
Hundreds of priests, bishops, priests and nuns killed by Covid-19. Msgr. Lozano (CELAM): “Many were infected in low-income neighbourhoods and in hospitals. They brought consolation to the poor”

“I knew some of them. They died out of a deep commitment to be there for those who were suffering, in the words of Pope Francis, to touch “the suffering flesh of others.” Many were infected in low-income neighbourhoods, soup kitchens, hospitals, in their desire to bring consolation to the poorest.” Msgr. **Jorge Eduardo Lozano**, General Secretary for the Latin American Episcopal Council ([CELAM](#)), Bishop of San Juan de Cuyo (Argentina) thus recalls the many priests, deacons, men and women religious who died after having contracted COVID-19. This dramatic situation has worsened further over the past few days. In fact, the ‘Brazilian’ variant is acting as a multiplier in a long and devastating second wave throughout the Latin American continent. *How many priests have died in Latin America and the Caribbean? Several hundred for sure, and most certainly close to a thousand.* It’s hard to estimate the exact numbers in the absence of detailed records. SIR contacted the local Bishops’ Conferences. This tragic count has been made in some cases, in others only estimates are available, while some of the existing records are considered unreliable (largely by default) by the authors themselves. *Either way, it’s a challenging task, as news of this tragedy keeps coming in every day.* “Over 250 priests died from COVID-19 in **Mexico**,” said the General Secretary, Msgr. **Alfonso Miranda Guardiola**, auxiliary bishop of Monterrey. At the end of March, the Catholic Multimedia Centre reported 245 dead bishops, priests, deacons and members of religious orders. However, these figures are incomplete, since not all dioceses provided information. In **Brazil**, the only available data, obtained by the National Commission for the Clergy, dates back to the beginning of March, indicating the death of 65 priests, with 1,455 infected. These numbers are clearly higher today and certainly underestimated. The Bishops’ Conference updated its mapping of the situation in **Venezuela** (201 priests infected and 24 dead; 10% of all 2,002 priests in Venezuela have contracted the virus) and in **Colombia** (60 deceased priests and 37 nuns). Research is underway in **Ecuador**, as well as in **Peru**, but there are at least a dozen deceased priests in the capital Lima alone, and several deaths have been reported in the Amazonian regions over the past few days. There have been about 15 deaths in **Nicaragua**, where authorities are continuing to investigate the impact of the epidemic. In other less populous countries, the numbers are smaller, according to information provided to SIR: one elderly priest died in **Uruguay**, two in **Honduras**, two in **Puerto Rico**, none in **Haiti** and **Cuba**. *A total of twenty bishops have died as a result of the pandemic.* Seven were killed in Brazil, including a cardinal (the Archbishop Emeritus of Rio de Janeiro, Cardinal **Eusébio Oscar Scheid**), five in Mexico, three in Venezuela, two in Colombia, one in Peru, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Argentina and Ecuador. *Two of the deceased were born in Italy:* Msgr. **Marcelo Angiolo Melani**, Bishop Emeritus of Neuquén, Argentina, a Salesian priest from Florence. He died on April 14 in Pucallpa, in the Peruvian Amazon, at the age of 82. The bishop had been living in Peru since the end of 2019 as an “ad vitam” missionary. Msgr. **Eugenio Scarpellini**, Bishop of El Alto (Bolivia), from Bergamo, (Italy) was 66 years-old. He was [interviewed by SIR about a year ago](#) about the tragic situation in his native country. [He died on July 15th](#), in a country with a very precarious health system, after having devoted his whole life to the mission ad gentes. The last of the seven Brazilian bishops to die, Monsignor **Pedro Carlo Zilli**, member of PIME and [Bishop of Bafatá](#) (Guinea-Bissau), served as missionary in Africa. “He continued to be a missionary even after his appointment as bishop, always close to the people with simplicity. He is deeply missed”, **Monica Canavesi**, a lay PIME missionary working at Caritas-Bafatá, told SIR. **Luis Bambarén Gastelumendi**, Jesuit, bishop emeritus of Chimbote, [passed away in March](#) at the age of 93. As auxiliary bishop of Lima, he assisted the poor in the so-called “pueblos juvenes” and later played a key role in confronting the Sendero Luminoso guerrilla group. We also [mourn the death](#) of Msgr. **Arturo Lona Reyes**, Bishop

Emeritus of Tehuantepec (Mexico), passed away at 95 years of age. He was called the 'bishop of the poor' and was a tireless defender of human rights, the pastoral care of indigenous people. *It's impossible to single out a few names among the many priests, deacons, missionaries, men and women religious. We remember in particular those who remained close to their people in the large Latin American cities.* These include **Father Basilio Brítez**, known as Father Bachi, who, despite his poor health, remained close to the sick and the people of the "villas", the slums of Buenos Aires. "When I think of a priest who died from Covid, I remember him," said Msgr. Lozano, recalling the huge crowd of people who attended his funeral. The death of Father **Pedro Velasco Suárez**, Opus Dei minister and chaplain in a school attended chiefly by girls from the "villas", also resonated strongly in Buenos Aires. A much loved Franciscan friar in Bogotá, capital of Colombia, Father **Gabriel Gutiérrez Ramírez**, known as "Frayñero", was infected while relentlessly continuing his service for the homeless. *Also in Colombia, we are saddened by the tragic loss of Sr. Johana Rivera Ramos, who died while ministering to the needs of young people and families just over a year ago in Cartagena, at the age of 33. She was the first to die from COVID-19 in the country.* Also Franciscan friar **Simplício José do Menino Jesus**, was killed by the virus at a young age. He was 28 when he died in Fortaleza, northeastern Brazil, after having been ministering to the homeless. The Salesian Provincial, Father **Juan Pablo Zabala**, passed away in La Paz, Bolivia. *Many priests died in Amazonian regions.* These include Pallottine missionary Fr **Celestino Ceretta** who [died in January](#) at the age of seventy-nine in Manaus, Brazil. He gave a seminal contribution to the study of Amazonia and the mission. Franciscan **Manoel da Silva Lima**, recently died in Santarém. In Venezuela, in areas with very few priests serving across vast areas, Father **José Taguaruco**, a Capuchin friar, died recently in the apostolic vicariate of Caroní, in the southwest part of the country, as did Claretian missionary Father **José Nobrega**, in the apostolic vicariate of Tucupita, in the northwest region. In Puerto Maldonado (Peru) many people are mourning the death of the first indigenous Dominican priest in the apostolic vicariate: **Domingo Sapaa Gechije**, 86, a member of the Ese Eja people. He devoted his life to dialogue with the indigenous peoples. The mission in Colombia of Father **Constantino Gutiérrez Gómez**, member of the Xaverian Missionaries of Yarumal, director of the Department for Ethnic Groups at the Mexican Bishops' Conference, served indigenous and Afro people. One of the many who passed away in Mexico is Father **Pedro Pantoja Arreola**, founder of the House of the Migrant in Saltillo (Coahuila). *"The Latin American and Caribbean Ecclesial Assembly, scheduled for next November, will provide the opportunity to pay homage to these priests and clergy,"* Msgr. Lozano concluded, "and to those who have died as they bore witness to the faith and carried out their service for the defence of human rights and the environment." (*) *Journalist, "La vita del popolo"*

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