

Catholic leaders take cautious steps in addressing Mexican violence

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Authorities say thieves in search of money to fund a drug habit murdered Father Jose Flores Preciado, an octogenarian known for hearing afternoon confessions in the cathedral of the coastal state of Colima.

The Diocese of Colima and its leader, Bishop Jose Amezcua Melgoza, responded with a call for silent marches Feb. 17 and 18 -- heeded by an estimated 10,000 residents in three cities hit hard by Mexico's crackdown on drug cartels and organized crime.

"We want to be (agents) of peace and, at the same time, we wish that our march is a strong call to the conscience and conversion of everyone," Bishop Amezcua said afterward.

Such marches might appear minor, but they signaled a slight shift in the church's response to the brazen violence in Mexico, which the Interior Ministry says has claimed nearly 70,000 lives since late 2006 and left more than 27,000 people missing.

Church leaders have mostly stayed on the sidelines as the violence spread, calling for prayer, responding to allegations its parishes laundered drug money through its collection plates and releasing a pastoral letter in 2010 that even they admit had little impact. They seldom challenged government authority -- not entirely unexpected in a country with a history of sour church-state relations.

"We must remember that creating a secure environment is the responsibility of everyone," the Mexican bishops' conference said in a statement supporting the Colima marches.

The marches and pronouncements in favor of peace fail to go far enough for the few priests who have protested the drug war since the start and called for church condemnations to include corrupt public officials and the police and soldiers accused of committing excesses.

"Many people ... don't see that the church reacts with bravery, audacity (or) with a prophetic voice," said Father Oscar Enrique, director of the El Paso del Norte Human Rights Center in Ciudad Juarez.

But with the marches in Colima came the revelation that 30 priests in the diocese reported being asked to pay extortion money. In neighboring Jalisco state, Cardinal Francisco Robles Ortega of Guadalajara revealed that at least three priests and many religious had been extorted. He also highlighted the case of a priest in Michoacan state, who went missing in late December.

Priests also have led marches in the north central state of Zacatecas, where the Los Zetas criminal group extorts people with relatives living in the U.S., and Acapulco, which a Mexican think tank recently ranked the second-most-violent city in the world.

"Many family members of those kidnapped or killed want revenge," Father Marco Antonio Marquez, 31, who

organized the Zacatecas march and celebrated Mass for the missing, told the newspaper Reforma. "We tell them that the way to change is with Christ, carrying the message of joy, respect, care and love. These are our weapons, not violence."

Archbishop Carlos Garfias Merlos has made providing attention to the victims of crime the focus of his pastoral work since arriving in Acapulco more than two years ago.

The archdiocese has established victims programs in four parishes, training members to reach out to those who have lost loved ones or experienced extortion and kidnapping.

Father Jesus Mendoza, pastor of the St. Nicholas of Bari Parish and director of archdiocesan social ministries, started such an effort after listing 120 parishioners who had been murdered, kidnapped or gone missing.

"The reality of the situation started pushing up against us," Father Mendoza said, explaining that the program fills a void for people fearful of going to police and prosecutors they suspect are complicit with criminals.

The Acapulco pilot program, which provides psychological and spiritual assistance, will expand to five more dioceses. Plans are under way to add legal services to the program.

Other church efforts have focused on finding forgiveness, as explored in the "Brother Narco" series of short films, which has garnered national attention. It comes as the new presidential administration addresses the economic promise of Mexico instead of the struggles of the drug war.

The pushback by the church is a reminder that violence has affected its members, and church leaders have taken precautions. Parishes in some dangerous places no longer celebrate Mass after dark. At St. Teresa of Avila Parish in the northern city of Monterrey, U.S. Father Scott McDermott installed an alert system similar to a stoplight so parishioners do not inadvertently encounter a shootout or danger upon leaving.

Still, church leaders often try to avoid provoking politicians.

"He's clear ... but he's careful," Father Mendoza said of Archbishop Garfias' approach.

In Colima, Bishop Amezcua took pains to point out that the diocesan marches were not partisan or political.

Some priests want that posture to end, along with the idea that bishops can wield influence behind the scenes or resolve issues through back-channel negotiations.

"What's going to happen with those who don't have influence? The bishops who don't have relations with government functionaries?" asked Father Alejandro Solalinde, who has courted controversy for his outspoken statements concerning crime and local politicians he claims want to close his shelter for migrants in Oaxaca state. "Nothing will get fixed, and what will prevail are impunity and corruption."

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