News

A nun joins people with missing relatives and victims of violence during a procession in Ciuda

A nun joins people with missing relatives and victims of violence during a procession in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico July 28, 2022, in memory of their loved ones as part of the Praying Days for Peace called by the Catholic Church due to the ongoing violence in Mexico. (CNS photo/Jose Luis Gonzalez, Reuters)

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Mexico's Roman Catholic Church has suspended a controversial priest who has advised parishioners to carry guns to fight off drug cartels.

Better known as "Father Pistolas," Fr. Alfredo Gallegos is a priest in the violence-plagued western state of Michoacan who has himself sometimes carried a weapon.

A circular from the Archdiocese of Morelia, the state capital, instructed other priests not to allow Gallegos to celebrate Mass.

While the archdiocese did not answer phone calls seeking to confirm the order, a priest in a neighboring diocese who was not authorized to be quoted by name confirmed the authenticity of the order Oct. 12.

The order, dated Sept. 21, did not specify a reason for the indefinite suspension imposed earlier that month, saying only that Gallegos "had been admonished on

several occasions” for something.

Even for Michoacan, it was surprising when Gallegos called from the pulpit in 2021 for parishioners to arm themselves against warring drug gangs.

“The cartel gunmen come, they take the livestock, they screw your wife and daughter, and you do nothing,” Gallegos said in a sermon. ”Well, get yourself a gun, the government can go to hell.”

“We have to defend our lives,” Gallegos continued.

Mexican law forbids most civilians from owning almost all firearms, except for extremely low caliber hunting rifles or shotguns.

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But Michoacan has a history of armed civilian “self defense” vigilante militia movements dating from 2013 and 2014. Back then vigilantes managed to chase the dominant Knights Templar cartel out, but rival cartels like the Viagras and the Jalisco cartel have moved in. Kidnappings, killings and shootings have prompted thousands to flee their homes.

At the time, Gallegos was backed by some fellow Roman Catholic clergy.

Fr. Gregorio López, a priest known for once wearing a flak vest while celebrating Mass, has spent the last few years running shelters for people who have fled their homes due to violence. He has also tried to help get asylum or refugee status for Michoacan residents in the United States.

López called Gallegos’ sermon “the cry of the people.”

“He is trying to be the voice of the people, and that is the feeling of the community, that they should be armed,” said López, who served as a sort of spiritual adviser for some of the self-defense groups in 2014.

Mexico is a notoriously dangerous country for priests' own personal safety.

The church’s Catholic Multimedia Center said seven priests have been slain during the current administration, which took office in December 2018, and at least two dozen in the six years of the previous president.