

CHINA AND NICARAGUA DESTROYING CATHOLICISM

Virtually every privately funded and publicly funded report on Christian persecution finds that communist and Muslim-run nations are the worst offenders. Conditions in the Middle East remain dire, and communist nations such as North Korea are just as vicious, but what is currently happening in China and Nicaragua commands our immediate attention.

North Korea makes plain that Christians have no rights, but, as Thomas D. Williams explains in his new book, *The Coming Christian Persecution*, matters are more insidious in China. It “offers a veneer of religious freedom but only on the communist party’s terms, and the state employs advanced surveillance methods to ensure that the content of Christian worship coheres with the ideology of Maoist socialism. Children under the age of 18 are not allowed in church for any reason.”

Williams does not exaggerate. They have a “Smart Religion” app that requires the faithful to register with the government as a condition of attending services. In other words, church attendance is not a private affair—it is the business of the communist government. Surveillance is ubiquitous.

According to China watcher Gordon Chang, the government is “moving in the direction where there will be no religious ceremonies or services ever permitted in China, because Beijing does not want religion in any place in China, even if it’s controlled religion.”

President Xi, the Chinese dictator, has instituted “Sinicization,” a policy where the government seeks to bring religious entities under his control, mandating eventual assimilation under the communist party’s rule. Those who are

seen as resisting this forced compliance are punished. In fact, Christians are told they must display “enthusiasm, fervor and love for the party.” They must abide by what the Communist Party mandates, “Love the Party, Love the Country, Love Socialism.”

Xi chose to single out Cardinal Joseph Zen, the 91-year old former archbishop of Hong Kong, for a public display of his iron rule. Zen was arrested last year on trumped up charges of “colluding with foreign powers.” Zen’s layman counterpart in Hong Kong, Jimmy Lai, was sentenced to jail before Christmas last year for challenging the increasingly tyrannical rule; it is a reflection of Hong Kong’s subordinate status vis-à-vis China.

Nicaraguan dictator Daniel Ortega has been cracking down on the Catholic Church for the past five years. Priests have been arrested, missionaries expelled, and Catholic institutions have been shut down. A human rights organization, Nicaraguan Nunca Más, estimates that dozens of religious leaders have fled since 2018, and that Church personnel have been deported. In 2019, the regime blocked entry of international donations.

In February Bishop Roland Álvarez was sentenced to 26 years in prison and stripped of his citizenship. He was falsely charged with treason and undermining the regime. Pope Francis blasted his imprisonment, comparing what Ortega did to the Bolsheviks in 1917 and Hitler in the 1930s. In response, Ortega closed two Catholic universities and Caritas Nicaragua, the Church’s aid organization. More important, Nicaragua has recently suspended relations with the Holy See, and on March 18 the Vatican’s diplomatic headquarters in Nicaragua was forced to close.

All totalitarian regimes fear internal threats to their power. Old-fashioned authoritarian regimes, such as Franco in Spain or the Czars in Russia, didn’t care what anyone believed in, just so long as they were in control. They are examples of

political dictatorships. Totalitarian regimes are political, economic, social and cultural dictatorships, and as such they are very much concerned about what its people think. Thought control is their signature.

Religion and the family stand in the way of totalitarian rule, and that is why they must be crushed. China and Nicaragua are both nervous about Christianity, and Catholicism, in particular, because they divert allegiance of the people away from the government. Hence, the move to force fidelity to the state.

For reasons not completely understood, Pope Francis has taken a hardline stance against Nicaragua and a soft stance against China. Catholics living in both countries deserve the strongest possible support from every nation-state, and that includes the Holy See.