

Violent death of Spanish-born priest in Cuba leaves nation in shock

MIAMI - The violent death of a Spanish-born priest serving in Cuba has left residents of the nation, including Catholic church leaders, in shock.

The body of Father Eduardo de la Fuente Serrano, 61, was found Feb. 14 in an area northwest of Havana.

The coroner's report said the priest "had received a nonfatal stab wound in the neck and been strangled with a rope," according to Havana Auxiliary Bishop Alfredo Petit Vergel, vicar for the area where the priest worked.

The bishop said he had seen the report and quoted from it in an e-mail to a reporter writing for The Florida Catholic, Miami's archdiocesan newspaper.

According to a press release issued by the Archdiocese of Havana, all indications were that it was a criminal attack.

Havana Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino, who was in Spain at the time, expressed his "profound condolences" to the slain priest's relatives and friends as well as his brother priests in his home Archdiocese of Madrid, Spain.

At a Mass he celebrated for the slain priest a few hours after his body was discovered, Father Mariano Arroyo said that "it was moving to see the faces of the people, of the children and young people he always felt so close to."

"Not only did I know him, we were friends and I was partly 'at fault' for his coming to Cuba," the pastor of the Church of Our Lady of Regla said via e-mail.

For eight years, Father de la Fuente had been traveling to the island to fill in for vacationing priests. "When his mother died," Father Arroyo said, "he decided to integrate himself completely" into the Archdiocese of Havana, "which he had come

to love.”

“Nobody can explain what has happened,” Father Arroyo added. He said the government ordered an investigation and he spent three hours giving testimony to the police.

“There is not that much violence in Cuba,” Father Arroyo said, “at least not in comparison to other countries.” He added he did not believe whoever carried out the crime was targeting a priest.

Bishop Petit recalled that Father de la Fuente was too trusting when it came to giving people rides in his car. “You can’t do that because there are roving bands dedicated to robbing and killing tourists and unwary foreigners,” he said.

“We all lament such a senseless death,” the bishop added. The tragedy has “affected the entire neighborhood” where the priest leaves “a very happy memory,” he said. “He had led the parish since October 2006 and everybody remembers him with gratitude for his generosity and dedication to the poor.”

Relatives of the priest have asked that his body be returned to Spain.