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Priests in El Salvador have called on the nation's bishops to conduct their own investigation into the murder of a Salvadoran seminary rector.

In an Aug. 17 statement, a cooperative of priests known as COOPESA "exhorted" the Salvadoran bishops' conference to speak out prophetically on the slaying of Fr. Ricardo Cortez, who was found dead Aug. 7.

The statement, signed by Fr. Juan V. Chopin, COOPESA president, also asked that the bishops' conference "do its own investigation of the homicide, [so] results can be compared with the public ministry's investigation."

The murder of Cortez, 45, from the Diocese of Zacatecoluca, has caused pain and consternation for churchmen in El Salvador, where three priests have been slain over the past 18 months. None of the crimes has been solved — the norm in a

country with a falling homicide rate but still wracked by gang violence.

"This criminal sequence denotes the existence of an orchestrated homicide plan, in which there are actors from different origins and a pattern of premeditated criminal conduct, along with malevolence toward innocent victims," the COOPESA statement said.

"As in the times of Archbishop Romero" — St. Oscar Romero — "now we can say, 'Enough playing with life in El Salvador.'"

Authorities in the Central American country found Father Cortez's lifeless body in the early morning hours near a road and close to a car he had been driving. El Salvador's bishops say he was driving to the seminary after celebrating Mass in his home community Aug. 6.

Cortez was not robbed and had been shot in the head, according to the COOPESA statement. Bishop Elías Bolaños Avelar mentioned previously that one or more persons linked to the slain priest's parish might have been involved.

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