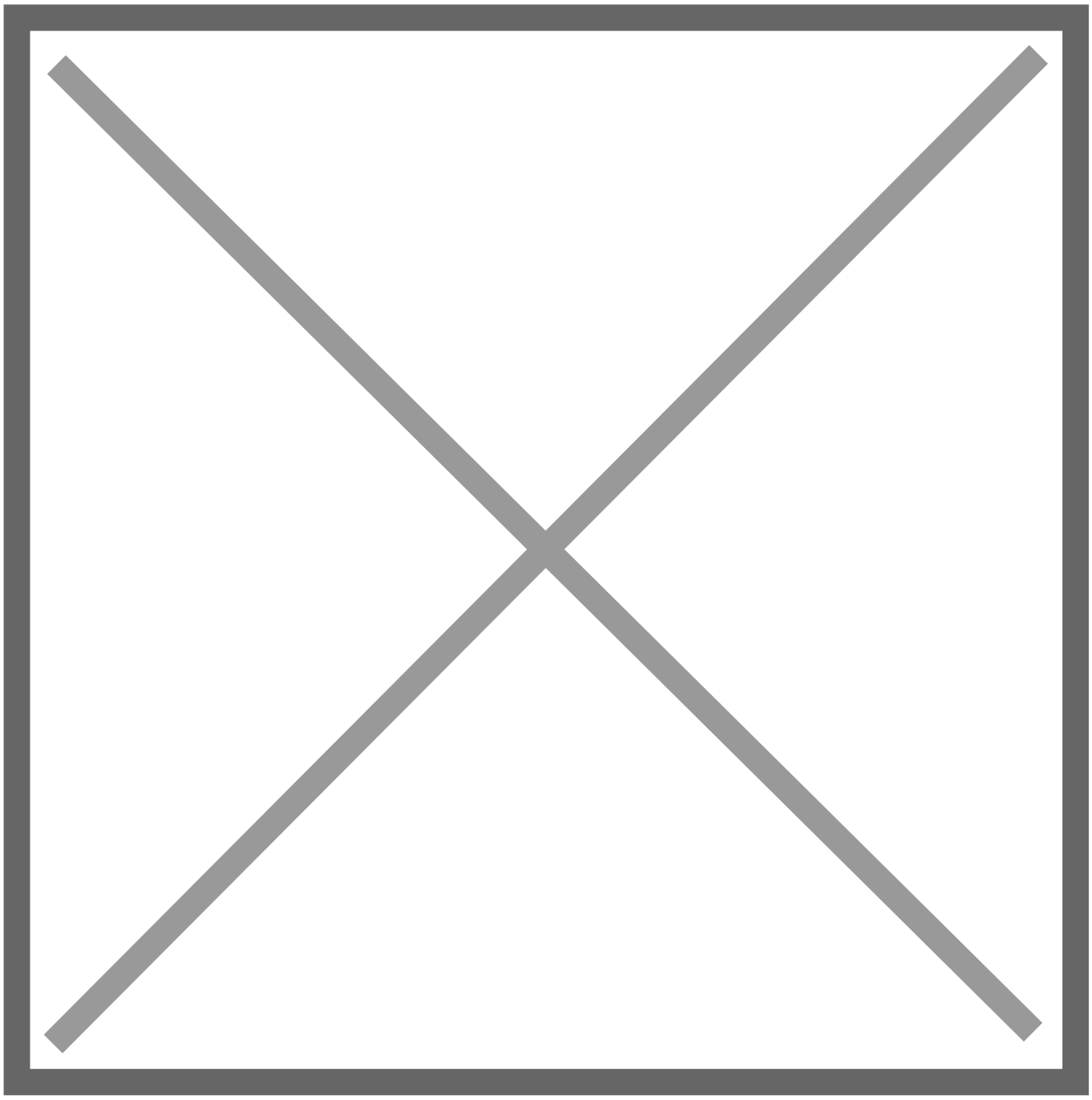


A vehicle of the forensic medical service. known as SEMEFO, leaves the crime scene where the body of Fr. Bertoldo Pantaleón Estrada was found Oct. 6, 2025, in Eduardo Neri, in Mexico's Guerrero state. Pantaleón was the pastor of San Cristobal Parish in the town of Mezcala, an area known for high levels of violence. (OSV News/Reuters/Oscar Guerrero)



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MEZCALA, Mexico — October 8, 2025

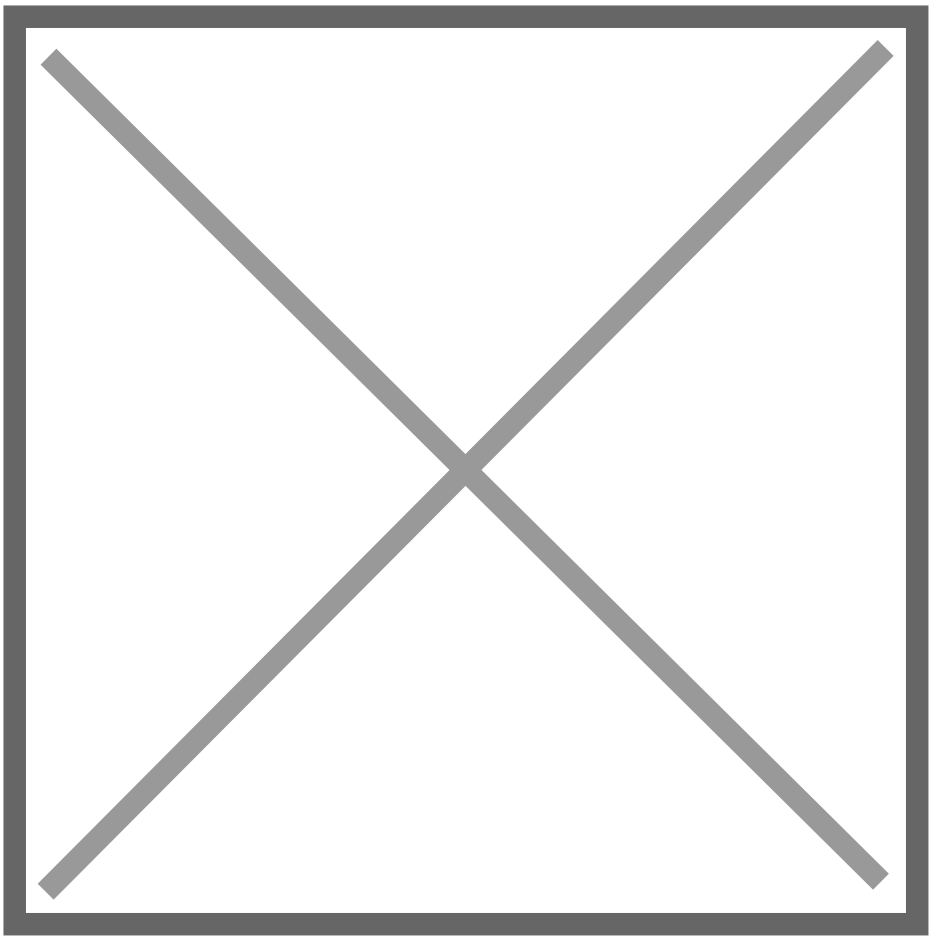
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Another priest has been found murdered in a violent southern Mexican state, where Catholic bishops' have brokered truces between warring drug cartels and clergy have been killed with impunity.

The body of Fr. Bertoldo Pantaleón Estrada was discovered Oct. 6 in the municipality of Mezcal in Guerrero state, some 150 miles south of Mexico City, according to the Diocese of Chilpancingo-Chilapa.

Pantaleón disappeared two days earlier, the diocese said. Mexican Milenio television reported Pantaleón was shot twice in the neck.

Federal public security secretary Omar García Harfuch said Oct. 7 that Pataleón's driver was a suspect in the priest's murder



Fr. Bertoldo Pantaleón Estrada, pastor of San Cristóbal Parish in Mezcala, Mexio, is seen in an undated photo. His body was discovered Oct. 6, 2025, in Mezcal in Guerrero state, some 150 miles south of Mexico City, according to the Diocese of Chilpancingo-Chilapa. Mezcala is in a region rife with drug cartel activity in what was once considered Mexico's heroin-producing heartland. (OSV News/Courtesy of Diocese of Chilpancingo-Chilapa)

"Everything indicates that he died in his truck. He was killed in his truck. He was about to head out to say Mass. And everything indicates that it was his own driver," García Harfuch told reporters.

"At this time, we have no indication that the father was involved in anything wrong."

Pantaleón was pastor of San Cristóbal Parish in Mezcala, a region rife with drug cartel activity in what was once considered Mexico's heroin-producing heartland. The region became notorious in 2014 for the attack on 43 teacher trainees as police forced the young men off buses and turned them over to a criminal group. The

atrocity remains unsolved.

"We note with sadness and pain that acts of violence have once again plunged our Catholic community into mourning. Therefore, we demand that the competent state and federal authorities conduct a prompt, thorough, and transparent investigation that will clarify this crime and ensure just punishment for those responsible," the Mexican bishops' conference said in an Oct. 6 statement.

"As pastors of the People of God, we raise our voices to remind everyone that no form of violence can have a place in a society that honors life and seeks goodness, truth, and peace for all its citizens."

Guerrero state, which unfolds to the south of Mexico City and includes the glamor of Acapulco and misery of impoverished Indigenous communities, has been plagued by drug cartel violence for more than a decade.

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Criminal groups previously disputed the production and distribution of heroin, but that illegal business was wiped out by the rise of fentanyl, Bishop Salvador Rangel, who led the Diocese of Chilpancingo-Chilapa between 2014 and 2022, told Catholic News Service. He said criminal groups now run extortion and kidnapping rackets and have co-opted local governments.

Rangel became controversial in Mexico for traveling to remote communities to dialogue with drug cartel "capos," or high-ranking leaders, in an effort to pacify his diocese and the wider state of Guerrero. He told OSV News in 2024 that drug cartels were actively backing candidates in that year's elections.

Guerrero's four bishops attempted to broker a peace accord between the state's drug cartels in 2024 — an initiative welcomed by then-President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

The murder of Pantaleón has reinforced Mexico's reputation as the most murderous country in the world for Catholic clergy. At least 53 priests have been killed in Mexico since 2006 and 10 priests between 2019 and 2024, according to the Catholic Multimedia Center, while crimes such as extortion committed against clergy and churches remain rife.

The Diocese of Chilpancingo-Chilapa has been struck by tragedy over the past 15 years. Two priests were killed in a 2018 ambush in the diocese. The remains of Comboni Fr. John Ssenyondo, a Ugandan missionary priest, were pulled from a mass grave near the city of Chilapa in 2014.