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Q&amp;A

# Censor, persecution are handmaidens in Nicaragua: editor

**Humberto Belli, a former editor for La Prensa, on censorship and persecution in Nicaragua.**

*Humberto Belli was the editorial page editor of the daily newspaper La Prensa in Nicaragua. He left the country a year ago to speak out against censorship of the media and mistreatment of Christians in Nicaragua.*

*He has been one of the featured speakers for Christian Solidarity International at its first world conference on the persecuted church ending today in Vancouver. The CSI conference precedes the World Council of Churches Sixth Assembly which has not listed the persecuted church as one of its eight topics of discussion. Belli was interviewed by Washington Times foreign staffer Stephen Goldstein.*

**Q:** How do the Sandinistas persecute Christians who are opposed to Marxist thought?

**A:** They have in a variety of ways. They have restricted the access to the media of those Christians who are not buying this Marxist brand of Christianity. In July 1980, they put our Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo off the air. Archbishop Obando has had a TV mass broadcast for several years. They stopped that program and the only channels left open to the archbishop were Catholic Radio and La Prensa. Now La Prensa is under complete censorship since March 1982, and the Catholic Radio is under severe censorship. So the archbishop no longer is able to broadcast his views, although he is still able to publish his homily in La Prensa.

By Easter, church leaders had to submit their homilies or their sermons to the Minister of the Interior to have them approved for broadcasting. The church didn't want to submit to that condition. Thus the government didn't allow the church to broadcast religious services on Easter for the first time in Nicaragua's history.

Also, those priests like Obando who are not sponsoring Marxist theology are under continuous harassment by Sandinista mobs, especially in the countryside where they sometimes have their religious services interrupted. Many times a political meeting would take place at the same time a mass is under way.

In Managua, they have staged several physical attacks against the bishops and the priests who are not with the Sandinistas. They have physically attacked the archbishop of Managua three times. Senor Cosco Vivas, auxiliary bishop of Managua, was beaten by a Sandinista mob last August. They also tried to disgrace and defame the director of Catholic Radio, Father Bismarck Carballos.

So while preaching Marxist theology, the Sandinistas are taking off the media those who would sponsor a different kind of theology. They are also physically harassing church leaders. They have staged defamation campaigns for three years in order to erode and undermine the authority of the bishop and the leaders of the church, saying that they are aligned with the CIA and are agents of American imperialism.

So far, the way that the Marxists in Nicaragua have persecuted the church is not a totally direct way. They allow the distribution of Bibles. You can

go to mass in Nicaragua, you can go to religious rallies, but little by little, they are isolating and harassing the orthodox leaders of the churches, reducing them to direct communication in the churches and direct preaching to proclaim their message.

There are some religious groups in Nicaragua that have been under a classical pattern of religious repression. This is not a subtle kind of repression but a direct one like the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Moravians, Seventh-Day Adventists and some evangelical groups. Starting in March 1982, Barricada, the official newspaper of the Sandinistas, started to present front page reports on how Protestant sects were manipulating the religious sentiment of the people and how they have been historically an arm of American imperialism.

Then, two months later, after a speech by Tomas Borge, in which he accused sects of being a sponsor of the counter-revolution, of preaching reactionary attitudes, the Sandinista mobs went through the streets and in a single night took over 20 churches of these Protestant groups.

To accuse its enemies of being CIA agents has been the standard practice of the Sandinista regime since 1979. This has been the standard Marxist practice in Cuba. We in La Prensa were accused of using the same tactics to destabilize the regime as a Chilean newspaper did when Allende was in power. They said we had to be under CIA help but they could not prove it. They also have said Obando has been playing into the hands of the CIA.

The Sandinistas already have found out who the Christians are. They say that the Christians who are not Marxists are not real Christians. Borge said, probably in May 1982, that Obando was a candidate to be the Antichrist in Nicaragua.

**Q:** Is there a lot of opposition within the church to the Sandinistas?

**A:** Yes, there is a lot, among the people, too. Liberation theology has not been a popular trend in Nicaragua. It has been an elite trend, a trend that is sponsored by a group of intellectuals who have arrived in Nicaragua after the time of the revolution but are very resourceful. They have full access and facilities to the mass media. They have a lot of theologians arriving in the country to be at group seminars.

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