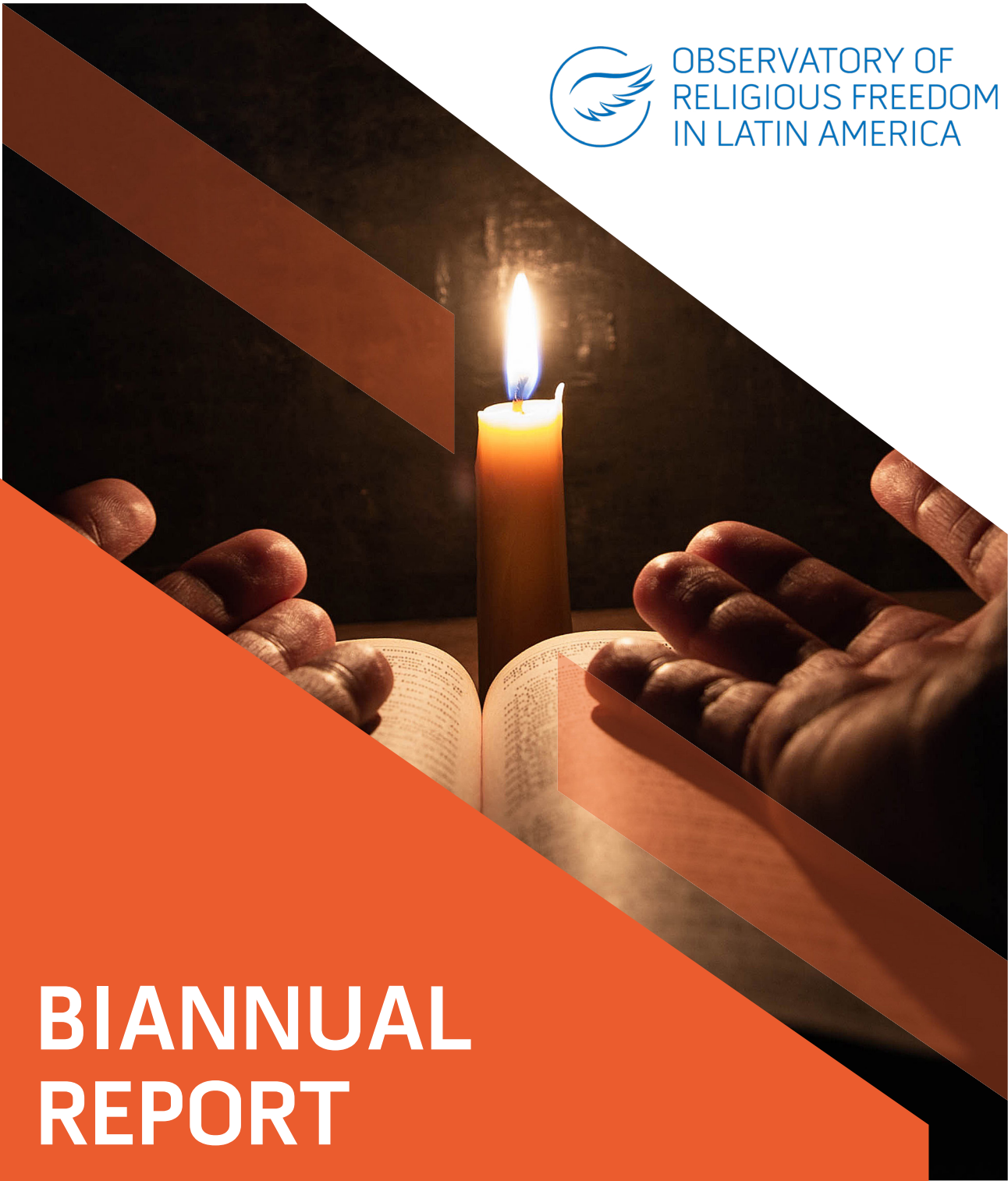




OBSERVATORY OF
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IN LATIN AMERICA



BIANNUAL REPORT

PERIOD:
JANUARY - JULY
2023

About us

OLIRE is a research, training, and advocacy program that monitors and documents the state of religious freedom in Latin America. We offer a space that allows the understanding and promotion of religious freedom from an academic, non-confessional, and nonpartisan perspective, which enables the strengthening of research on religious freedom and violations of this right in the region.

Following ICCPR General Comment No. 22 of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and Article 12 of the American Convention on Human Rights), in OLIRE, we consider religious freedom as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected in all spheres of society.

Religious freedom lies at the intersection of many fundamental rights, including freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and freedom of assembly. Religious freedom is much more than freedom of worship; it implies the freedom to live and express one's religion individually and collectively in the family, school, business, and cultural spheres. Consequently, we see

restrictions on religious expression in any sphere of society, whether caused by state or non-state actors, as restrictions on religious freedom.

We consider religious freedom an essential characteristic of a healthy democracy. The promotion of religious freedom is, therefore, part of the efforts needed to improve and deepen the quality of democracy. In recent years, Latin American societies have come a long way in this area, but challenges remain, particularly related to exercising religious freedom in some areas.

We adhere to the principle of separation of religion and state, but we also believe that religious individuals and organizations have the right to actively participate in public debate without any restrictions, like any other civil society organization, as long as they do not seek to impose their opinions on the rest of society. State institutions should not be subordinate to religious institutions, nor vice versa.

Areas of action

MONITOR:

We document, research, and analyze the state of religious freedom and its possible limitations in the different countries of the region. Especially the position of vulnerable religious minorities whose rights are being violated.

EMPOWER:

We train citizens, political actors, and international institutions on the right to religious freedom and the range of hostilities and violations of this right in Latin America.

INFLUENCING:

Our goal is to actively participate and influence the social and public sphere on a national and multilateral level to improve the protection of the right to religious freedom.



Source: Parish priest Javier García Villafaña is murdered in Michoacán; CEM condemns the crime. *La Razón de México*.

Latin America: State of Religious Freedom – January to July 2023

This report presents an overview of the challenges and difficulties experienced by religious communities in the region, based mainly on data obtained through our reporting tool: Violent Incidents Database-VID. The analysis will be carried out considering the conditions that have affected the enjoyment and exercise of the right to religious freedom in the following aspects or categories studied by OLIRE:

7. Organized Crime and Religious Freedom

As noted in our previous reports, the de facto power wielded by leaders of criminal groups entails implementing an organized structure that operates in society, in which the government and/or state security forces have little or no interference. This situation means that local governments often must negotiate with criminal groups to carry out basic social assistance functions, and at times, they are even compelled to pay fees for access to certain areas. In other cases, due to the high level of corruption in Latin American governments, authorities collude with these criminal groups, enabling the continuation of their illegal activities.

The diversification and desire for greater profits among different criminal groups operating in certain areas have sparked disputes over control of territories, transportation routes, distribution, suppliers, and collaborators. These confrontations, aimed at determining which of the active criminal groups has more power and authority, contribute to the high level of insecurity experienced and often lead to the mass displacement of families and entire communities due to direct or indirect threats.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, and due to the strengthening of criminal networks and failed violence-reduction strategies, some governments have chosen to entrust certain aspects of national security policies to the armed forces through public policies that legitimize military intervention or the involvement of special police units. A notable example is El Salvador, where, in combating gangs, the Armed Forces have gained greater autonomy at the expense of civilian control. While this security strategy is widely criticized for not reducing violence and instead increasing insecurity, impunity, and human rights violations, it has been attempted in Honduras and is now seen as an option in other countries due to the rising crime rates in the region.

In **Colombia**, mainly due to the ongoing alarming levels of violence, national and international faith-based congregations, churches, and communities regularly voice concerns about the serious hardships faced by indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural communities as a result of the armed conflict. However, the response of the authorities to the complaints raised by religious communities remains inadequate and delayed. Consequently, the escalating social violence corresponds with the increased vulnerability of religious communities to armed groups, which have even forced these communities to support the political interests of these armed groups through violence and pressure, not to mention other tactics such as restricting freedom of movement, including curfews or forced confinements.

Similarly, in **Mexico**, religious leaders and human rights activists advocating for an end to violence engaging in pastoral and humanitarian activities

are perceived as a threat to illicit interests and the de facto authority exercised by criminal groups. This situation is aggravated by the cruelty with which they are silenced and the ties of corruption between criminals and public officials. Even at the highest levels of state administration, the calls to action made by at-risk religious communities or those victimized by such situations are not adequately addressed.

In **Honduras**, religious and secular representatives have been targets of threats and attacks for their defense of human rights and their denunciation of social violence and abuse of power against the most vulnerable sectors of the population, especially indigenous communities. Their continual public advocacy for the most defenseless has put them at risk, especially if they are seen as obstructing the activities of criminal groups that operate extensively in the country, often with the absent, and at times complicit, gaze of authorities.

In the case of **El Salvador**, the “iron fist” policy to combat violence has particularly affected the reintegration activities led by religious communities. Religious groups running such programs, mainly Christian, are at risk because the police consider social reintegration centers as hiding places for gang members. This situation has led to indiscriminate operations and arbitrary detentions of numerous former gang members who have converted to Christianity.



On the other hand, the economic and humanitarian crisis, the increase in the population in extreme poverty, and school dropout rates have also exposed the younger population to greater susceptibility to being recruited into criminal groups, either out of necessity or through force. In this context, the educational programs run by various faith communities are consistently targeted. Similarly, the religious leaders in charge of these social programs are frequent targets of threats and extortion attempts against them and their families.

In this context, religious leaders continue to be subject to defamation, extortion, kidnapping, and death threats. In many cases, these incidents lead to the complete or partial cancellation of worship activities or restrictions related to specific schedules for their conduct. It is common for these groups to impose an unofficial curfew. Thus, some churches in rural areas have changed their service schedules so that parishioners can attend without exposing themselves to greater risks when traveling to and from places of worship. Similarly, transit to and from some communities is completely restricted, isolating them for several days. This situation affects the normal development of church activities and the growth and continuity of religious communities, especially the younger ones.

Additionally, in various countries in the region, thefts of parishes and other places of worship are still frequent, substantial, and even violent. This includes not only property or religious images but also donations and collections.

During the process, desecrations of deeply symbolic/religious images or objects are common. These violent events occur even during religious celebrations, jeopardizing the safety of attendees. Despite the continuous efforts and appeals by communities and religious leaders to draw attention to this issue, when authorities have responded, their actions have been insufficient and, at best, ineffective. Furthermore, the work of religious groups focused on humanitarian assistance to alleviate the impacts of the pandemic, natural disasters, and economic crises is constantly at risk of criminal responses such as thefts or armed attacks. Not to mention that, in many cases, religious leaders require permission from leaders of cartels, gangs, or guerrilla to carry out their activities in some areas of the country controlled by these groups.

Given the current situation, the right to religious freedom is limited, especially in its collective dimension, as the violence and insecurity in the environment hinder the entire exercise of faculties related to worship or gathering in connection with a religion or belief, establishing and maintaining venues for these purposes, teaching a particular religion, and even celebrating religious festivals or rites. Additionally, it is important to note the various limitations on the right to security and integrity of religious leaders who are actively involved in defending human rights and eradicating violence in their communities.



Source: UN Mission in Colombia rejected the attack against members of the Catholic Church in Caldon, Cauca. infobae.com



Source: The Nicaraguan government confiscates the assets of the Poor Fraternity of Jesus Christ. Vida Nueva Digital



2. Religious restrictions motivated by an antireligious political ideology or authoritarianism

As cross-cutting aspects, we can point out that authoritarian governments like those in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, relying on concentrated power in the government and backed by a repressive regulatory framework, continue to implement restrictive measures against any dissenting voices.

In the first half of the year, despite serious attacks and threats, religious leaders increasingly criticized the abandonment of democratic practices and the use of repression as a form of government. This has led to greater social recognition, turning religious leaders into voices of moral authority for the citizenry, although it has also exposed them to more significant harassment for contradicting the authorities.

It is also worth mentioning the substitution of the right/duty of parents to educate their children by indoctrinating them in schools according to the ideological guidelines of the ruling political party.

At the same time, especially in Nicaragua and Venezuela, the manipulation of language and religious references continues to gain legitimacy among a mostly Christian population. Authorities seek to approach congregations, especially evangelical ones, to work with them or provide them with certain benefits to demonstrate apparent respect for religious beliefs before the population and the international community.

In the specific case of **Cuba**, any critic of the “socialist revolution” is considered an enemy of the government and a traitor. Given the circumstances, religious leaders and congregants, who, motivated by their faith doctrine, raise their voices against the injustices of the regime, denounce human rights violations, or urge the government to guarantee multiple dimensions of religious freedom, such as the right to manifest faith, the right to preach and disseminate the faith doctrine, the right to obtain legal situation, the right to build and renovate buildings used for worship, etc., become targets of hostilities.





Source: Crime in Cuba does not even respect the Church: The tithe is stolen in the parish of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Vedado. Cuba cute.

These hostile actions have intensified since the protests of July 2021 and have materialized through the Office of Religious Affairs (Spanish acronym: OAR). These actions include the cancellation of religious activities without prior notice, the closure of churches (including those operating inside private homes), confiscation of property, unjustified arrest of religious leaders and activists for supporting protesters, participating in protests, or refusing to support the ideological principles behind the development of the New Family Code or criticizing the legalization of imposed religious repression imposed in the New Penal Code, confiscation of imported goods, prevention of entry or exit from the country, acts of repudiation (which can include physical violence), defamation campaigns by authorities, threats to lose custody of children, unfounded and arbitrary police summons and/or unjustified detention by state agents, workplace harassment, closure of private businesses, constant surveillance by the police and community members, not to mention the recent wave of thefts from places of worship.

Only those religious communities affiliated with the OAR enjoy minimal freedoms as long as they remain loyal to the regime, although any of them always operate under the premise that they are permanently monitored.

In the case of **Venezuela**, the relationship between the government and religious denominations depends to a large extent on the acceptance, by the latter, of the regime's

guidelines. On the one hand, the Catholic Church in the country still represents a voice of authority in society and continues to denounce the critical situation in which the country lives. On the other hand, its charitable work, by preventing the most needy from depending entirely on the government, is seen as an element that undermines the unconditional loyalty of citizens to the regime. For these reasons, the government's relationship with the Catholic Church is tense. Authorities present the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference as a political party that has turned its back on the country or refer to some evangelical groups as the true church.

In this regard, the government continues to approach factions of Protestantism, implementing programs for their members and their activities in general. However, these actions have been interpreted as government attempts to improve its image and secure electoral support, as the country is in the midst of the presidential electoral process. It is worth mentioning that the Evangelical Council of Venezuela (CEV), an organization composed of independent churches and evangelical entities from across the country, has warned that churches close to the government do not represent all Protestant groups.



On the other hand, the situation of religious communities in **Nicaragua** has reached extremely worrying levels. In particular, the Catholic Church, being one of the last institutions openly critical of the regime, has become a permanent target of the government, which has activated various oppressive mechanisms against it, albeit cloaked in legality.

The severity of the situation has prompted civil society organizations, both national (in exile) and international, inter-American and universal human rights bodies, and representatives of various governments and religious communities to repeatedly condemn repressive measures against leaders and members of religious communities who have been sentenced to prison, had their nationality revoked, been arbitrarily arrested, subjected to criminal investigations on unfounded charges, kidnapped, prevented from worshiping both inside and outside temples, had their legal personality revoked, faced mass closures of religious institutions and organizations, property confiscation, financial asphyxiation, expulsions of religious leaders from the country and restrictions on their entry, extreme surveillance of religious leaders, their families, and those close to them, police harassment of religious buildings, monitoring


and criminalization for defending their faith on social media, not to mention the recent wave of thefts from places of worship. This is without mentioning the hostilities suffered by members of religious groups who, without holding representative positions within them, are labeled as “enemies of the government” and harassed by their communities, paramilitary groups, and local police for belonging to specific faith communities and for their proximity to the leaders of those communities.

It is also noteworthy that the government's attempts to create an appearance of closeness and affinity with religious expressions through the organization of its own religious festivals and an apparent rapprochement with a sector of the Church (mostly evangelical), aiming to delegitimize the ecclesiastical authority of the leaders of some communities and promoting a thought of acceptance and tolerance only toward faith leaders who are not considered opponents. In other words, they manipulate religious references in their favor to establish a kind of para-state church.



Source: Two priests join the list of those forced into exile. Nicaragua Investiga.





Finally, we can also mention, as an object of monitoring in the region, the danger of the development and continuity of religious activities when hostility is perceived from the government.

In the case of **El Salvador**, the authorities have shown hostility toward religious leaders who criticize human rights violations committed during the State of Emergency implemented in the country since 2022 or those who denounce abuses against the religious sector that has

developed reintegration and integration projects with gang members and former gang members, especially when referring to the stigmatization promoted by the government against this type of pastoral work.

In the case of **Mexico**, there have been cases of break-ins into churches by security forces in the context of detention of migrants, violating legal protocols, and infringing on the integrity not only of the people sheltered in the temple but also of the place of worship itself.

Source: Church rejects vandalism against Catholic temples in the 8M march. Noticias Fides.

3. Hostility towards religious expression by state and non-state actors

In various countries of the region, under a misguided interpretation of the separation of Church and State principle, opinions or comments made by religious leaders about government policies, as well as the defense of faith expressions in the public sphere, are qualified as intolerant, anti-rights, backward, archaic, misogynistic, discriminatory, among other terms, and are intended to be censored. This is especially true when it comes to defending religious doctrine regarding the protection of life, family, and marriage, which substantially contradicts the principles promoted by certain groups considered minorities or vulnerable sectors.

Under the multidimensional approach to human rights, it is essential to highlight that in these situations, not only is the right to religious freedom affected, but also the right to freedom of expression. Especially when there are increasingly clear attempts to silence expressions of faith (in the form of religious

expressions or symbols) in the public sphere, under political or governmental consideration, certain faith doctrines (in whole or in part) should not have a place in social life. Thus, with varying nuances and intensities among Latin American countries, there is an increasingly frequent identification of a marked trend of attempts to censor the views of religious actors and the approval of rules that apparently promote anti-discrimination but, in practice, not only foster a greater intolerance towards religion but also hinder the full enjoyment of religious freedom by limiting the expression and defense of convictions based on religious tenets. In these scenarios, religious communities and their members are more vulnerable when the expression or practice of their religious doctrine is contrary to or critical of issues such as abortion, sexual diversity, gender identity, same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, and therapies for individuals with gender dysphoria, among others.

A noticeable effect of this type of social intolerance towards public expressions of faith, which seeks to reduce religious manifestations only to the most private and intimate sphere, is self-censorship among members of different faith communities. That is, out of fear of being socially attacked or labeled as “conservative,” “anti-rights,” or “discriminatory” solely for defending certain faith convictions, especially in the workplace and in the political arena under the specter of public policies, legislation or entrenched practices, individual feels intimidated by social pressure and fear of facing severe consequences (sanctions, dismissals, constant mockery). Consequently, they lose the freedom to express their faith freely and often choose not to do so for fear of censorship. The phenomena of the chilling effect and self-censorship are especially identifiable on social media, as it has become a space where not only certain religious tenets or expressions are criticized, as is common in free societies, but these same expressions become a continuous target of attack that serves to victimize those who express a faith opinion. This can occur due to the level of verbal violence reached or the labor and/or legal consequences that may arise.

At this point, it is important to clarify that the intolerance and social rejection experienced by certain religious denominations (especially those linked to the Christian religion) for the reasons mentioned above are increasingly evident in the region; a lesser-scale phenomenon of the

opposite nature can also be observed. That is, intolerance or stigmatization of certain religious groups towards other social actors when there is a contradiction between the tenets defended by both parties. Thus, although this type of behavior also lacks justification or legitimacy, it must be evaluated, and under no circumstances should the misconduct of individual members be generalized to all members of the religious group or all faith communities.

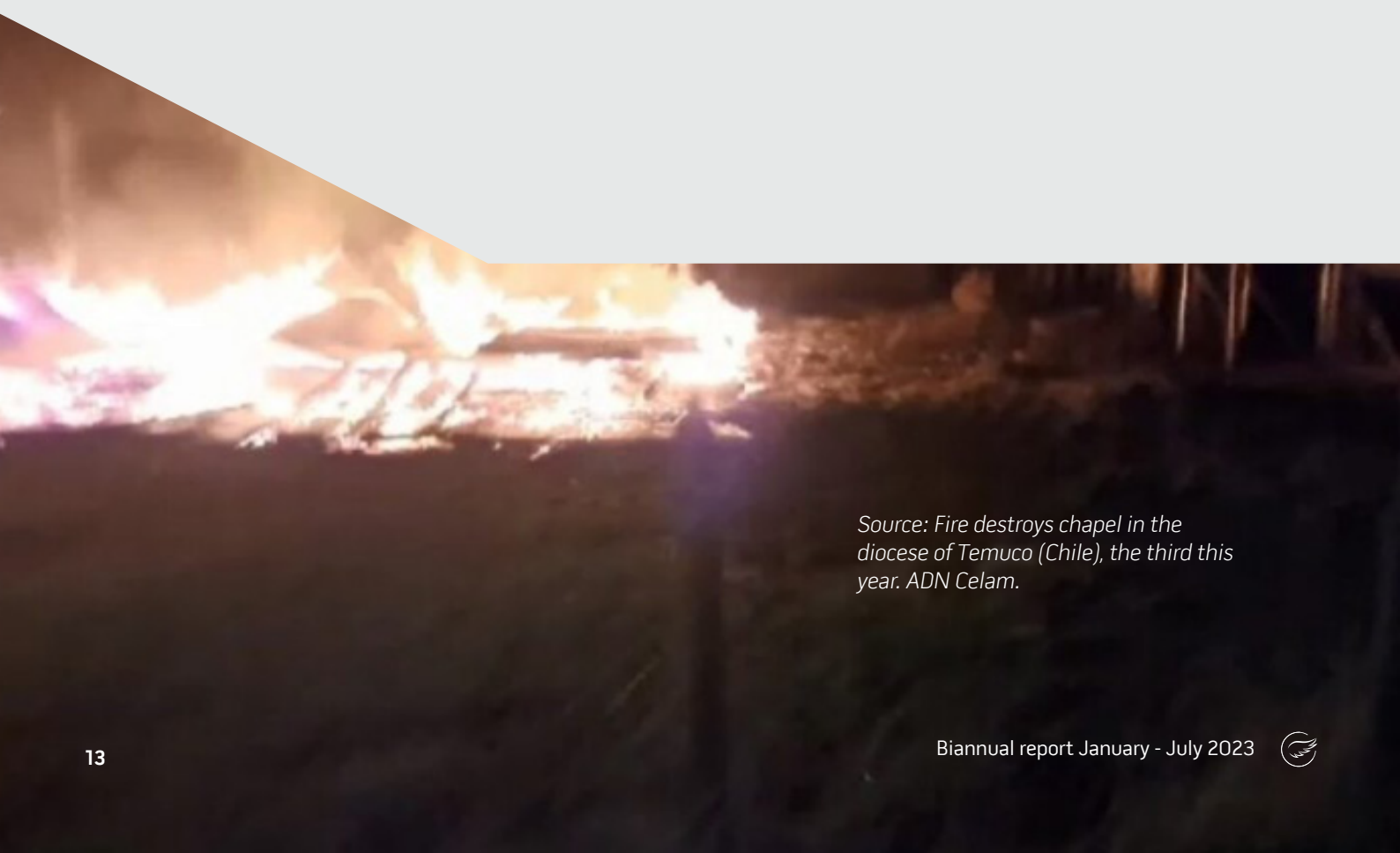
Strictly speaking, these manifestations of intolerance can range from constant criticism for defending certain faith principles, workplace bullying, pressure to receive training and promote an ideology contrary to the professed faith, impediment to expressing opinions or participating in public events because religious tenets are considered harmful, limitations on exercising the right to conscientious objection, especially in the medical and educational fields, obstacles to educating and transmitting parents’ religious convictions and beliefs to their children, accusations of discrimination against employers, clergy, and parents who are not willing to promote the tenets of the LGTB community through their individual actions, monitoring and surveillance of religious leaders and their teachings with the aim of later accusing them of promoting “hate speech,” restrictions imposed on confessional institutions (including hospitals and schools) to promote a culture consistent with their religious ethos, among others.



However, these forms of pressure are not the only manifestations of hostility towards religious expressions, as there is a concerning trend regarding acts of violence resulting from such religious intolerance. In this sense, attacks on places of worship by some radical feminist groups during their celebrations and/or protests, as happens every year on International Women's Day, continue the dynamics. In this scenario, the damage to religious buildings is apparently justified on the grounds that religion, especially the Catholic Church, is a natural enemy of women's rights and, therefore, part of what must be abolished or eradicated to promote equality and non-discrimination towards women.

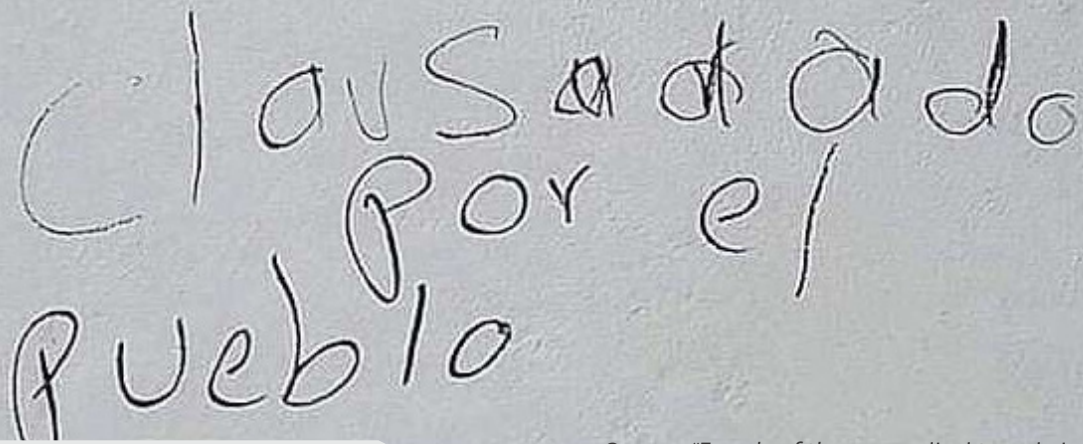
It is also relevant to mention that another constant in the context of hostility towards public expressions or symbols of faith is the attack on places of worship regarding the social

and political demonstrations that do not have the Church as their direct target. Still, it is attacked because it represents an institution with historical roots or because it represents values that have been publicly supported by certain political actors, especially in the context of elections. Therefore, it is part of the status quo that is sought to be revoked to assert social demands to authorities and part of the solution to eradicate structural inequalities and paradigms in today's society. It should be noted that the scope of these attacks is not limited to the material damage caused but, at times, also hinders the regular continuation or development of religious activities and creates a feeling of insecurity and risk in remaining in a place of worship when some form of protest or social demonstration is taking place.



Source: Fire destroys chapel in the diocese of Temuco (Chile), the third this year. ADN Celam.





Clausurado
por el
Pueblo

Source: "Facade of the evangelical temple in San Pedro Chimaltepec", *Evangélico Digital*.

4. The religious freedom of indigenous communities

The report "[Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America](#)," conducted by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in collaboration with OLIRE, identifies two dimensions of indigenous communities' right to religious freedom that are susceptible to violation.

On the one hand, there is the collective dimension of the religious freedom of indigenous communities. At the collective level, indigenous communities remain extremely vulnerable to external threats from state and non-state actors (the latter include organized crime, paramilitary groups, and multinational corporations). Although most indigenous worldviews interpret any threat to indigenous territories as a direct or indirect threat to the religious freedom of the people living in these territories because the land is considered sacred, there are five main areas of

concern: lack of recognition of ancestral land ownership, absence of the state and organized crime, extraction of natural resources by legal and illegal companies, social fabric breakdown, and dispossession through appropriation.

On the other hand, concerning the individual dimension and how the right to religious freedom of some members of indigenous communities is violated, five areas of concern were identified: conversion, contributions to patron saint festivals, construction of places of worship, proselytism and religious education, and relinquishment of ancestral rights, practices and expulsion from communal property. The leaders of ethnic groups themselves perpetrate most of the incidents related to these aspects, but the role of organized crime (in Colombia and Mexico) and revolutionary and paramilitary groups (mainly in Colombia) should also be highlighted.

Given that the worldview of indigenous communities governs every aspect of their lives and their relationship with other members of the community and with the world in general, it is essential to emphasize that this way of thinking constitutes a fundamental element in the formation of the identity of each of their members. It reaches political, economic, and cultural aspects, including the relationship with the environment and religion. In this context, religious practices shape their identity and serve as an indicator of cohesion and belonging to the ethnicity, creating an even stronger bond than blood ties. Consequently, anyone who deviates from the religious rituals of the community (whether syncretic or ancestral) is considered a traitor. Therefore, by no longer being a community member, they lose any rights, faculties, or freedoms and become victims of hostilities as a sanction for their abandonment.

Colombia and Mexico remain the most representative countries regarding violations of the individual dimension of the right to religious freedom. In these countries, conversion, primarily to Christianity, is rejected by ethnic members and leaders and is penalized through various actions, including the loss of community rights (including state census registration), pressure to participate in religious rituals, fines for not participating in religious rituals, restrictions on entering or leaving the community, imprisonment of converts

and their families, prohibition of enrolling converted children in public schools, pressure to marry converts or their children to ethnic leaders, expulsion from communities, physical violence against converts and their families, loss of state-granted benefits, hindrance in expressing or discussing their faith even within the family, destruction of converted homes, arbitrary detention in community prisons, and sometimes prosecution by ethnic leaders, accompanied by episodes of physical violence, among other actions. All these hostile actions against converts aim to prevent them from continuing with the religious practices of the religious community they joined. Additionally, through intimidation and defamation, these actions seek to discourage similar cases from arising within the community.

It is essential to add that syncretic practices in some indigenous communities are often related to the influence of the Catholic religion. Those who promote attacks on converts do so under the premise that it is a way to defend their doctrine, although the Catholic Church does not officially endorse the blending of ancestral and Catholic rituals. However, in most cases of hostilities against converts, it is not the Church being defended or purportedly defended that promotes these actions. Instead, they result from individual motivations or a misunderstanding of the faith they claim to profess.

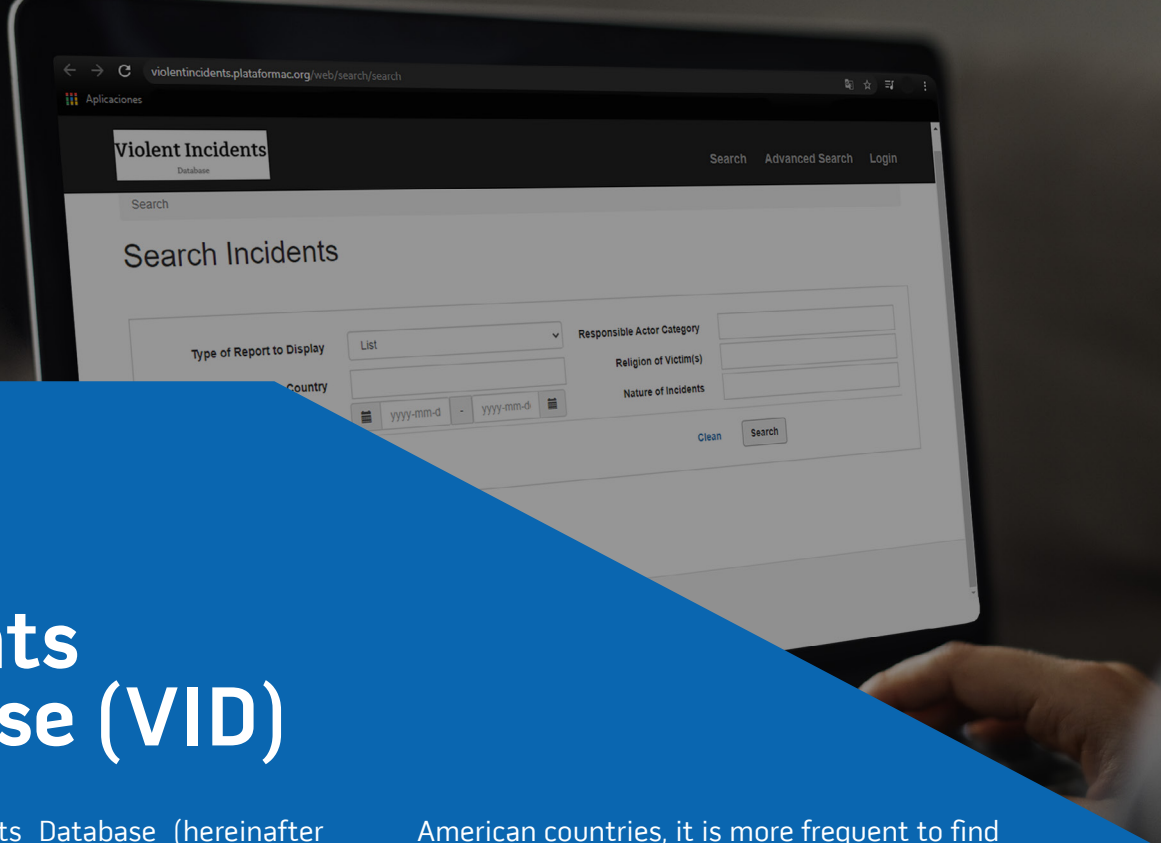


In this context, due to the cultural and geographical barriers to accessing the reality of indigenous communities, it remains a significant challenge for society and the state. In some instances, the lack of clarity in the development of events and their relation to personal and political conflicts has served as a seemingly justifiable excuse for authorities to not provide a timely and effective response to safeguard the religious freedom of converts, especially in terms of their freedom to profess a different faith and practice it without the risk of coercion or pressure to change it. Additionally, the apparent defense of “indigenous autonomy” and self-regulation based on each community’s “customs

and traditions” has been a recurring excuse for failing to take reparative actions for victims of religious intolerance and even less, preventive measures against the serious violations of human rights they have experienced. Forced displacement due to religious reasons is one of the most severe consequences, as it not only involves the upheaval of the convert and their family from their community (considering its significance in the indigenous worldview) but also initiates a cycle of violations of fundamental rights such as the right to life, personal integrity, freedom of movement, personal security, housing, employment, health, nutrition, etc.

Source: “El Corima Tarahumara. Experience of an indigenous community in Mexico”, Congregación de la Misión.





Violent Incidents Database (VID)

The Violent Incidents Database (hereinafter referred to as VID) is the primary tool used by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (hereinafter referred to as OLIRE). It is designed to collect, record, and analyze incidents related to violations of religious freedom.

Currently, VID is one of the few comprehensive data collection efforts systematically tracking violations of religious freedom in its various dimensions: individual and collective violence, physical and non-physical, state and non-state actors, religious and non-religious motivations, and all areas of life. VID distinguishes between two types of violations of religious freedom: **physical violence**, such as torture, rape, kidnapping, or murder, and **non-physical violence**, which may take the form of discriminatory legislation, social pressure, cultural marginalization, government discrimination, or obstacles to conversion, participation in public affairs, or religious life, etc.

It is important to consider that since Christianity is the majority religion in Latin

American countries, it is more frequent to find incidents involving this religious group rather than other religious minorities.

On the other hand, the main source of information for VID is publicly available data, most of which comes from digital media on the internet. These data are complemented by field interviews, documentary research, and reports provided by partner organizations. In this sense, VID cannot claim to be exhaustive. Since this database is continuously updated, recently reported cases may be included later, although many incidents may not be public and, therefore, not included.

Although the VID approach is intended to be global, to date, it contains most of the information about Latin American countries.

As an illustrative example, we provide a limited list of some incidents reported and/or identified by OLIRE from January to July 2023:



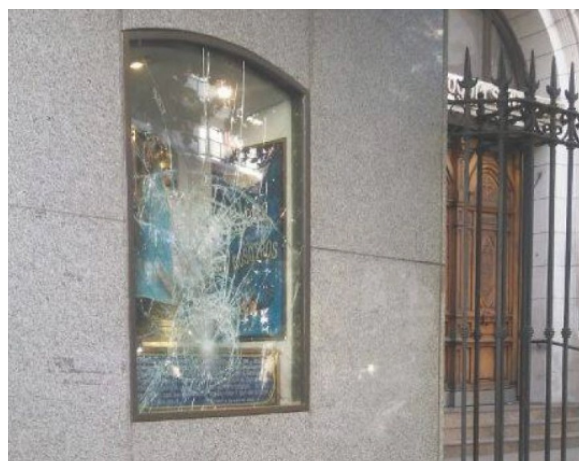
I. Forms of physical violence

These are violent actions that endanger the human security of religious actors, religious communities, and their members, either through physical abuse, kidnappings, murders, thefts, etc. They can also affect places of worship and other properties (businesses, residences, etc.) through vandalism or other means.



Argentina

- May 2023, Buenos Aires: Criminals forcibly entered the Church in the San Cayetano neighborhood and **stole** valuable items. The suspects were intercepted and arrested by the police.
- March 2023, Salta: The Cathedral Basilica of Salta was **vandalized** after the International Women's Day march. A young police officer was severely injured by a group of people with covered faces when the police tried to prevent the attack on the religious building.

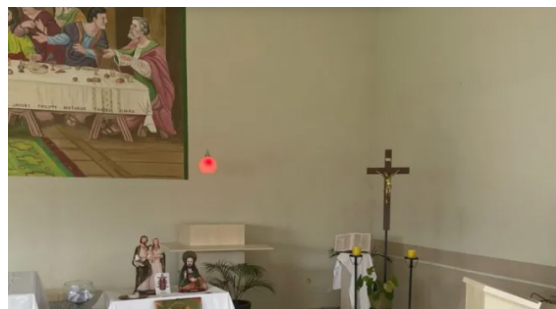


Source: They broke the hermitage of the Virgin of Lujan in the sanctuary of Santa Lucia. Caminos religiosos.



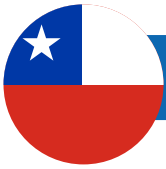
Brazil

- February 2023, Bahia: Pastor Marcos Froz de Almeida was **shot dead** in front of his own church.
- February 2023, Paraná: A chapel belonging to the parish of Nossa Senhora de Fátima was **vandalized**. The doors were forced, and the thieves stole some items used by the community in the Eucharistic celebrations, including the tabernacle with the consecrated Eucharistic species.



Source: Parish with consecrated hosts is stolen. Acidigital.





Chile

- March 2023, Araucanía: An **arson attack** destroyed the Sacred Heart of Jesus chapel in the San Francisco de Asís parish in Selva Oscura.
- March 2023, Araucanía: Eight masked and armed men arrived at the chapel of Nuestra Señora de los Truenos in the town of California, Araucanía, central Chile, and set it **on fire**. The attackers left leaflets and a banner claiming responsibility for the attack and warning of future violent actions. "Every bullet they fire will be returned. Temuicui resists." The message was signed by RMM, an acronym for Resistencia Mapuche Malleco, a guerrilla group that claims to defend the rights of the Mapuche indigenous people and has been responsible for other attacks in the past.



Source: Catholics of Chile say "no to violence" in the face of a new chapel fire. Aciprensa.



Colombia

- July 2023, Cauca: The Señor de los Milagros church has been affected by constant **thefts**, at least 3 per month. Thieves have entered the church 15 times, taking valuable items, including a water meter, cash, a bell, and a bronze Christ. It is known that an identified criminal has been terrorizing the community.
- July 2023, Cauca: Armed men **fired** 36 shots at the truck assigned to Father Javier Porras, who was not injured because he was not in the vehicle at the time of the attack. At the time of the attack, deacon Fredy Muñoz and Deiver Bototo, one of the priest's assistants, were traveling after completing pilgrimage days in several towns in the municipality. Father Javier Porras has been the parish priest of the church of San Lorenzo de Caldono for several years and actively works for peace, non-violence, and the reconstruction

of his community despite the presence of armed groups, exposing him to situations of violence like this attack. The attack caused concern in the municipality, which is experiencing a new wave of violence due to the presence of the Dagoberto Ramos column, a dissident faction of the FARC, and the ELN, who have been in territorial disputes since January 2022.

- March 2023, Cauca: **Damage** was reported to three churches and historic buildings in the city of Popayán during the marches commemorating International Women's Day. At the end of the marches, protesters painted graffiti and offensive messages on the San Francisco and Santo Domingo temple facades in the city center and the La Milagrosa church in the Prados del Norte neighborhood.

Source: The ONU condemns attack on members of the Church in Colombia. Made for minds.





- June 2023, Havana: The presence of criminals in churches in Cuba has become permanent; in Havana, the Church of the Sacred Heart, located on Línea Street in Vedado, has once again been affected by [theft](#) inside its facilities. The criminal entered and took lamps and light bulbs. The priest in charge did not report the theft because the authorities did nothing to locate the perpetrators.
- April 2023, Camagüey: Last March, the activist Marisol Peñas Cobas, was formally accused of committing “other acts against the normal development of the minor” for “not teaching her daughter to love the revolution.” She is currently awaiting trial, after paying a bail of two thousand pesos. On april, the police went to her house to take her and his daughter away to the police station, to subject them to [interrogation](#). The activist pointed out: “They are going to have to shoot me, because I am never going to teach my daughter to love and respect communist leaders”, “My daughter only has to love and respect God, her family, whom is good to her and to freedom above all”.

- March 2023, Villa Clara: Despite his delicate health, the Castro regime authorities denied [extrapenal license](#) to Yoruba priest and political prisoner Loreto Hernández García, detained for his participation in the protests of July 11, 2021. Since his arrest, several complaints about the case of Yoruba priest Loreto Hernández have come to light, including the lack of appropriate medical care.



Source: 7-year-old girl summoned for questioning “because her mother has refused to let her be indoctrinated at school.” Martí.



- July 2023, West: Sister Marcella Catozza, a Franciscan from Port-au-Prince, talks about the G9 and the constant [threats](#) she receives from the gang, who tell her they will destroy the sisters’ house, a place that houses several children, protecting them from being kidnapped and becoming gang members or being raped. The G9 violently demands rice, oil, and beans. The sister is looking for a new shelter to accommodate about 30 children. She has to deal with constant harassment while they threaten to take over her house and turn it into a base.
- March 2023, Croix des Bouquets Area, a suburb of Port-au-Prince: Father Jean-Yves Medidor, a priest of the Clerics of Saint Viator, collaborator of the Christ-

Roi parish in Puerto Príncipe, was [kidnapped](#) in Croix des Bouquets. He was attacked and abducted by a group of armed, hooded men who put him in a car and drove away. After twelve days, he was released.

- February 2023, Port-au-Prince: Members of gangs in Haiti kidnapped three worshipers as they were leaving a church in the capital, Port-au-Prince, after attending Sunday Mass. Local media reports that the [kidnappers](#) are demanding large sums of money as ransom. The kidnapping comes just five days after gang members also kidnapped a Claretian priest.





Honduras

- May 2023, Olancho: Pastor Carlos Muñoz, of Nicaraguan origin, was shot several **times** as he left a service at Pentecostal Christ Church.
- May 2023, Tegucigalpa: According to the Society of Jesus, Radio Progreso has been under a series of attacks through social media and the mainstream media for several months and has also been a victim of **threats**, extortion, and hacking of official networks and websites. On the other hand, Father Ismael Moreno has been the victim of a disinformation campaign and threats.
- February 2023, Tegucigalpa: The evangelical leader of the Church of God of Prophecy, Amado Hernández, was **shot** and killed in the capital of Honduras. According to the police report, based on witness statements, the victim was driving a small gray bus,

and as he was about to park the vehicle in front of the church, he was shot in the head. The evangelical leader worked with young people in the area.



Source: Jesuits from Honduras denounce threats against the director of Radio Progreso. ADN Celam.



México

- June 2023, Chihuahua: The Pueblo de Santa Anita church suffered a **shootout**. Two lifeless bodies were found, one of them nearly decapitated by gunshot wounds to the neck. A total of 961 shell casings and a grenade were found. This act has been considered a desecration. Catholic priest Enrique Urzúa Romero, in charge of the Guachochi Cathedral, reported that residents of three communities fled and remain displaced due to confrontations between organized crime members.
- May 2023, Mexico City: 12 men entered the San Luis Gonzaga Parish in the Iztacalco borough of Mexico City. The men **attacked** Father Cuauhtémoc Islas and two parish employees to steal money from offerings and some sacred vessels. The men pushed, intimidated, tied up, and placed the employees in the area where parish waste is deposited. They violently entered the priest's room and threatened to kill him.



Source: "It is a desecration": shooting in the Guachochi church left two bodies dead, one of them decapitated. Infobae.



- March 2023, Durango: For the second consecutive year, radical feminist groups **vandalized** the Cathedral of Durango during the March 8 demonstration. The most affected historical building was the Minor Basilica Cathedral.
- March 2023, Chihuahua: Officers from the Municipal Public Security Secretariat (SSPM) **broke** into the Cathedral of Ciudad Juárez to detain migrants without adhering to legal protocols. The Episcopal Dimension of Pastoral Care for Human Mobility of the Episcopal Commission for Social Ministry issued

a statement indicating that SSPM agents arbitrarily removed people from the Cathedral of the Diocese of Juárez, using violence and violating the physical and psychological integrity of the people.

- January 2023, Chihuahua: The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights urged the Mexican government to protect the lives of 11 Jesuits from Cerocahui. Organized crime groups have **threatened** and attacked the Jesuits, preventing them from normally carrying out their pastoral activities.



Nicaragua

- July 2023, León: The parish priest of the Diocese of León, Douglas Ramón Guevara Ávila, went **into exile** after being repeatedly harassed by police personnel of the Ortega regime. He had been in charge of the Inmaculada Concepción de María parish for ten months. He is the third priest victim of this regime in less than a week: Father Juan Carlos Sánchez, whom Migration denied entry to Nicaragua, and Father Fernando Zamora Silva, arrested on July 9.
- May 2023, Matagalpa: According to a statement by the Police, priest Jaime Montesinos was **captured** for having a suspicious attitude in a van; however, he is accused of committing acts that threaten the nation's independence, sovereignty and self-determination,

based on the Controversial Law for the Defense of the People's Right to Independence, Sovereignty, and Self-Determination for Peace.

- April 2023, Rivas: The government **expelled** three nuns from the Dominican Sisters of the Annunciation Congregation. The three nuns ran the Lopez Carazo Foundation Home for the elderly in Rivas, Nicaragua. The two Costa Rican nuns left Rivas and crossed the border into Costa Rica minutes before 3 p.m. Sor Teresa, originally from Guatemala, was in bed and had to be transported by ambulance. The government also took over the Susana López Carazo school, one of the emblematic works of the Dominican Sisters of the Annunciation.



Source: Parish priest Douglas Ramón Guevara, from the Diocese of León, goes into exile.. Confidencial.



Source: Government of Nicaragua returns Monsignor Rolando Álvarez to La Modelo prison. *Centroamérica & Mundo*

- May 2023, Masaya: The government **revoked** the legal status of the Christian Mission Verb Association, responsible for the Casa Bernabé project, designed to aid children and adolescents in an orphanage in Veracruz, in the Municipality of Nindirí. The Ministry of the Interior alleges that the Christian Mission Verb Association does not have the “credentials” granted by the Ministry of the Family to operate as a Center for the Internment of Children and Adolescents. The Government also accuses the Christian Mission Verb Association of obstructing the control and oversight of the Directorate of Registration and Control of non-profit organizations with its projects. In the agreement, the Ministry of the Interior orders the confiscation of movable and immovable property and instructs the Attorney General’s Office (PGR) to transfer the property to the name of the State of Nicaragua.

- February 2023, Matagalpa: The Bishop of the Diocese of Matagalpa, Monsignor Rolando José Álvarez, was **sentenced** to 26 years and four months in prison in Nicaragua. He was charged with conspiracy, spreading false news, aggravated obstruction of functions, and contempt for authorities. He had been part of a commission that sought to mediate between the government and opponents of the policies in the nation. Still, he was arrested by the authorities on August 19, 2022, and finally sentenced.



Venezuela

- March 2023, Caracas: The Archdiocese of Caracas reported that unknown individuals caused **damage** to the San Ignacio de Loyola parish, located in the Mezzanine of the Central Park of the Venezuelan capital, from where they stole some sacred vessels. During the robbery, the Blessed Sacrament was profaned.



Source: Criminals cause destruction and steal sacred vessels in the San Ignacio de Loyola parish. *Efecto Cocuyo*.



Table 1: Incidents of violence in Latin America (January - July 2023)

Countries	Killings	(Attempts) to destroy, vandalize, or desecrate places of worship or religious buildings	Closed places of worship or religious buildings	Arrests/ detentions	Sentences	Abductions	Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse)	Attacked houses/ property of faith adherents	Attacked shops, businesses, or institutions of faith adherents	Forced to leave Home	Forced to leave the country
Argentina	0	7	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
Brazil	1	3	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Chile	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Colombia	2	19	0	0	0	0	6	3	0	0	0
Cuba	0	5	0	15	1	0	4	1	0	0	2
El Salvador	1	2	0	49	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Haiti	0	0	0	0	0	5	4	1	0	0	0
Honduras	4	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Mexico	4	33	0	2	0	0	23	0	0	0	0
Nicaragua	1	5	17	24	8	2	0	1	1	1	26
Venezuela	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: OLIRE, Violent Incidents Database – VID.

The updating of this database is continuous, so the number of incidents may vary as new cases are registered/identified.

To view the updated data, [Click here](#)

The data presented in this section has been obtained with the collaboration of the Latin America Research Unit of Open Doors International.



II. Non-physical forms of violence

The second research area involves monitoring and subsequent analysis of other forms of pressure, such as discrimination, social exclusion, and other forms of hostility.



Colombia

- April 2023, Bogotá: The Javeriana University canceled the presentation of the book “Generación Idiota” on its premises. The author, Agustín Laje, an Argentine political scientist and writer, was scheduled to give a lecture on the book’s content. Students and activists from the LGBTIQ+ community argued that it was not appropriate for Laje to give a lecture because, according to them, the author’s right-wing positions represent discrimination and hate speech against sexual minorities.

Source: “Censorship. Total idiotism”: Agustín Laje speaks with SEMANA directly about what happened at Javeriana and accuses that educational center. Semana.



Cuba

- March 2023: Several educational centers have suspended their class schedules to take children around their neighborhoods and ask neighbors to go to the polls. The order, known as the “Plan Tún-Tún,” has been deployed in several provinces. On March 26, Cubans voted for the 470 legislators who will represent them in the National Assembly in elections that saw the highest abstention rate since the revolution’s triumph.
- February 2023, Nuevitás: [The host of a wedding in Nuevitás, Camagüey](#), was subjected to harassment when, on February 13, he organized a Jewish wedding ceremony at his home. When the guests began arriving at the ceremony, a neighbor who belongs

to the neighborhood Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) repeatedly visited the house on various pretexts. Although the neighbor did not specifically inquire about what was happening, it became clear to those present that they were being visited and scrutinized to identify those in attendance for reporting to State Security.

- February 2023, Havana: Cuban priest Jorge Luis Pérez Soto, known for his activism in defense of human rights and freedom, was [excluded from](#) the guest list at the official event attended by Cardinal Beniamino Stella at the Aula Magna of the University of Havana.





Source: Access to the Virtual Campus of UCA – Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas 2023. Mundo campus virtual



El Salvador

- June 2023: The Central American University (UCA) José Simeón Cañas, of Christian inspiration, is accused of planning a coup d'état. In particular, Rector Father Andreu Oliva and his Vice-Rector Serrano are **accused** of conspiring to prepare an insurrection against the government, allegedly for supporting two citizens participating in the 2024 elections.



Mexico

- June 2023, CDMX: Congressman Héctor Malavé Gamboa, from the Morena party, lost his temper and **verbally attacked** religious groups protesting in front of the Congress. They were demanding a review of a proposed bill that apparently limited their freedom of worship. The congressman expressed that the Catholic Church wants to interfere in state affairs and added, "The door will be closed to the Catholic Church because it has always opposed the progressive advances of the left."
- May 2023, Jalisco: A group of 20 young people and some children went to the cinema and, upon exiting, found themselves at the food tables. As a priest accompanied them, the security personnel at the location asked them to leave, escorting them as if they were criminals. This is not the first instance of **discrimination** recorded at the La Gran Plaza Fashion Mall in Guadalajara.
- January 2023, Rio Bravo Border: Evangelical pastors dedicated to providing food and water to Venezuelan immigrants have been **removed** from the Herrera Jordán and Oro areas. This was ordered by personnel from the National Institute of Migration, who also opted to remove immigrants from these surrounding areas due to Biden's visit. Many immigrants of different nationalities are waiting to determine their immigration status.



Source: Campeche: Religious ask for freedom of belief; Morena deputy attacks them. La Jornada Maya.





Nicaragua

- May 2023: Some religious leaders have made it known that the bank accounts of their dioceses and parishes have been **frozen**. According to a police statement, they were informed of “illegal activities in the management of funds and resources in bank accounts that had belonged to individuals convicted of treason against the nation.” The police claim to have “initiated investigations that led to the discovery of hundreds of thousands of dollars hidden in bags located in facilities of the country’s Diocese.” They add that the Attorney General’s Office, the Superintendency of Banks and Other Financial Institutions (Siboif), and the Financial Analysis Unit (UAF) “have confirmed criminal movements with funds that, according to the Diocese, have entered the country irregularly and are being investigated.” Processes have been opened for all these crimes.
- March 2023, Rivas: The traditional procession at the National Sanctuary of Jesus del Rescate in Popoyuapa was **anceled** by the authorities of the

Catholic Church, citing “reasons beyond our control.” Meanwhile, the Municipality of Masaya and other municipalities controlled by the Daniel Ortega regime sponsored a parade of carts heading towards the sanctuary.

- February 2023: The government of Nicaragua **stripped** 94 individuals of their Nicaraguan citizenship, including Bishop Silvio José Báez, an auxiliary bishop of Managua, and Father Uriel Vallejos, a priest from Matagalpa. Appellate Judge Ernesto Rodríguez accuses them of being fugitives from the magistrates and traitors to the nation. Their assets have been confiscated.



Source: Rivas is left without the traditional procession of Jesús del Rescate. Confidencial.





OBSERVATORY OF
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IN LATIN AMERICA

*To review all
incidents, please
visit the provided
link [here.](#)*



JANUARY - JULY 2023