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During his Aug. 8 homily, Bishop Elías Bolaños Avelar of Zacatecoluca, El Salvador, admitted he was still struggling with the Aug. 6 killing of a priest from his diocese, who also was the rector of the philosophy department at the St. Óscar Romero Seminary in Santiago de María.

Many young men knew him as a rector of their seminary, but priest friends knew Fr. Ricardo Cortez, who was in his 40s, as the "philosopher of Agape, the philosopher of love" because of his great smile and friendship, Bolaños said during a homily at the priest's funeral Mass.

Authorities said they found the lifeless body of the priest near a road, close to a car he was driving, after being alerted early Aug. 7, but he may have been killed the day before. No one has been charged with the killing, but Bishop Bolaños made a brief mention is his homily that perhaps someone, or more than one person, connected

with a parish may have been involved.

Cortez is the third priest killed in the country in the last 18 months, and most of the country's bishops showed up to the funeral Mass to demand justice for the killing. Archbishop Jose Luis Escobar Alas of San Salvador read a statement from the bishops' conference, calling the killing a "sacrilege," condemning it as an "abominable crime," and demanding an investigation.

But by dying in such a way, said Bolaños, the priest was sharing the experience of the many in the country, living in "a world of violence where others are killed with ease. That's what happened to our good Father Ricardo."

"They have taken away a fruitful life for the Salvadoran church," said the bishop. "In the face of such an unexpected situation, there's bewilderment, an evoking of sadness, shock and a bit of anger and objection."

Looking at comments from Salvadorans on social media, the country's Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez said he had seen many ask the question: "Who (which priest) will be next?"

"It's as if saying: Who is safe in this country?" the cardinal said. "It's very sad not being able to trust in justice, not to feel safe, to feel that anything can happen at any time."

El Salvador has at various times in recent history been at the top, or near the top of lists of most dangerous countries in the world not at war. And members of the clergy and even the hierarchy, just as in the time of the country's civil war in the 1980s and early 1990s, have been victims of violence. In 1980, the archbishop of San Salvador, now St. Óscar Romero, after whom the seminary is named, was killed during Mass.

Bolaños' statement against the killing reflected on the country's bloody history and how church members, particularly those who work with the poor, have not been spared from the bloodshed.

"The innocent blood of a good priest once again irrigates the land of El Salvador," he said, making reference to this year's 40th anniversary of the martyrdom of St. Óscar Arnulfo Romero, Franciscan Fr. Cosme Spessotto and four women religious from United States — all killed in El Salvador. "Once again, our diocese is stained with the innocent blood of a good pastor dedicated to his sheep."

Just before the priest's burial, Fr. Felipe López, pastoral vicar of the Zacatecoluca Diocese, said that what had taken the life of Cortez was a virus — more powerful than COVID-19 — that has long plagued the country.

"Father Ricardo was taken from us by the most powerful virus this country has, and that's delinquency and criminality," López said. "That's what took Ricardo. I hope that just as there is a battle going on to eradicate the great virus, COVID, I hope that a crime like this will be the impetus to battle the root of the virus that we all live with every day and that leaves many Salvadoran families filled with blood."

Cortez was buried Aug. 9 in his hometown Concepción de Los Planes, and a jersey with the No. 6, the number from the soccer team he played on, draped over his coffin.

Rosa Chávez encouraged Salvadorans not to give in to despair.

"It's important not to give in to resignation, but to build the world that Jesus dreamed of: the Kingdom," he said. "That kingdom of love and justice and peace. That's what our dear Father Ricardo worked for ... that Kingdom begins here, although it does not end here. It is the seed of that Kingdom that we must continue sowing, that seed, because people deserve a better future. Each one of us does his part, but we are all builders of that kingdom. We can't do everything, but we can do something, and that something is what's needed to finish that magnificent project of God, that world that is just, fraternal, united and peaceful."

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