Return to Nicaragua finds the flame of solidarity still alight

by Tom Boswell

Perspective

When you have won the vote, and the crowd congratulates you,
think about the ones who died.
When you're cheered as you go up to the speaker's platform with the leaders,
think about the ones who died.
--Fr. Ernesto Cardenal


It has been 27 years, almost to the day, since I last visited here. It was late 1987, the height of the Contra war, and I came for two weeks with a Witness for Peace delegation from Wisconsin and Minnesota.

I returned with a delegation of 10 people from throughout the United States. They represented the Volunteer Missionary Movement, a group that recruits and sends lay missioners to accompany the poor in Central America. It has its roots in the Catholic social justice tradition, but its volunteers come from various Christian faiths.

On our first night in Nicaragua, a few of us toured the capital of Managua, a sprawling city of 1.5 million. We were reminded that it lacks a real downtown since an earthquake leveled most of it two days before Christmas in 1972. Dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle pocketed most of the foreign aid and failed to rebuild the city. Seven years later, Somoza bombed much of it before fleeing the country as the
Sandinistas came to power.

Still, Managua has survived three generations of Somoza, 45 years of dictatorship, the revolution, and the Contra war. It seems vibrant today, albeit a mishmash of planned and improvised development. Since returning to power in 2007, the Sandinistas have concentrated on restoring the city's center, neglected in the 1990s. There are a number of new parks and sports fields; one large park even offers free Wi-Fi. The mass transit system works; it only costs a dime to ride the bus. The government has built lots of low-income housing, which the owners pay off with long-term, low-interest loans, but it's impossible to keep pace with demand.

Much has changed since my last visit to the city and much of that positive change is attributable to Hugo Chávez, the late Venezuelan leader, who poured oil and money into Nicaragua in exchange for beef and other products. This is according to Br. José "Chepe" Barnett, a member of the Little Brothers of Jesus, who works with the Volunteer Missionary Movement in Central America.

There is a lighted sculpture of Chávez prominently displayed in a roundabout. Lining the main boulevard and sprinkled throughout the city are massive lighted sculptures called Trees of Life, the brainchild of Rosario Murillo, the quirky poet and wife of President Daniel Ortega. There are about 50 of these glittery public ornaments now, and supposed plans for 100 more.

We passed the U.S. Embassy, a huge, imposing building. Across the street stands a big billboard picturing Ortega, as well as a mural painted on a wall of Argentine revolutionist Che Guevara. Down the street a few blocks is the old U.S. Embassy, now a call center, a sought-after place of employment for young people with good English skills. The maquiladoras, mostly textile factories, appeared after the war in the 1990s, clustered in the "Free Trade Zone" near the airport. But the call centers pay better.

Two volunteers, Kelsey and Erika, teach English at Managua's Batahola Norte Cultural Center, founded in 1983 by St. Joseph Sr. Margarita Navarro, a nun from the U.S., and Dominican Fr. Angel Torrellas, a priest from Spain. Students from ages 15 to 25, and some much older, study English with these two recent U.S. college graduates, taking advantage of the center's affordable prices. In Nicaragua, English can mean the difference between a good job, a poor one, or even none at all.

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The next morning we drove up to Tiscapa, a hill overlooking Managua, where Ortega has erected an immense steel figure of César Augusto Sandino, the Nicaraguan hero who waged war against the U.S. Marines before being murdered by Anastasio Somoza García, the first Somoza dictator, in 1934. Next to it are the remnants of Somoza's palatial residence and the underground prison where he tortured dissidents.

Looking down at a crater lake and the city beyond, we could make out the new Metropolitan Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, built in 1993 with a $2.5 million gift from Thomas Monaghan, founder of Domino's Pizza. It is a strange-looking structure with a mass of mounds on the roof. Some call it the "egg carton cathedral" because that is what it resembles.

There are signs of U.S. corporate presence throughout the city: Wal-Mart has taken over some local department stores, there is a Hilton hotel, McDonald's and a few mega-malls that cater to the elite.
Heading south out of Managua one day, we passed a large building. Joe Connelly, who works at Batahola Norte and served as our translator and tour guide, noted that the structure is owned by the Pellas family. They pay no taxes on the building because it's considered to be in a "tourist zone."

Carlos Pellas Chamorro is one of the richest men in the country and is close with Ortega. He is the chair and major stockholder of Grupo Pellas, which owns 25 or more companies that deal in rum, real estate, finances, tourism and various other industries throughout Central America and the Caribbean. Pellas recently built a $250 million world-class resort community on the Nicaraguan Pacific Coast that features a luxury hotel, vacation condos, an elaborate spa and golf course. But he's also a philanthropist who reputedly takes pains to preserve the country's dramatic landscape in designing his tourist-oriented projects.

Ortega, his wife and their many children have amassed their own economic empire. Once a militant socialist, the Nicaraguan president is now faulted by many for being too chummy with the business elite he once detested and for doing the bidding of the International Monetary Fund, an organization of 188 countries that works toward global monetary cooperation.

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One day, we ventured up into the mountains north of Managua to visit San Nicolás, a village of around 1,000 people. It's about an hour and a half from the Honduran border, and many people here lost family members during the Contra war. Sarah and David, the young couple who serve here with the Volunteer Missionary Movement, teach in the secondary school and enjoy their work, but it is not without its challenges. There are no books, no computers and no school library.

The secondary school goes from seventh to 11th grade, but in San Nicolás and other rural areas, most don't go beyond fourth grade, according to Barnett. There are about 30 smaller communities circling San Nicolás, and many students travel two or three hours by horseback to attend high school here on Saturdays.

Barnett has worked in this region since the revolution. "There was no elementary school in San Nicolás when we got here," he recalled, "just one teacher giving classes in a house." Before that, young people would travel to Estelí, a long trip north through the mountains, to attend school.

Idalia López, the high school's director, started as a primary school teacher in nearby La Garnacha. Barnett helped her get a scholarship so she could earn a master's degree in education, a requisite to run the school. For three years, López taught during the week and attended classes on Saturdays. Raised on a farm in San Nicolás, her father was killed by Somoza's National Guard. Five uncles were also killed during the dictatorship and two more in the Contra war.

When we met with Jesuit Fr. Fernando Cardenal in Managua the following afternoon, he told us how he recruited 60,000 high school and college students to go into the mountains to live with the campesinos and teach them to read and write. "That was the time in which the Contras were here; they were soldiers of Somoza who had been overthrown, filled with hate, and they organized to destroy the revolution," he said.
When Cardenal started to organize what he called the Literacy Crusade, the Contras announced they would kill anyone who volunteered to participate. They made good on their threat. First, they shot a young woman from Managua. "When I got that news, I was filled with profound sadness," Cardenal said. "The news spread around the entire country. It was a crime with a message from the counterrevolution."

The Contras then killed another, and another, until seven were dead. Then they stopped. "They realized that it was useless," Cardenal said. "Of 60,000, none of them went home, in spite of that criminality."

Barnett and two of his fellow Little Brothers of Jesus volunteered for the literacy campaign. He spent the first three months training students from a Catholic school in León in "popular education," and then six months teaching peasants in the mountains near San Nicolás.

"The first day of the campaign we woke up to the death of Señor Romero," Barnett said, referring to Oscar Romero, the martyred archbishop of El Salvador. "It was very painful, but his death was also the birth of the literacy campaign; it was a mystery of death and resurrection. The literacy campaign was, without any doubt, the best experience in my life."

About 97 percent of all students and teachers in the country participated, he said, and the illiteracy rate plummeted from 56 to 12 percent in less than a year. "It was just amazing! The whole country was united." The campaign brought the cities and the campo together, he said, and "created a solidarity that even today hasn't died out."

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Remarkably, the little village of La Garnacha is becoming a tourist destination, despite the lack of a decent road to access it. Not that it isn't beautiful, nestled high in the mountains in the midst of a Nicaraguan nature preserve.

Although it is remote, the town is located on what is called the "coffee route" and is becoming increasingly popular for ecotourism. When we visited, there was a large group from France there, helping to construct a new building to accommodate the tourist traffic.

Barnett explained that the name La Garnacha translates loosely as "something useless," like an old jalopy. The mountainous land is steep, not optimal for growing crops. But the resilient people who've claimed this place as home have found many uses for the land and its resources.

As part of the agrarian reform program that came with the revolution, a rich landowner who wasn't using his land was forced to sell. The government transferred the land to 16 families who started a cooperative in 1985. The families owned their own homes but worked the rest of the land together for 10 years, raising cattle and staying solvent.

When Violeta Chamorro defeated the Sandinistas in the 1990 election, the land reform laws changed and many people opted to own land individually or sell the land they had acquired from the government. Now people in La Garnacha own their own land but still do much of the work communally as a small association with 14 employees.

Pablo Centeno, who operates a restaurant concession with his family, estimates that 80 to 90 percent of the cooperatives in Nicaragua evolved into this sort of shared enterprise. Still, he said, "I think it's fair to say that all campesinos that live in collectives are doing better than those who sold."
The families of La Garnacha operate an organic farm and raise cows and goats. Many of the young people have begun to work as artisans, selling their handicrafts of wood and stone in their community and the larger cities.

A few years ago, a farmer from Switzerland visited the town and realized that the climate and temperature in La Garnacha were ideal for cheese-making. He taught the local farmers how to make Swiss cheese, and it is now sold to tourists, as well as in the major cities of León, Estelí and Managua. Centeno shows us the underground building where the cheese is cured; it had been a bomb shelter during the Contra war.

There is an elegant, round church in La Garnacha, built about 15 years ago. We ducked inside to take cover from a sudden downpour and listened to Victoria Bucardo Castillo talk about her work in the community as a religious leader and natural herbalist.

Castillo told us how she learned about herbal remedies from her father, worked as a midwife, gave birth to 14 children (nine still alive), and later studied formally to teach the use of natural medicines. When Barnett and the other brothers came to her community, she became a catechist. Overcoming self-doubt and machismo society obstacles, she then became a delegate of the word, a Nicaraguan lay church leader who assists with evangelization and formation for the sacraments. She has now been working as a delegate and eucharistic minister for 28 years.

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Listening to Castillo's story thrust me back to 1987, when everyone in these mountains needed to be strong, courageous and faith-filled just to survive. Our Witness for Peace group had traveled in the Paiwas and Río Blanco region, the geographical center of the country, where the mountains meet the jungle.

For five years, the Contras had been targeting anyone who worked for or cooperated with the new government: teachers, health workers, members of agricultural cooperatives. Killing, kidnapping, burning homes and vicious massacres were their modus operandi. Seeking refuge from the war of terror, people fled to asentamientos (resettlement communities) or to Paiwas, which swelled from 500 residents to more than 2,500 in several years. But no one was safe.

Some nights we stayed in Paiwas, sleeping in hammocks in people's simple homes while pigs rooted around on the dirt floor beneath us. Other times we stayed in the asentamientos. One night, huddled in hammocks in little wooden huts, we tried to sleep while listening to gunfire. In the morning, we heard there had been a Contra assault nearby.

It was here I met Susana "Chanita" Castro, whose husband had been a judge and delegate of the word until the Contras killed him, a few months before their 11th child was born. Castro lost two brothers, a sister and two other relatives to the war. She took her husband's place as a delegate and became a leader of a sewing cooperative, a health clinic, and various other community projects.

She had narrowly escaped death several months before we arrived. Returning from a speaking tour in the U.S., the Contras tried to ambush her on the road back to Paiwas.
Then there was Juana Moran, who had farmed in a small settlement near Paiwas with her husband, Felipe. One day while they were visiting a nearby cooperative, the Contras attacked their settlement, killing 36 people, including 17 children and eight women. The Morans stayed on their farm, but the Contras returned a few weeks later and captured their 22-year-old son. They found him with his eyes gouged out and 75 bayonet wounds on his body.

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Founded by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba in 1524, Granada was purportedly the first European city in mainland America. About 30 miles southeast of Managua, it lies on the shore of the immense Lake Nicaragua.

There are no monuments here to William Walker, the mid-19th-century mercenary from Tennessee who seized control of the Nicaraguan army and appointed himself president a year later. Walker's main motivation for being in Nicaragua was to help U.S. slave states expand their plantations into Central America. Before a coalition of Central American forces drove him out, Walker burned much of Granada to the ground.

Now, many of the city's old colonial buildings are being renovated, and Granada is turning into a major tourist center. We arrived near the end of our week in Nicaragua, to dine at the Café de las Sonrisas (Café of Smiles) and meet the proprietor, Antonio Prieto, known here as Tio Antonio (Uncle Tony).

We enjoyed a delicious meal of chicken burritos in an open café courtyard. The wait staff was congenial but silent. Everyone who works at the Café of Smiles is deaf. The wall behind us was covered with images of the sign language alphabet.

"Nicaragua," said Prieto, "first makes you fall in love with it, and then it breaks your soul." He emigrated from Spain, dreaming of opening a restaurant. But he kept meeting deaf children and wanted to help them.

"After three months, I didn't have a restaurant," he said, "but I was cooking for about 200 kids at a local school," many of them deaf and desperate to find jobs.

There are an inordinate number of deaf children in Nicaragua, Prieto said, explaining that much of it relates to pesticides and other toxins produced in the U.S. and banned for domestic use, but hefted onto other countries through trade agreements.

Realizing that what these young people needed was jobs, Prieto decided to open a hammock factory. The venture didn't fare well at first. The city of Masaya is just 20 kilometers from Granada and is renowned worldwide as the City of Hammocks.

"We made the worst hammocks in the world," Prieto recalled. "They were really, really ugly. We couldn't even get them to be straight." But tourists bought the hammocks anyway, perhaps out of sympathy, which was more infuriating than failure to Prieto. "I realized I was creating a monster, a kind of zoo here. So I closed the store, and we committed ourselves to make the best hammocks in the world."

Six years later, the hammock workshop has 38 workers and is self-sustaining. Last year, they created a hammock for Pope Francis. "A blind young man did that hammock," Prieto said. "It was an incredibly important moment for us. At first, nobody wanted us, and then all of a sudden we were the heroes that were on CNN and 23 other TV stations because we were the ones who made the papal hammock."
Three years ago, after several unsuccessful attempts to interest local businesses in hiring people with disabilities, Prieto decided to open the café. "In a city with 80 hotels and more than 150 restaurants, we had to open our own business, and only hire deaf young men and women, just to show other businesses you can do it," he said. "And this project, the coffee shop, is the one I'm most proud of, because the growth in these young men and women has been incredible."

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Almost three-fourths of the population here lives on $2 a day, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti. High school enrollment is among the lowest in the world. There's still a large gap between rich and poor, but surely that's no different from the United States. Of course, there's also the corruption.

Barnett said there are more women in leadership roles than in other countries in the region. One, Aminta Granera, is chief of the national police. She is honest, fair and popular. Born to a wealthy family in León, she studied sociology, philosophy and theology and was once a novice with the Sisters of the Assumption. She worked in the Sandinista government early in the revolution. There are a high percentage of women on the police force, and advancing and protecting women's rights is an important goal.

The last time I had been here, soldiers toting AK-47s on the streets was a ubiquitous sight. Now, I'd been here a week and not seen a gun. Nicaragua's homicide rate is the lowest in Latin America.

Then there's the canal, with its promising economic and geopolitical potential. A proposed $40 billion inter-ocean corridor to compete with the Panama Canal, it would be the largest civil engineering and construction project in the world. It's Ortega's brainchild, and he found a Chinese businessman, Wang Jing, who wants to build it. Many Nicaraguans are worried about potential loss of national sovereignty and damage to the environment, but many also hope it can lift the country out of poverty.

I think this revolution, what they used to call the process, is not over. I believe it's something like the kingdom of God. Not something in the distant future, in a faraway place, but in the here and now, present everywhere. Present in the smiles and laughter of its children; in the creative hands of its indigenous people, "telling stories" once again with the clay they mold into pottery as their pre-Columbian ancestors did; in the resilience of its campesinos, curing artisan cheese in a converted bomb shelter; in the faith and fortitude of Tio Antonio and his deaf and blind young protégés, stitching hammocks and lives together with hope.

The revolution is present in the flame of solidarity that is still alight in the hearts of all its humble heroes: Fr. Fernando Cardenal, the students who taught in the Literacy Crusade, those who died in the war, and those who still struggle today for peace and justice.

[Tom Boswell is a freelance journalist, photographer and poet living near Madison, Wis.]


Links
[1] https://www.ncronline.org/join-conversation