News

A man in a black jacket grips a little boy's face with both hands as the little boy beams up at

Fr. Ramiro Tijerino greets his nephew Andres at the Charlotte Douglas International Airport in North Carolina Feb. 12, 2023, after being released about five days earlier by the Nicaraguan government. Tijerino was among 222 political prisoners released by President Daniel Ortega Feb. 9 and flown to the United States on a plane to Dulles International Airport just outside Washington. (OSV News photo/Liz Chandler, Catholic News Herald)

Liz Chandler

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Charlotte, N.C. — February 14, 2023

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Two Catholic priests imprisoned in Nicaragua since August arrived in Charlotte late Feb. 12 to hugs and tears from family and friends, after their release and deportation to the United States Feb. 9.

Frs. Ramiro Tijerino and Óscar Danilo Benavidez, both of Nicaragua, were among 222 political prisoners exiled from the country by President Daniel Ortega. Their release came after what the U.S. government said were concerted diplomatic efforts.

Mayra Tijerino, a parishioner at St. Matthew in Charlotte, flew to Washington to bring her brother and his fellow priest to her home in the Charlotte area.

The parish, which has been praying for him and his fellow political prisoners since their imprisonment last August, shared the good news of the priests' return at Sunday Masses, and two dozen well-wishers turned out to greet them at Charlotte-Douglas International Airport.

"I am thankful to God," Tijerino's mother, near tears as she and her husband positioned themselves at the bottom of an escalator that would soon deliver their son.

"He's coming!" a boy cried, spotting Tijerino, his uncle, descending toward him.

Well-wishers unfurled blue-and-white Nicaraguan flags as they greeted the priests, who appeared generally fit -- and all smiles.

"There were some hard months but thanks to God and the prayers of this parish, we were given the strength to endure," Tijerino said, working his way through a receiving line in baggage claim.

Benavidez was embraced as if he were family, too. "God bless the parish," he said. "I am grateful to this diocese, and to the parish, and to the faithful whose prayers sustained us."

Both priests said they were not physically mistreated in prison but noted emotional and psychological stress caused by such tactics as leaving the lights on for two straight months, then off for a month.

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"They gave us food," Tijerino said, "and the medical care wasn't the best, but it was there."

Fr. John Allen, parochial administrator of St. Matthew Parish, hugged his fellow priests and pledged to help with anything they needed. He has arranged for a physician to see both priests during the coming week and is planning a Mass of Thanksgiving at an appropriate time.

"Today is a joyous day for their family and friends, and we look forward to celebrating with them at St. Matthew," Allen said. "As witness to the power of prayer, we will continue to pray for Bishop Álvarez who remains imprisoned and in danger."

Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa -- a vocal critic of the Nicaraguan government who was forcefully put under house arrest in August -- refused to board the Feb. 9 flight carrying the group of political prisoners to the United States, according to Ortega, who says the prelate wanted to meet first with his fellow bishops. The bishop was subsequently moved from house arrest, where he had languished incommunicado for five months, to a prison notorious for deplorable conditions.

On Feb. 10, Álvarez was convicted and sentenced by a Nicaraguan court to 26 years in prison. The court convicted the bishop on charges of conspiracy to undermine national integrity and spreading false information after a secret trial in which he was denied a lawyer of his choosing. He was also stripped of his Nicaraguan citizenship and prohibited from holding elected office or a public position.

Álvarez was not present as Judge Octavio Rothschuh delivered the decision over state-controlled media.

In his Sunday morning message Feb. 12, Pope Francis invited the faithful to pray and expressed sadness over the continued detention of Álvarez. He issued an appeal for Nicaraguan leaders "to open their hearts" in search of peace and to engage in dialogue.

As an independent institution trusted by a large portion of Nicaraguans, the church is a threat to Ortega's increasingly authoritarian rule. Student protests intensified last spring and numerous Catholic and other religious leaders were among those detained during a crackdown last summer.

"I am grateful to God for bringing me here, and I am happy to see my family," Tijerino said Feb. 12, kissing his infant nephew Eduardo, whom he was meeting for the first time.

"I knew I would see them again -- I just didn’t know when," he told the Catholic News Herald, Charlotte’s diocesan newspaper. "I want to thank the Catholic community of Charlotte for their prayers of support for me, and I hope we will remember and continue to bring strength to the prisoners who remain in Nicaragua."