

Nicaragua: In the Footsteps of the Polish Church?*

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Everyone remembers the celebration of Mass by Pope John Paul II in Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, on 4 March 1983. On that day, for the first time in the course of any Papal trip of recent times, a crowd of some 700,000 people — almost a quarter of the country's population — got completely beyond the control of the churchmen organising the occasion.

First of all, when the Pope began his sermon, there were cries of "The Pope, the Pope, long live the Christ-King!" shouted by those in the crowd supporting Mgr Obando and opposed to the regime. As the Pope spoke with increasing firmness on his theme of the unity of the Church, another slogan was heard, not instigated by the organisers of the liturgy but taken up by another section of the crowd and finally drowning out all the rest: "We want peace!". Despite the command of "Silence!" repeated authoritatively by the Pope, his sermon finished amid growing confusion. Indeed, in response to the Pope's uncompromising remarks on the "popular Church", a third slogan began, this time with a clearly political message, "Power to the people!", shouted at the tops of their voices by militant Sandinistas.

The Mass was abruptly concluded, with the hasty distribution of communion, while total chaos reigned in the huge 19 July Square; some of the crowd had already begun to leave.¹

It is fruitless to go over yet again these events which gave rise to so many contradictory interpretations and such strong feelings. It is true, however, that Sandinista Nicaragua is today at the heart of a national and international controversy which shows no signs of abating.

The psycho-drama of Managua

The Papal Mass at Managua was a sort of psycho-drama on a national scale. The different groups of participants suddenly found themselves involved in various unexpected and unforeseeably serious repercussions. The explanation given by the Sandinista propaganda, which blamed "cells" of troublemakers, was far too simplistic to provide answers to all the questions posed by an event the results of which are still becoming apparent a year later. Although the official explanation did account for one aspect, other must also be sought for a full understanding of the phenomenon.

By contrast, John Paul II's trip to Poland the following June was to

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demonstrate strikingly the profound empathy which exists between the Pope and the Polish people. Against the background of a despised, though unmentioned, regime, John Paul II was able to bring to a pitch the cohesion of local Catholicism and the unanimity of the nation's estrangement from their government. One had to see John Paul II, at one with the life of the young people of his country, in order to understand the intensity of the communion that exists between this providential man and the Polish nation. The Pope's visit in 1983 to his native country, was also a psycho-drama, incorporating all the hopes and fears in the hearts of the Poles.

As Gwendoline Jarczyk² wrote, "This osmosis, both understood and yet surprising, is such that the Pope's speeches immediately seized one's attention on several levels. As an earthly man, John Paul II comprehends the hard facts of reality almost instinctively, to the point that his understanding with the audience permits him to use implication to the point of audacity, without transgressing the limits imposed by the troubled situation, and he accomplishes this with confidence."

Thus, considered side by side, we have these two events, both of the same type and with a common factor — the person of the Pope: the disastrous failure of Managua and the triumphant success of Poland.

Using the Polish Model

One would naturally suppose that behind these two events — so similar and yet so opposite — there must be two different problematic situations. While the Pope is "fully attuned to the situation in Poland, and more broadly to that of the Slavic and Baltic states under communist rule", writes Gwendoline Jarczyk, "he shows no such instinctive understanding of the problems in Latin America. Perhaps in his approach to the problems of Central America he tries to apply the 'Polish model' and this prevents him from being able to grasp the essence of the popular soul of these countries."³

Bearing in mind this lesser understanding in considering the Managua Mass, one could put the question in the following way: Were the preparation and the running of the Pope's trip to Nicaragua based on the "Polish model"? In other words, behind the events of 4 March 1983 in Managua, did there not lie a questionable analysis of the situation in the country, in both the ecclesiastical and the political contexts? Or again, was the Polish yardstick the only scale by which measure was taken of the facts of Nicaraguan reality?

We now have good reason to reply in the affirmative to these questions. In effect, for many Catholics, communism is in Nicaragua, as it is in Poland, the "principal enemy" of the church, since according to them, both these countries are popular democracies under the total control of a Marxist-Leninist party.

The Archbishop at the head of the Opposition

If there is no shadow of ambiguity in the Polish situation, it should be said of Nicaragua at the very least that things are not so simple there. Nevertheless this has been the assumption that has prevailed for some time, and is still prevalent, in influential Catholic circles in Managua. It is known that the archbishop of the capital, Mgr Obando, played a decisive role in the Pope's visit, from the decision in principle to invite him, to the concrete arrangements for the celebration of Mass in Managua: the welcoming of the Pope by Mgr Obando (on the symbolic theme of the visit by Pope John XXIII to a prison in Rome!); the choice of Bible readings, the first being the story of the Good Shepherd; the plans for public prayers mentioning the imprisoned Somozists but not the fifty thousand killed in the civil war, nor the seventeen young people killed a few days earlier on the border and buried on the eve of the Pope's arrival, on the very square where the Mass was held. This selectiveness does seem at first glance a little strange, but it is perhaps not surprising when one remembers that Mgr Obando was at that time already the symbol of political opposition in Nicaragua.⁴

A Church in Danger

One can be confident in asserting that it was in fact the "Polish model" that was used by the Archbishop of Managua and his staff in analysing the country's situation and in making the appropriate strategic decisions. Three documents support this assertion: the first is a piece entitled "A Church in Danger — a report on the situation of the Nicaraguan Church", edited by a Colombian group from Bogotá,⁵ the Confederation of Laity for the Faith. The author of this report is a Nicaraguan, Humberto Belli Pereira. * An article by the same author was published in the Bogotá magazine *Tierra Nueva*, in July 1983, entitled "The Nicaraguan Church faced with a choice: Poland or Czechoslovakia?"⁶ Then a third document, in Spanish, untitled and unsigned, emerged from Vatican circles in the weeks following the Pope's visit to Central America.⁷ This last document, though in a more defensive and didactic form, bears remarkable similarities in both basis and tone to the two articles mentioned above. Clearly, the author of this document, if not Humberto Belli himself, is someone of very similar views.

Humberto Belli

Who is Humberto Belli? A Nicaraguan, aged 36 in 1983, he is qualified in philosophy and law. His early sympathies with Marxism explain his knowledge of Leninism and his sharp sense of political analysis. Even

*An article by Belli was published in *RCL* Vol. 12, No. 1. pp. 42-54 — *Ed.*

before Somoza's fall and the Sandinistas' rise to power, he was working in close cooperation with the Managua diocese, particularly in connection with the movement of lay Catholics "faithful to the hierarchy".⁸ He was director, also under the aegis of the diocese, of the "Centre for Religious Studies", in the name of which he and others published large numbers of articles in the Managuan opposition newspaper, *La Prensa*, until the end of February 1982. He then brought his collaboration with the diocese to an abrupt end when he departed for the United States to establish himself there. At about the same time, he became an adviser at the Secretariat for Non-Believers at the Vatican, a post he still holds. It was during that year, 1982, that he worked on his "Report on the Situation of the Nicaraguan Church", which was, significantly, published in Colombia, no doubt because of the still considerable influence of CELAM, which is based in Bogotá. And it was during the later months of 1982 that there also appeared the anonymous document mentioned above which presents ideas remarkably similar to those put forward by Humberto Belli in his various articles. This then is the story of a man who appears to have played a decisive role in guiding the thought and decisions of the ecclesiastical authorities responsible, at the highest level, for the preparations for the Pope's trip to Nicaragua.

Czechoslovakia or Poland?

The theory put forward by Humberto Belli in his article, "The Nicaraguan Church faced with a choice — Czechoslovakia or Poland?" is rooted in a political analysis and suggests a strategy for action.

First of all it is an analysis of the nature of the Nicaraguan regime. The title itself is revealing: whatever choice the Nicaraguan Church makes between the Polish option and the Czech option, it is taken for granted that the Nicaraguan regime is a popular democracy like that in Czechoslovakia or Poland. In the main body of the article, however, it emerges that this is not as obvious as he at first indicated. He speaks of the "government of strong Marxist tendency",⁹ of the lack of consensus among the Nicaraguan bishops resulting from "different opinions on the true nature of the regime", of the concern felt by "many Christians in the world" about the presence of priests in the government.¹⁰ But for Belli, in the end it all comes down to "a policy which, though cleverly disguised, still pursues its traditionally anti-religious objectives".¹¹

By what strange reasoning do the "significant existence of private property" and the existence of "Catholic colleges" permitted by the government become, in Belli's argument, the "sign that the evolution towards a truly totalitarian state is gradually taking place"?¹² The dialectic here is somewhat bold. But this is not the crucial point, which is to be found in the repeated assertion — aimed at hesitant bishops — that "the

philosophy and fundamental aspirations of the Sandinistas are not substantially different from those of communists at other latitudes",¹³ in other words that one could be "fully aware of the Marxist character of the Nicaraguan regime".¹⁴ Anything else is "an illusion" or "simply tactical manoeuvring".

No theological argument

In the framework of this sort of analysis of the Nicaraguan regime, one would expect the author to go on to give an exposition of the nature of the church, its spiritual mission, its social role, even its function as an eventual or necessary counter-force; in other words, one would expect some ecclesiology. Unfortunately, Belli's article does not present anything resembling a theological or pastoral argument able to justify an attitude of political opposition; he considers the church only in the context of a simple juxtaposition of forces, and he gives no reason for political opposition other than what could be called "reasons of church" analogous with the "reasons of state" which as we all know from experience can be used as an appeal to public interest to justify the unjustifiable and to legitimise the illegal.

With this perspective, one can see why the church, according to Humberto Belli, must as its first priority, define the "enemy" against which it must assert itself in Nicaraguan society, since the church is the only social group whose legitimacy is acknowledged by the whole nation. It is important therefore to remember above all "that the church is faced with what one must call, strictly speaking, an enemy. That is, someone who intends to destroy or subjugate it." And Belli goes on to conclude: "Any strategy which circumvents or minimises this reality would be building on sand."¹⁵ A little later, speaking of Marxism and Catholicism, he adds, "There cannot be two gods". The church must therefore take advantage of its true superiority when confronting "the relative weakness of the Sandinista regime" in order to establish itself as an "invincible rock" as has happened in Poland. Any other hypothesis could only lead the church into a "Czech situation" where the church is subservient to the regime. Hence the necessity to close ranks behind Mgr Obando, the Wyszyński of "the Poland of Central America". Of course, the church could eventually "make some concessions on peripheral points" but it "should never trust the promises of the government."¹⁶

By adopting this sort of analysis and proposing this sort of strategy, Humberto Belli is really only consolidating and giving intellectual form to the views which have been held for some time by a number of church leaders in Nicaragua and in the Vatican. If the Pope has himself adopted this analysis and strategy — as many believe he has — this could explain why the Managua Mass gave rise to an unexpected demonstration of

national and ecclesiastical tensions, which were so strained that it took only the slightest *faux pas* to bring them to breaking point.

Unanimity on one side, disunity on the other

Present-day Nicaragua is not socialist Poland. In Poland, the Pope could implicitly condemn the regime because all aspects of the situation justified it: institutionalised oppression, a morally bankrupt state, unanimous national defiance, cohesion in the Catholic Church. In Nicaragua, on the contrary, the lack of unity among the Catholics and the absence of national consensus on the present course of the Sandinista revolution do not, objectively speaking, give the Pope license to make an implicit condemnation of the regime without risking an explosion. The explosion happened. It spared no-one — not the government, nor the Pope, nor the Christian people. It only served the cause of the radicals of both extremes and created a rift which will be difficult to heal.

So can one not justifiably ask the question: was the application of the “Polish model” to Nicaragua not a great mistake? In other words, was — is there — another, less dogmatic, less blinkered approach to the national and ecclesiastical realities in Nicaragua? Providing a positive answer necessitates a change of language and tone.¹⁷ Rather than speaking of a “strategy of confrontation”, it is more appropriate to define the pastoral mission of the church in a society in turmoil, and in a situation of open conflict. Faced with a regime as yet undefined (or, to use political language, a regime where the struggle for power is not yet concluded), it is the church’s responsibility to exercise discernment. In the case of Nicaragua, this means having a grasp of the situation’s problems in all their complexity; trying to identify the different constituent elements; being able to differentiate between what is acceptable and what is not; maintaining a critical objectivity with regard to people and events but at the same time maintaining a lucid and commanding solidarity. Discernment is the art of extracting the truth from the web which obscures or stifles it. Traditionally the exercise of discernment in the Catholic Church is part of the episcopal ministry. In post-Somoza Nicaragua, this should be exercised at three levels: in the ideological and political debate; in the realm of economic decisions; and in questions of fundamental public liberty, bearing in mind that the obligatory terms of reference at all three levels must be “giving priority to the poor”, as defined by the Latin American bishops at Puebla.

Giving priority to the poor

During the last twenty years, the pastoral leaders of the church in Latin America have tried to put into effect the “priority of the poor” in situations of repression in their respective countries. Some have applied

themselves to this with enthusiasm, as has been demonstrated by the evangelical vitality of the church in Brazil among the people. With the political change of direction in Nicaragua in 1979 was there not a challenging opportunity for these same church leaders to consider the new pastoral implications of the "priority of the poor" in a situation of political reversal which has still not decisively stabilised?

It has become a matter of urgency — before it is too late — to concentrate all resources of pastoral thought on the problems arising in Nicaragua, focusing an investigation on the following problem: how to reconcile an efficient economic system which would work for the suppression of social poverty with the fundamental public freedoms without which the threat of totalitarianism becomes a reality?

If the church in Latin America could shed some new light on these grave problems of society, she would without doubt do a great service to humanity. Simply repeating that "giving priority to the poor is not the same as giving priority to Marxism" makes no constructive contribution to the debate. Even if it is a necessary and obvious reminder, it cannot suffice to define the ecclesiastical or pastoral role of the church. The multitude of problems raised in Nicaragua today require more rigorous thought and more evangelistic action. If the Catholic Church in Latin America is obliged to formulate an "enemy", as some lay Catholics and clergy wish, this "enemy" should be nothing other than social poverty, or institutionalised injustice (as was decided in Puebla), for these are an injury to man made in the image of God.

¹Apart from newspaper articles, there are some documents in French on these events: the letter from Fr Houtart of Louvain-la-Neuve (10 March 1983), the communiqué from the information group in Managua (DIAL D843, 24 March 1983) and the account presented by the Historical Institute of Central America of Managua (DIAL D848, 14 April 1983).

²"John Paul II in Central America and Poland", in *Les Études*, October 1983, p. 294.

³*Ibid.*, p. 396.

⁴See *La Prensa*, 28 August 1981, with huge pictures of Mgr Obando on every page.

⁵Third edition, revised and corrected, February 1983. i.e. before the Pope's visit to Nicaragua.

⁶"The Nicaraguan Church faced with a choice", published (in French) in DIAL D912, 26 January 1984.

⁷Published in French in DIAL D862, 9 June 1983.

⁸In the article "The Nicaraguan Church faced with a choice", DIAL D912, p. 9.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁷Strangely, in the above-cited article, Humberto Belli himself clearly mentions another possible course of action, only to dismiss it cursorily. He speaks of the options open to the church of "following a policy of appeasement" or "preparing for a struggle of resistance". *Ibid.*, p. 2

¹⁸See the inaugural speech of Mgr Lopez Trujillo at the 18th General Assembly of CELAM at Punta de Tralca, 16 March 1981.