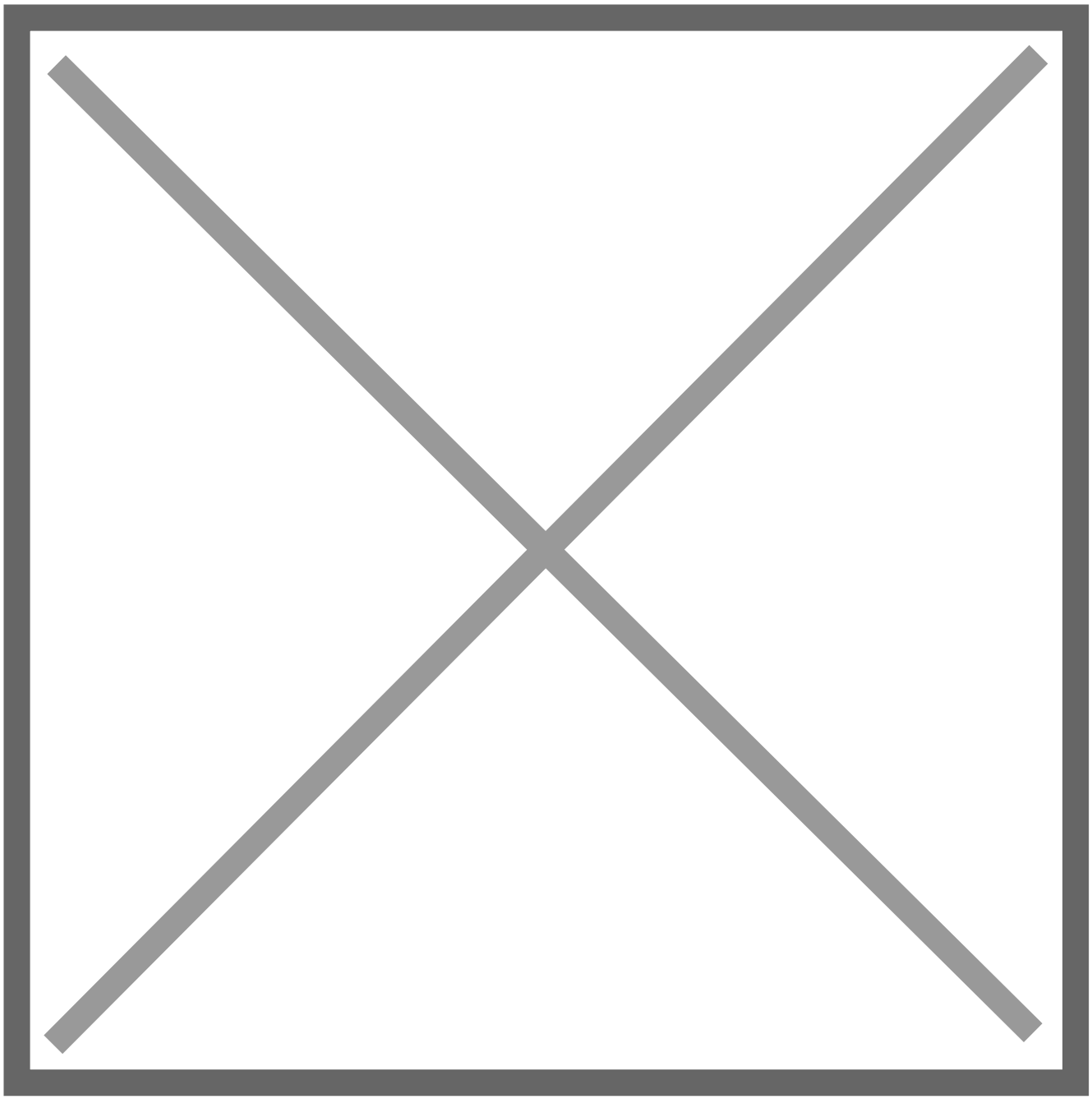
News



Worshippers pray during Mass at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Managua, Nicaragua, Aug. 21, 2022. Retired Bishop Juan Abelardo Mata was detained by police June 29, 2026, one day after celebrating a Mass in the city of Estelí, during which he requested prayers for the country's persecuted Catholic Church, according to independent Nicaraguan news outlet Confidencial. (OSV News/Reuters/Maynor Valenzuela)



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Managua, Nicaragua — July 7, 2026

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Another Nicaraguan bishop remains missing after being apprehended by police, drawing a rebuke from the United States for the ongoing "attacks on religious freedom" in the increasingly authoritarian country.

Bishop Juan Abelardo Mata was detained by police June 29 — one day after celebrating a Mass in the city of Estelí, during which he requested prayers for the country's persecuted Catholic Church, according to independent Nicaraguan news outlet Confidencial.

The country's interior ministry acknowledged Mata had been detained, but said in a July 4 statement that he "has returned to his home, where he remains in perfect condition." The statement continued, "Mr. Abelardo Mata has given statements regarding various episodes of violation of National Laws, which the Nicaraguan people have known about at different times."

Confidencial and Catholic observers, however, said Bishop Mata's whereabouts remains unknown.

"Until the dictatorship does not present the emeritus bishop Juan Abelardo Mata safe and sound at his home, any statement they issue is a lie," Martha Patricia Molina, an exiled lawyer who tracks Nicaraguan Church repression, said in a July 4 X post. "The bishop IS NOT AT HIS HOME. The priests who are informed about the case have confirmed this to me."

Molina told OSV News July 6 that no one close to Bishop Mata has seen him, despite the interior ministry's claims.

She told Confidencial that Fr. Francisco Morales, pastor of the parish where Bishop Mata celebrated Mass prior to his detention, was also detained. His whereabouts also remains unknown. Molina said Deacon Wilfred Arauz Rodríguez was likewise taken into custody, but had been released.

The Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs in the Department of State said in a July 4 post on X, "We demand the immediate and unconditional release of Nicaraguan Bishop Abelardo Mata who has been arbitrarily detained by the Murillo-Ortega dictatorship. 80-year old Bishop Mata poses no threat to the regime and his health is fragile. We further condemn the Murillo-Ortega dictatorship's continued cruel religious persecution and repression."

U.S. Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., added, "The regime must immediately provide proof that Msgr. Mata is alive, release him immediately and unconditionally, and END, once and for all, its persecution of the Nicaraguan people and its vicious attacks on religious freedom."

He continued in a July 2 X post, "There is NO place for evil dictators in our hemisphere. The Ortega-Murillo regime will be held accountable for its systematic persecution of the Catholic Church and the Nicaraguan people."

The detention of Mata offered a stark reminder of the repression of Nicaragua's Catholic Church under the Sandinista regime of Co-Presidents Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo. The repression has forced priests to censor their homilies, parishes to keep processions to church property and clergy to flee the country. Molina has counted more than 300 priests, religious and seminarians in exile, along with four bishops.

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The Sandinista regime appears to have targeted dioceses with bishops in exile, including Estelí, where exiled Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa is apostolic administrator. More than half the priests in the dioceses of Estelí and Matagalpa have left the country or been denied reentry after traveling abroad, according to Molina, while the many of the clergy remaining are elderly.

Regime officials have halted ordinations, Molina said. Fr. Frutos Constantino Valle Salmerón, an octogenarian serving as an ad omnia administrator in the Diocese of Estelí, was told not to perform three ordinations in July 2024. He has been confined to a diocesan seminary ever since, according to Molina.

Mata retired as leader of the Diocese of Estelí in 2021. Álvarez was exiled in 2023 after being convicted on conspiracy charges and sentenced to 26 years in prison. Catholic officials condemned the trial as a sham.

Four bishops are among those living in exile. Pope Leo XIV received three of the exiled Nicaraguan bishops Aug. 23, 2025, for a private audience, Bishop Carlos Herrera of Jinotega, Bishop Isidoro Mora of Siuna, and Auxiliary Bishop Silvio José Báez of Managua — a sign of his support for their continued leadership, despite being outside Nicaragua, according to Church observers. Molina has posited the co-presidents would like to have regime-friendly prelates as they crush all dissent in the country.

Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes of Managua, 77, returned from the June consistory in Rome — after not traveling to the previous consistory in January. He said July 5 in Managua that he met with Leo, who asked about his health and when Cardinal Brenes told him, "Just a cold," the pope said he can continue his mission, despite the fact he is over 75, the age at which canon requires bishops submit their resignation to the pope.

Báez, who now ministers in Florida after Pope Francis asked him to leave Nicaragua in 2019 for his own safety, told Confidencial in an interview broadcast July 5 that Pope Leo had proactively reached out to the exiled bishops after being elected in May 2025.

"After his election as pope, I realized he has a very detailed understanding of the situation in Nicaragua. He knows what is happening, he knows the situation of the Church, he was aware of our own situation," Báez told Confidencial.

"I am certain that Nicaragua, the Church in Nicaragua, the priests, and the bishops are in his mind and in his heart."