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Jose Yumet

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Jesus, the Marxist:
An Interpretation of the Nicaraguan Revolution through the Evolution of the Catholic Church in
Latin America

Jose Yumet

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Dr. Erin O'Connor, Thesis Director
Dr. Paul Rubinson, Committee Member
Dr. Leonid Heretz, Committee Member

Jesus, the Marxist

During the twentieth century, Latin America underwent fundamental political, economic, and social changes as the region modernized in the mid-twentieth century, imposed by the wealthy and powerful nations of the global economy. The latter half of the century was characterized by regime changes and revolutions, each of which were stoked by Latin Americans who felt exploited and underrepresented by the powerful nations of Europe and the United States. As the century developed so did the role of non-traditional sources of revolution. In Latin America, and in Nicaragua specifically, a new movement within the Catholic Church shaped the process of radicalization and eventually revolution. This phenomenon known as Liberation Theology signified a new, liberal Christianity which focused on creating a church that represented and empowered the impoverished sectors of society. As Liberation Theology developed it was woven with elements of Marxism, and both movements intellectually dealt with the role of the poorest members of the economy and agreed that the poor should be the focus of the Church¹, governments, and of society. The question remains, how and why did Marxism and religion combine in such an explicit manner during the Nicaraguan Revolution?

Liberation Theology and Marxism grew out of similar conditions in Latin America, conditions that forced radical action from religious and non-religious sources alike. The strongest avenue for positive change in Latin America was through economic reforms and a focus on the millions of impoverished people. Liberation Theology made Marxism more accessible through the common language of religion and more understandable by emphasizing the vulnerability of the impoverished. The new movement, Liberation Theology, was a reaction to the predatory

¹ Throughout the work, the Church will represent the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, i.e. the Papacy, the cardinals of the Vatican.

system of economics. The health of the world economy superseded the economic autonomy of the local poor, whose needs were substituted as nations grew more dependent on the global economy. This economic system of interdependence and increased inequality set the stage for a rapid and radical development of a new Christianity, in Latin America, one that was inherently different from the mainstream Christianity of Rome and the Church Hierarchy. This new Latin American Church focused on a pragmatic and active program of religion. This thesis will explain and highlight the background of Liberation Theology and Marxism and how they combined in Latin America and in the nation of Nicaragua. It will explain how the new Latin American Church intellectually separated itself from the Papacy in Rome and embarked on a crusade to end poverty and injustice through a message of economic pragmatism and active charity in an effort to create God's Kingdom on Earth.

This thesis will investigate aspects of Liberation Theology and Marxism and how they combined to create a revolution in Nicaragua during the 1970s. In the first section, the role of the Church will be explored prior to Liberation Theology, specifically focusing on the differences between the hierarchy of the Church and the Church sought after in Latin America. Next, the political, economic, and social background of Nicaragua will be examined in an effort to underline the conditions which facilitated the dissatisfaction and unrest which led to the Nicaraguan Revolution. Along with the background of Nicaragua, there will be a section covering the Marxism of the FSLN and the lessons learned from the Cuban Revolution which helped determine the methods of the FSLN. Finally, parallels will be highlighted between Marxism and Christianity, both of which were used to create a coalition capable of founding a new Nicaragua. The majority of this thesis will focus on Nicaragua and Latin America during the

1960s and 70s, the period in which Marxism and religion most explicitly intertwined in a process of radicalization.

Introduction to Liberation Theology

From the onset of Spanish rule, the Catholic Church, as an institution, represented leadership, counsel, and shelter for the wealthy ruling class. Yet, in the 1960s, the four-century old bastion of conservatism transformed; the hierarchy of the Catholic Church reconstituted what it meant to be a Christian through the Second Vatican Council (known as Vatican II). Called into session by Pope John XVIII in 1962, the council lasted through 1965 under Pope Paul VI. Interestingly, the next decade would be one of the most impactful in terms of direct Papal evolution and the effects on the laity. *Pacem in Terris* in 1963 and the Medellín Conference in 1968 shifted and sharpened the aims of the Catholic Church through progressive attitudes towards labor, economic dominance, and towards millions of impoverished Christians throughout the world. The institution of the Papacy intended on showcasing the morality of the Church, an institution whose moral responsibilities had been lost in an era of nuclear stalemates, ethnic conflicts, and a shrinking global economy. The Catholic Church wanted to assert its role as the moral compass with which the world would remain peaceful and equal.

In an effort known as *conscientization*, the Catholic Church trained itself to becoming the guardian of the poor, in the name of the Lord. Conscientization referred to the focus on morality which would lead the Church into a new era in which its aims were to promote the downtrodden members of society. In an effort to reconcile the Church's past failures with regard to its impoverished and exploited followers, there was an emphasis on the Old and New Testament's perception and objectives for dealing with poverty. In Latin America, this new emphasis on the

poor was welcomed by radicalized clergy and the impoverished laity they served. In 1968, the deliberations of Bishops in Medellín, Colombia spearheaded the movement of Latin American religious thinkers into the beginnings of Liberation Theology. There was an emphasis on the activities of clerical men and women who felt compelled to help their less fortunate Christian brothers and sisters. In the 1960s, Church hierarchy and liberal priests searched, introspectively, through the need for opulent churches and wealthy diocese, and reassessed their role as leaders in thought and morality.

In the 1960s, the world was split into two dominating camps: the open, capitalism of the United States and the West, and the closed, socialist system of the Soviet Union. Outside of these two monolithic powers, the strength of a nation, and the independence of their people, was determined by their economic alignment. Barring Cuba, Latin America was completely integrated into the capitalism of the United States by the turn of the twentieth century, and thus, dependent on the world economy. The greatest benefit of this integration came through the economic aid provided by the United States, and the capital generated by multinational corporations who held wealth, land, and resources within these nations. The expansion of wealth and technology within these poorer nations led to exploitation by the powerful nations and individuals of the world. Industrialization and modernization boosted GDPs in these nations but left the workers with menial, low-wage jobs. In Latin America, the wealthiest members of society grew their holdings exponentially as their purchasing power increased along with their introduction into the world economy.² With the increased access to land for wealthy businesses and individuals, the price of land rose accordingly. The possibility of maintaining ownership over these lands disappeared for hundreds of thousands of peasants through Latin America. In

² Roberto Cortes Conde, "Export-Led Growth in Latin America" in *Latin America and the World Economy: Dependency and Beyond*, Ricard J. Salvucci (ed.), (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996). 87-94.

order to survive, many of the impoverished men were forced to take low-wage jobs on farms, or leave their homes and find work within urban areas.³ There was a lack of respect given to the most vulnerable members of society by the wealthy and powerful. In response to the economic situation, the most powerful and influential thinkers in Rome decided to support those on the bottom of society rather than continue to support the most powerful.

This new era in the Catholic Church emphasized the role of the powerful in maintaining the common good, an idea which harkened back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Rousseau emphasized the "general will" of the people, "The first and most important deduction from the principles we have so far laid down is that the general will alone can direct the State according to the object for which it was instituted, i.e., the common good."⁴ While the Church no longer acted as a political entity as it had in previous centuries, as it was during the Holy Roman Empire, its service for the common good resonated in a time of drastic inequality. In *Dignitatis Humanae*, a declaration from Vatican II, there was an agreement over "the social nature of man" and the role of authority. Here, the Council declared "the function of government is to make provision for the common welfare,"⁵ rather than for its own self-promotion. In this, the Catholic Church sided with the common folk, the laity, in an attempt to distance itself from the dominance of governments and their inherent exploitation of their people. In retrospect, these declarations by the Church were the manifestations of an introspective Catholic Church, one that sought to advance towards modernity whilst rediscovering its role as the moral compass for millions of adherents of the faith.

³ William H. Beezley & Colin M. MacLachlan, *Latin America: The Peoples and Their History*, (New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 2000). 119-128.

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book Two. "That Sovereignty is Inalienable" (Duke)

⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae*, Dec 7, 1965.

Liberation Theology, Background & Influences

As monumental as the Second Vatican Council was, portions of this emphasized morality can be found in Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*. The main objectives of the text were to promote cohesion while underscoring the value of peace during the Cold War. However, within the text, the ideas of morality, self-reflection, and a focus on the impoverished made itself abundantly clear. With regard to the common good, *Pacem in Terris* stated "Individual citizens and intermediate groups are obliged to make their specific contributions to the common welfare...it is clearly necessary that in pursuing this objective they should respect its essential elements."⁶ The focus on the "common good" was clear, yet how was this seemingly obvious, and frankly minor, detail so important to the development of Liberation Theology? The Catholic Church felt obligated to break the "bonds of the egotistical possession of temporal goods"⁷ and to liberate the poor from the dominance of the material world, a not so veiled reference to the dangers of capitalism and its influence on the world economy.

In another example of the Catholic leadership attempting to reconnect its roots within Jesus Christ's religion for the poor, the Vatican decided that the Papal hierarchy in Rome could not be silenced. In an effort to provide assistance to the poor, the Vatican declared, in *Pacem in Terris*, that while nations reach separate levels of development, it does not suffice "for some to take unjust advantage of their superiority over others. Rather should they see in it an added motive for more serious commitment to the common cause of social progress."⁸ The Catholic Church sought to assert itself as a moral compass for the more powerful nations and to help protect the most vulnerable by the combination of morality within economic conversations.

⁶ "Purpose of the Public Authority" in "Attainment of the Common Good" in *Pacem in Terris*

⁷ Paul IV, Homily of the Mass on Development Day, Bogota, August 23, 1968.

⁸ Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 88.

In Rome, the Catholic Church's hierarchy's objective was to balance the deliberate attempt to uplift the poorest members of society through a frank assessment of modernization and development throughout the globe. Additionally, the hierarchy of the Church wanted to remain on good terms with the dominant players on the world stage, this balance was difficult to maintain. On one hand, the ecclesiastical minds behind Vatican II, denounced the exploitation of workers when they stated:

Among the basic rights of the human person is to be numbered the right of freely founding unions for working people. These should be able truly to represent them and to contribute to the organizing of economic life in the right way. Included is the right of freely taking part in the activity of these unions without risk of reprisal. Through this orderly participation joined to progressive economic and social formation, all will grow day by day in the awareness of their own function and responsibility, and thus they will be brought to feel that they are comrades in the whole task of economic development and in the attainment of the universal common good according to their capacities and aptitudes.

By acknowledging the organizational rights of workers, the Catholic Church aimed to protect the exploited classes, mostly poor laborers, who for decades, were at the mercy of the world economic system which kept them employed through low wages and a low standard of living. As the Vatican seemingly slid left towards a liberal economic stance, this was not an endorsement of socialism as much as it was an eruption of frustration aimed at capitalism and its main proprietor, the west. At the same time, the Church hierarchy continued to protect private property as a pillar of society, "Since property and other forms of private ownership of external goods contribute to the expression of the personality, and since, moreover, they furnish one an occasion to exercise his function in society and in the economy, it is very important that the access of both individuals and communities to some ownership of external goods be fostered."⁹ This toeing of the line by the Catholic Church provided itself leeway amongst its base in

⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, 71.

capitalist nations along with their poor brothers and sisters around the world who were using the Gospel as a liberating force.

Poverty had been institutionalized centuries prior to the Church hierarchy's awakening in the 1960s, and due to that, the Catholic Church felt obligated to provide the path out of poverty and inequality. In *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII suggested both the "social duty inherent in the right of private property"¹⁰ which confirmed the need to retain aspects of the accepted social order while supporting "the worker's right to a wage determined according to criteria of justice...one sufficient, in proportion to the available resources to give the worker and his family a standard of living in keeping with human dignity."¹¹ The duality of Rome's objectives came to the forefront; while worker's needs were accentuated, the respect for private property and the necessity to maintain private rights was made clear. As the Vatican solidified its position as a friend to the poor, its previous position as a conservative institution was shifting. Later, in Vatican II, the Council lamented, "Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world's citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty, while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy."¹² To combat this rampant inequality, leadership within the Church desired a more active role in the lives of its adherents, in an effort to become a church of service rather than one of patronage. From Rome, the preferred medium of change came through official decrees and intellectual discussion. In Latin America, the Church, led by the bishops who convened in Medellín, wanted

¹⁰ Pope John XXIII, *Encyclical Letter of Pope John XXIII: Pacem in Terris Peace on Earth*, (New York: America Press, 1963), 21.

¹¹ Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 20.

¹² Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, Dec 7, 1965.

to provide physical assistance to those in need, the deliberations of Medellín led to a much more active clergy, a clergy that would live with the people and become a part of the community itself.

The gulf of wealth which had existed since the dawn of colonization in Latin America was now, in the 1960s, pitting the Catholic Church against its own people. According to the Latin American Bishops at Medellín, the “complaints that the hierarchy, the clergy, the religious, are rich and allied with the rich” were based in the outward appearances projected by the churches and cathedral around the world, which existed in “the great buildings, the rectories and religious houses that are better than those of the neighbors” along with the “luxurious vehicles. In an effort to relate to the masses, the Church in Latin America rediscovered “the Lord’s distinct commandment to ‘evangelize the poor’ ...that effectively gives preference to the poorest and most needy sectors.”¹³ The bishops realized how far from Christ’s teachings the Church hierarchy had strayed and concluded that in order to serve the poor, the Latin American Church must be a poor church itself. At Medellín, the Latin American bishops implored to treat “poverty as a commitment,” not to simply speak of helping the millions of impoverished Christians in Latin America but to act in solidarity with them.¹⁴ To do so, this poor church had to:

Denounce the unjust lack of this world’s goods and the sin that begets it; preach and live in spiritual poverty, as an attitude of spiritual childhood and openness to the Lord; [be] herself bound to material poverty. The poverty of the church is, in effect, a constant factor in the history of salvation.¹⁵

¹³ “Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, ‘The Church in the Present-Day: Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council’ (August 26-September 6, 1968)”, in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Alfred T. Hennelly (ed.), (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990). 89-119. “Poverty of the Church- Medellín Conference”, 9.

¹⁴ “Poverty of the Church- Medellín Conference”, 4c.

¹⁵ “Poverty of the Church- Medellín Conference”, 5.

These bishops, far from Rome, were the ones reinterpreting Christianity's role as a moral compass, this quest to impose moral superiority focused on the role of the Church in relation to the poor.

The first step for the Church was to recognize itself as the Church of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who lived and died for the poorest members of society. In the spirit of Jesus Christ, the Church had to "reemphasize strongly that the example and teaching of Jesus, the anguished condition of millions of poor people in Latin America."¹⁶ The image of Jesus as a poor man resonated with the millions of impoverished people, he was not only a model to live by, in fact, Jesus was the ultimate version of how to live, and his path was the one for all Christians to follow. Salvation and eternal happiness could only be acquired through a struggle parallel to Jesus's, which required sacrifice of both the physical and material variety. At Medellín, the Latin American Bishops declared "Christ, our savior, not only loved the poor, but rather 'being rich he became poor,' he lived in poverty."¹⁷ His poverty was a choice, and like Christ, the Church had to promote its solidarity with the poor by living in poverty itself. In Latin America, theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, called for "the active participation of the oppressed"¹⁸ which would have the oppressed and impoverished Christians of Latin America become equals and beneficiaries of the "New Church." Gutiérrez's solution to eradicate poverty empowered the oppressed, a much stronger statement compared to *Pacem in Terris* and Vatican II's call for the Catholic Church to free the people. This plan held a distinctly different notion, one of self-improvement and the realization of agency rather than top-down declarations which imposed the will of Catholic leadership in Rome. Gutiérrez believed that through solidarity with the poor, the needs and

¹⁶ "Poverty of the Church- Medellín Conference", 7.

¹⁷ "Poverty of the Church- Medellín Conference", 7.

¹⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986). 113.

desires of the impoverished would be fulfilled, and only then would the hierarchy of the Church be able to fully comprehend the nature of their struggle.

In the Catholic Church, the responsibility to create and implement change was no longer with the cardinals and bishops of Rome but instead this responsibility was transferred to the men and women of local churches who would deal with the impoverished directly. In Latin America, we see the practicality of grassroots organization meet with the theoretical and ecclesiastical decrees of the Vatican and Medellín. Rome deemed “it opportune to remind our children of their duty to take an active part in public life and to contribute toward the attainment of the common good of the entire human family.”¹⁹ While “Our Children” most likely referred to the faithful (or all Christians), it could also be construed as the clergy themselves, either way, the message remains the same. From the deliberations at Medellín, “We exhort the priests also to give testimony of poverty and detachment from material goods, as so many do, particularly in rural areas and poorer neighborhoods.”²⁰ More so than their fellow theologians in Rome, the Latin American Church strove for direct action over attempting to effect change through prayer or teachings. For example, in Medellín, the bishops declared, “We encourage those who feel themselves called to share the lot of the poor, living with them and even working with their hands.”²¹ For Christianity’s sake, a concerted effort to help each other actively, an idea which promoted community and charity, had to be asserted. Moreover, the Catholic Church, as a whole, sought to place itself on the just side of social justice. For centuries, the Church was on the side of the powerful, helping to promote their interests rather than helping the faith’s poor brothers and sisters.

¹⁹ Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 146.

²⁰ “Poverty- Medellín Conference”, 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The “New Church”²² sought to be the international symbol of liberation, of equality, and of peace. This focus on re-examining the misguided actions of the Church’s past produced a political and pointed change in how it dealt with other powerful nations and people. In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutiérrez pointed out that in 1968 “the Christian community is beginning, in fact, to read *politically* the signs of the times in Latin America.”²³ The climate of the times stated that “above all, they want the Church to break its ties with an unjust order,” and they, the Christian community, wanted the Church to “cast its lot with those who suffer from misery and deprivation.”²⁴ The Church’s shift in morality was an effort to combat its reputation of supporting the established orders of the day. However, did the Vatican-led effort to combat inequality draw the rest of the church back into its original role as a protector of the meek? Or, were these decrees a reaction to what the Church hierarchy saw as the inevitable backlash against the established orders of the day?

Although Christianity was changing, Gustavo Gutiérrez disagreed with the Church hierarchy in Rome over the nature of implementing that change. While he disagreed with the speed of which changes were taking hold throughout the Church hierarchy, along with the authenticity of their new focus, he did consider the fact that their “denunciation is a manner of expressing the intention of becoming disassociated from the existing unjust order.”²⁵ His acceptance (even if he was reluctant) of the efforts from Rome provided a reconciliation between those in outside of Church leadership who felt Church hierarchy did not attempt to assist humanity to the fullest extent of their capabilities. Furthermore, this expression of satisfaction

²² Not a literal re-foundation of the Catholic Church but a re-interpretation over the role of the Church.

²³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 101.

²⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 105.

²⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 115.

with Church hierarchy, from more radical elements, provided a glimpse of unity and hope from one of Liberation Theology's most influential and progressive theologians.

Hidden within the New Church's call for a revamped morality and focus was a review of the contemporary geo-political climate in which wealthy nations dominated and exploited their fellow humans. Unlike of their historical forbearers, the Church of the Poor placed the misfortune and injustice suffered by the poorest members of society at the feet of the exploiters and materially obsessed. In order to facilitate change throughout Christian society, the wealthy and powerful had to promote charity and consideration for the poor. However, it was these wealthy people who had previously took advantage of their economic fortune and stimulated their personal success at the expense of the least fortunate in society, in order to create an equal economic society, the wealthy would have to change their economic way of life. There were two main facets of this exploitation, first on the local or national level, where the wealthy use their domination over local economies and industry to propagate a continuous cycle of poverty and oppression. This local dependence on the wealthy and powerful bred disdain and hatred which eventually came to a head in the form of violence and societal unrest. In Latin America, a lack of political and legal channels promoted violent assertions of agency by those excluded from power. In these examples of exploitation in Latin America, we find "extreme inequality among social classes: especially, though not exclusively, in those countries which were characterized by a marked bi-classism, where a few have much [culture, wealth, power, prestige] while the majority has very little."²⁶ With this blatant discrepancy between the haves and the have-nots came universal resentment and frustration. Even though the deliberations at Medellín revolved around theology and the role of the Church as a whole, there was an element of uncertainty over

²⁶ "Peace- Medellín Conference", 3.

how these proclamations would be received by both their religious brothers and sisters along with the lay people who would be effected by the prospective change.

The ability to foresee class conflict as a powerful political force highlighted the tension felt among nations across Latin America. In fact the bishops in Latin America pointed to the increased quality and accessibility of education and the “Growing awareness of the oppressed sectors”²⁷ who understood the lack of opportunities available for the lower classes in society. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, industrialization and global interconnectivity had created a gap between the wealthiest and poorest segments of the Latin American population. Following the Second World War and the economic decline following wartime production, interest and awareness from people outside of the elite had increased. The increased awareness of the populace was being felt throughout the Americas; the year 1968 remains a landmark year for those reacting against the establishment with infamous and violent rebuttals in the Americas, all this ironically occurred during what the UN called the “Human Rights Year.”

The ultimate goal for the New Church was to elicit peace through the world and to establish God’s Kingdom on Earth. However, for peace to be accepted, there had to be justice and respect amongst all members of society through a consensual societal order, rather than a lack of conflict ushered in through economic, political, or military domination. According to the Medellín Conference, “Peace can only be obtained by creating a new order which carries with it a more perfect justice among men,”²⁸ this new order was to be carried forward by a new type of man. This “New Man” was connected to the virtues of Christianity and equality, his development the effect of the revamped and rededicated Church. Gutiérrez called the creation of the “New Man” the product of liberation over “economic, social, and political dependence” combined with

²⁷ “Peace- Medellín Conference”, 7.

²⁸ “Peace- Medellín Conference”, 14.

this liberation is the morality emphasized by Rome.²⁹ This “New Man” struggled for others, attempted to reconcile his desires and possessions within his community, and simultaneously promoted the tenets of Christianity which enabled “Peace on Earth.”

The “New Man” was not alone. The development of this new humanism would be assisted by the New Church of Latin America, along with the Vatican. In Medellín, a direct statement towards the clergy declared, “To us, the Pastors of the Church, belongs the duty to educate the Christian conscience, to inspire, stimulate and help orient all of the initiatives that contribute to the formation of man.”³⁰ One may ask, how exactly can Christianity inspire or stimulate man’s development? The Medellín Bishops retorted with their specific requirements for an active pastor; a pastor must “awaken...a living awareness of justice,”³¹ “defend the rights of the poor and oppressed according to the Gospel commandment”³² and, most important for this investigation, they must “encourage and favor the efforts of the people to create and develop their own grassroots organizations for the redress and consolidation of their rights and the search for true justice.”³³ Elements of the impending revolution can be parsed from some of the Latin American Church’s most influential theologians. These theologians emphasized the change between their New Christianity and the previously accepted establishment (The Vatican’s Christianity), but also encouraged the organization of dissatisfied Christians and Non-Christians in an effort to better their political, economic, and social lots in life.

²⁹ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 91.

³⁰ “Peace- Medellín Conference”, 20.

³¹ “Peace- Medellín Conference”, 21.

³² “Peace- Medellín Conference”, 22.

³³ “Peace- Medellín Conference”, 27.

Nicaraguan Political, Economic, and Social Background

While the Sandinista led FSLN became the major player in Nicaraguan politics during the late 1970s and 1980s, their success grew from their ability to capture widespread support against the Somoza Regime. To understand the plight of the Nicaraguan people, we must first start in the early twentieth century as Nicaragua broke away from Spanish domination. In Nicaragua, the ideological divide between Liberals and Conservatives was as old as the cities themselves, with Granada in the South a haven for Conservatives and Leon in the North, a hotbed for Liberals.³⁴ Since independence in 1821, the two political factions battled for control of the nation, throughout the nineteenth century the two fought a series of civil wars which split the nation into two resentful factions. Under Somoza regime in the twentieth century, the elites of these factions became disenfranchised with the lack of legitimate political avenues and were frustrated by the cronyism necessary to rise through the political ranks. Meanwhile, similarly to the way the Somoza family dominated the political spectrum, the economy was dominated by the wealthiest and most connected Nicaraguans as well.

The opposition to the Somozas was not exclusive to the resistance groups of the 1960s and 70s. As early as the 1930s, the Somoza Dynasty had been at odds with sectors of society. From 1927 through 1933, a guerrilla war led by Augusto Sandino waged against the Conservative faction in charge of the nation. Specifically, Sandino fought to rid Nicaragua of United States armed forces and economic institutions who had dominated the isthmus over the previous century. Sandino had spent nearly a decade in Mexico where leftist, labor oriented political activity caught his attention in the aftermath of their 1910 Revolution.³⁵ His guerrilla

³⁴ John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985). 14.

³⁵ Booth, *The End and the Beginning*, 42.

fighters represented those struggling to find employment, fair wages, and economic autonomy against foreign imperialism, along with political and economic oppression. Their main target was the interventionist United States, who had destroyed the Nicaraguan economy as they pursued their “Good Neighbor” policy, first on the side of Conservatives and then Liberal lawmakers in Managua in the name of self-interest rather than genuine concern for the Nicaraguan state. As Sandino fought to destroy the Nicaraguan National Guard, (he believed they were stand-ins for U.S. Marines) a young officer by the name of Anastasio Somoza sought to destroy Sandino and his rebellion. It was Somoza himself who ordered the ambush and assassination of Sandino, his brother, and the rebellion’s top generals in 1934.³⁶ The assassination quelled the rebellion, and gave Somoza the political cache to maneuver his way into the Presidential Palace.

The Somoza Dynasty began in 1937 with Anastasio Somoza Garcíá, the former United States trained commander of the National Guard. In an effort to dominate Nicaraguan politics, the U.S. worked to install a friendly government, with Somoza they found a willing candidate. Famously, President Franklin Roosevelt allegedly referred to the Nicaraguan dictator by saying “Somoza may be a son of a bitch, but he’s our son of a bitch.”³⁷ Against the backdrop of United States support, the Somoza family ruled Nicaragua for decades without any significant challenges. However, after continued political oppression, and institutionalized elitism their stranglehold on the nation began to fray. The political system allowed for the dynastic transfer of power within the Somoza family, and while members of the liberal party, the family sought to repress opposition from expressing their political opposition.³⁸ Again, the largest proprietor of violence was the government’s own National Guard. From the onset of Somoza’s power and

³⁶ Booth, *The End and the Beginning*, 51.

³⁷ While many attribute the quote to Roosevelt, the quote has been used multiple times throughout the 20th century with different players substituted in.

³⁸ Ralph Lee Woodward JR., *Central America: A Nation Divided*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). 275.

throughout the Somoza regime, the National Guard was the dictator's own private army. The Somozas used the Guard to oppress political dissidents, fight factions of rebellion, and maintain social order. The National Guard symbolized the regime's monopoly on violence and were the face of the regime in terms of corruption and the established political system.

Somoza's dominance applied to the economic arena as well, those closest to the dictator were given the greatest opportunities to expand their wealth. Political and economic elites had been preying on a weakened economy since the Great Depression in the 1930s. In fact by the end of the Second World War, Somoza García was the largest landowner in Nicaragua, "by 1944 he [Somoza] owned fifty-one cattle ranches, and his forty six coffee plantations made him the largest coffee producer in Nicaragua."³⁹ While the wealthiest continued to grow their personal purses, the country's growth stagnated; from 1928 to 1944, the GNP grew 145%, while wages only increased 50%.⁴⁰ The inequality suffered by the non-landholding majority of the nation would become a foundational bloc of the opposition to the Somoza Regime in the 1970s.

Nicaragua's main source of revenue was through the exportation of its array of cash-crops, this in turn created a financial system which relied on commodities and the global economy. Instead of raising livestock and growing food and subsistence crops, the rural poor worked on low wages to plant, raise, and harvest coffee, cattle, cotton, and sugar, products that not only took up the best land available but also profited the richest members of Nicaraguan society.⁴¹ Nicaragua's export-based economy allowed for significant growth at the national level but sacrificed the autonomy of its poor rural citizens. Through cronyism corruption, the wealthiest land holders soon used the connections made through international business to

³⁹ In 1970, 60% of land was used for exports, 30% lay idle, and only 10%. Everingham, *Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition*, 67 & 89.

⁴⁰ Booth, *The End and the Beginning*, 69.

⁴¹ Woodward, *Central America*, 275.

increase their land, wealth, and production. The economic disparity became the focal point in the aftermath of the 1972 Managua Earthquake, a magnitude 6.2 quake, merely twenty-eight kilometers northeast of the city, devastated the urban hub. The disaster killed six thousand Nicaraguans and injured an additional twenty thousand and caused extensive damage to buildings throughout the city.⁴² Outrage grew as Somoza and his cronies grew wealthier as they siphoned humanitarian aid designed for the hundreds of thousands of displaced Nicaraguans.⁴³

Rise of the FSLN: Opposition to Somoza

In 1961 the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) was established as a coalition group led by disenfranchised youths of differing backgrounds.⁴⁴ The heart of the opposition against the Somoza Dynasty were the students that were admitted into first into UNAN and later the FSLN. By the 1960s Sandino's ghost would haunt Somoza and his sons in the shapes of the FSLN and the Sandinistas of the Nicaraguan Revolution. The generation of students who were attending universities throughout Nicaragua were of similar socio-economic backgrounds. The majority of them came from upper and middle-class families, many of which from the population centers along the Pacific half of the isthmus. Economically, many of these families had profited from the nation's focus on industry and modernization, which were two of the causes of a widening expanse between the economic classes. Yet, politically, these families had no clear path to political significance under the authoritarian Somoza regime. From 1960-1980,

⁴² According to the U.S. Geological Service, the quake damaged some 750 school rooms, all four main hospitals were rendered unserviceable, and 53,000 units of family housing (mostly low and middle income) were lost or seriously damaged.

⁴³ It is estimated that between 200,000-650,000 Nicaraguans lost their homes in the quake.

⁴⁴ Booth, *The End and the Beginning*, 110.

Nicaraguans between the ages of 15 and 24 made up roughly 20% of the total population, these university-aged men and women had seen the injustice of the Somoza period and were the most willing agitators in the oppositional movement.⁴⁵ According to Omar Cabezas, the *Frente* (The Oppositional Front) used the University's infrastructure to develop their political organization, while making use of the University's resources.⁴⁶ The opposition to Somoza rose from a culture of student organization, who believed that a political challenge to the status quo could be achieved. Their movement started first as a peaceful, intellectual movement; however, following the government's oppression through the National Guard, the movement turned to violence.

Alongside the popular student movement, there was palpable discord between the wealthiest sectors of society and the Somoza core; according to Mark Everingham, "the business community was derived from several generations of the Liberal and Conservative families who represented the vestiges of the oligarchical structure."⁴⁷ While elites enjoyed a quality of life inconceivable by the impoverished members of society, they lacked an adequate feeling of autonomy and power due to the dominance of those sectors by the Somoza regime and those who allied themselves with the dictatorship. By allying themselves with the powerful Somoza family, elites became dependent on that critical relationship to expand their political and economic power. While there was opposition from wealthy elites in against the Somoza Regime, it would be a stretch to consider them supporters of the leftist coalition which challenged the economic system itself. However, the exploitation of the 1972 Managua Earthquake destroyed the illusion

⁴⁵ "Percentage of total population by broad age group, both sexes (per 100 total population), in Nicaragua, 1950-1980." United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015). World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, custom data acquired via website.

⁴⁶ Omar Cabezas, *Fire From the Mountain*, (New York: New American Library, 1986.) 26.

⁴⁷ Mark Everingham, *Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition in Nicaragua*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996). 76.

of Somoza being a capable leader. The façade of a healthy nation crumbled behind the dictator's embezzlement of aid and the redistribution to a handful of his cohorts and gave disenchanted elites the reason to support the broad, growing oppositional front that was the FSLN.

The political coalition that had formed in 1972 against the Somoza regime began as a disjointed collection of anti-establishment groups. By the middle of the 1970s, this coalition had become the Frente, intertwined with a sense of necessary pragmatism and inclusive rhetoric. According to David Nolan, "Although the leadership [of the FSLN] retained its ideological commitment, the immediate political program was unilaterally broadened to cover a range of interests, and the rank and file was opened up to anyone who opposed Somoza."⁴⁸ Humberto Ortega, a member of the FSLN's leadership, stated "We are taking advantage of a situation where certain sectors of the bourgeoisie, unable to present their own alternatives, have drawn closer to us."⁴⁹ At the same time, there was an obvious attempt to co-opt non-Marxist forces, Tomas Borgé claimed "We have some Marxists with us but the Frente is much wider. The concept of prolonged popular war was not Marxist. It is a military concept... We are neither Marxist nor liberal, we are Sandinistas."⁵⁰ Their cause was assisted by the fact that the Sandinistas were by far the most bold and aggressive military force capable of waging armed conflict against the National Guard.

In support of the Marxist ideals of the FSLN and radical elements of the anti-Somoza coalition were laborers, farmers, middle-class citizens, students, and the clergy. While land

⁴⁸ Nolan, *Ideology of the Sandinistas*, 76.

⁴⁹ Nolan, *Ideology of the Sandinistas*, 77.

⁵⁰ Nolan, *Ideology of the Sandinistas*, 97.

ownership was scarce,⁵¹ Nicaraguan campesinos did not represent the majority of oppositional forces, however, that does not diminish their contribution to the movement. The bloc of impoverished Nicaraguans, identified as laborers, became a key component to the coalition against Somoza. Focused on the plight of workers was the PSN (Nicaraguan Socialist Party), which formed in 1944.⁵² The PSN refused to accept the inherent militancy of student organizations like the UNAN in the 1950s because they had not yet exhausted all political avenues necessary to avoid bloodshed.⁵³ But, by 1966, the Socialist group aligned with other organizations, such as the FSLN, to form the UNO Coalition in an effort to strengthen its cause.⁵⁴ Between 1950 and 1970 the individualized pockets of opposition could not sustain any broad, impactful change to the entrenched political system. In order to augment their individual strength, these oppositional groups came together to create a union capable of creating a new society within Nicaragua. The most active and dominant group within the oppositional front, the FSLN, became the face of the movement and their socialist agenda became the un-official dogma of the opposition.

The Marxism of the FSLN

Why did Marxism, and in particular the Marxism specific to Latin America, one based on agrarian reform and an opening of political avenues, take hold in 1970s Nicaragua? Through an analysis of the FSLN's fifteen point declaration of intent, one can uncover the factors which

⁵¹ In the 1970s, 45% of the total population were "economically active." Everingham, *Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition*, 88.

⁵² Everingham, *Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition*, 103.

⁵³ UNAN's leadership included Carlos Fonseca, Tomas Borgé, and Silvio Mayorga; all of whom would become founders of the FSLN. Everingham, *Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition*, 107.

⁵⁴ National Opposition Union

plagued Nicaragua in the 20th century. According to the FSLN, the United States' role in Latin America had been the perpetuator of exploitation and domination, a sentiment effectively harped upon by Guevara and other Marxists. According to the FSLN, the destruction of “Yankee monopolies” and the “renunciation of debts ‘imposed on the country by the Yankee monopolies’” would allow Nicaraguans to take back their own economic destiny.⁵⁵ The remaining points called for greater societal participation (including women in the process), as well as a truly independent political system, free from manipulation by the United States. Yet, one of the most important aspects of the declaration was the inclusion of agrarian reform, the FSLN promised “distribution of land to the peasants, with an emphasis on cooperatives. Agrarian aid, in the form of credits, mechanization, guaranteed markets, and off-season jobs.”⁵⁶ By including agrarian issues, the FSLN displayed a pragmatism that would allow them to broaden their appeal to non-socialists, whose support was equally valuable to the Marxists within the group. The FSLN put the nation's misfortunes squarely on the shoulders of the dictatorship of the Somoza regime, they were “the institute which protected capitalism and enforced imperialist dependency in Nicaragua.”⁵⁷

The Marxist leadership within the Sandinista movement took much of its political dogma from Socialist Cuba, and specifically from “Che” Guevara. The leadership of the FSLN had visited Cuba early in their formation. In 1959, Carlos Fonseca found himself in Cuba and in contact with both Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.⁵⁸ In 1960, Tomas Borgé travelled to Cuba to seek out the Argentine in anticipation of their inevitable insurrection. Their Latin American

⁵⁵ David Nolan, *The Ideology of the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution*, (Miami: University of Miami, 1988), 36.

⁵⁶ Nolan, *Ideology of the Sandinistas*, 36.

⁵⁷ Nolan, *Ideology of the Sandinistas*, 55.

⁵⁸ Nolan, *Ideology of the Sandinistas*, 23.

brand of Marxism took its cue from the most successful socialist revolution in the Western Hemisphere. Their emphasis on economic equality amongst their citizens and an attempt to free the nation from the dominance of the United States economic hegemony reflected the same ideals realized in Cuba.

By 1963, the FSLN leaders were implementing their own Foco inspired insurrection along the Rio Coco on the Honduran border.⁵⁹ The Foco theory came directly from the Cuban Revolution; it was the idea that through a vanguard, small and quick units of guerrilla fighters can challenge and defeat a stronger, better equipped enemy. To Che, Foco theory represented the best chance for Latin American “triumph.” He maintained that:

The Cuban Revolution made three fundamental contributions to the conduct of revolutionary movements in Latin America. They are:

1. Popular forces can win a war against the army.
2. It is not always necessary to wait until all the conditions for revolution exist; the insurrectional center can create them.
3. In underdeveloped Latin America the arena for armed struggle must be basically the countryside.⁶⁰

In Nicaragua’s case, Che’s sentiments meant a few things. First, it meant that against Somoza’s National Guard forces, a roving band of revolutionaries could succeed (which they would).

Guevara’s second notion implied that rather than waiting for the “Revolutionary Moment,” or the moment in which society comes together to coalesce against a powerful force, usually in an extraordinary situation of violence, tragedy, or extreme government overreach, an armed rebellion would gain strength by its existence, and the willingness of others to join in. Finally, and most crucially, the beginnings of the struggle would have to take place in the sparsely populated, rural areas of the nation. This prevented a quick suppression by Government forces by

⁵⁹ Nolan, *Ideology of the Sandinistas*, 24.

⁶⁰ “The Essence of the Guerrilla Struggle” in *Che Guevara Reader*, 64.

remaining mobile, while it gave the guerrillas the ability to coalesce amongst the unsatisfied factions of society.



The eastern region of the nation was primed for this sort of guerrilla occupation due to the sparse population detailed by the above image.⁶¹ The image above illustrates the vast Caribbean region which, save from a few well distanced cities, was the sort of locale detailed by Guevara. In addition, Guevara promoted the idea of the “Prolonged Popular War”⁶² which mirrored the

⁶¹ “Population Density Map of Nicaragua” in *A to Z Maps Online*, (Petaluma, CA: World Trade Press, 2007)

⁶² Also known as the GPP (Guerra Popular Prolongada).

efforts of the Vietnamese and other guerrilla movements. This technique aimed to draw out conflict until the rebelling force's eventual victory through attrition, rather than attempting to win direct military conflicts. With a template for conducting war in hand, the task of connecting the leadership's idealism and the implementation of practical change at the local level.

Marxism & Christianity

At Medellín, the Bishops' sentiments paralleled those of the Marxist thinker, Ernesto "Che" Guevara. The Bishops alluded to the "growing distortion of international commerce" which highlighted the "relative depreciation of terms of exchange, the value of raw materials is increasingly less in relation to the cost of manufactured products."⁶³ Known as the "dependency theory," the idea contended that core nations with wealth and prestige exploited smaller, less powerful nations through trade and commerce. Paired with the words of the Marxist revolutionary, the following statement by Che pointed to a common the same inequality detected by the reformist members of the Catholic Church:

In reality that is what we are — we, politely referred to as 'underdeveloped,' ... 'Underdevelopment,' or distorted development, brings a dangerous specialization in raw materials, inherent in which is the threat of hunger for all our peoples. We, the "underdeveloped," are also those with the single crop, the single product, the single market. A single product whose uncertain sale depends on a single market imposing and fixing conditions. That is the great formula for imperialist economic domination.⁶⁴

⁶³ "Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, 'The Church in the Present-Day: Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council' (August 26-September 6, 1968)", in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Alfred T. Hennelly (ed.), (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990). 89-119. "Peace- Medellín Conference", 9a.

⁶⁴ Che Guevara, "Cuba: Historical exception or vanguard in the anticolonial struggle?" April 9, 1961. In *Che Guevara Reader: Writings on Politics & Revolution*, (New York: Ocean Press, 2003).

Although not specific to Latin America, the economic domination of the larger nation would provide capital and technology to the exploited nation, while the dominator had control over the land, resources, and wealth. For the wealthy, the industrialization of economically weaker countries provided an avenue to achieve greater wealth and power. For the poor, this system provided low wages, and resulted in the loss of land to wealthy national and transnational organizations. Dependency Theory, and the backlash against it, provided a link between Liberation Theology and Marxism, it would allow integration between the two camps. Where Marxism opposed the economic dependency predominantly on an economic level, Church hierarchy opposed the system of inequality on the basis of social and moral corruptness.

The tenets of the “New Church” and the “New Man” lend themselves nicely to the growing popularity of leftist, Marxist movements in Latin America. The economic system of Socialism, made popular by Karl Marx, provided an assertion of economic power, within solidarity, for the laborers and workers in Latin America. For Marx, class conflict was at the heart of all inequality, and the eventual conflicts which were spurred on by the aforementioned class discrepancies. According to Marx:

In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working-class, developed, a class of laborers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital. These laborers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market.⁶⁵

Marxism provided an avenue to understand the injustice of the world by exposing the misgivings of a capitalist society where people were only as valuable as their productive potential. The exploitation described by Marx aligned with the exploitation described by the Vatican in the 1960s. Thus, Marxism and Liberation Theology combine in Latin America, and most explicitly

⁶⁵ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954). 18.

in Nicaragua during the Sandinista-led popular movement of the late 1970s. The conflict accentuates the reaction of Marx's proletariat, "the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants" who would rise up along with the other dissatisfied segments of society, against the dominators and exploiters of Nicaragua.

One parallel between the Sandinista style Marxism and the social aims of the Catholic Church revolves around the idea of a "New Man." For the Church hierarchy in Rome, this new humanism was reflected by their fellow Christians remembering that it is their right and duty to contribute to the progress of their own communities.⁶⁶ By helping one's neighbors, the overall quality of life and the strength of the community was inherently better, "especially in underdeveloped areas, where all resources must urgently be employed, those who hold back their unproductive resources or who deprive their community of the material or spiritual aid that it needs-gravely endanger the common good."⁶⁷ Compare that sentiment to Che's ideal man, who, through socialism, sees his labor as a contribution to the common good. The new man "truly reaches his full human condition when he produces without being compelled by physical necessity to sell himself as a commodity," he sees it as his "moral compulsion" to assist his fellow citizen, much like the Christian who works hard to better their own community.⁶⁸ Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez pointed to *Gaudium Et Spes* (Vatican II), where the Catholic Church decreed "Thus we are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined first of all by this responsibility to his brothers and to history," an idea which echoed Guevara's intellectual musings published in the same year, 1965. For Che, the new man's "image is not yet completely finished-it never will be, since the process goes forward hand in

⁶⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, Point 71.

⁶⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, Point 71.

⁶⁸ Che Guevara, "Man and Socialism" in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). 373.

hand with the development of new economic forms.”⁶⁹ This evolution included the recognition of his “quality of incompleteness, of being an unfinished product,”⁷⁰ a man who was never done learning from or teaching his community. The New Man’s characteristic of constant growth and evolution provided an element of hope and progress for the world.

In Nicaragua, the man who most effectively fused the economic liberation of Marx and Che with the Gospel’s teachings of Jesus Christ was Father Ernesto Cardenal. Born into a wealthy Nicaraguan family, he was highly educated; with his studies taking him to Europe, where he was introduced to Marxism. Trained as a poet, his ability to make allegorical connections between the Gospel and his teachings separated him from the other theologians of the period. As a pastor, he dedicated his life to bettering the lives of the poorest members in society, a testament to his adherence to Liberation Theology. In his *The Gospel in Solentiname*, his Bible study sessions amongst an isolated, peasant community on Lake Nicaragua highlighted the role of fervent preachers extending the word of God as the language of liberation. The community on Solentiname was a Christian Base Community (CBC). Following the Medellín Conference in 1968, CBCs were popularized throughout Latin America, these communities were based in rural, poor areas. Through constant Bible study these Christian Base Communities, and their active priests, made inroads within the community. These priests were the intellectual guides to economic evolution, and importantly, the idea class conflict which Marx popularized.

Cardenal was the prototypical pastor for Liberation Theology; he was the manifestation of the Latin American Church’s idealism to have an active role in the community. His role within the Nicaraguan Revolution, and in Solentiname serves as a case study for the role of the

⁶⁹ Che Guevara, “Man and Socialism” in *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). 371.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Church in Liberation Theology. Cardenal expressed the value in neighborly love as a way to promote the community and further its evolution towards the kingdom of God. The conversations of Solentiname were recorded first from memory and later with equipment. Cardenal used his conversations with the campesinos along with the writings of the Gospel to draw parallels between Jesus' struggle and the oppression faced by Nicaraguans under the Somoza Regime. The study group discussed the nature of Jesus's capture and realized:

I: 'They probably asked Jesus his name, age, profession or trade. That's the way they begin questioning in the Military Court [of the Nicaraguan National Guard].'
'Maybe he answered in the same way as Tomas Borgé in the Military Court: 'Profession, revolutionary.'...'
Felipe: 'At that time Christ was all alone. Now there are many Christs being sentenced in many places.'
Ivan: 'He gave the example and he now has many followers.'⁷¹

The conversational nature of the discussion showcased the ability of Cardenal to make complex political activities understandable for the peasants of Solentiname. This connection, illustrated by Cardenal, between the Gospel and the Marxist Revolution underway in Nicaragua was the epitome of Liberation Theology.

One of the most powerful sentiments of *The Gospel in Solentiname* was the connection between Cardenal and the lay people of the island through the Gospel. Nicaragua, like most of Latin America was predominantly Catholic since Spanish Conquest. By using religion as the lingua franca between the intellectual theologian and the practical campesino, a certain level of familiarity and trust was built into the conversation. From *Solentiname*, "I [Pancho, a campesino] think what we're reading here can be understood according to each one's ideas; you can understand it this way because you have Communist or socialist ideas, as you call them; but others will understand it another way, and I don't know which side to be on, yours or the

⁷¹ Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982). 201.

other.”⁷² This reflected the nature of the conversation at Solentiname. Rather than holding a one way conversation or lecture, Cardenal wanted to promote the community to think for themselves in a way that would produce the greatest level of intellectual curiosity and literacy. In the end, Cardenal’s mission was to express a lens of studying the Bible, in which the Bible’s own words would provide the evidence to support the merits of socialism.

Liberation through God’s work is paramount for reaching the ideal kingdom of God, according to Cardenal, “His [God’s] word is the Liberation of the oppressed and the triumph of the poor.”⁷³ Cardenal, like the Church of Latin America, and the bishops at Medellín, preached the value of action over words, “The hunger strikes and the protests that are being held in Managua churches are a better prayer than what they used to have in those churches. That’s asking in the name of Jesus Christ for a quart of milk not to cost more than a peso. Because that’s too much for it to cost.”⁷⁴ There was a sense that pragmatic approaches to disrupt the status quo of capitalism and the exploiters within Nicaraguan society.

For Cardenal and the other radicalized priests, the key tenet of their message was the expression of love for fellow citizens, strangers, and neighbors. In the Gospel, neighbors represent all of God’s children, physical neighbors along with neighbors in faith, “God is your neighbor; God’s the people.”⁷⁵ Later, Cardenal solicited the memory of Che when he recalled “Che said you had to feel any injustice committed anywhere in the world as if it was on your own flesh, and he died for people that didn’t even know him.” In Che, and in Jesus, Cardenal focused the attention on their willingness and desire to help all people to realize their liberty

⁷² Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 21.

⁷³ Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 28.

⁷⁴ Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 154.

⁷⁵ Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 112.

from economic or social repression. Through the discussion of both men, the role of the community and the intense connection of members within the community set the stage for the conversation of economic revolution.

Cardenal like the bishops in Latin America believed in the strengthening of the poor by liberating them of their oppressors' economic dominance. The liberation theologian asserted the leadership must not trump the people's objectives, he cited Fidel's claim that "you don't aspire to command; to command is a responsibility that the community imposes on you."⁷⁶ In Guevara's *Man and Socialism*, the ideal man accepts the speed of the people's revolution rather than imposing his own plan, "sometimes we go too slow and feel the hot breath of those treading at our heels. In our zeal as revolutionists we try to move ahead as fast as possible, clearing the way. But we know we must draw our nourishment from the mass and that it can advance more rapidly only if we inspire it by our example..."⁷⁷ Unlike the hierarchy in Rome; Cardenal, Gutiérrez, and the bishops at Medellín, formed the basis for the New Church, this Church co-opted the poor into its plans. By evolving from within, like the New Man, this New Church provided an outlet for the poor to see the benefits of a world without the traditional exploitation of the capitalist world.

For Cardenal and the FSLN, the proletariat (who in Nicaragua were the urban workers along with the poor campesinos in sparsely populated areas) were the inheritors of God's kingdom on earth. Their view on capitalism was simple, it was the societal force which widened the gap between those with wealth and power, and those without. Cardenal quoted the Bible:

*Take away his talent,
and give it to the one who has ten.
B[e]cause the one who has
will be given more and will have extra;*

⁷⁶ Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 178.

⁷⁷ Guevara, "Man and Socialism," in *The Cuba Reader*, 372.

*but the one who has nothing
will lose what little he has.*⁷⁸

Cardenal continued with his own analysis, he stated “Capitalism makes the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”⁷⁹ Cardenal recalled passages of the Bible multiple times throughout *Solentiname*. Many times he used direct citations of the Bible and a subsequent discussion between himself and the Bible study group in order to make his case for the merits of Marxism in a conversational and less intellectually driven manner. The accessibility to learn, understand, and identify with and from the characters in Cardenal’s book reflected the nature of the FSLN’s objective to coalesce large portions of the population behind Marxism and their new government.

Conclusion

Gospel in *Solentiname* represented the most explicit connection between Marxism and the New Church of Latin America. Cardenal himself declared “I came to the revolution by way of the Gospel. It was not by reading Marx but Christ. It can be said that the Gospels made me a Marxist.”⁸⁰ Liberation Theology was a complex theological movement. From 1963 through 1968, the ecclesiastical nature of the Catholic Church was significantly altered. Prior to this decade, the role of the Papacy was one of ultimate control, and all decrees emanated from the hub at the Vatican. The introduction of a New Church in Latin America provided an avenue for radicalization. The bishops at Medellín and the lay priests in Latin America were both the theologians and actors of a New Church, one that dedicated itself to the well-being of all its children. While the Vatican allowed theologians in Latin America to push forward with earnest

⁷⁸ “Matthew 25:14-30” in Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 45.

⁷⁹ Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 45.

⁸⁰ Cardenal relayed this in 1976 following a trip to Cuba. *Flights of Victory*, xv.

actions, it must also be commended for its flexibility. Rather than stifling the organic theological debates occurring in the 1960s, the hierarchy of the Vatican allowed clergy to discuss matters of global economics and the morality of their institution.

As Nicaragua provided us with a case study of Liberation Theology, and the role of the New Church as a political entity, the success of the Marxist Revolution provided significance to the theological movement. In July of 1979, the anti-Somoza coalition ousted the oppressive Somoza Regime and created a new government with representation from others within the revolutionary coalition. However, the aforementioned dominance of the FSLN within the coalition manifested itself through roles within the new government.⁸¹ Following the Sandinistas control of the government, peasants received promised agrarian reform, and all Nicaraguans benefited from dedicated programs for literacy and health services. However, the nation did not have the necessary capital to continue its domestic policies in the wake of the *Contra War*. While this report does not delve into the specific policies of the FSLN post-1979, it is important to note that by 1981, the Sandinista Government was waging war against U.S. backed counter-revolutionaries (*Contras*), a war that would drain Nicaragua of its economic resources. With a lack of resources, the economic wishes of the Marxist government could not be completely realized.

Nicaragua's Revolutionary aims mirrored the objectives set forward by the Latin American Church. There was a focus on the most vulnerable segments of the population: workers, peasants, and the millions of impoverished people in Latin America and Nicaragua. The Church for the Poor and the Marxist government of Nicaragua sought to provide tangible benefits and support rather than political rhetoric which would not solve the problems of society.

⁸¹ For example, Ernesto Cardenal was the Minister of Culture of the Sandinista Government from 1979-1987.

As Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Latin American Bishops were the foundational theologians of the Liberation Theology and a new Latin American brand of Christianity, Che Guevara was the leader of a Latin American brand of socialism. The intellectual foundations of both movements came from lived experiences within Latin America, rather than the theoretical musings of the Vatican and Karl Marx, both far removed from Nicaragua, in Western Europe. In Ernesto Cardenal, the merging of Liberation Theology and Marxism found a capable writer who used theology and socialism to create a critical allegory of Jesus Christ and the modern struggle of Nicaragua.

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