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The shadows of two people are visible before a stone statue of Jesus that stands in front of th

Parishioners attend a Mass at Santo Domingo de Guzman church in Managua, Nicaragua, Aug. 2, 2022. (OSV News photo/Maynor Valenzuela, Reuters)



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A pair of priests have been reported abducted from their parishes in Nicaragua as the country's increasingly totalitarian regime continues cracking down on the Catholic Church and silencing all dissenting voices.

Frs. Ivan Centeno and Julio Norori were abducted Oct. 1 by plain-clothed individuals, prompting fears the priests were taken by paramilitaries. The churchmen have been identified as pastors of parishes in the Diocese of Estelí in the country’s northwest, where imprisoned Bishop Rolando Álvarez is apostolic administrator.

Immaculate Conception of Mary Parish in the municipality of Jalpa, where Centeno is pastor, said in an Oct. 1 Facebook post: "Brothers, we ask for your prayers for our parish and our priests. United in prayer!!!"

Independent Nicaraguan media outlet 100% Noticias quoted a witness saying, "Four men in civilian clothes were waiting for Father Julio Norori," pastor at St. John the Evangelist Parish in the town of San Juan del Río Coco.

A third priest, Fr. Erick Ramírez, also was reported missing. But his parish later said via social media that he was in "perfect conditions" at his church.

The abduction provoked outrage from Nicaraguans forced into exile - and stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship, in some cases -- by the regime of President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo.

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"The fierce persecution of the Catholic Church continues. I ask the church around the world for their prayers for our persecuted church!" Auxiliary Bishop Silvio José Baez of Managua said via X, formerly known as Twitter. Baez has resided in Miami since 2019 after being asked by the Vatican to leave Nicaragua for his own safety.

Church repression has hit such levels that priests in Nicaragua report spies sitting in their celebrations of the Eucharist and feast day celebrations have been largely curtailed. At least three priests traveling abroad -- including two churchmen accompanying pilgrims to World Youth Day in Portugal -- have been denied reentry into Nicaragua in recent months, despite being citizens.

The Jesuits in Nicaragua have lost their legal status and the order's prestigious Central American University was seized in August by the Ortega regime.

Most notoriously, Álvarez remains behind bars after being sentenced to 26 years in prison -- a decision handed down in February after he refused to be exiled with other political prisoners. His condition is unknown.

Nicaragua has severed diplomatic relations with the Vatican, but a senior Vatican official expressed hopes for dialogue.

"A special thought goes to Nicaragua with which the Holy See hopes to engage in respectful diplomatic dialogue for the good of the local church and of the entire population," Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Vatican secretary for relations between states, said Sept. 26 in remarks to the U.N. General Assembly.