

**The Catholic Church and the 2018 wave of protests in Nicaragua**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2020

Between April and September 2018, the repression towards a Wave of more than 2,000 protests in Nicaragua installed an authoritarian regime but also created a national social movement that demands democracy restoration. Keeping a tradition of political involvement, the Catholic Church in the country mobilized its religious assets to catalyze or hinder political outcomes at this critical juncture. In a spiral of involvement, it appeared as an *institution* and *community* that mobilized along with other social actors in the events of the first protests. The Church also behaved as “Movement’s Midwife,” by enabling, certifying, protecting, and giving leaders to the emerging movement. After the wave, it also adapted its supporting strategies while was paying the material and human consequences of its participation with protesters.

With data gathered from different techniques (an original database on protests, secondary sources, interview with stakeholders, revision of Bishops’ documents (2006-2018), and simple regression analysis), this thesis answers: What role has the Catholic Church played in the development and outcomes of the 2018 wave of protests in Nicaragua? The Political Process theory (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) and insights from studies on religion and social movements (Leffel, 2007; Smith, 2014), illuminated the findings.

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## 1.0 Introduction

When was the last time anyone saw a nun rioting or  
heard of a Sunday School teacher plotting to subvert a  
government?  
(Smith, 2014)

Contrary to the traditional understanding of religion as a mechanism that legitimates and preserves the status quo, a growing literature emphasizes that religious institutions and their assets have served as one of the most essential factors for emergence, escalation, and success of many social movements around the world (Stefan Berger & Nehring, 2017; Hertzke, 2009; Hutchison, 2012; Leffel, 2007; Ng & Fulda, 2018; Reed & Pitcher, 2015; Smith, 2014).

Some authors also point out the dualistic role that religion plays in social and political conflicts. Religious arguments have been used to create or exacerbate divisions to justify, in extreme cases, genocides, wars, or terrorism (Collier et al., 2003; Seybolt, 2008; Sikkink & Regnerus, 1996; Staub, 1989). In other cases, religion has helped to mediate diverse conflicts, and its contributions to peacebuilding have been significant (Borer, 1996; Hertzke, 2009; Leffel, 2007).

In any case, religion continues to play a decisive role in the development of nations. With its proven and dualistic ability to stimulate disruption, social movements, conflicts, or legitimize the status quo, religion deserves special academic attention. Therefore, it is crucial to identify and analyze the processes, mechanisms, and particularities that make this role possible. This thesis aims to contribute in this regard.

This thesis presents a case study that would quickly answer Smith's question above. It studies the recent protest and repression that triggered an unexpected sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua, the results of which are still unknown because the crisis continues, making this case a low-intensity, protracted conflict (International Crisis Group, 2019; Martí i Puig, 2019). In these events, the Nicaraguan Catholic

Church has been a significant institution and religious community that mobilized, nurtured, protected, and legitimated protesters.

In this sense, the analysis from the sociological perspective of social movements not only describes the role that the Catholic Church in Nicaragua has played but analyzes and explains its rationales and retaliations. These findings contribute to the above-mentioned academic debate on three fields: religion, the always-volatile Nicaraguan politics, and Waves of protests. This research is also important at the personal level. As a Nicaraguan and a Catholic, the 2018 events deeply impacted me. I actively participated in the protests and from my position as an adjunct lecturer at the Jesuit university in the country, I was able to observe first-hand the development of the events. To date, given the growing authoritarianism in the country, I collaborate with opposition groups for the restoration of democracy and justice in Nicaragua.

Since this is an on-going crisis, no extensive academic literature exists in the case. However, a variety of non-academic sources inform aspects of the question, and indeed, contribute to this academic approach. Primarily, Nicaraguan and international news articles provided sufficient information on events related to the case, where the Catholic Church acquired a significant role in the unfolding of the wave of protest. In this regard, this research also serves to ‘translate’ all that available and dispersed information into academic terms, through methodological procedures and analysis.

With data gathered from different techniques (an original database on protests, secondary sources, interview with stakeholders, revision of Bishops’ documents (2006-2018), and simple regression analysis), this thesis addresses the following question: **What role has the Catholic Church played in the development and outcomes of the 2018 wave of protests in Nicaragua?** Using the Political Process theory (McAdam et al., 2001; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) and insights from studies on religion and social movements (Leffel, 2007; Smith, 2014), this thesis demonstrates that the Catholic Church—among other social actors—played a critical role in the origin and development of the wave of protest in Nicaragua in 2018, as well as in the resulting scenario. In particular, the Nicaraguan

Catholic Church acted as the *movement's midwife* in a *spiral of involvement*, while the Sandinista regime mutated towards authoritarianism.

The theoretical framework takes the primary inputs from the Political Process and Framing theories and Disruptive Religion studies, illustrating with numerous examples to give context to the analysis. The unit also includes relevant literature on the study of Religion and Politics in Nicaragua. The Methodology section describes the five techniques used for the study and explains their triangulation for the findings.

The results, divided into three chronological chapters, offer a description and analysis of the case. The first chapter, **The Wave's background: The Catholic Church in Nicaragua (2006-2018)**, demonstrates how the Church has influenced Nicaraguan politics before the Wave, and how it sounded the alarm about the democratic recession. The second chapter, **As Passion: The Wave of protests between April-October 2018**, offers a detailed description and analysis of ten significant events that illustrate the Church involvement and position. The third Chapter, **A Matter of Coherence, Legitimacy, and interest**, explores the institutional and ministerial rationale behind the ecclesial actions during the Wave and analyzes its outcomes with qualitative and quantitative evidence.

## 2.0 Theoretical Arguments

Considering the complex phenomenon under study, the **role of the Catholic Church in a wave of protests**, this research relies mainly on the traditional literature on social movements. Notably, the analysis develops under two complementary theoretical perspectives: (1) the Political Process theory, based on opportunities and threats, and (2) the framing process. These schools of thought give an extensive comprehension of the case study. Therefore, from now on, this thesis considers **the Catholic Church in Nicaragua as an institution-community** in mobilization.

The Church is a **transnational institution** that seeks to maximize its resources (money, members, infrastructure, and political and moral power), with a strong hierarchical structure conformed by the Pope, bishops, priests, religious men and women from different congregations, and laypeople following that order of power, visibility, and influence. The bishops are organized in Bishop's Conferences by regions or countries. They oversee territorial units, to which local parishes belong, but are subjected to the Vatican control (Ferrari, 2007).

It is also a small sovereign State, based in Vatican City that has diplomatic ties with 175 countries, and has a moral authority over a population rivaling that of the People's Republic of China (Ferrari, 2007; Manuel, Reardon, & Wilcox, 2007).

However, at the same time, the Church is a **community** of believers that, under the same creed, practice their faith in worldly activities (Himes, 2007), and develop strong ties with each other<sup>1</sup>. Its members consider themselves as a sign of love, life, forgiveness, justice, and compassion for the world (Leffel, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the Church could also be considered as an important source of social capital for many communities. In his study, Putnam (1995) noted that religious communities had been spaces where generations of Americans created connections, activism, social support, and recreation.

This thesis posits that the church, with this dual dimension, became a mobilizing actor amid the Wave of protests in Nicaragua in 2018. To explain this, the theoretical framework also has four sections. In the first three, the research considers the most relevant schools of interpretation for social movements. It begins with the Political Processes Theory, a “theoretical sponge” with insights from other schools (Almeida, 2019), discussing the role of structures, processes, and mechanisms in the creation, maintenance, and results of social movements. Then, with the framing theory, the research reflects on how social movements create meanings and symbols that support mobilization. Lastly, in this section, a literature review shows how religion around the world has been a determining factor in all stages of social movements.

In the fourth section, the theoretical framework reviews the literature on Nicaragua to show how the Catholic Church played a leading role in the most critical socio-political events in the country’s history. In particular, its influence in the 1979 Sandinista revolution and the return to democracy in the 1990s help to understand this point. This literature allows the reader to contextualize the case and offers a background for the 2018 wave of protests when the Church, again, was a protagonist.

## **2.1 Political Process Theory**

The first input comes from the concepts and analysis of the political process theory. Over the past three decades, this body of literature has become the most influential in explaining mobilization and incorporates some elements from other perspectives. It gives broader and better explanations for social mobilization (Almeida, 2019; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

It considers that political, social, and economic contexts shape mobilization processes, mechanisms, and social actors’ decisions through the identification of opportunities and threats. Social –and religious – actors, such as the Catholic Church, contribute and get involved in mobilization as

they identify signs in their environment. Therefore, analyzing a political process requires a characterization of the regime and the social, political, and cultural environment in which the process takes place. The democratic quality of a regime, for instance, can hinder or potentiate mobilization.

Second, within the regime, actors who mobilize or intend to do so identify positive signals understood here as the *opportunity structures* that enable mobilization (McAdam et al., 2001). Generally, according to Almeida (2019), the opportunities to mobilize are five: access to institutions to present claims, conflicts between elites and institutions, changes in political alliances, reduction of repression in authoritarian regimes, and multiplicity of power nodes.

Third, social actors also identify *threats* that, depending on their severity, duration, and credibility, can enable or hinder mobilization. These threats could be economic crises, environmental problems, erosion of rights, or repression, among others.

### **2.1.1 Processes and Mechanisms**

Once social actors identify opportunities and threats, they initiate two processes: *mobilization* or *demobilization*. On the one hand, there is **mobilization** if social actors organize resources to increase their chances of achieving their claims (Jenkins, 1983; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). The mobilization will necessarily have tangible actions, which reach different levels of transgression, according to the political and cultural context in which they take place (Sánchez et al., 2016). These actions may be limited without any continuity (Harris & Hern, 2019). However, sometimes, these actions sustain over time and become **social movements**, with continued spread and organized activities to achieve claims (Almeida, 2019).

Under some circumstances, the mobilization process generates a phenomenon called **Wave of protests**, a parabolic pattern of collective action with a considerable increase in the ordinary frequency of events in a geographic scale, and a multiplicity of actors involved in a disruptive activity (Tarrow,

1989 in Almeida, 2019). This frequency intensifies until reaching a peak that later decreases under a demobilization process (explained below). This phenomenon, precisely, occurred in Nicaragua in 2018.

The mobilization process activates through the interaction of several mechanisms: diffusion, brokerage, coordinated actions, escalation, certification, and identity creation, among others. *Diffusion* is defined as the expansion and dispersion of protest from one place to another, using multiple brokerage means: personal communication, social networks, or mass media. *The coordinated actions* mechanism, for its part, produces simultaneous protests and generates *escalation*, or upward scale shift, to make claims with more potent force. *Certification* is the validation of an external authority towards the actors and their claims. *Identity creation* is the definition that a group assumes based on interests, symbols, claims, and experiences (Almeida, 2019).

On the other hand, **demobilization** is the reversal process through which social actors eventually stop making collective actions (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). The effectiveness of this process depends on the original features of mobilization, on the authorities' strategy in response to the claims, and on the degree to which social actors build enduring structures to maintain their solidarity (Staggenborg, 2015). Usually, demobilization occurs through three mechanisms: repression, institutionalization, and escalation.

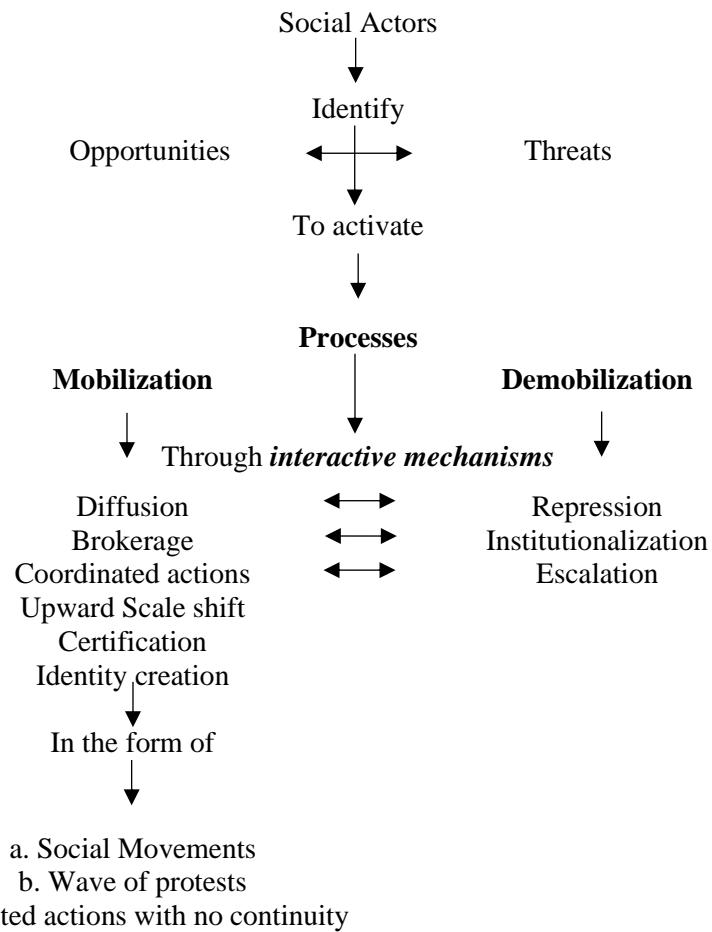
The repression mechanism is complex. Typically, when protesters and law enforcement operations interact, widespread situations of violence to reduce or repress dissent appear. However, repression can have a double effect. On the one hand, if state violence is increasing but inconsistent, the protesters perceive repression as a threat, generating more mobilization. On the other hand, if state violence is widespread, persistent, and overwhelming, the suppression of dissent occurs (Brockett in Tilly & Tarrow, 2015 Carothers & Youngs, 2015).

Institutionalization, for its part, occurs when social actors abandon confrontational and conventional protests and increase organized and less transgressive actions. The mass organization, the

creation of organizational structures, and purposive incentives activate this mechanism. With institutionalization, social actors generally merge into the party system or private life.

The escalation mechanism, lastly, is the pursuit of extreme goals and robust tactics. On occasion, as Tarrow (1989) noted for the protest cycle in Italy between 1966 and 1974, this mechanism inevitably meets with repression and polarization between social actors and, in some cases, terrorism (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

**Figure 1.** Interaction of Processes and Mechanisms of Mobilization and Demobilization.



Based on Almeida (2019), McAdam et al. (2001); Tilly & Tarrow (2015).

To sum up this section, Figure 1 gathers all the aforementioned theoretical perspective concepts in an analytical and sequential framework that underlines the several interactions of the mobilization and demobilization processes, their respective mechanisms, and possible outcomes. In the case under study, the 2018 Nicaraguan wave of protests is the result of the interaction of these processes. It was a phenomenon that emerged in a hybrid regime (quasi-democratic features), in which different social actors, including the Catholic Church, identified threats and opportunities to mobilize and did so. This process was activated and exacerbated by the mechanisms outlined above, until the State repression demobilized, generating an unclear conclusion of the wave around October of that year (Cabralles, 2020; Mosinger et al., 2019). The Catholic Church, as will be seen in the results, not only mobilized as an institution-community but also activated several of these mechanisms to mobilize other social actors changing, again, the socio-political juncture of the country.

## **2.2 Framing perspective**

The second theoretical input comes from the Framing perspective. The theory defines that social actors use cultural and symbolic expressions (frames) that motivate people to diagnose problems and propose solutions in order to generate more significant mobilization. It implies an active and procedural phenomenon to build, interpret, and challenge a given reality (Snow & Bedford, 2000).

This perspective is crucial in order to understand the development of social movements, along with other interrelated concepts, such as political opportunities and the threats mentioned above. This theoretical school, without a doubt, has analytical utility in helping understand the role played by the Catholic Church amid the Nicaraguan wave of protest.

Frames originate in reflections on structural conditions, possible opportunities, and threats relevant to a mobilization. Students of social movements maintain that in order to make a useful frame,

social actors must identify elements that resonate culturally, politically, and socially in the context where they are applied. This reflection on the potential frame is critical since more powerful and congruent symbols may resonate more meaningfully amongst the citizens, resulting in more substantial mobilizations and more effective results (Almeida, 2019; Hoyle, 2016; Hutchison, 2012; Yangzom, 2016)

Therefore, when developing frameworks for collective actions, such as protests, actors will appeal to historically significant events, shared experiences, martyrs, expressions, slogans, and songs full of meaning and with high mobilizing potential. Also, frame-making facilitates the emergence of identities. Reed & Pitcher (2015) point out that, through differentiation, identity statements, and oppositional awareness, social actors build their “we-ness” and their “they.”

Thanks to these frames, activists also promote the worthiness and legitimacy of their cause (Valentim, 2019), their commitments to change, and their strength, unity, and number as a group (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). These are all determining elements and catalysts for mobilization.

There are two types of processes related to framing: (1) the creation of symbols and interpretations, as already shown; and (2) the definition of counter-frames, designed to affect, refute, and neutralize the opponents’ symbols (Benford, 1987 on Evans, 1997). However, the creation of frames per se does not guarantee their effectiveness. The literature suggests that frames are a function of three factors: consistency, the credibility of symbols, and the credibility of actors. A frame will be more effective as much as it is consistent with the actions and procedures of credible actors that have the legitimacy to interpret and create the symbol (Benford y Zuo, 1995 Johnson, 1997 in Hoyle, 2016). As described later, religion is privileged in the creation of frames because of its rituals, traditions, legitimacy, and consistency.

### **2.2.1 Three expressions of frames**

Snow & Bedford (2000) and extensive literature in this theoretical perspective indicate that the framing process occurs in three ways: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational. Diagnostic Frames identify problems in social and political life, define their causes, and attribute guilt. Some scholars call them frames of injustice as a result of their high accusative component. Prognostic Frames, for their part, propose solutions through the generation of action plans or strategies. Motivational Frames take advantage of the mobilization potential and generate calls for action with moral or material incentives to participate in the movement.

The literature emphasizes that the three forms of frames are interactive and, in some cases, overlap. Also, they are generated within complex relationships with other social actors, modifying their content, effectiveness, and direction.

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Many elements from these two main theoretical perspectives explain the involvement of the Catholic Church in the wave of protests in Nicaragua. Thus, these concepts and explanatory models guide the analysis and help to structure the findings in this research.

## **2.3 Religion and social movements**

In addition to these two central theoretical perspectives on social movements, the literature on the role of religion in politics, social movements, and conflict mediation is necessary to understand the Catholic Church's behavior amid the 2018 wave of protests in Nicaragua.

Although particular attention is paid to similar cases in which the Catholic Church has been involved in other scenarios, this literary review also considers other religions that have run the

processes and mechanisms of mobilization mentioned above. First, the “disruptive religion” section briefly presents case studies where religion was a determinant opportunity for mobilization. Second, “the creative religion” section gives an overview of how religion creates meaningful and motivational frames for social actors and their claims.

### **2.3.1 Disruptive and creative religion**

Smith (2014) pointed out that religion is a system of beliefs and practices to interpret through the sacred or supernatural, the temporal and earthly realities. Therefore, it is a source of cultural meaning, a framework of interpretations, and a creator of identities. These features make religion inclined to legitimate, justify and preserve the status quo, but also to contain “seeds of radical social criticism and disruption” to judge and transform. In other words, religious interpretations have a high predisposition to create mobilization processes.

In his book “Disruptive religion,” Smith (2014) argues that religion prompts mobilization processes through six different assets: transcendent motivations, organizational resources, identities, social and geographic positioning, privileged legitimacy, and institutional self-interest.

First, *transcendent motivations* refer to the religious inputs that legitimate protests with sacred incentives. These inputs also create powerful inspirations, icons, rituals, speeches, and songs to sustain activism over time. They also give self-discipline, altruism, and the sacrifice that a movement requires.

Second, *organizational resources* are the inputs that come from trained, skilled, and experienced religious leadership that easily influence followers’ and movements’ direction. They also come from available financial, logistical, and spatial resources, such as churches, seminars, and processions, among others. In some cases, they are the result of accessible grassroots national and cross-national networks and come from pre-existing communication channels, such as traditional and

non-traditional mass media (Castells, 2015); and from recognized or pre-existing authority structures and monitoring mechanisms.

Third, *shared identities* represent the inputs coming from the religious capacity to gather strangers to work together with everyday purposes. Religion can create a sense of ease, cooperation, trust, and loyalty among a movements' participants by creating unifying identities against outside threats.

Fourth, *social and geographic positioning* represents religion's approachability to geographically dispersed people, extended recruitment efforts to more potential participants, quick social diffusion of causes and claims, and transnational organizational linkages that can help social movements transcend local restrictions and limitations.

Fifth, *privileged legitimacy* comes from religion's authority used as certification and protection for the causes of mobilization. In some contexts, the voice of religious authorities, such as bishops, priests, and nuns, is “taken more seriously than the same declaration would be if spoken by a politician, business person, or secular activists” (Smith, 2014, p. 21). Under authoritarian regimes, for instance, an expression of this protective disposition is when churches, mosques, or synagogues are the last open space to express dissent, and the movements take advantage of this opportunity to sustain their voices of resistance.

Sixth, *institutional self-interest* is the result of the decisive defense of the religious institutions' priorities, agendas, and concerns, explicitly or implicitly. Through these “selfish” motivations, religious authorities can determine if there are opportunities and threats that require mobilization. In his research on southern Mexico, Trejo (2009) found that the Church entered into a mobilization process in the face of an external “threat” –the expansion of Protestant churches in the monopoly-like religious market in indigenous communities in Mexico. As a result, the bishops and priests changed their traditional strategies, promoted cooperatives, adopted more radical measures and doctrines to demonstrate their commitment to indigenous people's rights, mobilized resources in favor of

indigenous and peasant movements, and provided social and welfare services. Trejo (2009) proved that *religious competition* (or the presence of multiple ‘religion suppliers’) in Mexican indigenous communities is a strong predictor of mobilization.

On occasion, religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, activate these six assets, endorse movements and claims, and deliberately put efforts into help in the birthing and nurture of movements, *while retaining their institutional identities*. In the process, they do not create social movements or become a movement per se. Smith (2014) named this mechanism “**movement’s midwifery**” (p.17), a very similar concept as the *certification*, coined in Tilly & Tarrow (2015).

Various social movements exemplify how religion is determinant in the identification of opportunities and threats by the activation of mechanisms and the contribution of religious assets. However, for a brief illustration, this section highlights six different cases: The Black church influence in the civil rights movements (USA), the Catholic inspiration on the solidarity movement (Poland), the ecumenical force in the anti-mining movement (Peru), the anti-apartheid movement (South-Africa); the anti-Marco protests and the Catholic hierarchical positioning (Philippines), and the Umbrella Movement (Hong Kong).

One. In his study on the civil rights movement, Morris (1996) evidenced how the church provided the movement with multiple *religious assets*: an organized mass base, skilled leadership of influential clergyman, a financial base for protests, reliable and rapid brokerage among local and regional churches, and meeting places for assemblies, among others. These assets activated the *mobilization mechanisms* that constituted the civil rights movements. More importantly, church leaders, such as doctor Martin Luther King, preached inspiring sermons that facilitated ‘consciousness-raising’ by engaging in the politics of agitation and refocusing black religion” (p. 43). Church members that were usually passive, rapidly transformed into a mobilized force pursuing equal rights with a transcendent and powerful motivation. This particular case proves that religious organizations could be preexisting structures that enable political protests when critical junctures emerge.

Two. In Poland, the Catholic Church challenged communist authorities through different means. In her study on pastoral mobilization, Osa (1996) demonstrated how the bishops and priests creatively promoted mobilization through a national peregrination called “The Great Novena” in the 1950s and 60s. This celebration nurtured the belief that the nation was under the Virgin Mary’s special protection and that the Church stands with the Polish people against an oppressive state. In those processions and liturgies, no specific political demands were articulated, especially as a result of political harassment. However, through these symbols, there was an implicit negation of the political authority’s legitimacy. Poland’s case, without a doubt, shows how religion serves to feed movements with powerful symbols and rhetoric. The identification of *threats and opportunities* activated the *mobilization* mechanisms that gradually contributed to, but did not explicitly cause, the institutionalization of the Solidarity Movement. According to Hertzke (2009), similar Catholic Church institutional behavior occurred in Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries. There, the congregations and churches became safe places where people could begin to express themselves avoiding authoritarian regime threats.

Three. In Peru, Arellano-Yanguas (2014) noted that the Catholic Church actively participated in social conflicts resulting from mining activities. Contrary to other studies on religious assets influencing social movements that emphasize institutional self-interest as a reason to mobilize, he found that the local Church moved through a spirituality that prioritizes people’s agency. Priests and religious men and women decided to join and “accompany” the conflicts, through sermons full of human rights speech and concrete, direct or indirect, supportive action. The particularity of the case is that religious figures were following lay community leaders, instead of taking leading roles. This case is an excellent example of the *movement’s midwifery* explained above.

In the same country, Farrell (2013) found that Christian missions moved in supporting communities in their conflicts with mining projects, and the churches activated mechanisms of mobilization with their international networks. For instance, the *brokerage* among Peruvian and

American churches allowed multiple actions that were determinant in the anti-mining movement: the media coverage, the scientific evidence that proved the mining impact on the local communities, and the ecumenical church *certification* (both Catholics and protestants) that gave more legitimacy to the actions.

Fourth. In the South African case, Borer (1996) describes a mechanism called the *spiral of involvement*, a concept similar to the *upward scale shift* or *escalation* mentioned in Tilly & Tarrow (2015). She argues that amid the context of repression and closures of political expression spaces in the apartheid regime, churches and religious leaders became more involved and transformed into vehicles of expression. Consequently, the state answered with military and police brutality, which led to the Church denouncing the government even more. The new denouncements engendered direct repression against the Church. At the peak of the tensions, the churches questioned the legitimacy of the government, the police, and defense forces. As is presented in the results, this reactive and increasing mechanism of mobilization also existed in the Nicaraguan case.

Five. In the Philippines, the role of the hierarchical Catholic Church in mobilizing for democracy is exceptional. In the early 1980s, the Bishops conference in the Philippines wrote a sequence of pastoral letters criticizing the legitimacy of the authoritarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos. The Church's pressure led to early but questioned elections. In a clear example of the *coordinated action mechanism*, the Church called out hundreds of thousands of Filipinos to go to the streets to reject the electoral fraud and support the opposition candidate. This massive participation in protests, the international pressure, and the Church's active role led to the resignation of President Marcos in 1986 (Hertzke, 2009).

Six. In Hong-Kong, 2014, the pro-democracy and pro-freedom of religion Umbrella Movement dwelled on Christian faith, symbols, and inspirations to mobilize people into the streets. Facing a *threat* of Chinese influence on their internal politics, Christians there started to have a more 'prophetic' public role. Indeed, most of the students and activists who participated and led protests, as Ng & Fulda

(2018) pointed, were educated in religious schools. In 2019, in another wave of protests, the people of Hong-Kong predominantly used the Christian hymn “Sing Hallelujah to the Lord” as a protest anthem to reject Chinese influence in the city. The song protected the protesters from policing and the ordinance that prohibited rallies and assemblies, except for religious gatherings (Leung, 2019). Again, its religious symbols and spaces were *opportunities* for mobilization.

In terms of how religion can create frames, it is easy to understand the reason. According to Evans (1997) Reed & Pitcher (2015), and Martín-Baró (1987), religion, by its very nature, offers opportunities to create meanings, symbols, and identities, to define limits, and to generate cognitive relationships between religion and political commitment. For instance, in their studies on the persistence of Christian-inspired transnational social movements for peace, Keogh (2013) and Leffel (2007) found that the use of religious symbols, liturgies, figures, and rituals accompanied and motivated protest actions in the United States, and gave strengths in extreme cases when protesters were arrested. These powerful symbols maintained the movement for decades, in addition to involving other social actors.

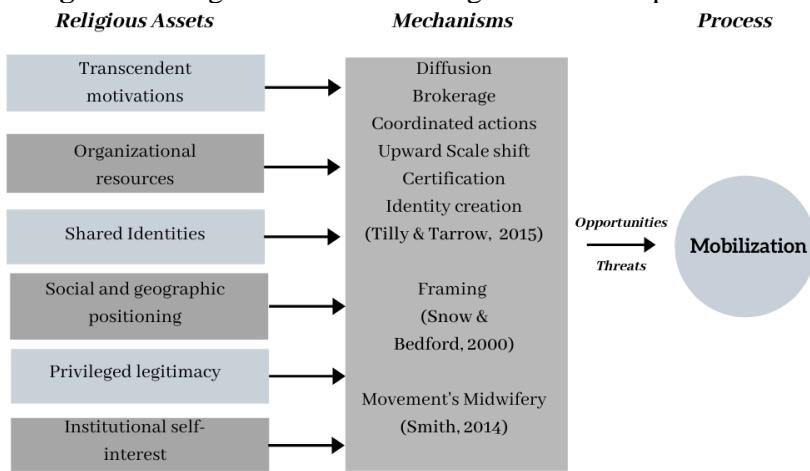
For his part, Peña (1994) found that besides creating an identity, the religious discourse of Liberation Theology served as an *intellectual frame* to mobilize priests and religious men and women in protests in Peru in the 1980s. More recently, Wood (2016) demonstrated how Catholic-inspired organizations under diagnostic and motivational frames mobilized in favor of public health reforms but against abortion during the administration of President Obama in the United States. On the other hand, Hoyle (2016), in his study on the Arab Spring, points out that one of the reasons why these mobilizations did not achieve their objectives - including power consolidation - was the difficulty of incorporating religious frames appropriate to that context.

These examples clarify how, within the multiple sources of frames that enable or restrict mobilization, religious discourse seems to be an especially privileged form of frame-making. The religious institutions and organizations that administer these discourses are particularly well-positioned

to generate those symbols with credibility and to catalyze mobilization around these interpretations (Hutchison, 2012).

Importantly, other cases show how religious frames and motivations can push toward conservative outcomes or mobilizations. For instance, M Salehi (1996) demonstrated how the simple dissatisfaction with the authoritarian regime was not sufficient to inspire people to the revolution in Iran, and how clerical leaders facilitated religious assets to foster mobilization. Gradually, the mosques became places of opposition and organization. In many cases, congregations in the mosques turned into demonstrations. With the success of the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979, some authors signal the ‘reappearance’ of religion as a significant political actor (Haynes, 2009).

**Figure 2.** Religious assets activating mobilization processes



Based on (Almeida, 2019; McAdam et al., 2001; Smith, 2014; Snow & Bedford, 2000)

To sum up, Figure 2 illustrates the connections of all the concepts mentioned above. The multiple religious assets, given by religious institutions (i.e., Catholic Church), activate mechanisms that interact with each other and, by the identification of opportunities and threats, initiate, sustain, and galvanize mobilization processes. The examples mentioned above confirm that these connections occur.

## **2.4 Religious influence on Nicaraguan political events and social movements.**

The Catholic Church in Nicaragua has a strong tradition of involvement in national politics. Numerous authors have studied this religious influence in major sociopolitical events in the past, but the Sandinista Revolution (1979-1990) received particular attention. In the related literature, it is possible to identify three significant approaches in those studies: cosmovision and frame studies, grassroots action revisions, and hierarchical-institutional analysis.

In terms of cosmovision, Pérez Baltodano (2008) explained that in Nicaragua, there is a generalized “resigned pragmatism,” where the national political elites and citizens accept, without any criticism, the circumstances. In this regard, according to the author, there is no possibility of transformation, and if there is a changing circumstance, it is prompted by an external agent –God, the United States, or the international community. The roots of this cosmovision, he argues, are in the providentialism resulting from the predominant Catholic culture. He showed, through speech and official documents analysis, how this vision permeates the Nicaraguan political behavior across decades. In this understanding, God organizes earthly realities, and there is no chance to inquire about it. For instance, in a presidential speech after an earthquake that destroyed Managua, the capital city, in 1931, president Moncada affirmed: “Nature has hurt us; there are no criticisms to make because it would be equivalent to making them to God” (Moncada in Pérez Baltodano, 2004)

However, according to the author, there are particular episodes of ruptures of this religious-political vision. The Sandinista revolution in 1979 is one of those. In the revolutionary process, the Nicaraguan people (its elites, its citizens, its religious and cultural institutions) actively fought for transforming the reality, expanding its possibilities, and provoking a regime change (the Somoza dictatorship). With time, even in this exceptional episode, the “resigned pragmatism” gradually returned to the political understanding. Pérez Baltodano (2008) argues that the Sandinista revolution,

even with inputs from contextualized theologies, was also full of providential and messianic visions or frames.

In this regard, Reed & Pitcher (2015) demonstrated how religious frames played a determinant role in prerevolutionary Nicaragua, with the diffusion of images, symbols, prayers, and songs that defined the “revolutionary we-ness” or identity in the face of the authoritarian Somoza regime. These frames were full of ideological motives that encouraged and prepared rural communities for the Sandinista insurrection. The authors demonstrated that religious frames were not only an “expression of real suffering,” but also a “protest and a transformative force against real suffering” (p.96). For instance, they noted an excerpt of a discursive contribution to the Gospel of Matthew in a Bible study that Ernesto Cardenal, a priest in Solentiname, a rural parish in Nicaragua, added:

May your will also be done means may your teachings be fulfilled. That is, may justice be done. The creation of a just system, of equality and companionship, and not of exploitation.

In other words, may the word of God be fulfilled. This is the same petition as for bread: that we all have enough. [I declare that the will of God is social justice and equality].

In terms of the grassroots actions approach, Nepstad (1996)’s study noted that community organizations such as the Ecclesial Base Communities and their popular church approach served as an organizational structure that allowed the Sandinistas to join a national network of support before and during the revolutionary process. These Catholic communities, as Reed & Pitcher (2015) also found, gave abundant frames that stimulated a culture of resistance and raised critical awareness. Most importantly, members of these religious communities also joined the Sandinista guerrillas and gave the movement their numerous inputs as trained leaders.

The author also noted that Church communities, parishes, and structures were safe spaces amid the authoritarian regime. The Sandinistas not only used temples as places for protests but also as accessible infrastructures to organize the movement and reach new followers. Indeed, Sandinistas also mobilized Catholic human resources. Many of the youth groups working in the parishes and

communities also networked –without explicitly joining the guerrillas – for resistance against the Somoza regime. Priests and religious men and women also directly supported the Sandinistas in multiple ways. For instance, as Nepstad (1996) noted, a priest baptized a girl by saying, “let all selfishness, capitalism, Somozism, go out of this little girl.” In other words, the sacrament acquired a revolutionary meaning. Even more illustrative, a sister of Christ in Siuna, the Caribbean Coast, received ammunition and medical aid by air and moved those resources to the Sandinistas in the mountains (Berryman 1984 in Nepstad, 1996, p. 118).

In terms of hierarchical-institutional analysis, Foroohar (1989) and Williams (1989) demonstrated how the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference, first reluctant to join the Sandinista revolution, gradually moved to a legitimization of the revolutionary goals pronouncing against the Somoza dictatorship and his oppression. In many ways, the authors tracked the roots of this Church position and determine as an origin the changing atmosphere in the Roman Catholic Church created by the Second Vatican Council in Rome, and the Latin American Bishops Meeting in Medellin in 1968. With these meetings and resulting documents, the institutional church gave clear signals of validation of the poor’s legitimacy to establish justice and challenge oppressive regimes. As Nepstad (1996) also noted, these documents were “incendiaries in Central America” (p. 110).

With the official and institutional support, the reach and work of Catholic grassroots communities, and the multiple frames created in support of the revolutionary process, the Sandinistas had multiple religious assets that, with several activated mechanisms, facilitated the mobilization for the Revolution in 1979. The participation of the Church in the mobilization was so noteworthy that the new Sandinista government published a communiqué on religion that explicitly recognized the role of Christians in the process, who “preached and practiced their faith in conjunction with the need for liberating our people.” (Nepstad, 1996, p. 118).

The institutional-hierarchical Church later distanced itself from the Marxists-ideological alignment of the revolution and became a fervent government opponent in the following years. This

change was also related to the new papacy of John Paul II, who came to power in 1979 and had a strong positioning against this type of regime (Foroohar, 1989).

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Having reviewed numerous studies on social movements, religious contributions to mobilization, and the specific case of Nicaragua with the Sandinista revolution, which set a precedent for this thesis, it is clear that religious assets in social movements require special attention and analysis. Despite the abundant evidence in cases around the world, there is still neglect on the study of how religion can shape politics and give particular dynamics of transgression (Smith, 2014).

The case under study gives evidence in this regard. The potential significance of this research to the literature on how religious assets impact social movements and politics would be significant. The role of the Catholic Church in the Nicaraguan crisis is a relevant case study to understand not only the processes and mechanisms behind social mobilization; but also, to illustrate the role of religion in development and conflict mediation, and in transitions towards and from authoritarian regimes.

This research also has significance in practice. Understanding the current conflict at one of its edges contributes to the analysis of an evolving crisis, and give evidence for stakeholders—within the country and abroad. Precisely, there are significant concerns about the intensified limitations to the freedom of religion in Nicaragua (United States Department of State, 2019) in addition to the proven violations of the freedom the press, expression, assembly, and other human rights (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, 2018a).

### **3.0 Hypothesis**

This thesis hypothesizes that the Catholic Church –among other social actors – played a critical role in the origin and development of the wave of protest in Nicaragua in 2018, as well as in the resulting sociopolitical crisis after those events. In order to do so, the Church –institution and community— made available multiple and powerful religious assets that activated mechanisms of social mobilization. In particular, the Nicaraguan Catholic Church acted as a movement’s midwife in a spiral of involvement, while the regime mutated towards authoritarianism. This institutional behavior answers to a strong tradition of involvement in politics in the country, to pastoral and theological motivations, and institutional interests.

## **4.0 Data and Methods**

This research has a non-experimental approach with mixed methods. In general, it follows the guidelines of Protests Events Analysis, with five techniques according to the topic under consideration. As a background for the analysis, I use an original database on Nicaraguan Protests created and maintained by this researcher since January 1, 2016. This data is obtained through the systematic monitoring and registering of protests covered in four Nicaraguan newspapers (La Prensa, El19digital, Hoy, and El Nuevo Diario). In order to consider an event as a protest, it has to satisfy four basic requirements by having: a claimant, a claim, an accused entity, and a form of protest<sup>2</sup>. If the event satisfies these criteria, it is categorized and included in the database with other important variables: geographical location, type of claimant and claim, the existence of alliances, repression, casualties, and a narrative description of the event. Other forms of non-contentious collective actions, such as processions, cultural activities, political parties rallies, are not included in the database because of the lack of one of the four required criteria.

Based on these data, it is possible to analyze multiple aspects of the wave protests under study, which consisted of more than 2,000 events between April and September 2018. Accordingly, by triangulating this data with interviews with demonstrators and leaders, and participant observations in specific circumstances, I analyzed the wave of protests in recent studies (Cabralles, 2020). Results have shown that the interaction of seven mechanisms of mobilization and counter mobilization run by several social actors—including students, the private sector, peasant movements, feminists, the

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<sup>2</sup> The research recognizes thirteen forms of conventional and non-conventional protests such as rallies, public declarations, hunger strikes, strikes, occupancy of buildings, roadblocks, marches, among others.

Catholic Church, and police forces, among others—have made the wave's dimensions possible. Most importantly, the database and this previous study allow the identification of critical events that modified the pattern of protests.

Thanks to this previous work, I also identified indicators of the Church behavior before, during, and after the Wave. Therefore, I based my thesis analysis on these evident stages and divided the discussion of the results accordingly. However, although the database was useful for the identification of the Church's role, it was limited in providing a full description and analysis of the events. Almeida (2019) advises that newspapers do not usually report key elements for protests analysis, such as frames, motivations, and organizations that constitute religious assets and indicators of the mechanisms at play. The absence of these elements would make it challenging to analyze the political process to prove the hypothesis. As a result, for each section, this research necessarily required a broader approach.

For the first chapter, **The Wave's Background: The Catholic Church in Nicaragua 2006-2018**, I based the analysis on the review of Bishops Communiqués (pastoral letters, public declarations, among others) between 2006-2018. The review considered 59 official documents released by the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference, excluding individual dioceses materials. The pastoral letters and communiqués issued before the wave allowed the identification of topics that had the attention of the Church in national politics and defined the State-Church relationship before the Wave, starting the year when president Ortega returned to power. These document revisions set the immediate background of the phenomenon under study.

All these pastoral letters should be considered the official position of the Catholic Church in the country, despite its internal differences, and they require special attention. For this review, I used NVivo®, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, to create 14 nodes around specific topics developed on these documents (as Table 3 suggests). The codification in this software allowed for efficient and systematic visualization of the Church's postures and thematic agenda across time.

This technique remains vital for other sections of the discussion of the results. For instance, I also reviewed the 15 Bishops Communiqués issued during the six months of the protests to have an understanding of the hierarchical positioning of the Church amid the changing events. Those documents were determinant in the development of the Wave.

For the second chapter, **As Passion: The Wave of protests between April – October 2018**, I based the analysis on triangulated sources. First, using the database, I selected demonstrations with the participation of religious figures or events that were validated by the Catholic Hierarchy. I also considered actions that demonstrated how the church mobilized its assets in support of protesters.

Thus, the researcher's selection of ten determinant events offers an analytical description of Church involvement in protests within the six months of the wave. Some more important than others, each event illustrates broader dynamics. These actions will be described by date, municipality, repertoire, type of actor, claim, and repression, among other variables.

To do so, I used secondary sources consisting of a comprehensive revision of national and international news coverage to the identified events, videos, Facebook and Twitter posts, and international organizations' reports. There are sufficient details that local newspapers, the first source of identification, did not cover during the wave of protest but are present in other resources. To avoid missing them, this study reviews those resources. For instance, for the “Moral reserve speech” and its context —nuns and priests protecting students from the lethal police forces—videos are broadly available on the Internet. For other events, national and international news coverages included interviews with bishops and priests that participated in them.

When necessary, I conducted unstructured interviews with stakeholders, such as priests, nuns, and laypeople that were involved in the selected events. The purpose of the interviews was to identify critical aspects if they were not explicit or apparent in the sources mentioned above. In other words, I used this technique if the secondary sources did not explain the actual involvement, the rationale behind those actions, or the implications of that involvement. In most of the cases, the interviewees allowed

the publication of their names, but I am using fictitious names mainly for security reasons or the nature of the information provided. I completed +12 interviews with nuns, priests, students, and peasants (see Table 1).

<b>Fictitious names</b>	<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Date of Interview</b>
<i>Carlos</i>	Protester in Rio Blanco, Matagalpa	May 2019
<i>Rodrigo</i>	Peasant Leader	May 2019
<i>Vilma</i>	Peasant Leader	May 2019
<i>Father José</i>	Managua Cathedral	May 2019
<i>Sister María</i>	Managua Cathedral	May 2019
<i>Father Ismael</i>	Parish Administrator, Masaya	May 2019
<i>Professor Pedro</i>	Parish lay collaborator in Masaya	May 2019
<i>Ignacio</i>	Student Leader	July 2019
<i>Victor</i>	Journalist – Church Events	December 2019
<i>Ramón</i>	Journalist – Church Events in Sébaco	January 2020
<i>Miguel</i>	National Dialogue participant	February 2020
<i>Juan</i>	National Dialogue participant	February 2020
Note: More interviews and very informal conversations helped in the research process.		

For the third chapter, **A matter of coherence, legitimacy, and interest**, I used mixed methods. First, I combined all the techniques mentioned above to identify the rationale behind the Church's involvement. Interviews, secondary sources, and bishops' documents Provided information in this regard.

Second, I run a regression analysis of the changing levels of trust in the Catholic Church on the citizen's position in the political spectrum using a proxy. The study used the most recent data from the Latino Barometer, collected in July 2018, amid the wave of protests. In particular, the two main variables for this simple regression analysis were the trust in the Catholic Church (as the dependent variable), and the president's approval (as the independent). Indeed, the regression was a *first and*

*simple approach* to demonstrate that the Church involvement created a cleavage. The analysis suggested multiple temporary costs after this involvement. Again, triangulated sources illustrated those implications and retaliation.

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To summarize, the methodology consisted of (a) the identification of Church's phases of involvement and events based on an original database on protests and previous findings; (b) triangulation of those events with secondary resources that deepened the analysis and description, (c) interviews with stakeholders in those events, if needed; (d) revision of Church official statements (2006-2018); and (e) a simple regression analysis using data from the Latino barometer. The discussion of the results triangulated these techniques.

In general terms, this study's comprehensive approach guaranteed the identification and analysis of the religious assets and mechanisms of mobilization for the ten identified events. The results discussion followed the insights from the theoretical framework above presented.

## **5.0 The Wave's Background: The Catholic Church in Nicaragua 2006-2018**

The Catholic Church in Nicaragua, as demonstrated in the literature review, has a tradition of political involvement in the country. In particular, the years before the wave of protests confirmed this inclination. The review of the official communiqués of the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference (CEN) issued during President Ortega's government before the Wave allows the analysis of the Church's official position toward the changing political, social and economic context of Nicaragua during those years. The communiqués have the CEN's vision, which was not necessarily uniform. These sources have been triangulated with interviews and newspaper articles to better understand the context to which the documents refer.

For descriptive and analytical purposes, it is possible to identify three chronological moments for the 59 documents issued during President Ortega's government. Following an analogy of the Catholic Church's liturgical year and its particularities, this research identifies: As Easter, years of optimism and hope (2006-2007); As an advent, alert to the signs of the times (2008-2013); as Lent, years of pessimism and insistent Bishops' voice (2014- March 2018).

Table 2 shows the temporal distribution of each of the documents and displays the political, social, moral, and economic concerns that the Bishops referenced each year, grouped into thematic nodes for practical and visual purposes. The table registers the number of documents referred to a subject per year, regardless of its emphasis in the document. The following three chronological subsections describe in detail these concerns.

**Table 2.** Nicaraguan Bishops Conference' Communiqués-documents and concerns. 2006-2018

	Year	2006*	2007	2008*	2009	2010	2011*	2012*	2013	2014	2015	2016*	2017*	2018
Total Number of documents		4	5	5	3	4	4	3	6	4	1	3	2	15
Total number of documents with references to concerns	Peace and violence			2		1	3		1	1	1	2		14
	Elections	2		3		1	2	1		1		2	1	2
	Institutionality		1	2	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	1		12
	Abortion	2	2		1	1	1	1		2				
	Family	2	1					2		2				
	Poverty – social welfare	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1			1
	State-Church relationship	1	1			2	1		3	1	1			2
	Corruption			3	1		1			1				
	Education		1	2			1	1		1				
	Health		1	1			1	1		1				
	Police and Military forces			2			1			1	1			3
	Judiciary and Prisons		1	1	1	2	1			1				1
	Labor conflicts	1								1	1			
	Environment		1				1			1				
	Church's reflections	As Easter: Optimism and hope	As Advent: Alert to the signs of the times						As Lent: Written voices in the desert				As Passion: The wave	

\* Electoral year.

**Note:** Registration considered official documents released by the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference as a whole. Particular dioceses documents are not included.

**Source:** Nicaraguan Bishops Conference's Communiqués available at official websites.

## 5.1 As Easter: Optimism and hope (2006-2007)

In 2006 Nicaragua had its third presidential elections since the return of democracy in 1990.

Martí i Puig & Wright (2010) enumerated multiple controversies in these critical elections: the fragmentation of political parties due to internal affairs, concerns about *caudillismo* and political elites' agreements that weakened the country's Institutionality, and changes in electoral laws that allowed to win the presidency with a simple majority. However, the 2006 electoral process conveyed optimism. The Bishops echoed the sentiment and published two documents with explicit references to it (see table 2). Before the elections, the CEN invited all Nicaraguans to exercise the right to vote and participate "in the construction of the political community (...) to select the most suitable leaders and to reject

those who lack moral and ethical qualities for the government " (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2006b, para. 5).

The CEN made clear on numerous occasions that its intention of influence in the country's politics was limited to its pastoral duty. They invited priests and religious men and women in Nicaragua to refrain from actively participating in electoral campaigns associated with political parties to avoid disorientation of the Catholics who, as the bishops pointed out, "trust in our respectful and objective posture" (2006b, para. 27).

However, the Church position was explicit and proactive on sexuality. In their pastoral letter before the elections, they invited voters to choose candidates against therapeutic abortion and with proven virtue and respect for the "natural structure of the family" (between man and woman). They also recommended candidates who guarantee rights to educate children, social welfare, distribution of wealth, and peace (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2006b, para. 12).

Being competitive elections, the candidates were receptive to the Church's positions. In this sense, the prohibition of abortion became a central issue. A month before the elections, the Church organized a massive march to the National Assembly, demanding the criminalization of therapeutic abortion. With this type of action, together with a strong advertising campaign, Catholics and Evangelicals strongly influenced public opinion on the subject. Before the elections, the National Assembly passed a bill that penalized abortion in all circumstances (Amnistía Internacional, 2009)<sup>3</sup>. The Bishop's influence on the issue continued the following year, with a short but strong statement in which the bishops applauded the decision of the National Assembly. They also rejected how some

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<sup>3</sup> Similar experience occurred in 2009 in El Salvador, where the Catholic Church promoted a campaign against therapeutic abortion, which became one of the most restrictive regulations in the world. The leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) took advantage of that position to deradicalize its "guerrilla insurgents" image and win the sympathy of new Salvadoran sectors (Viterna, 2012).

countries and international organizations influenced the national agenda on the topic (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2007e).

The November 2006 elections left the Sandinista Daniel Ortega as the winner, who returned to power after sixteen years in the opposition. The bishops celebrated the “expectation of a new government” among Nicaraguans. The new government and the recent political victory over abortion created among the bishops the sober and optimistic feeling that they could influence, from the pastoral perspective, the country’s politics.

Undoubtedly, the alignment of the new Sandinista government with the anti-abortion agenda showed positive signs of dialogue with the Vatican. However, many local Catholic leaders viewed these actions suspiciously (*Father José*, personal communication, May 2019). It was also positive that, with only three months of government, Daniel Ortega appointed the emeritus Cardinal Obando y Bravo, a former opponent of the Sandinista government in the 1980s, as head of the Reconciliation and Peace Commission. The bishops applauded the initiative, recognizing the Cardinal’s trajectory in that field, but also clarified that the role of the emeritus Bishop would not be subordinated to the President (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2007a).

In these two years of optimism, the Catholic hierarchy also had strong positions towards other national events and issues. For example, they positioned themselves in favor of the labor rights of doctors who went on strike to increase their incomes; but also had concern for the population that did not receive treatment in hospitals (AFP, 2006; Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2006a). Also, they encouraged the new authorities to look after the elderly, denouncing that many receive pensions that did not cover basic needs (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2007d).

In May 2007, the Latin American bishops met Aparecida, Brazil, to discuss issues of pastoral interest for the region. As in other meetings of this type, multiple aspects of Latin American social, political, and economic life were discussed. The CEN asked Catholics to be attentive to the meeting

(Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2007b). Elements of the resulting document – *Documento de Aparecida* - regularly appeared in pastoral letters in the following years.

The bishops' document for the 2007 Christmas summarized this period of relative optimism and hope. A pastoral letter enumerated the "lights and shadows" of several policies during the first eleven months of the new Sandinista government. In this document, the bishops applauded progress in public education, poverty reduction, public health system, pastoral access to prisons, environment protection, natural disaster mitigation, and the fight against drug trafficking. However, in each of the aspects, the bishops denounced elements that required attention. In particular, the CEN was concerned about President Ortega's confrontational position in international affairs and his intolerance for criticism (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2007c).

## **5.2 As Advent: Alert to the signs of the times (2008-2013)**

During this period of reflection, the Church hierarchy considerably escalated its accusatory language in reaction to public policies and government actions. For example, on January 23, 2008, the bishops questioned state neglect of subsidized Catholic schools and the lack of adjustments to teacher salaries (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2008d).

However, the 2008 municipal elections were the determinant events that changed the CEN position. Those elections indicated the “hegemonic inclination” of President Ortega. The increasing subordination of the Judiciary and the Electoral Powers facilitated the cancellation of two political parties in the opposition, and the free disposition of public resources from the growing Venezuelan cooperation allowed the Sandinista government to consolidate its power. After 2008 no competitive elections are held in Nicaragua (Martí I Puig, 2013).

In this context, the bishops cited the *Documento de Aparecida* to denounce "the regression of authoritarianism" in the country. In particular, the CEN criticized four aspects: deterioration of institutionality, violence, corruption, and increased poverty.

Regarding institutionality, the bishops perceived frustration in the Nicaraguan people due to the multiple irregularities of the electoral process: the cancellation of political parties, the rejection of national and international electoral observers, delays in the registration processes, and inconsistencies in the counting of votes. They were also concerned about the increase in the official position that considered "destabilizing actions all the opinions of disagreement." The CEN argued that the country's democratic institutions were at risk (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2008b, 2008c). Despite denouncing irregularities, they called to vote, defining abstentionism as the renunciation of participation in the development of municipalities. According to Envío (2014), a recognized Nicaraguan journal, the Bishops' reaction to the electoral process surprised the Sandinista government. For the Sandinistas, it was a betrayal, especially considering the numerous economic collaborations to parishes and dioceses across the country and the party's position on abortion.

Regarding violence, the bishops expressed their concern about the national crisis generated by the elections. They pointed out that deep wounds were being revived, referring to episodes of the civil war in the 1980s (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2008a). Indeed, after the elections, there was a wave of protests in several municipalities, leaving casualties (EFE, 2006).

Regarding corruption, the bishops pointed out that there were concerns about the lack of transparency in the administrations of funds from foreign cooperation. In effect, the worry was about the Venezuelan assistance towards Nicaragua, which gradually replaced the conditioned cooperation from Dutch, Scandinavian, British, American, and German governments (Martí I Puig, 2013).

Regarding poverty, in the context of the international economic recession, the rise in oil prices, and a fire that destroyed much of the most critical Market in the capital, the bishops alerted that the misery and famine rose like a "dark shadow."

In addition to the electoral controversy, the Church expressed concerns about the use of religious symbols and language for political purposes. In 2008 and 2009, the FSLN initiated a dispute over symbolic capital and the use of public spaces by placing statues of the Virgin Mary on the main roads of Managua. Also, the government hired citizens to “pray” and occupy the public areas to avoid protests (Editorial La Prensa, 2009; Perez-Baltodano, 2010). The Church rejected those actions.

In April 2009, Monsignor Silvio Báez, a discalced Carmelite, joined the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference. His Carmelite spirituality, based in prayer and contemplation, and his exemplary education in biblical theology created no political expectation at that time. Years later, with his position as auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese of Managua, he became one of the most important voices denouncing the government, in particular after a small wave of protest in 2013 (as shown in the second chapter).

In 2009 and 2010, the bishops continued to issue numerous reflections on the deterioration of the country's institutionality, as well as other topics of pastoral interest (see table 2). They elaborated messages similar to those of 2008 and indicated that “some of the situations continued worsening” (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2010). In particular, they denounced the devaluation of the rule of law and the subordination of the institutions to specific interests.

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The presidential elections of 2011 created a new scenario for the Bishops' thinking. Amid the electoral process, the bishops called Catholics to a penitential fast, as part of the ecclesial tradition in the face of a "national misfortune (...)" (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2011a). According to the CEN, the fast would bring national attention to social, political, and institutional problems (E. Chamorro & Vargas, 2011).

The CEN made clear that the national fast had to initiate with this prayer:

Merciful Father, in the name of the Lord Jesus, I begin this day of fasting and prayer. I ask you for our country, *damaged by the violence and the loss of Christian values*. May you comfort the

pain of those who suffer, and give success to the decisions of those who govern us. (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2011a)

As in other cases, these types of pastoral-liturgical actions demonstrate ecclesial positions full of symbolism. In Poland during the 1950s, for example, a national novena displayed the confrontation with Leninism. The resistance moved to symbolic politics, where the Church and the opposition were at an advantage (Osa, 1996).

Near the election day, the bishops motivated Nicaraguans to vote, despite the "shadows" that characterized that electoral process (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2011c). The central issue of the 2011 elections was the legality of the re-election of President Ortega<sup>4</sup>. To circumvent the constitutional restrictions, the Executive appealed to the Supreme Court to declare as inapplicable the ban on reelection. The judges approved the appeal. With this political move, according to Perez-Baltodano (2010), the Executive's control over the other powers was more explicit than ever.

Although these elections took place with lower levels of violence than 2008, the political and constitutional maneuvers gave evident signs of the country's institutional deterioration. President Ortega won with 62.66% of the votes, and gained control over the National Assembly with 62 deputies (out of 90). The leading opposition candidate, Fabio Gadea, did not accept the results, but no more significant social mobilization evolved.

In this post-electoral context, the Bishops Conference issued its last communiqué in 2011, where they categorically affirmed that irregularities in the electoral process did not respect the civil will, and the results' legitimacy was at stake. They echoed the distrust of national and international organizations and political parties. They affirmed that the Supreme Electoral Council was not able to exercise its functions with responsibility and honesty. They denounced, in a clear example of

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<sup>4</sup> The constitution prohibits consecutive reelection (Perez-Baltodano, 2010)

*transcendent motivation* (Smith, 2014), that the irregularities were “reprehensible in the eyes of God” (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2011b, para. 4).

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In 2012 the CEN maintained its position on conservative issues, such as abortion, family (particularly the care of the elderly), Catholic education, and poverty. However, during this year, the focus was on municipal elections. The bishops denounced that the political life in the country was dominated by an autocratic and abusive power that was destroying the fundamental principles of the rule of law (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2012, para. 4).

Without the use of allegories, the 2012 document was one of the most categorical statements made by the CEN in these years. It represents a significant transformation in the Bishops’ exhortations. For the first time, they did call to vote in the elections, but instead invited citizens to decide if they should participate or not according to their consciences (2012, para. 8). In addition to being municipal elections that generated apathy among the population (2012, para. 7), authors and reports consider this year as a determinant in the final installation of President Ortega’s hybrid regime (Chrimes, 2016; Diamond, 2015; Martí I Puig, 2013)

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The resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013 and the subsequent election of Pope Francis meant a gradual change in the Church’s paradigm of action. The new pope made numerous references to the Church’s commitment to democratic institutions (Pope Francis, 2015; Wood, 2016). As will be seen later, references to the magisterium of Pope Francis were constant in the bishops’ pronouncements during the 2018 wave of protests.

In Nicaragua, two controversial issues defined the political agenda that year: the approval of Law 840, which granted concessions to a Chinese company to build a canal that would cross the country (Huete-Pérez et al., 2015); and the intentions of making a constitutional reform. Regarding the

first issue, the CEN did not address the matter, although affected parish communities started to raise concerns.

However, reactions to the second issue were abundant. In November 2013, members of the National Assembly invited the bishops to consult them on the initiative. The CEN position was clear: “We have the firm conviction that the most urgent thing in Nicaragua at this time is not to make changes to the Political Constitution, but to purify and rectify its practice” (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2013b, para. 4). This initiative proposed critical transformations to the organizational structure of the National Police and the Nicaraguan Army, subordinating those institutions to the President’s supreme command of (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, 2018a). According to the bishops, it was not a favorable time for a project of that magnitude.

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This “advent” years (2008-2013), characterized by the gradual increase in complaints about the deterioration of the country's institutionality, closed with the celebration of the centenary of the Church Province of Nicaragua. With the festivity, the Bishops showed the Church's contributions to the political, economic, and social life of the country for 100 years. In 2013, the CEN stated that the Church had more than 320 parishes throughout the country, with numerous schools and hospitals, with religious orders working in different areas, and with lay movements working together with priests. Along with this inventory of religious and political assets, the Bishops Conference said that the Church promotes the institutionality, the rule of law, democracy, justice, and peace in every situation (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2013a).

One of the hymns prepared for this national celebration was heard in all Catholic parishes and media and referred to the messages of the bishops at different times in the country's history, and invited Catholics to be attentive to their diagnoses and motivations (See below). This hymn is a significant example of how the Catholic Church in Nicaragua created symbols, in a framing process (Snow & Bedford, 2000), to interpret social contexts and to mobilize. In particular, the expression related to the

Virgin Mary, an outstanding symbol for Nicaraguans, is potent in terms of disruption. With that verse, Nicaraguan devotion to the Virgin is associated with the denunciation of oppression.

(...) Today we are a **militant Church** and firm  
walkers on a planet in permanent combustion.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, by the eternal Father, and by the Holy Sacrament,  
Let us listen at all times to **the wise advice of the Bishop's voice** (...)  
We will be receptive,  
with the everlasting testimony  
that comes from the soul of the working people.

Let us raise prayers and acclamations  
To our Lady of the Conception,  
She will outline our destiny,  
**She will always show us the way to denounce, without fear, the oppression.**

(Mejía Godoy, 2013)

The bishops' constant message and strength throughout this period of reflections led them to be considered by various sectors (media and political parties) as substitute leaders for the fragmented opposition. They saw on the Bishops an alternative that should seek solutions to the increasing authoritarianism of President Ortega (Envío, 2014a). Under these conditions, a new stage in the relationship between CEN and the government took place in 2014.

### **5.3 As Lent: Written voices in the desert (2014- March 2018)**

This period of reflection began with relevant and unexpected news from the Vatican. In January 2014, Pope Francis named Monsignor Leopoldo Brenes, archbishop of Managua, as cardinal. The nomination had implications for the political life of the country. It reconfigured the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Nicaragua by depositing in the figure of the bishop significant political, and it opened opportunity windows that were blocked.

The government had the legitimacy offered by Cardinal Emeritus, Obando y Bravo, who, since 2007, headed the Verification, Reconciliation, Peace and Justice Commission. His figure, along with some priests related to him, moved parallel to the CEN statements, without any criticism to the government, while supervising social programs (see for instances Rivas (2012) in El19Digital).

When the news spread, the government reacted with perplexity with a communiqué until the next day (Envío, 2014a). Rosario Murillo, the first lady, celebrated the event by linking the figure of the two cardinals. “We are sure that Monsignor Brenes will continue to work near the poorest, contributing to the paths opened by the cardinal Miguel,” she said (Murillo en ACAN-EFE, (2014)).

In ministerial terms, the investiture had a celebratory character just after the centennial celebration of the ecclesiastical province of Nicaragua (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014a). The new cardinal was received with parades and tributes in several cities and parishes. At the same time, the coverage of the official media to his figure grew considerably (see, for example, Pérez, (2014)).

Regarding new opportunities, the event made President Ortega strategically decide to summon a dialogue with the bishops. After reflections on whether to participate or not, the bishops accepted under certain conditions: (a) presence of the entire CEN and (b) an open agenda (Envío, 2014a). In parallel, the bishops invited all Catholics to pray for the dialogue’s success and made clear their role and pastoral interest in Nicaraguan politics: “We do not seek anything for ourselves. We are interested in the good of the country. With the Pope, we are convinced that we must choose the dialogue, but without separating it from concerns for social justice” (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014b). The excerpt confirms the influence of Francisco's new papacy on the CEN to understand Nicaraguan politics, the pastoral motivation of the Church for this advocacy, and the breadth of issues and concerns.

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On May 21, 2014, the bishops met with the president in the Apostolic Nunciature to start the dialogue and give him a document. Being one of the most extensive documents of the period under

study, it is also one of the richest in content, synthesizes the issues presented since 2007, and adds new subjects to the list (see table 2). The bishops decided that the discussions for the dialogue were going to be about family, social problems, human rights, Church-State relationships, the Caribbean Coast, and institutionality.

Regarding **family concerns**, the bishops applauded the government's position against therapeutic abortion in international forums, the recognition of traditional marriage, and efforts to overcome machismo. However, they denounced forced sterilization of women in health centers and opposed the teaching of gender studies in schools, what they called ideology. They requested to have the same opportunity to teach Catholic moral doctrine in public schools and universities (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014c, para. 7).

Regarding **social problems**, the CEN provided testimonial evidence based on its presence in the rural and urban communities of the country. With a multidimensional approach to poverty, the bishops denounced unemployment, high cost of living, and inequality. They urged measures to address these problems. With these complaints, the CEN gave strong counter-arguments to the government's economic growth discourse. It was affirmed that thanks to a model of dialogue and consensus between the government and the private sector, the economy expanded by an average of 4.2% annually since 2007, one of the highest in Latin America (Chamorro, 2018; Gonzalez & Castellon, 2018; Otis, 2018).

In particular, they recognized advances in access to the health system but identified that there was no quality in medical centers. In the same way, they informed the president that the Catholic Church and other NGOs were providing services in the absence of the Government in many municipalities: "What would happen if the aid provided with great difficulty by organizations such as the Church and NGOs ceased to serve these vulnerable sectors?" –They asked. (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014c, para. 9) Similarly, the bishops recognized improvements in access to education. However, despite the progress, they pointed out that situations of ideological indoctrination were taking place in schools and universities. In this sense, they categorically affirmed that education of

excellence is fundamental to establish a democracy and that the Church was not indifferent to this urgent option.

Also, the bishops denounced a situation that would become alarming during the wave of protests in 2018. With “sufficient documentation” collected thanks to the Penitentiary Pastoral agents, the CEN condemned overcrowding conditions, inhuman treatment, and violations of the due judicial process in the country's prisons (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014c, para. 11).

Concerning **Human Rights**, the bishops first focused their attention on the actions of the National Police, recognizing the institution's efforts to guarantee citizen security, but denouncing situations of abuse of authority. The CEN also addressed the lack of respect for the human and labor rights, manifested, among other things, in unemployment and the instrumentalization of government's workers in party activities.

Also, the bishops denounced the "growing and alarming deterioration and destruction of natural resources," particularly in the indigenous, rural, and Caribbean areas of the country. They asked for government regulation to ensure mining companies to follow measures to protect life and prevent pollution. Even more explicit, they requested that permits be denied to mining projects in virgin territories, referring to the case of Rancho Grande. In that municipality, peasants protested for more than ten years against a metal mining project. The community organized in the movement "Guardians of Yaoska" adopted non-violent actions, which had broad support from the Diocese of Matagalpa (Sánchez, 2016). Notably, this is one of the cases that the CEN explicitly mentioned, and it can be inferred that it was a contribution from the Bishop of Matagalpa, Rolando Álvarez. In 2015, the government canceled the project, setting a historical precedent. Finally, along these lines, the bishops expressed concern about the deterioration of the freedom of expression, especially damaged by the growing monopoly of the media and the denial of spaces, resources, and availability of information to journalists.

Considering the **Caribbean Coast**, the CEN made a strong statement: "Since the annexation of the Caribbean Coast to Nicaragua in 1894, it has been a colony of the Pacific" (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014c, para. 27). In this manner, the bishops denounced the extraction of resources, the disrespect for the Caribbean culture, and the alarming dispute of colonizers to settle indigenous lands, which already left fatal balances.

The CEN officially addressed, for the first time, the Nicaragua Interoceanic Grand Canal project, mentioned above. They condemned the unknown environmental and social side effects. Although they did not show an antagonistic position to the project, the bishops requested greater transparency in the project details, as well as technical assistance to clarify constitutional, technical, and environmental concerns.

Regarding the **Church-State relationship**, the bishops were concerned about the use and political manipulation of religious images and symbols in partisan activities. They also rejected the practice of offering gifts to pastoral agents (especially priests in parishes) that, according to the bishops, were intended to silence voices and consciences.

Finally, about **institutions**, the CEN pointed to the severe deterioration of the country's democratic institutions, dishonest ineffectiveness of the Supreme Electoral Council, and an authoritarian style government. In one of the most personalized paragraphs of the document, they appealed to the president's empathy and rationality, inviting him to leave a legacy for the country, seeking ways of a national agreement, and restoring a genuine democracy. In particular, they reminded him that "the years pass and nobody is eternal" (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014c, para. 40). The phrase refers to Ortega's plans for continuous re-election.

They concluded this section by inviting the president to conduct an open, honest, and transparent **National Dialogue** that would include all sectors. They proposed a profound political reform of the country's electoral system, to ensure transparent and honest elections to guarantee the people's will in 2016 elections.

The President's response to this extensive document was: "I will read these proposals carefully" (C. Chamorro, 2014). Despite what it was desired, the bishops did not permit photographs, which represented a failure of image for the president (Envío, 2014b). Monsignor Báez pointed out that the Executive's reaction was astonishment because of the breadth of the issues, beyond the mere institutional and pastoral work of the Church (C. Chamorro, 2017).

Contrary to the extensive reporting of opposition media, no official press gave detailed coverage to the event. The first lady pointed out that the Executive had listened with humbleness to the bishops, and that the ministers would meet with the CEN to inform them more about the government's actions. Monsignor Rolando Álvarez said that the proposal was appreciated, but that they did not have time for such meetings. Despite the intense debate generated after the document, which was read in some parishes the following Sunday (Envío, 2014b), few concrete actions resulted from it.

The meeting ineffectiveness had an effect on the CEN. After that year, the bishops reduced their publications and thematic reiterations (see table 2). Indeed, in 2015 there was only one document, which deepened, among other things, the growing concerns about the Interoceanic Canal project and its possible effects on political, social, environmental, and economic life.

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The Bishops Conference started the 2016 electoral year with unusual behavior. That year, instead of the expected Pastoral Message for Lent, they issued a statement saying that they had various points of view on the country's context (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2016a). Although the bishops insisted that they were united, the general perception was that dissent reached the CEN (E. Chamorro, 2016).

It was clear that in their territorial units (dioceses and parishes), the bishops and priests always have shown different positions on the country's politics, mainly as result of their spiritualities, education, political and ecclesial experiences, compromises with international development and aid organizations, connections with transnational Catholic orders (Jesuits, Salesians, Carmelites).

However, the Nicaraguan Bishops conference, in its joint communiqués, presented itself as a monolithic body with a unique posture.

Despite the controversy around the lack of agreement that lent, the bishops published later two documents related to the presidential elections in which Ortega wanted his re-election, with his wife as a candidate for the Vice Presidency. The CEN classified the elections as complex and underlined the requests made in the 2014 document. Unlike other electoral processes, the messages tried to comfort and give optimism, despite the reasons for the pessimism. Although there was no explicit invitation to vote, the bishops appealed to the conscience to decide whether to participate or abstain in the elections. (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2016b). The predictable electoral victory of the Sandinista Front both in the presidency and in the National Assembly guaranteed four more years under the hybrid regime of President Ortega (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017). Experts classified these elections as non-competitive, with irregularities related to the dismantling of the democracy, the intentional fragmentation of the opposition, and the lack of the essential uncertainty of the results (Martí i Puig, 2019).

In 2017, the Ad Limina Apostolorum<sup>5</sup> visit to Pope Francis encouraged the bishops in their pastoral commitment. In the document published in this regard, the CEN stated that they were able to talk with the Pope, who was aware of the Nicaragua socio-political context and urged the laity to be active on politics (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2017a).

Later that year, in the municipal electoral processes, the bishops reiterated their concerns on the quality of the elections (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2017b). According to an interview with Monsignor Báez, the central message of the CEN with that document was that the problem in

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<sup>5</sup> The Ad Limina visit is the required visit of bishops of a jurisdiction to visit the tombs of the Apostles in Rome, and to meet the Pope to report on the state of their ecclesial territories.

Nicaragua was not primarily electoral, but institutional (C. Chamorro, 2017). This Bishops message, the last one before the wave of protests, reflected two critical elements of this period: a demobilized and discouraged society in the face of a hybrid regime that grew in authoritarianism<sup>6</sup>; and a Church that continued to appeal to the active civic participation on politics, with a consistent message throughout the years.

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<sup>6</sup> However, there is evidence that there were protests on specific issues. Few social movements sustained over time (Cabralles, 2020) .

## 6.0 As Passion: The wave of protests between April -October 2018

Following previous findings in the study of this Wave of protest, this section identifies events in which the Catholic Church, as a mobilized and mobilizer institution and community, played a determinant role. The researcher pays attention to protests in which (1) it was evident that there were the presence of religious figures, or (2) there were events that were *certified* by the Catholic Hierarchy, or (3) there were actions that display how the church mobilized its religious assets supporting protesters.

It is possible to identify for analytical purposes, three different phases of ecclesial involvement during the wave of protest. Initially, while continuing its role as a Mobilizing Church, it appeared as an institution and community that protested along with other social actors rejecting social security reforms.

Second, as a Movement's

Midwife, it appeared as an external agent that enabled and protected an emerging national social movement, which gradually grew amid the authoritarian drift and the revolutionary demands.

Third, as a resilient Church, without abandoning its spiral of involvement initiated in April 2018, it adapted its supporting strategies.

**Table 3.** Selected events for analytical description.

	Date	Event	Role
1 2 3	April 20	The “Moral reserve speech.”	Mobilizing Church
	April 28	The second national march	
	May 14 and 15	Sébaco intervention amid shootings	
4 5 6 7 8	May 16	The National Dialogue	Movement's Midwife
	June 21	Masaya intervention amid repressive attack	
	July 9 and 10	Bishops harassed in Diriamba parish. Santiago Parish profanation.	
	July 13	Divine Mercy Parish Shootings	
	July 19	Presidential Speech: <i>coup plotters!</i>	
	October (post-Wave)	Celebrations around Monsignor Romero's canonization	
9 10		Liturgical celebrations and safe spaces.	Resilient Church

Selection based on Cabrales, S. (2020). La oleada de protestas del 2018 en Nicaragua: procesos, mecanismos y resultados.

In this stage, the Church paid the high cost of its participation with protesters, motivated by transcendental and institutional reasons.

Thus, the researcher's selection of **ten chronological events** (each located in one of these three phases) offers an understanding of the Church's involvement in the Wave (Table 3). Some more important than others, these events and stages validate previous findings on broader processes and mechanisms of mobilization and countermobilization related to the pattern that the protests were following in 2018 (Cabralles, 2020).

## 6.1 A mobilizing Church

Before April 2018, along with national and international organizations, the Catholic Church hierarchy and numerous local religious leaders warned about the democratic regression in Nicaragua. The documents analyzed in the previous chapter demonstrated the increased ecclesial concern about the issue, making the Bishop Conference appear as one of the most solid voices in the so-called opposition.

The hybrid regime features in Nicaragua during those years allowed groups and organizations to protest under intermediate levels of repression that demonstrated the incipient, but progressive, authoritarian characteristics. According to previous findings, before the Wave, protests against the interoceanic canal by peasants' movements stood out among others. *Valence protests*<sup>7</sup> by transporters and taxi drivers demanding formalization of their working conditions, feminist organizations denouncing gender violence, and groups demanding electoral reforms also delivered significant

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<sup>7</sup> Isolated collective actions or protests, without ideological content and minor geographical scale (Harris & Hern, 2019)

demonstrations. However, none of these isolated demonstrations activated the processes and mechanisms of the 2018 Wave of protests (Cabral, 2020; Mosinger et al., 2019).

As previously evidenced, many of these events reached the top of the Catholic hierarchy and had echo in the Bishop's communiqué. In a variety of cases, Church involvement was strong, and it is possible to affirm that the Church behaved as a mobilizing institution according to "the signs of the times" before 2018. Although the involvement had different tonalities, it was also significant at all levels: from parish administrators to religious women, Bishops, and the Papal Nuncio.

In addition to the cases that reached the communiqués, two examples support the argument:

- An iconic intervention of two bishops, Monsignor Brenes and Monsignor Baez, in a low-scale wave of protests in Managua. On the morning of June 22, 2013, Sandinista Youth mobs attacked 50 students and 30 senior citizens that were protesting against an adjustment to the Retirement pension system (Miranda Aburto, 2013). The Bishops went to the place and asked that the violence against demonstrators cease and talked with the aggressors<sup>8</sup>. The bishops' public appearance was the first one of its kind in the time under study. Starting this moment, Monsignor Baez, one of the newest member of the CEN, gradually increased his accusatory language towards the government. His now-public and explicit reactions to this case and other governmental policies surprised many, mainly because he was considered an intellectual and spiritual bishop. This increased language also coincided with the new papacy of Francis in Rome, that as explained above, was impacting the CEN's vision and action.
- *Vilma*, a peasant leader in the Movement against the interoceanic Canal, and *Rodrigo*, a peasant leader in San Miguelito - Río San Juan, reported in field interviews that local parish administrators

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<sup>8</sup> See videos on the events <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9l56G448pU0> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8jvsZTbgeU>. In the second link, in a rare episode, the Bishops talked with the Sandinista Youth mobs and asked "in God's name" to stop the aggression.

made their resources available (mainly in the form of infrastructure and leadership) for the peasants' organizations. They also mentioned that the support was not uniform since some Bishops did not agree with their movement and actions (Personal Communications, May 2019). The disparity of support reflects that the CEN, a uniformed voice in the communiq  s, was unequal at the level of the dioceses. The bishops and priests, with different spiritualities, education, ecclesial traditions, understood with different perspectives the developing political events.

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Amid this quasi-volatile political hybrid context, at the beginning of April 2018, a forest fire in a National Park and the negligent State management of the situation changed the awareness of different social actors to new opportunities and threats. The forest fire was a unifying emergency for University students with vastly different political visions and experiences, bringing them together to protest. Faced with intermediate repression, students prepared conditions for further social mobilization. The fire, extinguished on April 13, left protests in five municipalities. The previous trend of Nicaraguan collective actions suggested that the mobilization was going to decrease. The difference, in this case, is an element that some scholars point out as fundamental in the activation of mobilization: the timing of threats (Almeida, 2019). This factor would come into play days later.

On April 17, 2018, after months of debate, President Ortega approved reforms to the Social Security Law. The unilateral decree meant the rupture of the recognized *Model of Dialogue and Consensus* between the private sector and the government. In previous years, the Bishops' Conference repeatedly questioned these public-private alliances because they were creating inequality (see the previous chapter).

After the announcement, the Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada (Cosep), a business organization, issued a statement that confirmed the rupture of these alliances, triggering the sort of conflict between economic and political elites that generally opens opportunities for protest mobilization. On April 18, students who days before had built incipient structures and repertoires of

protests for the Forest Fire emergency, called for demonstrations at the Universidad Centroamericana and a mall in the capital city, Managua. Other actors –mainly workers and feminists– joined them, building an *injustice frame* that understood the reform as extractive and harmful.

However, the governmental response to these protests consisted, as usual, of mobs that attacked the protesters, penetrated the university campus, and damaged private property (GIEI, 2018). The live broadcasting of the repression spread rapidly in social networks and media<sup>9</sup>, a widely valued phenomenon essential for the mobilization of many more citizens (Castells, 2015).



**Figure 3.** Nicaragua. Monsignor Baez's tweet on the April 18 protest  
Translation: I urged Daniel Ortega and his wife to stop the violence and repression. Do not threaten the peace of the country! Learn how to listen, to talk. Have the maturity to rectify so many mistakes for the good of Nicaragua!. Be reasonable!

stop the repression and to avoid a higher conflict. For his part, Cardinal Brenes called on the government and the protesters to stop the violence and pressed for a dialogue (Brenes in Canal 12, 2018a).

Previous research recognized that night as decisive for the creation of the Wave (Cabralles, 2020). The images of other protests in León and Managua, uprisings in public university dormitories with students refusing to participate in obligatory pro-government demonstrations, and plans to organize marches in several municipalities the next day were events that inaugurated the 2018 Wave

Following these events, Monsignor Baez tweeted a post that local and international media replicated (for instance, Rondón, 2018), and that went viral among Nicaraguan protesters. He addressed President Ortega and Rosario Murillo, his wife, and vice-president, to

<sup>9</sup> For instance, this videopost on the attack to Universidad Centroamericana' students had more than 16,000 visualizations. <https://www.facebook.com/Articulo66/videos/1693066687429171/>

of protests in Nicaragua. The Church leaders, as had been expected and as they demonstrated, were already mobilizing their religious assets.

Rather than describing in detail the +2,000 protests events that followed that night in the context of the wave, the next section will focus only on the selected events where the Church had a significative role (Table 3). In this regard, it is essential to bear in mind four elements:

- (1) Multiple variables<sup>10</sup>, mechanisms, and processes were also at play. Therefore, the role of the Catholic Church in the wave's development should not be absolutized or considered as merely causal. For instance, figure 4 locates the 2,067 protests in those six months. Even though the disruptive activity reached the nine dioceses of Nicaragua, some of them had more mobilization. This variation might be the result of different Church's pastoral approaches at the local level, different motivations, and actions during the Wave, and of course, demographic variances, distance to the capital, access to technology, among other factors.



**Figure 4.** Nicaragua. Location of protest events during the Wave April 18 protest – September 30, 2018. Dioceses of Nicaragua in the background.

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<sup>10</sup> Among other variables to consider is the international context. As Defronzo (2015) states, it is also an element that triggers—or hinders—protests and revolutions. In this case, the international community and foreign governments remained attentive to the events, constantly urged the government to stop repression, and encouraged protesters in their demands for democracy. A slight approach to this variable in this thesis has been the consideration of the Catholic Church as an transnational actor (Ferrari, 2007) with international networks and structures.

- (2) The selected events occurred at the same time as other significant actions, as is usual in a wave of these dimensions. For instance, when the Moral reserve speech took place on April 21, students were also occupying a university campus in Managua. It is not the purpose of this section to describe all those other events here.
- (3) Along with these selected events, many other episodes of protests are examples of how the Church, in its different levels, mobilized its assets. It is not the intention of this research to invisibilize them.
- (4) In many cases, the priests and religious men and women's actions were spontaneous and were the result of personal initiatives and motivations. Throughout this and the following chapter, the interviews and secondary sources confirmed that they supported the protests, and helped demonstrators without a clear policy coming from the hierarchy. To some extent, the Church's actions were also "*autoconvocada*"<sup>11</sup>. With the gradual proliferation of ecclesial actions and the explicit validation and participation of some bishops, these spontaneous actions became the policy towards the Wave. In July 2018, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes confirmed that he: "told the priests to open the temples, (...) that the temples can be turned into hospitals, into shelters, **as Pope Francis says**<sup>12</sup>." (Brenes in Villavicencio, 2018)

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On April 20, the Cathedral of Managua became one of the epicenters of the Wave. According to the testimonies of religious women, students arrived early that day to protests and to build an improvised health care center for wounded demonstrators (Sister Lopez, personal communication, May

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<sup>11</sup> Since the beginning of the Wave, journalist tagged the demonstrators as "*autoconvocados*" or self-convened, highlighting the spontaneity of the actions, without clear guidance and coordinated actions.

<sup>12</sup> Since 2014, Pope Francis constantly uses an analogy to describe the Church: "The Church is like a field hospital where wounded people arrive seeking the goodness and closeness of God." (ACI, 2014). This comparison had a literal interpretation in the Nicaraguan bishops and priest amid the Wave of protest.

2019). The violence increased considerably in the protests around the Cathedral. The images of the repression, notably the assassination of 15-year-old student Álvaro Conrado, who first went to the Cathedral to receive first aid, triggered protests throughout the country.

However, at 2:00 pm, the Sandinista Youth, escorted by police, began to attack the protesters around the Cathedral (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, 2018b). More than five hundred demonstrators ran to the temple, transformed into a refuge. The mobs surrounded the cathedral and began to threaten those that were inside<sup>13</sup>. The nuns and priests went out to talk with the mobs' leaders to persuade them to move away. However, one of them wanted the priests and nuns to expel the demonstrators out of the temple. The response of the nuns was: "We are not going to give them to you." Subsequently, the mobs began shooting at the cathedral. The priests' and nuns' communication with the bishops was constant. As a consequence, Cardinal Brenes contacted Rosario Murillo, vice president and first lady, to request the cessation of harassment. Immediately, according to interviews, the mobs withdrew but continued harassment in the surrounding areas that night.

More than 300 protesters spent the night inside the temple, fearing of being injured if they left the place. In those hours, the bishops issued their first pastoral letter amid the intensifying situation in the country. The statement urged the government to listen to the clamor of the young people and to repeal the reforms to the social security law. "The



**Figure 5.** Managua, Nicaragua. Clergy and Monsignor Baez and Brenes in front of students and journalists in the Managua Cathedral on April 21, 2018.  
Photo: Carlos Valle

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<sup>13</sup> There is abundant evidence in videos that went viral that day. See for instance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOo0uRiAFNg&t=74s>

Bishops (...) vigilant to the cry of Nicaraguan youth who civically claim their rights (...) urge the country's authorities to heed the clamor of the youth and the voices of other sectors", the statement said (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018g). The next morning, more than twenty priests, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, and his auxiliary bishop, Monsignor Silvio Báez, arrived at the Metropolitan Cathedral to show their support.

In this scenario, Monsignor Báez gave a very significant speech: "I would like to thank you on behalf of the Church because you are the moral reserve we have (...) Your protest is fair, and the Church supports you." He asked them to avoid political ideologies because the protests' cause was "social justice." Báez made constant reference to Pope Francis' social teaching (Álvarez, 2018).

Another example of this validation occurred on April 25. A group of nuns approached one of the occupied Universities, and, holding Nicaraguan flags, joined the protest. Visibly emotional, the oldest of them said: "Viva Nicaragua (...) free, sovereign, independent, democratic, fair! We have been in prayer for you (the students); we are taking care of you in prayer. Go ahead, the fight is fair" (SosNicaragua, 2018).

These statements are clear examples of the certification mechanism described by Tilly & Tarrow (2015). The Church, as an external institution with broad legitimacy, gave *transcendent motivation*, legitimacy, and support to the protests that were proliferating throughout the country. Although the Church's support for young people was already evident in the facilitation of multiple assets to protect and validate protesters, Báez's words and the nun's action ratified it publicly. Similar atypical but engaging declarations came from other bishops (such as Monsignor Álvarez in Matagalpa<sup>14</sup>).

In the same way, the diffusion and brokerage mechanisms defined in Tilly & Tarrow (2015) and Castells (2015) were also at play. The first interventions and bishops' declarations went viral within and

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<sup>14</sup> In an interview, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, the newest member of the CEN, appointed by Pope Benedict, in 2011, declared: I see as positive how the youth is displaying its social awareness (...). The Nicaraguan people have to know that the bishops are going to accompany them in this historical path." (Canal 12, 2018c). Álvarez had a record of involvement in anti-mining protests in his diocese (Sánchez, 2016).

beyond Nicaragua. As a result, other collective actors and individuals across the country joined the protests, full of these transcendent motivations, making possible the Wave's escalation.

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Amid the increasing violence and mounting protests, president Ortega proposed a National Dialogue and invited the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference to mediate it. The proposal evoked the insistence of the bishops since 2014 to celebrate an inclusive dialogue involving all social and political sectors (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2014c). From the first moment, many organized and emerging social actors saw the Dialogue as an opportunity to achieve the required changes. By then, the protests' claim continued as junctural but gradually acquired a revolutionary tonality demanding a regime change. The possible negotiations were also seen as a threat, as it was argued that they would serve to lower the pressure on the streets.

President Ortega's invitation to the Bishops highlights another feature of the powerful Church's certification mechanism in Nicaragua. All sides of the emerging conflict perceived the institution neutrality at that moment<sup>15</sup>. Despite the explicit declaration of some Bishops, Cardinal Brenes and other CEN members had a posture with remarkable restraint that kept doors open for negotiation. With this early ecclesial "neutrality," the Church involvement in different municipalities lent powerful credibility to the demonstrators.

On April 24, after "praying, listening, and asking for the light of the Holy Spirit," the CEN agreed to be a mediator and witness in the National Dialogue. The bishops asked for a climate of respect, cessation of violence, and openness. They requested the civil society to accept them in that decisive role (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018e).

While the dialogue was planned, the dioceses called for a striking and eloquent action. The bishops called for a national pilgrimage to pray for peace and justice in Nicaragua. The action took place in several

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<sup>15</sup> Later, amid the increased attacks towards the Church, the Sandinistas denounced that the Church was taking sides. This is explained in the subsequent events.

cities on April 28. Parishes and religious communities prepared the mobilization that quickly acquired contentious features.

In the dioceses of Granada and Matagalpa and the Archdiocese of Managua, pilgrimages became massive marches with the participation of groups from different sectors, including those traditionally antagonistic to the Church. For example, there is evidence of the involvement of feminist organizations<sup>16</sup>. With the Vatican and Nicaraguan flags and amid prayers, protesters demanded peace, with justice for the victims. In the case of Managua, the pilgrimage concluded with Mass in the Metropolitan Cathedral. The liturgy had a significant political component. Monsignor Silvio Báez led a prayer in which he remembered the deaths of demonstrators, the violence against women, the peasants' and indigenous communities' struggles, and the depredation of the environment. Participants continually interrupted with applause and protests slogans against the government. According to participants, it was a clear manifestation of trust in the Catholic Church in its mediation role (*Victor*, Journalist, Personal Communication, December 2019). From the perspective of political processes, the April 28 events represented a privileged opportunity in which the Church showed its worthiness, unity, number, and commitment (the WUNC effect, as Tilly & Tarrow, 2015 suggest). This demonstration of power was essential in the prelude to the national dialogue. With this action, the church confirmed its spiral of involvement and escalated its demands.



**Figure 6.** Managua, Nicaragua. Church's march for peace and justice. April 28, 2018.  
Note participants with protest signs with the name of death demonstrators.  
Photos: Oscar Navarrete

<sup>16</sup> Mirna Blandón, for instance, a feminist leader, said that they recognized the commitment and coherence of some Church leaders. According to her, there is a common goal. (Blandón in Ana Cruz & Álvarez, 2019)

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Starting in May 2018, the Wave of protest increased its dimensions and transformed its claims (See table 4). May had three times more demonstrations than April, many of them with more significant revolutionary features, demanding a regime change. These claims emerged among the population, mainly as a result of the overwhelming repression. The evidence suggests that this was not a revolutionary movement<sup>17</sup>, but a wave of protests that acquired revolutionary claims at a certain point in its development.

**Table 4.** Nicaragua. Frequency of protests and other features of the wave. January 2018- December 2018.



	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Number of protests	6	20	20	201	615	794	313	88	57	17	15	5
Protests with casualties	0	0	0	24	20	39	15	0	1	0	0	0
Type of claims												
Church's role	A mobilizing Church				A Movement's midwife			A resilient Church				

Source: Original data compiled by the author.

At the macro level, while the protests were increasing, the Bishops Conference prepared the dialogue and met with various social and political actors. According to interviews with individuals involved in the preparation process, there was support from negotiation experts from the Vatican, as

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<sup>17</sup> According to Goldstone (2014) in Almeida (2019), revolutionary movements are historically rare.

well as advice from supranational organizations such as the Organization of American States (*Juan*, personal communication, February 2020).

In this context, protesters started to locate numerous roadblocks in several municipalities, evoking the use of barricades in the Sandinista revolution, or the protests against neoliberal reforms in the 1990s (Almeida, 2014). The roadblocks quickly became places of high-impact transgression and violence. The *tranques*, as the demonstrators named them, were the most popular form of protest of this Wave, and served as a neighborhood defense against the parastatal repression (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, 2018a).

On May 14 in Sébaco, Diocese of Matagalpa, a prolonged conflict between protesters and

police, who were trying to dissolve the roadblocks, also took place. One of the protesters told journalists that the Police, along with Sandinista Youth members, attacked them with bullets. Participants responded with homemade mortars.

Due to the intensity of the attack, the local Catholic Church improvised a medical center to take care of the injured, because, according to Father Uriel Vallejos, doctors were not attending the



**Figure 7. Sébaco Intervention.**

(Top) Sébaco inhabitants in a procession with Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, amid shootings. May 14, 2018.  
(Bottom) Procession's trajectory and points of attack.

Map elaborated in collaboration with Julio César Zeledón, procession's participant.

Photo: Melvin Vargas

Map elaborated in collaboration with Julio César Zeledón, procession's participant.

Photo: Melvin Vargas

wounded protesters in the Public Clinic<sup>18</sup>. Participants in the events said that while the doctors were treating multiple wounded protesters, other Catholic parishioners were praying in the Church.

The communication with the diocese's bishop, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, was constant. On the afternoon of that day, the priest announced that Álvarez would arrive at Sébaco to try to restore order. Once there, Monsignor Rolando summoned the parishioners to pray for the peace. Then, spontaneously, he started a procession with the Blessed Sacrament in his hands, while the shootings continued.

The procession quickly became a march across the city. Figure 6b shows the route of the improvised procession that intentionally passed through points of high conflict. More than 500 Sébaco inhabitants, without creed distinction, participated in an atmosphere of solemnity and reflection despite the overwhelming violence. While they were praying and singing hymns, the crowd also shouted protest slogans. As can be seen in figure 6a, at several points, the procession uninstalled barricades and tires. The shootings stopped for a while. (*Ramón*, Personal Communication, January 2020). Doctors reported at least 16 protesters, including teenagers, were wounded that day. In an interview, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez said that his motivation to do the improvised action was “to accompany the people in prayer” (Velásquez, 2018b).

Similarly, in the Diocese of Matagalpa, in the city of Río Blanco, protesters reported that the priests were advising them. Amid repression, they alerted the young protesters of the increase in repression in other parts of the country: “The parish priest, well-known Catholic ladies, and our parents, arrived at the roadblock. They came to talk about not taking risks that there were already many dead

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<sup>18</sup> Reports have found that the Ministry of Health fired around 400 health professionals who participated in the protests or treated the wounded demonstrators (IACHR 2019, July). These actions show another serious form of repression. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Human Rights Watch and reports collected by the researcher in previous papers and in this study, evidenced cases of commands given to medical personnel not to attend injured protesters.

protesters (Carlos, personal communication, May 2019). Similar events were taking place in several municipalities and Catholic parishes. The National Dialogue, for its part, was about to start.

## **6.2 A “movement’s midwife.”**

Table 4 shows how the Wave of protests grew rapidly and reached its peak in June. Along with the increase in the number of events, the demands also acquired revolutionary features. The presence of five factors generally associated with successful revolutionary processes (mass frustration; elite break; legitimacy crisis; unification of efforts and identities; a favorable international context) generated the escalation towards revolutionary demands and the perception that it was possible to achieve them (Defronzo, 2015). The attitude was exacerbated with the beginning of the National Dialogue on May 16, mediated by the Catholic Church.

It is possible to affirm that, parallel to the claim escalation, the Church gradually modified its role in social mobilization. While being a mobilized and mobilizing institution and community, the Church deliberately put efforts into help in birthing, nurturing, and protecting an emerging movement, while retaining its institutional identity (Smith, 2014). This mechanism, previously explained in the theoretical framework, is the “movement’s midwifery.” In the case under study, the best expression of this role ws the National Dialogue.

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When the bishops accepted the mediation, they demanded certain conditions, such as the release of detained protesters, the cessation of repression, respect for freedom of the press, the revocation of the reform to the social security, the invitation of international organizations to supervise human rights violations, and an open agenda. They also considered that a month after the beginning of negotiations, they would evaluate the progress and the will of the involved actors. If certain conditions

were not met, they would suspend the dialogue (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018c, 2018b). It was relevant that the negotiation was going to take place at the Archdiocesan Seminary of Managua, putting even more conditions in favor of the Church. That location guaranteed the control of all the details, from the logistics to the position of the negotiating tables (*Juan*, Personal Communication, February 2020).

Despite the prerequisites, the bishops and the protesters saw with skepticism the possible results: “The National dialogue is a risk. It can be a government strategy to return to normality. Maybe nothing will be achieved. However, we the bishops want the truth; we will not let ourselves be instrumentalized, and we will only seek the best for Nicaragua. We will take the risk! ” Monsignor Silvio Báez said on his Twitter (04.28.2018).

According to numerous testimonies, in the last week of April, the bishops determined who would participate in the negotiation. They decided that there should be delegates from various sectors: businessmen, students, Academia, workers or unions, civil society, the government, among others. The CEN invited them to present three representatives who would be free to discuss the issue they wanted (*Juan, Miguel, Ignacio*, personal communication, February 2020). In a newspaper report, a dozen people said they received phone calls from the bishops. In some of the cases, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez invited them to visit the CEN headquarters. Some interviewed in this research confirmed the information and affirmed that Álvarez was, indeed, the architect of the negotiation. Dr. Carlos Tünnerman Bernheim, a representative of the Academia, said that he was

“Invited by Monsignor Álvarez to a meeting, and he asked me if I trusted the CEN to serve as a mediator and witness to the National Dialogue. I told him that CEN had all my confidence. He then asked me to participate in that dialogue, as a member of civil society, and I accepted” (Tünnerman in Olivares, 2018).

The selection process under the Church’s criteria is an explicit example of the religious institution as a movement’s midwife. At that time, the Church was the most robust institution in the

country amidst the chaos of the protests, showing its strength in the April 28 marches, participating and protecting demonstrators, and summoning at its discretion the National Dialogue participants. Without losing its ecclesial identity, the Church began to pick faces and leaderships to the protests, which until then had lacked structure<sup>19</sup>, conforming to the so-called Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy (see Table 5, grey zone). Since its creation, this organization has received international certification and remains as an interlocutor in all attempts to negotiate with the government.

**Table 5.** Nicaragua. Participants of the National Dialogue mediated by the CEN (2018).

CEN members acting as mediators:	Civil Society delegates:	Universities
Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, Archbishop of Managua	<b>Azahalea Solís,</b> Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres <b>Luis Sánchez Sancho,</b> Editor La Prensa <b>Carlos Tünnermann Bernheim,</b> former minister of Education	<b>Telémaco Talavera,</b> Consejo Nacional de Universidades (CNU) <b>Ernesto Medina Sandino,</b> President of American University Nicaragua <b>José Alberto Idiáquez SJ</b> President Universidad Centroamericana
Monsignor Silvio Báez, Auxiliar Bishop of Managua	<b>Sandra Ramos</b> Movimiento de Mujeres “María Elena Cuadra”	<b>Private Sector</b> <b>José Adán Aguerri,</b> Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada (Cosep)
Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, Bishop of Matagalpa	<b>Luis Barbosa,</b> Central Sandinista de Trabajadores JBE	<b>Jaime Rosales Pasquier</b>
Monsignor Bosco Vivas, Bishop of León	<b>José Espinoza</b> Central de Unidad Sindical (CUS)	<b>María Nelly Rivas,</b> American Chamber of Commerce
Monsignor Jorge Solórzano, Bishop of Granada	<b>Students</b> Alianza Universitaria Nicaragüense Movimiento Estudiantil 19 de abril Movimiento Universitario 19 de abril, Universidad Agraria Coordinadora Universitaria por la Democracia y la Justicia	<b>Michael Healy</b> Unión de Productores Agropecuarios de Nicaragua
<b>*Many more participants from each sector joined the sessions.</b>		<b>Government</b>

<sup>19</sup> The protest was called in many occasions as a protest of self-convoked people. The name stood for the nature of protest that emerged simultaneously, without strong leadership and without prior coordination (Cabral, 2020; Mosinger et al., 2019).

The visibility, opportunities, and recognition of specific individuals and groups in the critical events of the Dialogue, was decisive in the conformation of the national social movement generated amid the wave.

The union representative and feminist, Azahalea Solís, illustrates the importance of having been summoned by the Church to create the Civic Alliance: “I believe that this consensus, this unity, never seen before in the country, is a significant first success” (Solís, 2018). Without delving into the dialogue details, it is essential to note that the process was rugged. The absence of political will to hear the opponent’s demands stuck the negotiations on several occasions.

As a consequence, the Church suspended and reopened the dialogue more than one time. While the dialogue sessions were taking place, the protests increased exponentially, and they did so even more in June with 796 (see table 4). Most of these protests were roadblocks with high levels of violence and repression. The most significant number of events with casualties were in these weeks. This increase of protests is explained by the impossibility of the National Dialogue to achieve its demands.

In this stagnation and growing repression, the new opposition figures emerged and consolidated, under the protection of the Church. Meanwhile, the religious institution and community continued its mobilization in various localities of the country.

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By June, the repression of protesters left attacks and casualties in several municipalities. International organizations reported severe human rights violations, and foreign governments urged to resolve the crisis that was confirming an authoritarian drift (Amnistía Internacional, 2018; Martí i Puig, 2019). In the meantime, the rugged dialogue continued.

One of the most affected cities was Masaya. The municipality organized multiple barricades evoking the Sandinista revolution in 1979 (Mosinger et al., 2019). Police Forces and paramilitary groups constantly besieged the civil population, which responded to the attack with mortars, artisanal

weapons, and rocks (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, 2018a). The violence reached one of its highest points on June 21, when police set up an operation to restore order in the city and launched paramilitary groups with heavy weapons to shoot the civilian protesters (Fiorella, 2019).

When the reports on the attacks in Masaya reached Managua, Monsignor Brenes declared: "We would like to make a call to the Government (...) It is unfortunate to be talking (in the Dialogue) under the bullets, violence, and uncertainty." After this statement, an unexpected move surprised many.

The Archdiocese of Managua confirmed that Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, Monsignor Silvio Báez, the Papal Nuncio, and members of the Managua clergy would go to Masaya to accompany the people and try to stop the repression (Arquidiócesis de Managua, 2018a). Once in the city, residents took the streets to receive the bishops and knelt on the sidewalks with the Vatican and Nicaraguan flags, while shouting "Long live the Catholic Church, *Viva Nicaragua Libre*." Similar to the Sébaco events, the bishops made an unplanned procession with the Blessed Sacrament amid the barricades and attacks. "Justice, justice, justice," shouted the participants as they accompanied the procession (Editorial El Nuevo Diario, 2018).



**Figure 8.** Masaya, Nicaragua. Bishops intervention in the city of Masaya. June 21, 2018.  
Note the use of multiple religious assets.  
Photos: (Left) Jader Flores, (Right) Uriel Velázquez.

At one of the parks of the city, the bishops prayed with the Masayan people and asked for peace. The Papal Nuncio announced that "The Holy Father was informed of what is happening in Nicaragua." Later, the bishops spoke with the local Deputy Chief, Ramón Avellán, to reach a cease-

fire and to release detainees. The police agreed without specifying the duration of the arrangement. Members of the Civic Alliance also went to the city to try to mediate and support the people.

The event illustrates how the Church acted as a movement's midwife in three ways. First, it protected the protesters, moralized the Masaya city in its struggle, and mediated in the local conflict using symbols and religious assets (note the use of sacraments, clothing, flags, songs, powerful cultural-communal event, religious procession).

Second, it showed itself as a transnational actor in the presence and words of the Papal Nuncio. This action facilitated the immediate escalation to the bishops' movement that day. Third, the intervention in Masaya implicitly positioned Civic Alliance' figures, giving them greater legitimacy in the wave of protests.

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According to the protests records, by July, lethal violence became the usual form of repression against demonstrators. The government of Nicaragua, responding to the increased mobilization that demanded a regime change, activated this counter-mobilization process. Repression was shown more clearly in the *Clean Up operation*. This governmental strategy included the action of police and paramilitary forces to eliminate roadblocks and dissolve protests in occupied Universities. Reports confirm the use of high-caliber weapons against civilians (see Fiorella, 2019)

One of the crudest examples of this tactic occurred on Sunday, July 8, in the department of Carazo. Groups of paramilitaries and National Police agents entered simultaneously in different cities to "clean" the roadblocks. When the attack began, church bells rang to alert the protesters and inhabitants<sup>20</sup>. The shooting lasted for more than ten hours, leaving more than twenty protesters killed

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<sup>20</sup> In field interviews, protesters reported that in Jinotepe, Matagalpa, Masaya, Catarina, León and Sébaco, the parish bells served to alert the arrival of police and paramilitary forces to the cities (Personal communications, may 2019).

and dozens of detainees, according to reports by human rights organizations (Luna, 2018; Romero & Calero, 2018).

The next day, bishops and members of the Archdiocese of Managua's clergy, along with the papal Nuncio, went to Diriamba, Carazo. They wanted to free a group of people who were taking refuge inside the San Sebastián Basilica. They also wanted to express their solidarity, try to stop the siege, and negotiate the release of the detainees, as they did in Masaya weeks before.

In Diriamba, Sandinista mobs attacked the clerics. They shouted at them: "Assassins, coup plotters, pedophiles." When they entered the temple, government supporters beat them. The mobs wounded Monsignor Silvio José Báez in his right arm, hit him in the stomach, and robbed his bishop's insignia. Several priests cried at the aggression<sup>21</sup>. The attack stopped when the Nuncio called president Daniel Ortega, asking him for respect (Munguía & Calero, 2018; Tijerino & Cruz, 2019). Members of the Civic Alliance accompanied the bishops.

After the attacks, Brenes ordered everyone to return to Managua and declared: "We felt the brutal force against our priests. We went to the parishes to comfort our priests, to accompany them in suffering, and we received aggression. Lord, forgive them because they do not know what they are doing" (Brenes in Velásquez, 2018a).



**Figure 9.** Diriamba, Nicaragua. Bishops intervention in the city of Diriamba. July 9, 2018.

Photos: (Top) Oscar Sánchez, (Bottom) La Prensa AFP.

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance: [https://youtu.be/3\\_WStbJETog](https://youtu.be/3_WStbJETog).

When the attack was taking place in Diriamba, the Archdiocese of Managua also denounced, in escalated language, that “Sandinista mobs profaned the Santiago Apostle Parish in Jinotepe” (Arquidiócesis de Managua, 2018b). Sandinista supporters entered the parish and destroyed benches, images of Saints, tables, and medicines (collected in the temple to attend to injured protesters).

In this context, in a clear example of framing (Snow & Bedford, 2000), Carlos Mejía Godoy, songwriter of the Sandinista revolution and now opponent to Daniel Ortega's regime, composed the hymn Oremos: *Let us all pray today for our priests. We pray for their strong courage; we pray that the dogs never damage their integrity. We pray for our pastors and bishops; we pray for Pope Francis, who from Rome implores and calls out for peace*<sup>22</sup>. (Mejía Godoy & Los de Palacagüina, 2018)

These direct attacks on the Catholic hierarchy surprised protesters across the country and the members of the Civic Alliance (*Miguel*, personal communication, February 2020). The Sandinistas' message was clear: The Church as an institution and community, which until then was immune to direct repression, ran the risk of being affected. The spiral of involvement with the movement caused the Church to lose credibility and respect among the Sandinistas (this is statistically tested in Chapter 3). With these attacks, the Church began to transform its role as Movement's midwife.

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On Friday, July 13, as part of the Clean Up Operation, police and paramilitary forces attacked the demonstrators who were occupying the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN). According to various testimonies, the protesters were negotiating an agreement to leave the campus in exchange for guarantees when they were surprised by the armed attack (Voz de América, 2018). Faced with the unexpected operation, more than 200 protesters evacuated to the Divine Mercy parish (see

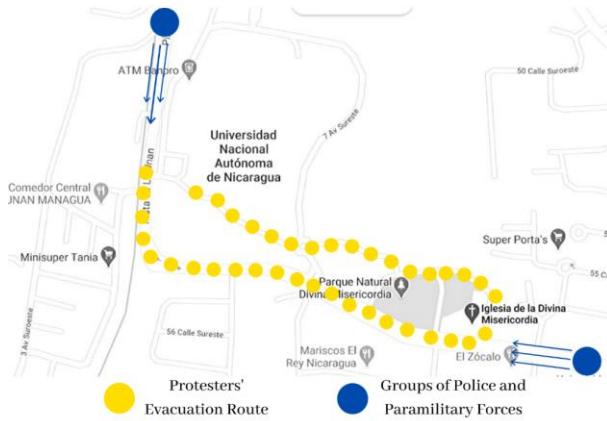
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<sup>22</sup> See composition here  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjZsDnLTBqg&list=RDMjZsDnLTBqg&start\\_radio=1&t=0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjZsDnLTBqg&list=RDMjZsDnLTBqg&start_radio=1&t=0)

figure 10a), which was as a medical center since the beginning of the protests. Wounded students also entered the temple looking for help. Josh Partlow, a Washington Post journalist that was present at the scene, reported that the protestors “carried the wounded students into the Rev. Raul Zamora’s rectory and put them on chairs or on the blood-spattered tile floor. Outside, at the barricade, other students shouted and fired their mortars against the unseen assailants” (Partlow, 2018).

After the evacuation, paramilitary forces surrounded students, two priests, neighbors, volunteers, and journalists who took refuge in the parish. The paramilitaries shot at the Church, leaving countless holes (see figure 10b). Amid the attack, two students died, and sixteen others were injured (Salazar, 2018a).

That night, Father Zamora had constant communication with the clergy, local radio stations, and the Bishops, asking for help. According to Partlow’s report, Father Zamora begged on a radio station interview: “Please (...) I call on the conscience of the authorities. If they (the students) have already left UNAN, why are they attacking the church? They cannot be attacking a sacred place” (Partlow, 2018).



**Figure 10.** Managua, Nicaragua. Attack to Divine Mercy Parish. July 13, 2018.  
Photos: (Top) Evacuation route map. Original elaboration based on reports.  
(Bottom) Carlos Herrera. Parish Facade after the Attacks

After ten hours of negotiation to release of the protesters inside the Parish, the Papal Nuncio, and Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes arrived at the Divine Mercy Parish. The released protesters were conducted in Church’s buses to Managua Cathedral, where they met their families. In an improvised

press conference, Cardinal Brenes declared: “We give thanks to God because the *muchachos* are safe and sound. We are going to work to ensure their safety” (Brenes in Salazar, 2018).

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On July 19, in the anniversary of the Sandinista revolution, President Daniel Ortega accused the bishops of promoting a “coup d'etat” against him, in cooperation with the opposition and the United States government (Salazar, 2018b). The president based his argument on the request made on June 7 by the bishops. The CEN proposed a solution to overcome the sociopolitical crisis: to anticipate the general elections for March 31, 2019, without the possibility of re-election. According to the bishops' statement, the request reflected the feelings and the thinking of the Nicaraguan majority (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018f).

The bishops designated Monsignor Baez to lead the meeting that day. He pointed president Ortega and Vice-president Murillo and said: "You are responsible for us being here, because if you had reacted in a rational and peaceful way, Nicaragua would not be as it is now. You are responsible! you are the ones who are killing people!" (Báez in J. D. Cruz, 2020).

In his speech, President Ortega said that the request surprised him: “When I received the document, I said: well, this is what they want. I thought they were mediators, but no, they were committed to a coup d'etat. They were part of the plan (...) It hurts me because I appreciate the bishops, I respect them, I am Catholic” He also pointed out that there were differences in the CEN, between hostile and moderate bishops. The Papal Nuncio, invited to the event, remained motionless on the stage.

Subsequently, the president said that in many parishes, the protesters stored weapons and bombs to attack the police and the Sandinistas. No international organizations that monitored the protests have evidence in this regard (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, 2018a).

Interviewed protesters also did not refer to the use of temples for these purposes. They only reported that the Churches stored medicines and food for demonstrations.

The bishops considered President Ortega's accusations as false. They pointed out that they have been impartial mediators in the conflict, but that they could not be insensitive to the suffering of their people. Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes confirmed that his command amid the protests was to open the temples, which became hospitals, "as Pope Francis says." (Brenes in Villavicencio, 2018). Despite the accusation, the bishops were reluctant to continue mediating in new sessions of the dialogue. The CEN sustained this position for the rest of the Wave.

In 2019, when the National Dialogue started again, the bishops decided not to participate and left the mediation in charge of Papal Nuncio. The Government was vetoing the participation of Monsignors Rolando Álvarez and Silvio Báez in those negotiations. The two bishops played a significant and visible role in the Wave, as demonstrated. "We will accompany as pastors in these crucial moments of our country," the CEN affirmed. They said that from then on, they would have a limited prophetic mission, dedicating themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (Confidencial, 2018; Miranda, 2019). This change of posture is the result of the first negotiations' failure, where the CEN consistently denounced the government's lack of will. Monsignor Baez confirmed that the "the first dialogue was frustrating" and there was not "willing to dialogue or compromise" (J. D. Cruz, 2020). In some interviews, negotiations' participants said that the bishops also insisted repetitively on moderate the regime-change claims of the opposition. Similarly, the pastoral needs and plans in their dioceses were also continuing, and another slow dialogue process would restrain them.

In any case, this abstention to participate confirmed that the Church, while supporting the movement, was not part of it. This behavior is a clear expression of the midwifery mechanism at play. The absence in the 2019 negotiations did not mean a lack of involvement in politics. The bishops (individually or at the CEN), and clergy members continue making constant calls to democracy and justice restoration.

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With the actions illustrated in the relevant events of this section, the Church “helped in the birth” of a national social movement under severe authoritarian conditions. Its decisions allowed to give it structure, face, visibility, and agenda, without becoming the movement itself. The subsequent abstention to participate in the 2019 negotiation confirms this midwifery role. At the same time, the Church continued its mobilization in several communities. However, as a consequence of the repressive events and the presidential accusation, the Church once again transformed its role.

### **6.3 A resilient Church**

After July, under the effect of the Clean-Up Operation, the Wave of protests transformed its demands (see table 4). The mobilizations began to include specific claims such as freedom for political prisoners, electoral reforms, support for persecuted figures (like the bishops), and democratization and justice. The adaptation of the revolutionary demands is mainly explained by the process of counter-mobilization and repression (Cabralles, 2020).

The Wave ended around September. The repression also mutated, giving way to the installation of a police state, with constant street patrolling, harassment of protesters, and arrest threats (International Crisis Group, 2018). The Church, for its part, adapted its repertoire without abandoning its spiral of involvement. In general terms, the Church transferred its struggle to the symbolic field in a framing process that allowed it to maintain its institutional mobilization and encourage others to action. The transformation was strategic, considering the imminent authoritarian drift that was affecting the religious institution. Two events illustrate this role: the celebrations around the canonization of Monsignor Romero, and the liturgical celebrations in the last quarter of 2018.

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In October 2018, the canonization of Monseñor Romero's, Salvadorian bishop and martyr under a military rule, provided the opportunity for the creation of social frames for the Sandinistas and the opposition in the Wave's context. Within the entire spectrum of symbols and expressions that the Catholic Church developed in this resilient role, the use of the figure and message of Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero is exceptional. His words in the context of repression in El Salvador were valid in Nicaragua, particularly in the authoritarian drift.

However, far from being a simple phenomenon, the construction and appropriation of the symbol of Romero became a real dispute between two sides of the conflict: (1) the opposition, the Church, and protesters, and (2) the Sandinista government.

On the one hand, the Catholic Church and the opposition revived the martyr's message to validate their protests and to label the government's actions as repressive and violent. On the other hand, the Sandinistas repositioned the figure of the bishop in the context of canonization. Before the wave of protests, the symbolic use of the martyr was already widespread among some Catholic Sandinistas. As Maier (2016) clarified, Romero has been associated with liberation theology - and, consequently, with the Latin American Left (Perla Jr, 2010). In this scenario, the Sandinistas revived that association in order to use Romero as an example for the Nicaraguan clergy that, according to them, was siding with the opposition.

The dispute over the symbol intensified because, in October 2018, the Catholic Church canonized the martyr bishop, only one month after the conclusion of the Wave. This ecclesial event generated wide dissemination of Romero's message, life, and work.

The Sandinistas stated that the example of Romero was key to the moment the country was living. His message, they noted, accompanied recent efforts to recover the lost peace and tranquility, as a result of the violent events caused by the right. "We Nicaraguans are committed to Romero's struggle, begging the Saint to fight to achieve peace," Vice President Murillo said in this regard (October 13, 2018). Simultaneously, Sandinista rhetoric began to argue with greater persistence for

the desire for peace and intentions to "eliminate hatred," an expression usually associated with the opposition in Murillo's statements. "His canonization invites us to be peacebuilders in difficult times," - she said (Murillo, October 13, 2018).

For its part, the opposition celebrated the canonization by continually reiterating the socio-political crisis in the country. Opposition groups underlined Romero's denunciations of the grave human rights violations of his own time, to achieve resonance in the context of the repression in Nicaragua. In an interview, Sister Damaris Acuña, a religious woman present in the tributes to Romero, affirmed that "Nicaraguan Catholics (must see) in Romero an example of Christian life in the current socio-political crisis in the country" (Acuña in Gonzalez Espinoza, 2018). Monseñor Romero was presented as a saint against repression, and a saint because of being a *terrorist*, *coup plotter*, and *vandalic*, three adjectives that Vice President Murillo pejoratively assigned to protesters in Nicaragua. (Martínez, 2018; Urtecho, 2018).

The creation of the frames was also to be found on Twitter, after Monsignor Silvio Báez, created a campaign labeled #OigamosARomero in that social network, to spread the message and figure of the Martyr (González Espinoza, 2018). A famous cartoon (Molina, P. 2018, October 13) also served as an accusation to the governmental inconsistency by referencing that beyond the tributes, Romero "begged and ordered" the cessation of repression (See Figure 11).

Similarly, President Ortega, while using Romero's message, accused that one of the causes of the crisis was international interference in the country. He emphasizes that Romero was: "A fervent opponent of all foreign intervention and interference because it perpetuates oppression. Monseñor's



**Figure 11.** Nicaragua. Cartoon on Monseñor Romero. October 2018  
Author: Pedro Molina

principles opposed those interventions because they bring violence, injustice, and deny peace to the people. (President Ortega, October 13, 2018).

Both opposition and Sandinistas endorsed the words and image of the bishop to interpret their mobilizations or justify their efforts against protesters, respectively. Through the framing process, the two sides described the problem and accused the counterparts; while making prognostic-motivational references for action (Snow & Bedford, 2000). The dispute over this symbol in the convulsive end of the Wave illustrates how the strategies from both sides gradually transformed and adapted to the changing conditions.

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On September 28, 2018, the National Police declared illegal any form of protest (Salinas, 2018). In one of its parts, the declaration states: individual and organization that summon these illegal mobilizations (...) will be accountable to justice." The announcement had an immediate effect on mobilization. Table 4 showed that after September, protests decreased.

Despite the "silence" generated after the announcement, the protests persisted under the strategic call of the emerging national social movement. However, these events have three different characteristics to those recorded during the wave of protests. First, they do not take place in the streets, due to the risk of apprehension of the participants. Second, they are not extended events. Third, they do not have a high number of participants. These new features represent an adaptation to the threats imposed by the counter-mobilization process, particularly in the face of the ban on citizen protest. However, the adjustment itself is evidence of the movement's strategy to sustain itself over time and enforce its demands.

The Catholic Church played a vital role in this new phase of adaptation. As has happened in other contexts of repression and authoritarianism, parishes became one of the few safe places to protest. Parish administrators have admitted such protests in the same spirit that led them to act at the beginning of the wave: to protect the lives of protesters from the possible threats (Sister Lopez, personal communication, May 2019).

On October 22, for example, for the first time on 27 Sundays, only one protest took place in Nicaragua. It was the unique event achieved thanks to its improvisation in a closed and protected space: the Managua Cathedral. After the Sunday Mass, the attendees raised their Nicaraguan flags, shouted the names of the prisoners, and remembered the dead protesters. In another parish, Monsignor Silvio Báez called for cultivating historical memory and criticism to eliminate “caudillismo and authoritarianism” (Álvarez & Del Cid, 2018). Similar circumstances began to take place in religious processions, which became expressions of protest in several dioceses (*Victor*, personal communication, December 2019).

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With its resilient role, the Church continues its involvement but adapts its strategy in the authoritarian regime. It remains as a mobilized and mobilizing actor that facilitates its religious assets for protesters. This role persists almost two years after the wave of protests began in Nicaragua and implies cost and benefit for the institution, as Chapter 3 shows.

## **7.0 A matter of coherence, legitimacy, and interest**

In some cases, the Catholic Church around the world, as an institution and community, tends to activate its spiral of involvement in critical junctures answering with different kinds of rationales. From the perspective of social mobilization, these responses vary accordingly to the perceived threats and opportunities, as explained in the theoretical framework. This case is not an exception.

Some of the events explained in the second chapter already outlined many motivations behind those actions. However, it is possible to deepen those interests. This chapter explains theological and religious interpretations of the Church's behaviors, emphasizing the community dimension. Subsequently, it explores the political and social interest behind the involvement, underlining the institutional aspect. The last section analyzes the short-term outcomes of the spiral of involvement.

### **7.1 Theological and religious coherence and motivations**

The Catholic Church is an institution with a centuries-old tradition of political involvement around the world. In Latin America, this participation in politics has meant not only alignment with the popular interests, but also in the majority of the cases, sympathy for oligarchy and elite interests, multinational corporations, and the U.S. government.

However, following the Second Vatican Council in the sixties, a new era of the relationship between Catholicism and politics began. According to Himes (2007), the new understanding is based on five statements that the council participants ratified:

One, the Church is *sacrament* conceived to be sign and instrument of salvation, so when the world looks at the Church, it will see God's grace at work for love, life, forgiveness, justice, and compassion (Leffel, 2007). Two, the Church is a *servant* engaged with all humanity in the transformation of the world. In this regard, the *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the Second Vatican Council documents, affirmed that the place of the Church is within the world, not apart from it. Third, the Church is *communion* behaving as a *transnational actor* composed of many churches united in faith and mission around the world (Ferrari, 2007). That is to say, the Church realized its purpose not only universally but mainly locally and regionally. In an age of globalization, the Church facilitates these transnational connections, and have a quicker voice in the development of global and local events<sup>23</sup>. Fourth, the Church is the *people of God* composed of a majority of laypeople that have a mission to be a witness in worldly activities, such as politics. Politics is understood as a way of living the mandate to love the neighbor, primarily through fair institutions. Fifth, the Church is *ecumenical* working with other religious communities in the aim to set social institutions to serve human well-being.

At the end of the Second Vatican Council, Latin American participants returned to the region and particular countries and adapted these teaching. Although the doctrinal appropriation was not uniform among all the dioceses, the ecclesial event had multiple implications in the Church-States relationship and motivated significant disruptive activity in a variety of oppressive contexts (Arellano-Yanguas, 2014; Reed & Pitcher, 2015; Sanchez, 2014; Trejo, 2009).

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<sup>23</sup><sup>23</sup> A clear example of this transnationality occurred on April 22, 2018, the fourth day of the Wave of protest. In his Regina Caeli Speech, he declared: "Dear brothers and sisters, **I am concerned about what is happening these days in Nicaragua**, where, following a social protest, clashes have taken place which have also claimed some victims. I express my closeness to that country in prayer, and I join the Bishops in asking that all violence cease, that useless bloodshed be avoided, and that open questions be resolved peaceably and with a sense of responsibility." (Pope Francis, 2018) This declaration shows the quick interconnections between the local Church in Nicaragua and the Vatican amid the developing events of the Wave.

As expected, these theological motivations rooted in the Church's self-perception were also present in ecclesial involvement during the 2018 wave of protests and its subsequent scenario. These inspirations, combined with institutional and political interests, served as *transcendent motivation* for the Church members (Smith, 2014). These pastoral motives also explain the institution's reaction to repression, which, although it demobilized the general public around October 2018, made the Church slightly adapt its strategy and keep the spiral of involvement mechanism activated until today with self-discipline, sacrifice, and altruism.

The revision of the Bishops communiq  s and interviews with Catholics leaders (priests, and religious men and women) and laypeople that participated in noteworthy events are full of examples of these pastoral and theological motivations. For instance, amid the revolutionary claims and the National Dialogue summoned by President Ortega, the Bishops reiterated their pastoral mission in the crisis, and that they did not have technical solutions for particular issues. The Church's goal, the bishops stated, was to be mediator and witness in that critical scenario (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018d).

The CEN made even more explicit its pastoral motivation with a communiqu   issued to denounce death threats to the Bishops and priests:

The prophetic ministry of announcing and denouncing, typical of those called to the episcopate in the Catholic Church, requires us to be attentive and active in favor of the just claims of the people that God has entrusted to us. (Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua, 2018a)

As another example, in an interview, *Sister Mar  a* said, in tears, that her primary motivation to shelter young protesters in the Managua Cathedral on April 20, 2018, and to protect them from repression was her commitment to life and Nicaragua. "We were not going to expose the *chavalos* (young people) to the street, knowing the danger, sending them to be killed. They (the police) were shooting to kill them. We did what we had to do." Notably, in recounting the event, the religious woman referred to one document of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, noting that the Church has

to be with the people and the justice (Personal communication, *Sister María*, Mayo 2019). Similar declarations were given by Father Silvio Romero, a Franciscan, when he said that for the Church, this involvement was not new, and it was a matter of coherence with its teachings (Personal communication, May 2019).

On May 30, 2018, Father Alberto Idiáquez, the president of Universidad Centroamericana, opened the university gates to shelter thousands of demonstrators that were under paramilitary attack to repress their protest. Visibly shocked amid the crowd, the Jesuit declared that the wave of protests was becoming “a massacre every day (...) with deaths, disappearing, tortures. It has no name; this is a defenseless people” (Somos Jesuitas, 2018).

In July 2018, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez celebrated a mass in front of a prison, where dozens of demonstrators remained incarcerated. According to Álvarez, the religious ceremony, full of powerful symbols, was to demonstrate how the Church shared its “pain and suffering (...) with those imprisoned and unfairly prosecuted” (Canal 12, 2018b).

Similarly, Father Raúl Zamora, the Divine Mercy Parish administrator, declared that during the July Friday 13th attacks, he had in his mind only the human lives at risk amid the repression when he gave refuge to the 150 students in the temple. Father Zamora administered the sacraments to a student that died in the parish as a result of the shootings (Voz de América, 2018).

Other declarations confirm that many priests and religious men and women answered the numerous emergencies as a consequence of their theological, human, and pastoral motivations. Once they activated this transcendent motivation, Catholic figures mobilized all their available religious assets: organizational and financial resources, identities and frames, geographic positioning, privileged legitimacy, and institutional power.

## **7.2 Sustained legitimacy and influence amid a Critical Juncture**

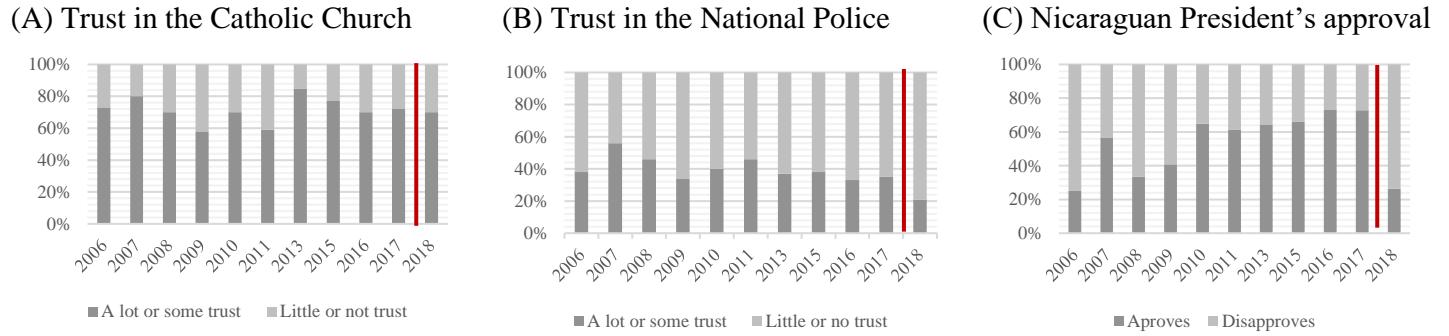
Besides pastoral motivations, it is clear that in the wave scenario, the legitimacy of the Catholic Church in the eyes of the public was at risk<sup>24</sup>. Its position in the political scenario determined the direction of the changes, catalyzed the mobilization, and facilitated multiple outcomes (from the negotiations to the liberation of political prisoners). Numerous authors have noted that critical junctures like the 2018 wave of protests in Nicaragua have a decisive impact in citizen's attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, including institutions such as the Church (Agger, Almond, & Verba, (1965), Craig & Cornelius (1980)). Therefore, political culture surveys reflect all or some of these transformations.

In particular, the most recent Nicaraguan chapter of the Latino barometer offers an opportunity to approach the matter<sup>25</sup>. Recent data, collected in July 2018 amid the wave of protests and repression, echoed these transformations. In effect, Table 6 reflects the differences in the citizens' trust in three major institutions that played a protagonist role during the critical juncture (red line): the Catholic Church, the National Police, and the Presidency.

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<sup>24</sup> As demonstrated before, the Catholic Church had frictions with the Sandinistas starting 2008. However, there were still political connections with the government that were important to sustain. The Bishops also considered the impact on this relationship when they took side in the evolving Wave.

<sup>25</sup> Latino Barometer is an annual public opinion survey that includes more than 20,000 observations in 18 countries in Latin America. This section focuses on data from Nicaragua. The survey includes 1,000 individuals from 64 of the 153 Nicaraguan municipalities. The survey includes indicators on perceptions, attitudes (what constitutes Political Culture), and demographics.

**Table 6.** Nicaragua. Trust in institutions before and after the Wave

Source: Author's elaboration. Data from the Latinobarometer. \*\*\* Red Lines describes the Wave of Protest.

The Catholic Church continued to be one of the most credible institutions in the country and was not affected by the critical juncture. In contrast, the National Police reached its lowest levels of trust after having come to be considered the repressive institutional arm of the government along with para-institutional control groups (Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, 2018a).

Another significant impact is on approval for the presidency. In recent years, despite the multiple indicators of democratic recession in the country, president Ortega was one of the most popular leaders in Latin America (J. M. Cruz, Marenco, & Rodríguez, 2018, Martí & Wright, 2018). However, the wave of protests impacted this indicator, reducing the approval from 72% in 2017 to 26% in July 2018. This data can be interpreted as growing opposition to president Ortega and a considerable loss of his legitimacy.

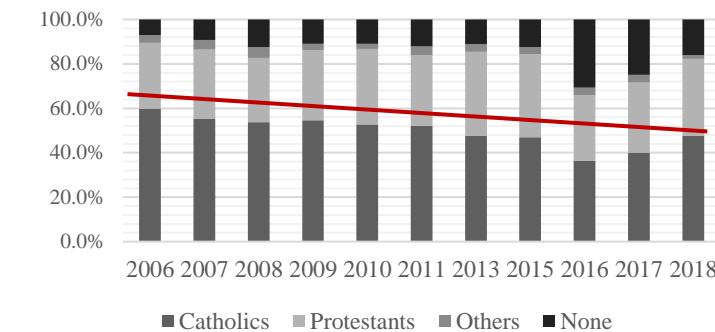
This recovered credibility among Nicaraguans would allow the Church to later impact the country's political agenda in times of greater stability, and to introduce pending subjects as those proposed in the years before the wave. A similar case occurred in Poland when the Church activated strategies to guarantee its viability and institutional independence and its ability to shape public policies within the consolidation of the victory over communism (Byrnes, 2007).

To give another interpretation for this legitimacy and influence motivation, insights from Trejo (2009) could be particularly useful. In his research, he developed the conceptual framework of a

religious market where the Catholic Church competes with other religious groups for the number of affiliates. Data from the Latino barometer shows an increase in “competitors” in the Nicaraguan religious market, the gradual reduction of Catholic affiliates, and the growing statistics for the Protestant church in its multiple denominations (Figure 12).

The best insight from this explanation is the “externality” perspective. The Church activated its involvement process, knowing the reduction of its affiliates, but not as a consequence of it. The institution knew that its

**Figure 12.** Nicaragua. Change in religious market 2006-18.



Source: Author's elaboration. Data from the Latinobarometer.

participation in the Wave’s events would also recover, **as a positive externality**, its influence in the country’s religious market.

### 7.2.1 “Came to bring fire on the earth”: A Catholic cleavage.

As expected, the Church’s positioning is creating divisions in Nicaraguan society, depending on citizens’ location in the political spectrum and their level of support towards the government. Gradually, the Church, as an institution and religious community, transformed into a cleavage point between the opposition and the Sandinistas. The former group consistently praised the role of the bishops, priests, nuns, and the papal nuncio during the critical juncture and pointed to the Church’s decisive institutional role in the future of the country despite some differences (Arturo Cruz, 2019).

The Sandinistas, for their part, developed accusatory speeches towards religious leaders, especially to some bishops. For instance, in one public declaration, the vice president and first lady, Rosario Murillo, said that the bishops were "full of hatred and not looking for the good of Nicaragua.

"They are looking for destruction, as they have caused it (...) over the centuries, and this year too"  
(Murillo, October 13, 2018, in Umaña, 2018).

To empirically test or demonstrate the extent of this argument, the researcher ran a **regression analysis** of the changing levels of the trust in the Catholic Church on the citizen's position in the political spectrum using a proxy, as explained below. Therefore, it is expected that the individual's political position determines his or her trust in the Catholic Church. In other words, he or she will trust in the Catholic Church according to his support for the Sandinistas or the opposition. This variability could be associated with the critical juncture that the wave of protests started, but more research is needed to establish more precise conclusions and causalities. Yes, this is a *first and simple approach* to a continuing and changing scenario.

The analysis uses the most recent data from the Latino Barometer, collected in July 2018, amid the wave of protests. In particular, the two main variables for this simple regression analysis are the trust in the Catholic Church (as the dependent variable), and the Approval for the president (as the independent). It is important to mention some features of these variables. First, the dependent variable is a *Likert scale* with four values: A lot of trust, some trust, a little trust, no trust. For the sake of interpretation, the researcher transformed it into a dummy variable, considering 0 as little or no trust, and 1 as some or a lot of trust<sup>26</sup>.

Second, the independent variable is a dichotomic value where the interviewee approves or disapproves the President's work. This value offers an opportunity to use it as a proxy of the positioning in the political spectrum. In other words, the disapproval of the president's works could be considered as an indicator of opposition. Even though other variables in the survey asked about their political party

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<sup>26</sup> The transformation of attitudes questions (Likert scales) into dummy variables is a common strategy in regression analysis. For instance, Bargain, Boutin, & Champeaux (2019) created a dummy out of a question on women's attitudes toward gender roles in their study of the impact of the Arab Spring in the women's political participation. **The strategy allows for the results' interpretation in terms of percentages.**

affiliation, the intensity of the critical juncture distorted that question, and those variables suffered from attrition. For example, for the question “For whom will you vote if the elections were this Sunday?” many respondents left incomplete. A possible explanation for this is that at that moment, there was not a clear political opposition.

The analysis introduced some controls for the regressions, trying to avoid confounding effects. For instance, age, sex, ethnicity, education, religion, and municipalities' fixed effects were included. The fixed effects control absorbed a critical consideration: the municipalities' economic conditions and the intensity of the wave of protests in that locality. For robustness checks, the regression included another dependent variable: (1) the trust in the National Police, and (2) the trust in the Military. As they were also Likert scales with four values, the researcher transformed them into dummy variables for straightforward interpretation.

Therefore, this section is estimating the following model:

$$TCC_{2018} = \alpha + \beta_1 PoliticalPositioning_d + M_{fe} + u$$

Where  $TCC_{2018}$  is a dummy variable of the individual's trust in the Catholic Church in 2018, and  $PoliticalPositioning_d$  is the dummy variable of the individual's approval or disapproval of the president's work.  $PoliticalPositioning_d$  is considered as a proxy of his or her positioning in the political spectrum during the critical juncture.  $M_{fe}$  are the controls for the municipality fixed effects.

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Results in column 1 in Table 7 show that if the individual is in the opposition, his trust in the Catholic Church improves 22%. The results were significant at the 1% level, but the R-squared was very low (0.043). For those reasons, the researcher gradually introduced more controls –such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, and municipality fixed effects. The results in all the columns remained significant and illustrative.

**Table 7.** Nicaragua. Individual's political position on dependent variables (Trust in Catholic Church, National Police, and Military)

Dependent variables	Trust in the Catholic Church							Trust in the National Police	Trust in the Military
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Individual's position in the political spectrum (x)	0.22***	0.22***	0.22***	0.257***	0.25***	0.26***	.2894***	-0.44***	-0.40***
(Standard Error)	(0.03)	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.037)	(.004)	(0.32)	(0.037)
Age	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sex		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ethnicity			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Education				Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Religion					Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipality fixed effects						Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	875	875	875	761	761	752	752	757	750
R-squared	0.043	0.04	0.04	0.06	0.06	0.08	0.22	0.37	0.27

In particular, in column 7, with all the controls activated, the results remained significant, and the R-squared reached a value of 0.22. The results indicated that if the citizen is in the opposition, his trust in the Catholic Church will increase by 28.94%.

When using other similar dependent variables (Column 8 and 9), with institutions that acquired an opposite position during the critical juncture, the results varied interestingly. In column 8, if the citizen is in the opposition, the trust in the National diminished 44%. The results were significant at the 1%, including all the controls.

Similar results are appreciated in column 9, where the trust in the Military diminished 40% if the citizen was in the opposition. Results were also significant at the 1%, including all the possible controls. Although there is no evidence of explicit Military involvement during the critical juncture, the inaction of the “*poder moderador*” has been intensely criticized among the opposition (Bow, 2019).

In sum, these findings indicate that, even with sustained credibility among Nicaraguans in the growing opposition, the Church faces the threat of diminished legitimacy and respect of the Sandinista groups still in power. In the short term, this implies critical momentary costs.

### **7.2.2 Momentary costs: repression**

Since the beginning of the Wave, the Catholic Church involvement implied high human and material costs as part of the counter-mobilization process executed by the State of Nicaragua amid its authoritarian drift. The Church, both as an institution and as a community, also suffered the seven forms of repression inflicted on the Nicaraguan protesters that were found in previous studies and reports: discursive underestimation, media censorship and manipulation, extraordinary decrees, harassment, arrests and prosecutions, deprivation of resources, and use of direct violence (Amnistía Internacional, 2018; Cabrales, 2020; Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, 2018a; United States Department of State, 2019).

It is important to note that repression can have a double effect in a wave of protests. On the one hand, if repression is increasing but inconsistent, the protesters –in this case, the Church as institution and community–perceive repression as a threat, generating more mobilization, a spiral of institutional involvement or escalation, as described in the theoretical framework (Borer, 1996).

On the other hand, if repression is persistent and overwhelming, the suppression of dissent and demobilization occurs (Carothers & Youngs, 2015). For the opposition in general, this hindering effect took place after the protesters claimed revolutionary changes around May 2018 (Cabrales, 2020). However, the institutional Church sustained its position and strategies throughout the wave and adapted its role as a movement's midwife, despite the increasing costs under the seven modes of repression.

Chapter two already mentioned several cases of these modes of repression towards the Church. This section, for its part, illustrates seven forms of repression that together imposed high short-term costs on the Church, especially after the Wave's conclusion: discursive underestimation, media censorship and manipulation, extraordinary decrees, harassment, arrests and prosecution, deprivation of resources and direct violence.

The **discursive underestimation** justifies more repressive measures through elaborated arguments and rationales for countermobilization. In this case, Sandinista media reproduced terms that were usually originated by the vice president and first lady, Rosario Murillo, or president Ortega. Those expressions slandered, and stigmatized protesters and Church leaders by considering them criminal groups, coup plotters, diabolic, and terrorists.

The best example of this mode of repression occurred on July 19, 2018, with President Ortega's speech, which has already been described in chapter 2. Similarly, on October 13, right after the Wave's conclusion, Vice President Murillo implicitly accused the bishops and blamed them for being "full of hatred and not looking for the good of Nicaragua. They want destruction, and they have caused it (...) over the centuries, and this year too" (in Umaña, 2018).

In November 2019, and amid a controversial hunger strike in a Catholic parish, Murillo accused the Catholic Church by sustaining, a year after the Wave, the "coup" rationale. She said that there was a "manipulation of *well-known religious sectors* that participated along with atheists and abortionists in an attempted coup d'état" (Velásquez, 2019)

It is imperative to note that authorities' discursive underestimation of the other in critical junctures such as a wave of protests, has often served as a precondition for harm-doing in group violence –such as genocides (Staub, 1989). The Church members and leaders in Nicaragua are in a vulnerable condition in the face of an accusatory speech coming from groups in power recently accused of crimes against humanity (GIEI, 2018)

The state's **media censorship and manipulation** are exemplified in the temporary shutting down of TV broadcasts in the early hours of the protest on April 19, 2018. The Telecommunications Institute censored the Bishop's television channel along with news networks. The Institute gradually restored the broadcast the next day.

The censorship also had an expression in the harassment of journalists that reported protest events. International organizations counted more than 50 journalists that had been or currently remain

in exile after the Wave of Protest. For instance, Julio Zeledón, who worked as a journalist in a Matagalpa Diocesis TV Channel, and contributed to this research with an interview, left the country amid persecution for his journalistic coverage in Sébaco (Personal communication, February 2020).

State repression also works with **extraordinary decrees** that build a legal or normative framework against the Church involvement. For instance, in October 2018, government officials forced public employees to sign a letter headed to the Vatican, denouncing Monsignor Silvio Baez for "instigating violence and discord," which "does not correspond to the pastoral tasks of his investiture or the papal command" (Vargas & López, 2018).

Starting in July 2018, priests and religious men and women reported barriers to their work in prisons, especially when they wanted to have access to political prisoners to offer religious sacraments and other pastoral needs. On the contrary, evangelical protestant volunteers did not report the same restrictions. Similarly, Catholic and Evangelical leaders affirm that the government is restricting travel visas for applicants intending to travel to Nicaragua for religious purposes, based on the perceived political affiliation (United States Department of State, 2019).

**Harassment** as a repression mode had expression in multiple physical assaults and verbal affronts, threats, and intimidation by pro-government groups against Catholic leaders and members. Five different cases, among numerous examples, illustrate this repressive tactic.

In July 2018, priests and laymen reported multiple acts of vandalism, and profanation of temples and religious items in regions such as Carazo, Masaya, Managua, Granada, Matagalpa, Estelí, and Jinotega (Ruiz, 2018; United States



**Figure 13. Nicaragua. Estelí. A parish vandalized.**

The graffiti says: Get out Coup Plotters!  
Photo: Roberto Mora, July 2018

Department of State, 2019). For instance, the Diocese of Jinotega denounced that “on Friday night, July 20th, unidentified individuals profaned the chapel of Our Lady of Carmen (...) in the city of Jinotega. They dishonored the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Altar protected in the chapel.” (Diócesis de Jinotega, 2018)

On September 9, Deputy Chief Ramón Avellán physically attacked Father Edwin Román in Masaya amid a prayer that was constantly interrupted by Sandinista music. According to Father Román, when he asked that the harassment stop, deputy Avellán pushed him on the shoulder and said to him, “you priest, *son of a bitch* (...) get into your church and eat all those cookies (referring to the communion bread)” (in Romero & Tórrez, 2018). Father Román is a prominent religious figure that supported the protesters during and after The Wave.

A significant example of this tactic occurred immediately after the Wave’s conclusion in October 2018. The San Pablo Apostol community, a catholic-inspired organization that is not in communion with the Vatican, whose liturgical activities explicitly show Sandinista affiliation and support (Gaitán Hernández, 2019), announced it had an audio recording of Monsignor Baez conspiring with opposition activists. In consequence, Sandinista supporters demanded Báez to go into exile or jail because of his involvement in the so-called attempted coup d'état. The Bishops Conference showed Monsignor Baez its support (E. Chamorro, 2018; Ynestroza, 2018). Later on, in April 2019, Pope Francis transferred Monsignor Silvio Baez to Rome to work closely with him (Ynestroza, 2019).

In May 2019, a nun in the Managua Cathedral described situations with police force infiltrations of religious celebrations in the temple to spy on protesters and Catholic laypeople (Sor Lopez, Personal Communication, May 2019). There are reports of similar police behavior in other parishes that have been protests centers during and after The Wave.

In November 2019, when political prisoners’ mothers were holding a hunger strike in a parish in Masaya for nine days, the National Police surrounded the temple, interrupted the electricity and water, and prohibited access to the church (Ana Cruz, 2019). In this exacerbated context created by the

national attention to the events in Masaya, the police also harassed parishes in neighborhoods in Managua, Jinotepe, Catarina, and Jinotega, trying to prevent more protests.

State repression also worked in the form of **arrests and prosecution** of Church members who actively participated in numerous protests. Although no religious leaders had been officially arrested for a prolonged time, threats to do so had been abundant. Government officials stated that bishops did not have judicial protection and could be processed for political involvement and an intended coup d'état (United States Department of State, 2019).

At the end of 2018, at least three priests had to go into exile as a consequence of these threats. According to *Father Ismael*, a Salesian, there are unpublished cases of religious men and women – especially foreigners— who had to be transferred by their superiors as a result of these threats and harassment. (Personal Communication, May 2019).

**Deprivation of resources** as a form of repression had its best example when the bishops were informed about financial retaliation against parishes and cathedrals that received tax exemptions and budget allocations from the National Treasury before the wave of protest (López & Chamorro, 2019). The controversy around the government's gifts and support to churches and priests had precedent in the years before The Wave, as explained in chapter one. However, The Wave's events put an endpoint to this divisive issue.

**Direct violence** is the most aggravated and powerful form of repression, consisting in the use of lethal and non-lethal force by state and parastate groups against protesters, and the Church's infrastructure and members. In addition to representing human rights violations, it exerts an intense demobilizing effect. According to the protest records in previous studies, this form of repression was gradually increasing during The Wave, becoming more intense once the protesters started to demand revolutionary claims in mid-May 2018 (Cabralles, 2020).

Along with the multiple violent events of the wave described in chapter two, the use of direct violence against church members continued after the Wave culminated. For its part, government

officials claimed that the violence against religious leaders was isolated, not systematic (United States Department of State, 2019).

In December 2018, for instance, a Russian woman threw sulfuric acid at a priest at the Managua Metropolitan Cathedral during confession. Although there is no evidence about the linkage of the woman to the government, NGO executives, feminist activists, and journalists associated the rare event to the atmosphere of persecution against the church members (Tórrez, 2018).

More recently, in November 2019, Sandinista supporters entered the Cathedral in Managua to displace a group of political prisoners' mothers who were starting a hunger strike. The Sandinistas, while holding signs protesting Church involvement in the crisis, physically assaulted Father Rodolfo López and Sister Arelys Guzmán in the temple. "This is bad (...) they (were) going to lynch us" said Sr. Guzmán, administrator of the Metropolitan Cathedral (Arcia, 2019).

In sum, the combination of these seven modes of repression has contributed to the accelerated *spiral of involvement* process that the Church has been undergoing since April 2018. Far from having a demobilizing effect in the Nicaraguan Catholic Church, the religious institution and community has been adapting and increasing its strategies to oppose the authoritarian drift and to *midwife* the emerging national social movement, with theological and self-interest purposes.

## **8.0 Conclusions**

The involvement of the Catholic Church in Nicaraguan politics is not new. On numerous occasions, the Church –as an institution and religious community – mobilized its assets to catalyze or hinder political outcomes. The Sandinista revolution has been one of the most studied events in this regard. Keeping this tradition of involvement, the return to power of president Ortega in 2007 was not the exception.

Starting with optimism and hope (2006-2007), the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference achieved significant success in matters related to sexuality and education. However, many indicators of accelerated democratic recession made the Bishops to issue strong statements on the lack of Institutionality and human rights abuses (2008-2013). In 2014, with a power reconfiguration in the CEN, president Ortega –now reelected – had a National dialogue with the bishops on several affairs, but mainly democracy restoration. After this unusual meeting, the CEN sustained its position amid the increasing pessimism in the Nicaraguan Society (2014 - March 2018). In this hybrid regime, different social actors protested locally on several issues. There are reports on Church involvement in many of them.

Then April 2018 came. A wave of protests unexpectedly emerged, initiated by an environmental threat, and followed shortly by an economic one. Subsequently, the authoritarian drift caused mobilized actors to perceive the entire regime as a threat per se. Several factors generated an escalation of the wave of protests, which reached more than 2,000 events in six months (April – October 2018). The demands gradually transformed from junctural –revocation of reforms– to revolutionary claims –immediate regime change.

In this Wave of Protests, the Church had three different phases of involvement. Initially, while continuing its previous role as a Mobilizing Church, it appeared as an institution and community that mobilized along with other social actors in the protests against social security reforms and the mounting repression. Several examples across the country showed different levels of engagement with the protesters.

Second, with the events related to the National Dialogue, the Church started a mechanism called “Movement’s Midwifery.” It appeared as an external institution that enabled, certified, protected, and gave leaders to an emerging national social movement. The mechanism was exceptional since it happened amid the authoritarian drift and the increasing revolutionary demands that sought a regime change. In this context, the government of Nicaragua activated a counter-mobilization process, which manifested in severe forms of repression that left more than 300 fatalities and thousands of wounded.

Third, at the Wave’s conclusion, the Church adapted its supporting strategies to the emerging movement while paying the material and human consequences of its participation with protesters. As a resilient Church, the institution-community does not abandon its spiral of involvement initiated in April 2018.

This thesis has confirmed that the Catholic Church –among other social actors – played a critical role throughout the 2018 wave of protest in Nicaragua, as well as in the resulting sociopolitical crisis after those events. Numerous examples amid the changing Church’s role validates that the religious institution and community made available its six powerful religious assets, as Smith suggests: organizational resources, shared identity among the protesters, geographic reach, institutional power and legitimacy, and transcendent motivations to the Wave and the resulting opposition movement.

The activation of Smith’s assets acquired even more relevance in the context of a country with a strong tradition of Catholic involvement in politics. These available assets were the result, following the insights from the political process theory, of other external and unique opportunities (i.e., Pope

Francis social teachings or the local and international media coverage of the events) and threats (i.e., a background of Sandinistas-Church rivalry, increasing authoritarianism, falling Catholic influence in the country politics). These findings suggest that it **is only under certain circumstances** that religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, mobilize their assets.

Importantly, after the Wave, the Catholic Church sustained its credibility among Nicaraguans as a positive externality of its involvement. However, it also faces the threat of diminished legitimacy and respect among the Sandinistas still in power. Multiple reports on at least seven modes of repression that continues after the Wave confirm that the Church is paying the temporary cost of its *spiral of involvement*. Far from activating a demobilizing effect, the religious institution and community is currently adapting and increasing its strategies to oppose the authoritarian drift. Pastoral and self-interest purposes motivate these actions.

Without having the final word on an unfinished scenario, this thesis contributed to the understanding of the Catholic involvement in the 2018 wave of protests in Nicaragua, from the perspective of social mobilization.

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