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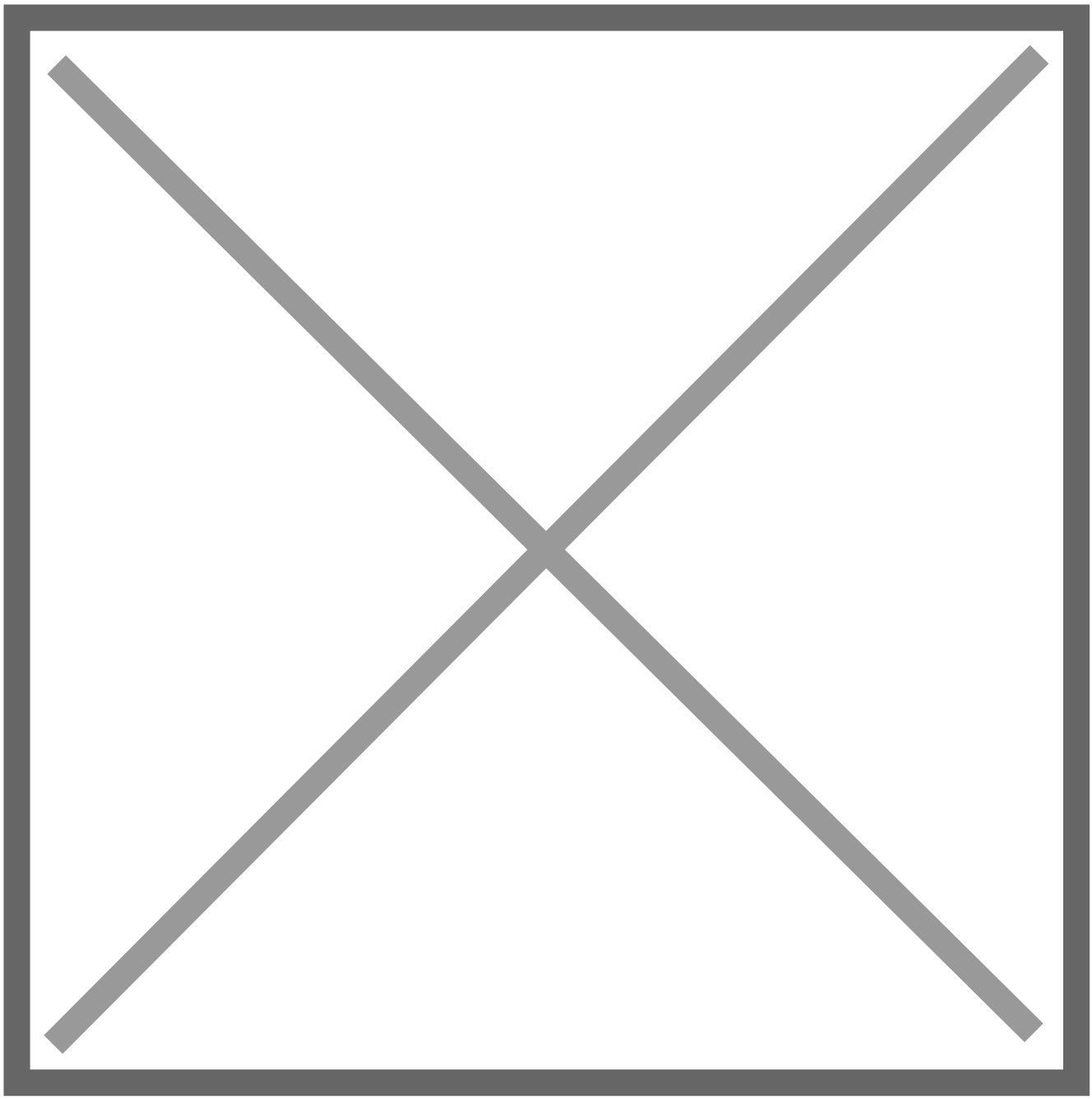

Fr. Manuel Corral Martín, canon of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City, straightens the clothes of a Christ Child figurine, dressed in the jersey of the Mexico national team, at the cathedral June 16, 2026, where fans visited and prayed for their national team to advance in the 2026 FIFA World Cup. On July 5, Mexico lost its round of 16 game to England 3-2. (OSV News/Reuters/Quetzalli Nicte-Ha)



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Mexico City — July 6, 2026
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Mexican soccer fans have prayed for World Cup success at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City, where the faithful dressed a Christ Child in the country's official soccer kit.

Many have attended Mass in green Mexican soccer jerseys. Some have even made promises to Our Lady of Guadalupe known as "mandas" (sacred vows) of personal change, acts of service and penance (sacred vows) in exchange for Mexico enjoying World Cup success. Mexican players, meanwhile, have entrusted themselves before matches to the national patroness at a shine in the Estadio Azteca, their home pitch.

Faith has been front and center through Mexico's World Cup run on home turf as it hosts the tournament with the United States and Canada. Fans have prayed for success and for Mexico to reach the quarterfinals for the first time since 1986 — finally overcoming a stretch of heartbreaking and calamitous tournament departures.

Mexico fell short in its round of 16 game, however, dropping a close 3-2 match against England in Mexico City July 5.

The Mexican performance unleashed passion and patriotism as hundreds of thousands of fans wearing green — with Mexico's jersey being the top tournament seller — celebrated victories at the Ángel de la Independencia monument. Crowds were so intense that three people were crushed in the celebrations and died of asphyxiation, while a fourth fan died after an epileptic crisis. Fans even attempted to disrupt visiting teams' sleep by bringing mariachis, banging drums and setting off fireworks outside their hotels.

For many Mexicans, "it's been an escape," Fr. Manuel Corral Martín, canon of the Metropolitan Cathedral, told OSV News.

The tournament, however, unfolded amid domestic difficulties. Collectives of families, who search for their missing kin amid government indifference, protested to draw attention to Mexico's crisis of 135,000 missing persons.

Games were played in Guadalajara, the country's second largest city, where drug cartel violence flared in February after the slaying of crime boss Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, who was known by his nickname, "El Mencho." One in 10 homes in Guadalajara has a missing relative, according to Jalisco Cómo Vamos, a non-governmental group.

President Claudia Sheinbaum has downplayed the missing persons problem and boasted the homicide rate has fallen 46% since she took office in October 2024.

"The World Cup is a distraction from what's happening in the country," Jesuit Fr. Jorge Atilano, executive director of the National Dialogue for Peace, a Catholic initiative for pacifying Mexico, told OSV News prior to the England match.

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"I think that perhaps these days we'll celebrate the victories, but also with the awareness that we're doing poorly" in areas such as security, he added. "The two aren't mutually exclusive. We can celebrate Mexico's victory and acknowledge that there's still much to improve."

The Mexican bishops' conference has celebrated the Mexican team's successes. But they said in a June 25 statement, "We want families celebrating Mexico together and young people pursuing their dreams without their lives being endangered. … How we wish that the joy expressed in the streets will translate into a commitment to Mexico and become a source of hope for the most vulnerable."

The Jesuits' Mexico province expressed hopes the World Cup excitement would prove to be a teachable moment. Fans in Mexico have rallied behind the slogan, "What if yes?" The Jesuits wrote in a short reflection, "From the Ignatian spirituality, we could read that 'What if yes?' as an invitation to look at reality with hope and discernment."

The Jesuits continued, "Believing does not mean denying the difficulties, but asking ourselves … What if yes, we can take one more step? What if yes, we can rebuild ourselves as a country? What if yes, we can choose peace over violence? What if yes, we can find all the missing persons? What if yes, we can turn enthusiasm into a force for encounter, fraternity, and the common good?"

Faith and football have long been intertwined in Mexico.

The tradition of dressing a Christ Child in Mexican colors started ahead of the 1970 World Cup hosted by Mexico at St. Gabriel Archangel Church in the Tacuba neighborhood. Parishioners continued the tradition every four years, fashioning a uniform for the Holy Child of Miracles, which normally drew people to pray for their sick children.

The tradition was stopped ahead of the 2026 tournament, however, as the current parish priest considered the act "fanaticism," according to Father Corral. The cathedral stepped up in late June by dressing a Christ Child in Mexican colors because people were asking for it, he said.

Devotion to the Christ Child runs deep in Mexico and formed part of the early evangelization after the Spanish conquest in 1521, according to priests. Mexicans traditionally place Christ Child statues on their home Nativity scenes. On Candlemas, they often dress the Christ Child statues elegantly or sometimes as saints or even in sporting or work uniforms for the feast of the Presentation.

"It's common to dress the baby Jesus in many ways to ask for favors … even leading (people) to put the baby Jesus in his Mexican national team jersey as a way of

praying for the soccer players," Fr. Alan Camargo, spokesman for the Diocese of Matamoros-Reynosa, told OSV News.

Mexicans were not the only fans in Latin America praying for World Cup success. Colombian fans prayed at the cathedral ahead of a June match with Uzbekistan in Mexico City, according to Father Corral. Fans from other countries also prayed to the Christ Child for their teams, he said.

The World Cup has shown the world a festive and hospitable Mexico as the country welcomed thousands of visitors with few stories of fans being denied visas — unlike the United States and Canada. The Iran squad stayed in Tijuana and traveled to Los Angeles and Seattle for games after being denied permission to spend extended periods in the United States.

Social media videos showed Mexican and English fans getting along in the streets before their round of 16 match and even singing The Beatles hit "Hey Jude."

Priests expressed hopes the country could show the same unity in celebrating soccer success beyond the tournament.

"The question is, what comes next? Hopefully, this will help us take advantage of the opportunity to unite for good things. But sometimes the excitement fades and we each go our separate ways," Camargo said.

This story appears in the **World Cup 2026** feature series. View the full series.