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Many priests in green vestments surround a green altar. Many flags are on the wall next to th

At the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, Mexican Catholic leaders marked the first anniversary of the murders of two elderly Jesuits with a special Mass June 18, 2023, celebrated by Cardinal Carlos Aguiar Retes of Mexico City. Prayers also were offered concelebrated for Mexico's thousands of missing persons and the families of the many Mexicans murdered over the past two decades. (OSV News photo/courtesy Archdiocese of Mexico City)



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Mexican Catholic leaders marked the first anniversary of the murders of two elderly Jesuits with special Masses celebrated June 18 in memory of Mexico's thousands of missing persons and the families of the many Mexicans murdered over the past two decades.

At the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Cardinal Carlos Aguiar Retes of Mexico City prayed for peace and "national reconciliation," and also for "the migrants, the disappeared persons and their families, and the family members of the deceased due to violence."

"It is always necessary to start at home … to bear witness within families and then move to citizen relations, to the work and business environments, fostering a political environment capable of becoming the place where all proposals which favor respectful relations are heard," Aguiar said.

"This is the virtuous circle of good shepherds who transmit forgiveness and reconciliation, which will create a reconciled society and achieve the social peace that we so long for," the cardinal added.

Similar services were celebrated across Mexico, with families of victims invited to attend and bring photos of their missing or murdered loved ones.

Bells also will toll at churches across Mexico at 3 p.m. June 20 -- the anniversary of the murders of Jesuit Frs. Javier Campos Morales and Joaquín César Mora Salazar, who were shot dead by a notorious crime boss as they sheltered a person in their parish in the rugged Sierra Tarahumara region of northern Chihuahua state.

The slayings of Campos and Mora provoked outrage in Mexico's Catholic Church and among the broader society, while reinforcing Mexico's ruinous reputation as one the most murderous countries for priests.

At least nine priests have been murdered during the administration of current President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who took office in December 2018, according to the Catholic Multimedia Center.

Only three days before the bishops gathered to pray for the victims of violence, missing persons and for peace throughout the country, two catechists, Gertrudis Cruz de Jesús and Gliserina Cruz Merino, were killed on their way to a Eucharistic procession.

The young women were killed when their vehicle was attacked June 15 in a conflictive region of southern Oaxaca state, according to the Diocese of Huajuapan de León.

The country's bishops responded to the Jesuits' murders with calls for action -- raising their voices on an uncomfortable topic for prelates, who have preferred not to provoke politicians or endanger their priests' lives.

"The events of Cerocahui" -- where the priests were murdered -- "mark a before and after," Fr. Luis Gerardo Moro Madrid, Jesuit provincial in Mexico, told OSV News.

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"(The gunman) burst into a church where there were two elderly priests and it's in a church where they were murdered. A sacred space was profaned. That means that drug trafficking, that violence can reach anywhere. … That breaks the rules of the game," Moro said.

"I think it was also a moment of awareness among religious and priests that something was wrong, something is already rotten in the Mexican system and that it deserves a prompt response," he added.

Violence in Mexico has claimed more than 400,000 lives since 2006, when the then-President Felipe Calderón launched a crackdown on drug cartels. More than 100,000 people have disappeared during that time, too.

"Violence in Mexico is not a new thing, it is one of the biggest scourges that has hurt us for years, and it seems that we have no truce, but rather, it is getting worse," Archdiocese of Mexico City publication Desde la fe wrote in a June 18 editorial. "Thousands of victims of violence in Mexico accumulate, murdered and disappeared, unidentified bodies, clandestine graves, are expressions of this terrible evil that we suffer."

The church's demand for changes on security matters has brought it into conflict with López Obrador, who rejected calls to change a security strategy he describes as "hugs, not bullets."

Jesuit Fr. Javier Ávila said at the slain priests' funeral Mass, "Hugs are not enough to stop bullets. … I respectfully ask the president of the republic to review his public security project, because we are not doing well."

Little has changed in the Sierra Tarahumara since the murders, Ávila told OSV News, though the Jesuits continue serving the local Indigenous population amid rampant insecurity.

A chapel in the municipality of Guachochi was shot up with 700 bullets June 6, while a pickup was torched in front and a decapitated body was left at the door.

"For me," Ávila said, "I believe it's a message against the government, telling them, 'Look how far we will go, and they do nothing to us. We enjoy impunity.'"

The suspect in the slaying of the Jesuits, José Noriel Portillo Gil -- known as "El Chueco," or "The Crooked One" -- terrorized the region, according to Ávila, who has worked in the Sierra Tarahumara for 49 years and founded a human rights center.

Gil was shot dead in March in what church officials describe as a settling of scores -- an unsatisfying outcome for the Jesuits.

"The lack of a trial in accordance with the law for this homicide implies a failure for the Mexican state in its basic duties," Moro said. "It also confirms the authorities do not have territorial control in the region."