

Two young men shot dead outside Mass in Mexico

MEXICO CITY — Two young men arriving for a Mass to be celebrated before a quinceanera in Mexico's Veracruz state were shot dead as they entered the parish parking lot. It was the latest atrocity in a steady string of mass slayings, which have highlighted a surge in the country's already shockingly high homicide rate.

The May 18 attack occurred at around 6 p.m. in the town of Fortin de las Flores, about 175 miles southeast of Mexico City. The gunmen got out of their vehicles and shot from the street at the young men — whose names and ages have not been released — as they arrived at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, according to media reports and a statement signed by Bishop Eduardo Patino Leal of Cordoba.

The parish priest, Father Jorge Montenero Diaz, ushered attendees waiting for the Mass to the back to the church "while numerous firearms detonations were heard," according to the diocesan statement, which expressed alarm with the deteriorating security situation in Veracruz, one of Mexico's largest states and lately one of its most violent.

"It's not the first time these attacks are carried out close to churches or schools or businesses in plain daylight," Bishop Patino wrote.

"From the authorities in the three levels of government, we demand realistic and efficient plans against organized crime and the corruption, in which so many aggressions originate ... and cause society to suffer: disappearances, kidnappings, shootings, extortion and the proliferation of addictions."

Mexico has suffered through a series of mass shootings in 2019 as crime soars and politicians punt responsibility for public security, pinning responsibility on their rivals and predecessors. In Veracruz, where the church has sometimes stayed silent on security issues, the violence there has shocked an often-numb country. For instance, a Good Friday attack on a private party left 13 people, including an infant, dead.

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador campaigned on calming the country. After taking office Dec. 1, Lopez Obrador started creating a militarized police. Critics questioned the move, pointing to ongoing problems, including human rights abuses, with putting soldiers in security roles.

Over the first three months of 2019, nearly 8,500 homicides were counted, an increase of 9.6 over the same period last year. Lopez Obrador has promised to combat what he considers the root causes of violence in Mexico: poverty and corruption. He also has said repeatedly that he inherited a country in ruins.

In a March 19 statement, Mexico's bishops called for action on insecurity and for "society to recover a sense of the sacredness of the life of the person and of essential values."

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