

NICARAGUA

Álvarez's exile to the Vatican rewards Ortega

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Certainly, this great favour to the Ortega regime does not diminish delight at the news of the release of Monsignor Rolando Álvarez and 18 other religious who arrived in Rome on 14 January. In a statement issued by the Nicaraguan government yesterday, 15 January, the Ortega & Murillo dictatorship confirmed their release and thanked Pope Francis and Cardinal Parolin for their prudent diplomatic action.

Nonetheless, the release of the two bishops, Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, in prison since 2022, and Monsignor Isidoro Mora, Bishop of Siuna, in prison since last December for praying for Álvarez, sets a dangerous precedent and advances the plan to expel all priests and religious from the country and subsequently agree with the Church of Rome to take control of seminaries, religious and bishops. The request for dialogue with Ortega's regime, invoked by the Pope on 1 January, therefore has only one meaning: to encourage the expulsion of witnesses to the faith from Nicaragua, to get rid of anyone who symbolises dissidence to the tyrant.

In his statement, the dictator says he is 'profoundly grateful ... for the very respectful and discreet coordination carried out which made possible the trip to the Vatican of two bishops, fifteen priests and two seminarians', also recognising the 'possibility of a frank, direct, prudent and very serious dialogue, a responsible and attentive dialogue, which has made it possible to arrive at this day of praise to the God of all'.

Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, archbishop of Managua, had sent a note in the previous hours to all the few priests in the country, informing them of the agreement between the Nicaraguan government and the Holy See, which reads: "It has been agreed to transfer Monsignor Rolando, Monsignor Isidoro, some priests and two seminarians to Rome", asking "everyone to pray for the bishops and priests so that the Lord's grace may never fail and the Holy Spirit may guide them at every moment of their lives". There can be no doubt that this time Bishop Rolando Alvarez was ordered directly by the Pope to leave his diocese and his beloved Nicaraguan people.

Bishop Alvarez had already refused for the first time, on 9 February 2023, an order by the regime to exile in the United States. He was consequently taken from house arrest in his diocese and transferred to the maximum security cells of 'La Modelo' prison, known as El Infiernillo. The following day he was sentenced to 26 years and four months in prison. A second attempt by the regime to expel Monsignor Álvarez took place in the first week of July 2023, this time through 'contacts' established with the Vatican. But the bishop had not accepted the imposed conditions of his exile and was

returned to his cell in El Infiernillo on the morning of Wednesday, 5 July.

On 10 October, again, in the context of an initial agreement for the release of priests and religious taken hostage in Ortega's prisons, Mgr Alvarez's clear refusal to be released on the condition that he leave the country and take refuge in the Vatican had emerged. He did not want to accept exile and reiterated, as confirmed by the press and also by the Latin American Church expert Luis Badilla, director of *El Sismografo* (a news website that ceased to operate last December 2023) that he would only leave prison and the country on the direct order of the Holy Father. So, the Pope's order arrived in the last few days and forced Monsignor Rolando Álvarez, who has become a symbol of all innocent Nicaraguans in prison and a shining example of the firm and consistent defence of the faith and independence of the Catholic Church, to leave the country and his diocese, eliminating the number one enemy of Ortega's communist regime.

The auxiliary bishop of Managua, Msgr. Baez, tireless voice against the dictatorship, already forced by Pope Francis to exile in the Vatican since April 2019 and from there moved at his own expense to Miami, after three months of useless idleness in the Vatican, to be close to Nicaraguan refugees, was delighted at the news last Sunday of the release of Msgr. Alvarez. But, happiness cannot erase the very dangerous victory awarded by Pope Francis to the Ortega regime. This increases if we consider the expulsion of at least 203 religious men and women from 2018 to January 2024 and, in particular, a terrible 2023 (307 assaults on religious men and women, plus 3600 processions banned, plus 237 Masses banned in cemeteries, 85 nuns expelled and their congregations dissolved), as shown by researcher Martha Patricia Molina.

So what is the reason for this undeserved Vatican gift to Ortega and what will happen to Bishop Rolando Álvarez in the Vatican? Will he be allowed to give public testimony forcefully demanding the liberation of his people from tyranny or will he be hidden in the Vatican mists? Finally, having created and confirmed the precedent, following the Catholic Church's renunciation of freedom and autonomy de facto ceded to the communist regimes of Peking and Managua, should we expect from Francis' diplomacy the same cession of sovereignty and doctrinal adjustments to all the social-communist regimes of the globe, Cuba being next?