

# Remembering Managua, 1988: The hope of the Sandinista revolution

JANUARY 1988: It's a hot day with a brilliant sun in downtown Managua and the ruling Sandinista Party has planned a rally. It is to take place in the large open plaza in front of the Palacio Nacional, with the old cathedral off to the left.

The palacio is adorned with waving black and red Sandinista flags, banners, and life-size pictures of Sandino, the hero of Nicaragua's revolutionary past and present. The cathedral looks forlorn and empty, abandoned since the earthquake of the 1970s.



Sandinista rally at the Palacio Nacional in Managua

At mid-morning, we 12 Benedictine brothers of Weston Priory and four Mexican Benedictine sisters mingle with the large crowd that overflows the huge plaza.

Almost everyone in the plaza is wearing a military uniform, but there is a surprising absence of guns or weapons. Ages appear to range between 15 and 25. The median age of Nicaraguan citizens, we are told, is 15. And another surprise: at least half of the military at this rally are young women.

The scene is colorful and festive. Lots of laughter, flags waving, songs and spontaneous dancing. The spirit is joyful and friendly, hardly what one would expect at a military or political rally. Speakers line the steps of the Palacio Nacional and loudspeakers boom their message. The youthful gathering responds with cheers and approving acclamations.

Just in front of us, a young woman is tossed playfully, high above the heads of her friends, only to land into the outstretched arms of her comrades. The performance is repeated again and again, to the delight of everyone around.

When President Daniel Ortega takes the microphone, all come to listening attention. His message is interrupted by applause, shouts, and chants. All the Nicaraguan people will be educated. Literacy brigades of young students will spread out through the countryside to the remotest villages to teach peasants to read and write. Basic health services will be available to all

Nicaraguan citizens through local health clinics specializing in natural medicines. Businesses and factories will be co-owned by employers and workers. Prisons will be reformed as centers of rehabilitation and job training. Culture will be fostered especially among the young, with centers for music and the arts. Those who have lost homes and land in the earthquake will have shelter. No one will be rich, but all will have the necessities of life.

The vision sounds like a Utopia -- or at least a more just society. And the youthful audience responds with all the idealism of their age. We Benedictine brothers and sisters are older, and obviously from another country and culture. But this does not hinder the friendliness and welcome we receive from the young Nicaraguans around us. Coming from our different background and perspective, we can but wonder how such a vision can be realized. In the real world, can this dream become a reality?



Weston community with Mexican sisters and their hosts and guides, Managua, 1988

In the days that follow, we get a glimpse of small beginnings that suggest that something new is happening here. A first hint comes as we walk the streets of Managua. No street signs, no numbers on the houses, many lots still vacant since the time of the earthquake, but also -- no begging!

In Mexico and other third world countries, we have become accustomed to seeing people sitting with outstretched hands, imploring eyes -- or children, begging for just one peso.

Our Presbyterian guides from the United States tell us that no one in this society seems wealthy, but the hope of the society is that no one should be without dignity and have to live by begging.

When we ask about health care, we are brought to a local clinic in one of the neighborhoods of the city. A small group of women is on hand to answer questions and offer consultation. These women explain that they have learned about herbal and natural medicines from elders in their families and communities. They offer their services on a volunteer basis and dispense medications at a minimum cost. Drugs commonly available in first world pharmacies either cannot be readily obtained or are too expensive. Medical doctors oversee the clinics and can be seen at the few hospitals in the city.

In the short time we have in Nicaragua, it is clear that we brothers and sisters will not get to see the full reality. But we are being shown areas that give a taste of what this dream might become.

We are aware that the Sandinista's economic policies are questioned because of links with Cuba and Russia. The opportunity to discuss this issue with government officials gives further food for thought.

In the city of Leon, we are welcomed to the office of the military Governor of the Province. He seems genuinely pleased to meet with us and responds to concerns and questions in a relaxed and non-defensive manner. He tells us that he and others in the government are not Communists, but that they have concern for a more just distribution of wealth and services among an extremely impoverished populace. He calls this system Social Democracy.

His words give more perspective to the idealistic sounding program we heard at the rally in Managua. It is also reassuring to hear his admission that mistakes have been made and that the young government has much to learn.



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