
Mexico: dozens of priests killed and threatened by organised crime groups and drug dealers

The latest victim, Father Juan Antonio Orozco Alvarado, a Franciscan, only 33 years old, died a few weeks ago because he was unfortunate enough to be caught in the crossfire of rival drug cartels, in the State of Durango. Previously, at the end of March, Father Gumersindo Cortés González, a 64-year-old priest from the diocese of Celaya, in the state of Guanajuato, was found dead, with visible signs of violence and gunshots, a few hours after his disappearance. Before him, in 2019, Father José Martín Guzmán Vega, from the diocese of Matamoros (Tamaulipas) had been subjected to an outright assassination.

Three different scenarios but one common truth: Mexico's criminal violence has taken a heavy toll even on priests, with some 30 deaths reported since 2012, based on a detailed reconstruction by the Centro Católico Multimedial.

The killings are but the tip of the iceberg of a series of attacks, threats, intimidations, assaults and desecrations of churches. The multiple ways in which these and other priests have been killed reflect the complexity of the problem. However, defining all the murdered priests as true “martyrs” killed “in odium fidei” would be incorrect. It is equally wrong to claim - as occasionally happens in a somewhat simplistic manner - that in a country where organised crime kills about 80 people a day the fact that “every now and then the victim is a priest” is “to be expected.” **Willingness to understand the Church.** “The situation is extremely complex,” the director of the Centro Católico Multimedia, Father **Omar Sotelo**, told SIR. However, it is safe to say that, in general, the phenomenon of violence and killings of priests is linked to organised crime and drug cartels. Our research shows that in 80% of cases, priests were victims of organised crime, not of common criminals, but most of the time what we see is a deliberate attack on the Church as an institution, owing to its role in societal stabilisation. **Rodrigo Guerra López**, an official of the Centro de Investigación Social Avanzada (Cisav) in Santiago de Querétaro and member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, affirmed: “It is not a question of religious violence. In fact, most of the time the targeted victims represent a hindrance to organised crime, frequently resulting in outright assassinations.” **Only the tip of the iceberg.** Centro Católico Multimedial published a comprehensive report on the issue in 2019, and continues to monitor the situation. Father Sotelo explained: “The killings are just the tip of the iceberg. Over 50 incidents of threat and intimidation against priests are perpetrated every year. In addition, an average of 26 churches are attacked or desecrated every week, along with kidnappings: 5-6 in the past year. Fortunately in some cases the abducted victims are released, but only after violence and torture. Killings are often particularly heinous and barbaric. Furthermore, on many occasions, after the murders attempts are made to delegitimize the slain priests, including by political authorities. Allegations are made that they were going to parties, that they should not have been where they were, or other such things.” Why is this happening? “Violence in Mexico is widespread and the Church is operating within this context. However, also the parish is affected as an institution with a fundamental social role: the parish stabilises the community. The homicide of a priest destabilises society and sends a strong intimidating message, thereby giving rise to a terror drug-culture. In a number of cases, priests had openly denounced the situation, as happened in Matamoros, where Father Guzmán Vega exposed the involvement of the government of the State and publicly condemned organised crime.”



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Moreover, despite the resolutions of President López, who took office in 2018, violence remains unchallenged in Mexico, as Guerra López confirmed: 'It must be said that our country has been plagued by violence since pre-Hispanic times. However, the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero War in the 20th century gave it anti-religious connotations. Over the most recent period, violence has been a feature of organised crime groups, now turned into professional crime, run by highly sophisticated companies. Fragmentation of the cartels often results in a multitude of violent criminal groups. Succeeding presidents have tried to uproot organised crime in various ways. Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) sent the army to control the territory, but he failed to do anything about the banking and financial sector. Had he done so, political corruption and complicity would have been exposed. When López Obrador took presidential office he announced a new strategy based on dialogue, yet 80 people have been killed every day in the last three years, twice as many as under Calderón.' **Need for dialogue with the US Church.** Things are not going to get any better: "A new drug trafficking corridor - a veritable highway - runs from Baja California, in the north, to Chiapas, in the south. Most of the winning candidates in states where elections were held a few weeks ago, were openly backed by drug lords. I believe there is no alternative to full and long-term action, in terms of repression, prevention and control of financial activities." Guerra López concludes: "The bishops have spoken out on several occasions, since their strong statements in 2010, and again a few days ago. They rightly highlighted the suffering of priests and of all the people. A strong bond between priests and the people has been consistent throughout history. For the future, more dialogue between the Mexican and American Churches is advisable, given that all this is happening especially because of high levels of illegal drug use in the USA. The bishops are dialoguing on the issue of migrants, and they should also address this issue, that the Church may increasingly be 'one' Church on a continental level. It was the dream of John Paul II, and has continued to be the dream of Benedict XVI and of Francis."

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