

More priests killed in Mexico as drug violence spirals

by [Stephen Woodman](#) in the [November 8, 2016](#) issue

Even in a community that has grown accustomed to the news of brutal killings, the abduction and murder of a popular Catholic priest in rural Mexico created shock and outrage.

The bullet-ridden body of José López Guillen was found earlier this fall on the highway outside Puruándiro in the western state of Michoacán, a region plagued by violent conflict. The 43-year-old cleric had been abducted from his home in nearby Janamuato five days earlier.

“He was an engaging personality,” said Maria Solorio, a regular at López’s church. “He was an excellent priest and very devoted to the community. . . . What happened to him was a great injustice.”

Such injustices have been piling up and have prompted questions about whether the church is under attack or whether the clergy are just collateral damage in a wider wave of violence.

The same day López was kidnapped, authorities discovered the bodies of two slain priests in the eastern state of Veracruz. In total, at least 15 priests have been slain over the past four years.

In the wake of the killings the church has also abandoned its normal reluctance to criticize the government and has publicly accused state officials in Michoacán and Veracruz of directing a defamation campaign against the priests.

Mexico has the second-largest Catholic population in the world, with nearly 100 million people, or more than 80 percent of the population, identifying as Catholic. But the country has a long history of anticlericalism, and in the past century the government officially and often violently suppressed the church.

That dynamic changed dramatically after constitutional reforms in 1992, and the government and the Catholic hierarchy enjoyed good relations for the most part.

Motives have not been established for the latest killings, but the Centro Católico Multimedial (Catholic Multimedia Center) notes that violence against clergy occurs disproportionately in states with high levels of organized crime, such as Veracruz and Michoacán.

The organization records 31 killings of priests in Mexico since 2006, the year then president Felipe Calderón deployed troops to Michoacán in an effort to stamp out the drug cartels.

A decade later, the war across Mexico has claimed more than 150,000 lives and thousands more are missing, while Michoacán remains a hotbed of crime and civil unrest.

Pope Francis visited the state capital, Morelia, during his trip to Mexico in February, in a show of solidarity with those most affected by organized crime.

The intensity of the violence in Michoacán has compelled some priests to engage in social activism, although the moves are rarely welcomed by the Catholic hierarchy.

One such priest is José Luis Segura Barragán, who is among the most high-profile opponents of drug cartels in the state.

After he was appointed parish priest in the town of La Ruana in 2013, Segura voiced support for the armed self-defense groups that had sprung up in response to rampant insecurity in the region. Other groups of locals soon tried to drive him out of town.

“Because I didn’t leave, people fired bullets and threw rocks and fireworks at the church,” he said.

Segura, who finally left La Ruana four months ago, came under the media spotlight for his views. Yet for the clergy, even keeping a low profile is no guarantee of safety. In the most dangerous states in Mexico, any resistance against cartels, however minor, can become a motive for murder.

“Priests find themselves in problems when they refuse to provide a service to drug traffickers, like a baptism or mass,” Segura said.

Analysts generally agree, however, that violence against the clergy should be seen within the wider context of the drug war.

“It would be dishonest to say this is a targeted persecution of priests or the church,” said Hugo Valdemar Romero, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Mexico City. “But the fact that you are a priest does not liberate you from the risk of robbery, murder, or torture.”

Omar Sotelo of the CCM said the role of the clergy makes them particularly vulnerable to crime, since priests come into contact with a great variety of people, some of whom may be criminals.

“The violence against priests often has to do with their pastoral work,” Sotelo said. “These are not just common crimes.”

Some critics have accused Mexican bishops of concentrating on social matters such as same-sex marriage while turning a blind eye to the politically sensitive topic of violence.

“The church is focused on sexual issues,” said Alejandro Solalinde, a priest and activist. “They don’t organize many marches to protest injustice, government corruption, and impunity.”

But attempts by prosecutors to link recently murdered priests with crime and criminals seem to have convinced church officials to speak out against the government.

Surveillance footage apparently showing López entering a hotel with an underage boy was leaked to a media outlet in Michoacán. It caused an uproar until a woman on social media identified the pair as her ex-husband and son, not the murdered priest.

Similarly, Luis Ángel Bravo Contreras, state attorney general, was criticized for claiming the two priests in Veracruz had been drinking heavily with their killers before the crimes.

Church officials have responded with a vigorous defense of the victims.

On September 26, a day after López’s body was discovered, the Mexican bishops’ conference made a statement demanding an end to slander against priests or anyone, especially during investigations.

Slander, Solalinde said, “is a common strategy . . . to criminalize victims in an effort to contain the public outcry.”

In this Mexican context of crime, corruption, and impunity, Solalinde believes violence against priests suggests they are truly living their vocation.

“This persecution is a sign that priests are defending human rights,” he said.

Solalinde has himself been threatened by criminals on multiple occasions.

“If one day something happens, it happens,” he said. “But I refuse to let that worry me.” —Religion News Service

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