

# Fernando Cardenal, Nicaraguan Christian Revolutionary- Presente!

Priest in the Revolution

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**Fernando Cardenal, the revolutionary Jesuit priest who served as Secretary of Education in the Sandinista government of Nicaragua, died in Managua on February 20 following complications arising from heart surgery. He was 82 years old.**

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Cardenal, joined the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) before the Nicaraguan revolution of 1979, having been like his brother the poet Ernesto Cardenal, also a priest, recruited by top Sandinista leaders. Cardenal played a key role in the 1970s, before the revolution, in building the Christian Revolutionary Movement and after the revolution he was the leader and organizer of the National Literacy Campaign. When in 1984 Pope John Paul II insisted that the Cardenal leave the Sandinista government, he refused, writing that he could not believe that God would want him to stop serving the poor.

In the early 1990s Cardenal broke with Daniel Ortega's increasingly authoritarian Sandinista government, returned to the Jesuit order in 1997, and continued his work among the poor.

## Sandinista Revolutionary

At the time Fernando Cardenal joined the Sandinistas, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, a dictator who used torture and murder to maintain his grip on power, ruled Nicaragua, as had his father and brother, with the support of the United States. A few former Communists and admirers of Fidel Castro's Cuban revolution joined together to create the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) with the goal of creating a guerrilla army and installing a government such as Cuba's in Nicaragua. The Sandinistas attracted Nicaraguans from all walks of life: workers and peasants, business owners and professionals, and also several Catholic priests.

Cardenal, was recruited by Sandinista Oscar Turcios, with whom he held several discussions. Cardenal wrote in his memoir *Priest in the Revolution*,

*"His ideas about religion and believers were totally different than the theory and practice that had been being carried out for more than 50 years by the Communist parties of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and by Cuba's for decades. It was clear that in those parties one could not be a Christian and be a party militant [ie., a party member]. In some of those countries there had been*

*real persecution of the Church. The Sandinista Front in this respect began its revolutionary life with a complete originality and in a way that was really appropriate for our profoundly religious people. This position was very satisfying and calmed me tremendously."*

Later after being invited to a left event in Managua and finding himself there with many Sandinistas, Cardenal wrote, "I knew that we were sharing profound ideas of justice and solidarity with the oppressed, with our people." Through such conversations and gatherings the FSLN won over not only the two Cardenal brothers, but also other Catholic priests and lay people.

## **A Christian Revolutionary Movement**

By the early 1970s Nicaragua Catholic priests had initiated Christian base communities (comunidades eclesiales de base) made up of grassroots people in poor neighbourhoods, served by priests or catechists. Delegates of the Word, as they were called, offered short courses (cursillos) based on what was called "consciousness raising," that is, using the Bible as a way to interpret contemporary social reality. The Gospels and the Old Testament story of Exodus in particular were used to question and criticise the Somoza regime, the repression, the lack of democracy and the country's backward economic and social situation. Through the Christian base communities and consciousness-raising groups, some priests and a number of lay activists and parishioners would come to join the Sandinista organisation or at least to support the FSLN-led movement.

Catholic activists also became involved in the revolution through the Jesuit University and Catholic high schools. Father Fernando Cardenal and other Jesuit priests organised consciousness-raising groups among college and secondary school students. Much like the Christian base communities, these student groups discussed the country's social situation using not only the Gospels but also the writing of Karl Marx. Cardenal mentions study groups that read eclectically: Marx, Marta Harnecker, Mao Tse-tung, and liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Helder Cámara, among others.

The students, many of whom came from upper class and middle class homes, became radicalised through these discussion groups and some became convinced revolutionaries, leading to the formation in 1972 of the Christian Revolutionary Movement (MCR). Radical, humanitarian, and in a broad sense socialist, the Christian revolutionaries, however, had no distinct revolutionary socialist theory of their own, consequently they tended over time to fall under the sway of the FSLN, which modelled itself on Castro's Cuban Communist Party.

By the early- to mid-1970s the Christian base communities and the Christian Revolutionary Movement had turned to activism, joining with working people and the poor to protest increases in bus fares and in basic food prices as well as marching with teachers protesting Somoza's expulsion of the teachers' leaders from their union. Throughout the decade, the Christian activists who participated in protests were photographed, identified, arrested, jailed, tortured, and often murdered, their bodies thrown into the volcanoes or into the lakes. For these reasons, "Being involved in the urban protest movement was often more dangerous than being involved in the guerrilla," wrote Fernando Cardenal in his memoir.

The MCR recruited a number of activists to the Sandinistas, or, when Somoza's repression threatened to kill them, the young Christian revolutionaries ran away to the mountains to join the guerrilla movement. While these students considered themselves socialists, they did not have the Stalinist, Fidelista, or Guevarist politics of the original Sandinistas and they grew to represent a distinct Christian current of socialist politics within the FSLN. Though they did not have a very clearly elaborated socialist theory, they had their Christian principles, their common history in the

MCR, and their shared commitment to the movement.

While Catholic priests such as Fernando Cardenal became secret members and leaders of the FSLN while another priest, another, Gaspar García Laviana, actually joined the guerrilla and was killed in combat. García wrote, "With a gun in hand, filled with faith and love for the Nicaraguan people, I must fight to my last breath for the advent of the reign of justice in our country." Many other priests worked with the Sandinistas and significant numbers of young Catholics eventually joined the Sandinistas, participated in guerrilla operations, or more typically as civilians supported the FSLN in one way or another.

## **The National Literacy Campaign**

After the triumph of the Nicaraguan Revolution in 1979, Cardenal was chosen to head up the National Literacy Campaign that aimed to eradicate illiteracy in revolutionary Nicaragua. The National Literacy Campaign represented in many ways the highpoint of the Sandinista Revolution and of the government of 1979-1990. Morally inspiring and uplifting, pedagogically innovative, logistically challenging, the campaign of 1980, in a nation of just three million people, involved 100,000 volunteers, most of them youth from 14 to 18, in the education of 400,000 illiterate men, women and children in the cities, towns and in the countryside. It was conceived of as a second liberating army, but far larger and with a far greater scope than the guerrilla army that had fought in the mountains or even than the masses who had participated in the insurrection.

Under the Somoza dictatorship, religious schools and other private schools had educated the rich, as they had done since colonial times, while his expanded public education system provided basic education to some in the large cities and small towns. Most of those in the countryside had very little if any education. Few students went beyond primary school and most did not finish sixth grade, while only a handful attended and fewer finished high school. University education was for the children of the elite only. Consequently, illiteracy in 1980 was estimated to be more than 50 per cent, and probably significantly higher, since few polled wanted to admit they were illiterate.

Carlos Fonseca, the founder of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) had early on adopted the slogan "And also teach them to read." The initiative for the National Literacy Campaign came from the Sandinista government almost immediately after the Triumph of July 1979. The new government asked Father Fernando Cardenal to assume leadership of the campaign under the aegis of the Ministry of Education headed by Carlos Tünnerman, who gave it his full support and bestowed upon the campaign virtually complete autonomy.

This would be a second army and a second revolution. The Sandinista government and Cardenal worked to create an air of excitement and enthusiasm about the campaign. The government declared 1980 'The Year of Literacy'. The campaign itself was officially called 'The National Literacy Crusade: 'Heroes and Martyrs of Nicaragua''. Carlos Mejía Godoy composed a Crusade's hymn with the famous line, 'Fist held high! Book open!' The volunteers who would go forth to conduct the campaign were called 'The Peoples Literacy Army' (El Ejército Popular de Alfabetización or EPA).

Departmental and municipal commissions were established throughout the country. In order to be able to travel to all of these locations, Cardenal boldly asked Mexican President José López Portillo to give him helicopters for the campaign. López Portillo gave him the helicopters, Mexican pilots, and paid for the fuel. The helicopters and a couple of planes provided by the Nicaraguan Air Force made it possible to visit the departments to supervise the work as well as to respond to emergencies.

The sheer scale of the operation was daunting. The Campaign would send 60,000 volunteers into the

countryside and 40,000 adults and young people into the cities. The primer titled 'Morning of the People' contained 23 lessons organised around Nicaraguan history and issues. Each class would begin with a general discussion, followed by the reading lesson. The lesson might deal with "Who was Sandino?" or the word "revolution." One lesson dealt with the Church, with a sentence reading, "There is religious freedom for all churches that defend the interests of the people." Since many of those who could not read were also incapable counting, adding or subtracting, in addition to the reading primer there was also a book to teach arithmetic. There were special materials for the Atlantic Coast where people were taught to read in their native languages: Creole English, Miskito, Sumo and Rama.

The campaign had the support not only of the Sandinista leadership, but also of all of the Sandinista mass organisations: Association of Rural Workers (ATC), the Sandinista Workers' Confederation (CST), the 'Luisa Amanda Espinoza' Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE), the Sandinista Defence Committees (CDS) the National Association of Nicaraguan Educators (ANDEN) the Sandinista Children's Association (ANS) and the "19 of July" Sandinista Youth, the Sandinista Peoples Militias (MPS). Unlike the Cuban experience, where the mass organisations had actually carried out the literacy campaign, in Nicaragua they were only the supporters of the youth who would carry out the work.

The training program, which eventually trained 200,000 literacy workers, was based on what has come to be called a 'train the trainer method'. A group of 80 teachers from ANDEN and 80 youth from the Sandinista Youth trained the first 200 trainers, who in turn went off in groups to train others, the numbers expanding geometrically until they trained 200,000 literacy workers, of whom 100,000 participate in the campaign.

The young volunteers of the Peoples Literacy Army were loaded up on buses and trucks and sent throughout the country, most of them going to the rural farming areas. There each day for five months they worked alongside the farmers and their families doing the daily chores and in the afternoon they held their classes. Most of the volunteers came from Nicaragua's cities and this was their first encounter with the peasantry and with rural poverty and hunger. The National Literacy Campaign provided food for the volunteers, 120,000 rations of rice, corn and beans per month, but the volunteers often shared the food with the families, just as they shared the medicines in their first aid kits. Many of the young people formed strong attachments to their host families while living in the towns and villages, working alongside the families, and teaching them to read, write and count.

Throughout the campaign, Cardenal and the other directors boarded their helicopters and flew to cities, towns and rural areas to deal with problems and emergencies. The campaign was not without its tragedies. The Contras murdered a number of the volunteers; altogether seven volunteers were killed, forty-one died in accidents and eight died of natural causes. Yet despite the murders intended to demoralise and disorganise the campaign, not one of the volunteers asked to return home. When the five months had been completed, the Literacy Campaign had taught 400,000 Nicaraguans to read and write and had lowered the illiteracy rate from 51 per cent to 12.9 per cent, Cardenal reported. For ten days returning volunteers were greeted in Managua's Plaza of the Revolution by family and friends, an army of returning veterans of the war against ignorance.

The Literacy Campaign led by Fernando Cardenal, which in one way or another involved 500,000 people or one-sixth of the country's entire population, had a profound impact on the nation, creating a sense of national unity around the commitment to improve the lives of working people and to uplift the poor. Because it involved such a large proportion of the country's population, it created a tremendous new national consciousness and a strong sense of patriotism. Led by the Sandinista government, the campaign also tended to strengthen the FSLN and the government and the party-state's influence throughout the country.

The National Literacy Campaign created a tremendous élan as the country's youth confronted and defeated the great enemy before them: ignorance. The literacy campaign would provide a model for other projects such as the inoculation campaigns against polio and other diseases, the coffee brigades of the 1980s, and the initially voluntary military mobilisation against the Contras. The Sandinista Revolution would, however, unfortunately prove incapable of creating such an extraordinary national sense of commitment, mission and accomplishment again. Nor would subsequent governments be able to maintain high literacy rates.

## **The Pope Demands Cardenal Resign**

In the early 1980s, Fernando Cardenal found himself under attack by Pope John Paul II for his role in the Sandinista government as it planned to hold the country's first elections since the overthrow of Somoza. The context for the Pope's attack on Cardenal and other Sandinista priests was the government's decision to hold elections in 1984 in the midst of both civil war and foreign intervention.

When Ronald Reagan became U.S. president in 1981, he threw the support of his government behind the Contras, the Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries who were attempting to overthrow the Sandinista government through violent attacks on rural communities, schools, and hospitals, attacks that took the lives of hundreds. Reagan's principal charge against the Sandinistas was that they were establishing a Communist government in Central America, and that, like Fidel Castro's Communist government in Cuba, the FSLN government had never held elections and never allowed the people of Nicaragua to choose their own leaders.

Faced with this criticism of their government, not only from Reagan but also from their domestic critics, American liberals, and European and Latin American social democrats, the Sandinistas decided to create a government along more liberal democratic lines. The Sandinistas decided to hold elections in 1984 for president and vice-president and to create a congress made up of elected representatives of political parties. This would be the first elected leadership since the triumph of the revolution five years before and it opened the first major public, society-wide debate of the revolution's success or failure in Nicaraguan society.

During this period, under both domestic and international pressure, the Nicaraguan Catholic Church had split. Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo, a very popular figure in a country that was 95 per cent Catholic, played the leading role as spokesperson for the anti-Sandinista forces throughout the entire election period, mobilising the church to oppose the Sandinistas. He received economic assistance from USAID and secret funds from the CIA and other foreign sources to help finance the Church's anti-government activities. Obando attacked the Sandinistas for suppressing political liberties and for challenging the Church's authority as well as for drafting the country's youth to fight the Contras. On the other hand he never criticised the Contras, despite emerging reports of their many atrocities, including the murder of health workers and schoolteachers. His attitude exacerbated the division among Nicaraguan Catholics, between those loyal to the institutional Church and those who supported what they called the "popular church" and backed the Sandinistas.

The split in the Church came into the open in March of 1983 when Pope John Paul II, a staunch anti-Communist, visited Nicaragua. The Christian Base Communities of the popular church prepared for the Pope's visit with the slogans: "Welcome to free Nicaragua, thanks to God and the Revolution" and "Between Christianity and Revolution, there is no contradiction." The Pope responded by condemning the popular church as "absurd and dangerous" and demanding obedience to the bishops. The differences became public when during the Pope's open air mass members of the

popular church shouted slogans such as “Popular Power!” and “We Want Peace!” and, though the Pope called for “Silence!” the mostly poor congregations continued their chants. The public confrontation with the Pope proved a public relations disaster and an enormous political problem for the Sandinistas.

In 1985, the Pope, infuriated by the Nicaraguan popular church, suspended Cardenal—who had already been expelled from the Jesuit order in 1984—as well as three other priests in the Sandinista government, including Fernando’s brother Ernesto. In response Fernando Cardenal wrote an open “Letter to my Friends” in which he defended his continued his participation in the Sandinista government. “I cannot conceive of a God that would ask me to abandon my commitment to the people,” he wrote. Shortly thereafter the Pope elevated Obando to the rank of Cardinal in 1985. Archbishop Obando, now clearly the dominant figure in the Nicaragua Church led the right in its attack on the Sandinistas in the 1984, raising the dominant themes of the campaign: the lack of political freedom, the decline of the economy, and the draft. Still, Ortega and the Sandinistas won the election and remained in power.

### **Resignation from the FSLN**

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Ortega and his clique in the Sandinista government took power completely into their own hands. At the same time, though the U.S.-backed Contra war had ended, the combination of continuing political turmoil, violence, and the calamitous economic and social situation meant that the FSLN continued to be under tremendous pressure from both the wealthy elites above and the working class and the poor below. The political tendencies that had emerged at the time of the FSLN First Congress held in 1991 developed into full-blown factional organisations over the next few years, creating a genuine debate over theory, politics, and strategy within the organisation. No longer able to support the Sandinista leadership of Daniel Ortega, Cardenal resigned from the government.

Rival factions first appeared in the FSLN at the First Congress’s Extraordinary Session held in 1994. Subsequently, Sergio Ramírez, leader of the FSLN National Assembly delegation, comandante Dora María Téllez, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, editor of the FSLN daily paper *Barricada*, and the poet priest Ernesto Cardenal wrote a document titled “For a Sandinismo that Returns to the Majorities,” leading their tendency to be called “The Majorities” (though they would prove to be a minority). On the other hand, Daniel Ortega, Tomas Borge, René Nuñez, and Henry Ruíz, all members of the National Directorate, joined by the party ideologue Julio López Campos, called their group the “The Discussion Forum of the Sandinista Democratic Left” and produced a set of documents laying out their positions. Ironically Ortega’s group, all advocates of Cuban-style Communism, titled of their document “The Democratic Left.”

The Majorities, who were in essence social democrats, wanted to build a party capable of winning elections and, beyond that, building a new social consensus for democracy and socialism. Ramírez and his comrades criticised the FSLN leadership’s historic tendency to see the state-ification, that is, the nationalisation of property, as the solution to the country’s problems. The so-called Democratic Left, on the other hand, still inspired by the Soviet Union and Cuba, defended state property and the organisation of the working class and peasant masses in a socialist and anti-imperialist movement that would return to power through mass actions and electoral success. The Democratic Left put great emphasis in the language of its document on representative and participatory democracy, though these had never been strong points in the FSLN leaderships practice.

Stripping away the rhetoric, the 1994 debate was one between the social democratic critics led by



the party's outstanding intellectuals such as Sergio Ramírez and Ernesto Cardenal on the one hand, and the historically Stalinist, Fidelista, and Guevarista leaders of the FSLN such as Ortega, Borge and Ruiz on the other. The latter won the votes and were reconfirmed as the FSLN leadership, strengthening the historic tendencies of vanguardism, democratic centralism, and the top-down dictation of directives to the party membership. With the social democratic tendency having lost the fight over the leadership and the future direction of the FSLN, Fernando Cardenal resigned from the party.

Though no longer directly involved in politics, Fernando Cardenal remained deeply committed to the Theology of Liberation, the organization of Christian base communities, and the education of the poor. In 1997 Cardenal was reinstated by the Jesuit order and became head of the Nicaragua office of Fe y Alegría (Faith and Happiness), a Jesuit program providing schools and education to the poor of Nicaragua. When I met and talked with Fernando Cardenal in 2013, he remained an opponent of both capitalism and bureaucratic communism, a man committed through his faith to democratic socialism.

**Dan La Botz**

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\* New Politics/ February 24, 2016:

<http://newpol.org/content/fernando-cardenal-nicaraguan-christian-revolutionary--presente>