
Nicaragua dictatorship plans to stifle the Catholic Church by freezing its bank accounts nationwide

Catholic dioceses in Nicaragua are facing a blatantly specious charge of 'money laundering': "a pretext to stifle the Catholic Church in the country once and for all, to starve it of funds, in order to silence it altogether and hinder its activities nationwide. Daniel Ortega's regime has frozen the bank accounts of numerous dioceses in the country, of the Episcopal Conference, and of other Catholic organisations, associations, educational and formation establishments, for over two weeks now. The decision was announced at the end of a week that saw the arrest of three more priests and the prohibition of all processions on the feast day of Saint Mary Help of Christians, 24 May, a recurrence that is very dear to the hearts of many, given the important contribution of Salesian priests in the country. In an official statement, Ortega's police confirmed that the bank accounts had been frozen (though without specifying which ones and how many), and that they are investigating several dioceses of the Catholic Church for money laundering, and for "illicit activity in the management of funds and resources in bank accounts that belonged to persons sentenced for treason." The police say they conducted "investigations that led to the discovery of hundreds of thousands of dollars hidden in bags located in facilities belonging to the dioceses in the country." The statement clarifies that the investigations "confirmed the illegal withdrawal of funds from bank accounts that had been ordered by law to be frozen as part of a money laundering network that has been discovered in dioceses of various departments." **The words of Cardinal Brenes.** The country's banking regulator also requested that the Nicaraguan bishops' conference and Cardinal **Leopoldo Brenes**— described as "Head of the Catholic Nicaraguan Church" but who is actually primate of Nicaragua, since he is archbishop of Managua, but not president of the Bishops' Conference - "submit all documents that record the movements of the dioceses' bank accounts." During the homily at Pentecost Mass, the cardinal encouraged the faithful "not to be afraid and remain calm", without "listening to news that exaggerate" the facts. The Department for the Pastoral Care of Education at the Archdiocese of Managua announced that since June 7 Daniel Ortega's government has been paying, through the Ministry of Education (MINED), the salaries of subsidised teachers working in Catholic schools that receive funds from the State, thereby confirming that the freezing of banking accounts of Catholic dioceses nationwide. **An escalating series of persecutions over the last five years.** "This is but the latest of a long string of incidents", Martha Patricia Molina, researcher, lawyer and member of the editorial board of the independent newspaper 'La Prensa', told SIR from the United States where she fled. "I started receiving confidential reports from ecclesial sources concerning the freezing of banking accounts already on Friday. At first, everyone thought that there were technical problems, until it became clear that the accounts had been deliberately frozen. In fact, the measure does not only affect the Bishops' Conference and dioceses, as it also applies to individual parishes, seminaries, schools. These are days when salaries are paid in Nicaragua. I don't know how all these entities will manage from now on." Martha Patricia Molina is considered a point of reference with respect to the regime's persecution of the Nicaraguan Church: she edited the Report titled 'Nicaragua, a Persecuted Church', whose third issue was released in early May. Over the past five years the Catholic Church in Nicaragua faced 529 episodes of hostility, many of which amounted to outright persecution, committed by the Government led by Daniel Ortega, starting with the people's protests in April 2018. This long list of incidents includes the imprisonment of Msgr. Rolando Álvarez, bishop of Matagalpa, 37 religious sent into exile - among them also bishop Silvio José Báez, auxiliary bishop of Managua - along with thirty-two nuns from various congregations. The government has also closed the apostolic nunciature in Managua. The report details all 529 attacks that took place during this period: not only arrests and expulsions, but also confiscations of assets and buildings, media and university shutdowns, outright desecrations, intimidation. **Priests under attack.** "I'm already working on the 4th issue of the Report - said the researcher -, since the figures presented less than a month

ago have already been greatly exceeded. Three priests were arrested last week. Father Jaime Iván Montesinos, from the diocese of Matagalpa, has been imprisoned in the notorious 'Chipote' prison, two priests - Father Eugenio Rodríguez Benavides and Father Leonardo Guevara, from the diocese of Estelí - are being held by authorities in a church compound. The regime is now targeting those who served in Caritas, an important operational wing of the Church. Right now, three priests are incarcerated in Nicaragua, including Bishop Álvarez, three are under house arrest, besides those who have been exiled - that now include a Spanish priest serving in León, totalling 38 exiled priests. A serious episode of desecration occurred not long ago, when the Feast of Mary Help of Christians, that falls on May 24, was celebrated only inside the churches, with no processions, as had happened during Holy Week, when as many as 3,176 ordinances prohibiting processions and public display of the faith outside the churches were enacted. One of the most paradoxical situations occurred in Nindirí, where, according to tradition, young men dress up as 'Cyrenians' on Good Friday, to "help Jesus carry the cross". On that day, the police blocked the procession and imprisoned some of these young men, just because they were unwilling to renounce this beautiful tradition." Martha Patricia Molina concluded: "The Church is persecuted because in 2018 it stood with the people; it spoke the truth. But the situation grows worse every day. We are still allowed to pray, and speak. It is important to make this situation known worldwide. It also calls for the testimony of the laity, at a time when, as a result of the new charges, every bishop in the country risks standing trial and face imprisonment."

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