News



Framed images of Jesuit priests Javier Campos Morales, left, and Joaquin Cesar Mora Salazar are displayed on an altar during a memorial Mass in Mexico City, June 21, 2022. Two years have passed since a leader of one of Mexico's organized crime stormed into a Catholic church in the remote Tarahumara mountains and shot the two Jesuit priests to death on June 20, 2022. (AP/Fernando Llano, File)

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Two years have passed since a leader of one of Mexico's organized crime gangs stormed into a Catholic church in the remote Tarahumara mountains and fatally shot two Jesuit priests.

Among many faith leaders nationwide, the pain unleashed on June 20, 2022 — when the Revs. Javier Campos Morales, 79, and Joaquín César Mora Salazar, 80, were murdered by a local gang leader — has not faded. Nor their quest for peace.

"The murders of Fathers Javier and Joaquín has allowed us to redefine the pain that lives in the hearts of many corners of the country," the Catholic bishops conference of Mexico said in a news release Thursday. "To build a shared movement that has peace as its horizon and the victims of violence as its starting point."

The bells at Jesuit churches and neighboring Catholic parishes tolled for the slain priests on Thursday afternoon. Later, dozens gathered at a church in Mexico City for a Mass in their honor. It was followed by the inauguration of a nearby mural depicting Campos and Mora called "Cerocahui Memory."

"With them, we remember all of those who have died due to violence and indifference," said the Rev. Javier Acero, standing next to a portrait of his murdered Jesuit brothers during the service. "Today we ask for peace, we scream for it."

"We denounce that people still disappear in our country, that those who are responsible for safeguarding our security remain indifferent," Acero said. "And we know that denouncing this means shedding blood, sweat and tears, but we will keep doing it."

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, since he took office in 2018, has avoided direct confrontation with cartels and violent gangs controlling and terrorizing local communities. His "hugs, not bullets" policy has drawn extensive criticism from faith leaders, human rights organizations and journalists who have echoed victims' fears and anger.

Organized crime has long controlled swaths of territory in states such as Guerrero, Guanajuato and Michoacan. Many people have been displaced from rural villages in

Chiapas by warring cartels.

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Some two dozen candidates were killed ahead of June 2 elections, when Mexicans elected Claudia Sheinbaum as their first female president.

Both Sheinbaum and López Obrador have rejected any criticism of the government's security strategies, claiming that homicide levels were reduced during the last administration. In contrast, church leaders have repeatedly said that Mexico suffers from a "deep crisis of violence and social decomposition."

In remembrance of the 2022 murders, the bishops conference, Jesuits of Mexico and some other national religious organizations announced Thursday a third stage of the "National Peace Dialogue." They demanded concrete actions to address nationwide violence.

For the past two years, the initiative has brought together civil society, academics, violence victims and businesspeople who search for solutions to achieve justice, security and peace. More than 60.000 testimonies have been gathered.

The relationship between López Obrador and the Catholic Church has been tense ever since the murder of the Jesuits priests. Bishop Ramón Castro, secretary general of the bishops conference, said ahead of June elections that he wished for a deeper dialogue between the government and the church.

Lopez Obrador has said that religious leaders are "cynical" and "hypocrites" for criticizing him but not his predecessors.

"It's a shame that the President ignores history," the Rev. Javier Ávila, a Jesuit who worked close to the murdered priests in the Sierra Tarahumara, said in a recent interview. "So I need to remind him that we, the Jesuits, were expelled from America for having shouted in favor of the Indigenous people."

"One cannot be indifferent when one has hit rock bottom, when blood has splashed on you, when you have shared tears."

In its news release Thursday, the bishops' conference announced the start of the "Local Peace Projects," which will include various actions in schools, neighborhoods,

companies and family environments.

The peace proposal from the Catholic Church addresses seven topics: reconstruction of the social fabric, security, justice, prisons, youth, governance and human rights.