



# The Church in every age has its trials and challenges.

| PHOTOS BY CHUCK DECKERT

**TODAY: BISHOP ROLANDO ALVAREZ OF MATAGALPA, NICARAGUA, AND A GROUP OF HIS PRIESTS AND SEMINARIANS ARE NOT CELEBRATING THE CHRISM MASS, BECAUSE THE BISHOP IS IN PRISON. HE'S IN PRISON FOR SPEAKING OUT ON CATHOLIC RADIO AND DEFENDING THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE POOR.**



**BY BISHOP MICHAEL C. BARBER, SJ**

Bishop Michael C. Barber, SJ has been bishop of the Diocese of Oakland since May 2013.

You may have seen the photo of Bishop Alvarez, in his cassock and pectoral cross, kneeling, with his hands raised in surrender, when the police came to arrest him.

In prison he and the other priests and seminarians that

were arrested with him were stripped naked, brought to their arraignment naked. They were insulted, made fun of and served muddy soup that had been laced with laxative.

One priest was interrogated for three months, for hours each day, in an effort to make him confess the “crimes of the bishop.” “Where does the bishop hide his weapons? Who is financing him?”

The priest said: “They told me, ‘Look, just sign this paper where you say what the Bishop is doing [illegally], and you go free without any problems.’”



**... how do we maintain our fidelity in the midst of attacks on us from the outside and temptations on the inside?**

“I spoke to them about the fidelity that one promises in ordination, to Christ through his bishop, but they did not understand that.

“I told them that I was faithful to the bishop until death, but they did not understand.”

The priests and seminarians were put on a plane and expelled from Nicaragua.

Bishop Alvarez was offered the chance to also come to the United States, but he refused to leave his country – refused to leave his people – and is serving a 26-year prison sentence.

In every age, the Church has its trials and challenges.

And ours is no exception. But to be honest, the difference between the situation in the Diocese of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, and the Diocese of Oakland, California:

There the Church is being persecuted because clergy were being faithful to their vows to Christ and the Church.

But today in Oakland, the Church is being persecuted because some priests were unfaithful to their vows to Christ and the Church. ►





Some priests, but not you.

You are the faithful ones, of whom Christ said, you who have stood by me in my trials. You have come here today to concelebrate the Eucharist with the bishop, to join in the consecration of the holy oils – with which we will confer the “Spirit of the Lord” on our people. You have also come today to publicly renew your promises, your vows to serve Christ and his Church, and his people.

You are the ones who Bring Glad Tidings To the Lowly, Who Heal the Brokenhearted – when you make time for someone who is going through difficulties and needs to talk.

You are the ones who Bring Liberty to Captives and Release to Prisoners when you unleash people from the prison of sin through the sacrament of reconciliation.

You are the ones who “Comfort all who Mourn” – when you visit the bed of a dying parishioner, celebrate their funeral Mass and personally give them a Christian burial.

My Brother Priests, how do we maintain our fidelity in the midst of attacks on us from the outside and temptations on the inside?

How do Bishop Alvarez and his priests maintain their fidelity?



These are the three things that they said keep them faithful in prison:

1. Rosary
2. The Eucharist
3. Priestly Fraternity

The priest who was imprisoned with Bishop Alvarez (and the other priests and seminarians) said: “The only thing that allowed us to be calm and full of strength was to meditate on the holy rosary.”

They made rosaries out of cloth wipes and hid them. When they were discovered and confiscated, they made more. Praying the rosary brought them consolation.

Praying the rosary also had a pastoral effect:

“I remember at one point, a prisoner came up to us and said, ‘Excuse me for what I am about to say, Father, but we are very happy that you are in prison with us because it gives us hope, and we feel that the Church is with us.’”

Second was The Eucharist. When Bishop Alvarez went outside his house to kneel,

raise his hands and surrender to the police, he asked one of the priests to go to the tabernacle in his private chapel and bring the Blessed Sacrament in a monstrance. The priest, wearing a cope, did just

one day one of the priests was allowed a family visit. At the end, his sister gave him a white Covid mask. He protested – we don’t wear those in here. She insisted, “Take the mask!”

“I saw that inside the mask, there was a closed white cloth. I opened it and there was the body of Christ – the Eucharist.

“As I could, half hidden, I received Holy Communion, and I felt immensely happy.

“I got to the cell and told the others and everyone said, ‘Jesus is with us, Jesus is with us,’ and we embraced each other and prayed with great joy together.”

“The third thing that kept them faithful was fraternity. The priests and seminarians prayed daily with their bishop in prison and supported one another.

My brothers, in the days and weeks ahead, we will be facing challenges.



that. And Bishop Alvarez rose, took the Blessed Sacrament and blessed the police who had come to arrest him. They arrested him.

In prison, they were not allowed to celebrate Mass. But

Don’t forget:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because the Lord has anointed us!

We have the gift of the Eucharist, which we confect, but we also receive. We receive the



same Christ who promised us:  
“I am with you always, until  
the end of the ages.”

We have the gift of our  
priestly fraternity, our  
friendship with one another.  
Let’s take advantage of that.  
Let’s not take each other for  
granted. In times of distress,  
we need each other more.  
There are some very good  
men here.

That’s why we have 1,596  
people joining the Catholic  
Church in our diocese year.

It’s why we have seminar-  
ians asking to be ordained  
and young men petitioning  
to enter the seminary for  
our diocese.

We have our fraternity.

We have the gift of the  
rosary, which reminds us of  
Our Lady’s love. Especially  
Our Lady of Guadalupe, who  
said to St. Juan Diego:

“Hear me and understand  
well, my little son, that noth-  
ing should frighten or grieve  
you. Let not your heart be  
disturbed ... Am I not here,  
who am your Mother? Are  
you not under my protec-  
tion? Am I not your health?  
Are you not happily within  
my fold? What else do you  
wish? Do not grieve nor be  
disturbed by anything.”

Do not be disturbed.  
Remember that on Holy  
Thursday when our Lord told  
his disciples:

“I have told you these  
things, so that in me you  
may have peace. In this  
world you will have trouble.  
But take heart! I have over-  
come the world.”

*This is Bishop Barber’s  
homily at the Chrism Mass,  
on April 4. The quotes for  
Nicaragua appeared in  
The Pillar. ●*



I, John, Recall  
the night you washed my feet  
with water and a kiss.

You caressed  
these sullied limbs and freshened them  
to meet the thirsty road ahead.

I recall  
the night you broke the bread  
and graced it with your flesh.

You caressed  
my hungry hand. Your food shall be,  
you said, My body, yes this vine.

I recall  
the night you shared the wine  
from grapes that bred your blood.

You caressed  
my sentenced soul and had me taste  
the fine you paid to ransom me  
from the damned.

Then came the sweet command  
You do as I have done.

Eucharist  
each other now. Evangelize  
the plan this servant night foretells.  
I am with you...

– E. Donald Osuna

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