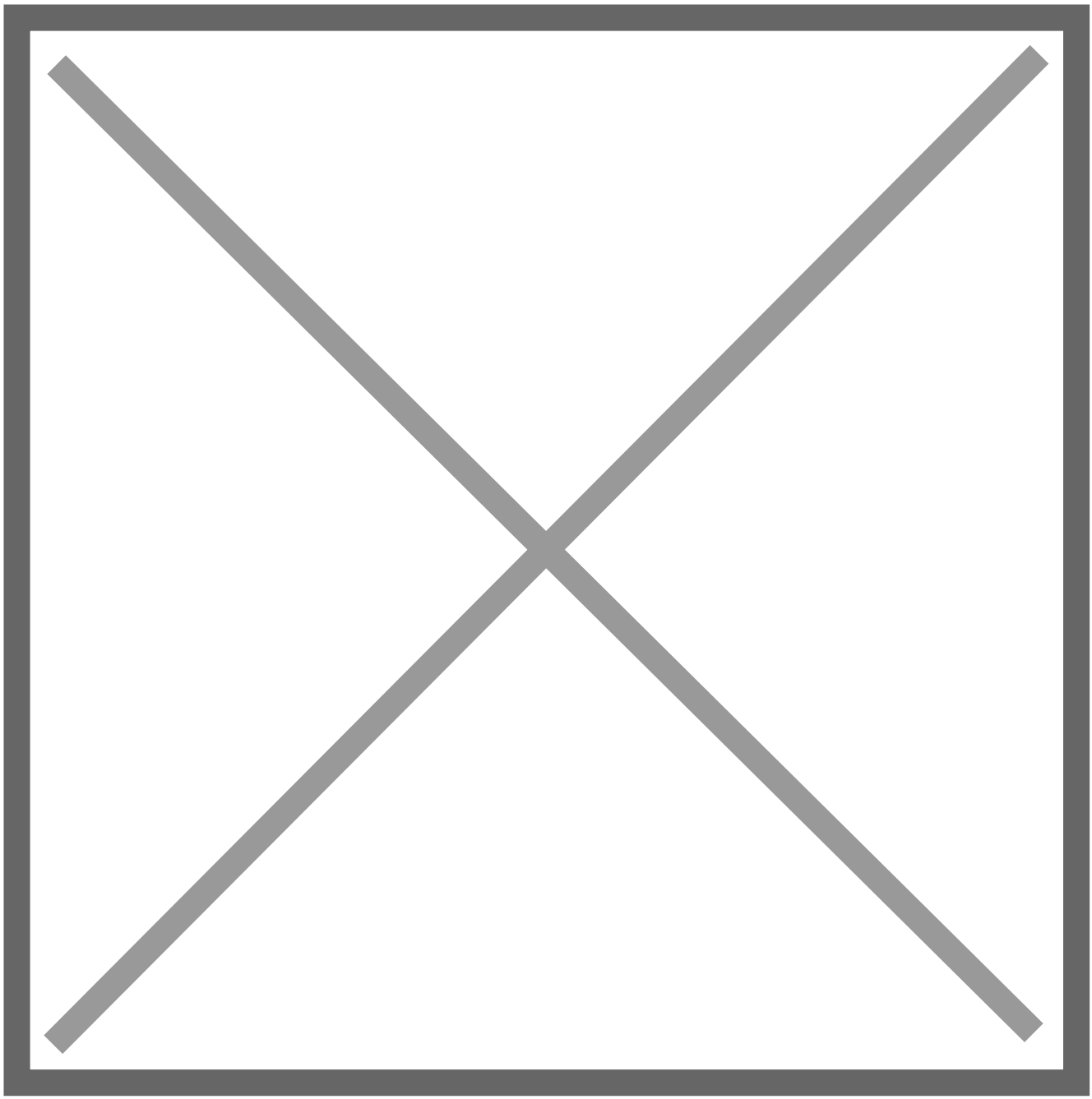
News



A view of cable cars that cross the Guayas river, in Guayaquil, Ecuador, April 10, 2025. A tragic incident involving the rescue of an altar boy occurred March 13, 2026, during a Lenten retreat in the coastal town of General Villamil Playas, in Ecuador's Guayas province. Two priests drowned during the rescue operation. (OSV News/Reuters/Daniel Becerril)

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GUAYAQUIL, Ecuador — March 18, 2026
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A tragic incident involving the rescue of an altar boy occurred March 13 during a Lenten retreat in the coastal town of General Villamil Playas, in Ecuador's Guayas province.

An altar boy was caught in strong waves and began to drown. Fr. Alfonso Avilés Pérez entered the sea to help him, and thanks to his intervention, the boy was able to reach safety.

However, according to the newspaper El Comercio, Avilés was swept away by the current, and, amid the commotion, Fr. Pedro Anzoátegui tried to to help in the rescue, but both succumbed to the force of the water. Avilés' body was found shortly after the accident, and Anzoátegui's body was found on the beach the following morning.

Reports varied on whether there were one or two altar servers who needed help, and in trying to verify the number, OSV News received the following answer March 17 from the Archdiocese of Guayaquil: "As the Archdiocese of Guayaquil, based on the information provided by the Society of Jesus Christ the Priest, we confirm that it was an altar server who was drowning, and Fr. Alfonso Avilés and then Fr. Pedro Anzoátegui came to his aid, with both priests losing their lives."

Avilés, who was born in 1966 and was originally from Murcia, Spain, served as pastor of San Alberto Magno Church in the Diocese of Daule for about nine years and was a member of the Society of Jesus Christ the Priest for more than 30 years. Anzoátegui, 43, a native of Ecuador, was ordained in 2010 and had previously served the parish communities of Santa Cruz de Durán and Santa Marianita, both in the Diocese of San Jacinto. At the time of his death, he was no longer affiliated with the diocese.

The Archdiocese of Guayaquil, the metropolitan see that includes the suffragan dioceses of Daule and San Jacinto, stated that all the altar servers participating in the trip survived and returned to their homes.

In an email to OSV News, the archdiocese also said that both Avilés and Anzoátegui were buried at the Metropolitan Cemetery.

On its Facebook page, the Diocese of San Jacinto expressed condolences for the death of Anzoátegui, saying: "We join in prayer for the soul of Fr. Pedro Anzoátegui, who served for several years in our Diocese. May he rejoice in God for all the good he did in our Diocese."

On the evening of March 13, Bishop Cristóbal Kudlawiec of Daule celebrated a Mass at San Alberto Magno Church, which was offered for the eternal rest of Avilés and was attended by a large congregation.

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In a heartfelt homily, the prelate expressed that, even in the midst of grief, one must trust in the Lord's will because he "does not err; his will is holy, and we, as mere humans, must always affirm this, even in moments when our soul is broken."

"We must trust and have great courage to say to the Lord, 'I believe in you; I do not doubt your holy will.' … You are my God, my Lord, and you are the Lord of Fr. Alfonso's life, of mine, and of everyone's; that is why we affirm, 'Lord, I believe in You and I want to fulfill Your commandments, above all the commandment to love you and others,'" the prelate concluded.

The following day, during a Mass concelebrated with Kudlawiec, Cardinal Luis Gerardo Cabrera Herrera of Guayaquil stated that "the death of a shepherd always leaves a void, but it also leaves a deep mark on the hearts of the people."

"Dear brothers and sisters, today we bid farewell to Fr. Alfonso with tears, but also with hope. For Christians, death is not the end of the journey ... it is the beginning of eternity," said the cardinal, who affirmed that at the moment of his death, FAvilés "was not thinking of himself, he was not calculating the risk; he simply reacted as a shepherd would react when he sees that one of his sheep is in danger."

"At that moment, the words of the Gospel were fulfilled in a striking way. It was not a premeditated or calculated gesture; it was a spontaneous act of love, and that is why we also recall here the words of Jesus: 'There is no greater love than this — that a man should lay down his life for his friends.' Fr. Alfonso's death pains us — of course it pains us, and deeply — but at the same time it reveals to us the greatness of his pastoral heart," the cardinal said.

During the March 14 Mass, the community also prayed for the eternal repose of Anzoátegui.

In an Archdiocese of Guayaquil social media post, the cardinal also expressed thanks to God "for the beautiful gift of the live and priestly vocation" of Anzoátegui, saying the Ecuadorian priest served for many years in its ecclessial jurisdiction.

A memorial Mass was celebrated by Bishop Gustavo Adolfo Rosales Escobar of the Diocese of San Jacinto at Santa Marianita Church in the evening of March 16.