
Msgr. Álvarez's conviction is Ortega's revenge. The journalist Espinoza: "The Church remains the bastion of those who believe in freedom, which is why it is being increasingly persecuted"

"I cannot, here, not mention with concern the bishop of Matagalpa, Msgr. Rolando Álvarez, whom I love so much, sentenced to 26 years in prison, and also the people who have been deported to the United States. I pray for them and for all those who are suffering in that dear nation. And I ask you for your prayers." These are the words with which **Pope Francis** referred to the situation in Nicaragua on Sunday, Feb. 12, after the recitation of the Angelus. The Pope added, "We also ask the Lord, through the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary, to open the hearts of political leaders and all citizens to the sincere search for peace, which is born of truth, justice, freedom and love, and is achieved through dialogue." The Pope's words, together with the messages of closeness and prayer that are pouring in from many sides (including from the Latin American Bishops' Council-CELAM), capture the tremendously intense impact caused by the extreme 26-year sentence imposed on Msgr. Rolando José Álvarez Lagos, bishop of Matagalpa and apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Estelí, at the end of a basically nonexistent trial, conducted in defiance of any safeguards. The incredibly severe sentence, unprecedented on the Latin American continent, is a genuine revenge by President Daniel Ortega, consummated within 24 hours, after the bishop on Thursday refused the forced exile that would have made him join 222 other political prisoners. "Traitor to the homeland," guilty of "conspiracy to undermine national integrity and propagation of false news through information and communication technologies." These are the charges that led to Msgr. Álvarez's conviction. Deprived of his freedom last Aug. 19, he remained under house arrest until Thursday, awaiting trial. Although he was included in the list of detainees who would be taken to the United States (as were four priests, a deacon, and two seminarians, almost all from the same diocese of Matagalpa), he refused forced exile, which he considered a further injustice and act of violence by the regime. **"An example that will bear fruit,"** says **Israel González Espinoza**, a Nicaraguan journalist specializing in the ecclesial sector who lives in exile in Spain due to threats in recent years. He is very touched by the bishop's choice. "I know him well," he told SIR, "because he led the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference's Commission for Social Communications. As a young man he was already forced to spend time outside his country and study in Guatemala. He knows what exile is, but above all he conceives his task as a shepherd as that of one who stands by his flock, who is called to accompany his people, not to abandon them. He is a person of great charisma and leadership, he knows how to make very good use of the media, and is close to the humblest people, the campesinos." According to the journalist, while in pain over what happened, "the example set by Msgr. Álvarez is very strong. He did not accept what would have been a genuine deportation, he showed his loyalty to the dioceses, to the people of God. His gesture will be understood and rewarded, in time." Ortega's was a "furious vendetta, a legal aberration," in regard to the choice made by the bishop according to his own conscience. At the same time, González believes that the release of the 222 political detainees, albeit in the form of forced deportation, is a small sign in a context, that of an increasingly oppressive dictatorship, which remains very difficult. "A small window of dialogue has been opened," he explains, "It is understood that there have been talks with the U.S. Secretary of State. It is a first step, we will have to see now what happens domestically, if there will be a slight easing of the repressive measures and the banning of fundamental freedoms. In any case, Ortega has shown many times that he does not keep his promises, and he needs to be kept under pressure from the international community by maintaining sanctions against him and the Sandinista leadership. And the Church remains the bastion of those who believe in freedom, which is why it is being increasingly persecuted." **A judicial system subservient to dictatorship.** Lawyer **Marcos Carmona**, executive secretary of Nicaragua's Permanent Commission on Human Rights (Cpdh), also emphasizes the actions against the Church. From his exile in Miami, he told SIR: "Since the start of the sociopolitical

crisis in Nicaragua we have seen that priests have been subjected to political persecution, with physical and verbal assaults, as well as the destruction of churches. Since 2022 the persecution has increased, to the point that many priests have been exiled, others have been arrested. Those who have been tried have been deprived of the right to choose their own defense counsel, and a court-appointed lawyer has been imposed on them who, as is well known, serves the interests of the dictatorship. The pastoral care of the Church has, in fact, been criminalized, in defiance of the Constitution." In the case of Msgr. Alvarez, "first, as is well known, the bishop was held captive for 15 days in the Matagalpa curia, then there were attempts through police allegations to destroy his reputation with false and slanderous accusations. He was then arrested. His criminal trial was characterized by a severe lack of guarantees on the part of the Nicaraguan judicial system, which put itself at the disposal of the dictatorial political power, failing to fulfill the requirement of achieving a fair trial." The attorney's feelings about the release of the detainees are mixed: "First of all, we want to thank the Lord for the release of these fellow countrymen, who are now enjoying being reunited with their families. This is good news for our people. But at the same time, we cannot help but condemn yet another aberrant act of the dictatorship, to exile these people, to deport them. Once again, the regime shows its abusive traits and in opposition to human rights. We cannot stop denouncing the barbarism that the dictatorship is perpetrating." Carmona is fresh from an initial meeting with many of the former detainees, who have come to the United States in great distress, sometimes after years of imprisonment. "We are helping our fellow countrymen, many of them have no housing, we are coordinating with other Nicaraguans. We are also making efforts to provide them with adequate and continued psychological and emotional support. We will remain close to them." *journalist for "La vita del popolo"

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