

Vatican agency says at least 20 church workers killed in 2008

VATICAN CITY - At least 20 church workers were killed in 2008, demonstrating that Catholic men and women - bishops, priests, religious and laity - continue placing their lives at risk in order to proclaim the Gospel and serve the poor, said the Vatican's Fides news agency.

Publishing its annual list of missionaries killed during the year, the agency of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples said all Catholics have an obligation to remember those who sacrificed their lives, to thank God for their witness and to resolve to be more courageous in demonstrating their own faith.

"In profoundly different situations and contexts, according to their own talents, attitudes and with their own limits, all of them consecrated their lives to the unique mission of proclaiming and witnessing to the love of Christ, who died and rose again for the salvation of mankind," said a Dec. 30 Fides statement.

"Without heroics or solemn proclamations, they did not hesitate to put their lives at risk each day in many different contexts of suffering, poverty and tension," Fides said.

Chaldean Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul, Iraq, led Fides' 2008 list. The 65-year-old archbishop was kidnapped Feb. 29 in an attack that left his driver and two bodyguards dead. His body was recovered two weeks later after the kidnappers told Catholic leaders in Iraq where he had been buried.

The list also included 16 priests, one religious brother and two Catholic lay workers.

Jesuit Fathers Otto Messmer and Victor Betancourt, whose bodies were found late Oct. 28 in their Moscow apartment, were among the priests on the list. Moscow police have arrested a man with a history of mental illness and have said he confessed to the murders.

The last name on the list is that of Boduin Ntamenya, 52, who was killed Dec. 15 in

Rutshuru, Congo. The husband and father of six children worked for an Italian Catholic aid agency running schools in the war-torn country. Mr. Ntamenya and a driver were visiting the schools in the region to ensure they survived recent fighting when four armed men opened fire on their vehicle. Mr. Ntamenya died on the way to the hospital; the driver was wounded in the hand and the side.

In addition, anti-Catholic violence in India claimed the lives of three priests and a lay volunteer in 2008, Fides said. Two priests were killed in Mexico and two priests were killed in Kenya, while the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, Guinea and Nigeria each reported one murdered missionary.

From the beginning of 2001 to the end of 2008, at least 193 church workers were killed, Fides said, adding that the actual total is likely to be higher because the figures include only missionaries whose violent deaths were reported to the evangelization congregation.