News

Three men in white cassocks stand among laymen and priests. Two of the men in white cassc

Auxiliary Bishop Silvio José Báez, right, and Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes Solorzano of Managua, Nicaragua, arrive at anti-government protests in Diriamba July 9, 2018. Later that day, the two prelates were among Nicaraguan bishops and clergy attacked by armed groups aligned with the city government. Báez now lives in exile. (CNS/Reuters/Oswaldo Rivas)



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Since Christmas, Nicaraguan police and paramilitaries have detained more than a dozen priests, including an archdiocesan vicar, as the Sandinista regime escalates a campaign of terror against the Catholic Church -- an institution it has struggled to subdue.

Reuters reported in the afternoon of Dec. 30 that the number of priests detained numbered 12 in the prior three days. On Jan. 1, citing Nicaraguan media outlet 100% Noticias and other local sources, Vatican News reported that a priest was arrested after he celebrated Mass on New Year's Eve and that the number of priests detained over Christmas and New Year's is now 14.

Pope Francis voiced his concern over the worsening situation of the persecuted Nicaraguan church in his New Year's Angelus prayer. Speaking to the faithful gathered in St. Peter's Square, Francis said he was "following with concern what is happening in Nicaragua, where bishops and priests have been deprived of their

freedom."

He expressed his "closeness in prayer to them, their families and the entire church in the country," urging that Catholics "pray insistently" to find "a path of dialogue to overcome difficulties." "Let’s pray for Nicaragua today," Francis said on Jan. 1.

Auxiliary Bishop Silvio José Báez -- currently exiled in Miami -- issued an urgent plea for solidarity, saying in a Dec. 30 post on X (formerly known as Twitter): "The Sandinista dictatorship this week unleashed a ferocious manhunt targeting priests, imprisoning many of them, in addition to two bishops already imprisoned. I beg bishops and the world's bishops' conferences not to abandon us at this time; may they pray for the church of Nicaragua, stand in solidarity, and raise their voices to denounce this persecution by the dictatorship against our Church!"

Most of the affected priests were detained between Dec. 28 and Dec. 30 -- with several taken by police and paramilitaries from their parish residences, according to independent Nicaragua media and activists tracking attacks on the Catholic Church.

Four priests were taken during the evening hours of Dec. 29 and after midnight Dec. 30 in the Archdiocese of Managua. They were identified as Fr. Mykel Monterrey, pastor of Our Lady of Candlemas Parish; Fr. Gerardo Rodríguez, pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish; Fr. Raúl Zamora, pastor of Divine Mercy Parish; and Msgr. Miguel Mántica, pastor of St. Francis of Asís Parish. As of Dec. 30, the priests' whereabouts were unknown.

Báez also confirmed the detentions of other priests from the Archdiocese of Managua, whom he described as "pastors and prophets."

They include Fr. Pablo Villafranca, pastor of Our Lord of the True Cross Parish in the city of Masaya; Fr. Héctor Treminio, the archdiocesan treasurer; Msgr. Silvio Fonseca, pastor of Santa Faz Parish; and Msgr. Carlos Avilés, the general vicar and a vocal critic of human rights abuses and church repression in Nicaragua.

"I am outraged by the unjust kidnapping of three beloved priests from Managua by the criminal Sandinista dictatorship," Báez posted Dec. 28 on X: "I ask God to protect them and that they be released immediately!"

He posted on X the following day, "The fury of the criminal Ortega dictatorship unleashed against the church continues."

Two priests outside of the Archdiocese of Managua also were reported arrested, according to Martha Patricia Molina, an exiled lawyer and researcher tracking attacks on the Nicaraguan church. Fr. Fernando Calero and Msgr. Marcos Díaz, priests in the dioceses of Matagalpa and León respectively, were abducted Dec. 28, Molina posted on X.

Reuters reported that four priests were arrested early Dec. 30, according to a high-ranking member of the Catholic Church.

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The Vatican News report Jan. 1, citing Molina's latest remarks to 100% Noticias, said the priest arrested after celebrating Mass Dec. 31 was Fr. Gustavo Sandino, pastor of Our Lady of Sorrows Church in Santa María de Pastasma, in the Diocese of Jinotega. Vatican News also said two other priests had reportedly been arrested in Managua: Fr. Fernando Téllez Báez, pastor of Our Lady of the Americas, who was taken in the early hours a day earlier, and Fr. Jader Hernández, pastor of the Mother of the Divine Shepherd, who was taken the evening of Dec. 30.

According to 100% Noticias, the number of priests detained without a warrant "could be higher."

The wave of arrests followed the Dec. 20 arrest of Bishop Isidoro Mora of the Diocese of Siuna and two seminarians as they traveled to a parish near the Caribbean coast for the sacrament of Confirmation.

Mora's whereabouts is unknown. He celebrated a Dec. 19 Mass in the Matagalpa Cathedral, where he expressed spiritual support for imprisoned local Bishop Rolando Álvarez.

Álvarez was convicted in February and sentenced to 26 years in prison on charges of conspiracy and spreading false information -- accusations pursued in a secretive trial.

The Central American Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights posted on X Dec. 28 that it "condemns the forced disappearance of Bishop Isidoro Mora in #Nicaragua … and the new wave of detentions of religious. In addition to attacking personal freedom, it would violate the right to religious freedom, the pillar of any

democratic state."

The arrests come as President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, appear to aim to crush dissent in the country and attempt to control traditional Catholic celebrations and words spoken from the pulpit.

Priests report receiving intimidation visits from police and say they are spied upon during Mass, according to Molina. In an earlier list, she had identified two bishops, 10 priests and two seminarians currently detained in Nicaragua.

Murillo lashed out at church leaders Dec. 27, calling them "the true devils who rang the bells to order the killing of our people."

The hyperbolic discourse referred to 2018 protests demanding Ortega's ouster. The protests were suppressed with violence by police and paramilitaries, claiming more than 350 lives, according to human rights groups.

The Catholic Church opened parishes to protesters fleeing persecution, accompanied political prisoners and mediated a national dialogue.

Priests outspoken against Ortega and the Sandinista regime have been detained or forced to flee the country. Avilés headed the archdiocesan justice and peace commission and routinely informed local and foreign media about attacks against the church.

"In recent years, the church has been at the side of the people's just demands and the defense of human rights," Avilés told Catholic News Service in 2020 after an arson attack on the Blood of Christ Chapel at the Managua cathedral. "There's repression, persecution, hatred of the church; but we're going to continue."