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Miguel Flores, one of the 222 Nicaraguan political prisoners sent on a plane to Washington last year, poses for a photo near the Washington Monument on Feb. 22. He said he is determined to keep fighting for democracy and "can't look the other way" when it comes to the abuses in Nicaragua. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)



by Rhina Guidos

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The number 222 is now a part of Miguel Flores' identity as much as his name. That's because a little more than a year ago, he was one of 222 Nicaraguans the government put on a plane en route to the capital of its biggest enemy: the United States.

"Of course I was scared, scared that we didn't know where we were going," Flores told National Catholic Reporter, recounting the experience of [Feb. 9, 2023](#), the last time he saw his native Nicaragua.

He was 25 when he became a political prisoner after participating in anti-government protests. Using his tweets defending democracy as evidence, the government [convicted](#) him of conspiracy and spreading fake news, among other charges, and sentenced him to up to 10 years in prison.

But he had barely served two weeks when he found himself being transferred from a prison cell to a plane.

A year later, with support from parishioners at Washington's Holy Trinity Catholic Church, his English vocabulary has expanded; he has independent housing and graduated from an apprenticeship that trains refugees in the District of Columbia for jobs in the culinary field. He recently started a job in the kitchen of an upscale Washington hotel.

But the past year hasn't been easy, no matter what it looks like from the outside, he said. He misses his mother and the rest of his family. He misses his country and all that means home to him, the streets of Managua, Nicaraguan food, and the smell of coffee at home.

"I've had to face a lot of things," he told NCR. "But I told myself, 'I will move forward. I will not let them ruin my life.' "



Miguel Flores talks about his experience of leaving his home country of Nicaragua almost a year ago, near the Washington Monument on Feb. 22. Along with 221 other Nicaraguans, which included priests, he was sent on a plane bound for Washington Feb. 9, 2023, and stripped of his nationality. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

The "they" he refers to is President Daniel Ortega, those who surround him and are responsible for changing the life of many Nicaraguans, and not for the better, as Flores sees it. He still keeps tabs on what Ortega and others say. Recently, a [video](#) of Ortega rankled him.

"Those who commit treason against their country are *apatridas* [without a country]," Ortega railed before an audience of young Nicaraguans. "They no longer have a country."

Attempting to make fun of the 222 he expatriated, Ortega said they must be proud now of being "*Yankees*."

While Flores is grateful to be in the U.S., he's had some time to think back on the headlines and descriptions of what happened to him and "the 222."

"We hadn't even crossed into the airspace of the United States when the news began spreading in Nicaragua that they were stripping us of our citizenship and we were automatically disappearing from the public registry," he recalled. "That's when we became stateless, without a country, and so, in the end, our freedom wasn't real because freedom means being able to remain in one's country."

That's also the stance of the Organization of American States, [which said](#) on the day they were stripped of their citizenship that what took place was not a "liberation."

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"Where are they sending us? Are they sending us to Venezuela? The fear was real," Flores recalled, almost as if transporting himself mentally back to the moment. He recognized other political activists, as well as some priests among the group.

The idea of being sent to Cuba or Russia, allies of Ortega, crossed his mind.

"We never imagined they would send us to the United States," Flores said.

He didn't have time to understand what was happening. After landing with the others at Washington Dulles International Airport in Virginia, he was given three days in a hotel, \$300, and a smartphone to start a new life.

Flores went to live with a family in the Maryland suburbs who took him in for a few days and later allowed him to rent a room. That's where he said he first got a sense of freedom, looking for a coffee shop on his phone and walking without worrying that someone was following him. It was a rare feeling given that he has been an activist since he was 15 and was used to looking over his shoulder.

"But when I got there, I realized, I didn't know how to order coffee," he said. "It was funny so I decided I really need to learn English."

Practicing English and enjoying fellowship with the "migrant *familia*," a group made up of Trinity parishioners and displaced people from around the world, has helped him get his bearings, he said. Among them he has found that his story, unfortunately, is all too common.



Miguel Flores looks over the Tidal Basin in Washington on Feb. 22, almost a year after being expelled and stripped of his citizenship in Nicaragua. He said he will keep talking about his home country and abuses committed by the Ortega government. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"I've found people with stories similar to mine," he said. "The stories of these people are incredible. They come running from war, governments like ours."

Though he studied political science in his native Nicaragua, he said he has found a new professional love in the kitchen and wants to one day become a chef.

But his philosophical convictions continue and they became reinforced in his apprenticeship, where he found that he shared with refugees in the program a similar way of thinking.

"They told me, 'We have to change. No one should have to flee their own country,' " he recalled. "It was interesting because while we were learning about the kitchen and restaurants, we also learned that our stories were connected."

He doesn't know whether one day he'll once again pick up political science, but said he plans to continue to talk about his country.

"I'm still committed to defending democracy, come what may," he said. "I can't look the other way."

Though he's not Catholic, he said he's concerned about [the persecution of the church](#), the way church members have been detained and their properties taken over by the government.

"And that's just in Nicaragua but it happens all over the world, similar situations," he said. "My goal is to contribute to society so that we can do things differently."

He spent his 26th birthday last year drinking coffee with a friend and talking about human rights with a group. This year, he plans to celebrate putting his culinary skills to use and cook for those who have supported him, including some Trinity parishioners. He's not going to be silenced, he said.

"The [Nicaraguan] government's plan was to destroy our lives by sending us to a place we didn't know," he said. "Did they do us a favor? No. Did they give us freedom? No. On the contrary, they gave us a different kind of prison, a complicated prison with obstacles. But I'm going to do something positive with my life to show them and show myself and show other Nicaraguans that despite the darkness we're living in, we can move forward. I'm focused on it."

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