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Not Above the Fray: Religious and Political Divides' Impact on U.S. Missionary Sisters in 1980s Nicaragua

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Prompted by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, in late October 1983, provincials and generals of units with sisters in Nicaragua met to discuss what, if anything, U.S. missionaries might do to address divides in the Nicaraguan Church. Following Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza's departure in July 1979, the country struggled to find its way, both politically and religiously. Though most Nicaraguans cheered Somoza's exit, they did not agree regarding the new Sandinista government or what the role of the Church should be. At the same time, the U.S. government sought to undermine the revolution through economic and military means, including support for the contras, the counterrevolutionaries who sought to overthrow the Sandinista government. Surprisingly, in calling for the meeting, women religious did not mention the U.S. government's role or their status as U.S. missionaries. Their omission suggested that they regarded themselves as unaffected by the Nicaraguan divisions. However, as the meeting revealed, the women were profoundly impacted, and they were divided amongst themselves and even within their own communities. While prior scholarship has highlighted missionary opposition to U.S. foreign policy, the October 1983 meeting revealed a missionary community struggling to respond, both individually and collectively, to Nicaraguan divisions.

Keywords: Leadership Conference of Women Religious; U.S. women religious; missionaries in Nicaragua; Catholic Church in Nicaragua; Sandinistas

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Introduction

In early September 1983, Sister Lora Ann Quiñonez, CDP, Executive Director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), wrote to the eighteen provincials and generals of units with U.S. women religious in Nicaragua. As she reminded the women, "a proposal was introduced at the recent National Assembly" for communities with sisters serving in Nicaragua "to initiate dialogue" with both the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference. Though the assembly did not vote on the issue, as Quiñonez explained, the LCWR executive committee decided to move ahead with the idea. The plan was to discuss the divisions within the Church in Nicaragua and what role, if any, the U.S. Church could play "in enabling dialogue and reconciliation among sectors of the Nicaraguan church." The call for a meeting revealed the belief that the missionary sisters could draw on their experience to educate others and hopefully improve Nicaraguans' lives. As Quiñonez wrote, "This effort seems like a very concrete expression of our growing corporate commitment to work for peace and for the justice from which peace springs."[1]

Given the controversial nature of Nicaraguan debates in the United States at the time, it is surprising that the call for missionary sisters' help did not refer to the U.S. government's role or women's status as U.S. missionaries. In hoping to aid the divide, the sisters appear to have assumed they were not affected by it. However, as argued here, notes from the meeting reveal the contrary. The shared experience as a missionary or even one from the same religious community did not mean sharing the same outlook. In this way, missionary sisters' positions illustrate that the religious divisions among Catholics in Nicaragua were not neatly categorized.[2] Furthermore, scholars' focus on Catholic opposition, particularly that by missionaries, to U.S.-Nicaragua foreign policy has obscured how divisions impacted missionaries and how missionaries attempted to address them.[3]

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1. Lora Ann Quiñonez to Provincials and Generals of Units Having Sisters in Nicaragua, September 2, 1983, folder 17, Nicaraguan Conference 1979–1985, box 81, Leadership Conference of Women Religious Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, Notre Dame, Indiana (hereafter CLCW, UNDA).

2. For a discussion of divisions within Nicaragua, see Michael Dodson and Laura Nuzzi O'Shaughnessy, *Nicaragua's Other Revolution: Religious Faith and Political Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

3. For examples, see Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Dana L. Robert, "The Influence of American Missionary Women on the World Back Home," *Religion and American Culture* 12, no. 1 (2002): 59–89; Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture, and Agency in the Central America Solidarity Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press,

Development of the Political-Religious Divide

LCWR's call to address the divisions within the Nicaraguan Church was ambitious. In July 1979, the Sandinistas—*Nacional Liberación Frente Sandinista* (FSLN)—overthrew Anastasio Somoza, a member of the ruling family that had governed Nicaragua with U.S. support since 1936. The Somoza family used the *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard) to maintain its political power, and worked to enrich itself and its cronies financially, while the majority of Nicaraguans lived in poverty and without an education. The wealthiest 5% of households held 30% of the country's income, while the bottom 50% of Nicaraguans only held 15%. The rate of malnutrition for children five years old and younger doubled from 1965 to 1975. Nicaragua's education situation was equally abysmal. By the late 1970s, 65% of primary school-aged children enrolled in school, but only 22% finished the six-year program. In rural areas, the situation was even worse. Most communities only offered one or two years of school, fueling the 75% illiteracy rate.[4]

Besides not addressing malnutrition and the lack of educational opportunities, Somoza repressed dissent. As Jesuit Fernando Cardenal explained to a U.S. House of Representatives committee in 1976, Somoza's government persecuted union leaders, obstructed freedom of the press, and eliminated civilian courts. Opponents—and suspected opponents—were tortured, raped, and imprisoned. In carrying out the repression, Somoza was supported by U.S. military aid.[5]

The revolt against Somoza was unique because it incorporated Christian principles and saw massive participation by Christians.[6] After Somoza fled

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2004); Timothy A. Byrnes, *Reverse Mission: Transnational Religious Communities and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011); Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012). For divisions among Catholics, see Charles Strauss, "Quest for the Holy Grail: Central American War, Catholic Internationalism, and United States Public Diplomacy in Reagan's America," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 33, no. 1 (2015): 163–197; Theresa Keeley, "Reagan's Real Catholics vs. Tip O'Neill's Maryknoll Nuns: Gender, Intra-Catholic Conflict, and the Contras," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (2016): 530–558. For a discussion of divisions across Catholic and Protestant lines, see Lauren Frances Turek, "Ambassador for the Kingdom of God or for America? Christian Nationalism, the Christian Right, and the Contra War," *Religions* 7, no. 12 (2016): 1–16.

4. Tim Merrill, ed., *Nicaragua: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, 1993), http://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/25.htm.

5. U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on International Organizations, *Human Rights in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador: Implications for U.S. Policy*, 94th Cong., 2d sess., 1976, 11–15.

6. Fernando Cardenal, *Faith & Joy: Memoirs of a Revolutionary Priest*, trans. and ed. Kathleen McBride and Mark Lester (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015), 184.

the country, several priests served as ministers in the Sandinista-led government. Fernando Cardenal was education minister, his brother Ernesto was culture minister, Edgard Parrales was ambassador to the Organization of American States, and U.S.-born Miguel d'Escoto was foreign minister. But not all Catholics supported the Sandinista government even though the majority of Nicaraguans cheered Somoza's departure.

The differing opinions over the revolutionary project fostered a political-religious conflict. As Mexican political scientist Ana Maria Ezcurra explained, the "traditional elites of Nicaragua" attempted to use religion to regain their "control of the state apparatus." They sought to draw support away from the Sandinistas by alleging the revolutionary project was neither "pluralistic" nor promoted "a mixed economy and direct, participatory democracy." As evidence, elites argued that the government restricted freedom of the press and religion. Likewise, the church hierarchy, notably Managua's Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo, felt threatened. These church leaders saw the revolution's danger as ushering in "an undesirable, albeit powerful, Christian political and Marxist theory and practice." To counter Sandinista influence, the hierarchy transferred or expelled religious, critiqued lay organizations that supported the revolutionary project, and encouraged groups that opposed the Sandinistas.[7] For their part, Sandinista leaders challenged church influence by appearing at public gatherings, including religious processions.[8] As one contemporary observer concluded, religion became involved in politics because "both the Sandinistas and the opposition seek the legitimacy which the traditional authority of the church can confer."[9]

This split among Catholics was neither new nor unique. The disagreement over the revolution aggravated pre-existing divides. As Maryknoll Sisters in Nicaragua explained, Catholics in Latin America held "widely differing and opposite views about theology—the role of the Church, the understanding of Church authority, the meaning of the Kingdom of God, the political involvement of Christians."[10] Tensions among Catholics were "just below the surface in every local church in the world," one Jesuit con-

7. "Church Role in Anti-Sandinista Campaign Examined," *Latinamerica Press* (Lima, Peru), May 5, 1983.

8. Sergio Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos: A Memoir of the Sandinista Revolution*, trans. Stacey Alba D. Skar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 131.

9. Quixote Center, *Nicaragua: Look at the Reality*, January 1983, 4, folder-CATT Mailing—July 1983, box 6, Quixote Center Papers, Marquette University Special Collections and Archives, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

10. Reflection, Maryknoll Sisters, "Pope John Paul II in Nicaragua," March 1983, folder 10, box 19, Religious Task Force on Central America and Mexico (RTFCAM), Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.

cluded.[11] For Nicaragua, however, the revolution brought these tensions to the fore.

Once in power, the Sandinistas pursued agrarian reform and nationalized the financial system, the mines, and foreign trade. Education at all levels was free. The government initiated a National Literacy Crusade and a unified health system.[12] In recognition of these efforts, in 1983 the World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) called Nicaragua a "model country for health."[13] The revolution was significant beyond the borders of Nicaragua; it inspired a "great sense of solidarity." As Ernesto Cardenal noted, "Nicaragua became a mecca for thousands of people who wished to see social change in their own countries and who came to be inspired and help us move forward."[14]

But not everyone saw the changes in Nicaragua as positive. President Ronald Reagan tried to undermine the Nicaraguan revolution. Reagan's stance was consistent with the 1980 Republican platform that condemned "the Marxist Sandinista takeover of Nicaragua and the Marxist attempts to destabilize El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras."[15] As a presidential candidate, Reagan spoke of protecting El Salvador from going the way of Nicaragua. Two days after taking office, Reagan suspended $75 million in economic aid on the basis that Nicaragua was aiding the Salvadoran guerrillas. President Jimmy Carter had considered a similar move—declaring the Sandinista government a sponsor of state terrorism for its support of Salvadoran rebels—but decided against it. The Carter Administration concluded that no U.S. aid might "cause the Central American situation to deteriorate, and might even lead to retaliatory attacks on Americans throughout the region."[16] Besides denying aid to Nicaragua, Reagan also authorized $19.5 million—an increase from Carter's $1 million—for the contras, the counterrevolutionaries who sought to overthrow the Sandinista government.[17] By September 1981, Nicaragua was feeling so much pressure that the government declared a state of economic and social emergency, effective for one year.[18]

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11. "Church Unity Grounded in Option for the Poor," *Latinamerica Press*, August 4, 1983.
12. Cardenal, *Faith & Joy*, 178–181, 196.
13. Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, 214.
14. Cardenal, *Faith & Joy*, 185.
15. Quoted in Walter LaFeber, "The Reagan Administration and Revolutions in Central America," *Political Science Quarterly* 99, no. 1 (1984), 1.
16. Philip W. Travis, *Reagan's War on Terrorism in Nicaragua: The Outlaw State* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 41.
17. Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 37.
18. Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, 213.

As the tensions heightened, religious in Nicaragua condemned the U.S. government. In March 1982, Jesuit social scientists argued that U.S. intervention "only serves to preserve an anti-democratic past of misery and human degradation for God's poor people." In effect, U.S. actions were recreating Nicaragua under Somoza: poor living conditions and no political voice for most. Additionally, they argued, "We find ourselves more and more in a situation of war and an environment of terrorism provoked by the U.S. administration." In response, the Jesuits contended, the Nicaraguan government was forced to "temporarily suspend" Nicaraguans' new "civil and political rights."[19]

Religious also critiqued the Nicaraguan Church hierarchy for failing to condemn the U.S. government and the contras. Four months after the Jesuits' rebuke, Dominicans expressed their sadness that "most of our bishops" remained silent after contras killed *campesinos* (farmers) near the border.[20]

Heightened Tensions in 1983

Throughout 1983—the same year Quiñonez called for missionary dialogue—tensions between the U.S. and Nicaraguan governments, and among Nicaraguan Catholics, significantly intensified. The U.S. government acted more aggressively. In early 1983, the U.S. military conducted exercises—called Big Pine—involving 1,600 troops.[21] At the same time, both the U.S. press and contra leaders said the contras were trying to overthrow the Sandinistas, contradicting the Reagan Administration's assertion that the contras' goal was to stop the flow of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador.[22] The claim raised the issue of whether the Boland Amendment was being violated. The U.S. law prohibited the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Defense Department from using U.S. funds to overthrow the Nicaraguan government or to provoke military engagement between Nicaragua and Honduras.[23]

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19. "Jesuit Social Scientists Condemn U.S. Intervention, March 1982," encl. with James and Margaret Goff to Friend, April 15, 1982, folder 821, box 45, James and Margaret Goff Papers, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut (hereafter Goff Papers, YDS).

20. "Statement of Nicaraguan Dominican Priests, July 26, 1982," encl. with James and Margaret Goff to Friend, July 1982, folder 822, box 45, Goff Papers, YDS.

21. William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 317.

22. Cynthia J. Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the President, and Central America, 1976–1993*, 2nd ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 124.

23. Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1983), 296.

But to the Nicaraguan government, the situation was clear: Reagan was carrying out an "undeclared war." In the spring of 1983, the Sandinistas (FSLN) said that the United States was trying to cause "popular discontent" by "artificially stimulating the short supply of basic products." The U.S. government aimed to sow "anxiety and confusion" among the people and claimed that the Sandinistas were attacking the Church. The Nicaraguan government called on the people to "defend the fatherland" in the face of "invasions" by the Honduran army and increased attacks by the contras – the "genocidal counterrevolutionary forces" the United States "financed and directed." Nicaragua wanted peace, the Sandinistas insisted, and the country would continue to pursue its policies of "non-alignment, a mixed economy and political pluralism" in the face of "imperialist Yankee aggression."[24]

U.S. actions were not Nicaraguans' only problem in 1983. Both camps in Nicaragua hoped Pope John Paul II would validate their position during his planned March visit. The government pushed the pope "to denounce U.S. aggression against Nicaragua," while Sandinista opponents wanted the pope to critique the government.[25] Instead, the pope's visit highlighted these divisions. John Paul II celebrated Mass in the Plaza of Revolution with 600,000 to 700,000 people, many who waited in 100-degree heat. In his homily, he called for church unity and support for the Nicaraguan bishops. In response, Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs, the mothers of fallen Sandinista combatants, were seated near the pope and began chanting "We want peace," which others repeated. The pope responded, "The first to want peace is the Church," but after the murmurs continued, he eventually shouted, "*Silencio*!" In response to continued chants, the pope shouted two more times. Eventually, Sandinista party and government leaders raised clenched fists and shouted, "People's power!" with some in the crowd. Supporters of the revolution felt the pope failed to understand the Church in Nicaragua and to recognize those injured or killed by the contras. Sandinista opponents saw the episode as the Vatican later described it: a "premeditated political provocation."[26] As one Jesuit observer concluded, "What happened during the Mass is one of the saddest moments in the history of the Church."[27]

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24. "Frente a guerra no declarada de Reagan: FSLN llama a la defense de la Patria" (Summons by the FSLN to Defend the Fatherland Against Reagan's Undeclared War), *Barricada*, April 9, 1983, trans. with James and Margaret Goff to Friend, July 1983, folder 826, box 45, Goff Papers, YDS.

25. Reflection, Maryknoll Sisters, "Pope John Paul II in Nicaragua."

26. Phillip Berryman, *Stubborn Hope: Religion, Politics, and Revolution in Central America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 36–37.

27. Peter Marchetti to Phil Land, April 1, 1983, folder 39, box 35, Center of Concern Papers, UNDA.

As if these religious tensions among Nicaraguans were not problematic enough, the situation was compounded by the Nicaraguan hierarchy's opinions which seemed to echo the Reagan Administration. Bishops, like Archbishop Obando of Managua, critiqued the revolution because they worried it threatened the Church through a possible "convergence of Marxist and Christian theory and practice."[28] For his part, Reagan accused the Sandinistas of mistreating the Church. In his first address to the nation on Central America on April 27, 1983, Reagan spoke of repression in Nicaragua, and he referenced how the Nicaraguan government "insulted and mocked the pope."[29] Though common language by the bishops and Reagan did not mean coordinated efforts, many supporters of the revolution saw their bishops as treasonous.[30]

Besides highlighting religious tensions, the Reagan Administration tried to strangle Nicaragua economically. In early May, the White House announced a decrease in the amount of sugar—nearly 90%—that Nicaragua could sell in the United States, effective in October, which greatly impacted the Nicaraguan economy since half of the country's sugar exports went to the United States.[31] Reagan aimed "to reduce" Nicaragua's ability "for financing its military buildup and its support for subversion and extremist violence in the region."[32] The White House also sought to prevent Nicaragua from receiving international loans.[33] The U.S. government blocked or vetoed loans from the Inter-American Development Bank to Nicaragua in 1981, 1982, and 1983.[34]

U.S. economic and military actions had real impacts on Nicaraguans. The government rationed "rice, beans, sugar, and grains," while "groceries, medicine, toilet paper, [and] gasoline" were "scarce." As Gioconda Belli, a former underground revolutionary and member of the revolutionary government, explained, she and other Sandinista party members "use[d] our rage

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28. Carlos Fazio, "Archdiocesan Program Furthers U.S. Goals," *Latinamerica Press*, May 5, 1983.

29. Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on Central America," April 27, 1983, *American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-central-america.

30. For example, see "Al pueblo de Nicaragua y al mundo" (Christian Groups Respond to the Nicaraguan Bishops Communique on Military Service), *El Nuevo Diario*, September 13, 1983, trans. with James and Margaret Goff to Friend, September 1983, folder 827, box 45, Goff Papers, YDS.

31. Marlise Simons, "Central American Nations Refuse to Join U.S. Boycott of Nicaragua," *New York Times*, September 26, 1983.

32. "Announcement of Revised United States Sugar Import Quotas for Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador, May 10, 1983," https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/51083c.

33. Simons, "Central American Nations Refuse to Join U.S. Boycott of Nicaragua."

34. Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos*, 213–215.

to strengthen our determination" in responding to the low-intensity war of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). However, the general public saw "impending doom." In fighting back against Reagan's policies, "everyone was paying the price. The revolution's main base of support began to erode, slowly but irrevocably."[35] By the summer of 1983, the Sandinistas' "two big problems" were "food and religion."[36]

U.S military pressure continued. In late July, a Pentagon official announced a resumption of military exercises called Big Pine II. Scheduled to last until January, the operation sought to discourage Nicaragua from "aggression" and "fomenting insurrections" such as those in El Salvador.[37] Big Pine II involved 5,000 U.S. ground troops, 16,000 sailors,[38] and more than 200 jet fighters that engaged in "amphibious landings" and "mock bombing raids." It was "the longest and the largest U.S. military exercise in Central American history." The United States wanted to create a siege mentality, forcing the Sandinistas to redirect vital economic resources to preparing for an attack, unsettling the population, and making Nicaragua reveal how it would prepare if attacked.[39]

Facing increasing U.S. pressure, the Nicaraguan government proposed a military draft. It marked a significant flashpoint between the Church hierarchy and the government and between the bishops and other Catholics. After the bill's proposal but before its enactment,[40] the Nicaraguan episcopal conference described the bill as "partisan" and as following "the general lines of all totalitarian type legislation." The bishops saw no distinction between the FSLN and the government. The party was calling for arms in its own defense. Consequently, the bishops argued, "the army will become an obligatory center of political indoctrination in favor of the Sandinista Party." The FSLN was forcing its "ideology" on people. Those who disagreed should, according to the bishops, conscientiously object and should not face punishment, persecution, or discrimination.[41]

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35. Gioconda Belli, *The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War*, trans. Kristina Cordero and Gioconda Belli (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 303–304.

36. T.D. Allman, "After Four Years Uniqueness of Nicaraguan Process Strikes Visitors," *Latinamerica Press*, July 21, 1983.

37. Richard Halloran, "Pentagon Details Honduran Action," *New York Times*, July 26, 1983.

38. Arnson, *Crossroads*, 135.

39. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 317–318.

40. James and Margaret Goff to Friend, September 1983, folder 827, box 45, Goff Papers, YDS.

41. "General Considerations on Military Service by the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference, August 29, 1983"; "Conferencia Episcopal sugiere 'Objeción de Conciencia': Nadie puede ser obligado a tomar armas por un partido,'" *La Prensa*, September 1, 1983, trans. with James and Margaret Goff to Friend, folder 827, box 45, Goff Papers, YDS.

Nicaraguan Catholics largely disagreed with the bishops' statement seeing it as a political attack on the revolution that ignored the reality of the situation. Several groups—Christian base communities, the Conference of Religious of Nicaragua (CONFER), and university student representatives—joined together to issue a protest statement. The episcopal declaration, they believed, revealed that the bishops were "totally uninformed about the global situation of the country and the aggression of which the people are the victims." The bishops seemed unconcerned with U.S. ships on Nicaragua's coasts, contra and Honduran army invasions, or U.S. interference in Nicaragua's political affairs. They seemed to disrespect the dead who died for the cause as well as the revolution's accomplishments. The declaration was not a statement against the draft, they argued; it was opposition to "the legitimacy of the present Nicaraguan state and the legitimacy of our Revolutionary Process." As the statement argued, the bishops were "not defend[ing] the cause of the poor," but "the interests of the bourgeois."[42]

Tensions between the United States and Nicaragua reached a crisis point in between Quiñonez's letter to U.S. representatives of women religious in Nicaragua in early September 1983 and the LCWR's meeting with Nicaraguan missionaries on October 31. In September, contra forces attacked Nicaragua's oil terminal, and the next month fires were set at Corinto, Nicaragua's main port for imported fuel.[43] The fires prompted the evacuation of 25,000 and injuries to twelve. Nicaragua lost "at least 3.2 million gallons of gasoline and other fuel," according to the government.[44] One of the contra groups—the Nicaraguan Democratic Force—claimed responsibility, and Reagan officials admitted that the CIA had instructed contras "in sabotage techniques and commando tactics and helped plan a series of attacks."[45] Three days later, rebels attacked Puerto Sandino,[46] one of Nicaragua's two spots for unloading oil.[47] The October attacks prompted Exxon—which brought 75% of Nicaragua's oil—to stop transporting oil

42. "Christian Organizations: Obando Document is Strictly Political, September 7, 1983"; "Varias Organizaciones Cristianas se pronuncian: Documento Obando se inscribe en Campo Político" *El Nuevo Diario*, September 8, 1983, trans. with James and Margaret Goff to Friend, folder 827, box 45, Goff Papers, YDS.

43. Richard J. Meislin, "3 on Kissinger Panel Meet Antisandinista Chief," *New York Times*, October 12, 1983.

44. "Nicaragua Evacuates Port Raided by Rebels," *New York Times*, October 13, 1983.

45. Philip Taubman, "U.S. Officials Say C.I.A. Helped Nicaraguan Rebels Plan Attacks," *New York Times*, October 16, 1983.

46. Richard J. Meislin, "Nicaragua Reports an Attack by Insurgents on Major Port," *New York Times*, October 15, 1983.

47. "Nicaragua Evacuates Port Raided by Rebels."

from Mexico to Nicaragua.[48] In response, Nicaragua announced plans to further ration gasoline and to strengthen the military.[49]

The oil attacks were disturbing, but panic set in when the United States invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada on October 25. In a joint statement, some Nicaraguan Catholics and Protestants condemned the military assault and saw it as a warning sign for Nicaragua. As they argued, "Today there has been a criminal attack against the people of Grenada and with it one more step has been taken against the process of the poor in Nicaragua; and the threat of direct aggression against our people has become more serious." They condemned "this brutal and cynical aggression of imperialism against our small brother people."[50]

The October 1983 Missionary Meeting

Less than a week after the Grenada invasion, the meeting Sister Quiñonez organized took place. The agenda included "prayer/reflection on division and reconciliation," the missionaries' sharing of their "perceptions regarding the situation of ecclesial divisions in Nicaragua," identification of the group's assumptions, discussion of "whether U.S. communities/hierarchy have any role(s) to play in reconciling," and finally, "some decisions about next steps."[51] What was billed as a gathering to channel U.S. missionary efforts to address divides among Nicaraguan Catholics instead revealed a missionary community struggling to respond, collectively and individually.

The sisters' responses, noted according to community affiliation, but not individual names, indicate that nearly all of the missionaries spoke about divisions within the Church—the topic of the meeting—but they came to different conclusions. Some expressed worry. The Sisters of Notre Dame were "concerned about the division that seems to be deepening." Similarly, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary were also "very disturbed regarding split in church" and the "papal visit." The Sisters of St. Joseph said that "relations with hierarchy are poor," though it was unclear if they meant the relationship between religious and the hierarchy, the state and the hierarchy, or the people and the hierarchy. By contrast, the Sisters of Loretto said the

48. "Exxon Stops Supplying Nicaraguans With Oil," *New York Times*, October 16, 1983.
49. Meislin, "Nicaragua Reports an Attack by Insurgents on Major Port."
50. "Ante invasion a Grenada: Grupos Católicos y evangélicos opinan" (Statement of Nicaraguan Catholics and Protestants on the Invasion of Grenada), *El Nuevo Diario*, November 2, 1983, trans. with James and Margaret Goff to Friend, November 1983, folder 829, box 45, Goff Papers, YDS.
51. Lora Ann Quiñonez to Provincials and Generals of Units Having Sisters in Nicaragua.

Nicaraguan situation was not unusual, as the "ecclesiastical tension [experienced was the] same as in other contexts."[52]

To some sisters, however, the Nicaraguan church hierarchy was to blame. The sisters from the Society of Sacred Heart (MSCs) and the Maryknoll Sisters expressed unhappiness "with [the] hierarchy" and "frustration," respectively. The MSCs saw a "real gap between official positions of [the] church and goals of religion." The situation left "people confused." The Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis were also critical. As they explained, the "official church position [was] of standing aside and criticizing instead of getting in and trying to shape."[53]

For the Sisters of St. Agnes (CSAs), the split was personal. The women noted a "big division between Hartman and [Archbishop] Obando," presumably Sister Mary Hartman, CSA, who strongly supported the revolution. After the revolution, Obando asked Hartman's superior to remove her from Nicaragua. When the superior asked Obando to put his request in writing, the bishop did not, and nothing more came of the bishop's demand.[54] In March 1982—before the meeting Quiñonez called for—Hartman wrote to the *National Catholic Register* contesting the paper's charge that "The Church is being used by the Nicaraguan government to impose a foreign ideology" and that the Sandinistas were "stimulating or provoking activities to divide or use the Church." Instead, Hartman insisted, "The Church is more healthy and alive than ever." This "Christian conversion," she admitted, was a "painful process." Hartman argued that the paper's view was likely based on information from "the financially secure who perhaps find it unpleasant to smell the sweat of the poor, to patiently listen to the 60% of the population who have just learned to read and write and speak without fear." The real danger was not the Sandinistas, but the U.S. government. As Hartman asserted, President Reagan and Secretary of State Alexander Haig have "the most destructive ideology that mankind has known: In the name of anti-communism they are massacring the most legitimate claims of the poor. They play a symphony of death."[55]

Rather than focus on the divisions, some sisters stressed their support for the poor. The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary and the Sisters of St. Joseph said

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52. Handwritten notes on back of Quiñonez to Provincials and Generals of Units Having Sisters in Nicaragua, September 2, 1983, folder 17, Nicaraguan Conference 1979-1985, box 81, CLCW, UNDA. The author is not indicated.

53. Ibid.

54. Equipo Envío, "Nicaragua: Problems Within The Church In Nicaragua," *Revista Envío* (Managua), September 1981, http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3106.

55. Mary Hartman, "Freedom in Nicaragua?" *National Catholic Register*, March 21, 1982.

they were on the "side of the people." Similarly, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM) identified "with the poor and cause of the revolution."[56] Their language echoed the Latin American bishops' 1968 Medellín declaration of a "preferential option for the poor," which meant not simply working with the poor, but also recognizing unequal social systems and seeking to transform them through religious values.[57] As liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez explained in 1973, "the 'poor person' is not the result of an act of fate; his existence is not politically neutral or ethically innocent. The poor person is the by-product of the system to which we live and for which we are responsible." Therefore, standing with the poor entailed a political choice because it meant choosing "one social class against another."[58]

For these women religious, their option for the poor led them to support revolutionary projects, such as healthcare and education; it did not necessarily mean support for the government or blindness to Nicaraguans' complaints. The Sisters of St. Joseph stressed that as a group, their position was "critical support of [the] revolution." They also acknowledged discontent among some Nicaraguans. As they noted, "populace will probably not rise against the government."[59]

Several groups expressed alarm about violence, though none explicitly mentioned the U.S. government. The Sisters of St. Joseph noted "major attacks by contras," including attempts to destroy political structures and the "state of material emergency." The Sisters of Notre Dame noted they had been "touched by incursions from [the] contras" and were "fearful of invasion." Likewise, the Society of Sacred Heart Sisters said they were "very fearful about [the] possibility of invasion" and "sabotage." With the word "invasion," the sisters were likely referring to the attacks on Nicaragua's ports and the U.S. invasion of Grenada and fears of a similar action toward Nicaragua. Likewise, the Sisters of Mercy said the "military situation [was] critical."[60]

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56. Ibid.

57. Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People: United States Involvement in the Rise of Fascism, Torture, and Murder and the Persecution of the Catholic Church in Latin America*, 1st ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 42; Paul E. Pierson, "The Rise of Christian Mission and Relief Agencies," in *The Influence of Faith: Religious Groups and U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Elliott Abrams (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 166; Angelyn Dries, *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 242–243.

58. Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Praxis of Liberation and the Christian Faith," from *Signos de Liberación* (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1973), trans. by James and Margaret Goff, in *Jesuit Project for Third World Awareness, Resource Service* I: 9 (July 1974), folder 12, box 19, Brockman-Romero Papers, Special Collections & Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.

59. Handwritten notes on back of Quiñonez to Provincials and Generals of Units Having Sisters in Nicaragua. Emphasis in original.

60. Ibid.

On the other hand, the Medical Mission Sisters mentioned only Sandinista violence. They reported "evidence of torture by Sandinistas" and added, it is "difficult to know where to be on this."[61] The note taker did not indicate if the women were unsure how to respond to Nicaragua's general situation or to the Sandinista torture they mentioned.

Though the sisters conveyed contrasting viewpoints among communities, groups were also divided internally. Within the Congregation of St. Agnes, Sandinista supporters seemed to be the minority. The sisters revealed "one member—[as] very strong pro-Sandinista, extreme, non-critical," implying the viewpoint was unusual. They likely meant Sister Mary Hartman. Three women "who were perceived as critical of the Sandinistas were separated." Others, by contrast, "see the gamut" of viewpoints. Overall, the "community [was] divided." Ultimately, the community aimed to be "for the people and retain some freedom to be critical,"[62] just as the Sisters of Saint Joseph noted. The women did not suggest a possible reason for their differing views.

Both the MSCs and Maryknollers cited time of arrival as dictating their varying perspectives. MSCs "who lived through war" felt a sense of "euphoria." The women "participated in pro-humanitarian [efforts] within the revolution but [were] not married to it."[63]

Likewise, Maryknollers found that those who lived through the revolution tended to have one point of view, while those "who came later" thought differently.[64] Though the notes do not specify what this difference of opinion was, it is likely that those who lived through Somoza's dictatorship and the revolution were more supportive of the Sandinista project. Despite Maryknollers' differing views, earlier that year—in January 1983—as a community the Maryknoll Sisters declared its support for "the revolutionary process." Though there were instances "of poor judgment or haste or outright sinfulness," the women declared, "the revolution was birthed by the poor and we choose to remain with them, to struggle with them, to suffer with them."[65] To the Maryknollers, like others, support for the principles of the revolution did not mean ignoring the mistakes of the Sandinistas.

Some communities shared the toll of living in a divided political and religious situation. The Congregation of St. Agnes described their work as "dif-

61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid. Emphasis in original.
64. Ibid.
65. Quixote Center, *Nicaragua: Look at the Reality*, 5.

ficult."[66] The Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent DePaul reported that the women serving in Central America—"about 600" of them—suffered "horrors" and criticism from both sides. Unable to attend the meeting, Provincial Superior Mary Rose McGeady described a bleak situation. The women "have struggled nobly to avoid being identified as partisan in their service and have tried in their work to care for those suffering or in need, regardless of political affiliation." However, the work was difficult: "They speak of fire, of village burnings, of death, stench, and general misery to which they have given themselves with truly heroic courage."[67]

Like other women religious, the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent DePaul struggled to serve divided communities. Their provincial in Guatemala City wrote of "the painful antipathies stemming from political differences even within families." To cope, the women "avoid attempting to work out political solutions among themselves and strive to preserve unity by community and prayer which energizes them to return to serve in the midst of such indescribable pain."[68] Their nationalities seemed to aggravate the situation, perhaps because their countries had different foreign policies toward Central America. Unlike Maryknollers and MSCs, the Daughters of Charity cited their seven nationalities, not the timing of their arrival, as the cause of their differing views.

The sisters' conversation revealed an agreement that the division harmed the Church and the people of Nicaragua, and that as missionaries, they stood on the side of the poor. What was not clear was how they should move forward and where to place blame, if at all. The meeting notes do not convey how contentious these conversations may have been, and if the women's assessments of Nicaragua reflected more of a sense of sadness, disappointment, anger, or frustration. Overall, the notes reveal disagreements but do not suggest how participants may have engaged with one another over these differing views.

Although Quiñonez's initial letter focused on women religious, two representatives from men's communities with members serving in Nicaragua attended. The two groups—the Capuchins and the Maryknollers—also did not agree with one another. The Capuchin Fathers focused on how their members suffered at the hands of both the Sandinistas and the contras. As they reported, their members had been "captured and threatened by both

66. Handwritten notes on back of Quiñonez to Provincials and Generals of Units Having Sisters in Nicaragua.

67. Mary Rose McGeady to Lora Ann Quiñonez, October 19, 1983, folder 17, Nicaraguan Conference 1979-1985, box 81, CLCW, UNDA.

68. Ibid.

sides."[69] The Capuchins had a history of speaking out against violence in Nicaragua. In the days of Somoza—in June 1976—thirty-five U.S. Capuchins serving in Nicaragua sent a public letter to the dictator documenting 350 cases over two years of *campesinos* whom the *Guardia* abducted, tortured, or mistreated in the northeastern countryside.[70] At the October 1983 meeting, the Capuchins described an increasingly trying situation. The "basic position of [the] order has been one of support and cooperation with both church and government. [It] is becoming more difficult and tense."[71]

By contrast, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers seemed to overwhelmingly support the Sandinistas, at least as expressed at the meeting. They noted that among their members, a "couple of people exaggerate and judge quite hastily intentions of Sandinistas." The division was perhaps more personal for Maryknollers because one of their own, Miguel d'Escoto, served as foreign minister. As they underscored, "[Archbishop] Obando and d'Escoto have no communication."[72] Just as with the Sisters of St. Agnes and Mary Hartman, d'Escoto's experience in Nicaragua impacted the Maryknoll community.

Proposed Actions

Though Nicaraguan Catholics' divides prompted the meeting, those who attended—the leaders of provincials and generals of units with Sisters in Nicaragua—concentrated their post-meeting actions elsewhere. Of the four proposed points of action, only one dealt with the divides in Nicaragua. Hearing reports of the missionaries' struggles may have changed the focus.

Because of participants' country of origin, the first three categories of actions involved the United States. They may have felt those were the areas where they could—and should—make the greatest impact. Attendees hoped for "some way of forestalling invasion/war," and they proposed writing a statement to the president.[73] Many attendees crafted a group letter to President Reagan, expressing their "urgent concern at the very real threat of war" in Nicaragua and urging him "to seek diplomatic rather than military solutions." They argued that U.S. policy raised "grave moral issues" of "the right

69. Handwritten notes on back of Quiñonez to Provincials and Generals of Units Having Sisters in Nicaragua.

70. "Missionary Priests List Violations of Human Rights in Nicaragua," *Latinamerica Press*, July 22, 1976; Berryman, *Stubborn Hope*, 21.

71. Handwritten notes on back of Quiñonez to Provincials and Generals of Units Having Sisters in Nicaragua.

72. Ibid. Emphasis in original.

73. Meeting of Officers of Congregations/Provinces with Community Members in Nicaragua, October 31, 1983, folder 17, Nicaraguan Conference 1979–1985, box 81, CLCW, UNDA.

of self-determination of every sovereign nation, and the immense inevitable loss of human life at stake in any armed conflict that might take place." As they told Reagan, the signers based their assessment on the experiences of their members who served in Nicaragua "prior to, during and after the revolution against the Somoza dictatorship." These missionaries had seen firsthand "U.S. efforts to undermine the government and economy of that nation," including "the steady build-up of U.S armed personnel and logistic support in Honduras, . . . the continuing presence and activity of our naval vessels and personnel off both coasts of Nicaragua, the repeated strategic incursions of C.I.A. sponsored and supported sabotage teams, [and] the dismissal of Nicaraguan proposals for peace in the region." They also mentioned the invasion of Grenada. The signers argued that U.S. policy toward Nicaragua undermined U.S. "credibility as a country that believes in human dignity and national sovereignty." They sent copies to the State Department, the Nicaraguan ambassador to the United States, Congress members, LCWR, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, members of the congregations of the signers, and those who worked with the congregations of the signers.[74]

Attendees also planned to share the meeting with their communities and "strategize" with their peace and justice groups "about ways to enlarge the public's understanding, concern about the Nicaraguan situation." The group proposed approaching bishops requesting that they "issue pastoral letters regarding [the] Central American situation."[75] They cited San Francisco Archbishop John R. Quinn's pastoral on Central America. Earlier that month, Quinn called U.S. military aid to El Salvador's government and the contras "profoundly misdirected." To alter the policy, Quinn argued, Catholics needed to "use the democratic process in every way possible." They should offer sanctuary to Central American refugees and vote for San Francisco's ballot measure condemning U.S. policy toward El Salvador. Otherwise, "without our active commitment to creating U.S. policies which recognize the persistent yearning struggle of Central Americans for justice," Quinn argued, "there will be no peace in Central America."[76]

The final category of "possible actions" concerned the religious communities' members themselves, not divisions among Catholics in Nicaragua. In highlighting future actions, the group acknowledged the formidable task they faced. Attendees at the meeting should communicate with members

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74. Missionaries to Ronald Reagan, October 31, 1983, folder 17, Nicaraguan Conference 1979–1985, box 81, CLCW, UNDA.

75. Meeting of Officers of Congregations/Provinces with Community Members in Nicaragua.

76. Bill Kenkelen, "Archbishop Quinn Blasts U.S. Policy in Central America," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 21, 1983.

serving in Nicaragua and pass along lessons learned from the meeting. Communities should share that attendees recognized the "complexity of the situation" and the need for missionaries to be "reconciling presences," not to add to divisions. Attendees worried about members' ability to cope and communities' ability to handle "internal divisions." The group underscored preparation for future missionaries. Missionaries should understand the "complexity" of "Central American (and other Third World) contexts" and be ready "to deal with these kinds of situations before they undertake ministry." As for those already serving in Nicaragua, communities should provide members "opportunity for space/time."[77]

Post-Meeting Developments

The meeting did not end the conversation about the role of U.S. women religious in Nicaragua. In December 1983, Father Valentín Menéndez, provincial of the Jesuit Central American Province, wrote to the acting president of the Jesuit Conference Father Albert C. Louapre. Menéndez asked Louapre to reach out to Quiñonez and request that LCWR "continue proposing solutions of dialogue and not of war for our countries." To Menéndez, the situation was critical. There was a real "possibility of imminent war in Central America." Louapre passed along Menendez's plea.[78]

However, as Quiñonez and the October meeting participants recognized, the problem was more complicated than U.S. foreign policy. When Quiñonez responded in early January, she noted "that LCWR shared Reverend Menéndez's alarm and concern." As she explained, "both as an organization and through many individual members we are engaged precisely in the activity that he recommends to U.S. religious—we continue to make representations to the government of the United States and to groups around the country urging that only peaceful means be used to approach the situation." But it was not as simple as urging peace and lobbying the U.S. government. U.S. religious' efforts were stymied by the "evident internal conflict of the church particularly in Nicaragua." Even worse, U.S. government officials highlighted these divides among Catholics, "especially when the viewpoint of the hierarchy matches that of the Reagan administration." Therefore, Quiñonez concluded, religious in the United States and Central America were both needed to address the situation. As she urged, "religious in Central America are also being called by their very reality to become forces

77. Meeting of Officers of Congregations/Provinces with Community Members in Nicaragua. Emphasis in original.

78. Albert C. Louapre to Laura Ann Quiñonez, December 14, 1983, unnumbered folder, Central America, 1981–1986, box 81, CLCW, UNDA.

for dialogue and reconciliation in their local churches; I feel that their efforts and our efforts are inextricably bound together."[79] The problem of U.S. intervention was not the only one in need of a solution.

The complexity of the situation did not mean U.S. religious stopped pushing for a change in U.S policy. Instead of another meeting,[80] in 1985 several representatives of religious communities with members serving in Nicaragua, including the Maryknoll Sisters and the Medical Mission Sisters, wrote to President Reagan and challenged his support for the contras. Their letter came after Reagan stated in late February that he aimed to remove the Sandinistas from power. Although many had long accused Reagan of having that goal, the president's admission was startling because the administration had previously insisted it only sought to stop the flow of arms from Nicaragua to its neighbors or to pressure the Sandinistas to negotiate.[81]

In separate, but identical letters, the women religious stressed the contra war's impact on the poor; they asked Reagan "to end this unjust policy and to seek a diplomatic solution." The contras, assisted with U.S. "military equipment," spread "terror and fear . . . deliberately" among the civilian population. They engaged in "cold blooded murder" with neither "moral justification" nor a basis in "U.S. national security concerns." U.S. support for the contras, the women argued, implicated international law, went against "basic American values," and displayed "no respect for human dignity."[82] In highlighting the contras' human rights abuses and calling on the U.S. government to end aggression toward Nicaragua, women missionaries saw themselves as standing up for the Nicaraguan people. Their advocacy, however, did not mean unquestioning approval of the Nicaraguan government, as many of the women had stressed at the October 1983 meeting.

The religious-political fault lines in the United States and Nicaragua only hardened with time. In 1986, Reagan cited Obando—who was by then a

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79. Laura Ann Quiñonez to Albert C. Louapre, January 2, 1984, unnumbered folder, Central America, 1981–1986, box 81, CLCW, UNDA.

80. Walter L. Farrell to Laura Ann Quiñonez, March 11, 1985, folder 81, Nicaraguan Conference 1979–1985, box 81, CLCW, UNDA.

81. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard*, 410–411.

82. Luise Ahrens, Maryknoll Community President, to Ronald Reagan, February 25, 1985; Miriam Therese Larkin, General Superior, Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, to Ronald Reagan, March 11, 1985; Janet Roesener, Superior General and Julie Sheatzley, Assistant Superior General, Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, to Ronald Reagan, March 4, 1985, all in folder 81, Nicaraguan Conference 1979–1985, box 81, CLCW, UNDA; Anne O'Neil, Society of the Sacred Heart, to Ronald Reagan, March 6, 1985, folder 301800-302699, box 138, Nicaragua, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California; Janet Gottschalk, Superior, North America Sector, Medical Mission Sisters, to Ronald Reagan, March 26, 1985, folder 299000-301799, box 138, Nicaragua, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California.

cardinal—in imploring Congress to approve an additional $100 million in contra aid. In his March 16 address to the nation, Reagan quoted Cardinal Obando's remark that the Nicaraguan government "is totalitarian. We are dealing with an enemy of the church."[83] Months later, the Nicaraguan government expelled Bishop Pablo Antonio Vega for publicly supporting U.S. funding for the contras. Vega had previously met with contra leaders, and he described Christian base communities as "nothing more than cells of the Communist Party."[84]

These developments only underscored the ambitious quality of LCWR's call for U.S. women religious to address the divides among Nicaraguan Catholics. On the one hand, in standing with the poor, the women positioned themselves above the fray. Their option for the poor dictated how they viewed the actions of the U.S. and Nicaraguan governments and the Nicaraguan Church hierarchy. On the other hand, the women religious were not above the fray. As their comments at the October 1983 meeting revealed, the political-religious divides impacted them. They lived in a situation of undeclared war in which Catholics were also divided. The women's length of time in the country, their nationality, and the history of their community's relationship with the government and hierarchy influenced their views. The difference between the October 1983 meeting's purpose and the resulting action plan underscored the unique challenges U.S. missionaries faced in 1980s Nicaragua.

83. Ronald Reagan Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua, March 16, 1986, *American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-the-situation-nicaragua.

84. Stephen T. De Mott, "Visions of Church in Nicaragua," *Maryknoll* (February 1987), 12.