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A group of people stand outside greenhouses around a table with a white cloth, many candles

San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone blesses the sites of mass shootings in Half Moon Bay, Calif., and reclaims them in prayer as "places of peace" Jan. 27, 2023. Eight migrant farmworkers were shot Jan. 23 by a former co-worker at two separate locations in the bucolic coastal enclave, 30 miles from San Francisco. Seven of the victims died and one remains in critical condition. The suspect was apprehended hours later. (OSV News photo/Christina Gray, Catholic San Francisco)

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Monterey Park, Calif. — February 3, 2023

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The memories of Valentino Marcos Alvero brought a wide, warm smile to the face of Fr. Joseph Magdaong.

"A very happy person, always with jokes to share, just a fun guy to be with and have a meal with," said Magdaong, standing on the steps outside St. Stephen Martyr Church in Monterey Park and speaking about Alvero, a fellow Filipino American and a parishioner.

"Thank you, God, for giving me a chance to be with Val," Magdaong added about his "kababayan," or "countryman."

The pastor welcomed Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez and Auxiliary Bishop David G. O’Connell, vicar of the archdiocesan pastoral region that includes Monterey Park, and a congregation of more than 100 to an evening memorial Mass Jan. 27 in a community still looking for answers and seeking comfort from a Jan. 21 mass shooting at a dance club just two blocks from the church.

Alvero, 68, was one of 11 killed, along with nine more injured in the dance club shooting. His name was listed with the other victims on a simple white sign placed next to a bouquet of flowers near the altar.

In Northern California earlier in the day Jan. 27, San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone traveled to Half Moon Bay to acknowledge lives lost and families fractured in a deadly Jan. 23 shooting at two work sites there.

A crowd of approximately 50 grieving family and community members, including the town's mayor, gathered at both the Mountain Mushroom Farms and Concord Farms sites where the archbishop came to help reclaim the site from the violence that occurred there.

In Monterey Park, Gomez began the Mass at St. Stephen Martyr Church by reading a message from Pope Francis expressing his condolences to those affected by the shooting. He finished it with a message of his own, delivered in both English and Spanish.

"We want to be close to you in this challenging time," said the archbishop. "It is a tragedy that has affected all of us, especially the families of the victims as well as the parish and the community. But we are together. You have our prayers and somehow God is going to bring blessings to this difficult situation."

In his homily, Magdaong pointed to the importance of cherishing memories of those killed as a necessary part of coping with the tragedy, even singing lyrics during his homily to the popular 1974 song "The Way We Were," made famous by Barbra Streisand.

Celebrating the memorial Mass for the victims, the priest said, was important because "it is our obligation and our duty to always pray especially in this time of a mass shooting for those killed and injured. We pray for healing because we know prayer is powerful."

Prayer, he said, "helps us to stay calm and believe, a purpose to respond with peace and love instead of hate and violence."

As the memorial Mass concluded, some gravitated to two other nearby memorial sites that have been growing since the shooting took place: outside the entrance of the Star Ballroom Dance Studio, and in front of the Monterey Park City Hall.

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The shooting suspect, later identified as Huu Can Tran, 72, walked from the Star Ballroom to another nearby dance studio, but someone there disarmed him and he fled. He later took his own life in his van as police closed in. Nearly two weeks later police had yet to identify his motive.

In a statement released the day after Alvero's death, the family described him as "a loving father, a dedicated son and brother, a grandfather who loved his three granddaughters fiercely, an uncle who loved his nieces and nephews like his own. … He loved ballroom dancing, he loved his community and he was the life of the party. … We will all miss him for the rest of our days on this earth. We hope that he danced to his heart's content until the very end and hope that he is now dancing in heaven."

In Half Moon Bay, eight migrant farmworkers were shot by a disgruntled former co-worker at two separate locations in the bucolic coastal enclave, which is 30 miles from San Francisco and located in San Mateo County, one of the three counties served by the archdiocese.

Seven of the victims died and one remains in critical condition. The suspect was apprehended hours later.

"We come together this day to reclaim this space of death as a place of life," Cordileone said, circling the grounds to bless them with holy water. "This place where violence occurred, we are reclaiming as a place of peace. This place that causes fear, anger and pain, we are reclaiming as a place of hope and community. We reclaim the humanity of both victim and victimizer in God's name."

The archbishop spoke in both English and Spanish. All of the victims -- seven men and one woman -- were of either Asian or Hispanic descent.

Servando Martinez fought back tears as he spoke haltingly in Spanish about his brother, Marciano Martinez Jimenez, 50, who was one of the victims.

"For me, my brother Marciano is not dead. He is only ahead of us," he said. As family members flanked him in support at the microphone, he asked for forgiveness for the suspect, a remarkable act of faith the archbishop recognized, saying: "They themselves have manifested the love of God in extending forgiveness to the perpetrator of this heinous crime who took their loved ones away from them."

The suspect, Chunli Zhao, 66, faces seven counts of murder and one of attempted murder.

In comments after the prayer services, Fr. Jose Corral, pastor of Our Lady of the Pillar Parish in Half Moon Bay, said his parish community has rallied around the families "emotionally, spiritually and physically."

"Two of those seven people who died are from our parish," he said. "We hope that this is going to bring the parish together and the town of Half Moon Bay even closer and to get closer to God, to get closer to Jesus. He works in mysterious ways."

The parish and the archdiocese also took part in a community candlelight vigil for the victims later that night.