News

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

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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Separated from his beloved Nicaragua by a government that disowned him for speaking up for justice and peace, Bishop Silvio Jose Báez Ortega accepted a peace award in Davenport that he dedicated to courageous Nicaraguans continuing that advocacy.

Báez, the auxiliary bishop of Managua, Nicaragua, who is now living in exile, received the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award from Davenport Bishop Dennis Walsh in July.

The exiled prelate thanked all who made the recognition possible "for your solidarity with those who believe that the world can be transformed through compassion, hope and commitment to peace and justice, beyond borders and cultural differences," he said.

Báez criticized the "dictatorial regime" in Nicaragua, which he said has silenced, slandered and persecuted the voices calling for justice and freedom — including the Catholic Church. "But the church's commitment to freedom, peace and justice remains because it is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace."

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Báez said the award recognizes the church's efforts as well.

He praised the Catholic Church of Nicaragua "for its faithfulness to the Gospel of Jesus and its constant commitment to serving the people of God. The Nicaraguan Church, even amidst adversities, has stood by those who suffer the most: the poor, the exiled, and those who have been victims of injustice."

"Like Jesus, the church in my country has been like the Good Samaritan in the parable — a community that bent down to listen and accompany those who suffer, to heal the wounds of those who bleed, and to communicate the hope of the risen Christ to those who feel discouraged and downcast."

The Pacem award takes its name from the encyclical of St. John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* ("Peace on Earth"). St. Teresa of Kolkata, Dorothy Day, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and the Dalai Lama are among previous Pacem award recipients. Walsh and the interfaith Pacem in Terris Coalition of the Quad Cities presented the award.

"The coalition recognizes your commitment as a shepherd of the poor and a courageous defender of human rights and democracy who had endured physical injury and threats to your life while pursuing mediation between government and pro-democracy forces in your beloved Nicaragua," Walsh told Báez. "Your perseverance, built on responding to the call of the Gospel, has inspired you to seek

peace by working for justice."

The July 9 award ceremony followed Mass in Sacred Heart Cathedral, where Báez gave a homily focusing on the beatitudes, specifically, the blessed ones who "hunger and thirst for justice" and the "peacemakers."

Among those at the Mass and award ceremony were refugees from Nicaragua who now live in Iowa — a married couple, a priest and an exiled journalist — who said they took encouragement from the bishop's message.

In 2019, Pope Francis asked Báez to leave Nicaragua because of death threats against him and in 2023, he was among 94 people that a Nicaraguan court called "dissidents" and stripped them of their citizenship.

The award "is not primarily a personal honor," Báez said, "but a recognition of the tireless struggle of many courageous and dignified Nicaraguans who have worked — and continue to work — for peace, freedom and the defense of human rights in our country."

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Báez said that as a bishop of the Catholic Church he strives daily to live as a disciple of Jesus and to dedicate himself as a pastor of God's people. Although living in exile, he continues to advocate for peace and justice in Nicaragua and teaches sacred Scripture at St. Vincent De Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach, Florida.

"The saving power of Jesus sustains me every day and drives me, even amid the shadows, to walk in the light of the Gospel of Christ mediated and contemplated in the silence of prayer," he said "Through prayer and union with Christ, I find the strength and wisdom to be his witness amidst the darkness that envelops my country."

In receiving the Pacem award, Báez said he is honored to represent "the many brave men and women of Nicaragua" who "continue to fight for a future of freedom and justice for our people." He said they "enrich and inspire my episcopal ministry."

Nicaragua has turned into "a vast prison" because of the dictatorial regime that has taken hold of the country and clings to power, "brutally crushing all dissent, denying

our people the most basic dignity," Báez said. "But with God's grace, the spiritual support of the universal church and the adequate pressure from the international community, we will not tire of continuing to dream and fight peacefully for justice and freedom in Nicaragua."

He added that "the unwavering desire for freedom, the radical choice for peaceful solutions and the respect for human life remain the light that illuminates the hearts, steps, and projects of Nicaraguans who dream of a free Nicaragua."

Giovanna Rodriguez, and her husband, Luis Somarriba Rivas, who fled Nicaragua in 2022, traveled from their home in Pleasant Hill, Iowa, to attend the Pacem award ceremony.

Báez is "always modeling love for God, sharing hope for Nicaraguans," Rodriguez said. Fr. Nils de Jesus Hernandez, pastor of Queen of Peace Parish in Waterloo, Iowa, said he appreciated that Báez spoke out about what the Nicaraguan government is doing.