



## **Challenges to Religious Freedom in Latin America: The Cases of Mexico and Nicaragua**

Latin America—the most Catholic region in the world—has been figuring more and more among the regions where religious freedom is threatened. The forms that these threats take, however, differ from other regions, where religious majorities—or militant minorities—threaten the religious freedom of the Church or other groups of believers through forced conversions or violent pogroms against believers. In Latin America threats to religious freedom most often take the form of government or criminal groups’ crackdowns against religious actors’ ministries in the public sphere—ministries which are fundamental to the exercise of the full spectrum of a faith’s doctrinal tradition. Mexico and Nicaragua are examples of how a religious group—in this case the Catholic Church (though not exclusively)—can be threatened by governments and criminal syndicates for conscientious actions in support of Catholic social justice doctrines.

### **MEXICO**

It is estimated that 80% of the Mexican population is Catholic, with the Church exercising a historically important role in the formation of the national identity. Despite the 1917 anticlerical constitutional provisions and their bloody consequences in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—greatly reduced in the 1990s by the reform-oriented government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari—the Church in Mexico is vibrant and continues to be the most important civil society institution in the country.

For close to two decades, Mexico has been fighting a bloody war against powerful narco-trafficking syndicates for control of its national sovereignty, with over 360,000 deaths since 2006. It is, in part, because of the Church’s influence, its social justice teachings, and its daring in the face of injustice, that priests in Mexico are suffering extreme persecution at the hands of these transnational drug cartels. Since 1990, dozens of priests and one cardinal have been murdered for preaching against the drug lords, as well as for defending vulnerable populations in the country. Thus, Mexico has been called “the most dangerous place to be a priest” in the world.

Compounding the violence against priests for their preaching against the cartels, many prominent drug lords and their hitmen have espoused a dark counterfeit religion that worships an idol called “Santa Muerte,” or “Holy Death”—iconized as a grim reaper usually garbed in female clothing. Drug cartels have even gone to the extent of offering “Santa

Muerte” human victims as votive sacrifices. It is said that “Santa Muerte” offers hitmen the dark solace of protection from God’s wrath at the hour of death, and thus, functionally speaking, the cult acts like a psychological “comforter” for those drenched in innocent blood. Despite all this, the Mexican people continue to be very fervent in their support of Catholicism.

## **NICARAGUA**

Since 2018, the Church in Nicaragua has been facing extreme hardship from the government of President Daniel Ortega and his wife and Vice President Rosario Murillo for defending civil society against government tyranny, abuses of power, and violent repression. Because of the Church’s support for civil society demonstrations, churches, as well as priests and religious, were brutally targeted with lethal force. Dozens of priests and three bishops have been exiled, as well as hundreds of lay men and women for opposing the increasingly dictatorial Sandinista government. Bishop Silvio Baez, living in exile since 2019, fled Nicaragua because of credible threats to his life.

Unlike other left-wing movements that first gained power during the Cold War, the Sandinistas have consistently sought not to destroy religion, but to appropriate it to serve the revolutionaries’ political objectives. This aim has been pursued in various ways, including trying to set up a “parallel church”, as well as actively trying to intimidate church leaders into submission and empowering those with more sycophantic tendencies or inclinations.

Since 2018, however, the Sandinistas’ persecution has intensified beyond traditional parameters in Nicaragua, with religious processions banned, the exiling of priests, a terrorist attack on the cathedral in Managua, the closing of the Jesuit university, among other acts of violence and institutional coercion. Bishop Rolando Alvarez of Matagalpa, furthermore, endured more than a year of brutal confinement before being exiled to Rome along with fellow priests in January 2024. Although the regime touts its longstanding “understanding” with Evangelical Christians as evidence of its openness to all faiths, the truth is only a small minority of Evangelical churches support President Ortega. Furthermore, the reason why Catholic, as well as Evangelical Christians and religious leaders are being persecuted is because of their preaching of the social justice doctrines inherent in the faith they possess. It is the gospel and the challenge they represent to his total authority that the Ortega regime seeks to silence.