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Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega speaks during a meeting in Managua Nicaragua Nov. 8, 2

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega speaks during a meeting in Managua Nicaragua Nov. 8, 2018. Ortega called his nation's Catholic bishops a "gang of murderers" in a Sept. 28, 2022, speech that also insulted a U.S. diplomat. (CNS photo/Jorge Cabrera, Reuters)



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JINOTEPE, Nicaragua — August 15, 2025

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Nicaragua's ruling Sandinista regime has seized a prominent Catholic school, claiming without proof that it had operated a "torture" center during past protests and renaming the education facility for a slain partisan.

The Colegio San José de Jinotepe, a project of the Congregation of the Josephine Sisters, was "transferred to the state" on Aug. 12, according to Co-President Rosario Murillo.

The school was renamed "Héroe Bismarck Martínez," who supporters of the Sandinista regime claim was tortured and murdered in Jinotepe during the protests of 2018, when Nicaraguans took to the streets and demanded the ouster of then-President Daniel Ortega — now co-president with his wife, Murillo. An investigation by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission found 355 individuals died during "the repression of social protests."

Details of Martinez's disappearance and death remain mysterious, but Ortega criticized the country's bishops in 2019 for not condemning Bismark's death.

"In Jinotepe, a center where there was torture and murder; the coup d'état, during the nefarious, criminal occupation of the city of Jinotepe, comrades were tortured and murdered. And where did these crimes occur? At the San José school, unfortunately," Murillo said in comments spread through pro-government channels and repeated on social media.

"We have a new school. This is an achievement of peace, of the peace we live, the peace we safeguard, the peace we deserve," she said.

Independent news outlet Confidencial reported school officials had refused to bend to pressure from the Sandinistas to fly the movement's black and red flag — rather than the country's official blue and white flag — and have students engage in "patriotic" activities.

In Washington, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs denounced the school's seizure in a post on X, calling it "further proof that the Murillo-Ortega dictatorship's cruelty knows no bounds."

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The expropriation of the Colegio San José de Jinotepe continued the Sandinista regime's crackdown on the Catholic Church and its educational projects — in a country where even the most mild dissent is not tolerated and priests must watch their words during Mass. Four bishops have been exiled from Nicaragua, along with more than 250 priests, women religious and seminarians, according to Martha Patricia Molina, a Nicaraguan lawyer in exile, who tracks church persecution in the Central American country.

The regime has forced the closure of more than 5,000 nongovernmental organizations, including Cáritas chapters and Catholic universities. The Jesuit-run Central American University was seized by the government in 2023 after branding the school a "center of terrorism."

"It's a theft by the dictatorship from the citizens themselves," Fr. Edwin Román, an exiled Nicaraguan priest in Miami, posted on X. "They're not just being robbed of infrastructure, but also a comprehensive education and spiritual values."

Murillo's reference to the 2018 protests showed the regime's ongoing revenge against the Catholic Church. Parishes and schools — including the Central American University and Colegio San José de Jinotepe — provided shelter for protesters being attacked by police and made space for them to receive medical treatment. The Nicaraguan bishops' conference also convened a national dialogue, but abandoned the process due to government disinterest.

"They are trying to punish a church that has been sensitive, that has been close to people's suffering," Arturo McFields, a former Nicaraguan diplomat, told OSV News.

"This evangelizing and humanitarian mission of the church is being punished."