

In Mexico, priests face death, extortion

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Columban Father Kevin Mullins, pastor of Corpus Christi Church outside of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, points to the open field behind his church Sept. 16 where he hopes to build a youth center to prevent the young in his parish from being attracted to the lure of the cartels. Two of his former confirmation class students were stoned to death in this field. (CNS photo/Joseph Kolb) (Oct. 5, 2011)

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico (CNS) -- Ministering in a city where crime is pervasive and murders occur at an alarming rate, Columban Fr. Kevin Mullins knows he's been very fortunate.

While he has personally escaped the violence, the Australian-born priest has been touched by it through the lives of his parishioners at Corpus Christi Church in the poor neighborhood of Puerto de Anapra.

During Advent 2008, though, there was a time when parishioners and fellow priests were praying for his soul, thinking he had been killed during an attack by drug cartel gunmen.

"I have been quite lucky," Mullins said in a thick Australian accent. "It was actually an Anglican minister who had a heart attack and was found in his car a few blocks away from my house."

In Mexico, the sight of a priest slumped over in a car is not all that unusual. In 2005, Fr. Luis Velasquez Romero was found in his vehicle in Tijuana, handcuffed and shot six times. In 2009 a priest and two seminarians were gunned down in their car, dragged out then shot again because a relative of one of the seminarians was believed to be associated with one of the country's notorious drug cartels.

Since Mexican President Felipe Calderon declared war against the cartels in 2006 more than 40,000 people have been killed, including 12 priests. A survey from the Catholic Media Center in Mexico found that in 2010 more than 1,000 priests were extorted, 162 threatened with death and two kidnapped and killed.

Prior to Calderon's aggressive action, three priests had been killed in the preceding decade. The rise in clergy deaths represents part of the cartels' response to the growing pressure exerted on them by both Mexico and the United States.

Msgr. Rene Blanco Vega, vicar general of the Ciudad Juarez diocese, declined to discuss the number of priests and parishes in the diocese, saying he did not want to provide the cartels with information they could use to extort money.

"We don't have that problem and we don't want it," said Blanco, who adamantly denied the cartels have any

influence on the church in his diocese.

Fr. Oscar Enriquez, director of the Paso del Norte Human Rights Center in Ciudad Juarez, said he has not observed any direct attempts by cartels to extort money specifically from churches, but that he has seen instances where priests have been attacked. Ironically, Father Enriquez's office was ransacked by Mexican federal police after he accused some in their ranks of corruption.

"I see funeral homes, restaurants, and businesses as the prime targets of extortion here," he said.

Mullins, who has ministered in Ciudad Juarez for 11 years, said he has heard of incidents where other priests have been approached to pay an extortion fee, but that the transition of the city's population has made it difficult for criminals to benefit. Most of the city's wealthy residents have fled the violence by moving to nearby El Paso, Texas. The exodus of wealth has left the once-vibrant Ciudad Juarez shopping and manufacturing districts ghost towns with a tenuous middle class and an overwhelming level of poverty.

"Being the poorest parish in Ciudad Juarez has had its advantages," Mullins said, noting that the average collection from three Sunday Masses is \$150. "We have not had any extortion attempts because we just don't have any money to give."

Enriquez said the economic pressures in Puerta de Anapra -- in clear site of the U.S. border -- affect all facets of life. His biggest struggles are keeping parishioners fed, housed and out of the gangs where easy money beckons despite the threat of death.

"We're not pounding the pulpit denouncing any one group or person despite knowing who they are; we are making blanket pleas to our parishioners to stay away from the criminal elements," Mullins said. "Prudence can keep your head on your shoulders."

Mullins estimated that 50-60 gang-related executions have occurred in his parish in the last three years. Men ages 15-30 have been the primary targets. The Australian priest has presided at tense funeral Masses hoping there would be no retribution from rival gangs.

"We don't go to the cemeteries anymore for services, it's just too dangerous," he said.

What perplexes many pastors are the offers of financial support from the cartels. For decades parishes received donations of money and buildings from cartel officials with an attitude of resigned ignorance, without having to face a moral dilemma.

Blanco maintained, however, that "it has never happened here where a church in Juarez has taken money from the cartels."

Earlier this year, eyebrows were raised but no voices of dissension were heard when a church in Hidalgo state revealed a plaque dedicated to Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano, the leader of the notorious Los Zetas drug cartel implicated in several mass murders in northeastern Mexico, who contributed generously to the building. Lazcano reportedly was killed in a firefight in Matamoros in June, but neither Mexican nor American officials have confirmed his death.

"About three months ago, I had a woman associated with the Juarez cartel approach me offering an open checkbook to build our youth center," Mullins said. "Of course, I kindly declined her offer."

He turned down the offer despite wanting to build a youth center and basketball courts on a nearby debris-filled lot where two teens from a confirmation class at his parish were stoned to death a few years ago.

Mullins has had cartel members attend Mass and, much to his relief, all declined to receive Communion, so he did not have to turn them away. If someone involved in a criminal enterprise did seek to receive Communion, Mullins said, he would take a deep breath and give the person a blessing instead.

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