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A file photo shows the cross atop the old Metropolitan Cathedral of Managua, Nicaragua. (OSV News/Oswaldo Rivas, Reuters)



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In a moving letter, Pope Francis expressed his closeness with the people of Nicaragua as Central American bishops called for a day of prayer for the country on the feast of the Immaculate Conception amid constitutional changes that will lead into an even darker dictatorship.

Expressing his "affection," Francis said: "I profess for the Nicaraguan people, who have always been distinguished by an extraordinary love for God," noting that the people affectionately call God "Papachú."

"I am with you, especially in these days when you are celebrating the Novena of the Immaculate Conception," Francis wrote Dec. 2.

"Precisely in the most difficult moments, when it becomes humanly impossible to understand what God wants of us," he wrote, "we can understand what God wants from us, we are called not to doubt his care and mercy."

Central American bishops have called earlier for a day of prayer for Nicaragua as the country slides deeper into totalitarianism and constitutional changes threaten the Nicaraguan church's relationship with the Vatican.

The Episcopal Secretariat of Central America called for the day of prayer on Dec. 8, when Nicaraguans celebrate the feast of the Immaculate Conception — a national holiday in the deeply Catholic country.

"We express our deep solidarity and communion with the people of God in Nicaragua, who often confront a challenging reality," the episcopal secretariat said in a Nov. 28 statement after its 82nd general assembly held in El Salvador.

Dioceses, parishes and church communities across Central America were invited to join the Nicaraguan tradition of "la gritería," or "the shouting." It's a deep expression

of popular piety and Marian devotion, in which people pour into the streets and visit altars built for the Virgin. They shout, "Who is it that brings this joy?" to which the response is given, "The conception of Mary" — a phrase Francis reminded the faithful of in his letter.

The feast of the Immaculate Conception of Mary is widely celebrated in Central America. But it has special significance in Nicaragua, where it is known as La Purísima and is observed with a novena.

Francis in his letter told the people of Nicaragua: "Be certain that faith and hope work miracles. Let us look to the Immaculate Virgin, she is the luminous witness of this trust." Nicaraguans, he added, "have always experienced her maternal motherly protection in all your needs and you have shown your gratitude with a very beautiful and spiritually rich religiosity."

"I wish that this celebration of the Immaculate Conception, which prepares us for the opening of the Jubilee of 2025, may give you the encouragement you need in your difficulties, uncertainties and hardships," Francis wrote.

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"For this year 2024, we call on everyone to join in prayer with this cry of faith and hope, peace and freedom, which the faithful direct to their Mother and Patroness," said the statement of the Central American bishops, which was read at a celebration of Mass by Bishop José Antonio Canales of Danlí, Honduras.

"Our thoughts are with you, Nicaraguan brothers and sisters. We fraternally join your cry, which respectfully hopes to find an answer," Canales said, adding, "We cannot be indifferent to what is happening there."

The ruling Sandinista regime, however, has curtailed religious celebrations, including a ban on processions during La Purísima. Parishes have limited celebrations to church property.

Celebrations of La Purísima this year follow the introduction of a constitutional overhaul granting President Daniel Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, sweeping powers, which include making the couple "co-presidents" with the authority to "coordinate" the other branches of government.

The draft constitution, which is expected to be enacted in January, declares Nicaragua a "revolutionary" country with "socialist ideals." It regularizes "voluntary police," which would effectively be paramilitaries — thugs used to besiege protesters in 2018 demonstrations that human rights groups say left more than 300 dead. The revised constitution also introduces the concept of statelessness for people deemed "traitors" to the homeland — such as the political prisoners and clergy sent into exile and stripped of their citizenship.

The constitutional overhaul changes 143 articles of the 202 existing articles and eliminates 37 articles entirely.

Martha Patricia Molina, an exiled lawyer who tracks church repression, raised concern over changes to the sections pertaining to religion. Article 14 states, "The state is secular and ensures freedom of worship, faith and religious practices in strict separation between the State and churches," Molina posted on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Article 69 guarantees the individual and collective right to express "religious beliefs in private or public with respect to the fundamental principles established in the constitution."

But the revised constitution also says that religious groups must remain "free from all foreign control."

"The reforms propose a definitive break between the Pope, Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church and the Nicaraguan Catholic Church," Molina posted on X. "With these reforms, a parallel church can be created that is not in communion with the Pope. ... The discretionary power enjoyed by the Ortega-Murillo dictators will consider any opinion expressed by Pope Francis, cardinals or foreign bishops as aggressions."

In consoling words for the people of Nicaragua, Francis assured in his letter: "I pray unceasingly to the Blessed Virgin to console and accompany you, confirming you in your faith. I want to say it forcefully, the Mother of God: God does not cease to intercede for you, and we do not cease to ask Jesus to keep you always by his hand."

Francis encouraged Nicaraguans to pray the rosary in the moments of trial and finished his letter with the words of a special prayer he wrote for the Jubilee Year.