News



Candles are seen on the altar at the Church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Mexico City March 23, 2025, in memory of eight young people shot dead outside a church in Salamanca, in western Guanajuato state, on March 16. (OSV News/Courtesy of Fr. Jorge Atilano)



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SALAMANCA, Mexico — March 24, 2025
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Mexican parishioners placed eight candles on church altars in memory of the eight young people shot dead in an attack outside a parish church.

Catholic leaders called for action on insecurity and urged reflection on how violence is scandalously claiming the lives of many young people.

Masses were celebrated around the country March 23 as Catholics prayed for the victims of the attack, which claimed eight lives and left five injured, in the city of Salamanca in western Guanajuato state March 16.

Details are still unclear, but Bishop Enrique Díaz Díaz said in a March 18 statement, "They were talking and socializing after the celebration of holy Mass, (then) at approximately 7:30 pm, armed men arrived … and opened fire."

Investigators found 50 shell casings from high-powered weapons, along with bullet holes in the wall of the San José Mendoza Church, according to Mexican media.

"This act makes us reflect on the violence plaguing our nation, which has become a cancer for our society. Criminals flaunt their impunity, manifest contempt for life, and make insecurity prevail in our community spaces," the Mexican bishops' conference said in a March 18 statement.

"This reality wounds the hearts of all Mexicans; no one can feel excluded from it. It's time to unite and for us to assume our commitment to peace in our country," the statement continued.

"Let us form a common front, living the solidarity that has so often characterized us in the face of the tragedies we confront, and fight crime and the lack of justice that bleeds our country and thwarts the dreams of thousands of our young people."

The attack on the young people came as violence continues to convulse Mexico. Stories of horror routinely make the headlines — including the recent discovery of what appears to be an extermination site, where searchers looking for their missing loved ones found bone fragments, clothing and ovens used to cremate victims.

Mexico has stepped up its enforcement against drug cartels under U.S. pressure since President Claudia Sheinbaum took office Oct. 1. But her administration continues to downplay atrocities such as the discovery of the apparent extermination site.

Violence has been rife in Guanajuato — considered one of Mexico's most Catholic states — as drug cartels battle over an illegal business of stealing gasoline from pipelines operated by state-run oil company Pemex. A December 2023 massacre at a Christmas party in a community served by the Diocese of Irapuato killed 11 young people and left 14 injured.

The attack on the church youth highlighted the tragedy of young Mexicans losing their lives amid the violence. Young people are also falling into lives of crime with teenage boys being recruited as drug cartel gunmen and young women claimed as girlfriends by cartel bosses.

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"Adolescents and young people are the most affected by this wave of violence in Mexico, and each death calls us to protect their lives and take steps to protect them from the evil that seeks to trap them and lead them into darkness," said a statement from the National Dialogue for Peace, an initiative to pacify Mexico sponsored by the bishops' conference, the Jesuits and the Conference of Religious Superiors of Mexico.

"For many authorities, (the eight slain young people) will be a normalized part of Mexico's violence statistics and the tragedy that saddens the country and has touched thousands of anonymous families," the Catholic Multimedia Center, which tracks violence against clergy and religious, said in an editorial.

Fr. Andrés Larios has worked with young people in the conflict-ridden Tierra Caliente region of western Michoacán state, where drug cartels dispute territories and run extortion rackets, and says some there see organized crime as a path to prosperity due to limited social mobility.

He said that young people there have told him: "I want to be a narco, because narcos have the best trucks and soldiers and the police do everything for him. They practically don't work."

"That's what motivates them, unfortunately, living in a somewhat limited and impoverished situation, and also seeing injustice, corruption and impunity," he added in comments to OSV News. "At the end of the day, drug trafficking is what solves that problem."

Life expectancy is short for drug cartel hitmen. But Larios said a mentality exists in which "many of these young people say, 'I prefer to live without limits for a month, a year or two rather live poor all the time.'"

Larios also spoke disappointingly of church efforts at keeping young people from the clutches of drug cartels.

"It's about raising awareness of the reality our people are experiencing, trying to educate ourselves, from morals, religion … to be good citizens," he said.

"We're neglecting a lot of pastoral care," he added. "Sometimes we exhaust ourselves training children for the sacraments of baptism or confirmation, first Communions, weddings, and that's where our time ends up, unfortunately, on purely sacramental training."