News

Pallbearers walk with the casket of Jesuit Fr. José María Tojeira during his funeral procession a

Pallbearers walk with the casket of Jesuit Fr. José María Tojeira during his funeral procession at the Central American University in Antiguo Cuscatlan, El Salvador, Sept. 11. The beloved human rights activist, best known for leading the Central American Jesuits during El Salvador's civil-war era, died Sept. 5 at age 78 in Guatemala City, Guatemala. (OSV News/Jose Cabezas)



David Agren

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

September 20, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Jesuit Fr. José María Tojeira immediately rushed to the scene upon hearing the awful news Nov. 16, 1989: Six fellow Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered in their home in San Salvador in an attack perpetrated by Salvadoran troops.

Tojeira pushed for justice to be carried out in El Salvador, but had to wait 30 years before testifying in a Spanish court — which convicted Inocente Orlando Montano, vice minister of defense at the time of the killings. Montano was convicted in July 2020 and sentenced to 133 years in prison, though many more suspects never faced justice.

"He was the most consistent voice after the death of the Jesuits," Juan Melendez, country director for the Netherlands Institute of Multiparty Democracy, told OSV News.

"Despite the militarism … and the height of war in the 1990s, he was consistent and denounced human rights violations. (He was) very brave and at the same time, a man of peace."

Read this next: Read NCR's coverage of 1989 massacre of Jesuits in El Salvador

Tojeira died of a heart attack Sept. 5, while preparing to give a lecture at Jesuit-run Rafael Landívar University in Guatemala City. He was 78. He was laid to rest in Antiguo Cuscatlan, El Salvador, on Sept. 11.

Fr. José María Tojeira

Jesuit Fr. José María Tojeira speaks during an interview with Reuters in San Salvador, El Salvador, March 13, 2009. Tojeira died Sept. 5 at age 78. (OSV News/Reuters/Luis Galdamez)

Commonly called "Padre Chema," the Spanish-born Tojeira was a giant in El Salvador's public life as the country suffered war, achieved peace accords, returned to democracy, experienced savage gang violence, then returned to strongman rule with the president operating under emergency powers.

"He could talk to everybody, engage people from the other side of an issue, while still holding firm to his principles," a Catholic source in El Salvador told OSV News. "But he was just really approachable and willing to engage everybody in dialogue and find ways to work things out."

Tojeira served as provincial of the Jesuits' Central America province from 1988 to 1995 and rector of the Jesuit-run Central American University José Simeón Cañas in San Salvador from 1997 to 2010.

He also served as director of the university's Human Rights Institute and pastor of El Carmen Parish in Santa Tecla until his death. He became spokesman for the Society of Jesus after the Jesuit-run Central American University in Managua was seized by Nicaragua's dictatorship in 2023.

Read this next: El Salvador to try former president in 1989 killing of Jesuits, companions

Tojeira championed environmental causes in El Salvador. He testified for a national water law before the National Assembly in 2017 and criticized the 2024 repeal of a law banning mining. "It's false that mining enriches the country," he said, contradicting claims from President Nayib Bukele that extractive activities would bring in a bonanza of revenue.

He took issue with Bukele, who calls himself the world's "coolest dictator," telling the president to seek dialogue rather than "exercise power in a despotic and tyrannical style."

Advertisement

Tojeira was born in Vigo, Spain, in 1947 to schoolteacher parents. He joined the Jesuits and was sent to Central America in 1969. He started in Honduras, working with a religious community, serving as a parish priest and directing Radio Progreso, a Jesuit project.

He moved to El Salvador in 1985, starting work with the Jesuit's university and becoming regional provincial three years later. He became a Salvadoran citizen, too, a prominent figure in the country's public life.

"After they killed the Jesuits, he certainly became the voice of and the face of the martyrs in talking about that, engaging and pushing for justice, but also engaging people across the political spectrum to find solutions in the country," the church source said.

"People really appreciated … his openness and his attitude to really look for a solution."