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***Relanzamiento* of Nicaragua's Christian Base Communities**
Forging New Models of Church and Society for the Twenty-First Century

by

LARA GUNDERSON

Bachelor of Arts, Anthropology, Western Washington University, 2002
Master of Arts, Anthropology, University of New Mexico, 2011

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctorate of Philosophy
Anthropology

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my dissertation chair, Dr. Les Field, for your intellectual guidance, generous time, and shared preoccupation with Nicaragua. You met with me in the most challenging of times to help me progress as a scholar and through the doctoral process. I chose the University of New Mexico's anthropology program specifically to study with you and I could not have chosen better for this endeavor I was so compelled to write.

Thank you to my committee members Dr. Suzanne Oakdale and Dr. David Dinwoodie for guiding the development of my theoretical foundation. Your feedback and encouragement from those first semesters of graduate school to the final stages of this dissertation have shaped who I am as a scholar. Thank you to my outside member Dr. Kathleen Holscher for enriching my understanding of the varied, contested, and embodied ways of what it means for people to be Catholic.

I was privileged to receive financial support for my research. I am grateful for the Latin American and Iberian Institute Field Research Grants and PhD Fellowships; the Karl Schwerin Graduate Fellowship in Ethnology; and the University of New Mexico's Graduate and Professional Student Association, Anthropology Graduate Student Union, and Student Conference Award Program.

Thank you to my friends and family who supported me through this long endeavor. Thank you to my family, Chris, Doug, Rachel, Zack, and Geoff: Life doesn't stop for a PhD and a lot changed since I began this endeavor. Thank you to my Grandma for sharing her network of progressive activist Catholics who knew how to connect me with the Nicaragua CEBs. Thank you Nixie and Phil for ongoing encouragement and support throughout this process. My anthropology *compañeros*: Annie, Christina, Daniel,

Elise, Gwen, Jara, Jen, Kelley, Miria, Olya, Pilar, Liz: Thank you for the intellectual conversations, camaraderie, emotional and actual nourishment, and so many needed laughs. Catie, thank you for mentorship, for employing me all these years, and for the invaluable professional development working for you has provided. Ellen, David, Leah, Dan, and Will: Thank you for the rich conversations, Toñas, and surf trips. Above all, thank you to my husband, Madison, for encouraging me and supporting me through the at-times grueling process of fieldwork and writing. I love you unconditionally and without hesitation.

Most importantly, this dissertation would not be possible without Nicaragua's Christian Base Communities. *Padre Arnaldo, doña Marta y su familia, Marsela, Kora, Daysi, Mayra, Carmen, José Luis, Isael, Marvin, Ana y el grupo de "jóvenes" de La Amistad, Ana y Efraín, Ester, los hermanos García, Hermanas Rosa y Carmen, la Pastoral de Juventud, todas y todos de las Samaritanas: Mil gracias por su apoyo, tiempo, y sabiduría. Mi tesis está hecho de su generosidad compartiendo su historia, su fuerza y solidez recontando experiencias a-veces traumáticas, y su paciencia y tiempo enseñándome sus practicas y valores.*

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ABSTRACT

How do narrative practices used by members of Christian Base Communities (in Spanish, CEBs) construct particular Catholic-political subjectivities within the Church, the nation-state, and the larger global institutions? Christian Base Communities, the vehicle by which liberation theology is put into practice, played a significant role in Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution. Their proclaimed renewal is happening under dramatically different contexts from which they first emerged. Their religious beliefs continue to justify and place a moral thrust on their struggle for a more egalitarian society despite the reduction of social programs on the part of neoliberal governments, including the current Sandinista party administration. I recorded elicited and un-elicited autobiographical narratives that are integral to participation as religious and political subjects. CEB participants recount processes of transformation, in which a new identity is being crafted by people on the economic margins capable of effecting change within the church and society. I focus upon liberation theology as a part of anthropology of Christianity and Catholicism. In that light I ask, might contemporary CEBs function as theological revolutionaries, seeking to transform Catholic practice?

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I had been looking forward to chatting with Genoveva and her husband, Juan Carlos. We were in the back room of the small yet highly respected non-governmental organization (NGO) where they work with young people and women on sustainable rural development, promoting an agro-ecological model of production. They are dynamic and committed members of Nicaragua's Christian Base Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*, hereafter CEBs), which practices liberation theology. They focus on youth groups, often jumping up to the microphone, singing, dancing, and leading topics for discussion at meetings and events. In 2008 Genoveva represented Nicaragua at the Latin American CEB conference in Bolivia, where participants chose *relanzamiento* (relaunch, revitalization) as their primary goal.

A revitalization in the liberation theology practice was and is needed, Genoveva and Juan Carlos explained to me, and it is a long, slow, continuous process. "How can we connect better, networking in solidarity to evaluate and promote spirituality? The revolutionary era was magnificent; but now in neoliberalism, consumerism is another dictator," Genoveva asserted. "We need to get back to our origins, be more creative, choose a new impulse."

After quoting liberation theologians Leonardo Boff, Pedro Casaldaligas, and Oscar Romero, Juan Carlos observed, "At our base we have to teach how to denounce. And we must present a different vision. The enemy before was clear but now it is less visible or hard[er] to conceptualize," he continued, explaining that the fight for liberation against a dictatorship supported by the United States' empire was much easier to comprehend.

The current struggle for liberation from a capitalist political economy, again supported by the same empire, which operates by impoverishing and exploiting people and the Earth, is much more difficult to both articulate and conceptualize. Contemporary CEBs are trying to cultivate more awareness, or *conscientización*, of this social, political, and economic context. My research concerns the contemporary CEBs in Nicaragua in light of this proclaimed revitalization.

My Introduction to Liberation Theology

When I tell my grandmother I'm not interested in practicing liberation theology myself and do not "believe" as my research collaborators do, she smiles and responds that all acts of goodness are the presence of the Holy Spirit.

I grew up in a progressive Catholic family and parish schools in Seattle. This meant an emphasis on volunteering, or "serving," in soup kitchens and shelters, tutoring children in reading and writing, visiting assisted-living homes, and being an outdoor education camp counselor for middle-school students for the Catholic Youth Organization. I much preferred the service activities to the Sunday schools and religion classes, which focused more on Catholic doctrine. I remember as a child I said my prayers at night, but that habit had already ended by my teenage years when I took part in the sacrament of Confirmation, mostly at the behest of my mother but also probably because "all my friends were doing it."

I was first exposed to the concept of liberation theology as an undergraduate at Western Washington University by Dr. James Loucky. I was not aware of CEBs during

my twenty-seven months as a Peace Corps volunteer in the department¹ of Rio San Juan, Nicaragua. Only later, while I was developing my research on religious practice in Nicaragua for my master's degree, did I seek them out. One prominent liberation theology scholar with a history in Central America told me to be careful not to focus my research on a dead end, or "bark up the wrong tree," by studying something that had already reached its apogee. Other researchers told me that they were not aware of current liberation theology practice because their focus had moved on to other topics.

It was not the scholars who wrote about them in the past that connected me to the contemporary CEBs, but my progressive Catholic grandmother and her network of activist colleagues. My grandmother gave me names of people from Pax Christi, a Catholic peace movement, and the Maryknoll, a progressive Catholic organization and religious order involved in mission work to serve the poor. An activist from Pax Christi responded most swiftly with contacts for three people who worked with the CEBs in Nicaragua, all of whom responded positively and ultimately connected me with a Jesuit priest, Father Arnaldo Zenteno. Father Arnaldo moved to Nicaragua from Mexico in 1983 and has remained deeply committed to CEB participants and the CEB model.

Father Arnaldo invited me to come to Nicaragua and learn about the CEBs. He arranged for me to stay with a CEB family in a working-class barrio in the capital, Managua, and helped me schedule activities and interviews while I was there. Looking for and finding the best-connected and most knowledgeable people took more effort and courage than I expected. A seminar led by my dissertation chair that was focused on

¹ Departments in Nicaragua are subnational regions similar to states relative to the U.S., or perhaps more accurate, similar to counties relative to US states.

preparing for fieldwork helped me with weekly goals to accomplish before entering the field. Inserting myself into a community to study a group of people was uncomfortable, and I wanted to do it in the most respectful way. Father Arnaldo and the other contacts invited me to Nicaragua, where I met members of the CEBs who were happy to share their stories in the hope that my work might provide them a larger audience that could become aware of, and then do something about, the structures of inequality that make such communities, like the majority of people in the world, so poor.

Researchers I contacted who had studied the emergence and first phases of liberation theology told me they considered the CEBs a part of history, a relic of an era that did not transform the world in the way their proponents had desired.² The pastoral religious communities however not only kept in touch, they knew where the CEBs worked and with whom I should speak, as my grandmother foresaw. This dissertation is a combination of my efforts to approach my upbringing as a progressive Catholic in a way that still allows me some connection to it instead of total alienation, and my relationship with the people of Nicaragua upon whom I developed a lasting focus. I expected to see a practice based in more concrete service activities, yet I was struck by the level of religiosity among CEB practitioners. To end scholarly focus at the moment a political regime is overthrown, or when the effort to transform appears to end, as in the 1989 electoral loss of the Sandinista Party, is problematic. The existence of CEBs is more complicated than just a movement within a political revolution. I intend to contribute to filling the lacuna in the literature on the contemporary practice of liberation theology. I

² A rare exception of the contemporary use of liberation theology is by Paul Farmer and Gustavo Gutierrez in *In the Company of the Poor* (Griffin and Block, eds. 2013).

will contribute to an anthropology of liberation theology by analyzing Christianity as a “cultural fact” (to draw from Cannell’s 2006 *The Anthropology of Christianity*). By “cultural fact” I mean that rather than assuming what being Christian means for those who call themselves Christian, or seeing their identification with Christianity as a secularizing practice or safe facade for social justice or subversive struggles, I focus on how the CEBs practice and experience their religion as Catholics.

Research Statement

A call for a renewal of Christian Base Communities first occurred at a CEB Continental conference in 2008. In 2010, progressive Catholic priest, Father Joseph Mulligan S.J., announced that Nicaragua’s Christian Base Communities were in a process of renewal (Mulligan 2010). CEBs played a significant role in the Sandinista revolution that unfolded after the successful overthrow of the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979, but CEBs went into decline in the 1990s (Canin 2000; Lancaster 1988; Randall 1983). The revolutionary Sandinista decade was characterized by government-supported cooperatives that focused on literacy, local business, and universal health care, social projects the CEBs saw as pro-poor and thereby compatible with their own values. Since the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, or FSLN) in 1990, successive Nicaraguan governments have pursued increasingly neoliberal³ policies that reduce government spending on healthcare and education (Babb 2001), trends that in some ways have continued, following the election of the former revolutionary Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega to the presidency

³ “Neoliberal” is a discursive concept that CEBs employ and find useful. I am referring to capital accumulation and participation in agreements that free up global capital at the expense of small local business, and the reduction of social services.

(Montoya 2013; Spalding 2012). Relationships with foreign capital, and constitutional reforms that favor the permanence of the current administration, take place alongside the increasing presence of diverse NGOs and conversions to evangelical Protestantism. In this emerging hegemonic social reality, CEB networks that emphasize actively helping the poor in a state that has radically diminished spending on health and education since the 1980s have begun to reemerge.

In 2006, and again in 2011 and 2016, Ortega, one of the nine Sandinista *comandantes* who led the revolutionary government in the 1980s, was “reelected” as president (thanks to his constitutional reforms and opaque electoral process). Yet the neoliberal trend has continued unabated (Close et al. 2012). My research in twenty-first-century Nicaragua found that progressive Catholics continue to emphasize a moral responsibility and a focus on helping the poor, in a political and economic climate that does not support those same values. One might posit a simple correlation between the election of Ortega to the presidency and the contemporary renewal of CEBs, but this is not the case. I bring together an anthropology of Catholicism into dialogue with autobiographical narratives to illuminate factors responsible for the CEBs’ reemergence under different circumstances than the revolutionary era of the 1970s and 1980s, and what these contemporary CEBs look like.

This research explores the religious practice of Christian Base Communities in Nicaragua during the years 2011-2015. Participants reflect on the transition from working against the Somoza dictatorship before 1979 to challenging imperial neoliberalism in the twenty-first century. This dissertation focuses on liberation theology as part of a greater anthropology of Christianity. In that light I ask, might contemporary CEBs function as

theological revolutionaries, seeking to transform Catholic practice? To answer this question, I draw from the work of Greeley (2000) as used in Norget, Napolitano, and Mayblin's *The Anthropology of Catholicism* (2017).

Andrew Greeley, in *The Catholic Imagination* (2000), argues that a distinct Catholic sensibility exists. Greeley locates this particular sensibility in events, people, and material objects. Greeley was a Catholic priest and sociologist, and he appears to have developed his analysis using Geertz's approach to culture as observed through symbols. One of his primary arguments, derived from David Tracy's *Analogical Imagination* (1982), is that Catholics imagine the presence of God in the world (*immanence*) whereas Protestants imagine the absence of God (*transcendence*). Citing Tracy, Greeley asserts that Catholics view material things as metaphors for the divine, as opposed to the more textual basis for understanding God among Protestants. While the seven official Catholic sacraments (baptism, reconciliation, Eucharist, confirmation, matrimony, holy orders, and anointing the sick) reveal God and God's love, Greeley argues that even a sandwich might be sacramental, if it is made with love and/or nourishes the person who eats it. He defines sacrament as "a revelation of the presence of God." This definition is different from my anecdotal—or perhaps Durkheimian—understanding, growing up Catholic, of sacraments as ritualistic events that cement one's membership in the Catholic community.

Robert Orsi (2016) upholds Greeley's assertion of there being a particularly Catholic conception of God as "present" and "embodied" in both human bodies and materials. He holds that religion, or, specifically, gods, indeed have a real presence, and function not only to maintain social order; they may also subvert the order in ways that

are painful to their practitioners (2016:5). Orsi wants religious scholars to recognize the gods as present, to ask how people relate to them, and even to include the gods as interlocutors. He argues that we must study the relationship people have with the actually present gods; what the humans do to, for, and with gods; and what the gods do to, for, and with humans (2016:4-5).

Norget, Napolitano, and Mayblin (2017) recognize anthropologists' skepticism about a universalizing Catholic subjectivity, but they maintain that Greeley's assertions and description of a Catholic imagination also motivate inquiry regarding Catholic views of reality (2017:1). Michael Scott (2005) observed that scholarship on Christianity has neglected the theological meanings for research participants in practice. Anthropological research on Catholicism is still, in the words of Norget, Napolitano, and Mayblin, "woefully small" (2017:1).⁴ I argue that there is ample space to conduct ethnographic investigations about progressive Catholicism as part of the anthropology of Christianity.

Greeley's argument that there is a Catholic imagination provokes research that seeks to illuminate an embodied and contested set of practices that compose Catholic worldviews. Indeed, he acknowledges the need for further exploration of a Catholic imagination (2000:183). Orsi, too, asserts that studies of religion that uphold the modern ideal of unseeing the gods "miss the empirical reality of religion in contemporary human affairs and will fail to understand much of human life" (2016:252). Greeley's operationalization of "sacrament" is also useful in my effort to illuminate what might be distinctly Catholic about contemporary CEBs' practices in Nicaragua. Sacramentality and

⁴ Anthropologists who have studied Catholicism include Burdick (2004), Mayblin (2010), Mosse (2006), Orta (2006), and V. and E. Turner (1978). There is also a 2008 dissertation by Catherine Stanford on Catholicism in Nicaragua.

the Catholic imaginary regarding God's immanence draw attention to the unique relationship I observed between CEBs' proclaimed spiritual motivations and the daily practices I observed.

While Catholics share a number of sacraments with Protestants, the way they are practiced by Catholics differs in that it mobilizes the social hierarchy of the Church, as well as the relations between priesthood and laity. CEBs challenge such relations in creative ways. The primary way CEBs challenge Church hierarchy is through service activities. I suggest that members of CEBs see themselves as mobilizing a sacrament (sensu Greeley) of *service* in order to revitalize the church, placing the service of the laity above that of other orders or vows. Might CEBs be seen as new kinds of "priests," facilitating new kinds of service, consistent with Catholic notions of God as immanent? Might we think of the CEBs' work for revitalization as practicing a revolutionary theology?

Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston suggest conceptualizing the laity in some heavily institutionalized and orthodox forms of Christianity as "communities of deferral" (2014). Bandak and Boylston observe that the priesthood is expected to maintain practices of devotion, piety, and religious knowledge as a special group, upholding strict standards so the laity need not. The laity are allowed to take a more passive role in relation to piety (see also Norget, Napolitano, and Mayblin 2017:19). CEBs, conversely, perceive that the priesthood has become overly entrenched in the political affairs of states and imperial capitalist formations. In Nicaragua, CEBs have seen clergy as subservient to the state and even as apologists for the actions of corrupt rulers. Through liberation theology, the laity have committed themselves to a higher standard of Catholic conduct.

They are attempting to invert the community of deferral, to act (as opposed to deferring) on behalf of the Catholic community in a situation in which the priesthood has become beholden to the neoliberal power structure. Is it possible that they are putting themselves forward as a new priesthood to address the plight of the poor majority, drawing on Marx, ironically, to become more pious, to revitalize religious knowledge, and to disrupt the Catholic community of deferral?

I have considered other potential approaches to my research. One possibility is to frame CEBs as a continuation of a long history of Catholic liberalism, emerging during the Enlightenment era of nation-state formation (see Borutta 2012; Lehner and Printy 2010; Rosenblatt 2006). Although this approach opens the anthropology of Catholicism to a wide range of historical issues, it risks inferring that CEBs represent a historical continuation of Gallicanism, a Catholic movement to reconcile Christianity with the modern French state. This approach, while illustrating many parallels, would diminish the importance of the roots of liberation theology in Latin America.

A second approach would be to demonstrate that members of CEBs build civil institutions as vehicles of God's Kingdom on Earth. This is a version of what Mark Goldie (1987) argues for James Harrington, a fifteenth-century English Protestant. Goldie argues that secularization was a Protestant Reformation project meant to open up access to God directly for all believers, instead of primarily through a pope or clergy. Although I did observe institutionalization within CEBs, I see their organized projects as supporting their mission to work in the service of marginalized peoples rather than to reshape Nicaragua—even if they seek the latter as well. This approach does not help me highlight

what is most original about my ethnographic material, or emphasize what I found so distinctive about CEBs as opposed to other progressives, regardless of religious practice.

A third approach is to consider CEBs as religio-political syncretism, drawing from political scientist Daniel Levine's body of work (1986, 1990a, 1990b, 1995). Members of CEBs are Catholics who draw upon Catholic principles—or perhaps “sacraments,” following Andrew Greely as presented in Norget, Napolitano, and Mayblin (2017)—to engage the political and economic challenges facing the impoverished majority. They are a new kind of Catholic developing a syncretism of Catholicism and historical materialism. Levine's project focuses on the political effects of CEB actions. He acknowledges the existence of religious motivations but focuses on political effects. His view is that practitioners of liberation theology should be taken seriously as political agents. This view does not help me uncover what is distinctly Catholic about the CEBs.

I have come to see the strengths made possible by framing this ethnography of contemporary CEBs as a form of revolutionary theology, as Church revitalization. This approach supports and elaborates the data I collected and examine in my ethnographic chapters. CEB participants with whom I spoke during my preliminary research explained that the renewal was like waking up after having “been asleep with one eye open” because, they said, there was more work to do. This research asks how CEB participants are constructing a Catholic subjectivity that is appropriate to this present moment. I investigated ethnographically the scope, and structural position, of CEBs in contemporary Nicaraguan society and the ways that CEBs take and have been taking shape in weekly meetings in Managua, celebration days, bake sales, bible studies, and workshops. I elicited autobiographical narratives about experiences, practices, and beliefs that are

integral to identifying as a CEB member. I investigated whether and how these practices shape or construct types of Catholic subjectivities within the Church and the nation-state. In Chapter 2, I discuss the role of liberation theology in the anthropology of Christianity and in the history of Nicaragua in more detail.

The genre of autobiographical narrative is familiar to practitioners of liberation theology. Speakers are continuously invited to share their testimonies at meetings and events. In Chapter 3 I draw from literature on autobiographical narratives that helps me explain the transformation the speaker describes as a result of participation in CEBs. Specifically, I use Oakdale's ethnography of Kayabi leaders teaching their listeners how to live (2005); Carr's research on patients' and therapists' use of narrative in the transformation from sickness to health (2011); and Keane's examination of the difference between the language ideologies of the missionaries and those of their Sumbanese converts (2007).

Nicaragua's Christian Base Communities and My Fieldsite

In Nicaragua the great majority of people identify as Christian, with a varying degree of religious practice. CEBs are part of a long history of progressive Catholics who are involved in service projects. CEBs say they are simply Christians practicing their faith. I frequently heard participants describe their service activities as a religious responsibility to "create a kingdom of God on Earth." If liberation theology is a social process in which progressive Catholics are continuously in dialogue with ideas about society and social justice, their activities index a continuous production of new interpretations of the Gospels that inform their service activities.

Previously CEBs and the Nicaraguan Sandinista state saw themselves as part of a common project to raise up the impoverished majority. Some people still feel this way, but a growing number of CEB participants no longer feel their goals are the same as those of the state. In the contemporary context, CEBs are redefining themselves, if not in opposition to, at least apart from the current Ortega administration. Liberation theology practices now take place outside of state-sanctioned arenas. In fact, distinguishing themselves from the FSLN was, or is, needed for CEBs to relaunch in Nicaragua.

My ethnographic focus is in the capital, Managua, where I could access the most CEBs, and where the main meeting and national administrative hub of the CEBs (the *Casa Pastoral*) is located. The Nicaraguan CEBs are organized nationally under the name “Christian Nicaraguans for the Poor” (*Cristianos Nicaraguenses Por los Pobres*, CNP). When the CNP formed in 1985, they originally called themselves the *Comisión Nacional Provisional*, and then in 1986, *Comisión Nacional Permanente*. According to the minutes of their 2008 Strengthening Sessions (CNP 2008), led by facilitators from Mexico, CEB participants describe having first networked nationally in 1983. At that time, they were unable to resolve their differences until Dom Pedro Casaldáliga arrived from Brazil to support the CEBs and, with local leaders, organized a retreat in an effort to centralize organization and “relaunch and reorganize” to better support one another throughout Nicaragua (also from *Articulación CEB-CNP Nicaragua*, 2012). Concepts such as revitalization, renewal, and relaunch are common in CEB discourse—and arguably in Christian discourse generally. In 1991 they renamed themselves the Christian Nicaraguans for the Poor. Father Arnaldo explained the first two names were chosen upon recommendation from Mexican bishop and renowned liberation theologian don

Sergio Mendez Arceo to avoid provoking the Church hierarchy, as the El Salvadoran CEBs had done when they chose to call themselves the National Coordinators of the Popular Church. The third iteration of CNP was chosen to more publicly proclaim the CEBs as “opting for the cause of the poor” (Zentento 2012).

The CEB-CNP ally nationally with social movements and networks and coordinate their demonstrations and activities. In Central America they network through the Oscar Romero of Central America Committees (*Comités Oscar Romero de Centroamérica*, or CORCA), with whose members they frequently communicate and less frequently meet, dialoguing about regional environmental concerns and world events such as the global economic crisis—especially in Spain and Greece at the time of my fieldwork—and the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. They are networked on a larger scale throughout Latin America and the Caribbean with *CEB Continental*, the International Christian Solidarity Service to the Peoples of Latin America (*Servicio Internacional Cristiano de Solidaridad con los Pueblos de America Latina*, or SICSAL), and *AMERINDIA*.⁵

Some CEBs in and outside of Managua have not maintained a relationship with the CNP. Some people prioritize the definition of a CEB as a small group of Christians and do not feel that a centralized organization is appropriate for that identity. Others experienced conflict with CNP coordinators in their region and/or in Managua and broke away. While I was there, the CNP and CEBs were working to reconnect with some of

⁵ AMERINDIA originated from the 1978 Puebla Conference of Bishops (<http://www.amerindiaenlared.org/quienessomos>); CEB Continental is coordinated from Mexico City (<http://www.cebcontinental.org/>); SICSAL is out of El Salvador (<http://sicsal.net/articulos2/taxonomy/term/84>). All have social media presence.

these groups. The Estelí and Chinandega regions, for example, have always had CEBs that were active locally, but only recently strengthened their relationship with the CNP and their coordination in Managua. Tola, in the Rivas region, does not maintain a relationship with Managua, but people there still identify as a CEB. A Managua CEB, one of the oldest, only recently returned to the fold after conflict over organization and leadership stemming from disagreements about CEB sovereignty. One CEB member described the CEBs as a family, and like a family they have conflicts despite love and loyalty to one another. “In the disorder is order,” he smiled.

A few representatives from each of the Managua CEBs meet every Monday night at the *Casa Pastoral*, the central administrative hub for Nicaragua’s base communities, or a particular CEB will host at their own common house.⁶ This important weekly event unifies and maintains open dialogue between the diverse CEB groups as well as providing workshops on social, political, and economic issues. Those present take notes so they can report back to their local CEBs; many activities are organized at these meetings. The *Casa Pastoral* also provides office space for communication with CEBs in other regions, nations, and the solidarity groups that support them morally and financially.

In response to the neoliberal economic restructuring of the 1990s, the Nicaraguan CEBs have founded various social projects they call Social Projects for Life. After ten years of empire-imposed war that left 70,000 dead and thousands more disabled, Father Arnaldo wrote,

⁶ Most CEBs have a neighborhood meeting place they call their *casa comunal* where they worship and host events and celebration days.

It appeared that the violence of the war had ended and peace arrived. But quickly we discovered that another war had begun, distinct but truly a war. There was a new government, badly named “Liberal”—that did not liberate us, but further oppressed us. Quickly we discovered a waterfall of evils in which there was more hunger than in the wartime, that unemployment was rising, that hospitals were scarce for the poor and that they had to pay nearly everything. And we saw how the wave of brutal contrast rose between the poor—extreme poverty and wasteful spending and the immeasurably rich (Zenteno 2010).⁷

In the face of this growing impoverishment and desperation, as the CEBs tell it, they reflected on their commitment as Christians and initiated projects that include serving the growing number of women in prostitution (*Proyecto Samaritanas*); creating a home for girls that houses and provides nationally accredited education to children from throughout Nicaragua who have been removed from their homes because of abuse and neglect (*Casa Hogar*); supporting services for child streetworkers (*NATRAS, or Niños-as/ Adolescentes Trabajadores*) and morning cafeterias for undernourished children and expectant mothers (*Ollas de Soya*); organizing a skills-based school for individuals served by other projects to learn technical trades such as cosmetology, computing, baking, and sewing (*Escuela Tecnica*); and developing a natural alternative medicine clinic in Managua. Rural CEBs have created heirloom-seed-sharing projects as well as community banks; some regions outside of Managua also have *Ollas de Soya*. These projects, some more than others, have become institutionalized. For example, Casa Hogar is an accredited school and receives money from the state, and Las Samaritanas receives international funding and is recognized as part of the network to serve sexworkers. While I was in the field, the Samaritanas director was interviewed on television regarding the

⁷ Father Arnaldo gave me this document, “Una Buena Noticia para los Pobres: Los Proyectos CEB-Proyectos Sociales por la Vida,” but I also found it published at <http://www.redescristianas.net/una-buena-noticia-de-jesus-para-los-pobres-los-proyectos-sociales-ceb-por-la-vida-arnaldo-zenteno-sj/>

project's participation in the RedMas (*Red Masculinidad*)⁸ campaign to teach men how to be “good men” and combat the increasing femicide and domestic violence. In another example of at least partial institutionalization, NATRAS held an official permit for their kitchen to make and sell fruit ices and smoothies.

In addition to the Social Projects for Life, CEB members are organized into commissions that focus their work: (1) Youth Pastoral, supporting teens and young adults; (2) Adult Pastoral, which one member described to me as the “motor” of the CEBs; (3) The Commission on Citizen Participation and Political Advocacy (often shortened to the Prophetic Commission or the Citizenship Commission, likely a result of various name changes), who work to bring awareness regarding laws and human rights in order to justify their social justice activities, and (4) Social Projects for Life, elaborated above. During meetings, attendees often split into these separate commissions to discuss particular plans and issues. Coordinators of the commissions and the Social Projects for Life hold regular meetings.

The Casa Pastoral in Managua has a large open space where members of various CEBs come together for major celebration days, both religious and revolutionary. The most active facilitators in national CEB regions might often be found at the Casa Pastoral; a few have paying jobs as coordinators there. Although I focused my time primarily in Managua, I also traveled with Managua *animadoras* (a term CEBs use for those who facilitate activities; many are averse to using the term “leader” because it implies a relationship of power) to rural CEB sites in the other regions. By examining both urban and rural sites, I had the opportunity to observe the rich diversity of

⁸ <http://www.redmasnicaragua.org/>

contemporary Nicaragua CEBs; diversity and independence are features they claim distinguish contemporary CEBs from those in the past, as well as taking on a more environmental focus. My research took place predominantly in Managua barrios that have some of the oldest and most active CEBs. Each of these CEBs is composed of founding and newer members and operates multiple projects. I began fieldwork in the barrio pseudonymously named *26 de Julio* located in the eastern portion of Managua. Father Arnaldo introduced me to the CEB in 26 de Julio that was actively developing various projects, which meant I could participate and gain information from CEB activities. In fact, the second day of my preliminary fieldwork visit, he dropped me off at the family's house where he decided I should stay. After he left and we had been getting to know each other, the oldest sister asked, eyeing my travel backpack, if I was going to be staying with them. It seemed Father Arnaldo forgot to mention that part to them!

Some of the 26 de Julio CEB members compose the pastoral group with others from neighboring CEBs who meet weekly and travel every other week to rural communities in the department of León that were displaced by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. This group of about 8-10 people is focused mainly on facilitating progressive Catholic-style Bible studies with the communities in León. The youth group in 26 de Julio was quite active during my preliminary fieldwork, organizing bake sales, raffles, and selling soup to raise funds to attend events and workshops with other CEB youth groups in other parts of Managua and in rural Nicaragua. But as they grew older, the youth group rarely met during my long-term fieldwork. The 26 de Julio CEB also runs an *Olla de Soya*, the morning cafeteria for undernourished children and pregnant women. Many activities take place in the CEB's common house, where Father Arnaldo often gives mass on Sundays.

Although I maintained a close relationship with the 26 de Julio CEB and especially my host family, I began volunteering with Samaritanas at the beginning of my long-term fieldwork. The time spent with the Samaritanas team meant that I was more connected to the CEB network across Managua and to people around my age, rather than just one CEB.

Contemporary Nicaragua

I conducted preliminary fieldwork in the summers of 2011 and 2012 and my doctoral fieldwork from 2014 to 2015. I had served as a Peace Corps community health educator in Nicaragua in 2004-2006. Initially, I perceived the political-economic atmosphere during my fieldwork highly contradictory. Although government social programs appeared to grow after Ortega's 2006 election, since his nontransparent reelection in 2011 these positive changes have plateaued or diminished, following the global neoliberal trend. Resources were often contingent on whether one agreed to formally affiliate with the Sandinista Party and attend the neighborhood party meetings. The Ortega administration's Zero Hunger program had been declared a shambles by one of the two news journals not owned by the Ortega family (Aburto 2014b); and while general poverty levels decreased 2%, the level of "extreme poverty" in the country grew 2% in 2013 (Olivares 2014). Non-government organizations (NGOs) who do not publicly express support for the current administration were sanctioned and were finding it harder to work in-country. I knew of one NGO that was no longer able to import their medical supplies because their director spoke out against the proposed interoceanic canal. Eighty-five percent of journalists reported in November 2014 that their freedom of expression was threatened (Navarrete 2014).

Simultaneously, the Ortega administration had provided more benefits to the impoverished majority than any government since 1990, as demonstrated by his Houses for the People program (*Casas Para El Pueblo*). The state seemed strong amidst constitutional changes to place more power with Ortega and related accusations of rigging the electoral system. The historically ignored region of Rio San Juan, where I served two years in the Peace Corps, was dramatically more developed, with paved roads, cell phone service, and a Japanese-financed bridge crossing into Costa Rica. Despite being the poorest country in Central America, Nicaragua also remained the safest. The Alliance for Global Justice in April 2016 reported that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was closing its office in Nicaragua because Nicaragua had kept up “macroeconomic stability and growth since 2011.” Since the Sandinista Party returned to power in 2007, they had strategically enacted some IMF mandates while stopping the process to privatize water and ending healthcare and education fees.⁹

Despite numerous marches against the proposed interoceanic canal, from Managua to the most remote locales, the Ortega administration’s presence and militant response to the protests in these historically abandoned regions is a demonstration of strength and power. It is not accurate to correlate the CEB revitalization with the return of a nominally revolutionary government; the revitalization actually originated in continental CEB meetings beginning in 2006.

Current Institutional Relationship with the Catholic Church

The CEB’s relationship with the institutional Catholic Church is still fraught with tension and outright antagonism in Nicaragua. The CEBs were expelled from parishes in

⁹ <http://www.nicanet.org/?page=blog&id=34855>

the early 1980s after the Church felt its power was threatened by Catholics who decried hierarchy and inequality. Representative of the Church hierarchy's feelings about the revolutionary process was Pope John Paul II's famous chastisement in 1983 of Father Ernesto Cardenal, a priest and Minister of Culture in the revolutionary government, for supporting and working for the revolution (Randall 1983:33). Nevertheless, since 2013 when Pope Francis was sworn in, I have watched the CEBs transition from criticizing the popes (namely John Paul II and Benedict) for being akin to CEOs of a transnational corporation to including Pope Francis's statements as guiding messages. Pope Francis wrote a letter to the CEBs in January 2014, expressing a statement of their inclusion in the Church. During my fieldwork, the Nicaragua CEBs were forming a letter to him in response, asking that he support their survival as part of the Church. The 50th anniversary of Vatican II (1962-1965), the process of making official the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero, whom the CEBs consider a primary prophet, and the CEBs' recognition that they need to work toward renewal rounded out my time in Nicaragua.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

Because CEB service activities are focused on improving the lives of the most marginalized, their work is seen as threatening by those currently in power. I struggled for a time with balancing participation and observation after witnessing the Ortega administration thwart a CEB-organized march against mining, for example. I saw some CEB participants abstaining from critiquing the Ortega administration because he is the head of the political party that was historically revolutionary and had held similar values of working toward social equality. I became conflicted about how much to probe my study participants for their thoughts about the current political environment when I

noticed they were carefully choosing how much to disclose. I observed that some of them selected what to share with me, or qualified their answers. For example, “Lara, look, I am a militant Sandinista revolutionary, so . . . but there are obvious problems,” and even, “He is the only one who has remained by our side.”

Sometimes the political environment during my doctoral fieldwork was disconcerting. In the years I previously spent in Nicaragua I had not felt or seen such a high level of government repression and insecurity. Speakers at every CEB meeting earnestly encouraged their peers to have no fear, to demonstrate, to speak out against injustice. Many members appeared torn between their commitments to social justice as a liberation theology practitioner and being a devoted member of a revolutionary party that no longer appeared to be very transformative, and which in fact appeared to include individuals in the administration who by CEB standards should be denounced. I constantly reevaluated the questions I asked when I observed reluctance during some of my formal private interviews. I noticed, too, that the informal conversations were much richer ethnographically. Some chuckled to me that my questions made them reflect more deeply on their practices and identity as CEB members.

Research Participants

Resonant with their self-identification of being at the “base,” or grassroots, CEB members are in some of the lowest economic classes in Nicaragua. Even when they are able to find work, it might mean standing in line at a factory every morning hoping to get chosen to work, or working construction. More likely they find their own opportunities in the large informal sector—for example, selling food outside a school or at a local event. In the rural areas, many pick coffee and farm for their own subsistence needs. Although

CEB participants constitute a minority of the population, they have a substantial impact on others because of their “sacrament” of service.

CEB members are networkers. They are the ones who participate in community meetings and workshops, such as the agriculture, livestock, and forest committees, the local chapters of the ministry of environment/natural resources, or the speakers at the celebration for an NGO’s 25-year anniversary. They speak, organize, lead, and overall are found in positions where they can facilitate delivery of services for the most vulnerable. Yet they are not always identified in these meetings as a member of a CEB. CEB members self-identify as impoverished, and the majority are female. They often have family members who worship in a parish or evangelical church, they can be found in both urban and rural areas, and they identify as mestizo in some areas and indigenous in others.

Positionality

Two factors facilitated my invitation to visit CEBs and subsequent permission to conduct my research. First was my upbringing as a progressive Catholic, which I elaborated upon above, illustrated by the network that ultimately connected me to Father Arnaldo. My Catholic background made me familiar with some of the practices, and made me familiar to the CEB participants. Although I am no longer a practicing Catholic, I am sympathetic with the CEB struggle for a more egalitarian society. Second, my history of service in Nicaragua as a Peace Corps volunteer demonstrated to Father Arnaldo and the CEBs my knowledge of Nicaragua and of Spanish. I spent more than two years in a rural fishing village on the southeast side of Lake Cocibolca as a

community health educator; this village was in the news during my fieldwork as one site the most recently proposed interoceanic canal would traverse.

I returned to Nicaragua to meet the CEBs five years after I completed my Peace Corps service. I could see there had been changes when a female taxi driver drove me from the airport. Yes, changes, the female taxi driver said, but it stays the same, *lo mismo*, a common phrase (see Müller 2010). The next morning I met Father Arnaldo at the Jesuit residence at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), and after he introduced me at the mass he facilitates in barrio 26 de Julio, he took me to the family with whom I lived during my two summers of preliminary fieldwork and who remain very close to my heart.

As we got to know each other during one of my first evenings in their home, I asked for the umpteenth time how I could contribute to the household while I lived with them. My host mother, Miriam,¹⁰ grabbed both my hands and looked into my eyes. “Larita, I want you to become conscious (*conscientizada*) of our living situation as a participating member of this family. If there is no milk, go get some milk. If we need beans or vegetables, invite me or my daughters to the market.” She was immediately teaching me CEB values and practices by asking me to become aware of the economic poverty of their home and community, and to make decisions with the awareness of my presence as a resource consumer in their home.

Research Plan and Methods

I am inspired particularly by work emphasizing reciprocity and collaboration. CEBs have a tradition of eschewing hierarchical relationships and of recognizing the

¹⁰ A pseudonym.

value and knowledge of people at the bottom, or “base,” of society. During my fieldwork, CEB participants often told me that they welcomed my research so I could help spread the word about what CEBs are and what they do. They saw the potential for a reciprocal relationship, and my intention that this research respect and reflect CEB subjectivity. The outcome for me is immeasurably greater—a PhD (Field 2008; Hale 2006).

The principal methods employed in this ethnographic research include documentation of narrative performance, life history interviews, and archival research. Father Arnaldo also suggested that I volunteer my time with one of the CEB projects, Samaritanas, the team that works in solidarity with exploited and at-risk women and adolescents. Volunteering was not just a way to give back; it allowed me to establish a more intimate relationship with CEB participants. Through a deeper understanding of the way they value serving the poor, I was also able to observe their belief that one locates God among the most vulnerable.

I interviewed a range of members (women, men, young and old, church and lay) about their participation in CEBs and the proclaimed revitalization. I recorded the public autobiographical narrative performances that take place during celebration days, weekly meetings, and the frequent regional workshops. I complemented the focus on CEB narratives with a perspective on the structural position of CEBs in Nicaragua, based on interviews and demographic information I collected regarding who and how many participate. I continuously refined what I learned about the CEBs in relation to how they constructed and represented themselves.

Life history interviewing in particular was a robust method for answering my research questions. I interviewed CEB participants and elicited conventional life

histories. These interviews allowed me to ask how they have come to relate to the key figures (i.e., the poor, Jesus, Sandino, and other historical figures) that animated their narrative in CEB events and to see how participants situated themselves within Nicaraguan history. Elicited life history interviews also illustrated what was distinct about each interviewee's past political and religious self, and how they conceptualized CEB identity in the contemporary context. I also was able to learn more about how they contrasted themselves with the growing evangelical Christian population and the increasingly distinctive and contradictory ways of being Sandinista.

Archival research provided the historical context of the contemporary CEBs. I collected some documents that CEB participants had kept in their homes with other important legal and medical papers, but Father Arnaldo is the primary author of and archivist for CEB documents, which are located in his home office at the Villa Carmen, the Jesuit priests' residence at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA). With his permission and direction, his assistant transferred entire folders from his computer to my flash drive. He also generously allowed me access to his library on liberation theology. I consider Arnaldo an extremely influential and primary shaper of Nicaraguan CEBs and their discourse, and I did not feel he hid or limited information for my research. He actively encouraged everyone to interview with me; but I also felt he was strategic in choosing my host family and assigning me to work with Samaritanas.

Research Significance

This research contributes to illuminating the changes CEBs in Latin America are undergoing in different social, political, and economic contexts. Little analysis or ethnography of CEBs in Nicaragua or elsewhere has occurred since the 1980s, but their

current revival under dramatically different social, political, and economic contexts can tell us much about how progressive Catholics—and people in extreme poverty—experience and practice their religion. My work contributes to the anthropology of Christianity by examining how contemporary practitioners of liberation theology experience and work to transform their religion. A secondary contribution is to literature on the processes and strategies of groups who struggle against the current dominant neoliberal narrative that facilitates unrestricted flows of capital and a pull-up-by-one's-bootstraps individualism over alternative systems. Theoretically, I link autobiographical narratives with identity formation in the CEBs where I conducted my research.

Although practitioners of liberation theology in Nicaragua are perhaps best known for helping to overthrow the violent dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle during the late 1970s, I observed contemporary CEBs practicing a revolutionary action more focused on the church. I discovered that my research participants enact their Catholic identity in a way that makes others see them as, and become aware of, an alternative to that of current church practice. They are enacting an alternative organizational principle, an alternative “revolutionary action,” by building new communities within, or under the nose of, the church and state (to draw from Graeber 2004). Most of their meetings and events are in the barrios, and they invite all of their neighbors to attend. When they participate in or help to organize demonstrations, they say they do it to awaken the people.

I am not saying the CEBs do not pay attention to the Catholic Church in Rome or the Nicaraguan state—they certainly do—but I am suggesting that their overall goals go beyond the existing social, political, and economic realm. In this sense, I return to my argument that CEBs are in the process of identifying themselves apart from the

Sandinista-identified nation-state and more as revolutionizing Catholicism and the laity within the Church.

October 2012 marked the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in Rome, from which liberation theology was born. My research offers an ethnographic riposte to the conservatism of the Catholic Church under a global capitalism and the domination of neoliberal processes, even with opposing emphases introduced by Pope Francis.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2 examines the role of the liberation theology in the anthropology of Christianity and in the history of Nicaragua. The first part of the chapter frames liberation theology within the anthropology of Christianity. The second part provides the historical background necessary to understand contemporary Christian Base Communities in Nicaragua.

In Chapter 3, I begin with the literature on liberation theology in light of the proclaimed renewal of the CEBs. I examine the different perceptions of the renewal by some of my research participants. Although there is evidence the CEBs are in a revitalization phase, challenges remain.

In Chapter 4, I set the stage for the narratives I collected through examination of literature on autobiographical narrative. CEB participants recount processes of transformation, in which a new identity is being crafted by people on the economic margins capable of effecting social change. The speakers tell how they came to practice liberation theology and identify themselves as people who could transform the Church and build a more just society.

Chapter 5 builds from Chapter 4 to examine the narratives I elicited from CEB participants that shared similar stories of transformation. Some speakers embedded their life story with that of the revolution, others with the Bible, and still others through chance encounters in their life history.

Chapter 6 illustrates the disjuncture between the contemporary service ideas of the CEBs and that of the Ortega administration. I draw from the Christian Salute to the Revolution and the most recent iteration of the project to build an interoceanic canal through Nicaragua.

I explore how Christian Base Communities enact their post-transformation identity in Chapter 7. Bringing awareness to injustices and acting to improve the lives of the poor is fundamental to the identity of CEB members, who use the terms *profetismo* and citizenship in their service efforts. This chapter describes how CEBs put these terms into action at the annual Ecological Festival.

I conclude in Chapter 8 by arguing that the CEBs are still relevant. I offer insights into crafting a religious-political subjectivity; implications for other marginalized communities that are working toward social, political, and economic transformations; and describe the contributions of my study.

The Narrators

I collected 38 life history interviews and recorded roughly 17 unelicited autobiographical narratives at various events. Providing a definitive number for the unelicited narratives is difficult. The speakers all reflected on historical processes, yet I sometimes had only a limited view of how they spoke of transformation. Other times I only observed the incorporation of historical figures from the Bible or Nicaraguan history

while the speakers narrating their lives. Some stories focused on transformation at the community level as well. A woman I will introduce below, Layza, commented that “Pope Francis is inviting the Church to change, but the Church is not following him.” Or, for example, at a planning meeting for their annual assembly, someone asked the other attendees, “What is your community doing to transform?” Other moments occur after a Bible reading in which listeners offered interpretations based on their life experiences.

I chose three unelicited narratives that represent the CEB practice of performing autobiographical narratives that are meant to provoke a transformation in the listener. During a weekly meeting focused on women and men religious, Sister Margarita shared her story of being called to the sisterhood. She was first exposed to liberation theology as a young nun sent to work in Ecuador, where she met a priest who had attended the Medellin Bishops’ Conference convened to discuss enacting the Vatican II Council reforms in Latin America. Upon returning to her native Nicaragua, revolutionary processes were escalating and she found herself called to participate.

Another woman, Samara, wrote out a “proclamation” to read to her audience of diverse Christian persuasions at the annual Ecological Festival. She is a very active CNP facilitator in the rural mountain region. She had been raised evangelical, but when she lost her brothers in the Contra war, she said it was the CEBs who were there to accompany her family in grief. Her narrative draws on a shared Catholic community identity among rural fisher/farmers.

Third, a young man named Felix briefly shared his reflection on the Bible reading during a weekly meeting. Finally, I also include public autobiographical narratives told

by two Nicaragua CEB founders, Jenny and Luciano. I did not elicit their narratives, but they were invited to share their story.

For the elicited interviews, I often asked individuals how they had come to participate in CEBs, and the interviewee responded with a transformation story. Some of the life history interviews I count as elicited were very informal. For example, on a break at a CEB workshop I asked a youth leader about his participation in the CEBs, and he responded by sharing how he had changed because of his participation. Other questions on subjects such as “New Woman” and “New Man” (described below), decade-specific questions, governmental changes, and relationships with other churches were usually discussed at other times. In the spirit of producing a coherent work, I chose seven individual narrators who I feel best represent the elicited autobiographical narratives I documented during my fieldwork. Choosing was extremely difficult, and if I could have, I would have included them all. I also chose these seven because I have spent a great deal of time with most of these individuals and through their narratives I can provide the most perceptive analysis.

I also interviewed community leaders, CEB allies, and peripheral individuals familiar with the CEBs; these interviews mainly enriched my understanding of the contemporary context of Nicaragua. I will also include my work with other individuals throughout this dissertation as applicable, especially Father Arnaldo, whom I consider the primary shaper of Nicaragua CEB discursive ideologies and practice.

The seven narrators are Layza, Orlando, Franklin, Rosalba, Maria Jose, Eugenio, and Soledad (pseudonyms). I selected sections of their narratives to illustrate the subject transformations and interpretations of their practice in the contemporary context.

Layza began practicing liberation theology as a girl in a rural community in the department of Carazo. Like Jenny and Luciano, her religious practice led to her involvement as a courier for the Sandinistas in the late 1970s, in her participation in the revolutionary projects of the 1980s, and ultimately as a coordinator of the CNP. As fate, or history, would have it, I met Layza when I was a Peace Corps volunteer, years before I had established my doctoral research. I knew her only as a person who worked in a local women's maternity house and as the mother of my friend's boyfriend. I did not know of her involvement with the CEBs. As a result of my doctoral research, I have noticed that many CEB members are very active in their communities and often participate in other activities related to social justice. Layza and I also discovered that we share the same birthday, just different years, and we often wonder about how our paths have crossed at least twice, and three times or more if one includes my having done my Peace Corps training in the municipality where she grew up and the fact that she knew my host family. Layza's narrative was recorded over pastries and fresh juice at the Casa Pastoral, the administrative heart and event space in Managua for the CNP.

Orlando. I became friends with Orlando and his wife during the span of my fieldwork and a few times attended their on-going "youth group" (although participants were generally in their early 30s, like me). They had grown up in a long-established CEB in Managua with a vivid revolutionary history. Father Arnaldo first suggested I seek out Orlando after listening to him present at a weekly CEB meeting on the recent constitutional reforms enacted by the Ortega administration. Orlando looks the intellectual he is, with glasses, slight in stature, and somewhat in need of a haircut.

Franklin. I met Franklin during my preliminary fieldwork. He is a young man from one of the roughest barrios in Managua, about 6 feet tall and always gentle and approachable. He and his two brothers are always joking around like kids, belying their harsh upbringing. He sold tortillas on the street as a child and had already left school when Maria Jose (see below) encountered him and his brothers. We sat outside the Pastoral at a picnic table while I recorded his life history; he works there, at project NATRAS.

Maria Jose. I interviewed Maria Jose only once, having gone to the Pastoral the day I interviewed her with the intent of interviewing someone else. Others had told me I should definitely speak with the latter person as part of my research, but I ended up concluding he did not particularly want to be interviewed after he kept cancelling on me or not showing up. Luckily, Maria Jose was there; she was another person I was told I must not miss, and she was often referenced in other people's narratives. Maria Jose might look older than she is, with curly salt and pepper hair, glasses, always with a modest skirt and a tucked-in white blouse. I thought she was a nun when I first met her, yet if I had only heard her soft voice I would have guessed she was a child. She was born and raised in Managua and discovered the CEBs as an adult. She is a devout CEB participant and is referred to endearingly by younger members as a mentor, and by some as an "angel." We met during my first fieldwork visit in 2011, but she had always been dedicated to her work with project NATRAS and, although she said I was always welcome, I did not spend as much time there. She is also so expressively devout that I suspected she was not interested in wasting her time with me when there were children in need. Perhaps because of my lack of devotion, I never felt like I got beneath the surface

in our conversations. I include her narrative here because it is the clearest example of the life transformation story that was so compelling in my research.

Rosalba is in her late forties and was introduced to the CEBs as a young, single mother who became alienated from her local parish, where she had previously been extremely active. She and I established a friendship during my preliminary fieldwork when I spent time in the rural mountain community where she lives. She is known among other CEB participants for being very revolutionary, and most of her work is spent with the CEB Prophetic Commission and in her (non-CEB) regional agricultural and livestock committee.

Eugenio and I often sat next to each other at events and in the back of pickup trucks on the way to them; he is one of my favorites. We spent a great deal of time together during my preliminary fieldwork and had many philosophical conversations while on the road. He also loved to tease me and ostentatiously flirt with me (and the nuns) in front of the biggest audience he could get; somehow he knew how to do it in a totally inoffensive and charming way, which was very rare. He was in his late sixties and was not in the CEBs until he retired, or was made to retire because he was no longer able to work in construction. I learned he was the foreman of the crew that plowed the road to my Peace Corps site in the rural southeast side of Lake Cocibolca back in the 1980s. He told me many stories of his time there during the Contra war. Nevertheless, I could never get him to sit down for a recorded interview.

Soledad is the director of the Samaritanas Project. I volunteered there during my doctoral fieldwork and recorded her narrative one day over lunch. Curiously, she began first as a Sandinista Youth in the 1980s, volunteering to cut coffee and participating in the

globally recognized literacy campaign in the mountains. She emotionally shared this experience that had changed her life. Later, as she studied to become a social worker, she met a nun who connected her first to the CEBs' Project NATRAS and then to Samaritanas, where she works, endlessly, today.

The next chapter will locate liberation theology within the anthropology of Christianity. The second part will contextualize the Christian Base Communities within the history of Nicaragua. I examine literature on Nicaragua's revolutionary history as it relates to identity formation.

Chapter 2: The Anthropology of Christianity and Historical Ideological Forces in Nicaragua

How should we think about the contemporary Nicaraguan Christian Base Communities in relation to the anthropology of Christianity? To address that question, I frame liberation theology within what Robbins has called the “middle-aged” (2014) anthropology of Christianity. As Julie Byrne wrote succinctly in *The Other Catholics* (2016), which focuses on left-leaning Catholic groups in the United States, “not all Catholics are Roman Catholics” (Byrne 2016:3). The second part of the chapter explores the historical background necessary to understand the Catholic practice of contemporary Christian Base Communities in Nicaragua. In Nicaragua, liberation theology became entwined with revolutionary efforts by the impoverished majority, coalescing with the revolutionary processes of the mid to late 1970s. I will contrast the ideological and political forces that shaped the presence of the CEBs in the 1970s and 1980s with the current parameters shaping CEB experience and practice.

Joel Robbins (2014) observes that around the year 2000, the fact that the presumed trajectory of modernity and secularization had not transpired was a common realization. In fact, people were reasserting the place of religion in the public sphere. Although there had been ethnographies of Christianity before, he argued that the newer work in the anthropology of Christianity is rooted in the awareness of the turn-of-the-millennium resurgence of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianities. Robbins’s seminal ethnography of Christianity, *Becoming Sinners* (2004), examines culture change in the Urapmin community in Papua New Guinea through their practice and experience of Christianity. Robbins argues that their traditional values and symbols in the context of

globalization and modernity contributed to the Urapmin people's adoption of Christianity and the form of practice that it took. He also approaches his ethnography as being about a Christian culture and focuses on the people as Christians (2004).

Orsi (2016), too, reminds readers that the belief that gods would disappear with the evolution of modernity has not occurred. His project is to dive into the nature of the "real" presence of gods with regard to how the study of religion and history was constituted. His work as a historian tells of the centuries-old debate among Christians about the nature of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Orsi argues that the debate crystalized over the process of modernity, beginning in the sixteenth century, to become the idea that Catholics find the presence of God in the world and Protestants, the absence of God. In other words, for Catholics, God may be found in material form such as artwork a good deed, while for Protestants, God is beyond earthly objects. Yet, the study of religion itself depended on a European assumption of modernity as well as imperial practices, using Catholicism as the template for shaping modern consciousness. This scholarly trend eventually cemented the idea within religious scholarship of gods as symbols or metaphors. Modern practitioners are also disconnected from historical conceptions of an embodied presence of the divine. Religious practice, then, was viewed by scholars as a variation of modernity (e.g., pre-, proto-, post-). But gods have not disappeared from human perceptions, and there are still ample things to examine and say about them. Orsi, like Greeley, wants scholars of religion to look for gods and religion as embodied and inside material culture. He believes we must look for that unseen aspect of Catholicism.

Christianity is a subject of anthropological research in its own right (Barker 2008; Cannell 2006; Engelke and Tomlinson 2006; Keane 2007; Robbins 2004). Perhaps because of the surprising growth of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianities, the anthropology of Christianity has been much less likely to focus on Catholicism. Much of the research has in fact emphasized evangelicals and Pentecostals (Comaroff 2009; Eriksen 2010), charismatics (Coleman 2006), missionization and conversion (Keane 2007; Orta 2006; Rutherford 2006), indigenous interpretations (Gow 2006; Harris 2006; Orta 2006; Robbins 2004; Toren 2006) or small exotic sects of Christianity (Busby 2006). Norget, Napolitano, and Mayblin (2017) establish Catholicism's place in literature comprising the anthropology of Christianity. Anthropologists who have studied Catholicism include Burdick (2004), Mayblin (2010), Mosse (2006), Orta (2006), and V. and E. Turner (1978).

Simon Coleman asserts that just as Protestantism materialized from an opposition to the supremacy of Catholicism in Europe, the contemporary study of Catholicism is a response to the prior anthropological focus on evangelical Protestantism and Pentecostalism (2017:273). Including Catholicism will open up the field of inquiry. He calls for scholars to ask how the anthropology of Catholicism articulates with the anthropology of Protestantism; he calls for studies that search for common ground as well as those seeking productive distinctions. He offers two ethnographies as a counterpoise. Whereas studies of proselytizing forms of Christianity often connect Protestants to social change and a focus on rupture, Catholicism is often associated with stagnation. Jennifer Hughes (2012), however, discovered a Mexican Catholicism in a phase of creative expansion, and Toomas Gross (2012) illustrates the cultural work among Catholics in

Zapotec communities who choose not to convert to Protestantism (2017:279). Both of these studies present a different perspective of communities where the dominant research is focused on Protestant growth.

Many scholars of Christianity argue that the renewed interest in religion comes as globalization is creating more social fragmentation and uncertainties. Historically, where there is insecurity and dislocation, people have looked to religion, and religion has thrived (Kapferer, Telle, Eriksen 2010; Robbins 2010). Cannell asserts that too few anthropologists have seriously considered the religious experiences of others, and too often explain religious experience as not based in reality or a result of some political-economic process (2006:3). Robbins observed that anthropologists have historically considered Christianity as a colonial tool and did not view non-Western societies that practice Christianity as having a “Christian culture” (Robbins 2004:27).

Michael Scott’s “I was Abraham” (2005) articulates the tension between two lines of thinking regarding the anthropology of Christianity. One is that Christianity is a coercive system that holds its shape across different contexts (Robbins 2004). The other line of thinking considers Christianity a flexible tool for problem-solving that is picked up and put down situationally (Barker 2008). Scott (2005) argues that, depending on the society in question, people can and do incorporate Christianity as a whole system or select and interpret only parts. More importantly, recent scholarship demonstrates that anthropologists need to be well acquainted with the foundational religious texts that local people draw from and interpret to analyze local Christian thought in a manner that is more accurate (Scott 2005).

Cannell asserted the absence of an anthropology of religion that considers religion a “cultural fact” (2006); with respect to the anthropology of Christianity, much greater attention to the historical and political-economic contexts shaping ethnographic inquiries is needed. For example, Danilyn Rutherford’s (2006) examination of the connections between religious institutions and the state informs why and how certain religious practices are interpreted. Her ethnography examines Papuan separatists who read the Bible for signs of God’s support of their fight for independence. Rutherford makes an effort to place this study within the greater context of historical Western Papuan political changes as well as the history of religious institutions (Scott 2005). Elaborating the conditions under which Papuan leaders have interpreted biblical texts provided a greater understanding of their religious practices.

Erica Bornstein (2006) found an absence of meaning in a prayer meeting ritual in which United States and Zimbabwe World Vision workers participated. She examines the larger political economic conditions that explain why that particular week’s prayer meeting, whose subject was success, was meaningless to the Zimbabweans. The prayer meeting leader distinguished between spiritual success and material success, and Bornstein argues that recent economic policy changes in Zimbabwe, rather than the colonial missionary past, had rendered the prayer for success devoid of meaning. The contradictory Christian celebration of material success simultaneous with the message that cautions against its evils, in combination with the recent IMF structural adjustment that led to a dependence on non-government organizations rather than on the state, rendered the prayer for success meaningless. The Zimbabwean workers had access to very little money, and “the message of placing the spirit above material concerns was met

with indifference” (2006:85). Connecting these Christians’ experience of political economic trends with changes in what was meaningful (or not) to their subjectivity as Christians (as Engelke and Tomlinson suggest in their 2006 edited volume) was particularly illuminating for my examination of the contemporary CEB revitalization.

Ethnographies of liberation theology, as Cannell observed regarding the anthropology of religion in general, have been quite entrenched in political-economic literatures and ideas about its secularizing effects. There is, therefore, even more of a need for research that takes progressive Catholicism as a cultural fact. My research on the revitalization of CEBs demonstrates that CEB participants are basing their revitalization on a particular Catholic imagination and practice. Drawing from Robbins’s use of Sahlins’s argument that culture change happens within the terms of the culture itself (2004:10), I see the revitalization of CEBs as dependent on how the CEB participants’ experience historical changes. In the CEBs’ case, I see their experiences of the current, neoliberal context as being shaped by their foundational liberation theology values and symbols. I would not assert, as Robbins does, that the CEBs have “contradictory cultures” because of contemporary changes; rather I argue that their religious practice takes place in the terms they understand and value, but that are not valued by the greater, more powerful church and elites in Nicaragua.

Contemporary Christian Base Communities in Nicaragua

Christian Base Communities might be seen as continuing a history of progressive reformist Catholicism. The CEBs occupy a unique space in the Catholic—and other Christian—communities in Nicaragua that is informed by their emphasis on service. They share an affinity with the long history of Catholics (e.g., Jansenists, Gallicans, even

Jesuits) who work to change and manage the relationship that their religion, and their subjectivity as Catholics, has with their church and with their nation. Although CEBs have historically been studied as a popular or social movement or as a kind of Marxist Christianity, as described in scholarly literature of the 1970s and 1980s which detailed their involvement in Latin American revolutions (see Lancaster 1988, for example), the data I collected offer a richer perspective regarding the Catholicism and Christianity conceptualized by contemporary CEBs in Nicaragua, as enacting a theology that reaches beyond both the Catholic hierarchy and the Nicaraguan nation-state, and which promotes service as part of their subjectivity as Catholics.

Christian Base Communities express an antagonism with Rome and the church hierarchy but not with the existence of, and collaboration with, women and men of religious orders; rather, they believe that people with religious vocations should be on an equal level with laity. They especially participate in service efforts to improve the quality of life for the poor. They emphasize the model of small community groups like those in the first centuries after Christ, inspired, as they say, by Acts 42 regarding the organization of a small fellowship of believers.¹¹ They cite their own particular historical-political and religious figures as models to live by. CEBs practice in Nicaraguan Spanish, and they strongly value use of particular words in their religious and identity discourse— and I have been corrected for using different words more than once. Use of particular words and objects provides us a glimpse of their particular Catholic identity. They also

¹¹ “They met frequently to listen to the teachings of the apostles, and participate in a shared life, breaking bread in prayer” (“Se reunían frecuentemente para escuchar la enseñanza de los apóstoles, y participar en la vida común, en la fracción del pan en las oraciones; *La Biblia de Nuestro Pueblo; Biblia del Peregrino América Latina* 2015).

experienced significant division with their fellow Catholics after the 1979 Revolution and the ensuing Sandinista nation formation project (Stein 1997).

CEBs in the 1980s worked within the fabric of, and in solidarity with, the revolutionary state because they shared a common goal. Currently they appear to be in the process of disentangling themselves from the FSLN, or at least from the national project as promoted by the Ortega administration. The next section will trace the historical forces that opened up a space for the emergence of liberation theology in Nicaragua and its practitioners' role in the 1979 Sandinista Revolution.

Anti-Imperial Struggle and Revolution

Nicaragua's revolution drew global attention and thus a range of sympathetic scholars interested in the hows and whys of its fruition. The historian Bradford Burns, who wanted to understand the forces that led to Nicaragua becoming a nation-state, cites the rivalry between the two powerful city-states, liberal León and conservative Granada, as the principal factor in preventing unity until 1858, when Nicaragua coalesced in reaction to the megalomaniac American William Walker and drove him out (Burns 1991). Walker became interested in Central America in the middle 1850s as a Southerner and advocate for proliferating slavery through the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. His desire to control the interoceanic trade route across Nicaragua, by changing land ownership laws for personal benefit and reinstating slavery, led to the unification of political factions in Nicaragua and within Central America as a whole in response to this foreign intervention. Walker's actions led to the first sense of nationalism in Nicaragua among both rich and poor (or, as Burns said, "patriarch and folk"), and led ultimately to his defeat in 1857. Nicaragua's experience with Walker resulted in resentment and

distrust of the United States. Nicaragua's struggle against imperialist powers at its birth as a nation-state, Burns concluded, lay the groundwork for the forces that manifested in the revolutionary struggle in 1978-1979. Enlightenment ideals of progress—especially elite desires to participate in international trade—as well as, and related to, the need to resist foreign intervention, marked the unification of Nicaragua and subsequent transition to a nation-state (Burns 1991; Gould 1998).

Jeffrey Gould, working to dissect the inaccurate but very popular revolutionary narrative that all Nicaraguans are *mestizo*, asserts that the historical elites' desire for "modernity," or participation in the global market, included collusion on the part of the Church, state, political parties, elites, and intellectuals who expropriated communal land, exploited labor, and alienated indigenous peoples culturally by discrediting their identity (Gould 1998). Both of these historians were working in the period following the Sandinista revolutionary triumph in 1979 and asking about the roots of Nicaragua's historical trajectory.

The violent and oppressive Somoza regime began in a 1936 coup d'état after the first Somoza was installed by the U.S.-trained National Guard in an effort to maintain Nicaragua as an agricultural-produce-exporting puppet state of the United States. The Somoza dynasty ruled, sometimes through puppet presidents, from 1937 until it was overthrown in the 1979 Revolution. Augusto César Sandino, from whom the Sandinistas get their name, led a small group of volunteers to confront the US Marines in 1927 in guerrilla warfare and was successful in temporarily frustrating the imperial intervention. Sandino was ultimately kidnapped and killed by Somoza's forces in 1934 and became an anti-imperialist hero of Latin America (Gould 1998; Hodges 1986).

Donald Hodges (1986) underscores the influences of Mexico's revolutionary struggle on Sandino, who worked in Tampico between 1923 and 1929, an exposure that Hodges argues shaped Sandino's understanding of United States interventions in Nicaragua. Sandino's unique "political theosophy," combining Enlightenment ideals of liberation, equality, and fraternity, contributed decades later to the Sandinista leadership's valued inclusion of the CEBs in the revolutionary process, notably by one of the FSLN founders, Carlos Fonseca (Zimmermann 2000). Hodges (1986:23) elaborates that Sandino assimilated select parts of Freemasonry, interpretations of Marx, Spiritualism, Mexican anarchism, and the particular blend of anarchism and spiritism from the Magnetic-Spiritual School of the Universal Commune that had followers in Mexico while Sandino worked there. Sandino was one of the few leaders who "grasped the extent of his country's political and economic subordination to the U.S. [and] predicted the war in Nicaragua was not over" (1986:158). Sandino's eclectic combination of ideologies led Somoza to try to discredit Sandino as unintelligible and the Sandinistas to simplify his complex philosophical background in their popular evocation of Sandino as the revolutionary hero and martyr. Despite its peculiarity, Sandino's ideology attracted attentive followers, who mobilized around his leadership. Hodges argues one anarchist component of Sandino's ideology originated in his interpretation of the Christian gospels. According to Hodges, the premise that God is love and that all people are children of God is anarchist, implying that the government is a repressive apparatus and that the solution is to live communally (1986:298). Sandino arguably cultivated a theology of liberation fifty years before Vatican II and the Medellín Conference established an official structure for the practice to propagate.

Sandinino was not the only individual whose ideas contributed to the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of Sandinismo and the presence of CEBs in the revolution. We must also ask how seemingly disparate shapers of the revolutionary processes of the FSLN, such as Carlos Fonseca, Tomás Borge, and Silvio Mayorga on one hand and Father Ernesto Cardenal and other devout Christians on the other came together to defeat a US-supported dictatorship. The famous poet priest Ernesto Cardenal also developed and disseminated a Christian rebranding of Marx's communist society, thereby helping to shape the particular character of liberation theology in Nicaragua (Cardenal 1982; Hodges 1986). With guidance from Trappist monk Thomas Merton before the Second Vatican Council, Cardenal set out to form a new kind of contemplative community in which "the first rule will be that there won't be any rules" (Randall 1983:45). Cardenal's book *The Gospel in Solentiname* (1982) was banned by the Somoza dictatorship for using the Gospels to promote communism. The book documents the voices of a faith community located on a remote archipelago in southern Nicaragua whose inhabitants interpreted the Gospels according to their life experiences and who later grew to identify with and participate in the revolutionary process. The model of dialoguing about the Gospels, and the Bible as a whole, practiced by the community on Solentiname spread globally as Cardenal's book was translated into different languages in the second half of the 1970s. For example, Cardenal recalled reading about communities in Poland that were finding entirely new interpretations of the same readings (Cardenal 1982:xiii). Both Cardenal's and Sandino's reinterpretations of the Gospels provided the foundation for their unique approach to Christian practice, and both led to their political involvement.

Similar to Sandino and Cardenal, CEBs practice within an ideological framework that lets them produce interpretations of the Gospels equally as legitimate as the interpretations of clergy or laid out by popes. Most CEB participants are not deeply familiar with Marx but can cite the Bible in a way that justifies their political action (Lancaster 1988; author interviews). The acceptance and assimilation of Christianity into Sandinismo on the part of the more Marxist-Leninist leadership may also be a result of Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutionaries' readings of two Marxist intellectuals outside the particular Nicaragua case, Mariátegui and Gramsci, who emphasized the importance of "culture" for mobilizing a revolution (Hodges 1986:179-184). Specifically, Mariátegui advocated incorporating a Christian component into Marxism to better mobilize the masses. Gramsci's approach valued people mobilizing around their own values (Hodges 1986).

Two years after founding the *Frente de Liberación Nacional* in 1961, Carlos Fonseca, Tomás Borge, Silvio Mayorga, and Noel Guerrero deployed Sandino's name to become the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) in a move to embed Nicaragua's specific history in their fight for national liberation (Zimmermann 2000:73-74). In her biography of Fonseca, Matilde Zimmermann notes that while many scholars, including Hodges (1986:162), claimed Fonseca "discovered" Sandino in the mid-1950s, he likely was only aware of Somoza's unsurprisingly deprecating biography on Sandino until 1959 when Fonseca went to Cuba. Fidel Castro and Ernesto Guevara had studied Sandino and his methods and had access to books about Sandino that Fonseca had never seen in Nicaragua. Scholars such as Hodges were citing Tomás Borge's posthumous book about Fonseca (Borge 1984). Borge, for his part, was writing from memory about

Fonseca while incarcerated in solitary confinement in Nicaragua by the Somoza dictatorship. Zimmermann noted that this observation is important because it illustrates the immeasurable importance of the Cuban revolutionary process for the development of the FSLN's revolutionary ideologies (2000:59-60).

Both Hodges and Zimmermann describe Fonseca as emphasizing the ethical nature of the revolutionary struggle that the current CEBs cite as guidance in their social justice actions. Fonseca's rereading of Sandino contemporized Sandino's theosophy of liberation in a manner that created space for liberation theology and for Christian participation in the Sandinista revolution (e.g., Hodges 1986:269; Zimmerman 2000:193-194). Fonseca's reframing of Sandino, and later Borge's of Fonseca,¹² were enormously influential in the construction a unified national revolutionary process.

The student movements of the 1950s, of which the FSLN founders were a part, resisted the dynastic dictatorship and expanded dramatically after the devastating 1972 earthquake, after which the Somozas pilfered millions of dollars of international aid (Walker 1985:21). The earthquake was so damaging and the Somoza regime's response so kleptomaniacally corrupt that even the elite began to express opposition (Spalding 1994). The growing resistance prompted Somoza and his National Guard to increase violent oppression in the countryside as well as in the poor urban barrios of Managua. Somoza was defeated and the FSLN came to lead the country as part of the Junta for National Reconstruction in 1979 with majority support of the Nicaraguan people (Walker 1985).

¹² Narratives upon narratives in the spirit of Bakhtin (1986) and Goffman (1983).

CEBs and Revolution

Scholars (e.g., Dodson and O'Shaughnessy 1990; Lancaster 1988; Randall 1983) have argued that Nicaragua's CEBs were responsible for the revolution's success in overthrowing the Somoza family dynasty. Certainly among the forces in Nicaraguan society that opposed the Somoza dictatorship, CEB participants' alliance with the FSLN was key. Although the FSLN was the most organized political vehicle struggling to overthrow Somoza, the CEBs provided established religious networks that appear to have spread revolutionary ideas and were essential to grassroots subversive activities. Nicaragua's case illustrates that access to a Bible in the context of political and religious authoritarianism can produce incredible mobilization in favor of democratization (Dodson and O'Shaughnessy 1990; Walker 1997). Gould similarly observed that it was the Christian communities in deeply rural areas that made the Revolution possible (1990:273).

Philip Williams (1989), responding to the bountiful literature on the changes in the Catholic Church in the 1960s and through the 1980s, highlights how much still remained unchanged. In his comparison of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, Williams argues that the Catholic Church aims to preserve itself and, despite dramatic political and economic change, should be seen as adapting mainly for its own survival. A critical factor that led the CEBs to support the revolution was the collusion between the church hierarchy and the Somoza dictatorship. The Church as an institution had lost its credibility among those who began to practice liberation theology in Nicaragua during the Somoza dictatorship (Cardenal 2011; Lancaster 1988; Williams 1989); indeed, non-involvement by clergy was seen as passive political collusion with the dictatorship.

Dodson and O'Shaughnessy's recounting of the political involvement of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua since Spanish colonial times argues that the church in Nicaragua has always depended on alliances with the political elite (1990). The Nicaraguan church was quite comfortable during the Somoza dictatorship and only—temporarily—expressed solidarity with the people working to overthrow the regime when it became clear the dictatorship would fall. The changes that the church did make, they continue, reflected the severity of the social and political crises, not a decision to help the poor by the Church as an institution.

Liberation theology and revolutionary ideals interacted and grew together, and those involved drew ideas from both trajectories. Liberation theology was born from reforms that came out of the Second Vatican Council 1962-1965 and the subsequent Medellín Conference in 1968, which looked at how to implement reforms in Latin America, a continent rampant with authoritarian regimes and immensely unequal distributions of wealth. There was a conscious alliance on the part of Marxists and Christians and all those in between (Hodges 1986:277). The relationship between the FSLN and CEBs appeared to be one of strategic convenience for both groups, with both believing that as long as their goals were parallel for the majority of people in Nicaraguan society, they would be able to transform the social, political, and economic structure. CEB participants observed, and still do, parallels between Marxism and Christianity such as a focus on the poor and the common good (Randall 1983; author interviews), but they do not feel any kind of eternal loyalty to the other belief system beyond mutual benefit. Still, Christian and Marxists have jointly utilized the labels “new men” and “new

women” to facilitate the transformation of society (Berryman 1987; Borge 1984; Montoya 2012; Zenteno 2000).

After the Sandinista triumph, the church hierarchy’s support of the revolutionary process waned because of the concern that followers of liberation theology were becoming too independent and critical of the institution of the Church. Lay Catholics and clergy were divided politically to the point of violence (Williams 1989; author interviews). While some clergy accepted political positions in the revolutionary government, others were working with the US-funded counterrevolutionaries, or Contras. Dodson and O’Shaughnessy (1990) document examples of priests such as Father Amado Peña, who transported arms for the Contras (1990). The bishops began to criticize the CEBs because they decentralized Church authority and therefore threatened the Church’s institutional influence in society. Furthermore, pastoral clergy who sympathized with the CEBs experienced a dilemma about how to continue with community work without provoking a confrontation with the hierarchy (Cardenal 2011; Williams 1989). Some CEB participants during this time transitioned to groups organized by the Sandinista party in order to continue their involvement in the revolutionary project (Canin 2000; Williams 1989).

The apparent waning of the CEBs in the 1990s was a result of powerful ideological forces reacting to maintain the authority they perceived the CEBs threatened, as well as the sudden loss of powerful state support for CEBs after the FSLN 1990 electoral defeat. The propaganda campaign waged by the Reagan administration during the 1980s claimed that the church was being persecuted and that the Sandinista government was killing people indiscriminately. The Reagan administration and the

Catholic hierarchy were both threatened by the will of the Nicaraguan majority to change the extreme poverty in which they (barely) lived. Reagan was insecure that the United States was losing its economic and political dominance in Central America, and the church feared the new authority of the laity that emerged after Vatican II and Medellín. The church was also threatened with the loss of its privileged position within the Sandinista government. Priests such as Obando y Bravo most notoriously, but others such as Father Vega too, lied about and/or exaggerated situations in Nicaragua. Other bishops even had to publicly correct the misinformation (Dodson and O'Shaughnessy 1990; Walker 1997).

Identity Scholarship in Nicaragua

Scholars writing about post-revolutionary Nicaragua have discovered significant evidence that contemporary identities and social justice struggles are rooted in the revolutionary era (Borland 2006; Field 1999; Montoya 2012). In his ethnographic investigation of identities after the FLSN electoral loss in 1990, Les Field (1999) observes that non-elite identities distinct from what the Sandinistas had explicitly promoted during the revolutionary period persisted into the post-revolutionary years. These perspectives created cultural bases around which to resist the type of nation-building in which the interests of elite intellectuals and powerful outsiders dominate; artisans are one group that has resisted the elite drive to homogenize or essentialize Nicaragua identities. Likewise, Kathrine Borland (2006) traces changes to festival traditions among Nicaraguan residents of the city of Masaya during both Somocismo and Sandinismo, who have resisted appropriation or “folklorization” by national elites attempting to form a homogenous national identity. Florence Babb (2001) researched the

impact of the neoliberal era on the poor and working class and found that, although the subsequent neoliberal governments worked to dismantle the FSLN's social projects, which has resulted in desperate financial situations for the majority, social movements and organizations have in fact also diversified and no longer have to fall under the umbrella of the FSLN state. Cymene Howe (2013) investigated sexual rights activists in neoliberal Nicaragua and found that they adopted their organizing strategies from their experiences during the revolutionary era. Women's movements and organizations especially diversified after 1990 (Babb 2001; Bayard de Volo 2001; Bickham-Mendez 2005). A substantial amount of these social forces were unforeseen and/or undesired by the Frente (Borland 2006; Field 1999). Thus, despite the many misunderstandings, mistakes, and misconstructions of indigenous subjectivity, Sandinista social and cultural policies resulted in a greater variety of identities, discourses, transformations, and perspectives.

Nevertheless, standards of living worsened as a result of the ensuing neoliberal political economy—even worse than during the period of the US economic embargo in the preceding decade (Robinson 1997; Zenteno 2010; author interviews). Supporting Williams's argument that the church acts to preserve its influence, Kampwirth (1997) found that Catholic ideology taught in schools also took a conservative turn post-1990.

Contemporary CEBs in the Second Sandinista Period

Research on CEBs took place in a much different social and political-economic context during the second Sandinista period. This period began with the return to power of the FSLN, with Daniel Ortega as president (Close et al. 2012; Kampwirth 2010), sixteen years after losing the decisive election of 1990. This period is marked by the

growth of the cult of personality in Ortega as a leader. Corruption charges abound, Ortega has made constitutional reforms to augment his power, and Nicaraguans now commonly make distinctions between Sandinistas and Orteguistas. Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism have an increasing presence. Contemporary CEBs maintain an emphasis on actively helping the poor in a country that, despite the return of Ortega, has decreased social welfare spending markedly. CEBs exemplify the continuity of a practice of successful organizing and mobilization for the twenty-first century, learned during the fight for liberation in the 1970s and 1980s. The CEBs' view of the revolution is of a long historical process that began with Sandino (or, according to some, with Jesus) but did not end in 1990 (Mulligan 1991).

The ideological and political forces that are now the parameters of CEB existence and participation in this second Sandinista period are different than the first. Contemporary CEB practices also look different from the first ones. While CEB participants identify as socialist, they are not as quick to claim the Sandinista label. High-ranking ex-guerrillera Dora Maria Tellez, founder of the Sandinista Renewal Movement (MRS),¹³ called Ortega a dictator (Cruz 2011), and even those who remain supportive of Ortega are not unaware of how closely Ortega has resembled a dictator. “But he is the only one who has stayed with us,” some of my research participants stressed, noting other original Sandinistas sold out, left the country, or changed

¹³ *Movimiento Renovador Sandinista* is a political party formed by nationally beloved revolutionaries (e.g., Dora Maria Tellez and Sergio Ramirez), Sandinistas who felt the Sandinista Party was betraying its own values and wanted to “rescue Sandino” and be an alternative for the Left. They have been prohibited from running a presidential candidate since 2008 and are currently more of a movement than a political party, going by the name of Alliance MRS.

allegiances. A CEB member justified his support for Ortega to me before the elections in 2011, explaining that if Ortega were to run *again* after winning in 2011, he *would* be a dictator. But he added, at this time there is no alternative. In the summer of 2012, the same participant skipped a CEB meeting to attend a political meeting with non-FSLN supporters, indicating to me that he may be looking for an alternative. Based on CEB participants' accounts, they identified as more homogenous and united with Sandinismo in the 1980s, and less so in the second Sandinista period.

Despite social services being inferior to those during the revolutionary era, the rural poor of Nicaragua have seen somewhat increased, albeit uneven, financial assistance following the 2006 reelection of Ortega. At least there is more help than during the 16 years of neoliberal governments. Whether aid to the poor is deployed only to purchase their votes is a controversial issue, as I gleaned from my fieldwork interviews. One person I interviewed asserted in disgust that "Ortega is leaving the crumbs while running away with the restaurant."

Why, in this environment, might the CEBs be engaged in a process of renewal? Participants at the 2008 *CEB Continental* conference held in Bolivia called for a revitalization, or *relanzamiento*, of Christian Base Communities. Because all over Latin America CEB participants' identities are based in the local context, a *relanzamiento* by definition looks different everywhere. At the time, Nicaragua's CEBs were in a dormant phase, having waxed and waned in different contexts from when they first emerged. Father Joe Mulligan, mentioned in Chapter 1, described in a 2010 article for ADITAL that the CEBs in Nicaragua in particular were in the process of renewing. He elaborated

on contemporary CEBs in Nicaragua renovating themselves for the current context, especially in the Managua community where he primarily worked (Mulligan 2010).

Father Mulligan wrote that the CEBs in Nicaragua are renewing because they are called through an awareness of contemporary realities (2010). Father Jose Sanchez explained on the CEB Continental website that the renewal was in part a response to the attacks on liberation theology by the church hierarchy that lasted from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. These attacks resulted in CEB participants losing morale and experiencing suspicion on the part of other Catholics who had come to think of the CEB as aligned with “atheistic and violent ideologies” (Sanchez 2009). A relaunch was needed to reassert the model of CEBs as akin to the first Christian communities, the idea that the poor have a unique knowledge to offer the Church, and the importance of its mission to serve the Kingdom of God. The relanzamiento was to make concrete strategies to embed liberation theology in communities, strengthen established CEBs, and create new CEBs through 2016, when they would reconvene on a continental level (Sanchez 2009). Indeed, it is laborious to avoid becoming a “community of deferral” (Bandak and Boylston 2014).

I noticed during my preliminary fieldwork that the CEBs engage in a discourse of ongoing crisis. For example, they speak of the “global economic crisis,” and I wondered if it too might be a catalyst for a relaunch. Casaldáliga, a much-cited supporter and interlocutor of the CEBs who has visited Nicaragua CEBs since the 1980s, observed that “Crisis is a fever of the spirit” (2006). “Crisis” for CEBs does not simply mean disaster, but spurs one to action. The CEBs have experienced and are experiencing crisis on many levels.

The contemporary CEBs do not (yet) have a dictator to overthrow similar to Somoza during the 1970s, as Genoveva and Juan Carlos pointed out in Chapter 1. There is no longer any clear political vehicle, such as a revolutionary state, behind which they can throw their support. At one point, the MRS appeared to be a political party with whom the CEBs could ally. The MRS included beloved original Sandinista revolutionaries, but the Ortega administration ensured they did not appear on any electoral ballot. Then the MRS leaders discredited themselves by advocating that Nicaraguans vote for the Liberal Party during the 2011 election, arguing that anyone was better than Ortega. This MRS action infuriated and alienated CEB participants. The crises generally appear more covert and are not easily identified, but CEBs can articulate well the violent effects of neoliberalism that make people desperate. International donors on which the CEBs depend can no longer send what they used to, they point out. Despite his anti-imperialist rhetoric, Ortega has barely made moves to limit transnational corporations' exploitation of Nicaragua's people and natural resources.

The abject political corruption in Nicaragua is part of the "crisis" they talk about. Daniel Ortega is no longer the revolutionary hero he still claims to be. Since his reelection in 2006, Ortega has changed the constitution so he is not limited to two presidential terms, and he has prevented steps that would support free and fair elections. CEB members described the political situation as a "shadow" looming over them. For example, the "*Pacto*," as Nicaraguans call it, that facilitated Ortega's 2006 election was made through collusion with the convicted money launderer and former neoliberal president Arnoldo Alemán and the church hierarchy. These events support Williams's 1989 argument that the church works to maintain its authority at the expense of the

people (see also Kampwirth 2010). Furthermore, the Ortega administration has been very adept at disarming groups who are more effective at what the administration claims to do, according to an NGO director I interviewed in 2011 who has been in Nicaragua for three decades. The MRS party was, in part, a victim of this strategy. The administration propaganda is clearly everywhere, pink and flowery as designed by the first lady and national poet Rosario Murillo, using the slogan, “Christian, socialist, and in solidarity.” While Ortega continues to appropriate revolutionary and Christian discourse, the slogans might be losing their effectiveness.

Another force I see contributing to the renewal of the contemporary CEBs in Nicaragua is the growing conservatism of national Catholic Church hierarchies. The hierarchies, in a reversal from the revolutionary Sandinista decade, work in collusion with the Ortega administration. The Catholic Church in Rome under emeritus Pope Benedict moved to limit and even reverse the Vatican II reforms from which liberation theology was born. When Benedict was Cardinal Ratzinger, he was notorious for criticizing liberation theology, and as the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,¹⁴ he worked to divest liberation theology clergy and nuns of their titles and positions (and some, tired of being censured, left their orders voluntarily). As pope, he continued his conservative hardline positions, alienating many Catholics around the world. October 2012 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Vatican II Council, and progressive Catholics worldwide have been reasserting their support of the reforms (*National Catholic Reporter* 2012) that decentralized the church, placed importance on

¹⁴ The disciplinary branch of the Catholic Church, born during the Inquisition, is charged with safeguarding Catholic doctrine.

the laity, and influenced the birth of the CEBs. Although Pope Francis (elected in 2013) appears more progressive, and is embraced by CEBs, they shared with me that he has his work cut out for him in convincing the national hierarchies to change. CEBs in El Salvador have recently been excluded from parishes by the national hierarchy, for example.

I also consider the growth in conversions to evangelical and Pentecostal Protestant Christianity in Nicaragua a catalyst for CEB renewal. International evangelical religious groups that bring desired—and very much needed—medical, financial, and other substantive aid to Nicaragua appear to be growing in influence. CEB participants shared that they do not believe these conversions to be “true” ones, but rather are actions taken by people attracted to the material goods or even jobs the missionaries can supply. One participant critically observed that the evangelical churches are like the Catholic hierarchy in Rome. Another made the analogy that they are like corner stores, “popping up on every block and selling junk.” Evangelical conversion is a topic of conversation during CEB meetings, as missionaries are everywhere, and many of their family members have converted.

The matriarch of the family I lived with in the 26 de Julio barrio in Managua during the summers of 2011 and 2012 described the CEB relanzamiento succinctly. She explained that about five years before, the youth had all but dropped out of the CEBs and adults were hardly participating. Father Arnaldo became so depressed that he returned to Mexico for a period of rest. She perceived that leaders, and others too, felt the CEBs were coming to an end. When I asked core coordinator Sister Margarita about the relaunch, she simply attributed it to all things naturally waxing and waning. Then, Father Pedro

Casaldáliga issued a proclamation that the CEBs meet and reinforce themselves; the 2006 circular from Casaldáliga mentioned above supports this account. Father Arnaldo, with the encouragement of his friend and CEB financial and morale supporter Father Tomás in Spain, heeded the call. “He helped Arnaldo gain a greater perspective on things,” according to my host mother. The CEB conference, which they refer to as the *Encuentro*, gathered CEBs from all of Latin America, and “relanzamiento” became the rallying theme. Those who had fallen away from the CEBs returned, and people began “knocking on doors” to assert their presence and organize. The young people who had grown up—the matriarch named six of them that I knew—began facilitating and leading new youth groups.

This chapter has provided the anthropological and historical framework for contemporary CEBs in Nicaragua as they relate to liberation theology and the anthropology of Christianity. The CEBs and their religious practices provide insight into a distinctly Catholic practice. The next chapter will more specifically elaborate on liberation theology and the ethnographic data I collected in regard to the CEB revitalization.

Chapter 3: *Relanzamiento* of Liberation Theology

Anthropological research in the 1970s and 1980s paid significant attention to liberation theology. As seen in Chapter 1, liberation theology is an interpretation of Catholicism that emphasizes action to transform the political, economic, and social constraints that prevent the advancement of the impoverished within class systems. It was born in Latin America and has since splintered into many liberation theologies emphasizing different gender, race, and ethnic experiences. In this chapter, I examine what CEB participants say about their historical trajectory and *relanzamiento*. I will first review the literature on liberation theology from theologians and social scientists. I found that whereas the state and CEBs previously saw themselves as part of the same project, some practitioners of liberation theology no longer feel that way.

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology grew out of reforms implemented within the Catholic Church during the Council of Vatican II (1962-1965). Rome recognized the need to make the church more accessible and inclusive. Latin American bishops convened the Medellín Conference in 1968 to reflect on the Vatican Council and figure out a way to enact the changes in Latin America (Berryman 1987; Boff and Boff 2000).¹⁵ Whereas Vatican II leaders made generalized observations about underdevelopment and the needs of the poor, Medellín attendees worked to name the origins of poverty and outline specific guidelines for restructuring the church with a “preferential option for the poor.” That phrase signified that the poor are not simply objects in need of compassion, but agents of

¹⁵ The Medellín Conference is officially named the 2nd *Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano* (CELAM) or Roman Catholic Bishops Conference.

their own history and liberation (Gutierrez 1988). Liberation theology grew out of reforms at Vatican II and Medellín, but it was not mandated from the church hierarchy as a new way to practice Catholicism. Rather, the hierarchy recognized processes that were already happening pastorally. Liberation theologians and practitioners claim the practice is born in the experiences that people—laity, nuns, clergy, aid workers, missionaries—have had living with, listening to, and working among the poor.

The Medellín Conference centered on discussions about the disparity of wealth in Latin America. Attendees recognized that industrial development and the prevalence of authoritarian regimes with relationships to the United States were responsible for marginalizing and exploiting the poor in Latin America (Boff and Boff 2000). According to Gustavo Gutierrez, a priest and philosopher who wrote extensively about liberation theology: “Liberation theology had its origin in the contrast between the urgent task of proclaiming the life of the risen Jesus and the conditions of death in which the poor of Latin America were living” (1988 [1971]:xxxiv). Many men and women religious talk about their experiences working among the impoverished as the catalyst for practicing liberation theology (F. Cardenal 2011; López Vigil 1989; Randall 1983; Sobrino 1993). The pastoral clergy in Latin America in the 1950s and early 1960s began to question their role as part of an institution that was complicit in upholding the unjust social order (Berryman 1987). They felt that the church had a faith-based responsibility to denounce and fight institutionalized violence and express solidarity for the victims.

The growing number of revolutionary movements and insurrections in the 1950s and 1960s was met with an increase in military dictatorships. Many of the dictatorships were established through the intervention of the United States under Cold War policies

that prioritized safeguarding the financial interests of the upper classes in both the United States and Latin America. Popular protests against the growing disparity of wealth spread throughout Latin America. Members of church and foreign aid organizations grew anxious in response and began to pay attention to the greater social, political, and economic systems in which they worked (Berryman 1987; Boff and Boff 2000).

The Cuban Revolution and radical politics in Brazil and elsewhere in the 1950s and 1960s also provoked clergy, nuns, and aid workers to become more aware of the structural conditions creating and reproducing poverty and social injustice (Berryman 1987). Cuba completely excluded religion from their revolution; still, Cuba was a role model in other countries' liberation movements (Randall 1983). Tensions ran high in this Cold War period. Liberation theology in Nicaragua, my site of inquiry, developed in the 1960s under the repressive Somoza dynastic dictatorship.

Throughout Latin America, liberation theology was cultivated through Christian Base Communities (CEBs), which maintain a significant presence in Brazil, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The small group structure inherent to CEBs was made official at Medellín, as well as facilitation by a layperson, priest, or nun (Berryman 1987; Boff and Boff 2000; Randall 1983). Through reflection, they work to enact ways to improve conditions of poverty and oppression in which community members live. Depending on the group, these activities may include protests against political corruption, fundraising to build a road, or organizing the community to feed undernourished children. CEB trainers/organizers have utilized the Freirean model of critical pedagogy in which students and teachers enter into a dialogue to share experiences and thereby overcome and transform the inequalities inherent in the dominant educational framework

(Berryman 1987; Freire 1972; Gutierrez 1988). In short, liberation theology centers around a praxis of asking theoretically what the causes of oppression are and then taking action against those causes.

A distinct precept of liberation theology is that it comes from the perspective of those who are impoverished and oppressed, not the elite or scholarly theologians. Liberation theology considers the poor as having been made poor by the operation of capitalism's political and economic structures (Althaus-Reid et al. 2007; Boff and Boff 2000). The church often criticizes liberation theology as being political, while liberation theologians often criticize the church for not acknowledging its own politics in implicitly and covertly supporting dominant and oppressive regimes.

Liberation theology has been defined as a movement (Burdick 2004; Ondetti 2008; Smith 1991) and is often placed in social movement literature. Although liberation theology manifests very differently historically and geographically, the CEBs in Nicaragua do not consider themselves a movement; they assert that the concept implies a temporality that does not apply to them (Mulligan 2010). Political scientist Daniel Levine, who specializes in the relationships between religion and politics in Latin America, agrees that liberation theology is not a movement. It does not have leaders or political parties, and it does not depend on any given organizational structure (1990b). It does not have clearly marked goals that it seeks to achieve. It is much too diverse and includes small, organized groups that often follow multiple different paths depending on their communities' particular needs. Rather, liberation theology is a social process in which participants are continuously in dialogue with certain ideas and continuously change the expression of those ideas. It is a two-way street for ordinary people, clergy,

women religious, and academics to engage with one another's ideas in "a convergence of religious renewal, social transformation, and political conflict" (1990b:604).

Gutierrez defined practitioners as aptly fitting Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectual" in that the work of liberation theology practitioners relates to popular struggles (1988:10). His seminal text, *A Theology of Liberation* (1988, originally published in 1971), gave this radically different kind of theology its name and articulated its ideas. Gutierrez utilized a number of philosophical texts from Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, Mariátegui, and Freire in combination with Christian texts such as the Gospels, Thomas Aquinas, Vatican II, and Medellín documents, to outline the historical causes that made a new theological approach necessary.

Liberation theologians have reached into the social sciences and humanities to ground their ideas (Gutierrez 1988; Segundo 1985). Curiously, the humanities and social sciences have barely reciprocated in analyzing their own relationship with Christianity, as Maldonado-Torres (2008) argued they should. Gutierrez stressed that liberation theology must first be understood as a theology that considers structural poverty a sin and values action to right injustice. Nevertheless, scholars and sympathizers of liberation theology often overlap and cannot be separated cleanly into two camps.

Liberation theology's presence has always been more qualitative than quantitative, but its academic presence is fairly significant (Berryman 1987). Although not a movement in itself, its legacy of promoting consciousness among the poor and mobilization against injustice has spilled over into various social movements, creating leaders and alliances with secular groups (Burdick 2004). Because of its grounding in history and emphasis on local and lay grassroots interpretations, liberation theology is

different in each place it is practiced. A portion of the literature about liberation theology discusses whether it is still useful and relevant (Burdick 2004; Canin 2000; Claffey and Egan 2009). Other scholars offer solutions for how to keep liberation theology a player in the processes of social change (Hinkelammert 2003; Irvine 2010; Petrella 2008). These efforts share an optimism that liberation theology may be a vehicle for achieving a better social system.

My approach to liberation theology in Nicaragua recognizes that it is more accurately seen as a process, not a movement. I am not a practitioner, but like many past liberation theology researchers I sympathize with some of their social justice projects. Perhaps this is because participants in liberation theology carry similar ideologies grounded in Western or North Atlantic, Judeo-Christian inspired, progressive thought, as do many of the researchers.

CEB participants are impoverished people who in many ways are “picking themselves up by the bootstraps” and taking action against the structures that are oppressing them. They are progress-oriented, and their struggles suggest an alternative social or communal modernity that does not have the wealth disparity of capitalism. Although their ideologies of modernity and progress propose different end goals than the dominant one, they maintain the idea that history does indeed progress. So while in one sense their struggles threaten dominant social orders, they seem to have derived their ideas from the same intellectual philosophies.

Liberation theology literature on 1980s Nicaragua is rich and varied (Dodson and O’Shaughnessy 1990; Hodges 1986; Lancaster 1988; Montoya 1995; Randall 1983). Levine (1990b) observes that Nicaragua’s successful 1979 revolution, on the one hand,

and liberation theology, on the other, grew together. They were able to draw from and work with one another. Nicaraguan CEBs have been credited with the success of the revolution thanks to the social networks they established throughout the country (Lancaster 1988; Randall 1983). Because they grew together, it is difficult and possibly inaccurate to distinguish whether some phenomena are entirely rooted in either liberation theology or the revolution.

An important feature that is found in both the revolution and liberation theology is use of the terms “new man” and “new woman.” The terms are present in both biblical and revolutionary texts. The Nicaraguan revolution promoted the development of new men and new women as part of the transformation of society the revolution was trying to bring about (Montoya 2012). Gutierrez’s liberation theology text relies on biblical texts to discuss the “new humanity” that is the goal of the liberation process (1988:81). There was a confluence and overlap of values between revolutionaries and liberation theology practitioners in that both were concerned with liberating the poor from injustice. In this overlap, CEBs in the 1980s worked mainly through state-sanctioned arenas of the FSLN on a common nation-building project. The CEBs’ current claim to be in a phase of renewal thus refers to an ongoing “Christian responsibility” to create a “new and more just world” (Mulligan 2010). I will return to ideas about new men and new women in Chapter 4.

Ebb and Flow of Christian Base Communities

I sat down for the first time with Orlando at his place of employment, a non-profit working in solidarity with indigenous land rights in Central America. He had a lot to say in response to each of my questions, and his answers often led us into tangents about

other topics concerning Nicaragua, liberation theology, and even global capital flows. He began participating in the CEBs as a ten-year-old, when his guitar teacher, a CEB participant, invited Orlando to accompany him on the guitar at the weekly CEB meeting in the barrio. At these meetings, the CEB's representatives communicate to the rest of the CEB what occurred during the weekly Managua gatherings. Although his aunt was a loyal participant, Orlando had never attended with her.

While we sat in a patio near the UCA where he worked, I described my interest in learning about how the CEBs functioned and how they had changed over the decades. He thought for a moment and explained that CEB members were aware that the key issues have changed, and they maintained that people should free themselves from the things that hurt them. He elaborated: "We are no longer in war times, and it is not a theology based in a military context. It is a theology based more in the context of environmental crisis, a context of immigrants, a context of poverty, unemployment, femicides, gender, intra-familial violence, lack of law and order, the youth too, women." His voice trailed off, and he continued thinking.

Similar to the observations of Genoveva and Juan Carlos introduced in Chapter 1, Orlando noted that the context had changed. Nevertheless, even in the absence of a dictatorship, the contemporary focus for people in CEBs is still upon factors that degrade them and lead to less "dignified" lives. Having been born a couple of years after the revolution, he perceived that around 2004, with ongoing neoliberal economic restructuring, it became even harder for young people to spend time in CEBs. "When I entered the youth groups, I come from a poor family, in a working-class barrio. We all, the Communities are made of this type of people, with difficulties, people that work in

the factories, people that work in the Oriental Market,¹⁶ vendors at the stoplights.”

Whereas his youth group had time to meet and reflect on or plan activities in the 1990s, the young people today have to work, mostly in the informal economy, selling bootleg music or movie CDs outside the shopping mall, he said.

“Note the difference, Lara!” Orlando stressed, “We had time to walk to meet each other!” He listed the individuals in the youth group he led who had to work every waking minute they were not in school to help provide for their families.

“This dynamic of youth today does not allow one to organize. So from 2004 until today’s date, the subject of crisis, unemployment, lack of access in general, let’s forget the subject of government for now, of social politics and all that because that’s a whole other story, it has to do with it but, but the system is the same.” He seemed to me to carefully sidestep criticizing the FSLN at this point and went on to add the impact of consumerism, which he contended limits the extent to which the young people can reflect enough on the current situation to resist its temptations.

“So how, in this context, will the youth of today learn to be an alternative?” he asked, exasperated and concerned.

In the 1990s and early 2000s public attention focused on whether the CEBs were disappearing. Levine (1995) reviewed works by such scholars as Berryman (1994) and Burdick (1993) and observed that these sympathetic scholars lamented CEBs’ demise and the fact they had not achieved the egalitarian society they claimed to have been building. In the ensuing years, a rash of literature extolling evangelicalism in Latin America

¹⁶ The *Mercado Oriental* is considered the largest market in Central America and sprawls chaotically throughout Managua. They say if you can’t find what you are looking for in the Mercado Oriental, then it’s not for sale anywhere.

appeared, pushing attention away from the study of liberation theology. David Stoll, for example, argued that evangelical and Protestant Christianity was growing among the poor, that it functioned in more relevant ways to their lives. Stoll predicted Protestant and evangelical practice would overtake Catholicism (1990; for more on Protestants in Latin America see Cleary and Stewart-Gambino 1992). To be fair, many Protestant and evangelical groups in Nicaragua have allied with CEBs and contributed to the liberation process too (author interviews; see also Berryman 1987 and 1994; Haslam 1987; Lancaster 1988; Smith and Haas 1997).

In 1994, the number of CEBs in Managua had dwindled to fourteen (Strengthening Sessions, CNP 2008). Eric Canin (2000) concluded the Nicaragua CEBs were diminishing as evidenced by the closing of some of the cafeterias, the Ollas de Soya, and the small number of attendants at the annual Christian Salute to the Revolution. He explained the decreasing numbers as the outcome of efforts by the church hierarchy to stop the CEBs by moving supportive priests and nuns elsewhere and limiting their resource streams. Even before the electoral loss of the FSLN in 1990, Lancaster had observed some CEB participants transitioning their work to strictly Sandinista-controlled projects (1988). Most conversations I had with CEB participants on the topic of the 1990s were stories of heartbreak about the electoral loss of the FSLN and the dramatic drop in support for CEB social justice work by the religious orders and the Nicaraguan government. The new, bleaker reality also elicited a stronger response to serve the growing number of desperate people. Despite widespread heartbreak, there was also awareness among CEB participants that a number of their own communities had helped vote the FSLN out.

Looking back, Layza described a process of reevaluation. “Massively all of us were Sandinista. Our inclination was Frente Sandinista. After the nineties, when three periods of government beat the Frente Sandinista we began to realize that our Communities were also voting for the Right, that people had changed.” She shared with me that this discovery provoked disgruntlement and even discrimination against CEB members they believed voted for the Right. CEBs experienced fractures from within during the neoliberal years.

Layza described a group of them embarking on a campaign, pointing out that discriminating against one another was not Christianlike and that they must accept political diversity. “And yes, I can tell you that the majority, their political inclination is the Frente Sandinista because we are for a project for the poor. The only government project that comes close to a project for the poor is the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional.”

The man who helped start Orlando’s youth group shared with me that in 1990 he had known the FSLN was going to lose. He was at the main Plaza of the Revolution in Managua for the election rally in 1989, and looking around at all the FSLN T-shirts, he knew they were not all sincerely going to vote for the Frente. He said it aloud, “Not all the people who look like they are going to vote for Ortega are really going to.” People criticized him as being disloyal for saying it, but he knew, he told me, with so many deaths and the conscription (compulsory military service) that people just couldn’t take any more. He pointed out that Violeta Chamorro said she would end the military service. Nicaraguans—including CEB participants—voted the revolutionary government out in order to survive, to get a respite from the very bloody US-funded Contra War. As a

result, CEBs lost additional institutional support and morale for a time, and it showed in their numbers and projects.

Nevertheless, the prevailing idea that the demise of liberation theology was imminent prompted Levine in 1995 to argue, in “On Premature Reports of the Death of Liberation Theology,” that it was too soon to claim that liberation theology was dead. Such a view disregarded the fact that liberation theology was by definition not a static phenomenon. It was, as my research participants pointed out to me time and again, a “church in movement.” Levine asserted that whether liberation efforts have so far succeeded or failed is irrelevant and such questions derive from limited and short-term perspectives. One year later, French sociologist Michael Löwy agreed and cited Levine’s argument in his, “The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America” (1996:123).

In August 2007, just before the continental call for *Relanzamiento*, Father Arnaldo distributed a document summarizing major themes from the 5th Episcopal Conference of Latin American nations held in Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007.¹⁷ The document addressed the question of whether CEBs were disappearing. CEB expert Father Jose Marins noted that the church hierarchy purposefully moved priests and nuns away from their support of and work with the CEBs, removed financial and spiritual support, and tried to absorb them into parishes (Zenteno 2009). Furthermore, some of the most active members in the communities migrated to other activist positions, and there had been co-optation of social movements and their politics. The “great generation of Vatican II” was dying out, Marins wrote, while new leaders were centralizing religious authority

¹⁷ El Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, or CELAM; as stated above, the Medellin conference was the second.

once again and restricting the more “creative” theologies. Father Arnaldo, in his summary of Marins’s observations, added his own thoughts and agreed that the hierarchy has been most effective in their efforts to “dilute” the CEBs by reducing them to bible study groups or social work cooperatives, anything but the “fundamental ecclesiastical cell” that he perceived them to be (Zenteno 2009:12-13).

Relanzamiento

A call to renew, relaunch, and revitalize was issued during the July 2008 *CEB Continental* meetings in Bolivia. Mexican priest and CEB coordinator Father Jose Sanchez wrote that for the CEBs the revitalization meant a return to being excited about their model as the Church of the Poor. “It is a return to promoting new CEBs and strengthening existing ones. It is to work joyfully and creatively to augment Christian Base Communities quantitatively and qualitatively” (Sanchez 2009:2).¹⁸ The term “relanzamiento” implies that they had previously felt weak or stagnant and were in need of motivating one another to reaffirm their faith and model for practice. Renewal is a common term in Christianity, so calling for it was likely understood by CEB members and communities as a faith-based activity.

Orlando’s impassioned observations quoted above demonstrate how the CEBs work to remain relevant to the contexts in which the participants live. Through the research I did for this dissertation, I have come to agree that CEBs and liberation theology are relevant in contemporary Nicaragua. They exist in spite of significant challenges; high points and low periods are not new but are a part of their fabric.

¹⁸ Link to all of the CEB Continental documents on the 2008 Relanzamiento: <http://www.cebcontinental.org/index.php/blog-central/relanzamiento-ceb/fortalecimiento-del-relanzamiento/378-documentos-para-el-relanzamiento-de-las-ceb>

Orlando, and Genoveva and Juan Carlos, voiced serious concerns that young people today do not have time to reflect and act in alternative ways. The CEBs identify a new “enemy” in consumerism and neoliberalism. These are terms CEB members find descriptive of their experience of contemporary capitalism.

Upon being asked how many people are in the communities by an audience member at a public talk, one of the original CEB founders replied, “Christian Base Communities are small communities. We are not a great mass of people. We are formed with the idea of a biblical community. Acts 42 is our model. So in a big group, like fifty, it would be very hard for us to all know each other, be in solidarity, and live together.”¹⁹ CEBs are, by definition, meant to be small, local groups.

I see the current relanzamiento and past revitalizations as evidence that CEBs constitute a church in movement, adapting and responding to contemporary processes. One such period was when youth groups flourished during Orlando’s young-adult years in the early 2000s, a time when CEB networks in Latin America were considered weakened. CEBs have existed for fifty years, so perhaps they do not project the newness or elicit the excitement they did during their early years. They emerged in Nicaragua during the dictatorship, when participants risked their lives, and they thrived during the revolution, when the leadership encouraged CEBs’ existence and support. They survived the dramatic and damaging structural changes of the 1990s, and my ethnographic fieldwork demonstrates their continued existence—and even growth—into the second

¹⁹ See note 9. I quote from the Bible used by the CEBs, drawing from Michael Scott’s (2005) suggestion that scholars consider the meanings for the religious practitioners.

decade of the 2000s. The narratives I collected all included assertions that they were absolutely relevant to the current circumstances.

As we sat at the little lunch table in the back of the base of operations for Project Samaritanas, Soledad asserted, “We move forward squarely in the twenty-first century. Talking about abandoned women in prostitution; we no longer talk of leprosy, we talk of people living with HIV and AIDS, we talk about children in situations of total malnutrition and hunger.” She clearly drew parallels between CEB’s work at this time and the Christians of the first centuries.

“How to bring the Good News to this population? So for me everything the Gospels do, for me it’s not just talking in a certain way, verbalizing the Gospels, it is also practicing them,” she stressed to me. The drive among practitioners of liberation theology to “build the kingdom of God on Earth” appears unbreakable. I did not perceive this commitment as something practitioners consider finite.

From her office chair, preparing documents for Project NATRAS, Maria Jose described in very religious terms the current context as the CEBs continue the work to create a new way to live. Speaking slowly, she reflected, “It’s pretty bad, the situation we currently live. We are living another context, at the ecclesiastical and the political level, and we are polarized. Some people are confused, I feel that they are confused.”

“But from our basic principles to do our analysis based in our reality, our lives, of what the community lives, what the rural folks live, what we live. We work from there, and the communities continue alive!” She smiled at me and continued, breathless. “They continue the spirit of Jesus, right, of the mystical, we have it clear that to make

community is what Jesus announced. And to continue to live the Gospels, to make alive, open, dynamic communities, that we live fraternally, in solidarity, with justice.”

“And so from Jesus we continue. We are about eighteen communities right now in Managua. There have arisen new communities. We keep going, we continue with missions.” Smiling, whispering in what I perceived to be very spiritually based wonderment, Maria Jose described what she saw as the current process of the CEBs. She referred to the “Gospel that Arnaldo announces,” citing him as a guide to their practice; her words are incredibly dialogic in her narrative, exemplifying CEB language ideology and belief.

I began fieldwork with a central focus on the proclaimed CEB renewal. I realized quickly it was not the best topic to begin my inquiry. For a number of respondents, the issue did not have as much significance as I expected. Some individuals expressed a need for renewal; others felt that there has always been ebb and flow, that they have experienced renovations in the past, and that is natural that certain aspects wax and wane over time. I still wondered about the use of the word “renewal” that I had discovered throughout the documents I had collected over the years, as well as one of the recurring themes CEBs chose to focus on and activate at events. How much does the rally cry for “relanzamiento” really result in renewal?

After a few months in the field, I wrote in my notebook that while the CEBs are certainly present and in no danger of dying out, I was not sure what to make of the relanzamiento. I felt confident this was a special time in Nicaraguan history, but that a nascent awakening of the CEBs could take a while to bloom. There were new communities, and there was tension between them and the established communities,

especially in regard to the political approach and representation of the established CEBs. CEBs are no longer catalyzed by a sense of revolutionary triumph, nor does the neoliberal economic restructuring of the nineties push them in their work. Surely, they are hurting financially, but this is a wholly different time. As Genoveva and Juan Carlos perceived and shared with me, the enemy now is a system that hides the roots of structural violence.

Nonetheless, since the continental call for renewal, four new CEBs have been founded in Managua and a larger number nationally have reconnected with the CNP. The word *relanzamiento* has been written about in online religious journals and in the local CEB bulletins and documents. Although my questions about the current *relanzamiento* did not elicit the responses I expected, the responses were still revealing.

Layza, whose sister Genoveva attended the CEB Continental conference, shared her thoughts on my questions about the renovation. As a CNP representative of her region of Carazo, she is well aware of the CEB networks throughout Nicaragua and Latin America.

In 2008 we began a chapter we call the renewal of the CEBs. I'm going to respond bit by bit to your question. Look, we [the CEBs] are networked at the level of Central America and also at the level of Latin America. So there was a Latin American conference. It was in Bolivia, and Genoveva and another person participated. They went, and there was a thread about how the communities have become so passive, comfortable, among themselves. Or, they have aged. In this phase of renewal what we want is the communities to become more creative. Because we have gotten, well some of the communities are reproducing the critical model, so in saying renewal we want to wake up the people to a revived consciousness. What is the role of the CEBs now, in this new context? Because we are certainly not in wartime, there's no bullets, deaths. But there is in another manner a silent war. We see technology, consumerism as something that enslaves. Enslaves the youth, so we said, Ok this is what we want: Christians with a more critical consciousness about the way we live. And to have a way to transmit all of this in a more creative way within the CEBs. To stick with the same critical model, our celebrations have to be more embodied, and from there begin to

change gears. Because we have this mechanism that has told us that God is above, God disciplines, God polices us. And we have to change our people away from this mechanism; God is not up there, because we cannot believe in something so far away. We have to believe in something that is here with us; to have to act, to motivate us, move us. From there, to begin, our celebration is more embodied in life. That's it. This was the community commitment. So at that point we start creating it.

Layza is describing the recognition of the need to adapt to changing social, political, and economic contexts. They could see there were still societal problems they had to make others aware of, to address.

Soledad described the theme of renewal more as seeing the need for reenergizing their work. As she spoke, I felt she had not pondered the theme of *relanzamiento* in depth before I asked. It was not uncommon for people to tell me that my questions made them reflect further on the subject.

I think perhaps the relaunch depends on the perceptions and expectations of each person tracing it out. But for me it has to do a little bit with how we are going to grow at each level as communities, how do we strengthen. And in this renovation, this sprouting of these new little communities full of joy, energy, and hope of following this live Jesus, this different Jesus, to share this. And they are in the *barrio* making a life. I think these new communities are part of this fermentation, moving little by little. I believe these are contexts with many disadvantages, maybe like when the CEBs in the seventies were flourishing, those contexts too called, invited the communities home. Many youth for example are working in the factories, maybe in more informal work, many people [have to], to survive—it's not to live, but to survive. The fact that Monday, for example, the sharing [the Monday meeting] here in Samaritanas, I saw many . . . fifty, sixty people here and it generated in me so much joy. This church, small, poor, like the song says, "church poor, heart pure." So the new communities are part of announcing the good news that has been penetrating little by little, weaving through the *barrios*. And the work, the constant work in the case of [lists 3 major coordinators] and other people involved, the supportive religious women like the Guadalupes, Oblates, and other committed people. Little by little. At other times it's the part of the youth—we know what they need—maybe if the youth were more active, but there are youth too who are out looking for any kind of economic support to bring home to their families, to generate some kind of income. That also has to do with the context the CEBs in the current moment, getting moving. . . .

Soledad also perceives a need for CEBs. The current context is so difficult that people are just surviving. Both Layza and Soledad appear to feel the CEBs can help lift people up.

Some people are concerned that the new communities formed out of the relanzamiento are substantially different from the more-established CEBs. The new CEB members are coming from parish churches, and to some established CEB participants, the newcomers do not understand what it means to be political but not partisan. Orlando perceived that the new CEBs think that all politics are partisan, and that issues like trash pickup, clean water, and paved roads are political, not religious, topics. “It is so hard to get them to consciousness!” he remarked, frustrated.

A Sisterhood in Service to CEBs, and the Desire for Religious Accompaniment

Another project in the spirit of relanzamiento is a nascent effort to form a new religious sisterhood in service to the CEBs. Sister Lisbeth (pseudonym), a nun who grew up in a CEB in Mexico, shared with me that she has been called to found this new sisterhood. Sister Lisbeth has been instrumental encouraging the formation of new communities in and around Managua. Founding this order of religious women was not well known among the CEBs at the time, but she sat down with the core coordinators to discuss the risks involved in planning and executing such a program. They expressed support for her endeavor. They provided a common house in one of the CEB barrios in Managua where she could live after she was forced to leave the house of her religious order because of her decision. The coordinators all agreed they would not place any restrictions on her project.

At the time she shared her mission with me, she was waiting for word from her superior about whether they would dismiss her from her order for her decision. She had

instructions to complete her five years in Nicaragua and then travel to her next assignment. She shared that she would never renounce her vows, and that she had been reflecting on this decision for 14 years, wanting to make sure founding the new order was indeed what God was calling her to do. Initially she thought her work would be in service to indigenous people in Mexico, in the state she is from, but after living in Nicaragua she realized she needed to start her project in that country.

At the time of my fieldwork, four young women had expressed their intentions to join her efforts and she was awaiting a visit from another, but so far had not found the right fit. “My one stipulation is that the person love the CEBs and live among them,” she shared. I had arrived at the common house where she was living to record an interview with her about her participation in the CEBs. Her plans for a sisterhood came up toward the end of my visit.

“Some girls are more inclined toward a cloistered life,” she explained, and one of her interested visitors left to join an established order. One young woman who visited appeared to be looking for a safe, structured life and confessed to not loving the CEBs. I was surprised someone would confess such a thing, and it showed on my face, and I think Sister Lisbeth agreed. She shared that she was fully prepared for the long-term and very challenging process of founding and cultivating this new sisterhood. Her greatest concern was that others might lose faith that such a sisterhood could be built, and by criticizing the project could discourage support for it. I asked if a sisterhood such as this had ever been attempted, and she replied that she knew of one in Colombia that had since mostly disbanded. I have tried to find out more about this project through the Internet, but so far have been unsuccessful.

Sister Lisbeth and I conversed about the need for religious orders to support the CEBs. Religious accompaniment was something Sister Margarita, a core coordinator of the CEBs who had been with the Nicaraguan CEBs nearly since their founding, has been vocal about this in her process of retirement. I heard more about this need from a now-adult youth group leader as well, in her reflection of how important a local nun was to her participation in the CEBs as a teenager.

Sister Lisbeth and I talked for four hours on wide-ranging topics. We reflected on a popular conversational topic, comparing the current environment of Nicaragua with the most challenging periods during the 1980s as far as limitations on freedom of the press and official antifeminist policies. Many people also compare the contemporary moment to the early 1970s, when drought, resource exploitation, and growing political dissension were major social problems. Sister Lisbeth prepared us a refreshing Mexican lunch of chilaquiles, pico de gallo, homemade orange juice, and coffee. She is assertive and can provoke people sometimes, but I also perceived her to be selective in choosing her battles. I think she knows herself well and knows when to push. She is a person I think could succeed with such an ambitious project.

I include Sister Lisbeth's endeavors and her thoughts because what she is doing demonstrates a current effort to support and sustain the CEBs into the future. Many CEB participants lamented the diminished support of clergy and nuns relative to the early decades (1960s and 1970s). They emphasized how important religious supporters have been pastorally, by encouraging various projects in the barrios and rural villages. While liberation theology emphasizes the capacities of laity, men and especially women of

religious orders have a special background and training that they can bring to the communities.

A few days after my meeting with Sister Lisbeth, I attended the weekly meeting hosted by the CEB that encompassed the Guadalupe Order's house near the UCA. The theme of the meeting was to celebrate people with religious vocations. Pope Francis had declared 2015 the Year of Consecrated Life.²⁰ February 2, the day of the weekly meeting, was also the Día de las Candelarias, or Candlemas, which celebrates the forty days after Jesus' birth. We had set up chairs outside, and many people in the neighborhood turned out; the CEB that hosts the weekly meeting invites everyone in the neighborhood to attend, and many do so.

As usual, Luciano started us out singing. The older folks knew the song he chose best, and at the very end Luciano muttered, "Let's get this revolution started already," to approved chuckles.

Sister Carmen had set up a computer screen, projecting a video of religious and uplifting messages; and because it was the Día de las Candelarias, we began with our arms raised, with candles, turning to pray to each cardinal direction. Next, a young woman of this particular CEB stood up and read the story from Luke 2 of Jesus being presented at the temple, the traditional reading for the Día de las Candelarias. As is customary, the speaker then invited the audience to reflect in silence, and then to interpret the reading. Sister Lisbeth spoke and said that the message of the reading was an invitation for transformation. Next, two older women volunteered that the reading shows

²⁰ https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacraati.html

how we can discover Jesus in many different people and lifestyles. All three women focused on the prophets Anna and Simon, who were in the temple and recognized the child of Mary and Joseph as the son of God. I mention these interpretations because they aptly represent key motifs in liberation theology that I elaborated earlier: transformation and the idea that God can be found in anyone.²¹

Next, Sister Margarita stood up and shared her life story about how she came to be called to a religious or a consecrated life, *la vida sagrada*. She began by asking the audience to discuss the meaning of “la vida consagrada.” Answers included a commitment, dedicating oneself in service to others, and positioning oneself with God. Sister Margarita pushed them to recognize laity with consecrated lives, to see that the term encompasses myriad lifestyles, and that lay people are included. She elaborated the many callings or vocations that are “no better, no worse” than another. She shared,

Sometimes I have asked why was I called and not my better friend. Remember Samuel, whose father kept offering his older, stronger brothers but they were not picked? I know someone expelled from sisterhood three times because it was not her calling. I know another one married with children who realized she was called to sisterhood.

The CEBs turn the concept of “community of deferral,” as elaborated by Bandak and Boylston (2014), on its head. Sister Margarita’s words emphasized the potential of laity to be just as “called” as the clergy are and to hold knowledge about how to live as Catholics.

She then defined the religious life, distinguishing it from the priestly vocation. She explained that a parish priest who lives alone to serve a congregation is not

²¹ Arguably a general motif in Catholicism, more so after Vatican II, but more apparent in liberation theology.

necessarily a religious person. “Fathers Arnaldo and Jose are religious because they belong to the Jesuit community.” She was referring to the pastoral work emphasized by certain religious orders of men and women.

“We are not nuns here,” Sister Margarita asserted, “We are religious. We are not cloistered in a convent in habits.”

Questions abounded, and a young man asked how a parish priest might not be religious and vice versa. Sister Margarita said it was because they do not live fraternally, but alone in the church. A woman pointed out that some priests live very much among their congregation and they clearly read the same Bible, so why couldn't they be included too? Sister Margarita agreed, and Sister Lisbeth encouraged the speaker to continue; she loves it when people speak up and find their voice. A woman from one of the founding CEBs who spoke previously pointed out that Oscar Romero was a priest, but not of a particular order.

Then another CEB founder asked, “What if a priest marries?”

Sister Margarita replied that at present, such a priest loses his position but not his vocation. “It is like if a medical doctor loses their license, they don't stop being a doctor, even if they can't practice. It is a centuries-old practice,” she said, “Not a divine law, and I see it eventually changing.”

Naturally, the next question was why women could not be priests. The same answer was proffered: it is not a divine law and it will eventually change, in Sister Margarita's view.

Then she began her story. “I was normal, I enjoyed going out, attending parties, socializing with my friends, all that.” She repeated louder, “normal.”

Sister Lisbeth poked fun, “I was normal!” and everyone laughed.

“My mom was very religious,” Sister Margarita continued, “and did not become a nun.” Margarita was raised in Catholic school and frequently worked with her parish church. But eventually there was something more she needed to follow, she expressed.

“I would have liked to have a family, but I felt God called me to give that up. Despite challenges, I do not regret my path, and it has been sixty years now. I never dreamed I would come to participate in the revolution, but it was another call from God.”

It was quiet for a bit, and Manuel, a core coordinator along with Sister Margarita and Arnaldo, stood and said simply that he was called to accompany the people as a layman. I thought he too would share his story, since it was quiet for a while. I imagine the audience all perceived him to be strongly dedicated to service and to the CEB model. He was also shy, I thought. Instead of continuing, he launched into a discussion of logistics, ending the meeting and directing attendees to the trucks that would take them home.

Sister Margarita’s narrative, the comment by Manuel, and Sister Lisbeth’s endeavor illuminate how liberation theology practice conceptualizes lay and religious participation. Sisters Lisbeth and Margarita’s stories show how important religious orders are to sustaining the CEBs. There is a space for both; the value for lay leadership does not erase the perceived need to have men and women who have taken religious vows work with them, as repositories of knowledge who bring with them sources of support, and who should at least live and work with the communities. The immense value placed on lived knowledge does not diminish the years of study many of the religious bring with

them, as well as the financial support they receive from their orders to live and serve pastorally.

Participation of priests and nuns illustrates that CEB ideas about societal change are faith-based. Sister Margarita tells how she was called by God to participate in the revolution, for example. Notably, Sister Lisbeth's project of creating a new sisterhood in service to CEBs is occurring outside any official church or political institution. It is not sanctioned by anyone outside of the core coordinators of the CEBs; in fact at the time of my fieldwork, few CEB participants knew of it at all. The CEB projects currently take place in isolation from political or hierarchical church realms. However, because Sister Lisbeth grew up in a CEB in Mexico, she was part of a parish. She shared that she is encouraging the new CEBs to insist that their parish membership provide extra support and resources. Whereas CEBs in other countries were more tied to their parish churches, Nicaragua CEBs were historically more connected to the FSLN. Sister Lisbeth's push for CEB parish membership also provokes some discomfort because it was traumatizing for the CEBs of the 1980s to be excluded from their parishes by the church hierarchy.

Disjuncture

Simultaneous with the efforts to renovate the CEBs and cultivate new communities, I observed growing pains. The growing pains were exacerbated by disagreements about how CEBs might approach current processes in a unified way. I discovered incongruence in how the CEB-CNP participants felt about the Ortega administration and its perceived threats to democratic processes. These threats were perceived in relation to the interoceanic canal through Nicaragua that was being promoted by the Ortega administration, undemocratic constitutional reforms in favor of a

powerful and limitless Ortega presidency, and the distinction between being political and being partisan.

When I arrived in 2011 and 2012 for my preliminary fieldwork, at first I noticed positive changes in the country since my two-years of Peace Corps service in 2006. After the return of Daniel Ortega in 2006, a few months after I had completed my service, the department of Rio San Juan began to shed its “abandoned” status and receive more attention from Managua. Costa Rica had been taking advantage of the area for years, mainly through illegal logging, and successive governments in San Jose have claimed a fairly large parcel of this region. Ortega moved to firmly assert the department’s inclusion in Nicaragua, perhaps as part of what many observers saw as the rise of the new “national Left” in Latin America (Coronil 2011). The road to the department of Rio San Juan had been paved, cutting the travel time between Managua and San Carlos, the departmental capital, in half. San Carlos rebuilt and revitalized a whole new riverfront. A Japanese-funded modern bridge changed the riverfront landscape at the border crossing with Costa Rica, where I remember having to squeeze into a boat to traverse the Rio Frio. Ortega frequently funded large groups of Sandinista Youth to travel there to build houses and embark on recycling and garbage-collecting campaigns, publicly demonstrating that that the Rio San Juan belonged to Nicaragua. One could find bumper stickers, billboards, and graffiti across the nation that said just that: “El Rio San Juan belongs to Nicaragua!”

Whereas the neoliberal governments of the previous sixteen years had been looking for foreign capital and agricultural-export markets, the Ortega administration appeared to be looking inward and getting great popular response. Tourism continued to expand considerably, and more people were accessing basic needs through various new

programs, including Zero Hunger and Houses for the People (Montoya 2013). Even the road to the village of San Miguelito on Lake Cocibolca was paved, and the residents had cell phone service and Internet access.

Upon arrival for my long-term doctoral fieldwork in 2014 I perceived a different, less hopeful sentiment regarding the Ortega administration. The CEBs generally identify as “militantly” Sandinista; most members are FSLN party members. They always qualify that statement, however, by saying that above all they value maintaining a “critical” relationship with the political party. A number of CEB participants began raising their voices in dissent against some of the administration’s actions and projects. These were the moments when I observed what I considered disjuncture in their well-cultivated, and regularly tended-to, common identity.

One weekly CEB meeting resulted in noticeable tension. The meeting was focused on the constitutional reforms that allowed Ortega to run for president indefinitely and the explicit right of the administration to decide which private corporations to contract with for an interoceanic canal, mining, and logging. My ethnographer ears perked up in fascination and curiosity when I heard murmurs of disagreement and a few people using the common Nicaraguan phrase, “What barbarity.” Abruptly, Eugenio couldn’t take it anymore and yelled out, “That is a dictator!” He had told me during my preliminary fieldwork, when Ortega was running for a third term,²² that if he ran again it would signify Ortega’s transformation into a dictator. I wondered why the 2011 run was not met with this feeling, since the constitution had limited a president to two terms.

²² His first term as president was 1985-1990, the second in 2006-2011, and the third in 2011-2016. He embarked on his fourth term in November 2016.

Eugenio explained at the time, as did others, that there simply was not a viable alternative. Another person attending the weekly meeting responded in defense of Eugenio, stating that they “should not be afraid to dissent, to speak out!” While most of the audience agreed that the constitutional reforms were undemocratic and not at all representative of the administration slogan being “Christian, Socialist, and in Solidarity,” they were not in agreement regarding how to react to these constitutional changes.

The audience, composed of CEB representatives and the host CEB community, was discussing how they should interpret and respond to such changes when Father Arnaldo stood and spoke. He reminded them of actions they had taken in the past. They got on the radio and wrote letters to the editor; another jumped in and reminded the audience how important their strategy of simply talking to their neighbors had been (see also Lancaster 1992), referring to the revolutionary process. The meeting did not end with any final decision about how to move forward or to respond.

In another instance I observed disagreement about the CEBs’ relationship with the FSLN while traveling to a CEB event in the back of the pickup with two young adults, Isaías and Julia. Julia made a comment disparaging Ortega and Isaías, with a pained looked and drawn-out “Nooooo,” protested her comment. She was provoked to respond in an angry voice, listing her grievances, including her failed efforts to work as a teacher without having to formally indicate her support for the Ortega administration. Isaías listened while shaking his head, looking as if she had hurt him personally. Julia shared with me later that she is frustrated that the CEBs are not sufficiently critical of the current administration. Her frustration has led her to participate less often in their events.

Later I observed this disjuncture again when the CEBs were planning—and then evaluating—the annual Christian Salute to the Revolution and the near-total lack of response to the proposed interoceanic canal (both topics examined in Chapter 6). If the CEBs so strongly emphasize action in their expression of faith, why could they not come to agreement about these enormous issues that could threaten their efforts toward building a more egalitarian society? Were the CEBs not as “critical” as they claim to be? Could their religious identity not overcome their political identity? To answer these questions, the next two chapters will examine CEB identity formation in more depth through their autobiographical narratives of transformation. These narratives will also provide a window into the different eras in which CEBs have operated.

Chapter 4: Autobiographical Narrative and the Production of the Kingdom of God on Earth

In relation to its emphasis on the poor and valuing the lived knowledge of those at the base of society, CEBs have utilized *testimonio*, or testimonial narrative, as a way for the participants to share their histories and develop a critical awareness of their impoverishment in the context of the overall political economic system (Beverley 1989; Yudice 1991). This method was used even before the official founding of CEBs after the Medellín Conference. It is a form of storytelling that attempts to give voice to marginalized and oppressed people, to raise awareness about them to an audience composed of all classes. The intention of *testimonio* is overtly political and meant to elicit support to promote social change. *Testimonio* emphasizes popular, oral discourse with the idea that each individual speaker's experience corresponds to a collective social experience and can act to mobilize people to take action against injustice (Yudice 1991).

Testimonio is controversial. Supporting or criticizing *testimonio* hinges on individual and collective politics (Beverley 2004). Some scholars have been concerned about how much *testimonio* is "true" (Beverley 2004; Stoll 1999). Furthermore, despite the fact that *testimonio* is understood as a representation of the powerless, its structure requires the involvement of more "powerful" others, such as the "compiler" of the narrative, and the audience, which has the power to help facilitate change. Although during my preliminary fieldwork, I did not observe that contemporary CEBs necessarily share *testimonios* exactly as they were used in the 1960s and 1970s, one still hears the term at important, well-attended events. Telling one's life story is still an important facet of identifying as a CEB participant. Participants frequently share how they came to

participate in CEBs in a way that calls the listener to action, and justifies action against wrongdoing. The listener, after hearing a few CEB life stories, begins to notice commonalities, such as references to aspects of Jesus' life or those of revolutionary heroes.

My research focused on the more ritualized autobiographical narrative CEB participants utilize to produce and sustain a particular progressive, Catholic, service-oriented subjectivity. Through her/his narrative, the speaker shares how she/he transformed into this "new woman" or "new man," thereby calling the listener(s) to do the same. My interest is not in the veracity of the narrative or in measuring how much telling the story might actually alter power relationships. Rather, I am interested in the way its use relates to a change in subjectivity, particularly into a person who can transform society. Furthermore, whereas in traditional Catholicism the pope is seen as the human conduit closest to God, the poor who tell these narratives become the primary source wherein one can have access to God. In the idea that narrative practice in liberation theology transforms the practitioner into a distinctly Catholic, empowered agent, I see the continued tradition of a Catholicism that is deeply involved in the "sacrament" of service.

CEBs value becoming *conscientizada*. The term, mentioned in Chapter 1, signifies becoming aware of the origins of poverty and how one fits into the structures of inequality, on the one hand, and the responsibility to act to transform society and individuals as new men and new women on the other. The process of becoming *conscientizada* is historically related to autobiographical narrative. Paulo Freire developed and advocated for *conscientização* (the Portuguese word) in Brazil in the 1950s and early

1960s. *Conscientização* was a pedagogical method to teach the poor to read and write, thereby empowering them to be agents of action in their own lives. This model also advocated incorporating words and images relevant to the lives of rural fishing/farming folk. Pastoral clergy, community organizers, and social workers began to employ Freire's *conscientização* to help the communities in which they worked. The Medellín Conference then promoted training sessions to organize CEBs and spread the Freirean methodology in Latin America (Berryman 1987). Autobiographical narrative performances can be used to bring listeners into a new consciousness that will facilitate their drive to promote social change, and in the CEBs' case, cultivate a more just nation.

Although the circumstances in which they tell their life stories may not always fit the typical notion of ritual performance, the repetition and commonalities of CEB life stories led me to use the term "ritual." Sneft and Basso (2009:18) observe that models of communication vary in the degree to which characteristics are present, and in this way the degree to which different types of utterances are "ritualized" can be represented as a cline. The idea of a cline of ritualization poses the question whether all speech might be ritualized in some degree, which sounds like what Silverstein (2001:606-607) inferred in his comments on "Ritual Communication and Linguistic Ideology" by Joel Robbins. Suzanne Oakdale also argues that narratives are variously ritualized depending on the event in which they are enunciated, in her ethnography of autobiographical narratives told by Kayabi leaders in Brazil (2005:5).

Oakdale's *I Foresee My Life* (2005) looks at how Kayabi leaders' autobiographical narratives provide models for how to live as well as a means for developing a sense of identification between narrators, types of audience members, and

personages of the past in moments of sickness and death. The Kayabi leaders' narratives, like those of the CEBs, work to facilitate change at the level of individual subjectivity. Oakdale's ethnography also illustrates how autobiographical genres can blur the lines of present speaker, historical or mythic figures, and interlocutors in a way that is relevant to my discussion of the CEB narratives.

Summerson Carr has also looked at similar moments in which there is an active attempt to change subjectivity (and agency). Carr's *Flipping the Script* (2011) examines how people in self-help situations in a US Midwestern city strategically shape their subjectivity in a way that helps them to attain desired results, such as visits with their children or finding a place to live. Self-help therapists also work to transform their patients from "sick" to "healthy" through the production of a "language of inner reference" (2011).

Webb Keane's *Christian Moderns* (2007) examines Calvinist missionaries and their potential converts in the Dutch East Indies to illustrate how ideas about "words and things," or *semiotic ideologies*, facilitate the understanding of agency and subjectivity. Keane elaborates the concept of language ideologies to include how meanings of words as well as people's beliefs about language and material things are culturally specific. Language ideologies focus specifically on ideas people have about language use. Keane suggests that the Sumbanese converts understood words and concepts such as agency and modernity differently than the missionaries understood them, *and* differently than the missionaries expected the Sumbanese to understand them. In resonant fashion, I found that linguistic ideologies among CEB participants hold that autobiographical narratives help produce a particularly conscious kind of CEB subjectivity.

In light of semiotic and linguistic ideologies, Berryman (1987) cites parts of the Gospels that the CEBs utilize to justify the practice of liberation theology as well as to distinguish their ideas from the Catholicism mandated from Rome. For example, Jesus denounced ritualized religion as hypocritical when one neglects “justice and mercy and good faith” (1987:55). The “institution of religion—churches or cathedrals; vestments, incense, or sacraments; laws, rules or customs; religious orders, dioceses, or the Vatican—all are means, not ends” (1987:55) to practicing faith. Practitioners of liberation theology see traditional Catholic rituals as secondary characteristics rooted in the institutionalization of the church. Their ideals lead them to stake a distance from the centralized institutional features they see as complicit with power structures that have done violence to the poor,²³ yet my ethnographic observation is that they have their own, somewhat centralized structure. Their goal is to progress beyond the conventional power structures by means of a total transformation of society. Berryman further cites Paul in Colossians calling those who come to follow Jesus’ “new men,” who put aside their old selves in favor of being formed anew in Christ. Berryman also observes that some may also think of Che Guevara and other Marxists’ use of the term “new man”: the revolutionary individuals they theorized would result from the creation of a new socialist society (1987:59). But Berryman does not further explore the dual use of this term.

While Marxism’s resonance in liberation theology has received a lot of attention and criticism, Marxist analysis is most often utilized as a method to look at the structures

²³ Borutta (2012:198-199) shows that confession was a common target of attacks by nineteenth-century anticlericals, who were often liberal Catholics. Confession, they argued, violated the private sphere, especially between husband and wife, as well as the autonomy of the subject.

of oppression that liberation theology then interprets as sinful. Both liberation theology and Marxism place an emphasis on the poor, locate inequality and oppression in capitalist social structures, and engage in praxis, or action, that requires critical self-reflection (Hinkelammert 1986, 2003; Petrella 2008). They arguably both see history as progressive and anticipate a “better” future. Levine (1990b) wryly observed that Marxism is not as central to liberation theology as its critics assert or supporters wish. Most practitioners are not versed in Marx per se, but are conscious that their subjectivity as poor people is a result of the current political-economic structure that is capitalism.

Keane’s (2007) ethnography supports the idea that these new forms of subjectivity are connected to ideas about historical consciousness. Like Calvinist missionaries, CEB participants see their new subjectivity as more progressive in that it helps transition them into the next historical stage. Modernity, Keane acutely observes, is slippery to define, yet is pervasive as an idea in the historical imagination for people around the world. In different contexts, people conceptualize modernity as having a kind of moral thrust, or a belief that history is progressing toward human liberation.²⁴ Keane is very careful about appearing too assertive, so he infers that concepts of modernity relate primarily to the Protestant Reformation and Christianity.

In my analysis I utilize Keane’s assertion that the way one comprehends the concept of modernity “is crucial to people’s historical self-understanding” (2007:48). Keane’s work helps examine the process by which the CEB participants tell their life stories in order to construct their religious activist subjectivity by pointing to ideas about

²⁴ In contrast, Islamic communities/nations resist or redefine the use of “modern,” especially in subjectivities, because for them it denotes Western ideologies (Deeb 2006)

history that underlie these processes. CEB participants are working to create an alternative modernity by conflating their path with that of other transformative historical and religious figures. Keane focuses on a “religious frontier” as an ethnographically rich place that illuminates a clash of two contrasting semiotic ideologies (2007:24). CEBs also appear to occupy a kind of borderland between religious and civil practices; these “frontiers” may become most visible through the CEBs’ use of autobiographical narrative. The ethnographies by Oakdale, Carr, and Keane all examine how ritualized autobiographical narratives can be used to bring about a change in subjectivity. Here again the CEB’s religious practice itself leads to civic engagement in that they see themselves as people who can bring about an egalitarian society, or in their words, the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Bauman (1986), Bakhtin (1986), Goffman (1983), and Tambiah (1985) have shown that narrative is formed by social constraints but also shapes social relationships in the context of its performance. Bakhtin (1986) holds that our words are never entirely our own; they are dialogic, echoing what others have said or written before us when we communicate. Goffman’s (1983) “footing” is also useful to enhance our understanding of the dual roles of the CEBs’ style of autobiographical narrative as both presenting an individual life history and *representing* or reinforcing the broader CEB subjectivity. Footing provides a framework to isolate who is speaking, where the message is coming from, and who is listening. A sender can have different roles: author, principal, and animator; depending on whether the sender created the message themselves, is reciting something, or speaking for someone else. Footing can help illuminate why and how larger cultural and institutional structures influence who is permitted to speak, for whom

one speaks, and who is heard. Communication is seldom as simple as Goffman's particular framework, but the model is helpful when analyzing CEB narratives that may have multiple senders and audiences.

Attending to frameworks for communication can help show how autobiographical narratives facilitate changes in subjectivity. They may help direct the focus of the analysis to the way the speaker identifies with historical and religious people, such as Jesus or Sandino, or with a collective subjectivity, such as "the poor." CEB participants tell their stories in a way that informs their audience about the Nicaraguan revolution, as well as naming the catalysts for their current activism. The revolutionary history of Sandino becomes intertwined with talk of Jesus and Paul of the Gospels; traditional Catholic saints are seldom referred to, present, or utilized.²⁵ CEB participants also appear to link their own experiences under the Somoza dictatorship and their involvement in the revolution with Jesus and Sandino. There is a famous revolutionary song by Carlos Mejia Godoy that all Nicaraguans know about Jesus being born in Palacaguina, Nicaragua, and leaving carpentry to become a revolutionary. The CEB participants shape/present their life stories embedded in the life stories of significant religious and political figures, reminiscent of Oakdale's observation of Kayabi leaders' autobiographical narratives (2005).

The way the CEB speakers appear to sometimes merge their life stories with that of a biblical or historic/mythic figure is relevant to other ethnographies that attend to the use of the pronoun "I" (Graham 1995; Oakdale 2005, 2009; Urban 1989). Influenced by

²⁵ With the exception of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Others, like Ana and Simon, are considered prophets. Orlando once commented to me that some of the older CEB members still carry traditional Catholic practices such as praying to saints.

past scholarship on pronoun frameworks, Urban suggests that “I” has different uses in discourse; for example, the speaker can assume the identity of others, and the “I” can be understood to actually reference “he, she, it, and they” (1989; see also Rodriguez 1996 on Nicaraguan revolutionary use of “I” to mean “we,” but only a masculine “we”). Influenced by Urban, both Graham (1995) and Oakdale (2009) elaborate the complex uses of the pronoun “I” among the Xavante and Kayabi, respectively. Graham’s ethnography shows how old men use “I” to become mythic individuals and help lead them into a trance (1995), and Oakdale shows how Kayabi use of “I” helps link the events being narrated to the actual event (2005, 2009). In these ways the use of the pronoun “I” can facilitate a new subjectivity.

CEB subjectivity in Nicaragua, then, is progressive Catholic, activist, and nationalist. CEB participants’ life stories are embedded in the lives of historical, political, and religious figures that help direct their current activism. The autobiography-subjectivity focus illuminates the particular form of liberation theology in contemporary Nicaragua. It intertwines history and religion in a way that brings local revolutionary experiences together with that of Jesus’ life. The literature on ritualized autobiographical narratives helps to understand not only CEB subjectivity, but also how participants have managed to maintain unity throughout political-economic transformations.

Carr observes, “I understood that my charge as an ethnographer was to account for the complexities of speech events, however much I myself was implicated or involved in them” (2011:21). I was aware that the CEB participants anticipated what they thought I wanted to hear and what they wanted me to know, and told their story in the practiced format of the CEBs. I recognize that I, too, was involved in the speech events.

The speech event reproduced in this chapter is not obviously autobiographical. The couple, Luciano and Jenny, tell the story using “we” more than “I” and talk more about collective action than their personal story. In this way, their narrative ties testimonio literature to that of Graham (1995), Oakdale (2005), and Urban (1989). Jenny and Luciano tell of a Catholic community transforming together through religious practice to promote a new consciousness. Their story is told jointly, and they confer with and interrupt one another. The speech event is a model for the sort of collective action they speak about and continue to work toward.

Cultivating an Egalitarian Society/ Kingdom of God on Earth

Samara, a CEB coordinator I interviewed from the northern mountains, shared:

The richest part of being a member of the CEB is that I have come to know the image of God in another way. A God of love, God father and mother—not just father—full of love and compassion. We have learned, too, to understand the mission of Jesus in another way, the construction of the Reign of God. Before, we understood poverty as a punishment from God.

Reminiscent of Keane’s observation that the missionaries and the converts had different conceptualizations of modernity, CEBs claim to be working to build a Kingdom of God on Earth. This idea is an alternative modernity in which all people have their basic needs met and live in egalitarian, community-centered societies. Their mission, as articulated in their 2008 strengthening workshop, states:

We CEBs in Managua were born in 1966, following Jesus and inspired in the mystic of the First Communities and encouraged through the Testimony of the Martyrs, we are a Missionary Church, Prophetic, Evangelized and Evangelizing in the service of the People with a Fundamental Option for the Cause of the Poor and Excluded, we are networked and actively participate in liberatory processes

for the construction of the Kingdom of God (CNP Strengthening Sessions 2008:18).²⁶

In this same document, and exemplifying the value they place on words and things (recalling Keane 2007), a section titled “Concepts most utilized in the Communities” lists 44 words or phrases, including “Kingdom of God,” for which they provide the following definition:

It is a project of Father-Mother God in that we are invited to live as children of God; among one another as brothers and sisters and respectfully responsible of creation. A just, fraternal society in solidarity. The Kingdom has a transformative and operative sense as like Jesus’ passion for the radical transformation of our society following the goodwill of the father. It is a project of God that Jesus announces and that calls us to live in justice, love, and equality (CNP Memoria de las Sesiones de Fortalecimiento 2008:36).

CEB participants, like Carr’s treatment seekers, are “ethnographers of language in their own right” (2011:19).

Gutierrez (1971) elaborates on their approach to history and time in his effort to explain that the mission of liberation theology is not to wait until the afterlife to live in the Kingdom of God, but to participate in the process of building it on Earth. He cites the Gospels, in which Jesus confronts the domination of the Jewish people (e.g., by the Roman Empire and Herod’s collaboration with them, the publicans, the Sadducees’ fidelity to law, and the Pharisees’ hierarchical structure), and Jesus’ overall call for a “new creation” that ends domination of one group over another (1971:130-135). The CEBs in Nicaragua have maintained this fundamental mission as laid out by Gutierrez in

²⁶ My translation, “Las CEB en Managua nacimos en 1966, siguiendo a Jesús e inspiradas en la Mística de las Primeras Comunidades y animadas por el Testimonio de los Mártires, somos Iglesia Misionera, Profética, Evangelizada y Evangelizadora al servicio del Pueblo con una Opción Fundamental por la Causa de los Pobres y Excluidos, participamos activa y articuladamente en los procesos de liberación para la construcción del Reino de Dios” (CNP Memoria de las Sesiones de Fortalecimiento 2008).

the words they use, the transformation narratives, and social justice actions. The idea of not waiting until after death for the Kingdom of God is also a reaction against the message historically sent to the poor by the church hierarchy to acquiesce to suffering in life so they will be first in Heaven,²⁷ a message that the Second Vatican Council attempted to rectify by asserting the “preferential option for the poor.”

The Christian Base Communities’ faith-based goal of building the Kingdom of God on Earth, in political-economic terms, sounds like they are working to bring about an alternative, egalitarian society. The way CEBs go about building the Kingdom of God appears, in part, to enact *profetismo*, discussed in the previous chapter, through social justice activism and consciousness-raising. This distinguishes them from other Christian groups, especially the growing population of evangelical denominations who emphasize a more individual-centered relationship with God and locate activism in the political realm, not the religious (recalling Greeley’s argument that what differentiates Catholic imagination is their sense of God’s immanence as opposed to the Protestant sense of God’s transcendence). Father Mulligan wrote

Our Church community with its “preferential option for the poor” is (1) of the poor and (2) for the poor in the sense that it is not exclusive but preferential, that includes the service to the poor (for example, the Olla de la Soya) and the *conscientization*²⁸ with respect to human Rights and the need for a more just society as the basis for peace and as a sign of the Reign of God.²⁹

²⁷ Likely an interpretation from the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-10): “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

²⁸ Consciousness-raising; see also Chapter 4.

²⁹ “Nuestra comunidad como Iglesia con su “opción preferencial por los(as) pobres” es (1) de los(as) pobres y (2) por los(as) pobres en un sentido no exclusivo sino preferencial que incluye el servicio a los(as) pobres (por ejemplo, la Olla de la Soya) y la concientización con respecto a los derechos humanos y a la necesidad de una sociedad más justa como base de la paz y como signo del Reino de Dios” (Mulligan 2010).

In this sense, working for a more just society is in itself signaling the presence of the Kingdom of God, as perceived by the CEBs. Additionally, the “base” in their name refers to the socioeconomic class that comprise the CEBs and that want, indeed need, transformation. When CEB participants spoke of the Kingdom of God (often), I could hear the confluence of their ideas about the prophetic, history, and new women and new men. I observed that the CEBs are still wedded to ideas about progress, but it is a progress alternative to that of the dominant elite who thrive on “the way things are.”

During my ethnographic fieldwork I documented many conversations on constructing the reign or the Kingdom of God. Sister Margarita communicated to the representatives planning the annual assembly that Pope Francis had just asserted that they must be creative and invent new ways to attract new people into the Kingdom, which sounded to me more mission-oriented than social justice. CEBs seek alliances with other groups whose end goal is also a more just society, in spite of the differences in how the other groups might justify or verbalize their ultimate goal. They are comparable, in this regard, to groups who act in spite of pressure to compromise, such as the autonomous thinkers in Italy that David Graeber (2004) mentions or the Argentinian factory workers’ take, or *toma*, of industrial factories presented in Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis’ documentary, *La Toma* (2004).

CEB participants are still among the impoverished majority they seek to serve. In addition to their distinct Christian discourse, they employ language rooted in global human rights and social justice, and they find meaning in globalization critiques, such as anticonsumerist and environmentalist stances. They suffer from common societal ills such as alcoholism, poverty-related desperation, and insecurity, and the trauma of war is

still evident. CEBs are few in number, and although they have impressive female leadership, I did not observe full gender equality enacted in all of the homes (although I would argue it is improved as a result of CEB participation, and some reach impressive levels of gender-equality). CEB participants are their own greatest critics, and I frequently heard women call one another out for not speaking up. Notably, for example, Rosalba said that the women from the CEB in the last remaining revolutionary cooperative community in the mountains did not speak during the national assembly. Although they work toward something better, and have been accused of being utopian, they clearly have the same challenges as others in similar contexts.

Whether the CEBs will ever achieve their goal of transformation is irrelevant; As Levine argued, “it is a mistake to confuse liberation theology with liberation itself” (1995:106). CEBs are always in process; in their words, they are a “church in movement,” and should be seen as working toward transformation. Father Arnaldo writes of the “impassioned love and unbreakable hope” of the CEBs that sustains them over changing structural contexts (Zenteno 2000). Basing their ideas in their religious faith appears to provide them with the endurance to continue the process over the course of changing and unfavorable political-economic contexts. They constantly speak of needing to be a “committed Christian,” embedding morality within their social justice work. Furthermore, I observed that their practice does cultivate a higher level of consciousness about structures of inequality, one that participants would likely not get elsewhere; I argue that the CEBs’ understanding of the structural roots of inequality is somewhat liberating in itself (although in no way at the level of actually becoming free of poverty). I also saw a loyal steadfastness in CEB identity, including in people who could not

frequently participate because of work or other constraints— unlike what is written of other Christian groups, there are no “deconversions.”

The previous sections focused on autobiographical narrative literature and CEB ideas about cultivating a Kingdom of God on Earth; the following section documents a specific narrative I collected during my fieldwork in which two CEB founding members talk about their transformations as a result of their particular religious practice. I made minor edits for the sake of readability, and I footnote speaker references where appropriate; all translations are my own.

Becoming an Empowered Shaper of Church and Society

The following autobiographical narrative was a public talk given by Jenny and Luciano. I did not change their names, nor the places and names they recount, because their story is already well documented and they were sharing in public. The talk took place at Casa Ben Linder, a gathering place named after a young engineer from the United States who was killed in a Contra ambush in 1987 while helping build a hydroelectric plant in support of the revolutionary efforts. Casa Ben Linder has hosted talks every Thursday morning since 1988. On this day, the approximately forty-person audience was composed of both host-country nationals interested in social justice issues and a smaller group of students from a Jesuit university in the United States. The professor leading their Nicaragua visit interpreted Jenny and Luciano’s story for these English-only speakers. It is not unusual for foreigners to attend the Thursday talks because of Nicaragua’s history; many *internacionalistas* had come to support the revolutionary cause in the 1980s. Another foreign attendee at this talk, for example, had volunteered in Nicaragua as a nurse in the 1980s and had returned to visit. The

significance of Jenny and Luciano speaking in a space that draws both foreigners and Nicaraguans lies, I think, in the persistent global romanticism about the Revolution. What they describe is a kind of Catholic society that transcends national borders but that is embedded specifically in Nicaragua's social, political, and economic processes.

We sat in plastic chairs in a half-circle on the backyard patio, under a zinc roof that magnified the thuds of mangoes dropping from the huge tree above. CEB founders Jenny and Luciano sat facing us, Luciano with his guitar as always. Roosters, trucks bouncing down the jagged street outside, and songs from people on the sidewalk marketing their wares interrupted their story.

To begin, Luciano introduced Christian Base Communities as very joyful, optimistic, and with great faith and hope. As is his practice, he explained to the audience that before beginning their story he would start with a song, one familiar to me from hanging out with the CEBs, "With Joy I Serve the Lord." The first mango thudded loudly on the roof and he reassured the audience, "Don't worry, they fall often, don't be afraid." As he and Jenny sang, some audience members who knew the song, including me, joined in, and Jenny gestured to everyone to clap along. Jenny shared after the song that she was reminded of a priest who used to drive through the neighborhood with a loudspeaker, inviting everyone to the church with his song. Luciano added that we could sing that one later, and that they would begin with their story, summarizing some things so as to not take too long. Jenny interrupted him when he was about to start and explained to the audience that while he is very to the point, women are more detail-oriented, so she would start.

Hands folded in her lap, sitting very properly but comfortably in her plastic chair, Jenny began, speaking slowly. “We arrived in Nicarao, there wasn’t a church, there wasn’t a priest. My brother went to look for a priest to celebrate mass and it took place in a storeroom. Early 1960s, . . . about,” she looked at Luciano, “Sixty-one, sixty-two? One of our neighbors worked in the Catholic school, the Sisters of Assumption. She met a Maryknoll, Estela, she was a catechist in that school. We met Father José de la Jara, a Spaniard, and seeing the need for a priest he decided to come.” She paused for the interpreter.

“The priest came, met the people of the barrio, and celebrated mass, and he began to visit married couples, gave talks on the Bible, and this is how it began with the community. He sang, played the guitar, told jokes, he was very funny.” The audience reacted, smiling, and she continued.

Mother Estela invited him, or gave him the idea of going, to Panama because she knew of a movement there called Families of God. And this priest chose two of the married couples in the barrio: Francisco and his wife Cecilia were one couple and the other couple was us. And we went to Panama and became familiar with the movement Families of God. For us it was something new; we hadn’t been in church communities like that. We participated in an “encounter,” what we would call a retreat, but they called it an encounter. We liked it a lot and we committed ourselves to bringing this movement to Nicaragua. And we worked here, first inviting more brothers and sisters to participate. We had two encounters, one per year, and we invited two couples from Panama to come. The first one was given by the two couples and by Father Leo Mahon,³⁰ the founder of the movement, from the Maryknoll order. Then, we began forming communities with Father Jose and Mother Estela with the team. We were giving talks, and the community and the parish was formed from four communities, Ducuali, San Rafael, 14

³⁰ Leo Mahon, from the Archdiocese of Chicago, set up the mission Families of God in San Miguelito, Panama, in response to Pope John XXIII’s call for priests to go to Latin America; he later hoped to influence Chicago seminarians toward a laity-led church. For the Chicago connection, see Peter R. D’Agostino’s “Catholic Planning for a Multicultural Metropolis, 1982-1996” (2000:282); also Todd Hartch (2012) and Mahon and Davis’s *Fire Under my Feet: A Memoir of God’s Power in Panama* (2007).

Septiembre, Reparto Schick. It was so big that we got two representatives from each of the other communities to form the parish council. We were the ones responsible for the pastoral work of the parish. Father Jose said he was only the spiritual counselor and that we had to do the work. So we were forming communities in various parishes, places, . . . people came to see us, and our mass was inspired by the Panamanian mass. The Nicaraguan popular mass was inspired in this way and written by Father Jose de la Jara, and interpreted by a community of friends, including Luciano.

Luciano added, “The priest José de la Jara was a very progressive priest, and upon receiving the opportunity that we had in Panama, he decided to put it into practice in our barrios, forming communities that at first were called Families of God. He was inspired by Vatican II.”

“And the documents at Medellín,” Jenny interjected. Luciano nodded and continued.

They opened up the mass a little bit. The priest no longer had his back to the people, but faced them, and songs were specific to each country, it wasn't in Latin like before. And the documents of Medellín, we studied them and then we moved from being Families of God to Christian Base Communities. The start of the communities were married pairs, and the idea was to receive and learn how to live together as families. The Medellín documents, the teaching of the Gospel was a bit different, it was to put into practice the Gospels in the community. We began to live in CEBs; these communities had already been formed in places in Brazil and Mexico. In Brazil there's a bishop named Dom Pedro Casaldáligas—”Who is still alive,” Jenny interjected—“And in Mexico there was the bishop Méndez Arceo in Cuernavaca, who has passed away, and all of them supported the Christian Base Communities in Central America.

So in summary, the turn we made was instead of spending a long time in church praying and singing and receiving workshops, we began to put things to more practical use in the community. The first stage was how to live spiritually, and then how to make a Christian commitment, a commitment to put the Gospel into practice. The third stage was action. Putting into action the liberating movements in favor of people, the poor people. For example, if they raised the prices of milk or public transportation, you had to protest. As a community we would go and protest that this would not be done.

And at the time there was a dictatorial regime in the government, the Somoza regime. They could not conceive of liberating movements, it was only what the government dictated. Any movement that was against their ideas was repressed. When we had a Stations of the Cross that went through [barrio] Reparto Schick and went through the different barrios—we did a different style

that reproached the government—we were pursued by the National Guard. Their jeeps would go behind us and listen to what we said at each Station. And so they began to follow us.

The movement was growing and becoming more conscious of the needs of the people. At this time the Frente Sandinista, the FSLN guerrillas, were in the mountains carrying out their guerrilla war. So they said we were Sandino communists. At that time the word “communist” was taboo. The Sandinistas were fighting in the mountains. Upon being accused of this the young people’s consciousness was raised further, moving to the point of revolution. They joined the revolution in the cities and the National Guard would follow them, and some went to the mountains. There were women religious that also supported us; Father José’s friends had their consciousness raised and came to support us. There was a priest in Rivas, Gaspar García Laviana,³¹ he entered into it and they killed him. There were people who weren’t priests but who also identified with this movement who joined the Revolution. There was a married couple killed in the mountains in the North, I can’t remember their name

Jenny remembered: “Mery and Felipe Barrreda.”³²

“Yeah Mery and Felipe were killed because they were so much into the process,”

Luciano remembered. And considering his audience, he added, “And there were people like Benjamin Linder who was ambushed, various other *internacionalistas* who were here supporting the process.”

So when the revolution triumphed and there were thousands of deaths in the barrios, Christian Base Communities saw we needed to join the process of recovering our country that had been totally sacked, no production. Also as communities we had to be involved in the cotton and coffee harvests. In all the tasks we were there, so they called us Sandinistas. So the church hierarchy was not sympathetic and did not understand, even today. So they don’t deny us, the communities, everything in the parishes, but they are not sympathetic and they do not understand. They considered us Sandinistas, so we always support what we saw as progress in the revolution, anything that was for the good of the people, the good of the workers, for the good of the children, the literacy campaign that was on a massive scale after the revolution and reduced illiteracy to a minimum.

³¹ See Randall 1983:26-29 for the full text of Laviana’s letter to the people of Nicaragua about joining the guerrillas

³² The story of Mery and Felipe Barrreda is well documented; they are considered martyrs of the Revolution.

Jenny whispered something to Luciano and he looked up and shared with us, “My wife told me I missed this: our parish St. Paul the Apostle that was founded by Father José de la Jara was huge because it had all the eastern barrios. Later Father José left.”

Jenny added, “The different stages in ‘68 and ‘69 there were two young priests.”

“Was there two or three?” Luciano asked.

“Felix Jimenez and Mariano Velasquez. These younger priests did not agree with the Families of God program; they were more interested in consciousness-raising. Father Jose said we had to be open to all the new currents.”

“Okay. I summarized this a little bit because there’s a lot of details.” Jenny and Luciano began discussing between themselves about what to add and when to end; Luciano wanted to move to questions, and Jenny was not ready.

“Luciano told you what happened during the revolution. When the triumph happened, the community was dispersed a bit because of the work they had to do and their political commitments. So we were concerned to get all the CEBs in the different barrios to come together, there were a lot of them. I think it was in ‘82 that Father Arnaldo Zenteno came from Mexico; he came to visit, he liked it a lot, fell in love with the communities.” Jenny and Luciano began discussing between themselves, perhaps trying to remember, or maybe deciding what parts of the many details to share. “At that time Father Arnaldo didn’t stay yet, but there was a meeting between the priest Rafael Aragon and, from the Valdivieso Center, Father Uriel Molina—”

“And Mendoza,” Luciano interjected.

“No that was later. So there was a meeting, Sister Margarita Zavala from the Sisters of Assumption,” Jenny quietly corrected him, recalling clearly the order of events.

“So we became an organizing, animating team (*animadoras*), well that was when Father Arnaldo came, but we were all ready to have an articulation between the communities.”

In ‘83 Father Arnaldo came back and he was asked to come support us. He was concerned that we not be just in Managua but on the national level. We began to meet with people from different areas in the 1st region, 2nd region, 3rd region is us, the 4th is Masaya and Granada, and the 5th region which entered first but isn’t part of it anymore. This was called at first the Permanent National Committee. Now it’s called the National Committee for the Poor.³³ So that is long to explain all that but I want you to know that it’s not just on the Managua level, we are organized on the national level as well.

An audience member, a young nun, asked whether there was repression, and Luciano replied carefully—painfully, I thought.

The communities have been seen badly by the hierarchy. When Obando was cardinal he sent a priest to our communities with the mission to get rid of the communities because we were “Sandinistas,” “communists,” we “interpreted the Gospel the way we wanted to.” Now that priest is the bishop of Granada, Solorzano. We did not get along with him. He told a lot of lies about us and we survived in spite of this. As time went by, the cardinal is now with Daniel Ortega, and he was named the head of the Reconciliation Commission and is now cardinal emeritus. And the one there is today, Leopoldo Brenes, he is a little bit, a tiny bit better, he has given some permission to priests in the parish that are not as conservative, to allow us to function as we do at St Paul the Apostle; that we can bring a Jesuit friend, for example, that’s a friend of ours to celebrate mass or weddings when the parish priest won’t do it.

But in the [bishops] meetings at Aparecida in Brazil, they talked about the importance of the Christian Base Communities and recognized their place in Latin America. It’s a little bit better, but Brenes sees the catechumenist and charismatic movement better than us. And now with Pope Francis he will have to yield a bit more, to the point that now we are trying to write a letter to Pope Francis from the communities. Not confronting him, but asking that he recognize us as a part of the Catholic Church and that we need support on the part of the cardinals and bishops. There’s a story I’ll tell you to summarize: We created the Nicaraguan Popular Mass in the parishes and the words are from Father José, and we put it to Nicaraguan music. At that time the guitar was an instrument prohibited by the bishops from being played in the masses. But when they approved the mass with three different guitarists, this opened up the mass, revolutionized the music we can sing. Now in all the churches they play the guitar. So that’s how we are today.

³³ The current term CNP, Christian Nicaraguans for the Poor (*Cristianos Nicaraguenses para los Pobres*).

Jenny and Luciano fielded questions at the end, and Luciano concluded their talk by playing more songs on the guitar for the audience.

Conclusion

I first met Jenny and Luciano during my preliminary fieldwork when they invited me to their home for lunch in 2011. I spent that morning with Luciano, visiting two of the CEBs' Ollas de Soya in the eastern barrios where he continues to serve as a coordinator of these cafeterias for pregnant women and undernourished children.³⁴ At lunch we took a short bus ride to his home in the barrio of Nicarao, also the location of the parish St. Paul the Apostle, the founding CEB and the only CEB parish church in Nicaragua (see also Williams 1989). Luciano and Jenny are well practiced at retelling their founder story, and it was at this lunch that I first heard them tell it. The second time was during a casual visit with Luciano and two other CEB members, at yet a different Olla de Soya. After lunch Luciano played and sang for me the music of Carlos and Luis Enrique Mejia Godoy, nationally beloved Nicaraguan musicians who put the revolution to song, and with whom Luciano helped write the *Misa Campesina Nicaragüense*.³⁵

Jenny and Luciano's process of practicing their faith in a different way began at the time of the second Vatican Council and continued during the subsequent Medellín Bishops Conference, and their community further changed in response to these globally significant meetings. The strategies and methods proposed by those at Medellín were

³⁴ There are 6-8 Ollas at recent count in and around Managua, but the number varies depending on funds (see Canin 2000).

³⁵ Songs were written for the popular Catholic mass in the style of local Nicaraguan folk music following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council 1962-1965 (the song mentioned in the narrative, "Jesus was born in Palacagüina," is also referenced in Chapter 5).

inspired and overlapped with what small groups such as Families of God were already doing. The transition of the Families of God into CEBs, as they tell it, occurred along with the global reforms in the Second Vatican Council, the continental Medellin Conference, and the nascent revolutionary movement within Nicaragua. Williams (1989:43-46) elaborates on the growth of CEBs in Managua, detailing and paralleling the founders' narrative. The emphasis on action that Jenny and Luciano recount was a dangerous decision during the dictatorship, and it continues to be a fundamental aspect of CEB identity and faith practice.

The next chapter will examine elicited life histories of transformation as a result of participation in Christian Base Communities.

Chapter 5: Subject Transformation Narratives: Cultivating Shapers of Church and Society

Jenny and Luciano's story, related in the previous chapter, puts a face on the history of the CEBs and liberation theology in Nicaragua described in the previous chapters. Through a particular religious practice, they came to identify themselves as people capable of changing both Catholic liturgy and the entire society in Nicaragua. Action is where the border between religious and civic practice is located for CEB members. Luciano said they made a "turn" to actions in favor of the poor such as protesting the price of milk. The speakers whose life stories I collected, like Jenny and Luciano, shared with me how they also personally changed, or transformed, as they began practicing liberation theology. In this chapter, I draw out some of the catalysts that led to transformations of the speakers' subjectivities and the development of their particular Catholic identities. I documented autobiographical narratives of CEB members, as practitioners of liberation theology, to show how they tell the story of their religious development, and how they became social justice actors who justify their service activities with particular interpretations of the Bible and Nicaraguan history. The individuals began participating during different decades, yet I found significant continuity in CEB identity through the different political-economic contexts.

In this chapter, I document autobiographical narratives that I elicited during my fieldwork. CEB members talk about their transformations as a result of their particular religious practice. I will elaborate on the context in which I recorded each of the narratives because in some cases I was asking the CEB participant about other topics but they responded with a transformation story. I organized the narratives into themes that

best illustrate the subject transformations that result in CEB participants becoming empowered to shape their church and society in the contemporary context.

Initial CEB Involvement

Many of my research participants included references to Bible passages to enrich their story and drew parallels to their own life experiences. Sometimes the passages were used as metaphors to describe the speaker's transformation; other times the speaker compared an event in the Bible to one they experienced as Nicaraguans, or to reference a guide, or "prophet," who provided an example for how to live.

Layza began her narrative by describing how she first became a catechist and Delegate of the Word³⁶ through training led by a Canadian missionary priest. Before his arrival, there was no regular priest in her community. I had arranged to meet Layza at the Casa Pastoral, where she works through the CNP as a facilitator for rural CEBs. We were sitting down at a communal table near her desk one morning when I asked her to tell me about how she became involved in the CEBs.

It was a political formation because we were living a revolutionary process, but very clandestine. I had already lived many of the actions, right, but obviously in the country we were without electricity and very little information arrived to us. So there wasn't much in the way of modes of communication. Sometimes we had a radio; if it had batteries, it could last a week for us to listen to some media. We did not have information, we were sincerely so illiterate in the sense of . . . I studied grade school and high school and I knew how to read and write, but illiterate in the sense of being critically conscious of the situation we were living. We had no consciousness. So there we read Exodus, we talked about Exodus during our training, how the people of Israel organized to escape slavery. Lights went off in us, enabling us to think about what was, let's say, "fermenting" the guerrilla struggle that was hobbling along, but us with very little information.

³⁶ A lay person prepared to facilitate bible studies, preach, prepare for Eucharist or Confirmation, and otherwise work pastorally to with Catholic communities, usually in places where there was no priest. Many Delegates of the Word became CEB coordinators after Medellin.

It was in this way we got involved in the process of the revolution, to participate in the struggle!

In the liberation, of '77 through '79, two years, I was involved in sending messages. I carried information from one place to another even though I was a young girl, very, very humble, very poor. Nevertheless, despite my simplicity I was capable of carrying information to other groups, guerrillas far from our families.

Berryman (1987) notes that Exodus is a common reference for practitioners of liberation theology because it tells the story of God helping the people of Israel escape slavery, through Moses. Layza says she found commonalities with the people of Israel, and it led her to become involved with the Sandinistas to get “free” of the dictator. Nicaraguan CEBs apply the Exodus story to describe their lives under the dictatorship and, then through the revolution, how they gained freedom from that oppression, thus transforming themselves and the entire country. They also refer to Exodus when recalling how Sandino led a group of poorly armed men to successfully fight off the US marines *and* as analogous and interchangeable with Sandino’s efforts overall. They commonly refer to the United States as “the empire” and the “foreign invader” of Nicaragua when recounting Sandino’s era, the Somoza dictatorship’s support of the United States, and US support for and instigation of the Contra War in the 1980s. They compare the US Empire with the reign of pharaohs in the time of Moses and of the kings during Jesus’ time. Layza’s story supports observations by Dodson and O’Shaughnessy (1990), Gould (1990), and Walker (1997), and my own in Chapter 2, that the Bible can be a transformative document and indeed was, in the case of many participants in the Nicaraguan revolution of 1979. People like Layza were empowered to see themselves as actors who could bring about change.

A number of narrators shared how, through religious practice, they came to participate in “acts of resistance.” Luciano and Jenny’s story described how they had come to realize that a Christian commitment meant action on behalf of those who needed help. They began protesting the rise in milk prices and bus fares, and later, a number of them joined the guerrillas in the mountains to overthrow the dictatorship. Layza also shared how reflecting on Exodus led her to work clandestinely as a courier for the Sandinistas. These are essentially service activities; they are examples that illustrate how CEBS are promoting a more political sacrament of service.

These activities in service to the poor were not limited to the era of the dictatorship or the revolutionary 1980s. Orlando’s autobiographical narrative consisted of very fond memories of his youth group in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a very “effervescent time for youth groups,” he observed. I had arranged to meet Orlando at his workplace after he got off work; the following speech event happened early in the interview on the same day as the one I included of his in Chapter 3. We sat outside on a covered patio in plastic chairs. As I described in Chapter 3, we talked for hours that evening and spanned many subjects; I perceived Orlando to have a lot to say on many topics, and I was asking about ones he was clearly passionate about. I found myself prompting him to return to my original question, or he would ask me to remind him of what I wanted to know about. His tangents were equally rich and provided important contexts to CEB history.

Orlando shared the following after I asked him about CEB youth groups, knowing that he continues as an adult to meet weekly with what the group members still call their “youth” group. There had been youth groups before his, but the participants had grown

up, and when Orlando's youth group formed, there had been very few for some years. A founder of his CEB pushed Orlando and other young people to form their own group and meet separately so the meeting topics would be more relevant. Orlando shared that they indeed developed a separate identity quickly, thanks to the "kind of training environment that is inside the communities."

"So this practice in our youth group, Lara, resulted in us doing acts of resistance. For example our youth group along with other youth groups had a strong presence against the free trade agreements in the year 2000. We did a protest, a strong protest during a mass at the metropolitan cathedral."³⁷ My eyes must have widened; I was impressed, and he paused for dramatic effect, proud, probably because he knew that it was a significant event.

Yeah! There's a newspaper article about it I could send you, a youth group of the communities, we put on masks, the masks used with El Güegüence,³⁸ and we went in at the hour of mass, we entered the cathedral during mass and with a pronouncement, saying how we as Nicaraguans were against the things that had developed, but we—remember we are up there—began to take the cathedral, that was in the hands of, at this time, still with the cardinal, and all his . . .

He smiled, drifting away in the memory. "I can tell you now that it's history, but yeah we had a preparation process, discernment, but this links us up with a prominent topic, not just any to-do, but Christians trying to have a prophetic voice in favor of the great majority of people. [. . .] They were moments of great commitment."

³⁷ The metropolitan cathedral in Managua was built despite considerable controversy regarding how expensive it was while poverty was so extreme.

³⁸ Nicaragua's folklore dance-drama, filled with humor, politics, and deception; also called Macho Raton. See Les Field's 1999 examination and creative application of the work.

Orlando's story of "trying to have a prophetic voice" illustrates how he and his youth group became empowered to participate in shaping national Catholic practices in Nicaragua. Their use of the Güegüence masks is significant because their audience would recognize them as quintessentially Nicaraguan. Their action was religious, political, and national.

Orlando shared that around 2000, they were concerned about the neoliberalization process and reflected, in his words, on the politicians, environment, consumerism, and globalization.

Central America was more awake about the politics because each religion, all the Base Communities, people's development groups like the *Equipo Maiz*, you know the Equipo Maiz right? The Equipo Maiz is a popular education group born in the years after the death of Archbishop Romero, and inspired by Archbishop Romero. But it's a popular education team, strong, with a lot of experience and that develops leadership workshops, popular economy workshops, theater workshops, those kinds of things.

Orlando described how his development within his youth group led him to protest, and how he participates in the CEB Prophetic Commission, but some of the other stories recounted more individual personal transformations.

Maria Jose's narrative is a representative example of a personal transformation. As mentioned in Chapter 1, I went to the Pastoral to meet someone else. In the end, he stood me up, but Maria Jose was in her office and she agreed to let me interview her. I intended to ask various questions about the NATRAS program for child workers she directs, but first I asked her how she came to participate in the CEBs, and she spoke the rest of the time until her voice gave out on her, about 15 minutes. She had just returned to work after having the flu; her health seemed to be generally fragile and she was coughing

pretty steadily at the end of the recording. Still, her voice was gentle, sometimes nearly a whisper, and she smiled as she shared with me, seemingly happy in her process.

Maria Jose likened her experience to that of the resurrection of Lazarus in the Gospel of John (11:1-44). Lazarus had been dead for days when Jesus opened the tomb and commanded him to “come out.”

I was invited to the Christian Base Communities through Jesus; or Jesus through another person. I was going through a very difficult time in my life, health-wise; very, very, very, very bad. Very bad situation. I had gone through very difficult times, in the hospital and all that. Then arrived this invitation, I say it was Jesus that arrived to me. And invited me and said, as he said to Lazarus, “Get up!” That is how the woman, the woman that worked with adolescent mothers, arrived to me. She arrived and said to me, “Maria Jose, you are going to get up from there.” Because I was bedridden, invalid. “You are going to get yourself up from there. And I am going to take you to a place so lovely that you are going to like. Where you will be able to serve.” And she said, “And you are going to go,” because I can draw and paint, “You are going to help child workers,” she tells me, “at Los Quinchos.”³⁹ The route passed by there and since then I’ve been helping the children. And when she told me this, and how I arrived here, I was brought back to life (“me hizo revivir”).

Like the sun, like the sun how I got out of that bed, pushed by the desire to live. At the same time to have a conversation like that, through a medium, in the situation I was in . . . “Lord, I am going to spread out my life when I get up, in service to the people who need it most.” When I got up I started volunteering, later in NATRAS. Not in Quinchos anymore, I thought it would be Quinchos, but permanently, with the Christian Base Communities in NATRAS. I started there, I arrived to volunteer and teach them painting and drawing. It was not easy, because that population is not easy, it was not easy at all. But, I don’t know, it was the impulse of the Holy Spirit that encouraged me to be there. I arrived with a cane. I had a lot of support from my family; my family helped that I may be a volunteer. And I felt it gave me life. Lots of life. It gave me life.

Maria Jose found a life in serving children in need; indeed she was made to live again, according to her. She became a new woman, able and empowered to serve children in need. The way she tells her story also exemplifies the belief emphasized among the CEBs

³⁹ Los Quinchos is a program in Managua that serves street children:
<http://www.losquinchos.it/index.php?language=eng>

that Jesus is embodied (*encarnado*) in other people. Maria Jose tells how she was like Lazarus and then moved by Jesus.

Not only do liberation theology practitioners believe that Jesus is currently embodied in humans on earth, they also believe that he had a significant human aspect while he was on Earth. Rosalba also emphasized Jesus as a historical man as she told of her transition from a parish church to a CEB, and of the need to resist, or “denounce.” The following speech occurred toward the end of my fieldwork, after Rosalba and Samara co-led a meeting for CEB members in the rural mountain region where they live to present all that happened at the national CEB-CNP Assembly. After the others left, Rosalba and I sat down to talk about her involvement in the CEBs. She was describing to me her participation as a member of the Prophetic Commission (like Orlando in Managua).

Of all the training that we have had from the CEBs—we have risked our lives to “announce, denounce”—that same training from the life of Jesus we are to walk in our own lives. It makes us commit fully and be resolute people to whatever “they” do to you or tell you to do, and however disheartened you are, you always have to remain loyal to your principles to demonstrate. We have said in those moments before they were going to kill Jesus that he was afraid and, like a human person, he cried. That’s like us when we are threatened, and we say, “But if we have faith in God then we are going to achieve what we struggle for. There will be well-being for the People.” So we have this commitment to walk in the path of Jesus where every day we commit. It frustrated me so much the way the parish worked, where everything was, “Oh ooh, you better not break that glass vase because it’s a sin, you’re going to hell!” I felt, “But where is the good Jesus, the Jesus of love, of service, where is He?” You will not find that inside the parish. That is not of Jesus. That is not of God, to be in a high-up chair looking down at the people in front with so much sickness, misery, poverty.

Rosalba ascribes and emphasizes the humanity of Jesus in that he felt fear and cried, again paralleling current life experiences. She finds inspiration and courage to fight for the poor in the story of Jesus being afraid and having the courage to be killed anyway.

And she alludes to building the Kingdom of God, saying that in their struggle, “there will be well-being for the people.” She stressed that it takes work to bring it about.

She goes on to say, “Jesus never dies and never died because he is inside every person who accepts the struggle [. . .] who gives their life for their people, Jesus is there, embodied in each of us to speak, dialogue, commit further to the work, social work as much as spiritual and political.” Recalling frameworks for communication, Rosalba’s assertion blurs the lines about who is struggling for whom. Maria Jose echoed this sentiment, sharing, “There is not a far-off God, but a historical God. God is historical, alive, of bone, among us. That is the Gospel. That is what made me fall in love with the communities, what keeps me going.” Many times I felt myself wondering if the speaker conceptualized Jesus and God outside of the spirit of service to those on the margins; with Rosalba and Maria Jose I frequently questioned this. Keane, elaborated in Chapter 4, supports the importance of attending to the CEBs’ semiotic ideologies to understand their subjectivity (2007). Keeping with frameworks for communication, CEB narratives such as that of Rosalba and Maria Jose blur the lines of the speaker, historical or mythic figures, and interlocutors. Concepts such as “embody” (*encarnarse*) help us see how the CEB participants distinguish themselves in their religious practice.

Nevertheless, the belief that God is embodied in human beings is not entirely different from what Catholics believe in other contexts. This idea harkens back to Greeley’s argument (2000), discussed in Chapter 1, that the Catholic imaginary sees God’s immanence or presence in the world, instead of as transcendent or absent from the world. I remember a story, a parable, I heard when I was growing up: how Jesus was to come to dinner and the family prepared a great feast to share, and while they waited they

sent away in succession three poor people in rags, each of whom came to the door asking for food. When Jesus finally arrived late they asked, “Where were you, why are you late?” And he replied that he had arrived three times before but they had sent him away. I share this because I want to avoid presenting the CEB beliefs as characteristic of a kind of exotic religious sect—I would argue that instead they accentuate more widespread Catholic practices. The narratives of Rosalba and Maria Jose help bring out the distinctly Catholic imagination of the CEBs.

Next, Franklin shared with me that he was first invited to a youth group led by the CEBs, and while he did not initially like it and only went “to break routine and look for girls,” he eventually became more interested and, according to him, began to transform. I recorded the following narrative after Franklin had previously shared with me in a casual conversation at a CEB meeting. For the recording noted here, we were sitting at a picnic table one morning before he was to begin work at NATRAS, one of the CEB projects where he had been served as a child. He was answering my request, “Tell me about how you became involved in the Communities.”

“I remember a Bible phrase about the new vase, the vase that breaks and gets put back together.⁴⁰ I am like the new vase, I entered in a way that I didn’t want to learn anything, and later I practically fell in love with the youth group and I began to change.” Franklin provided a very succinct metaphor of transformation.

My seemingly simple question immediately elicited emotional responses, to the point where one man, Eugenio, would only share with me casually and never in any formal, recorded session for fear of becoming too emotional about his transformation. I

⁴⁰ He appears to be referencing Jeremiah 18:1-11.

was able to write down his story nearly verbatim one afternoon while sitting next to one another waiting for a CEB event to begin. The following is from my field notes. We often sat together, and he shared with me many stories; he is a skilled and dramatic storyteller and singer.

“I was the prototype of machismo,” he told me sadly. “My wife did *everything* for me” (his emphasis). “I would get in the shower in the morning and she would lay out my clean pressed clothes on the bed. I would get dressed, she had breakfast set out for me. To the point of even put my shoes on for me! I was a hard worker and was a human resources manager at the end.” I remembered his stories of when he was young and in charge of a group of workers building the road in San Miguelito in the early 1980s, the same place where I eventually was a Peace Corps volunteer. He went on,

I was retired from my job in 2000 after my arthritic knee prevented me from working as usual. After that, a niece of mine invited me to a CEB meeting in barrio [. . .]. I went and later confessed to Arnaldo that if I entered a church I’d light up in flames. I entered the CEBs in 2004. They won me over somehow. At one point I broke down in tears to Arnaldo, and it was in the Pastoral chapel here that Arnaldo grabbed me up and walked with me to take communion. Since joining the CEBs, my life has transformed totally, a full one-eighty. Now my wife is free to go out with her friends or do activities she wants, we share house responsibilities, and I enjoy cooking for her too. We gift each other special things. She told me that she never imagined life could be like this.

Not only did Eugenio’s life change, but as a result, so did that of his wife. In this rare case, it was the man who first transformed. In most stories, it is the women who talk of how painful their transformation process was for their families, who were accustomed to them behaving a certain way, often meek and submissive, and with a life primarily inside the home.

New Woman and New Man

Christian Base Communities, as I stated earlier, are composed mostly of women. Through their participation, the women transform, become empowered, and develop self-esteem. The husbands who do not participate—perhaps because they work—are left behind and often resist the change, wanting their wives to stay in the home and act as they always had. Some women in CEBs said that, for some CEB female participants, going to a Bible meeting or doing something religious was a reason for going out that their husbands could not prohibit. This topic came up when sharing stories of transformation and when I asked about new women, new men, or new humanity. Montoya (2012) describes the contradiction in the Sandinista project of creating new men and new women because the FSLN did not actually value cultivating new women.⁴¹ Lancaster (1992) documented his research participants recognizing the contradictions in the “new man” project, especially regarding concepts of masculinity and machismo. The CEBs often cite Jesus as the first feminist and the first revolutionary. Here I want to draw out some of the ways the CEBs find in Jesus a proponent for gender equality and thus transformation.

While narratives of transformation themselves allude to the cultivation of new women and new men, the speakers do not always use those terms when sharing their stories. I mostly observed these terms written in proclamations and on posters on celebration days. I think that the concepts of new women and new men are fundamental to CEBs and to the revolution that they regularly invoke. I invited some of my research

⁴¹ For other gender contradictions in the revolutionary project to create new men and new women see Rodriquez 1996 and Saldaña-Portillo 2003.

participants to tell me about new men and new women in an effort to better understand the transformation stories I was listening to and collecting.

I asked Layza, again while we were sitting in her workspace at the Pastoral, enjoying *fresco de Jamaica* (a cold hibiscus drink) and *cajetas*, little homemade caramel candies that someone brought in. Other people had come in and out that day, including Juan Carlos and Mariluz. Layza nodded knowingly at my question and began,

We know that in the time of Jesus the woman was in all senses very marginalized, excluded. And Jesus was the first to approach women to help dignify a woman's life. Help her so that the woman is not subsumed by the man, because women, well, we are free. Men are not the only leaders. For me the New Woman is one who is conscious of her rights. It is her right, however laborious, her right as a woman in society, a free woman to make her own decisions without anyone imposing theirs on her what to do. In other words live with equality of men and women, with respect.

She continued, "So what needs to happen is that the man—so that the man becomes a New Man too—the man lowers and the woman rises and they meet at the same level," putting her fingers together to demonstrate equality. "That's how I see it."

So they meet where there is respect, good communication, where the man and the woman respect one another's rights. A man capable of seeing a woman as a being to love, appreciate, not as the boss that wants to dominate, treat badly, that says "I'm the boss of this woman," that we see each other as two free people. It is a very painful and costly process both for the man as much as the woman. Those are the consequences.

Layza paused to think for a moment. "We can see it in the new law we have struggled to get that was approved last year. Only fifty women have used it, reported, it is so painful because the men do not want it, as if it will make them lose their identity as a man." Layza had recently presented information on Law 779, which addresses increasing violence against women, to the women's group at Project Samaritanas, so they could become more aware of their rights.

“And we see it in the CEBs as we work on gender themes in our personal development. We continue to do workshops on gender for the young people; we have a big Youth Pastoral right now, you’ve seen them, so that we may have New Men and New Women in society.”

Layza moved artfully between Jesus and the current context and demonstrated the continued importance of making “new women and men” among young people. Layza perceived the CEB’s focus on youth as relating to cultivating transformation in the younger generations, thereby creating new women and new men. She justified their work as something Jesus did.

In sharing how she became involved in the CEBs, Rosalba focused on the involvement of women. During the same recording session as her narrative above, she shared that had been condemned at her parish where she worked as a catechist when she moved in with her partner without being married. Even her very Catholic family called it a mortal sin, she shared. Later, when she escaped him after surviving ongoing domestic violence, she was told she could go to church, but never take communion or participate in catechism or other activities. She drew a contrast between her parish church and that of the CEBs.

It is lovely to be part of the Christian Base Communities because it opens a place for you and gives women opportunities. There is a respect for women, a respect for men, young people, children, that we are equally among equals and no one is more important than another and we have rights, men and women. When Jesus began in the Gospel to defend the woman whom they wanted to stone,⁴² when he got involved, we say that Jesus has the heart of a woman—body of a man but heart of a woman—because he got involved in this whole part of the woman being the most poorly treated in the Old Testament, all the way to her

42 John 7:53-8:11

death. Jesus' birth began a new way of life and this new life is what we support carrying out for so many women who live in violence, maltreatment, murder.

A person's change is because inside the Christian Base Communities you have participation. You make decisions. You have decisions to say, "I like this, I don't like this," and mostly it's that we be Christians, that we believe in God. We are also critical of our church, against other members, our brothers and sisters, and we speak up that "This thing is bad, and you cannot do that because God does not want that." So we identify in this way, a form of being critical and self-critical inside our church, our own true church, we are obliged to call it the Church of the Poor, obliged to be with our Catholic Church. Because Jesus was very critical and he confronted such greed, we have such greed now like the kings and great pharaohs, and he never just let things be.

As with Layza, Rosalba began with Jesus as the example to follow regarding women. She made the analogy that women currently suffer similarly to the women in the time of Jesus. She also likened the current economic disparities with the time of the kings and pharaohs. Although she did not explicitly say "new woman" or use the term "transformation" (she used "new life" and "change"), Rosalba emphasized how one develops into someone else as a result of participation in a CEB.

I asked Orlando about new men and new women before one of his weekly "youth" group meetings that they invited me to attend. He began by describing the different conceptualizations of "new man" over the changing eras. He described how when he first began with his youth group, Omar Cabeza's testimonial book *La Montaña es mas que una Estepa Verde* (1998) about being a young revolutionary guerrilla training and fighting in the mountains fell into his hands. Although Cabeza's book is no longer applicable in the current context, he asserted, the message that, "a new man gives more than he believes he can give" really changed him. "That was the new man of the Revolution."

In the 1980s, a new man was one who organized in the street, and new women and new men could study and go to the university, and live in a just society. Additionally,

he noted, since the 1990s and up to now, “He [the new man] is capable of unlearning all that we have learned. The subject of consumerism, the family, or the idea that a man must be *machista*, that he can unlearn *machismo* and is capable of respecting women. That is a new man.” So, he acutely observed, not only can one transform, one can also unlearn what one has done or valued in the past:

A new woman is capable of being, of acting for herself. A youth who is able to go out without their cell phone, who is the protagonist of oneself. It is what you do to overcome when you live in a society that has increased machismo, femicide, migration, to question politics too, that is the new man; one who is capable of changing these things, capable of looking ahead. One who is not centered on the material but on human rights, solidarity, equality. You might say, “[Orlando] you are dreaming, utopian,” But no! These are things a person can do. They are simple to do. These are not things of some other world, Lara.

Unlike Layza and Rosalba, who based their answer on Jesus, Orlando begins with the famous Sandinista revolutionary Omar Cabezas and his autobiography, a very romantic testimonio about the revolution that continues to be passed around in circles sympathetic to the revolution. As noted in the previous chapters, “new woman” and “new man” are not concepts exclusive only to the revolution or to the Bible. The meanings and use of the terms “transformation” and “revolution” clearly overlap. CEBs in Nicaragua enact a distinctly Catholic, national, Marxian identity.

In their effort to promote and instigate an alternative Catholic Church structure and “Kingdom of God on Earth,” CEBs risk appearing utopian or being condemned as unrealistic. Liberation theology provides a space for individuals to test new ideas and see how they might play out in reality. This is the way practitioners begin to conceive of a

transformed church and society, whose existence still needs imagining.⁴³ Levine has argued (1990a) that in the process of conceptualizing new forms of organization, practitioners have found it useful to borrow from Marxism. Powerful people and institutions, and those who are comfortable with the current sociopolitical structure, have seen CEBs as dangerous for that reason.

Additionally, I observed that liberation theology practitioners uphold dominant ideas about progress and modernity in their efforts to promote a new society and a transformed church. Their autobiographical narratives of transformation may be seen as progression on the individual level; they represent progress. The structure of the speakers' elicited narratives is similar in that they all tell of how they came to have a new subjectivity from that they had before they began to participate in a CEB. Their individual transformations and transformation stories appear to support their efforts to change Catholicism and society.

Identification with Key Guides, or CEB Prophets

Liberation theology practitioners have their own guides to live by. Some are well known, such as Archbishop Romero and Sandino, or even Omar Cabezas, but other guides are discovered in the people practitioners serve. In light of their use of the concept "embodiment," CEB participants practice finding Jesus and guides in the very people they aim to help. They often cite Romero as inspiration for this practice; he was clearly using Christian language when shortly before he was assassinated he said, "I do not

⁴³ Human rights and dignity discourses come up frequently in the autobiographical narratives. Levine argued that Paul Sigmund (1990) incorrectly asserted that liberation theology did not have any theory of rights, and Dodson and O'Shaughnessy (1990) proved Sigmund wrong using Nicaragua as a case study (Levine 1990a:614).

believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people.” Those CEB members who work in the Social Projects for Life often reference finding Jesus in the street children at NATRAS, the girls in the Casa Hogar, or the sex workers and exploited teens at Samaritanas. Regions even have their own guides. For example, in the northern rural CEBs they remember a charismatic man named Toñito, who organized, connected them to other communities, and was very much beloved. The famous Mothers of Revolutionary Heroes and Martyrs are also still very much recalled as strong and selfless. The practice of locating examples to emulate also relates to ideas about transformation, in that an individual may come to find God inside the people they serve and be changed through their service. Drawing from Freirian pedagogy, there is a reciprocal process of change between teacher and student, or between the worker and the person served.

A young man named Felix briefly shared his transformation narrative during a weekly meeting hosted by Barrio 26 de Julio. This meeting was focused on remembering people who had died over the previous year, and the meeting attendees were commemorating them as *presente*.⁴⁴ Those “present” in this sense included not only the deceased CEB members the attendees personally knew, but also the students recently murdered at Ayotzinapa, the increasing number of femicides in Managua, and child migrants who had perished fleeing Central America and Mexico. Names, photos, and newspaper clippings covered the altar. Groups of attendees reflected on the resurrection of Lazarus (as in Maria Jose’s narrative). A participant in my group, a CEB founder who

⁴⁴ “Presente” is a term used in Latin America to connote a politically conscious person. The CEBs still use it during roll calls, and often playfully if being called on.

operated a safe house for guerrilla Sandinistas in the 1970s, made a comparison between substance users who become sober and the transformations other kinds of people experience. Users are transformed into new people through their sobriety, she said. When the groups came back together to share what they talked about, Felix stood up and spoke, “First we thought of Archbishop Romero, who said that death is but a step toward resurrection. So we need to take into account that death is part of the process of resurrection.” Then he spoke on a personal level. “Getting to know the Christian Base Communities has been a rebirth for me. It changed my entire life completely.” Here, Felix drew on both Romero and his fellow CEB participants as guides.

Franklin, at the same time as the narrative quoted above, spoke of being pushed—really, guided—by Maria Jose to study, but also identifying with the child workers served at Project NATRAS because he too had been a child worker.

So I entered NATRAS and at first that work scares you because you don’t know how the kids will receive you, like you don’t know if anyone will like the new teacher. But the community prepared me for that and I remember [sister] Margarita telling me, “Look, you have to have patience, you are going to work with child street workers.” So I went in prepared, right, but yeah, but I had a charisma that—maybe why I chose a psychology career—many times I understood the children because I am the same as them. I am the same as them and I liked that. I like to tell jokes; at first, with the kids they did not like me, I was a bad man, I was a bear, I don’t know what, but all this hate they sent me, I returned love, I returned with love.

Yeah so that passed; all that hate they sent me they got love back, so that bear, that ugly, that who-knows-what now has turned into affection, now I’m the endearing bear, the affectionate bear, the one that gives love, that loves them, that is there for them; it was transformational. I believe that they have done the same for me, they make me continue forward with them, and it is a love that I too have for NATRAS and I am still there. So yeah, the NATRAS project is so lovely because we work in the reality of the children and it has filled us with strength, us the educators.

I identify so much with those boys and girls of the project because I too was a child worker. I was a child worker and I never had any support from my family; my mom did not care if I studied or didn’t study. I was a child when I stopped studying, I preferred to wander and for my mom [it was] even better

because if I wasn't studying I could work, so better for her I could make something. But always in life there is a person to encourage you to keep studying, lift your spirits, give you the support from outside, who is not your blood family but is family because I consider them family through the communities. And I am enormously grateful for Maria Jose; it was she that encouraged me to keep studying. "Franklin, study, make it your goal and accomplish this goal!" I don't know what it was she gave me, but I told myself I am going to graduate on my own. So I signed myself up to continue on to secondary school and they accepted me and I began studying.

One aspect of CEB participation that relates to transformation is that other CEB participants encourage one another to continue to grow. Indeed, I see this as a reason for the similarities in the transformation narratives. Franklin described the other CEB participants as being the people in his life that guide him and help him along.

One of my goals was to graduate and get my high school degree and that was it, no more, and I achieved it. I said thank you to the people motivating me—Maria Jose, Reynaldo, I remember Junior was one of the people there saying, "Franklin, you can do this." I graduated, I lost one year but I kept working, that was the year Maria Jose offered me the job and I went to NATRAS to work. Always Maria Jose, "And now you're going to stay here? You should make yourself a new goal and another goal and now you have to go to the university and do this and you have to do that!" And, okay, I went to sign up at the university in 2010 and it was Maria Jose encouraging me, always that Maria Jose, always, always, "Franklin you have to do this," or "Franklin you have to do this other thing." And I went and signed myself up.

Franklin specifically used the word "transformational" to describe himself in his work at Project NATRAS. He attributes his changes to the children themselves and to Maria Jose, who brought him on and encouraged him to continue studying.

For her part, during the same interview as cited above, Maria Jose also claimed to find inspiration in the children at NATRAS and shared that one child in particular really guided her work. Working at NATRAS,

It gave me life. And it gave me this boy named Mario. It really paid off continuing there. He was like my challenge, because his life was so hard, his behavior was very difficult, but he was like my life challenge. He was so, I remember when I drew his face, and we did a fundraiser for making a T-shirt, and

I put Mario's face on the shirt, I put Mario on the shirt. And then when I studied social work, I did my thesis on Mario. Mario, Mario.

She whispered, remembering. She paused smiling at me, and explained that the CEBs helped her conceive of the church in a different way.

“And seeing this Jesus, not a Jesus closed up in the chapel but an alive Jesus. And I see him in NATRAS.”

“And another thing about the communities and the announcement of this Gospel, the Gospel of Jesus embodied in the poorest, the excluded, in my colleagues, in my neighbors, in my family. And to feel in this other sense, to feel their pain too.” She continued talking about the “alive God” that the CEBs express, how the idea that “Jesus walks along with you” keeps her getting up in the morning.

Like Franklin, Maria Jose talked about finding God among the children with whom she works. Soledad at Samaritanas too described how her experiences serving sex workers had “evangelized” her: the way they smile, hug, find hope despite what she sees as terribly unjust lives. I had asked her about her work and then to elaborate on how she has been evangelized, or changed, as we sat in her office at Samaritanas one afternoon. She explained that the people that Samaritanas serves make her see what is really important and feel that many of her worries are peripheral. All of the CEB participants who work in the projects described how they get as much or more from the people they serve or fight for than they give, relating again to the clear thread of Freirean pedagogy wherein both student and teacher learn from one another.

One day I asked one of the nuns, Sister Lisbeth, who works with the CEBs, if her work is specifically based in Freirian pedagogy. I felt that she really put Freirian methods to work in facilitating meetings and encouraging the formation of new CEBs. She replied

that while she is familiar with Paulo Freire, her work is based first and foremost in life experience and observation. Her answer relates to the fundamental CEB methods of *Ver*, *Juzgar*, *Actuar* (“See, Judge, Act”). *Ver* is to be aware or conscious and critical of structural inequality; *Juzgar* means to analyze the reality of the world and to see the root causes and consequences (of contaminated water or lack of food, for example); and *Actuar* signifies carrying out social, political, and economic transformation.

I also observed similarities between CEBs’ use of autobiographical narratives and how social activists in South Africa use life histories as “evidence” of injustice or inequality (Chari 2008). Sharad Chari observed that in post-apartheid South Africa, activists deployed testimonials to point out the continued existence of racism in an effort to bring about a transformation of social conditions. Sharing one’s life history as a transformational practice has remained constant throughout the different contexts of the decades since the fall of the Somoza dictatorship. The focus of CEB social justice work changes to concentrate on issues that currently affect them, yet they remain actors in the social justice realm, working to bring about a more just society.

This chapter examined individual subject transformations of Christian Base Community members into people who identify as actors able to make the change they want to see in the Catholic community, their country, and the world. The next chapter will look at how the new subject identity conflicts with the current iteration of the Nicaraguan nation-state.

Chapter 6: Conflicting Projects for Church and Society: CEBs and the State

In the preceding chapter I examined the development and practice of autobiographical narratives among CEB participants. These narratives help to form the particular political-religious identity CEBs have as well as provide a glimpse into the type of Catholic community they work to bring about. This chapter will focus on what I observed to be conflicting goals between the CEBs and the current Ortega administration. Whereas in previous eras CEBs perceived the FSLN as having a similar goal to improve the lives of the impoverished majority, they no longer see this as a common interest. This political incongruence affects CEB religious renewal efforts. In this chapter I will elaborate on an annual event held by the CEBs to commemorate the Revolution, efforts to cement religious (in contrast to laity) support for the CEBs, and the Ortega administration's interest in mega-projects such as an interoceanic canal. For CEBs to further revitalize, they must disentangle themselves from the FSLN.

When Ortega returned to the presidency in 2006, his administration appeared more favorable to the impoverished people than any of the neoliberal governments that had been in power since 1990. As he consolidated his power, Ortega also focused on mega-projects, such as mining, logging, and an interoceanic canal. In the 1980s the FSLN and the CEBs appeared to work in tandem to rebuild Nicaragua after the ravages of the Somoza dictatorship. In the 1990s, the CEBs were generally united in their opposition to the neoliberal governments (even if some of their members, as Layza disclosed, voted against the FSLN). A growing number of CEB participants no longer sense such an

alignment with the Ortega administration. I perceived this change as something that feels somewhat disorienting to them.

The Christian Salute to the Revolution

An event that reflects the emergence of this apparent disjunction between CEBs' nation-building project and that of the Ortega administration is the annual *Saludo de los Cristianos a la Revolución*. In 2014, the Salute was moved one day earlier, to Saturday, July 12, because of the World Cup championship game between Germany and Argentina. The CEBs agreed on the theme "Women in the Revolution," to fit in with their denunciations of the current rise in femicides and violence against women in Nicaragua. The theme also exemplifies the manner in which the CEBs recall their history to base their trajectory. I arrived to the Pastoral event space right before a torrential downpour, and many others arrived drenched. The main stage had a huge banner that said, "With [image of a lighted torch] we Salute the Revolution 35 Years of Liberation. We CEBs Continue Firm because we believe in a Liberating God. We Women of the People want to live in Peace Without Violence and With Respect." The decorations on the altar brought together national, Catholic, and revolutionary imagery: A Nicaraguan flag was set on top of the altar; resting on the floor against the front of the altar was a large framed portrait of Archbishop Romero and a smaller photo of the revolutionary martyr Georgino Andrade, for whom a Managua barrio and founding CEB are named. Recent newspaper clippings of the femicides and child immigrants trying to get to the United States framed the sides of the altar. To the left and right of the stage were the mottos of the Salute from past years. The annual themes tell the history of the revolutionary process, beginning in the eighties and continuing through the neoliberalization in the nineties to the current time.

The first Salute in 1983 had the theme “Celebrating the achievements of the Revolution and Remembering our Martyrs”; in 1990, when the FSLN left power, it was “Christians, Justice, Peace, and Reconciliation in the 11th anniversary of Our Revolution”; in 1991, the beginning of the era of neoliberalization, it was “Work, Bread, and Land for the Poor!!!” (the three exclamation marks are theirs); and in 1992: “With the Prophetic Spirit for Land and Life, the Economy, and Peace to the Christians We Fight with Dignity.” All of the themes resonate with liberation theology’s ideal of working within the national historical context, and they reflect the history of the struggle of impoverished people in Nicaragua.

The number of attendees is greatly affected by the lack of funds to transport all of the people who would otherwise attend the Salute, and who did so in the past when the FSLN supported their transportation costs. At the Salute in the rural mountain region of Matagalpa one woman explained to me, “Before, there were more resources for people to come together. For the Christian Salute they had enough to bring people from Masaya or Managua to Leon. Now they do not; now we do it in our own communities because there are no resources.” In the 1980s the revolutionary state bussed in people throughout the country, and 15,000 people or more attended. Additionally, the Ortega administration has co-opted the national revolutionary celebrations as their own political rallies, thereby alienating some would-be attendees. Since 1990, local Salutes have been held throughout the country, ranging from 20 attendees to about 100, and in Managua my estimate was that about 300 people attended the 2014 event. During my preliminary fieldwork in 2011, I counted close to 200 in attendance, and in 2012, when a barrio was the host and the communication about the location was unclear, only 100 attended in Managua and 100 in

Matagalpa. The CEBs try to schedule their departmental Salutes so that rural representatives can attend the Managua event too. A group of Spaniards who visit every year attended, and a North American priest co-led the mass at the end, the same one I remember from my two preliminary fieldwork attendances in 2011 and 2012.

In 2014, black streamers and black flags were used to symbolize the femicides and violence against women. The songs came from the Nicaraguan Misa Campesina and included the common “You are the God of the Poor” (Vos Sos el Dios de los Pobres) and “Nicaragua, Nicaraguita.” Right before the start of the mass, about 40 men of all ages stood up and, referring to God, asked for forgiveness from the “compassionate Father and Mother,” which reiterated the denunciation of violence against women. Next, a group from each CEB stood and denounced a particular type of violence using street theater. For example, barrio 26 de Julio’s theme was economic violence, so they held up and read from posters they had made with photos of women and children and messages saying, “I cannot feed my children” and “I want work so I can provide for my family.” As a participating guest of this CEB, I helped pin these posters and comments on three women garbed in black coverings to symbolize oppressed women. Between each act, Luciano and the “band” continued to sing folklore and revolutionary songs; when the electricity went out because of the storm, the crowd sang even louder.

Underneath this seemingly standard Salute a disjuncture in identity was ongoing. At one point my host sister picked up a popped red balloon and, as a political statement, put it on top of her black flag and waved it around, celebrating Sandinista party colors. She looked at me with a mischievous smile and giggled. She was rebelling against the message the coordinators sent to the Communities that the Salute would be a nonpartisan

event, something that had never before been emphasized. The message was in response to the general feeling that the new CEBs do not accept the idea of a nonpartisan political identity. Although most of the CEBs identify as Sandinista, they are more politically diverse than in the past. At the same time, the established CEBs do not perceive that the new CEBs understand how to be “critical” in terms of their political affiliation. The established CEBs perceive a lack of nonpartisanship among the new CEBs, so they were making an effort to distinguish FSLN party affiliation from being conscious or critically reflexive regarding politics. I might not have noticed this during the event itself, aside from my host sister’s small rebellion, but Orlando had clued me in the day before and told me to look for political “misunderstandings” by the new CEBs at the Salute. By misunderstandings, Orlando meant that the newly formed CEBs interpreted the event as a Sandinista celebration, while some of the established CEBs wanted it to be more understood as a Christian celebration. Later I observed the coordinators engage in a heated discussion about the issue.

A couple of weeks after the Salute, the coordinators met for their monthly meeting. I was rarely invited to the coordinators’ meetings. These were different from the weekly meetings and only included the core coordinators and representatives from each of the Commissions and the Social Projects for Life. I attended as a volunteer of Project Samaritanas, which was hosting this meeting. The purpose of this meeting was for the different entities to learn more about the work of Samaritanas, and the Project teams were taking turns hosting the meetings. The attendees had an impassioned discussion about the symbolism that was acceptable for the Salute.

“This is fundamentally a Christian event!” one person declared.

Another asserted that “The new Communities do not have the history the rest of us do, so they lack knowledge about how we interpret the symbolism. The youth group from one of the new Communities, for example, thought it was a Sandinista event.”

Soledad said in a strong but trembling voice, “But listen, the red and black flag is not just a political party, the red illustrates the bloodshed from war, the black the struggle undertaken.” She spoke for a while about the revolutionary effort, and her voice exuded strong emotion; she was obviously remembering the war, the oppression, and the violence that most people at this meeting had survived.

Luciano chimed in regarding such songs as “The Women of Cua,” about the women raped and murdered by the dictator’s National Guard, and “The Tomb of the Guerrillero,” about the many graves filled with the unknown and the Disappeared; he argued that “[t]hey were *testimonios*, not politics!”

Sister Lisbeth, the person largely responsible for guiding and encouraging the new Communities, said with a strong voice, “We all must acknowledge how hard it is to support and accompany a new Community.” She asked that the coordinators support the new CEBs, not criticize them. A few representatives of new CEBs were present, but they did not speak, and I imagine they were uncomfortable.

I realized I was watching the CEBs work out their separation from the contemporary FSLN. They were in the process of understanding the identity issues arising from the Relanzamiento and the formation of new CEBs, and how they might include and interact with the new CEBs, which were not yet “trained” in the ideological language and identity. In effect, the established CEBs were concerned about how to teach

the new CEBs the particular “words and things” (recalling Keane from Chapter Four) of CEBs.

Through my interviews and ethnographic observations I concluded that although all CEBs wanted the Relanzamiento, the process of cultivating new CEBs also produced discomfort. The new CEBs’ identity was not going to be the same as that of the CEBs established in a different era. New CEBs had a different history and a different entrée into the practice of liberation theology. How then might they all identify as CEBs? What were the required political and religious tenets around which they might come together? That process was being worked out during the period of my fieldwork.

La Gran Canal

The interoceanic canal is one of the Ortega administration’s goals for Nicaragua. I visited San Miguelito, Rio San Juan, in 2014, as conflict was heating up about the proposed canal. I wanted to see the community where I had worked as a Peace Corps volunteer and the internationally protected wetlands,⁴⁵ before they were destroyed by the canal that I had begun to think might actually get built.⁴⁶ Infrastructural changes were dramatic; I was told that one of the new hotels was filled with Chinese engineers working on the canal. My old friends chuckled at my memory of people standing on a tree stump in the middle of the bean fields on top of the hill outside the village to get cell phone

⁴⁵ The wetlands of San Miguelito are protected through the Ramsar Convention, an international treaty to conserve wetlands and their resources. The convention took place in 1971 in Ramsar, Iran. Nicaragua has nine designated Ramsar sites.

<http://www.ramsar.org/>

⁴⁶ There have been numerous attempts to build an interoceanic canal in Nicaragua, harkening back to the US industrialist Cornelius Vanderbilt (Rogers 2014). Centro Humboldt counted 78 separate attempts at the Nicaragua Academy of Science’s forum in November 2014 (see note 48).

service. A whole new neighborhood has been built there now, thanks to the Ortega administration's Houses for the People program.

Until I sat down with a friend involved in the protection of the wetlands, I had not understood the level of insecurity the proposed canal brought to the people in its path. My friend had already lost his position as a consultant in the mayor's office for publicly denouncing the canal, and he told me he was willing to die if it came to that. Another friend's family will lose their farm. This person told me her cousin had traveled to Managua in an effort to stop the expropriation of their land. Friends with family members who work for the Sandinista mayor's office were less vocal about their concerns, but when I asked, they expressed hope the canal will never come to fruition. However, everyone in the small community saw the Chinese people (numbering between 5 and 50, I was told) staying in the new hotel in the center of town. Property owners observed the arrival of Chinese surveyors protected by Nicaraguan military, trespassing on their land to measure and place markers. People said they were there to survey the land just south of town where the canal will traverse.

A Nicaragua interoceanic canal, if built, would be the one of the largest projects in modern history. The canal is supposedly being financed through an agreement with a private Chinese company, HKND, part of a complex network of financiers and holding companies spanning multiple countries and names. With rumors strengthened by the lack of transparency, many people believe HKND is linked to the Chinese government, which has been rapidly expanding its power in Latin America and elsewhere (Enriquez, Villa,

and Miranda 2014).⁴⁷ The project not only involves construction of the canal but also includes free trade zones, two international port cities, airports, and new tourist complexes with hotels and golf courses. The first lady, Rosario Murillo, who is also the Ortega administration's spokesperson and a government minister, claims that the "Grand Canal" will bring prosperity to all and make Nicaragua a global player: essentially Nicaragua's Manifest Destiny.

Why the concern? This canal will likely not be sufficiently regulated against narco-, arms-, and human trafficking. None of the entities involved have addressed the issue of regulating what goes through the canal, or of it being a target for terrorism, or even its proximity to numerous volcanoes. Logistics such as housing and feeding workers, or the increased need for police and schools during the period of construction, have also not been addressed, nor has the dredging of the shallow lake, frequent volcanic and seismic activity, and serious environmental concerns. Building another canal in the same part of the world when the Panama Canal's expansion would soon be complete (at the time of my fieldwork) is economically unfeasible according to experts (fieldnotes from the 2014 UCA forum on the canal, Centro Humboldt). Only 5% of global cargo goes through the Panama Canal, and a Nicaraguan canal presumably only get a portion of that. In addition, the northern passage over Canada is already traversable in the summertime and provides much shorter, and thus cheaper, routes for ships.⁴⁸ For China this canal is a strategic investment in soft power, not an economic one. The constitution

⁴⁷ Investigative journalism on HKND and Wang Jing includes Enriquez et al. 2014.

⁴⁸ From the forum of the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences (NAS) at the UCA on November 10 and 11, 2014; also see Chamorro 2014 for an interview with one of the speakers, Dr. Anthony Clayton.

states that it supersedes all other laws, but the enabling laws for the canal assert that they are above the constitution, and none of the related projects such as the free trade zones, hotels, or airports have been subjected to civic or economic approval (Caldera 2014:99).

During my fieldwork, the Ortega administration was fiercely campaigning in favor of the canal and putting down dissent using threats of violence and actual violence: making arrests, bribing key people, and deploying secrecy and trickery. Foreign journalists were misinformed about places and times of news releases, and some have been jailed for trying to get information or follow the canal route. Nicaraguan researchers who have spoken out critically have been fired (Aburto 2014a), and small landowners have been threatened and pressured, and land has been expropriated. Massive demonstrations have occurred, and continue, despite the government's bribes to pressure people not to join the marches (Vasquez 2014a). Some communities have set up roadblocks to keep the Chinese and Nicaraguan military from entering or staying in their towns. Social media groups against the canal have sprung up (e.g., Nicaragua Sin Heridas; No Al Canal Interoceanico en Nicaragua) reporting detainments, marches, and threats in real-time. These events cannot be ignored (Aburto 2014a). Yet in these circumstances, the CEBs were not acting in a united way.

For many reasons, the United States and other governments have not publicly responded to the canal project. The U.S. government has a history of violently asserting its interests in Nicaragua even before Sandino in the 1930s and the Contra War of the 1980s. The 1914 Chamorro-Bryan Treaty gave the U.S. sole rights in perpetuity to build a canal across Nicaragua, a treaty forced upon Nicaragua to avoid the possibility of a route that would compete with the Panama Canal. Another reason for the lack of

opposition is that many do not believe this project will actually come to fruition. This is the most recent of many—at least 73—efforts to build a canal through Nicaragua.

Perhaps, I thought, the CEBs in Managua were sufficiently removed from the proposed canal path that they did not sympathize with the people who would be displaced. While they strongly support and ally with the rural Communities in the north, the canal might not seem an imminent threat. To my surprise, even Orlando seemed to struggle in balancing the supposed benefits with the negatives. Was he falling prey to the well-funded propaganda campaign flooding Managua in favor of the canal? Or was his reaction simply that of someone well aware of the desperate need for jobs? I did not hear any of my research participants mention that (according to Ortega) famed liberation theologian Leonardo Boff counseled him to move forward with the canal. Boff later publicly corrected the story, saying that he had told Ortega to look for technologies with the least environmental impact and to find such examples as Itaipu on the border of Brazil and Paraguay, and Iguazu, where he thought humans and nature have found an equilibrium (Enriquez 2014). This article also noted that in 2007 Ortega asserted he would never, “not for all the gold in the world,” build a canal through Nicaragua.

While chatting with one of the women who works in Project NATRAS, I also wondered how much government support the different CEB projects depended on and whether that had anything to do with their reticence to denounce the canal. Non-government organizations that criticized the government were having their permits rescinded. I had learned that the NATRAS kitchen had government permits to make and sell their juices and ices. I asked Father Arnaldo later if he felt the government was indirectly buying CEB silence and he replied that none of the CEB projects received

government money. Although the girls' home is accredited by the government because they have a school, the funding comes from international donors. The only CEBs significantly united and vocal against the canal were those from the Carazo-Granada-Masaya tri-region, which were also the most strongly organized around environmental issues, and whose coordinators were reading the booklet on the canal debate that the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences (Academia de Ciencias de Nicaragua) published in 2014.

In fact, finding accurate information about the proposed plan for a canal was difficult for both Nicaraguans and foreigners. During meetings, many CEB members expressed the desire to know more and wondered where they could access the truth. The canal was ultimately brought up as an issue at the Managua pre-national assembly, where CEB representatives come together on a regional level to prepare for their national meeting in early January 2015. At that meeting, Eugenio acknowledged confusion about the canal. Later, at the CEB National Assembly, the canal was one of the topics they all agreed they wanted to learn more about.

Dr. Jaime Incer, former Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources under President Violeta Chamorro and founder of the Nicaraguan national parks program, had been invited to speak at the National Assembly on the current state of the environment and Nicaragua's mega-projects. After his speech, I asked Franklin what he thought, and he looked at me and said, "Empty." He advised me to listen carefully when the youth representatives met to evaluate the talk the next day, "They will rip it apart." Dr. Incer might be critical of the canal, but he is also consulting with the government about it, apparently playing both sides. The most telling piece of Dr. Incer's talk, I felt, was when

he told the audience that any fight to save Nicaragua's natural environment falls on them. One hour into his talk he finally mentioned the canal and said, "The benefit is not for you, it is for other countries." The audience murmured in agreement.

The next day, the youth representatives at the Assembly discussed Dr. Incer's speech. Curiously, Franklin argued that he had hoped the canal could be a good thing, because Nicaragua is desperate for anything that might provide employment and lift the masses out of poverty. The youth leader elected for the year took the opposite side and pointed out that Dr. Incer appeared to avoid the topic and stuck to mining. He did not want the talk to remain just a talk, and he stressed, "We are in a struggle!" Another young person said her sister worked for a mayor's office in the Matagalpa region and that she and her colleagues were forced to march in favor of the canal or lose their jobs. Franklin's brother Isaías observed that every time they want to act they are labeled rabble-rousers. Layza expressed delight at how conscious the young people were during this discussion and then, exasperated, asked, "How is it that all of Managua likes the canal?" Again, the Carazo-Granada-Masaya group was the only region united against the canal. Isaías remarked, "The government does not want us to demonstrate," indicating to me the discomfort that many felt if they went against the Sandinista party.

Conclusion

Although they were finally getting around to discussing the canal in more depth as I was finishing my fieldwork, the CEBs had still not united around a definitive stance. The issue of the canal project brought to light an uncomfortable fissure in the identity of CEBs in that it seemed to force them to choose one part of their political and religious identity over another. It also pushed them to review their contemporary uncertain

relationship with partisan politics, namely their affiliation with the FSLN, which is no longer espousing the ideals it once did (Montoya 2013).

The examples of the Salute and the canal make certain challenges to the CEB renewal salient. Their identity is brought into question by the contradictions created by the betrayals of the current Ortega administration of the original FSLN values. CEBs and the FSLN no longer have conjoined goals for the future of Nicaragua. They are also experiencing growing pains with the four new Managua CEBs that are in the process of developing their identity and relationship with the established CEBs on a departmental and national level. Of course, all identities incorporate contradictions among the characteristics that unite them. The ones I am describing for the CEBs derive from the events at the time of my fieldwork and the issues they were confronting then. They are not the first or the last disjunctures they have worked or will work through. However, my observations lead me to believe that they are uniquely positioned to be able to work out their disagreements considering the fact that their identity is also based on critical thinking about their social, political, and economic position.

A relanzamiento relies on increased lay and religious participation support, acceptance of the new and different CEBs by the established CEBs, and continued international and financial assistance. Certainly CEBs are solidly sustaining and institutionalized in the contemporary context after fifty years of existence, despite powerful institutional and systematic efforts to stop them.

This chapter has examined the challenge to a contemporary CEB renewal if they lose sight of their critical approach to political alliances. The next chapter will examine

the annual Ecological Festival as a site where CEBs publicly demonstrate their particular Catholic identity and their ideas for a transformed Nicaragua.

Chapter 7: Christian Base Communities' Catholic Identity in Action:

Demonstrating *Profetismo*

I decided to participate in the Prophetic Commission, or the Civic Participation one. I felt better placed, participating in this space because it had to do with the execution of things, doing things. It was in the year 2008 (about), and up to today I am a member of this Commission, one with highs and lows too. – Orlando

References to prophets, prophetic actions and words, prophetic mission, and the prophetic church are very common when CEB participants ruminate about identity and how to enact CEB identity. The Commission on Citizen Participation and Political Advocacy, often called the Prophetic Commission or the Citizenship Commission, in which Orlando is active, is dedicated exclusively to acting prophetically. This chapter examines how CEBs utilize the concept of *profetismo* and locates the term in liberation theology literature. Here I investigate how CEBs enact the term in contemporary Nicaragua. The autobiographical narratives tell how a person transforms into someone capable of shaping church and society, and CEBs consider the activities they perform as shapers to be prophetic.

How do the CEBs utilize *profetismo*? To put it simply (perhaps too simply), *profetismo* is the process by which the CEBs are political. As practitioners of liberation theology, they are very concerned with their responsibility to “announce” that God is among us and “denounce” corruption and structural inequalities. I frequently heard such assertions as “We as Christians have a responsibility to protect our right to clean water, protect our Mother Earth, denounce environmental destruction” (from a CEB representative at the annual National Assembly). *Profetismo* refers to the CEBs’ actions that, in their interpretation of both the Old and New Testaments, follow in the steps of

prophets who denounced injustice and announced a future in which all people have a sufficiency of what they need. The commitment to act prophetically is also the characteristic of liberation theology that people in power and in institutions likely consider most threatening.

The following account of how CEBs define *profetismo* took place at a newly formed CEB in Managua. This CEB was hosting the weekly meeting for the first time. A reflection on the statement (1 John 4:20-21) that “one who says they love God but does not love their brother is a liar” led to a lively discussion on how it is not enough to say one loves God or to condemn violence. Audience members asserted that one must demonstrate that they love God. The group at this particular meeting specifically stated that condemning the state of Israel for terrorism was insufficient, that they needed to actively protest the violence. “When we were at Palestine Park, denouncing Israel’s violence, God was among us,” added Sister Margarita.⁴⁹ She continued to say that they must act not only as Christians for Christians but for “Everyone no matter if they are pagan, or what race, or whatever. We have to collaborate.” Members of the group also questioned what to do, or “how to build the Kingdom of God,” in the face of environmental destruction, the rise in femicides in Nicaragua, or even when buying cell phones from companies that finance corporations that also make parts for weapons. The facilitator of this meeting, Sister Lisbeth, emphasized the need to consider the causes and consequences of all actions and non-actions.

⁴⁹ The CEBs had recently organized a protest at Managua’s Palestine Park to denounce the (summer 2014) upsurge in violence by Israel. The FSLN also has a historical relationship with the people of Palestine; Israel supplied the Somoza dictatorship with weapons and supported—materially and logistically—the Contras. For a brief history, see Field 2016.

CEBs frequently quote Archbishop Oscar Romero, expounding the message that there is no difference between the civic sphere and the Christian sphere: “No Christian can say, I’m not getting involved, I’m not committing myself, because that would be a bad Christian and a bad citizen.” One can see this quote printed on T-shirts that CEB participants often wear. For the CEBs, acting prophetically means working to transform church and society to make it function more favorably for the impoverished majority.

Being an action-oriented citizen is not politically neutral. During my fieldwork, I observed an ongoing discussion about changing the title of the Citizen Participation and Political Advocacy Commission.⁵⁰ Some people felt the name made them appear too politically partisan, to the detriment of their overall mission.⁵¹ The established CEBs had been struggling with the impression that the newly formed CEBs do not fully understand how being political does not correlate with being partisan. This issue came up frequently at meetings, and it appeared to be the reason for Sister Lisbeth’s choice of topics—to bring about an awareness among the new CEBs that all things are political. As we sat together at lunch, Franklin’s younger brother, Isaías, observed that, “before,”⁵² the political component was clearer because the CEBs played such a significant part in the Revolution. Nowadays, they are more diverse politically, and when one speaks of the political, the general population immediately labels CEB participants as members of the FSLN. Participants are consequently more careful, he said, because “no one wants to

⁵⁰ The commission’s name may already have changed by now.

⁵¹ CEBs are very concerned with the words they use. The Commission on Social Projects for Life also had a heated exchange about its name so that it would be more inclusive of the rural CEBs, who do not have similarly institutionalized projects that the CEBs in the capital have.

⁵² It is still pervasive to split time up between “before” and “after” the Revolution, *and* before and after the 1990 FSLN electoral loss (see Lancaster 1992).

return to the nightmare that is war. So many fought, for example, Lara, for the space we have to talk in now,” he gestured around the cafeteria where I had invited him to lunch, facing Rotonda Periodista. Isaías continued, explaining that prophetic actions are public actions that make the general populace aware of their lived reality.

Although CEB participants name specific prophets of liberation theology, especially Archbishop Romero and Dom Pedro Casaldaliga, they also include in the list “brothers and sisters of the Communities and people in general who day by day give their life and struggle for justice, dignity, and the rights of the people.” (Zenteno 2000).

Anyone can be a prophet. Some people referred to Father Arnaldo as a prophet, and in Maria Jose’s narrative about young Mario and the other street children, she considered them prophets. Franklin considered Maria Jose a prophet. Father Arnaldo often cites Archbishop Romero in his texts describing CEB identity:

He who does not love should not call himself a Christian. Preaching that does not denounce sin is not preached from the Gospels. A Church that is not united with the poor is not a church of Jesus Christ. A Christian who defends unjust positions is not a Christian. There is no sin more diabolical than to take bread from someone who is hungry (Romero, in Zenteno 2000).

CEBs recognize the difficulties encountered in enacting their interpretation of Christianity or, specifically, Catholicism. As recounted in Chapter 4, Luciano and Jenny continuously stress that a Christian is not just someone who goes to church and sings some Hallelujahs; one must actively reach out to the poorest and find ways to help them.

Orlando pulled me aside during the pre-assembly to explain his frustration with the Prophetic Commission. It has not been growing in the way that he wants, and he is certain that the tension in this Commission, including the name changes and

disagreements, are related to fear. During meetings I often heard the more participative people cry out, “Do not be afraid!” (as illustrated in Chapter 3). As Isaías observed (above), a great many CEB participants are very careful about how they might appear to others. There is a growing repression of the freedom of expression in Nicaragua, as I outlined in Chapter 2, and any public action that draws attention to disagreement with the current administration, however implicit, is a genuine risk.

Events are the clearest illustration of the CEBs’ *profetismo* and are the best way to draw out the contemporary CEBs’ political-religious identity and their ideas for society and church. First I lay out how liberation theology defines *profetismo*. The next section elucidates how the CEBs enact their political-religious identity and how they fulfill their belief that to be a true Christian, one must be prophetic. I describe the annual Ecological Festival as one example in which, as Isaías said, the CEBs publicly demonstrate who they are and what they stand for.

Locating the Prophetic in Liberation Theology Literature

Berryman (1987) and Levine (1986) list *profetismo* as one of the core scriptural motifs of liberation theology. Berryman cites the Book of Judges, which describes prophets denouncing the powerful who exploit the poor, are skeptical of God, and engage in idolatry. The text refers to the period around 1100 BCE, but practitioners of liberation theology see its application to current experiences for them and for most people worldwide. Indeed, Samara cited the ancient Hebrew prophet Amos in a speech at the annual Ecological Festival. Berryman explains that the description in Amos 8:5-6 of the exploitative behavior of the rich speaks to liberation theology practitioners: “We will . . . fix our scales for cheating! We will buy the lowly man for silver, and the poor man for a

pair of sandals; even the refuse of the wheat we will sell!” While describing their current reality as unjust, the prophets in these Old Testament books also predict a better future in which all people will live justly. One theologian called prophets the “conscientizers of the people” (Croatto, in Berryman 1987:52).

Levine draws parallels between, on the one hand, Weber’s definition of “congregational religions,” such as that of the Puritans, and the CEBs, on the other. (Levine 1986:15; Weber 1978). Congregational organizations are small in number, believers are equal to one another and do not rely on religious authorities, and discussion as practice is valued over ritual. He cites Weber, asserting, “The more religion became congregational, the more did political circumstances contribute to transfiguration of the ethics of the subjugated” (Weber 1978:591, quoted in Levine 1986:15). The CEBs’ discussions and reflections about Jesus and the prophets can result in questioning the dominant order and a call to action against injustice.

Aguilar, a Catholic liberation theologian, has explored the history and politics of theology in Latin America. He has historically contextualized *profetismo* as rooted in the Second Vatican Council 1962-1965 and the Medellín Conference of bishops in 1968. Vatican II, reflecting on the Church’s place in the modern world, highlighted a servant church, promoting the model of a Jesus who served the sick, the exploited, and the marginalized, and seeking to include all people who are not nominally Christian but who in action do God’s will. The Medellín bishops, in their reflections on how to enact Vatican II reforms in Latin America, addressed their prophetic role and initiated a plan to engage the realities of those in need and provide aid to them (Aguilar 2007). Gutierrez (1988) defined the “irruption of the poor” not simply as including those previously

excluded, but actually locating God as embodied in the most excluded people. The Puebla meeting of Catholic bishops in 1979 also agreed that the Church as a whole should enact *profetismo* (Berryman 1987).

Popes, Aguilar observes, tend to emphasize a monolithic model of the Church instead of embracing multiple or comparative models that recognize the diversely complex and dynamic realities of practitioners. Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI moved to reverse some of the Vatican II reforms of the 1960s and emphasized a doctrinal and centralized model of a teaching Church, as opposed to a peripheral and comparative/contextual, servant church model such as that advocated by liberation theology. These two popes placed education and evangelization among the clergy rather than the people, and separated the spiritual from the sociopolitical, in the manner of Bankak and Boylston's (2014) "community of deferral" (see Chapter 1). Aguilar draws from center-periphery models to characterize liberation theology, locating God in the periphery, whereas the Church hierarchy locates God at the center, in Rome, essentially limiting prophets to the Popes and clergy (Aguilar 2008). This division helps elucidate what is distinct about the Catholic liberation theology as practiced by the CEBs.

The Brazilian theologian Deifelt relates "contextual" liberation theologies, which embrace the fact that talking about God is inherently dependent on the reality of one's life experience, with ancient Hebrew prophets whose mission it was to "denounce injustice and announce *Shalom*," or the time of peace when all injustices will be overcome (2007:119-120).⁵³ Discussing Asian Christianities, Wilfred argues that

⁵³ The Boff brothers use "shalom" too (1986:90), as did Gutierrez in his 1988 introduction to *A Theology of Liberation*.

Christianity must maintain a prophetic voice and resist succumbing to national theologies that ultimately comply with the status quo. He argues that Christianity in India must find a dialectic in which both practicing a prophetic voice and being rooted in the reality of the people are present (Wilfred 2007:143).

Gustavo Gutierrez interprets the work of the prophets as eschatological, denoting a break with the past and a new way forward (1988:93-95). He explores language roots and historical interpretations to show that eschatology is not simply about the end time; it acknowledges the historical present and looks toward a new future, thereby perhaps setting the foundation for the “new humanity” that the CEBs foresee. “The commitment to the creation of a just society and, ultimately, to a new humanity, presupposes confidence in the future” (1988:121) is the sentence that begins his chapter on Eschatology and Politics. In the chapter focused on poverty, he cites prophet after prophet denouncing poverty (1988:166-168). He mentions the books of John, Colossians, Ephesians, Peter, and Corinthians to show that God is manifested inside each person (1988:109), and in his last chapter he returns to the prophets to show that poverty is a sin against God (1988:168). The CEBs’ approach is rooted in *A Theology of Liberation*.

Defending the environment is prophetic for the CEBs. Talk of the environment was sprinkled into conversations I had at different times with CEB participants. Samara from rural Matagalpa observed at a CNP meeting that “there are many organizations allied in the struggle for ecological profetismo, a commitment we have as Christians in the Latin American church.” Luciano, on our way home from a weekly meeting in the back of the pickup, described current CEBs as “more ecological, while the first groups were more combative,” he chuckled. Similarly, one young man whose CEB youth group

is dramatically committed to environmental issues shared, “We have even considered calling ourselves Christian ecological base communities (*Cristianos eclesiales ecologicas de base*) to call attention to our environmental work.” He made the statement to me as we sat on the steps outside a youth retreat at the Pastoral; I had taken advantage of the break to ask him about his role as a youth group leader. The topic of the environment was at the forefront for the CEBs during my fieldwork.

Ecological Festival

The CEBs’ fourth annual “Ecological Festival” took place in Rancho Grande, Matagalpa, on October 12, 2014, to coincide with the Day of Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance (*Dia de Resistencia Indigena, Negra y Popular*). The title “Ecological Festival” is slightly misleading; it is actually a demonstration that denounces environmental degradation. Denouncing the destruction of the environment is *profetico* because it decries government support of, or the relationship the government has with, the foreign corporations that are strip- and open-pit mining. The return of the Ortega presidency in 2006 and again in 2011 has been characterized by anti-imperial rhetoric and, simultaneously, close relationships with foreign capital and multinational corporations such as mining companies. The first Festival took place in the department of Carazo and focused on recycling and trash; the second, in rural La Laguna, Esteli, focused on deforestation; and the third was in Managua to defend its local “green lung,” Mokorón. This section focuses on the fourth annual Ecological Festival, one of the largest events of the year for the CEB-CNP⁵⁴ on a national scale. They begin planning for

⁵⁴ CNP, or Christian Nicaraguans for the Poor, is the CEB national articulation, defined in Chapter 1.

the October event at their annual National Assembly in January, and two CNP meetings and events led up to the fourth annual Ecological Festival in Rancho Grande.

In March 2014, the CEBs in Managua, in collaboration with the CNP representatives who meet quarterly, organized an event to commemorate Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in El Salvador on March 24, 1980. During my fieldwork, they did this by continuing to protest the destruction of Mokorón, as they had at the third annual Ecological Festival five months before. Mokorón is better known as La Colina or Cerro, the site where the Somoza's National Guard tortured and killed political dissidents, whose remains are still buried there.⁵⁵ They spoke of the 4th Festival coming up in October 2014 and recalled the previous year's festival. A number of other, non-CEB environmental activists spoke, including a woman from Arenal in Masatepe and Julio Sanchez from Centro Humboldt, as well as Jorge Andrade from the Committee for the Defense of Mokorón.

The two-day Mokorón event took place alongside the bimonthly meeting of the CEB-CNP. Both afternoons the participants went to Mokorón near the Nicaraguan National Autonomous University (UNAN) to march and hold a vigil. Approximately 150 people gathered at 3pm to march around the neighborhood. The first part of the march began at UNAN's outdoor basketball court across the street from a packed bar where people were watching Real Madrid and Barcelona in the World Cup. It felt as if the whole city was watching this game except for us; the speakers were competing with the screams, groans, and cheers of soccer fans. I helped Isabel, a teen from a Managua CEB, carry her youth group's poster, which took up half the width of the road. The poster

⁵⁵ For more on the history of Mokorón, see Barreto 2010.

commemorated Archbishop Romero and called for the defense of Mokorón. On the march, people sang popular songs from the Misa Campesina and other songs everyone knew. We had practiced the call and response routines during previous meetings: from “Viva the Christian Base Communities!” and “Viva Archbishop Santo Romero!” to “Who loves life with passion, defends Mokorón!”⁵⁶ From the newly elected Pope Francis: “A closed church, becomes sick.”⁵⁷ Finally they announced together the message that words are not enough; one must act to truly follow the Gospels.⁵⁸

Our numbers grew to about 200 attendees for the mass and candlelight vigil at the UNAN basketball court as the sun went down. The Jesuit youth volunteers from the United States arrived, and then nuns and other environmentalists from outside Nicaragua arrived and spoke about the need to network and expand the fight to save the environment. CEBs are expert networkers, perhaps as a result of their work to reform the Catholic church and society. Networking at this event was strategic for all parties, but also necessary; the rural people (42% of the population and falling, according to World Bank 2013) are predominantly subsistence farmers and depend on the environment for survival, and clean water in Nicaragua is more and more difficult to access.

The CNP meeting at the Pastoral focused on the Romero commemoration but it included a talk with a local journalist regarding the proposed interoceanic canal. The journalist joked about Nicaragua becoming a Chinese state and having Chinese mestizos, just like their experience with the Spanish Empire five hundred years earlier. A representative from Centro Humboldt also spoke about mining activities in Nicaragua,

⁵⁶ It rhymes better in Spanish: “Quien ama la vida con pasion: Defiende Mokorón!”

⁵⁷ “Una iglesia cerrada: Se enferma”

⁵⁸ “Predicacion que no denuncia el pecado: No es predicacion del Evangelio.”

how mining works, and the consequences of mining. The CNP audience grew outraged and discussions became heated.

At the next CNP meeting in August, a man from Rancho Grande, Matagalpa, was invited to attend and share his *testimonio* about the gold mine there. As I stated in Chapter 4, testimony remains a practice at larger CEB events. Unusually (to me), in this case they asked a person not accustomed to CEB practices. The man, Jaime, introduced himself as an “evangelical and proud campesino” and emphasized repeatedly how lovely it is to be allied, no matter the creed, race, or other characteristics. Unfortunately, I did not record this meeting; I was anticipating a planning meeting and not a *testimonio*. I took notes, however, and can report what he said.

Speakers also included an environmental activist from Centro Humboldt and my former housemate (a Protestant missionary from Chile) from the Inter-Ecclesial Center for Theological and Social Studies (CIEETS). The speakers were not CEB members, but people who had networked and were allied to protect the natural environment. The speakers were invited to provide expert information (not *testimonios*) on the status of the environment. Again the CEBs demonstrated the desire to focus their national bimonthly meeting on environmental concerns.

First, as is always their practice, the CEB members took a few minutes for audience members to share their current reality. These declarations are also called *testimonios*. Representatives from each region focused on the drought, which at that time was the worst in at least 42 years. One woman from a very remote, northern region of Nicaragua shared how many in her community had lost their entire first harvest. The rivers have dried up and cows cannot be fed, she reported. Other rural CEB members

nodded in agreement, as this resonated with their same experiences. A man from a neighboring rural community commented that some people were surviving on only plantains and salt. Another person from Managua pointed out that prices for basic foodstuffs were skyrocketing. Others began listing the prices of beans, carrots, and other produce. These people were invoking the “voices” (see Keane 2000 and frameworks for communication discussed in Chapter 4) of their neighbors and those in their communities who were not present. The narratives cultivated a consciousness among the audience of the dire situation in which they and their peers were living. After people share their stories, the practice of the group is to brainstorm actions to remedy the various problems.

Once they finished speaking, my former housemate related the speakers’ experiences to statistics contrasting this year’s and last year’s rain and crop production. Gasps of astonishment about the dramatic change in some of those numbers erupted. She concluded by saying, “Let’s not remain quiet, let us unite!” I was struck by their brainstorming about what they could do to prevent climate change and the greenhouse effect, about better ways to recycle, and what else to do with the trash: separating organic from inorganic material, make plastic bottles into water ducts for gardens, and more. These people are hardly the threat, and they are doing so much, I thought.

After dinner, Jaime was prompted by the meeting facilitators to share his community’s experience with the mining conditions created by the Canadian mining company B2Gold. He got up from his chair in the audience and walked to the front of the large meeting space. The people in his region have been organizing and demonstrating on their own against El Pavón, the mine, he stated. He reminded us that this was the group of 300 who were detained on their way to march with the CEBs against mining in Managua

on August 13. They were not just detained, he told us; the military took down identification numbers and held people without food or water. Two days after they were detained, the parents of Rancho Grande kept their children out of school to protest the poisonous water conditions resulting from mining. The parents, as a result, were accused by the government of violating the Child and Adolescence Code,⁵⁹ meant to protect the rights of young people. Jaime asserted it was a civic protest to protect their children.

He recounted to us another incident, when the mine invited community members to lunch. The mine representatives did not tell the attendees the mine was going to use their signatures (which they gave in exchange for the free lunch) to demonstrate support for the mine. The mine representatives on another occasion bribed people to provide proof of local support in exchange for a new roof. Sister Lisbeth muttered loudly that it was all distortion. Jaime identified himself again as a proud *campesino* and articulated how much more powerful the mining corporation is against the rural poor. And he shared that although he is an evangelical Protestant, he and the community of Rancho Grande very much value unity across religious faiths to stop the mine. Later my Spanish friend and coworker at Samaritanas, Pablo, likened the struggle against B2Gold to the story of David and Goliath. Both Jaime and the CEBs emphasized the alliance the Rancho Grande mining protests have with people from all political and religious persuasions.

I got the feeling that Jaime was nervous to come to Managua to speak. He wanted to make sure everyone knew he was evangelical and had a different religious practice from the audience. Certainly he did not base his mining protest on anything religious,

⁵⁹ Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia,
http://www.oas.org/dil/esp/Codigo_de_la_Ninez_y_la_Adolescencia_Nicaragua.pdf

unlike the CEBs in their activism. And I noticed when religious references were made or any prayers performed, he muttered other words to himself, I think saying his own individual prayer. His story was not told in the distinct fashion the CEBs are practiced in, yet it was representative of the community of Rancho Grande and their experience living next to the mine.

During the post-testimonio discussion, Jaime expressed concern when the CEBs began talking about the logistics involved in traveling to Rancho Grande to protest. He asked whether there was the possibility of anyone alerting the police. Layza responded that if their buses were stopped, the CEBs would say they were traveling for a youth retreat with the parish. Sure enough, when the time came, we had Vatican yellow and white flags draped from our bus windows, and the many people with Romero and CEB T-shirts covered them up with sweaters.

On the morning we left for Rancho Grande, Mario was late picking me up, which I anticipated, but I was worried after 45 minutes of watching the sun come up with my neighbor Enol so I called Mariluz. Just as I called her, at nearly 6 AM, the pickup pulled around the corner. I squeezed into the back of the canopy-covered pickup already filled with backpacks and people, and the ride went smoothly except for hitting a *pelibuey* (a type of sheep with hair instead of wool) which we were relieved to see get up and hobble away. Two hours later we united with two more buses from the Matagalpa and the Masaya/Granada/Carazo CEBs and strategically draped the Vatican flags out the bus windows. Sufficiently disguised, we continued for six more hours into the winding, raining, foggy, idyllically green mountains and valleys of creeks, waterfalls, bamboo, coffee, and cows, northwest to Rancho Grande.

About an hour outside the village of Rancho Grande, on a single-lane, unpaved, winding mountain road, a caravan of more than twenty cattle trucks and converted schoolbuses filled with mostly young men began passing us. They were loud, and some threw garbage at us as they passed dangerously close to our buses. We found out later that the government, in collaboration with the mining company, had bused state workers into this remote rural region to demonstrate in favor of the mine; no local person would ever agree to do that, the local coordinators explained. The same thing happened the next day, as I will describe below. This trip of ours was subversive.

Upon entering the village, we immediately observed the great majority of the wood houses had a painted image of the Earth on the front, with a quarter of the planet excavated and accompanied with the words, “No to mining in Rancho Grande!” We parked our three buses near the Catholic Church, where we were to hold the Festival. The concurrence of a priest was a rare prize for the CEBs. Despite the risk to his position within the Catholic hierarchy, he sympathized with the anti-mining efforts and allowed the Festival to take place on the parish grounds. We also slept inside the church that cold, rainy night.

After a group from the village fed us, the Festival began even though it was raining and we were standing in a muddy field. One man shared with me that he had traveled four hours on horseback to attend our two-day event. CEBs joined with representatives from Centro Humboldt and the local Guardians of the Rio Yaosca to speak to the crowd. Genoveva was angry that a representative from the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) was allowed to speak because she felt that they betrayed the Left in the previous presidential election by encouraging people to vote Liberal just to

spite Ortega. Later, youth from the different CEBs performed *sociodramas*, folklore dances, and musical numbers. Toward the end, the crowd cheered as a local duo sang a rancharo-style song with anti-mining lyrics. The Carazo youth group's "Three Little Pigs" rendition was my favorite: Canada was the wolf, the pigs were the exploited people, and instead of blowing the house down with his mouth, the wolf farted them down. I participated in the Managua group's *La Maldición de Malinche* and played the role of a Spanish conquistador along with Pablo (who is from Spain) and Isaías, often nicknamed Chele, or white guy, for his light-colored skin.

I was watching the performances with the large crowd when Wilmer, the CEB youth leader, recruited the four foreigners (including me) to speak on the local radio station. Although I was very reluctant for reasons of personal safety, I ended up on Radio Fatima. While the radio station "disc jockey" was waiting to speak with a nun from Mexico and with Pablo from Spain, another foreigner approached, looked at me carefully, and whispered, "Who are you?" I responded that I was here working on my anthropology dissertation about the CEBs. She said she was an anthropologist too and I asked her name. "I am not going to tell you my name," she said. She told me that I should not say my name on the radio or I would risk being expelled from the country. My turn came, and I very succinctly said, "My name is LaUra, I am a student, and I am here with the Managua Communities in solidarity with the people of Rancho Grande in their struggle against the mining." The radio people did not appear particularly satisfied with my brief statement, and I was not satisfied with my insignificant name change, but by then I was worried. What had I gotten myself into?

On the second day in Rancho Grande, I cannot begin with “we woke early” because I am sure I never fell asleep on the cold hard floor of the church. I put on every article of clothing I had with me before lying down on top of a thin blanket Blanca shared with me, but I never got warm. I covered my eyes with my locally woven head wrap and tried to use my thin travel towel for a pillow. We had expected to be staying with families, but there was not enough room for all of us. The village was small and probably used up all of their provisions just to feed us. Inside the drafty church it seemed that the others had stayed up chatting all night. A pew tipped over twice, and at one point I even heard guitar strumming. The bathroom was located across a muddy yard, and I was too cold and tired to trudge to it in the night. So when they woke us at 5:30 AM to clean up and prepare for mass, I figured it was for the best.

Because of the radio broadcast the night before, the government in collaboration with the mining company had sent out anti-riot police to keep more people from arriving. A group had also assembled on the other side of the fence from our event to blast pro-Ortega music and explode firecrackers to interrupt us. The people who had been detained set out on foot and arrived late. At the start of mass I was unimpressed with the number of people attending and concluded that the majority of the local people were evangelical and would not come. Toward the end of mass, however, I was amazed to see the crowd extending out through the open doors on three sides of the church. Leaders estimated that between 2,500 and 3,000 people marched that morning despite intimidation and roadblocks by the government.

The parish priest, Father Pablo, had been in Rancho Grande only two years. He quoted Archbishop Romero, “Do not be afraid,” and acknowledged that his participation

could have consequences, “Whatever may come, priest after priest, the struggle continues.” What courage, I thought: he knows he might be punished by the Church hierarchy for saying these things, and for quoting Romero inside the parish. Again, along with the other foreigners, I was called up to speak in the church. This time I briefly told the receptive crowd that they had international friends who were with them in their struggle against corporations that exploit both the people and the earth.

As the time to march grew closer, the CEB coordinators at first decided to call off the march. Layza kept saying, “It’s too hot.” Tensions between the opposing groups were too high. Anti-riot police were seen moving throughout the town. Nevertheless, we ended up marching along a smaller section of the planned route, and everything remained peaceful.

The banners carried by the CEBs from the different regions are telling: “Because a disorganized people is a mass to be toyed with, but a people who organize and defend their values, their justice, is a people who resist! No to mining!” And, “Following Jesus we unite in the struggle for the life of the people of Rancho Grande! No to the death mine!” Banners from non-CEBs included one from Centro Humboldt, which said, “Natural resource and life are more valuable than gold, “ and the local Guardians of [river] Yaoska Movement’s banner read simply, “We are against mining activity in the municipality of Rancho Grande.”

Arnaldo, who could not attend because he was still in recovery from the Chikungunya virus, reported to his many followers on social media (capitalization choices are his):

Sharing with our people and also our Communities who could not participate in the CEBs 4th Ecological Festival happening in Rancho Grande, where they are

threatened by open pit mining of a gold mine, and the general population opposes that it is exploited because it would end all the natural riches that Mother Earth bestows, as you can see her fruits gifted to each one of us participants. We were witnesses of the population's repression as they continue to be the object of politicians of the Government; it's a grand shame for those of us who trust the government. These things are never in the media; we want the people of Nicaragua and the whole world to notice that they are giving [as bribes] zinc [roofing materials] and mattresses and asking for signatures that they are using to say yes to the mine. Yesterday since 6am there were at least 20 people firing mortars saying yes to the mines, but the people are overwhelmingly saying NO despite the repression from anti-riot police who aren't letting them through to bring others from other municipalities. The Youth Pastoral and the CEBs in general are Committed to this community that fights to defend LIFE. Jesus taught us not to be afraid to fight with conviction and with awareness.

Samara's Proclamation

The following narrative performed at the Festival exemplifies the ways CEB participants dialectically fashion their particular form of Catholicism and value for acting prophetic. For Keane, paying attention to a Bakhtinian "voice," or the "linguistic construction of social personae" (2000), can illuminate the complex ways people use language in the construction of social identities and the way identities are performed, contested, and transformed. Keane asserts that there is an artfulness to how people speak, and research on voice can provide a glimpse into the construction and performance of subjectivity and the ways in which it can shift. CEB narrative practices provide a model *of* a certain kind of subjectivity and a model *for* others to approximate. Analysis of frameworks for communication can demonstrate how CEB autobiographical narrative employs different "voices," or animates different personae, to facilitate a change in subjectivity, thus illuminating how CEBs are creating a political-religious subjectivity appropriate to their current social, political, and economic context.

Samara stood up in the church, as the church service gave way to the start of the second day of the Festival, and ritualistically gifted to the local anti-mine coordinators a

written proclamation of solidarity that the Matagalpa CEBs had drawn up (My guess, from observation, is that Samara solicited input for the proclamation and then she composed it herself, then checked with the others that it included what they wanted to say). One of the coordinators formally received the printed document, nodded deeply toward Samara, and began walking away, when individuals in the crowd called for her to read it. (Often in CEB events a written letter is shared aloud with those in attendance; my perception is that reading aloud is still the preferred and more powerful medium.) She acted as if she didn't understand, chuckled nervously, and gestured to the man to return the document so she could read it aloud. Samara walked to the lectern and settled in to read; I perceive her as being very comfortable in speaking roles and I have even seen her lead the mass in her rural CEB, so it was funny to me that she began to walk back to her seat in the pew until the audience called for her to read the proclamation aloud. I recorded Samara's reading, in which she quoted Romero and numerous biblical texts, such as the prophet Amos:

The Christian Base Communities of the 6th region [list], in the years of the Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance we denounce the wrong destruction that our government officials are taking against our Mother Earth, giving mining concessions for the strip mining in Rancho Grande. The most outrageous is that this area is protected, it gives oxygen as a green lung and produces water for all faucets of the municipality. We energetically denounce the business [of bribery] for the homes that they are making in the head of the Yaosca River, for the way they see our Mother Earth as an ark filled with riches that they can take to amass for themselves, their own well-being. Even worse is that they toy with impoverished people's needs in this area by presenting themselves as the saviors of humanity, building schools, giving school packets, gardens, and buying the consciences of the environmentalists and governing bodies that have to do with the protection of Mother Nature. None of the things they give that supposedly convert into development will compensate. And this, mind you, the damage they do to the public health, of those working it directly and those of us drinking the contaminated water, because our life has no price. We want to remind you that we are all human beings despite color, politics, race, creed, religion, rich or poor. We were made in the image of God and so our life deserves respect. And this Earth is

our communal home, that man and woman may administer it, not destroy it (Genesis 1:27-29).

So we demand the government and those called to be part of our nation, as representatives of our dear Nicaragua, to think of the lives of the indigenous and fishing/farming folks that populate these areas where these mines are. The danger that it represents for our children so they must stray far from our land; we will all have to migrate to other places. Earth was made so that we may live and eat and work from Her and never for only one group to enrich themselves off of, above all foreigners. Enough already! No [one has] more right to live than we the poor have. . . . The drought that has affected us this year made it impossible to produce beans and sufficient corn. The cattle are dying. And who sees this? Who is going to help nourish us all? The promises from the higher-ups [that mining will bring] employment? False, because the majority of the workers come from outside. And we the poor Nicaraguans abandoned to our own luck. We are not dumb, we understand clearly that agriculture and ranching leave better returns to our country, and so why are you gifting our gold to these businesses? Allow the communities and the municipalities to [enact] the municipal laws and the General Environment Law. Why is there no transparency with these mining businesses? The population knows of no studies, nor of the contracts, that allow them to operate.

We remind you that we have rights, and one is the right to live and our children to live. We demand our government respects our lives, to be conscious, to think of the people and trust us to work for development and to be very conscious of the gravity of the situation. You are not the owners of creation; we are species with the most capabilities and accountability. The Prophet Amos already said it well: “Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?’— skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat” (Amos 8:4-6). How can we lift our prophetic voice as a commitment in the name of God for the most impoverished and to concretely serve the most humble?

We have faith that there will be a day when all of us come together in a just way to live on our Mother Earth. We want to live without fear, working as one for our earth. Because we are not supernatural, we are extremely natural. So we deserve respect and have the right to live in plenty and with dignity. We remind you that we are all a part of Her, not just the poor, indigenous, and fisher/farmers. We are all for Her. We are not just here to sleep and be born. No, She is the way we live together. It’s for this why we are present here today, expressing our solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the municipality of Rancho Grande. Because not just they are affected, it’s the whole territory. Whoever has a big love, faith in Rancho Grande, let’s continue the Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance! From San Ramon on the 12th day of October 2014.

The ever-growing crowd applauded, and then she returned the document to the man and went back to sit in the pew.

Samara's use and interpretations of the passages she chose, such as that from Genesis and the prophet Amos, are particular to liberation theology. She read the pre-written document, but easily looked up to cite the Bible passages and make other statements. She also made two references to the date, October 12, the day that is remembered in Nicaragua and in other parts of the Americas as Dia de la Raza and the Day of Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance (instead of the racist Columbus Day familiar in the United States). Samara also connects the struggle of the Rancho Grande region with other struggles elsewhere in the world. This strategy is also representative of CEB methods and the value of being prophetic. She was additionally aware that her audience was composed of people who practice different Christian faiths.

Her assertion of their *right* to land and clean water also linked their struggle with international movements fighting to stop or control logging and mining. In the human rights literature, CEBs might be understood as asserting their humanity, claiming their right to work, to food, shelter, and education (following Engle 2006; Goodale 2009). In the neoliberal context of extreme capital accumulation, the state is not bound to provide basic needs, and although the Ortega administration has made some attempts to help the impoverished majority, it controls and reaps the benefits from its relationships with mining and logging corporations and, on an even greater scale, the proposed construction of an interoceanic canal.

Samara's proclamation uses "we" instead of "I." In her description of CEB efforts to build the Kingdom of God quoted in chapter 4, she actually moves from "I" to "we."

Samara's proclamation is also meant to represent all of the CEB participants from her rural mountain region. Three times she identifies as "we the poor" in the spirit of liberation theology's "preferential option" for the poor, demanding the right to subsist through farming and fishing. She likens the contemporary experience of the poor in Nicaragua with that of the poor in Amos' text, the people whom the rich exploit. Samara decries the powerful mining group as unqualified to hold any power or land. Instead, the poor who depend on the land have that right. Samara's voice (Keane 2000) is much like the voice of a prophet.

Acting *profetico* is a way the CEBs politicize the Catholic sacrament of service, as outlined in Chapter 1. They are serving the community of Rancho Grande by protesting the government-supported mine and the powerful international mining corporation. Their service is political in that it denounces the role of the political elite, which is doing violence to the means of survival (e.g., subsistence farming, fishing) of already marginalized, impoverished communities. Through the Ecological Festival and the march against the mine, CEBs are reworking the Catholic sacrament of service.

Post-Festival

After we returned to Managua, I participated in the Monday night meeting about our Festival experience. I was assigned to share our impressions of the bus ride to Rancho Grande, along with my friend from Project Samaritanas. We noted that nearly all of the houses had a logo painted on the front decrying the mining. Later that evening, I learned that at a youth group meeting in Managua the representatives who had attended the Ecological Festival also shared their experience. As a result, the young people were so motivated to continue their environmental work that they began to brainstorm ideas for

more demonstrations. One young woman suggested they take the T-shirts the Ortega administration gives out and manipulate it to display a new message. The shirt now says, “Let’s go with Ortega! I build the nation!” She suggested adding in the same pastel greens and pinks, “I build the nation by saying no to mining!” and to wear it while carrying signs in one of the rotundas at the capitol. Father Arnaldo, in response, cautioned the youth group to be careful; following through on their ideas could get them in trouble with the government. This is another example of the diminishing space and freedom for criticism in the current Ortega administration, and that the CEBs are not unified in how to respond to these increasing limitations on free expression. This situation also illustrates how the youth are aware of the conflicting goals between the CEBs and the Ortega administration. Still, the Ecological Festival was recognized during the evaluation meetings at the annual National Assembly in January 2015 as a huge achievement, and they agreed that replicating it would be a priority for 2015. They also agreed to emphasize Profetismo in 2015.

October 2015 postscript: The priests and bishop became involved the year after the CEB-led event in Rancho Grande. Ten thousand people, including CEBs, marched, and as a result the government canceled the mine project in Rancho Grande. Father Arnaldo wrote:

In grand part, the cancelation of the exploitation of open pit mining in Rancho Grande was fruit of the march that the Bishop in Matagalpa promoted and where 10,000 people participated in the Municipality, rejecting the open pit mining in this agricultural producing paradise that is Rancho Grande. Last year the CEBs promoted there a march/ecological festival where 3,000 people participated. This year a CEB delegation from each region participated in the march. I believe that the principal thing in this achievement has been the first stance of the population of Rancho Grande without political or religious distinctions, united in this

struggle for their much loved and productive land—defending their rights. It gives us so much happiness. . . . And it is stimulus to keep on struggling.⁶⁰

The CEBs made the news for their 2015 5th Ecological Festival in the northern department of Nueva Segovia, condemning the deforestation (Lorío Lira 2015).

⁶⁰ See also Aburto 2015.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Contemporary Christian Base Communities are in a process of renewal in Nicaragua. Drawing on the work of Andrew Greeley (2000), CEBs may be seen as practicing a distinct Catholic identity which rests on faith-based social change. CEBs continue to use a practice of autobiographical narrative to provide a model of and for transformation (Geertz 1973). The processes of practicing liberation theology and performing these narratives help members identify as empowered shapers of church and society. Whereas historically the Nicaragua CEBs' goal of transforming themselves, the Catholic Church, and their nation in favor of an alternative modernity was entwined with that of the Sandinista political party, this is no longer the case. If CEBs continue to renew, their membership increasingly understands that they must further disentangle themselves from the FSLN to promote the egalitarian society they claim to work toward. This research project has generally confirmed the process of disentanglement.

Christian Base Communities remain very active in Nicaragua and are in some ways institutionalized. They have waxed and waned over the decades since their emergence in the mid-1960s, and their revitalization is ongoing despite a social, political, and economic context unfavorable to their pursuit of an egalitarian society. They function without support from the Catholic hierarchy, with limited international donations, smaller-than-before numbers of religious women and clergy, and a government administration expanding in power and increasingly suppressing dissent.

Christian Base Communities assert a moral thrust to their historical trajectory, as Keane concluded in his ethnography on Calvinist missionaries (2007). Archbishop Romero's quote, cited in the beginning of Chapter 7, stressed that those who do not

involve themselves in the public realm are bad citizens and bad Christians. Kathleen Holscher, in her examination of Catholic women religious teaching in public schools in mid-twentieth century New Mexico, observed that the nuns considered their jobs as educators a “natural extension of their vocation” (2012:21). For their part, CEBs emphasize a “sacrament” of service, drawing from Greeley (2000), that the mostly lay members mobilize. Some service activities take place in the context of a prophetic spirit of social justice activism, such as that of the Ecological Festival. For CEBs, God is present, or embodied, in their actions and in the people they serve (Greeley 2000; Orsi 2016).

The Christian Base Communities that participated in this research were organized at various points in time and participate variably in myriad projects, commissions, and meetings. They are quantitatively small but large enough so that not all members know each other and may not be familiar with all the goings-on within the entire national CNP-CEB. Disjunction and conflict is natural and accepted as part of being in a CEB, each of which is considered a sovereign community with different needs and foci. CEBs not only are repositories of memory for Nicaragua’s revolutionary history, thanks to their narrative practices, but also sustain the distinct religious-political identity first cultivated in the revolutionary era, which they enact in the contemporary context.

I began this dissertation by tracing the historical literature on Nicaragua from the time of Sandino to the Somoza dictatorship, and from the revolutionary era of the 1980s to the current neoliberal context. I framed the CEBs and the practice of liberation theology within the literature of the anthropology of Christianity and more specifically in

the anthropology of Catholicism. I considered what it means when the CEBs say they work to “build the Kingdom of God on Earth.”

In Chapter 3, I examined my initial questions about the proclaimed “relanzamiento” of the CEBs in Nicaragua. I traced the history of liberation theology and my research participant’s perceptions to understand the contemporary renewal process. In Chapter 4, I provided an analytic framework for autobiographical narrative to explore CEB participants’ life stories of transformation. I explored two founders’ joint narrative of the origin of CEBs in Nicaragua. Chapter 5 continued the narrative motif by examining transformation stories that illustrate how practitioners of liberation theology become “new women and men” capable of transforming their nation as a result of their participation in a CEB.

In Chapter 6 I contrasted the CEB’s faith-based projects of social change with that of nation-building of the current government. Specifically, I examined how the annual Salute to the Christians in the Revolution illuminated critical differences between established and new CEBs’ understandings of politics. I used the most recent iteration of a proposed interoceanic canal to show disjuncture in the CEBs’ political identity. Chapter 7 gave an ethnographic account of the annual Ecological Festival. During that event, it became evident how the CEBs’ mobilize *profetismo*, as CEBs enacted their particular Catholic identity publicly in order to spread a consciousness of the structural inequalities that impoverish and endanger the majority of Nicaraguan people.

In their effort to create a Kingdom of God on Earth, I have shown that CEBs place great value on actions and on results that lead to increased consciousness of inequalities and in turn lead to intensified efforts to build a more just social, political, and

economic world. Having worked to create an egalitarian society during the revolutionary era, their experience leads them to hope that their project is indeed possible. But their project is contextualized by a nation-state that has very little experience with democracy. Instead, Nicaragua's history is characterized by antagonistic and dynastic political elites. That has meant that the state has alternated between the pursuit of a neoliberal economic model of integration into the global market, which for Nicaragua means natural resource extraction and maquiladoras, and a conservative social order dominated by the Catholic hierarchy. Imagining and working toward a transformation that departs from both of these alternatives is for the CEBs still in line with a modern- and progress-oriented discourse. Like Lara Deeb's Lebanese Shi'ite research participants (2006), the CEBs conceive of a modernity different from the dominant Western capitalist one. As practitioners of liberation theology, they are not strangers to the accusation of secularizing Christianity because of their emphasis on the humanity of Jesus and their social justice work. My ethnographic fieldwork underscored their self-perception as deeply devout Catholics.

Contributions

This dissertation was based on an ethnography of one type of Catholic culture. My research provided insight into how the CEBs, as Catholics, come to see themselves as empowered to work for change. The dissertation therefore contributes to the anthropology of Christianity. This dissertation also contributes to understanding how impoverished people can self-identify as capable of bringing about social change. Whereas some might see structural vulnerability as reducing the agency of the poor, CEB participants appear to turn that idea on its head and assert that it falls on them, the poor

whose consciousness has been raised, to make the changes they need. They assume no one else will. They are not a “community of deferral,” as orthodox and Catholic communities have been called (Bandak and Bolyston 2014). Indeed, CEBs work to broaden the concept of “sacrament” to include service activities among laity. Service activities may also be viewed as political activism.

This examination of the construction of a particular Catholic identity through autobiographical narratives of transformation also contributes to the literature on subject formation. CEB participants hear stories of how others transformed to become people who are capable of shaping both church and society, and they learn to tell their own transformation story in the same fashion. The subject transformations that CEB participants shared with me constitute a kind of frontier between religious change and conversion geared to the self, on the one hand, and the politics of the revolutionary “new man and new woman,” on the other. Thus, while the participants in my research shared their lives with me on an individual basis, their narratives were in many ways quite similar.

An anthropologist I met at the Ecological Festival suggested that in Nicaragua the CEBs might be the only viable alternative for the politically Left at this time and wondered if there might be a surge in participation if the Ortega administration continues to solidify and expand power. I thought she was being overly dramatic; nevertheless, CEBs do encompass a history of respect and influence in Nicaraguan society.

This dissertation may also be useful to religious study scholars, perhaps specifically to anthropologists who are interested in the oft-neglected progressive forms of Catholicism. This study demonstrates the continued work by progressive Catholics to

continue the reforms of the Second Vatican Council despite efforts by powerful national Church hierarchies to suppress or turn back reforms. This study also contributes to pursuing religious research that asks about the relationship between humans and gods instead of “unseeing” the real presence of the gods (Orsi 2016).

Although Nicaragua was once on the radar of social scientists and elicited significant amounts of research during the revolutionary Sandinista era (1979-1990), much less follow-up research has occurred regarding what became of those participants who justified their participation in the Revolution based on liberation theology (Lancaster 1992:170; Canin 2000). The CEBs existed before the Revolution, mobilized with significant impact during the period of revolutionary government, and continue to exist today. In a time of immense global capital accumulation on the part of a few and the corollary increase of insecurity among the majority, Nicaragua’s Christian Base Communities offer the possibility of continued struggle for an alternative, egalitarian societal structure at the grassroots level.

What future research might be performed concerning the CEBs and other aspects of Nicaraguan society? Research possibilities in Nicaragua are as fertile as the country’s soil. For one, there is ripe data to be mined, if you will, on the very particular CEB and Nicaraguan linguistic ideologies. The history of the proposals for an interoceanic canal in relation to the current one might illuminate the contemporary Ortega administration in interesting ways. Analysis of national Catholic hierarchies in Latin America and their relationships with Pope Francis could produce important insight on how they affect local Catholic practices, such as liberation theology. The practice of Black (Cone 2000; Hopkins 2007), feminist (Althaus-Reid 2007; Grey 2009), and Asian (Phan 2009)

liberation theologies abounds in the contemporary global context and calls for more scholarly attention. How might they reimagine the sacraments? How do they empower laity to help shape their church and society?

This dissertation examined Christian Base Communities in Nicaragua as a form of Catholic culture. Through their practice of autobiographical narrative, they come to see themselves as empowered shapers of church and society.

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