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Religious Life



A protester holds a crucifix during a protest against the government of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega in Managua, Nicaragua, on May 15. (CNS photo/Oswaldo Rivas, Reuters)



by Rhina Guidos

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Indignation. That's what she said she feels when she hears Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, the country's vice president, refer to themselves as Christians.

At least 31 women religious like her have been expelled or left Nicaragua in the last 15 months. Following their forced exodus, their properties, including places that used to serve the poor, have been confiscated, renamed, and put to the use of the Ortega-Murillo government, much like the campus of the country's most prominent university after its confiscation in mid-August.



The University of Central America in Nicaragua had been administered by the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, whose private residence also was seized by the government a week later and the order banned.

Under the crackdown that began in 2018 against anyone who criticized or appeared to criticize the government, at least 355 Nicaraguans have been killed, more than 2,000 have been imprisoned, including a bishop, and 322 have been stripped of their citizenship, according to figures from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Those actions and practices, on the part of Ortega and Murillo, are "far from the essence of being a Christian … of saying 'I believe in Jesus,' " said the sister, whose

ministry is nursing, during an Aug. 31 interview with Global Sisters Report. (Editor's note: GSR is withholding her name for her safety and that of her congregation.)

"I can say 'I am this,' but if my practices are the total opposite, down to how I speak … it is sad and embarrassing. It's outrageous, really outrageous," to hear them say they are Christians, she said.

With the spate of expulsions, confiscations and arrests among religious communities inside the country, she said, the question is often asked, " 'Who's next?' "



Demonstrators protest outside the Jesuit-run Universidad Centroamericana, UCA, demanding the university's allocation of its share of 6% of the national budget in Managua, Nicaragua, on Aug. 2, 2018. The Jesuits announced Wednesday, Aug. 16, 2023, that Nicaragua's government has confiscated the UCA, one of the region's most highly regarded colleges. (AP Photo/Arnulfo Franco, File)

The sociopolitical situation has pummeled consecrated life in Nicaragua, particularly for women, she said.

Some older women religious have been forced to leave via land at a moment's notice, in wheelchairs and in some cases on foot, despite their physical limitations. But the hardest blow has been felt deeply within the church in the country, the sister said.

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"It's difficult because within the church itself and within religious life itself, there is this 'neutrality,' which in the end is not neutrality, it's people who are in favor [of the regime]," she said. "I'm not going to say that they are in favor of all this killing because, God forbid, what kind of religious people would we be? But unfortunately, there is a type of religious [men and women] who don't criticize, who say, 'No, this situation [of repression] is not happening.' "

It is hard to hear that, she said, since there is no hiding the blows the Catholic Church has suffered under what she calls "the dictatorship."

Those blows have come to the attention of the U.S. Department of State. A 2022 International Religious Freedom report documents cases of police, paramilitary groups and Sandinista party supporters participating in church activities to conduct surveillance, intimidation, and threats against Catholic clergy and worshippers.



Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, lead a rally in Managua, Nicaragua. Nicaragua’s government on Wednesday, Aug. 23, 2023, declared the Jesuit religious order illegal and ordered the confiscation of all its property. (AP Photo/Alfredo Zuniga, File)

Jesuit-educated Ortega once was friendly with the church when he, along with the Sandinista movement he helped lead, overthrew the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in 1979 and later when he became the country's first democratically elected president in 1984. But his relationship with the Catholic hierarchy has floundered in the last decade. Ortega lost bids for reelection in 1996 and 2001 but won the presidency once again in 2006 and has since refused to relinquish power. He has banished political opposition, including by jailing potential rivals, consolidating power and naming his wife as his running mate.

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The country's Catholic bishops attempted to dialogue with him about a number of issues in 2014, including the need for free elections in 2016. That seemed to end any dialogue the prelates had enjoyed with him.

The sister believes that in sentencing Matagalpa's Bishop Rolando Álvarez in February to more than 26 years in prison after accusing him of treason, Ortega wasn't silencing just a man, but a way of thinking, threatening the search for justice and truth.

Discussing justice and truth is dangerous in Nicaragua's current landscape because "you know you're touching the wound of an unfair structure," she said. "You want to put a stop to critical thinking and that's what's also behind the seizure of the properties [belonging to] religious communities, Catholic schools and universities," she added.

It's a limited view in her opinion because "you can silence people but you can't silence the Gospel," she said.

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Daily life in Nicaragua is especially difficult, full of distrust, suspicion and division, the sister said. When she first professed her vows 14 years ago, she said she couldn't have imagined the challenges she'd face in bringing the Gospel to the poor "in secret," because there is no freedom of expression in Nicaragua.

Religious freedom in Nicaragua continues to deteriorate, the State Department said, adding that the government has implemented increasingly severe restrictions on religious communities, particularly against the Roman Catholic Church, including against religious clergy, lay leaders, worshippers, and church supporters.

"The government's actions have created a real chilling effect," a senior State Department official told GSR. "Religious leaders are very cautious about what they can preach and communities are concerned about even going to church."

Because of that atmosphere of fear, the sister says she devotes herself to the "ministry of listening" because she doesn't feel free to say much. And what she hears at times is worrisome. Some Nicaraguans tell her that confrontations have increased in some areas of the country where there is talk of homicides, femicides,

beheadings, torture, rape of women and children, and other crimes that go unpunished. In the capital city of Managua, sometimes everything seems to be quiet but then suddenly there are whispered reports among residents that soldiers have abducted someone from his or her house in the middle of the night

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With no reliable news sources, she said, it is difficult to know what is really going on, but many social deteriorations are easy to see.

"Many children, including under the age of 5 on the street, entire families living on the street" are begging in Managua, which she describes as a militarized zone. Army soldiers and police, among the few Nicaraguans who have steady jobs, walk around the capital, handing out exorbitant fines for minor infractions to citizens who can't complain.

"This whole situation is creating a greater division in the families and in society, because it is practically placing Nicaraguan against Nicaraguan," she said. "It's deteriorating and tiring. The few of us who are left, we need to be very careful about what to say and how to say it."

Catholic Church members are not the only ones who have suffered, she said. Some members of evangelical churches also have been captured, imprisoned and even expelled from the country for speaking out against violations, said the sister, but "as an institution, as such, they do not have as much repression as the Catholic Church has had.



A woman prays during a Mass at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Managua, Nicaragua, on November 21, 2019. (OSV News/Oswaldo Rivas/Reuters)

Humanitarian church organizations such as Cáritas Nicaragua shut down almost overnight in March 2023. The apostolic nuncio, the Vatican ambassador, was expelled in March 2022. Nicaragua suspended diplomatic relations with the Vatican in March of this year.

Ortega's grip on power has fostered an unstable atmosphere kept in place by the implicit threat of death, imprisonment and expulsion, she said. It also has forced silence within the church, including from some bishops who have seemed to favor Ortega and Murillo, at least in the past, and now have little to say in the face of the "frontal attack against the church," she said.

She said she knows it's risky to talk about the situation. In her case, she could be imprisoned, expelled or worse, for talking to the press. But she has taken that risk thinking of the Nicaraguan people, of her religious community, of a country that has no one to stand up for it.

“There are so many people who would like to say something and can't speak," she said. "I am a part of those people, their struggles."

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Church members in Nicaragua know of the petitions by members of the universal church who pray for better days to arrive, and she asks that those prayers continue because there is always the danger of an even more violent scenario.

"This struggle must continue to be peaceful and not result in blood as it has at other times. We don't want that. But let's continue to make known the reality that we are living. And to the people who want to talk about Nicaragua and their situation, please, also listen to them," she said.



People gather for a Good Friday procession outside the Metropolitan Cathedral as the government banned Holy Week street processions this year due to unspecified security concerns, April 7 in Managua, Nicaragua. Parishes in Nicaragua conducted traditional Viacrucis processions on church grounds or inside churches. (OSV News/Reuters)

What Nicaragua is going through has to be talked about, documented, including crimes against humanity that are taking place so that they do not go unpunished, she said.

That is why she said it hurts to hear Ortega and Murillo talk about faith, about God, without any remorse for what they have done.

"It's blasphemy" for Ortega and Murillo to take God's name in vain knowing they have taken part in actions that have hurt and killed others, she said. "But one says, 'Lord, the merciful Lord, will know what to do' … truly [Ortega and Murillo] are sick with power, blinded by power and distanced from the goodness that God created in us."

This article was originally published in Spanish.

This story appears in the **Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas** feature series. View the full series.