre, Ecuador.\footnote{Smith, 188-92.} By that time the moderate majority had recovered control of CELAM, cut the institutional support from under the liberation theologians, and effected a relatively gentle but unmistakable backlash. This, too, would later have effects in Nicaragua. We will discuss those shortly. The question we must now ask, of course, is whether the liberation theology movement within the Latin American Catholic Church and the Church’s role in the Nicaraguan Revolution were related.

\textsuperscript{67}For samples of several very prominent European theologians to the liberation theology movement, see Jürgen Moltmann, “An Open Letter to José Míguez Bonino (March 29, 1976),” and Gregory Baum, “German Theologians and Liberation Theology (May 1978), both in Liberation Theology: A Documentary History, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990). Also see Hennelly’s introductions to both letters, pages 195 and 220.

\textsuperscript{68}Smith, 188-92.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSIONS

THE LIBERATION THEOLOGY MOVEMENT IN NICARAGUA

We must conclude that they were. Without exception, all of the identifiable agents in the Nicaraguan movement locate the genesis of their experience in the broader movement of Vatican II, Medellín, and liberation theology. Often they do so explicitly; sometimes they betray the origins of their belief by using the language of the liberation theology movement. Uriel Molina remembered that when he returned home to Nicaragua in October 1965, after twelve years studying philosophy and theology in Germany and Italy, he found to his surprise that “within the ecclesiastical atmosphere, the Second Vatican Council was here [in Nicaragua] very vague news; the Council did not have a deep repercussion in the pastoral of the Nicaraguan Church.”¹ Trying to change that fact was what attracted the attention of his restive students: “The UCA offered me the possibility of presenting the new face of the Church starting from Vatican II. My classes echoed a lot among my students.”² Likewise in the barrio: “I determined, therefore, on principle, to work in the line of the Second Vatican Council, recently concluded. I began to invite the faithful in order to explain to them the exigencies of the new times.”³ When asked about the Christian experience in Nicaragua, he wrote:

In everyone grows the fervent aspiration and longing that the Church should finally be able to face with valor the situation of institutionalized violence we live. Theologically this state of things is a situation of sin. Before the situation of open

dependency we live there remains for us no other road but liberation, which will not be realized without crossing a profound transformation of structures.\(^4\)

He even interpreted Nicaraguan history in the light of the Council: "And it was like this: the Second Vatican Council was officially inaugurated in the year 1962, one year after the founding of the Sandinista National Liberation Front. Since then in Nicaragua a double, parallel movement of National Liberation has been hit upon."\(^5\) In a more practical vein, "In the Base Communities, . . . the ‘SEE JUDGE and ACT’ method of Medellín promptly awakened their conscience."\(^6\)

Fernando Cardenal, who founded the MCR, spoke and wrote less than Molina, but confirmed the same influences. He entered the priesthood in 1952. After his novitiate, he went to study at the Catholic University of Quito, where the Christian sociology of Lebret and others was being taught. In 1969 he decided to spend his "tertianship," or third year of training, with the Jesuit priests in a poor quarter of Medellín, Colombia, where the Second General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate had just concluded.

But, in the final years of my training I was given a deeper comprehension that . . . for many, there had already begun to be fulfilled a hell on earth, as is the misery that millions of Latin Americans are suffering. . . . And then, . . . I began to worry about the most urgent type of service here . . . the service of the liberation of the poor of my people, their human, economic, social, and political liberation, which is an anticipation and a beginning of their integral liberation and of the coming of the Kingdom."\(^7\)


\(^6\)Ibid. Capitals in the original.

\(^7\)Cabestrero, _Ministros de Dios_, 59-60.
During that time he found that the priesthood had a "prophetic" aspect, and learned from his novice master, a Spanish Jesuit, that "the God who has revealed himself to us in the Bible is not a neutral God, but rather is a God who takes sides for the poor." He, too, used the watchwords of the broader movement: "The Kingdom of God that, as Vatican II very clearly says, begins to be constructed in history; . . ." "... preferably the cause of the poor that God has assumed as his own cause in history." He recalled, "Sometimes, after having studied and read many books, you encounter, concentrated in a simple phrase, something that illuminates everything that you have read and studied. I remember a phrase of the documents of Medellín that has very much illumined me: that political activity is the most noble and most effective form of exercising charity."

Sister Mary Hartmann, a Maryknoll sister who worked with the CEBs in both Waspán in Zelaya and in El Riguero, explained that she "came to Nicaragua in 1962, at a time when the church was asking that ten percent of their personnel go to Latin America to work with the poor and evangelize the continent." And she remembered her own reaction to the events of the liberation theology movement: "In the Medellín document, which arose from the work of the Second Vatican Council, the bishops of Latin America called on Christians to incarnate ourselves into the lives of the poor and work not only for their spiritual liberation but for their well-being in anything that touched their lives,

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8Ibid., 66.
9Ibid., 86-87.
10Ibid., 64.
11Melissa Everett, Bearing Witness, Building Bridges: Interviews with North Americans Living and Working in Nicaragua (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1986), 8. The request to which Sister Hartmann refered was issued by Pope John XXIII in 1961 in an effort to alleviate the severe shortage of Church personnel in Latin America. For more on the request and on the ramifications of large numbers of
because people are made up of a body as well as a soul. This was something new."

She also recalled how she led the communities in discussions of Exodus and Isaiah, two favorites of Gutiérrez and the other liberation theologians.

Carlos Tünnerman, a lawyer who became one of Los Doce, called the Revolution 
"a process in which we discover and practice the option for the poor, which is the 
preferential option that we should assume as Christians." María del Socorro Gutiérrez 
remembered, "The analysis of the documents of Medellín, which we studied in the 
School of Cursillos de Cristiandad, also took me to 'concientize' myself. . ." She 
got on to use Gustavo Gutiérrez's phrase word-for-word: "the preferential option for the 
poor." Edgardo García recognized and used the same language, even though it was 
inapplicable to his particular situation: "I was not able to say that I took the option for the 
poor, because I am also poor." Ricardo E. Chavarría, a former priest and the Vice-
Minister of the Nicaraguan Energy Institute, who entered seminary in Colombia in 
1962, claimed, "The changes and the transformations that are being carried forward in the 
Nicaraguan popular process have much to do with something that is essential in the 
Christian Church: the preferential option for the most poor." Zela Díaz noted that she 
belonged to the group "Cristianos en la Revolución" in order to "better comply with the

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12Everett, 8.
13Cabestrero, Revolucionarios, 303.
14Ibid., 176.
15Ibid., 178.
16Ibid., 161.
17Ibid., 96.
evangelical option for the poor.”\textsuperscript{18} While she was in Spain in 1966, “I lived in the convent of the nuns of the Assumption. The Provincial of the nuns was a woman completely steeped in Vatican II. I met with her and she awakened in me the renovation of the Church, the ‘aggiornamento.’”\textsuperscript{19}

Justinian Liebl, a North American priest who went to the rural East coast of Nicaragua in the 1950s, also recounted how the broader movement affected him:

My own interest in the Nicaraguan revolution was very heavily influenced by an earlier revolution, the one within the Catholic church that led to the second Vatican council in 1965. I was very much a part of those changes. We began emphasizing working much more with the people, getting them to work instead of having us priests go around playing the big cheese, going into the bush and giving masses to huge, admiring crowds. That’s how it was in the old days. You were detached from the people but you put yourself above them. Instead, we started working to form leaders in the local populations so that they could take care of their own churches. That trend began here in 1969 or 1970. We learned to keep quiet and let the people speak. What a difference!\textsuperscript{20}

Ernesto Cardenal, the best known progressive Christian in Nicaragua, took the least typical path. He was educated abroad, in the United States and in Western Europe, before he returned to Nicaragua in 1950 and proved that he was already a radical, despite the Conservative roots of his wealthy family, by participating in an abortive armed rebellion. In 1956, however, he experienced a religious conversion and decided to become a monk. He entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemany, in Kentucky, where his novice master Thomas Merton became his close friend. Although Merton first became famous for his contemplative memoir \textit{The Seven Storey Mountain}, by the time Cardenal met him he had adopted many of the tenets of Jacques Maritain’s

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 124.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 129.

\textsuperscript{20}Everett, 18.
Thus Cardenal noted that when he first met Merton, "I thought I’d have to renounce everything when I entered the Trappist order—my books, my interest in my country, in politics, in the dictatorships of Latin America, in Nicaraguan politics, in Somoza, in everything—and Merton made me see that I didn’t have to renounce anything." In fact, the idea to found a contemplative community like Solentiname in rural Latin America was originally Merton’s. According to Cardenal, "He wanted it to be in a poor place, with a peasant population, maybe with Indians. The original idea was to build it in the Andes. He talked about Ecuador, Colombia, Peru. So I said to him, why not Nicaragua?" The two made detailed plans, down to the clothes Merton would wear when he flew to Nicaragua to establish the community, before Merton’s abbot prohibited his departure from the monastery in Gethsemany. Nevertheless, Cardenal said, "the message Merton imparted to me, and that I conveyed to the community I founded, was that we couldn’t consider ourselves contemplatives unless we had also committed ourselves to every aspect of the community—its political, its social, its economic life—everything." Moreover, according to Cardenal, "Both Merton and the abbot, Father Lemercier, had progressive ideas, which afterwards influenced the Vatican Council and the whole church."

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23 Randall, 41.

24 Wilkes and Glynn.

25 Randall, 42-43.
Clearly then, the Nicaraguan Catholic Church’s “insurgent consciousness” (of the political process model), or its “collective identity” and “solidarity” (of Tarrow’s social movement theory), were adopted from the movement already underway in the worldwide Catholic Church. The latent resentment of Somoza’s brutality and social and economic injustice that gave the movement a “common purpose” are plain to see. What of “institutional resources?” We know that Father José de la Jara, a Spanish priest who came to Nicaragua in the wake of Pope John’s request, imported the format and methodology for CEBs from San Miguelito parish in Panama around 1966. CEBs in Panama seem to have been adapted from Bishop Helder Câmara’s application of Paulo Freire’s *concientización* techniques to the Basic Education Movement (MEB) in Rio de Janeiro; it seems likely that this happened during the time that Bishops Marcos McGrath and Câmara spent together at the Second Vatican Council. Besides CEBs, the most important resource for the Nicaraguan movement was probably the DP program, initiated in Zelaya primarily by North American Capuchins like Justinian Liebl, many of whom arrived on the wave of Pope John’s “ten percent” request.

The final element of the social movement, “political opportunity,” was most significantly provided by the Nicaraguan hierarchy, which not only became more lenient toward the progressive clergy in the wake of Medellín and the replacement of the Archbishop, but even exhibited hostility toward Somoza and lobbied internationally against his human rights abuses. Might this have been an indigenous element of the social movement in the Nicaraguan Church?

It does not appear so. Much has been made of the fact that one year after the landmark meeting in Medellín, at the *Primer Encuentro Pastoral* of 1969, the Nicaraguan
hierarchy remained obstinate and hostile toward progressive Christians like García and Castillo. Foroohar, for example, wrote, “Dr. Castillo’s conclusions proved to be too difficult for the conservative Nicaraguan Church hierarchy to digest. The hierarchy was not even prepared to criticize the existing unjust social system, let alone propose a revolutionary alternative.”

Williams explained that although the bishops formally assented to the formulation of a national pastoral plan, “many of the bishops sought to block the progress of those committed to implementing the new changes.” This is true, and even Williams did not address the obviously hesitant tone of the hierarchy’s response at the Encuentro. Yet both Williams and Foroohar failed to notice that the hierarchy’s response to the progressive movement, including García and Castillo, bristled with references to Catholic social doctrine, including both Vatican II and Medellín. Although the hierarchy bluntly rejected many progressive challenges and patronized most of the rest, they were forced to do so on progressive terms, using progressive shibboleths like “preferential option for the poor,” “signs of the times,” and “the Church as a people on the march through the times.”

In the following years, particularly after Obando’s surprise appointment, this tendency to rely on Vatican II, especially Gaudium et Spes, and the conclusions of Medellín grew stronger. The March 1972 pastoral letter, with its cautious political warnings to Somoza, cited Gaudium et Spes eight times and the Medellín conclusions three times in a seven page document. This common ground with the hierarchy afforded progressive lower clergy the political space necessary to make the social movement in the

26Foroohar, 72.

27Philip J. Williams, 24.
Church blossom. Indeed, the hierarchy’s moderate opposition to the regime constituted one part of that expanding social movement.

NICARAGUAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LIBERATION THEOLOGY MOVEMENT

If both the progressive clergy and the Nicaraguan hierarchy imported the lexicon of the worldwide Church movement, is there any possibility that they also contributed to it? If this were so, it would be much harder to call this a “foreign” phenomenon, and the case for interdependency would be weakened. When we examined the development of liberation theology through a social movement lens, we determined that both “political opportunity” and “resources” came from Vatican II and CELAM. Vatican II, as we have seen, was dominated by Europeans. Those Latin Americans who did play significant roles—Câmara, Larrain, and McGrath—were exceptional, and later made enormous contributions to the liberation theology movement in the Latin American Catholic Church.

With CELAM the case is more ambiguous. The common assumption is that CELAM was controlled by the South American bishops, but we know Nicaragua was represented there. Despite this, there is no evidence to suggest that Nicaraguans contributed to the changes that swept through CELAM in the late 1960s. The impetus for national episcopal conferences originated in Brazil. The idea for a regional episcopal conference came either from Brazil or the Vatican, or a combination of the two. Most of the intellectual foundation for CELAM’s work came from the southern cone. From its founding in 1955 until the Second General Conference in 1968, not one of CELAM’s

senior officers (President, First Vice-president, Second Vice-president, Secretary General, President of the Economic Committee) was Nicaraguan. No departmental director was Nicaraguan. The influential Pastoral Institute of Latin America (IPLA) was never headed by a Nicaraguan. Nicaragua was represented at the crucial Medellín meeting by the relatively unknown Bishop Clemente Carranza López and the conservative and blatantly corrupt Bishop Carlos Borge Castrillo. Of seventeen peritos listed in attendance, none was from Nicaragua. Nicaragua’s voting representative, Bishop Carranza, sat on only one comission: number two, with responsibility for the relatively unimpressive document on “Family and Demography.”

If Nicaraguans had power over neither the “political opportunties” that cued the Church-wide movement nor “institutional resources” that sustained it, we must question whether they influenced the formation of its “insurgent consciousness” that prompted liberation theologians to mount their challenge from within the Church. Again, it does not appear that they did. Though Smith is the only scholar careful enough to list them explicitly, virtually all scholars of liberation theology agree on who the movement’s intellectual leaders were and which were the seminal published books. Of eleven generally recognized innovators, or “first-generation liberation theologians,” as Smith calls them, none was Nicaraguan. None of their key early books cites any work by a Nicaraguan or refers to meetings held in Nicaragua.

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29 This information is compiled by comparing the list of “Directivos y Secretarios Ejecutivos en los 25 Años del CELAM,” reproduced in Elementos de su Historia, by the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 365-83 (Bogotá: Talleres Litografia Guzmán Cortés, 1982) with the list of Nicaraguan bishops at Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, Miembros Integrantes.

30 This information is derived from the “Nomina de Asistentes,” reproduced in Parada, 245-69.

31 These are Gustavo Gutiérrez; Hugo Assman; Rubem Alves; Lucio Gera; José Comblin; Juan Luis Segundo; Segundo Galilea; José Míguez Bonino; Enrique Dussel; José Miranda; Ronaldo Muñoz. See
SUMMARY AND REFLECTION ON THEORY

Thus the key tenets of interdependence theory seem to be vindicated in the events of the Nicaraguan Revolution. Nicaraguan Christians made crucial contributions to the Revolution by adopting essentially foreign ideas that had been imported through a transnational organization—the Catholic Church. Many of these ideas originated in century-old Catholic social doctrine and became codified in the European-dominated Second Vatican Council; ideas about parish organization and pastoral methods came from Brazil and Panama; economic and sociological armatures came from Brazil and the Southern cone countries; a Peruvian theologian provided the most compelling systematic intellectual justification for the new interpretations; finally, the South Americans who dominated the agenda of the Medellín meeting not only validated these radical new ideas but articulated a pastoral program whose method implied change independent of content. None of these ideas seem to have entered Nicaragua through formal governmental channels; few were even propagated through standard ecclesiastical channels. Clearly, as Keohane and Nye saw, “multiple channels connect societies.”

These imported ideas functioned in all three ways identified by Goldstein and Keohane: as a unifying worldview, as principled beliefs, and as causal beliefs. Nicaraguan citizens who came into contact with them experienced a thorough paradigm shift: God favored the poor and powerless; social structures themselves could be sinful; and faith demanded action, not complacency. Most importantly, these ideas did in fact translate directly into action. Christians affronted by political, social, and economic

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list in Smith, 169, which I have amended slightly by removing Juan Carlos Scannone and adding Lucio Gera and José Miranda.
suffering and mobilized by the international liberation theology movement organized and demonstrated against the government, fed and housed revolutionary muchachos, and took up arms themselves. Surely this constitutes “an absence of hierarchy among issues.” Nor was military force an option, for what foreign government could be held responsible and attacked?

Simply establishing the existence of interdependent relationships, however, is unsatisfactory. In order to understand the relationships that penetrate national borders and circumscribe the power of states, we must study the flowering of ideas within societies as well as their transmission between societies. Interdependence theory is incapable of doing so. Social movement theory is required.

The movement in the Catholic Church provided Nicaraguan Catholics with the political opportunity, the institutional resources, the common identity and the associated symbolic vocabulary required by any developing social movement. Only after all of these elements had been imported from abroad and disseminated through Church structures did Christians begin to engage in sustained contentious politics. As predicted, the expansion of this Church movement added to the pace of change in Nicaragua generally. Would-be student radicals who did not know how to involve themselves in struggle, for instance, found that “the only structure that existed was the parish, so we joined that.”33 As the costs of engaging in contentious politics shrank, the “cycle of contention” built upon itself and eventually achieved the “common purpose” underlying the whole evolution: the ouster of Somoza and an opportunity for greater social justice.


33Randall, 128.
Social movement theory also predicts that cycles of contention create new opportunities not only "for insurgents and for latecomers," but also, eventually, "for opponents and power holders." This was in fact the case in Nicaragua. Although the expanding social movement succeeded in toppling the dictator, within months of the Revolution's triumph the alliance began to crumble. Though the idea is not captured in Tarrow's analysis, it seems in the Nicaraguan case that "cycles of reaction" closely mirroed the original "cycles of contention." That is, groups who began to play roles in the movement late or reluctantly—the national bourgeoisie, the Catholic hierarchy, even the Carter administration and the Vatican—were quick to defect, and soon played equally active roles in opposition to the movement's continued development.

Literature on how social movement theory and interdependence theory relate to one another is scarce. Tarrow, of course, has examined and elaborated upon what little does exist. His critique of previous literature is perceptive. Those who see an emerging "global civil society," like Susanne Rudolph, give insufficient credit to the persistence of nationalism and cultural barriers. They assert that civil society will generate international norms that gradually impose themselves upon noncompliant nations. Tarrow is justly skeptical that norms will socialize themselves "without concrete mechanisms to effect such transformations." Put another way, global civil society theories often privilege questions of structure unreasonably and neglect questions of agency. As we see clearly in the Nicaraguan case, ideas did not diffuse spontaneously. They were carried into

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34 Tarrow, 7.


36 Tarrow, 183.
Nicaragua by active agents who consciously undertook theological and pastoral projects in line with the broader movement. Those who look primarily at “transnational advocacy networks (TANs),” on the other hand, like Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, frequently devote undue attention to deliberation and organization. This is not surprising, given their background in international relations theory, but their focus on centralization and on agents who set out to change specific “issue areas” has little explanatory power for the very personal conversions that drove the Nicaraguan scenario.

As an alternative, Tarrow proposed the inclusive term “transnational social movements,” by which he intended:

... sustained contentious interactions with opponents—national or nonnational—by connected networks of challengers organized across national boundaries. The targets of transnational movements can change from time to time; they may be either international or national, private or public. What is important in our definition is that the challengers themselves be both rooted in domestic social networks and connected to one another more than episodically through common ways of seeing the world, or through informal or organizational ties, and that their challenges be contentious in deed as well as in word.

This is an astute if cautious analysis. It describes almost perfectly what we have seen of Nicaraguan Christians who, though deeply rooted in their national culture and politics, also belonged to a “nonnational” field comprising loose organizational ties to like-minded, like-believing individuals. Thus the task, more than ever, in explaining how national self-interests are affected by international phenomena, hinges on defining “which self, and which interest” we mean. Though we may study both social movements and interdependence in the aggregate, we have seen in the Nicaraguan case that they converge only because individuals, confronted with new ideas, translate their beliefs into

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action. Those who took the themes of liberation theology seriously acted on them, and in so doing helped build a revolution: thus personal beliefs became a movement. Indeed, as the Council of Bishops recognized in *Gaudium et Spes*, it seems that “the destiny of the human community has become all of a piece, where once the various groups of men had a kind of private history.”

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38 Tarrow, 184. Italics in the original.

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