

Notes from Maria Lopez Vigil Presentation Feb. 2007 Encounter in Managua, Nicaragua

Nicaragua is in a new political stage with a change in government. Ortega was elected in November, 2006, and came to power in January, 2007. It is not clear at this time whether this is a real change, or it will be more of the same. It has only been one month, so the answer is not yet clear.

Recent Governments.

In the 80s there were major cultural and social changes. In the past, the Sandinista government was always associated with war. The election question was, can we have a Sandinista government without war? Ortega said, "Give me an opportunity to govern in a time of peace. We know that war cannot be repeated."

There are still many footprints from the 80s, but the 90s meant the end of the revolution. We shouldn't think of the period from 1990 to 2006 as one period, as our neo-liberal period. Neo-liberalism is a world level model. The Sandinista Government participated in this model. Even the first Sandinista government drastically reduced the number of government employees. The primary principle is to make the state smaller (meaning less responsible, or irresponsible.) This happened in 1987-89. Many people lost their jobs in this period.

1990-96 Violetta Chamorro: This was a unique post-war time. The main objective was to end the war. She put into place Neo-liberalism and the beginning of economic war. This was the first time there was a free press and freedom of expression in Nicaragua. Violetta's government favored the rich who had not been aligned with Somoza, those who had been aligned with the Sandinista leadership.

1996 – 2001 Aleman. In this government, there were many neoliberal policies, but this was not a Neoliberal government. It was a regression to a Somosista style government without the military repression of Somoza. No "National Guard". It was a mafia style government based on institutional corruption. It was a time of the "pact" with the Sandinistas, which was based on corruption and common property interests. They could do what they want without fear of recrimination.

2001 – 2006 Bolanos. Now this was a Neoliberal government.

Problems with Government.

The Sandinistas had participated strongly in the other two administrations.

The most profound problems of the country are with the culture, not the parties. The two pillars of the political culture are:

1. **Rotten.** Government positions are for personal gain, not for service. Take what you want. If you don't steal, you are an idiot. All of your friends and relatives will expect some benefit. This is true both on the left and the right.

2. **Impunity.** There are no consequences for corruption: no justice or tribunals. Everyone has buddies in the justice system; right and left. Judges will let you get away with it, someone will fix it. This has not changed Aleman made this an institution. Bolanos promised to fix this. But his prosecution of Aleman only affected Aleman, not the system. Sandinistas don't seem to want to touch this issue, or they might implicate themselves. The dream of many Sandinistas at the base is one of transparency and service – but this is not shared by all of the leadership.

Because of 16 years of government that didn't serve people, Nicaragua's basic life needs have been lowered. Now, one third of the population is illiterate. Public Education had fees for books and uniforms and other things. Many families couldn't afford education for all their children. Health care has gone down. Fees were charged for examinations, medications, treatment, even in public hospitals. Now the level of malnutrition in children is like that of the poorer countries of Africa. The last statistic from the UN was frightening. One third of the children below age of 3 are malnourished. This is the age where the brain develops, so permanent damage is being done. No attention is being paid to this area. Nicaragua is dependent on International aid for its basic needs. But this help is ambiguous. It helps, but it permits the state to be irresponsible. The state responds to the privileged and lets the international community respond to the poor. Aid often is negative. It creates a culture of begging. One loses confidence in one's own collective ability to reclaim rights.

There is a need to develop a consciousness of being a citizen. We need a political culture of people who ask and receive, and know their rights and responsibilities. This doesn't exist in Nicaragua. People ask for help – they have no understanding of their rights and obligations.

The problem is rooted in Colonial history. The US has always considered Nicaragua its back yard. The problem is also rooted in Christianity. God controls, we are dependent on God. "He" punishes and rewards. This thinking doesn't permit consciousness of citizenship. The idea of God as King keeps us submissive. This gets transferred onto political leaders. I.e. Daniel is thought of as a "God". "He knows what he's doing. We don't need to know." A question for Daniel should have been, "Why are you making a pact with a known thief?" Some leader isn't going to take us out of poverty; we need local organizing, debate, etc. The level of poverty and lack of citizen awareness is huge.

The New Ortega Government.

The new Government started this month - February. They have tried to fill the basic needs such as eliminating the fees for public primary and secondary schools. Many more children are now enrolled in school. But there are not enough desks, teachers, books, bathrooms. And the teachers had counted on these fees to augment their salary. This pits the poor against the poor – students against teachers. Similarly the government has reduced public health fees, but now the doctors and nurses are pitted against the poor patients.

Nutrition: There is the proposal of a zero hunger program similar to what Lula instituted in Brazil, with credit available to rural families. Rural families who own land are scheduled to receive small animals, seeds, and training in nutrition. It is to begin by August. The Minister of Agriculture has confessed (not publicly) that there are no resources to make it happen, money or staff.

There is a blind trust in Chavez of Venezuela to help Nicaragua. He has promised low interest credit for banks, help for a new road that will connect the Atlantic with the Pacific, all the oil Nicaragua will need for the next 10 years on low interest credit. New oil refineries that will allow the exportation of gasoline. Construction of schools and hospitals, and six new electric plants have begun. The basic plan is to rely on Venezuela. The plan is for the central Sandinista party to be the distributor of the aid. This is a very hierarchical model which by-passes the local Sandinista party at the municipal level. There will be more bread but less participatory democracy. There is a saying that when impoverishment exists there is no concern for democracy.

When European Socialism ended, many people tried to explain what happened. The Revolution in Nicaragua coincided with the fall of European Socialism. Fr. Beto, a Dominican from Brazil has written about Socialism and Capitalism, said: Under Socialism, wealth is socialized, but dreams are privatized - we all eat, but only the leaders dream. In Capitalism, wealth is privatized, but dreams are socialized – we all watch the same TV programs.

Questions and Answers

Q. Where is the Church?

A. You are here. As for the hierarchy, it has sought a comfortable place; it looks after its own interest. The church has accommodated itself in order to maintain power. There is some conflict in the church because Bravo and Daniel are close. Impunity for Aleman's corruption gets expressed as reconciliation, forgiveness, but it's done for political reasons. Crime gets expressed as sin. Some of the evangelical church leaders are close with Daniel, but the church doesn't educate for citizenry, it encourages submissiveness, relying on leaders.

Q. What do you think about northern European governments, or socialism?

A. There is a good article in today's Nuevo Diario which is an interview with the Swedish, Finish, and Norwegian ambassadors. They are going to demand from Nicaragua a tax reform so that the rich in Nicaragua pay. The Nicaraguan banks do not pay taxes. Bug business doesn't pay taxes. We pay taxes on the things we buy. The Sandinista Government has not said one word about taxes. We need critical questioning.

The culture problem starts with our children. In our schools we sit still and copy the board. They are not taught to think, to debate. We are not being trained to be a citizen. Also in our homes; our homes are the most undemocratic places. Children are told to be silent. They must obey. They have no rights. They are told that the Government is always right. If they behave well, they are loved; if they misbehave they are punished.

They are not encouraged to develop their own ideas. Male authority is still strong, despite gender education. She asked, "Are sexual relations consensual or imposed?"

The problems of Nicaragua are cultural. Issues need to be talked about and put on the table at home. To be a citizen is to have consciousness of rights and responsibility.

Q. What is the state of Liberation Theology in Nicaragua?

A. Liberation Theology is a continental movement which began in the 60s and 70s. Pope John Paul II applied enormous pressure against Liberation Theology. He supported repressive governments and sanctioned priests, and fostered public censorship. It is a very impressive list. That campaign was complicit in the death of Romero, the Jesuits and others. He did unimaginable harm in Latin America. Liberation Theology has always been weak, small and fragile. Liberation Theology means you cannot be a Christian if you don't have a social commitment; a commitment to organizing, political participation, renouncing injustice and prioritizing social well being. The Vatican suppressed collective ethical issues and substituted individual morals. The Roman Catholic Church is much like Mother Theresa. The church pities the poor and finds them objects of compassion rather than subjects of interaction.

I was in Granada for a meeting with youth from the Dominican Republic, France, and Guatemala, called the "Christian Workers Movement." I thought, how good. But they used a very literal interpretation of the Bible for understanding social issues. I spoke about the roots of violence against women. They thought of God as a male. My response, **Where God is a man, men believe they are god.**

Q. You used the term archaic in reference to God. What does that mean?

A. (she did a wonderful skit of God sitting in front of TV monitors pulling levers to reward or punish people)

This image of God makes the rich insensitive to issues, and makes of the poor, fatalists. No one is responsible.

Q. Tell us about your history.

A. Maria Lopez's response was very poignant. She said she grew up in a home where she was loved, allowed to play, and was happy. (Her implication was that her childhood allowed her to blossom and become the woman who she is today--definitely a stronger emphasis than her education, etc.) I came to Nicaragua in 1980 from Cuba. I was in a religious order and studied theology. I am editor of Envio, a magazine which is generally respected.

Another thought about change.

My grandmother didn't think about it

My mother thought about it, but didn't talk about it

I talked about it, but didn't do it.

I hope my daughter will do it.

These notes are based on Esther's, with some additions from Newell and my own.