



# The Sandinistas' Impact in Nicaragua

## Interview With Humberto Belli, Ex-Education Minister

By VIKTORIA SOMOGYI

As Nicaragua awaits the possible return of Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega to power, a one-time official says the country is still recovering from its Marxist past.

Humberto Belli, former education minister of Nicaragua, talked about the country's challenges, in this interview with ZENIT. He lectured at a conference on globalization and poverty, organized by the U.S.-based Acton Institute on Oct. 19 in Rome.

Belli was born and raised in Nicaragua. He studied law in Spain and later obtained a master's in sociology from the University of Pennsylvania.

In his youth he was a Marxist and a collaborator with the Sandinista guerrillas who later overthrew the Somoza regime.

Disenchanted with radical politics, he converted to Christianity. Belli became a vocal critic of Christian-left positions and became opinion-page editor of the only independent newspaper in the country.

He had to flee Nicaragua in 1982 as a political refugee and lived and taught sociology in the United States until President Violeta Chamorro defeated the Sandinistas in the 1990 elections.

Belli then became minister of education for more than eight years. Since 1999 he has been president of Ave Maria College of the Americas, a U.S.-based university that operates in Nicaragua.

*Q: As a young man what attracted you to the Sandinista movement?*

**Belli:** The idea of ending the very oppressive regime that we had in Nicaragua; the illusion of creating a new sort

of utopia, a just society, things that usually attract young people; this relatively naive idea that you can create a new world without injustice and oppression.

*Q: What made you convert to Catholicism?*

**Belli:** The first step was to become disenchanted with Marxism, which happened when I was about to go to university to do my graduate work. I be-

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gan to discover in a painful way that Marxism was not a science, it was a faith.

I had a lot of internal turmoil that eventually led me to Christianity by way of a personal crisis in which, in a very miraculous way, I had a personal encounter with the Lord.

*Q: Why Catholicism instead of other forms of Christianity or other religions?*

**Belli:** That was also a little bit gradual. First I converted to Christianity. I still had a mix of hostility and distrust toward the hierarchy of the Catholic tradition but I kept going to Mass and enjoyed the Eucharist and sacraments.

Soon, I also arrived at what you would call a logical conclusion; as a sociologist I was aware of the need for a single magisterium. When everybody is allowed to interpret the Bible as many Protestants do, you multiply the number of popes.

In a way every Protestant turns out to be a pope, willing to give himself or his group a unique interpretation of the Gospel, whereas in Catholicism you have a centralized authority that gives unity to doctrine and morals.

*Q: What is wrong with the Marxist ideology of the Sandinistas?*

**Belli:** It is an economic analysis believing that the state is the creator of wealth and prosperity, when in fact it is not. Their bad anthropology also led them to concentrate power in a single group, a party with no checks or balances.

There is a type of a political prudence that recognizes that men cannot be trusted, that men have a propensity to be selfish and to abuse. Western and Christian wisdom is the opposite of Marxism.

*Q: What were the moral effects of the Sandinista regime?*

**Belli:** They did tremendous damage to the work ethic of the Nicaraguan people. People who returned to Nicaragua after the Sandinista revolution saw the change in how people work.

One thing that happened was people were used to receiving subsidies from the state, to expect prosperity from the state, instead of believing themselves personally responsible for their own way in life. So a kind of state dependency became very acute along with a tremendous awareness of rights with-

out any awareness of duties.

*Q: How do you think these effects can be overcome?*

**Belli:** It's going to take time. Moral reconstruction has to work very closely with the youth. We have to be engaged in a new re-evangelization of youth.

*Q: As a minister of education what were your main goals? What were the main aspects of your policy?*

**Belli:** We had two major goals. One was to return traditional values to the educational system. We began teaching the Ten Commandments, basic moral principles, and we re-established in the curriculum a subject that had been abandoned: civic and moral education.

And the other important goal was to empower parents to have a say in the running of schools, including the promotion of what we called an autonomous model for the schools.

We organized in every school a board of directors made up of parents, some teachers' representatives and one student representative. This group, the board of directors, had the power to choose the principal of the school, hire and fire teachers, and also to adapt the curriculum to the needs of particular schools.

This model has prevailed in the country, and I hope that the upcoming elections will respect it.

*Q: What are your thoughts on the upcoming elections?*

**Belli:** Right now things are extremely difficult to predict because Ortega, the former Sandinista leader, has about 30-32% of votes according to the current polls.

In the past he had a little more than that, but the non-Sandinista political parties were united, so he was defeated in the last few elections by 55% to 45% of the votes.

This time he has lost some support, but the parties of the right and the non-Sandinista groups are divided. And that makes the situation a little difficult.

His closest competitor has about 26-28% and there is another one who has about 20%. If they were united, of course they would defeat Ortega. But they are not, and it seems difficult to unite them. It is too late.

*Q: Who is supporting Ortega?*

**Belli:** Sociologically it is mostly the lower-middle class. He doesn't have too much support among peasants but he does have some support in the cities among them because he did something while he was in the government: He magnified the size of the state and he also redistributed property, which he took away from the owners and gave to his followers.

I think the backbone of Ortega's support comes from people who either received free homes or whose debts were

canceled, or on a lesser scale, peasants who received land taken away from other people.

*Q: Why don't the poorest classes support Marxist ideology?*

**Belli:** To some extent, the Nicaraguan poor were victimized by leftist policies; they know that and suffered because of them. They went through the worst inflation that perhaps any country has. Nicaragua came to have about 30,000% inflation and that hit the poor directly.

Nicaraguan per-capita income reduced to one-fifth of the pre-revolutionary period, and many people, even from the lower classes, left the country; carpenters, masons, etc., tried to find better jobs outside. It was such a tremendous social trauma that the Nicaraguan poor are not so easily persuaded by Sandinista propaganda.

*Q: Which is the largest social class in Nicaragua?*

**Belli:** Nicaragua is extremely poor. About 70% of the population lives on less than \$2 per day. Only Haiti is poorer in Latin America.

That was not the case before the revolution in 1979. Nicaragua was a paradise in Central America. Costa Rica and Nicaragua were the most developed in Central America and the per-capita income was five times higher. But then we went through the decade of the 1980s, which was catastrophic.

*Q: What role did the Church play in changing the Sandinista regime?*

**Belli:** It played a very important role because the Sandinistas tried to divide the Church, playing what they called the Church of the rich against the Church of the poor.

Using liberation theology, they claimed that it was a Christian duty to support the revolution because the revolution was an attempt to rescue the poor from bondage. Therefore Christians who love the poor had to support the revolution.

But the hierarchy kept its head and said that you cannot confuse the Kingdom of God with a particular political movement. Christians are free to make their decisions and you cannot rescue the poor through a system that oppresses people and denies their freedom.

So there was tremendous trouble. The leader of the Catholic Church at that time was Cardinal Miguel Obando, who was very firm and supported Pope John Paul II very openly. People stood behind him and he was like a light that kept hope in the middle of the darkness.