

The Roman Catholic Multimedia Centre

2017 – A disastrous year for Mexican priests

The investigations unit of the Roman Catholic Multimedia Centre (*Centro Católico Multimedial – CCM*), publishes this partial report for 2017 with up to date information on priests, religious people, and laypeople that have lost their lives in Mexico.

Panorama of homicides in the current president's six-year term (From 2012 to date)

Our country has been considered the number one location for hate crimes against priests, religious people and laypeople in Latin America for the ninth consecutive year.

Recent data indicates that, from 1990 to 2017, the list includes 1 cardinal, 45 priests, 1 deacon, 4 religious people, 9 laypeople and 1 Catholic journalist. There have also been 67 registered attacks against members of the Roman Catholic Church, 61 of which appeared premeditated.

Under the rule of President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2017), the following has been observed:

19 priests and 2 laypeople have been murdered, and 2 priests have disappeared

Mexico has continued to be a dangerous place to be a priest. 2017 has been an undeniably disastrous year for the priesthood and the church in the country. Four murders, two kidnappings, two iconic attacks, one against the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City, and the other against the offices of the Mexican Episcopal Conference, as well as hundreds of cases of threats and extortion of priests and bishops, have been recorded. This is the sad panorama that leads us to claim that things are far from improving.

It should be pointed out that members of the church are not in conflict with the illegal groups in the country. Despite this, there are sectors of society that take advantage of the widespread violence and become contemptuous towards religious people in places such as Chiapas, Tabasco, Ciudad de México, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, Estado de México, Jalisco, Nayarit, Veracruz, San Luis Potosí, Colima, Culiacán, Tabasco, Michoacán, Guerrero and Tamaulipas.

These groups that attack priests and religious people are looking to limit the pastoral activities of the Mexican Church, which is involved in the health and education sectors, and offers assistance, refuge and counsel in favour of the human rights of migrants that come to Mexico.

It is for the above that pastoral agents, specifically priests, are the most vulnerable to diverse attacks, as demonstrated by the growing wave of aggression, murders and disappearances. This takes place under the indifferent observation of authorities throughout the country, where in recent years, insecurity has increased and the number of organised criminal groups has grown.

We cannot remain silent, the blood of thousands of Mexicans continues to be spilt. We will continue to fearlessly call to account the authorities of the Mexican government at all levels, be it federal, state, or municipal, until they provide guarantees enabling the practice of priestly ministry in many areas in Mexico where violence has been observed.

Chronology of homicides against priests in Mexico, 2012-2017

2012

1. Fr. Víctor Manuel Diosdado Ríos, diocese of Apatzingán. His pastoral work disturbed various criminals, this cost him his life on 7 June.

2013

2. Fr. José Flores Preciado was murdered on 5 February in the 'King Christ' (*Cristo Rey*) Church in Colima. Delinquents arrived at the location at 11pm on the Tuesday with the intention of robbery. They realised that the father was sleeping there, he was beaten to death, dying in hospital.

3. Fr. Ignacio Cortez Álvarez was murdered on 22 July. The Attorney General's Office in Baja California reported that the motive was violent robbery. The father was responsible for the *María Auxiliadora* parish in the Ensenada municipality.

4. Fr. Hipólito Villalobos Lima, 45 years old, and the vicar **5. Fr. Nicolás De la Cruz Martínez**, 31 years old, were found dead in the San Cristóbal parish, Ixhuatlán de Madero, in the state of Veracruz, on 29 November. The diocese of Tuxtla says that the zone is controlled by the *Jalisco Nueva Generación* and *Zetas* cartels.

6. Fr. Joel Román Salazar, of the Altamirano City Diocese in Guerrero. Died suddenly after his car was driven off the road in a premeditated attack. He died on 10 December 2013.

2014

7. Missionary Fr. John Ssenyondo, from Uganda. He was working in the Chilpancingo diocese in Chilapa, Guerrero. The father was kidnapped in Nejado, Guerrero, on 30 April 2014. He was found in a common grave on 28 October 2014 in Cocula, Guerrero.

8. Fr. José Ascención Acuña Osorio, 37 years old, was kidnapped on 21 September 2014. His body was found in the Balsas River on 23 September, very close to the town of Santa Cruz de Las Tinajas in the San Miguel Totolapan municipality (in the Tierra Caliente region, Guerrero).

9. Fr. Rolando Martínez Lara, pastor of the Santa María de Guadalupe Church in Canalejas, Jilotepec, Mexico state. The father's parish was the target of a robbery, he was killed in the early hours of the morning on Wednesday 19 February 2014.

10. Fr. Gregorio López Gorostiete. Armed individuals burst into the Mayor de Las Asunción Seminary, on the outskirts of Altamirano, in the foothills of Chuperio, and tried to kidnap him in the early hours of the morning on 22 December. The father was strangled but did not die immediately, he was shot in the back of the head on 25 December.

2015

11. Fr. Francisco Javier Gutiérrez Díaz, of the Brotherhood of Workers for the Kingdom of God (*Confaternidad de los Operarios del Reino de Cristo*), was found shot in the head on the night of 9 April. He had been abandoned by his aggressors at the side of a dirt road near the towns of Ojo de Agua de Ballesteros and San Nicolás de la Condesa, in the Salvatierra municipality, Guanajuato state.

12. Fr. Israel Garrido Omaña, 44 years old, belonging to the San Antonio Abad community in Bosque del Lago. Was shot five times in the Cuatitlán Izcalli municipality, Mexico state, on 13 November. He died on 23 December, the motive for the aggression remains unknown.

2016

13. Fr. Alejo Nabor Jiménez Juárez and **14. Fr. José Alfredo Juárez de la Cruz**. Both kidnapped and murdered between 18 and 19 September 2016. The bodies of the two priests showed signs of torture, they were killed with a firearm.

15. Fr. José Alfredo López Guillén. Violently taken from his parish on 19 September. Found dead five days later at a point on the road between Puruándiro and Zináparo in Michoacán. He was the third priest to be murdered in the country in a single week.

2017

16. Fr. Felipe Altamirano Carrillo, an indigenous priest from Nayar, Nayarit state. Murdered in March 2017. Following some testimonies, it is believed that he and other people were victims of an assault, but he was the only one to die. The investigation remains open.

17. Fr. Joaquín Hernández Sifuentes of the Saltillo Diocese. Murdered in January by two people who are now under arrest. Although they claim that the attack was provoked by supposed sexual abuse from the priest, their statements are contradictory. The prosecution process remains open.

18. Fr. Luis López Villa, 73 years old, of the Nezahualcóyotl Diocese, murdered on the night of 5 July. The suspected perpetrator of the crime has been captured and presumably committed the homicide to rob the priest, although there is not much evidence of robbery, but rather of a brutal and premeditated murder.

19. Fr. José Miguel Machorro Alcalá who was brutally attacked with a blank weapon after celebrating mass in the Archdiocese of Mexico Metropolitan Primate Cathedral (*Catedral Metropolitana de Arquidiócesis Primada de México*) on 15 May. He died on midday on 3 August. The perpetrator of the crime is imprisoned, their prosecution process remains open and the motive for the aggression is unknown.

Disappearances

On the other hand, there has still been no news regarding the disappearance of the priest **Santiago Álvarez Figueroa** of the Zamora diocese. He disappeared on 29 December 2012; to date, there has been no indication of his whereabouts. Regarding this, the former Apostolic Nuncio (ambassador) of Mexico, Mons. Christophe Pierre, said that he shared in the suffering of the families of kidnapping victims and expressed his sorrow for the disappearance of the young priest.

In the case of **Father Carlos Órnelas Puga**, who disappeared on 3 November 2013, there has also been no knowledge of his whereabouts, according to a representative of the Victoria City Diocese, the capital of Tamaulipas. The source added that after being presented with a report about the father's disappearance the case has remained in the hands of the Anti-Kidnapping group in Tamaulipas, whose members "were attacked by strangers in the Padilla municipality", which has some 14,000 inhabitants, in the first stages of the investigation. The exact timing of this incident was not specified.

Kidnappings

Two kidnappings of priests:

Fr. Luis Antonio Salazar de la Torre from the Tarahumara diocese in Guadalupe y Calvo municipality in Chihuahua. According to reports, two armed men kidnapped the priest who was driving in Baborigame on 6 November 2016. Later, he was successfully freed following an army operation in which one of the captors died.

Fr. José Luis Sánchez Ruiz of Catemaco, San Andrés Tuxtla Veracruz diocese. In the early hours of the morning on 13 November 2016, he was released by his captors. He had notable injuries from torture.

Attacks

Fr. José Miguel Machorro Alcalá. On 15 May 2017 in the Archdiocese of Mexico Metropolitan Primate Cathedral. After the celebration of mass, a young man identified as Juan René Silva, from San Luis Potosí, struck the priest a number of times. This became the first case in which someone had been killed in a sacred place in the Mexican republic.

On the night of 8 June 2017, a delinquent attacked **Fr. Juan Antonio Zambrano García**, of San Pedro y San Pablo parish, in the Tijuana Archdiocese, driving a screwdriver into the left side of his head. Father Juan Antonio recovered as the instrument did not touch any vital organs.

On 3 July 2017 at 19:45, in a parish of the Juventino Rosas colony of the Iztacalco delegation in Mexico City, **Parishioner Juan N** (name omitted for security reasons), was the victim of an unusual attack. After gagging him and preparing to execute him, one of the perpetrators looked at a photograph on his mobile and said “You aren’t the one we are looking for, forget about it.” The delinquents explained to him that he was not the person they had been sent to kill before running away. This event is being investigated with investigation number IZC2/UI3S/D2358/0717.

Explosion in the Juan Pablo II Building, headquarters for the Mexican Episcopal Conference (MEC) in Villa de Guadalupe, Mexico City. At 1:45am on 25 July 2017, a hooded man who had been prowling around the MEC’s buildings, left a bag in the main door of the Basilica de Guadalupe before lighting a cigarette and throwing it away. 5 minutes later, at 1:50am, the contents of the bag exploded, causing material damage to the building.

Sergio Omar Sotelo Aguilar, SSP, Dir. CCM