

In Mexico, pope's visit underscores perilous life of priests

by [Whitney Eulich](#) and [Tim MacGabhann](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Pope Francis's message against organized crime was potent in a country where more than 100,000 people have been killed in drug wars since 2006 and where some 80 percent of the population identifies as Catholic.

But his mid-February visit also highlighted a lesser known challenge for Mexico: its status as the most dangerous place in Latin America to be a Catholic priest.

Over the past three and a half years, 11 priests have been brutally murdered, and another two have gone missing. They join a list of 53 fallen church leaders since 1992, when the Mexico City-based Catholic Multimedia Center first started keeping count. The majority of the slain priests died over the past decade, when drug wars came into full swing.

The ongoing threats are tied to priests' positions of leadership in local communities, as well as a lack of support and protection—not only from all levels of government but from the church hierarchy as well, analysts say.

"Organized crime has permeated different institutions across the country: the police, the government at all levels," said Omar Sotelo, a priest and director of the multimedia center. "When a priest works to help the community, to protect human rights of migrants, women, children, and rural communities, his pastoral labor is inconvenient for organized crime."

Like the majority of crimes in Mexico, most murders of priests have remained unsolved. But they share evidence of a link to organized crime, Sotelo said. He believes the pope's message that Mexico's problems are the responsibility of the entire population could make a difference here.

The church is often under pressure to turn a blind eye to illegal activity, said Rodolfo Soriano-Núñez, a Mexican sociologist and author of *In the Name of God: Religion and Democracy in México*.

Mexico's drug lords pave roads and maintain relative peace when they're in control. In the state of Hidalgo, authorities in 2009 discovered that a Catholic church had been built through the "generosity" of a leader of the deadly Zetas cartel. Some suspect that organized criminals use churches for activities such as laundering money and recruiting foot soldiers.

"If priests are unwilling to play ball with the drug lords, or they tell [parishioners] not to pay extortions, that's an easy way to become a target," Soriano-Núñez said.

Some priests under threat have taken to wearing a bulletproof vest during mass, hiring bodyguards, or cutting back on time spent working with migrants or the poor in cartel-heavy territories.

"Their bishops aren't paying attention," Soriano-Núñez said. "The church hierarchy is unwilling to criticize the public safety and security policies of the last two governments. They are unwilling to interfere with their relationship with politicians."

Many hope the pope's sharp rebuke of Mexico's church leaders here will change that.

"Do not lose time or energy in secondary things, in gossip or intrigue, in conceited schemes of careerism, in empty plans for superiority, in unproductive groups that seek benefits or common interests," Pope Francis said.

Francis also spoke against violence and inequality when saying mass in Ecatepec, in the State of Mexico, where almost 7,000 women have died or disappeared since 2005. Ecatepec and other cities Francis visited also struggle with deep poverty and discrimination against indigenous populations.

The estimated congregation of 300,000 heard the pope excoriate "a society of the few and for the few," before envisioning a Mexico "where there will be no need to emigrate in order to dream, no need to be exploited in order to work."

Francis's time in Mexico also included mass at the U.S. border and visiting Cereso prison in Ciudad Juárez.

Though many in Mexico are [disillusioned with the church](#), some saw the visit as a source of strength.

“There is so much evil in Mexico today,” said Elvira García Salazar of Mexico City, who with her son lives on less than \$4 a day. “Pope Francis’s mandate is for peace, and it comes from God.”

This report also contains material from Religion News Service.

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