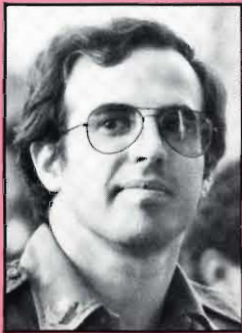


CHRISTIANS IN THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION

An Interview with Luis Carrion

National Directorate of the FSLN



LUIS CARRION, one of the nine members of the FSLN's National Directorate, began his involvement in the fight against the Somoza dictatorship as a member of a Christian student group. He was a founder and leader of the Movimiento Cristiano Revolucionario (MCR); he joined the FSLN in 1972, while remaining in the leadership of the MCR. During the final year of the war against Somoza, Carrion was selected to be one of the nine members of the first, unified National Directorate of the FSLN. At that time, he was also Commander of the FSLN's guerrilla forces on the Frente Oriental (Eastern Front). After the Triumph against Somoza, Carrion became Deputy Commander of the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS). In 1983, he was named Deputy Minister of the Interior.

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CHRISTIANS IN THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION

The Nicaraguan revolution is the first Latin American revolution in which Christians have participated in a massive way, in both the urban neighborhoods and the countryside, not only as part of the revolution's base, but in the leadership as well. What is the explanation for this phenomenon? What policy did the FSLN¹ follow to incorporate Christians into the revolution? Why can we not speak of a strategic alliance between Christians and Marxists? These questions are addressed in the following interview with Luis Carrion, member of the FSLN Directorate and a Commander of the Revolution. Carrion was one of the principal leaders of the university Christian movement; he began to work with the FSLN in 1972.



ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION

MARTA
HARNECKER

We know that Christians played a very important role in the Nicaraguan revolution. To what do you attribute the incorporation of this new force into the revolution: To changes within the Catholic Church? To the Christian tradition of the Nicaraguan people? Or to the type of political alliances that the FSLN put into practice? Do you think it is correct to speak of a strategic alliance between Christians and Marxists?

LUIS
CARRION

I think that our analysis of the situation must be based on the historical development of the incorporation of Christians into the revolutionary struggle in Nicaragua. First of all, it's important to note that the participation of Christians will be very extensive in any process of struggle in Latin America, because our people are eminently Christian. Nevertheless, I believe that the phenomenon of Christian participation requires a special analysis. I'll tell you about our experience.

Here in Nicaragua there has never been a political organization capable of gathering together an important sector of the population under a "Christian" banner. There existed and still exists a small Social Christian Party that never had the influence and could never manage to use the structures of the Catholic Church to strengthen its political activity. In this sense, Christians, until the beginning of the seventies, did not achieve organized political participation in the country in terms of being Christians, nor did they participate indirectly through a party calling itself Christian.

After the Vatican II Council, which ended in 1965, and particularly after the Medellin Conference² in 1968, new currents of thought and action were felt throughout the base of the Catholic Church. At this

time, ecclesiastical communities called "Christian Base Communities" began to develop. Their development signified a change in the way the Church carried out its work. The parish priest was no longer the only expression of the Church's presence. The Church began to create ecclesiastical base organizations in which all the Christians of the neighborhood could participate. These communities developed more in some places than in others. Their growth depended in great part on the priest who directed the activity.

MH What did these base communities do?

LC As these lay Christians began meeting for the purpose of communal reflection, they began to discuss not only Christian themes but also the economic and social conditions that were oppressing them. We must remember that in Nicaragua almost all other types of popular organizations were repressed. And so some of these base communities became the nuclei of community leadership in their neighborhoods.

In various places, leaders began to emerge — people from the Christian base communities. The impetus for this development was not under any one group's control. There was the initial momentum coming from the Catholic Church itself — Vatican II and Medellin — that encouraged Christians to concern themselves with world problems. And at a certain point this momentum coincided with the activity of the FSLN.

MH What kind of people participated in the Christian base communities? Socially conscious university students or the people of the barrios themselves?

LC It was strictly a popular phenomenon. The Christian base communities were made up of the people of the poor neighborhoods, the barrios. In general, the participants were older people, people who had a certain amount of authority in the community.

CHRISTIAN MILITANCY AMONG NICARAGUA'S YOUTH

Among the youth something different was happening, although it had the same roots. Most relevant to our discussion is what was happening at the university level. By the early seventies, Catholic youth organizations such as Catholic Worker Youth and University Catholic Youth had already ceased to exist. At that time youth groups began to form to carry out what they called "life reflection," consisting of reflection about the moral obligation or commitment these young people felt as human beings. They took part in sessions of criticism and self-criticism, framed by readings from the Bible and fueled by Christian faith and beliefs.

MH Explain to me what this commitment entailed.

LC The essence of this commitment was effective action for the good of one's fellow being, one's neighbor. We understood our "neighbor" to be our people in general, and especially the poorest of our people.

This phenomenon started in the high schools and later spread to the university. Motivation that originated in faith coincided with the intense political activity that was going on in the university at the time and accelerated the politicization of many young people. They increasingly began to commit themselves to activity that was more clearly political, although they were not yet joining the student organizations sponsored by the FSLN.

In January–February of 1972, I was a member of a group of Christian university students who decided to leave their middle class homes and go to live in a poor neighborhood, the parish of Father Uriel Molina. We combined our life in the neighborhood and the tasks we found there with our life at the university.

At this point the leadership of the FSLN perceived that something new was happening among this group of university students: this new generation of Christian youth possessed a certain amount of organization and a clear revolutionary political vision. The FSLN decided to try to incorporate this movement into its ranks. The first meetings took place between the leaders of the movement and the leaders of the FSLN. The FSLN bypassed the FER³ and directly established relations with this new group of Christians. That was how the first conversations occurred.

MH Were you a leader of the Christian movement at that time?

LC Yes, I had become a leader. My original idea when the contacts began was that we could form an alliance between our people and the FSLN. Our group and the FSLN could work together and accomplish many things, while we maintained our own identity.

MH You wanted to limit yourself to a unity of action?

LC Yes. The leaders of the FSLN did not directly challenge this position, but in practice it lost force. As we became incorporated into the revolutionary movement against the Somoza dictatorship, we began to see that we could not act as an independent force. Later, after some of us had joined the FSLN, we realized that, given the dynamic of current events, we could widen enormously the influence of the Frente if we could organize forces that were still relatively unorganized. I was told later that Carlos Fonseca was the first to suggest this project.

MH Organize these forces into a Christian movement?

LC Yes, into a political organization made up of youth with Christian backgrounds. This allowed us to bring together a large number of young people with histories of activism and militancy as Christians: people who had a great willingness to struggle yet who still had reservations and doubts about directly participating in Marxist organizations. The movement became strong in Managua and Leon, because they were the two university centers. It moved rapidly beyond the university, mainly to the poor neighborhoods of the cities.

WORK IN THE BARRIOS

MH Why was the movement concentrated in the barrios and not in the unions?

LC When the movement began, we developed a rudimentary analysis. We were encouraged to do so by the FSLN leadership. We prepared documents concerning the national situation and the responsibility of Christians in the face of that situation. The first document was crucial: in it we analyzed the social classes in Nicaragua. Because the working class was small and diverse we decided not to concentrate our forces there. We saw that the majority of the poor population was concentrated in the barrios and we came to the conclusion that it was there that we should direct this new movement.

MH Your previous community experience in the barrio must have weighed heavily in your decision.

LC Yes, that's true. Our relationships and our bonds were with the people we knew in the barrios as a

result of contacts between young Christians in the university and the Christian base communities.

We already knew some of the priests and some of the lay leaders in the barrios, so naturally the barrios appeared to be the logical place for the Christian movement to work.

Our work in the barrios speeded up the politicization that was already occurring there. When we went there we went as a Christian movement that included some members of the FSLN. What these FSLN members wanted to do was to integrate the most advanced people, the best cadres, into the FSLN without taking them away from their environment.

MH Could you explain that a little more?

LC We went from the university to the barrios and there we began to carry out activities that weren't exactly religious. We began to try to organize community directorates made up of young people. Our objective was to create an organized mass base that would be politicized for the revolutionary movement. But what did we find in many cases? That base communities had already been formed, and that there were very advanced people working in them, people who had been thinking about social problems and who were looking for something to do. In many cases, community and youth leaders came out of the ecclesiastical communities and from the ranks of the university students that we had taken into the barrios. Clearly many of Nicaragua's leaders come from a Christian background.

When we went to the barrios, we didn't go as a religious organization, but as an eminently political organization of Christian origin, many of whose members still identified themselves as Christians.

As FSLN militants and leaders of the Christian movement we acted with great freedom and we were presented with a wide field of action. No one told us how to do things or where to organize. The FSLN didn't attempt to define rules for us, and they gave us a great deal of autonomy even though we were

new militants. I think this autonomy was very important because it allowed the movement to develop in its own way, according to the characteristics and circumstances of its members. No one imposed anything on us. We never discussed philosophy or argued about religion. We debated about the practical needs of the political struggle.

As a result, a very important group of Christian leaders and people with a Christian background joined the ranks of the FSLN. These were people who were respected and had authority as both religious and community leaders. Their incorporation meant the possibility of reaching wide sectors of Christians.

The Movimiento Cristiano Revolucionario⁴ (Revolutionary Christian Movement) existed until the end, and always served to bring in new people who would join this movement more readily than they would join the FER.

MH Was it kind of a mass front of the FSLN?

LC Not exactly a mass front. It was relatively small, in the hundreds rather than the thousands. But these hundreds were cadre, hundreds of leaders working in the barrios, and because they were leaders, their work was multiplied. When they went to the barrios, they didn't try to get people to join the Christian movement. They were trying to develop different forms of organization and mass mobilization in the barrios, and, at the proper time, to link these organizations to the FSLN.

THE COUNTRYSIDE: A NETWORK OF DELEGATES OF THE WORD

MH

Did the same process occur in the countryside?

LC

Something different was happening in the countryside. In rural areas the Church created an organizational structure that was much more solid and effective than that in the cities. One lone priest could exercise control over a much larger area than in the city. Priests did this through people called "Delegates of the Word" — lay leaders who were usually supported by the Church. They were almost always of poor peasant origin, not because it was decided they should be, but because, for the most part, it was poor peasants who were most willing to dedicate themselves to this type of work, for so many hours and so little money. We must realize that in many cases the Church promoted the development of social works in the countryside: bringing in water, collecting donations to construct schools or housing and so forth.

One priest might have 15–40 Delegates of the Word under his jurisdiction, and they were spread around the area he was responsible for. They carried out certain clerical functions, such as preaching and distributing communion wafers already blessed by the priest. When their numbers increased, deacons were appointed to operate at a higher administrative level, to supervise a group of Delegates of the Word. This organizational structure enabled a priest to take responsibility for a very large area.

In general the Delegates of the Word became politicized when they began to deal with problems that were not exclusively religious, but material, concrete and political. They came to realize that the

Somoza government had no solutions to these problems; and they faced suspicion and repression from the National Guard. In this way, they began to participate politically, eventually linking up with the guerrillas.

At a certain point, the incorporation of Christians in the countryside and the barrios into the FSLN, or into the organizations it sponsored, became massive. I believe that this was because of the way in which the FSLN treated the question of Christians in its work. I think it's important to bring this out.

MH Could you explain in detail the strategy followed by the FSLN towards Christians?

LC The FSLN never gave into the temptation to design one course of action and one set of arguments for Christians and another for the rest of the people. This would have been a veiled manifestation of sectarianism. In the experience of the FSLN, neither the people nor the revolutionaries themselves could be divided into Christians and non-Christians. In Nicaragua's case, Christianity as a religious and cultural phenomenon includes the majority of the population, whether through active practice or through passive identification.

The oppression of the Somoza dictatorship and the people's submission to imperialism, poverty, ignorance and destitution — which are the results of capitalism in our country — affected all the people equally, regardless of their religious beliefs. The FSLN did not distinguish its work with Christians from its work with the rest of the people. We called upon everyone equally to fight for the defeat of the dictatorship and the construction of a new society. The existence of the Movimiento Cristiano Revolucionario did not constitute a negation of this policy, but rather a particular way of carrying it out. It was an organization of young students who were beginning their revolutionary political practice and starting on the road to a more developed consciousness, toward integration into the FSLN. It never had pretensions of making itself into a political organization of Christians in general.

CHRISTIANS DO NOT CONSTITUTE A HOMOGENEOUS BLOCK

Christianity is not a political program. Neither do Christians constitute a homogeneous block. In Latin America, Christians are represented throughout all of society, with its contradictions and its class struggle, its heroes and its villains. The cross and the gospel accompanied some of the noblest enterprises of human history, but also some of its most ignominious. Under these circumstances, it's absurd to talk about agreements or general alliances with Christians. No, this was not the policy of the FSLN. We discovered the revolutionary potential and the progressive positions of many leaders of the base communities of the Catholic Church, and we recruited them directly for the revolutionary struggle and into the FSLN, without going through intermediaries or asking anyone for permission. Nor did we invent pseudo-religious arguments to attract them to our ranks.

Clearly, when these base community leaders were recruited by the FSLN, they carried revolutionary influence into the heart of their ecclesiastical organizations. Often these comrades tried to move others to revolutionary militancy, motivating them with their own faith and religious convictions. But these arguments came from true Christians who were at the same time true revolutionaries: they were not some artificial fabrication of the FSLN. The official position of the Frente from the beginning has been one of absolute respect toward religious beliefs and a commitment to struggle against the manifestations of sectarianism and discrimination that can arise against believers.

MH How do you think the obstacles that exist between Marxists and Christians can be overcome in the revolutionary process in Latin America?

LC I believe that a principal task of the revolutionary leaderships in Latin America is to eliminate such obstacles and facilitate the incorporation of the extraordinary potential force that Christians constitute. Religion is an ideological force that is very powerful, and it can either hinder or accelerate the development of political consciousness in our peoples.

The reactionary sectors of the continent have tried, until now with a lot of success, to turn religion into a retarding, and even counterrevolutionary, force. On many occasions, the religious and social hierarchies have successfully impeded the determined participation of the Christian masses in revolutionary movements. We must also recognize, however, that the vanguard organizations have often made errors that have helped reinforce the distrust and fears accumulated from centuries of work by our class enemies. Without doubt there have been problems of sectarianism and discrimination against those comrades who come from a Christian background and who maintain their religious convictions.

Overcoming sectarianism demands that revolutionary Marxists recognize that the principles of Christianity, positively interpreted, form a moral basis from which to lead people into the fight against oppression and injustice. This is not a philosophical consideration but a historical fact. I myself — and I'm no exception — came to the revolutionary struggle from my religious convictions; my discovery of Marxism came later. Many other comrades died in the struggle against the dictatorship convinced that their revolutionary participation was the only way of living in accordance with their faith. Their moral standing is no less than that of comrades who came to the struggle from other types of ideological conviction.

MH If that is the case, then what would you say about the question, being raised throughout Latin America, of incorporating revolutionary Christians into Marxist vanguard organizations?

LC As long as the vanguard organizations keep their doors closed to Christians for philosophical or ideological reasons, and ignore the revolutionary practice and class position of these people, it will be difficult to eliminate the distrust and suspicion of Christians. This distrust has been fed not only by enemy propaganda, but by the sectarianism of many revolutionary organizations as well.

14 The experience of the FSLN is very rich and instructive in this regard. Many Christians, includ-

ing some priests, are active within the FSLN. I'm not talking only about members at the base of our organizations; some of these Christians are members of the Sandinista Assembly and occupy high political positions. Despite the struggles within the Catholic Church, the Christian beliefs of these comrades have not come into contradiction with their revolutionary militancy and party discipline. But neither has the FSLN become a forum for philosophic-religious arguments. It's possible to say many things about this experience of ours, but what's certain is that the Popular Sandinista Revolution has been strengthened by it.

I think that some revolutionary movements have tended to see organized, progressive, and revolutionary Christian sectors as a competing force that takes away part of the political clientele of the revolutionary parties. In my opinion this is an error, just as it is an error to set up revolutionary militancy as an alternative that excludes organized Christian participation.

Avoiding this error was one of the best tactics of the FSLN. We linked ourselves to the base communities of the Church not to take away people, but to incorporate them into the FSLN as a step in their political development, without this signifying any contradiction with their past or with what they were doing at the moment. On the contrary, we left them in their groups so that their primary commitment would revert back into political action in their own environment. Never did we present incorporation into the FSLN as a choice between Christian faith and political militancy. If we had put things in those terms we would have been left with very few people.

MH While Latin American Marxists have been wrestling with the issues raised by Christian involvement in the revolutionary process, this involvement has also provoked a great deal of debate within the Catholic Church itself. What is your perspective on this debate?

LC The contradiction that has been growing for several years in the heart of the Catholic Church between

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its progressive sectors and those sectors allied to the pro-imperialist and oligarchic forces is one of the most significant phenomena for the development of revolutionary struggle in Latin America. This contradiction and its outcome could have enormous repercussions for the whole continent. The outcome will determine whether the great ideological force of Catholicism will work for social change or against it.

For many centuries theological interpretation of biblical texts has been biased fundamentally towards the interests of the ruling and exploiting classes. Today, as a result of the class struggle within the Catholic Church, a new theology has arisen — Liberation Theology — which has come to legitimize opposite views: that is, it legitimizes the active participation of Christians in popular struggles.

This new situation will open up unforeseen perspectives, and we as revolutionaries cannot remain passive in the face of such a development. Obviously we are not going to participate directly in the debate, because that is the role of the Christian revolutionaries themselves. Our task is to eliminate the obstacles, both political and ideological, that impede the integration of Christians into revolutionary struggles and to give our support to the forces within the Church that are defending the interests of the exploited.

NICARAGUA: SCENE OF A CONFRONTATION

Nicaragua is one of the Latin American countries in which this conflict within the Catholic Church can be seen most sharply. This is logical because here we have had a successful revolution that has both stimulated progressive Christians and, at the same time, exacerbated the fears of reactionaries who have tried to turn the Catholic Church into the major political party of counterrevolution. Beyond that, the FSLN's principled position regarding Christians has played an important role. Christians know that this revolution does not in any way menace their religious beliefs, and that being a revolutionary, although it may lead to confrontation with some ecclesiastical authorities, does not in any way contradict their faith. □

FOOTNOTES

¹The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) is the political organization that led the revolutionary movement against the Somoza dictatorship and that has guided the government of Nicaragua since the triumph against Somoza in 1979. The Frente is headed by a nine-person National Directorate, of which Luis Carrion is a member.

²The Vatican II Council, called by Pope John XXIII, undertook numerous significant reforms to address the decline in active Church membership by making the Church more accessible and relevant to people in the 20th century. The purpose of the Medellín Conference of Latin American bishops was to consider the changes envisioned by Vatican II in the light of the situation of their continent. The concept of base communities and the call for greater identification with the needs of the poor were two of the significant results to come out of the deliberations at Medellín.

³Frente Estudiantil Revolucionario (Revolutionary Student Front) was the primary organization of Nicaraguan university students opposed to the Somoza dictatorship throughout the 1960's and 1970's.

⁴The Movimiento Cristiano Revolucionario (MCR) was the organization founded by Carrion and his colleagues to organize Christian university students in support of the revolution.