

Virgilio Elizondo, 'father of U.S. Latino religious thought,' dies at age 80

by [Christian Century staff](#) and [David Gibson](#)

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Virgilio Elizondo, 80, a Mexican-American Catholic priest and theologian described as “the father of U.S. Latino religious thought,” died March 14 in San Antonio.

The Medical Examiner’s Office for Bexar County, Texas, determined his death from a gunshot wound to have been a suicide.

Elizondo was professor of pastoral and Hispanic theology at the University of Notre Dame, and his scholarly work drew from his own roots in Latin America’s mix of Spanish and indigenous, or mestizo, cultures. Elizondo authored more than a dozen books, including *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* and *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*. He also directed and produced films in English and Spanish. While serving as rector of San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio in the 1980s and 1990s, his broadcast of Spanish-language mass reached more than 1 million households, Catholic News Service reported.

In a lawsuit filed last May, Elizondo was accused of sexual abuse that took place 30 years ago. Elizondo denied the allegation and said he would fight it through the legal system, Catholic News Service reported. No further accusations have come to light.

Addressing allegations against Elizondo, Robert Rivard, a journalist in San Antonio who knew Elizondo for three decades, noted that the truth is unknown. Rivard called Elizondo “a highly esteemed and warmly embraced priest.”

The son of Mexican immigrants, Elizondo worked on behalf of underpaid Mexican-American laborers during the early 1970s, and he founded a study center for pastoral leaders from the United States and Latin America.

He was “a beacon for Catholics and non-Catholics inspired by his deep appreciation of mestizo history, culture, and spirituality,” Rivard wrote.

Catholic News Service wrote that Elizondo was “considered the foremost interpreter of U.S. Latino religion by the national and international media.”

A tribute to Elizondo on the University of Notre Dame website included a quote about his upbringing in San Antonio.

“I came from a neighborhood where no one thought I would make it out or amount to anything,” Elizondo said. “Even as a boy, I knew I wanted to do something good for the world.”