



OBSERVATORY OF
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IN LATIN AMERICA

BIANNUAL REPORT

PERIOD:
*JULY -
DECEMBER
2022*



About us

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

Following the ICCPR's General Comment No. 22 on 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 a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected in all spheres of society.

Freedom of religion is at the crossroads of numerous fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, conscience, and assembly. Religious freedom is much more than a freedom of worship; it involves the freedom to live and express one's religion individually and collectively in the family, academic, commercial, and cultural spheres. Therefore, we consider

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

For us, religious freedom is essential characteristic to healthy democracy. Promoting religious freedom is, therefore, part of the effort needed to improve and deepen the quality of democracy. Latin American societies have come a long way in this regard in recent years, but challenges remain, particularly when it comes to the exercise of religious freedom in certain areas.

We adhere to the principle of separation between religion and state. 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 views on the rest of society. Government institutions should not be subordinate to religious institutions, or vice versa.



Areas of action

MONITOR:

We document, investigate and analyze the state of religious freedom and its possible limitations in the region's different countries. 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.

INFLUENCE:

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



Source: "Threats against Father Segura in Jalisco grow, hitmen unload weapons outside the church", Debate.

Latin America: State of Religious Freedom July to December 2022

This paper aims to present 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:

1.

Organized Crime and Religious Freedom

As noted in our previous reports, de facto power wielded by leaders of criminal groups entails implementing an organized structure operating in a society where 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 perform vital social assistance functions, even being forced -circumstantially- to pay fees to enter certain areas. In other cases, given the high level of corruption in Latin American governments, it is the same authorities that, in cooperation with these criminal groups, make it possible to continue their illegal activities.

Diversification and the desire for greater profits on the part of the different criminal groups operating in certain areas (depending on the country, the locations may be more attractive due to the geography of the territory, transport facilities, collusion with authorities, limits with other areas of interest, etc.) It has provoked disputes over the control of regions, transport, and distribution routes (in the case of actions linked to drug trafficking or human trafficking, recruitment of minors, installation of antipersonnel mines, threats to leaders and communities, selective assassinations, displacements, confinement, and sexual abuse), suppliers and collaborators. These confrontations in which attempts are made to determine which of the active criminal groups has more power and authority in a given territory influence the high level of insecurity experienced and often motivate the massive displacement of families and entire communities in the face of direct or indirect threats of which they are victims. However, given the strengthening of criminal groups following the COVID-19 crisis and the state's inadequate response, mass displacement often only contributes to the greater vulnerability of communities, which are victims of abuses in the new territory in which they settle, whether by factions of the same criminal group or by rival groups that view them with suspicion.

Today, because of failed strategies to combat violence, some governments have assigned a specific part of national security policies to the armed forces through public policies that legitimize military intervention or special groups within the national police. However, the facts indicate that these measures, far from reducing violence, have increased the level of insecurity and impunity, in addition to the increase in violations of the human rights of citizens that, finally, revictimize a society that

tries to get rid of violence. In specific contexts, incidents have been reported related to abuses by the national police and/or military, either due to disproportionate use of public force registered in some social mobilizations or with the practice of detention to "false positives."

In **Colombia**, primarily due to the continuing alarming figures of violence during the post-electoral stage, congregations, churches, national faith communities, and international solidarity networks are constantly speaking out against the severe events that indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant communities have been suffering because of the armed conflict. However, the response of the authorities to the facts that are the reason for complaints by religious communities remains insufficient and late. Thus, the gradual increase in social violence correlates to the greater vulnerability of religious communities by armed groups, which has even forced these communities to support the political interests of armed groups through violence and pressure. Not to mention other tactics, such as restricting free movement to the point of being forced into confinement in some regions of the country.

Similarly, religious communities' pastoral and humanitarian activity in **Mexico** is perceived as threatening criminal groups' illicit interests and de facto authority. The reaction is one of cruelty (increasingly cruelty) against religious leaders and human rights activists calling for an end to violence. However, the evident vulnerability of ministers of worship and active members of their religious communities, the links of corruption between criminals and public officials are so strong that, despite public denunciations made about it, so far, the perpetrators of violence continue to act with impunity.

Source: "Death threats against the Bishop of Buenaventura increase", Infobae.



The victims are stigmatized or criminalized for raising their voices alongside the people in an apparent demand for greater state attention to the fundamental rights of the disadvantaged, especially indigenous communities in the country's south. It is essential to mention that, even at the highest levels of state administration, there are signs of disinterest and lack of empathy to respond to the call to action made by religious communities that are at risk and/or have been victims of this type of situation.

In the case of **Haiti**, the peculiarity is that being a country with a broken society product of many years of political instability and civil wars that has been turning the State into a weak and ineffective structure, it is the criminal groups that exercise total control over many areas of the country. Thus, robberies, kidnappings, extortion, and looting of temples of worship and buildings of confessional organizations, including the murder of missionaries, are frequent.

In **Honduras**, as in El **Salvador**, religious and lay representatives have been the target of threats and attacks for their defense of human rights and denunciation of social violence and/or abuse of power exercised over the most vulnerable sectors of the population, especially indigenous communities. The continuous public appeal in favor of the most defenseless has placed them at risk, even more so if they are seen as an obstacle, especially by the criminal groups that operate in much of the country, to the continuity of illegal activities under the absent and sometimes complicit gaze of the authorities. El Salvador deserves special mention because, despite the fact that a State of Exception has been in effect since March 2022 to eradicate the presence of gangs and their criminal activities, this type of measure has not only increased complaints of abuse by state forces (and other types of steps that

will be mentioned in the following section), but it has also failed to fully eradicate the gangs' culture of terror and has left the most vulnerable sectors vulnerable.

On the other hand, the economic and humanitarian crisis, the increase in the population in extreme poverty, uncontrolled migration, and school absenteeism because of the pandemic have also influenced the increase in the vulnerability of young people in the context of structural poverty, to be enlisted in the ranks of criminal groups either by necessity or by force. In this context, the educational programs of the different faith communities that aim to keep young people away from the world of violence and drugs are constantly targets of attack since the development of these kinds of activities threatens the stability of the criminal group in the area and the possibility of having greater followers.

Furthermore, religious leaders in charge of these social programs are frequently the targets of threats and extortion attempts directed at them and their children, who are also the targets of threats as a form of intimidation of their parents into ceasing their religious activities in areas dominated by criminal groups. However, it is worth mentioning that, as part of a new dynamic in the period that merits this report, there have been even more significant threats against women religious leaders, who, although they represent a minority among their male peers, have also been victims of violence perpetrated by criminal groups. Thus, in Mexico, some nuns suffered threats of rape for maintaining an educational project that sought to keep young people away from violence and drugs. In Colombia, on the other hand, there have been reports of evangelical pastors being raped in retaliation for their church activity in areas controlled by armed groups.

In this context, religious leaders continue to be subjected to defamation, extortion, kidnapping, and death threats. In many cases, these incidents lead to the total or partial cancellation of worship activities or limitations relating to specific times for their realization. For example, some churches in rural areas have changed the hours of their services so parishioners can attend without being exposed to risks to their human safety or because the dominant criminal group in that area allows them to carry out religious activities at specific times. Thus, in these circumstances, it is common for these groups to impose an unofficial curfew as a mandatory period in which no community member can be out of their home after a particular time of night. Similarly, transit to and from some communities is prevented, keeping them isolated for several days either because of conflict between armed groups or because it is an arbitrary decision that contributes to imparting terror in the area and showing the dominance exercised over it.

Furthermore, robberies of parishes or other temples of worship continue to be frequent, numerous, and even violent in several countries in the region, as another source of economic income to finance illegal activities and as a form of retaliation and intimidation against religious leaders and the communities they represent. In that sense, criminal groups continue to destroy and steal not only goods or images of high economic value but also donations and collections gathered to meet some of the needs of both the religious denomination and the communities they are part of. In the process, the desecration of images or objects of deep symbolic/religious value for the parishioners is

common, even if they have no economic value, with the sole desire to damage the religious feelings of the community to demonstrate who holds power in the locality. These types of violent events occur even during religious celebrations, putting the integrity of attendees at risk. Even though communities and religious leaders make continuous efforts and call on the authorities to pay attention to this problem, when the officers have responded, these have been insufficient and, at best, ineffective. Even the work of religious groups focused on humanitarian assistance that alleviates the ravages of the pandemic, natural disasters, and economic crisis is at constant risk of criminal responses such as robberies or armed attacks, not to mention that in many cases, religious leaders require the permission of cartel, gang, or guerrilla leaders to carry out their activities in some regions of the country controlled by them.

In this context, the right to religious freedom is limited above all in its collective dimension since the violence and insecurity prevent the full enjoyment of faculties related to worshipping or gathering in connection with a religion or belief, establishing and maintaining premises for these purposes, teaching a particular religion, and even celebrating religious festivals or rites. All this without mentioning the limitations on the right to security and integrity of those who seek to stop the situation through actions inspired by their religious beliefs, especially when this implies being considered by criminal groups as obstacles that must be eradicated or controlled by any possible means.



Source: "Despite the growing repression, in October 2022 there were more protests in Cuba than in July 2021," *Diario de Cuba*.

2.

Religious restrictions motivated by an anti-religious political ideology (communism) and totalitarian control of the government

As has been stated in previous reports, unlike the legitimacy and proportionality of the government actions taken in several countries of the region to contain the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, in dictatorial governments such as those of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, the pandemic was the ideal pretext to tighten restrictive measures against dissident voices and try to subject religious groups to the political line of the different regimes in each country, intensifying hostility against those who are considered opponents and resorting to the abuse of power concentrated in the government. There are clear signs of communist inspiration on authoritarian governments, as well as the progressive abandonment of guarantees of citizens' human rights. Although many of the circumstances surrounding the pandemic have improved, in the second half of the year, some of the measures adopted remain in force,

and repression against the "opposition" for refusing to support government measures has even increased, even when they do so based on their religious convictions. Thus, despite progressively lifted social and mobility restrictions, hostility has spread/hardened over time. In the face of growing criticism of the abandonment of democratic practices and the repression of dissenting voices, attempts have been made to manipulate religious language, as well as references to gain some legitimacy among the population, through the defamation of religious leaders considered "enemies of the government," but also with the organization without the authority of religious festivals and the approach to some religious leaders (motivated by self-will or fear), all to demonstrate apparent respect for religious beliefs and show some legitimacy to the population and the international community.

In contrast, with many more religious leaders rejecting the attempts of the rulers to perpetuate themselves in power, certain groups have shown interdenominational unity and firmness in their convictions despite the severe attacks and threats that place them at constant risk before an almost absolute power on the part of the State, which also has the support of many citizens and para-state groups formed to serve the interests of the regime. It is worth noting that, despite the risks, and inspired by the defense of various religious convictions, an increasing number of religious leaders have emerged to oppose the regime's abuses. This has brought greater social recognition, which turns religious leaders into voices with moral authority before the citizenry and simultaneously exposes them to more significant dangers for contradicting the government's power.

In the specific case of **Cuba**, the more than six decades of communist dictatorship and the worsening humanitarian situation in the country have motivated continuous (peaceful) social protests demanding a radical change in government and the exercise of democratic practices to resume the opening to the world and

the market that makes it possible to improve the living conditions of citizens. As religious communities are part of the social groups that raise their voices against the injustices of the regime, their leaders and congregants have been continuously targeted to silence any dissenting voice, even those motivated by the professed doctrine of faith. Any critic of the "socialist revolution" is considered an enemy of the government and presented as a traitor, including religious and secular leaders committed to denouncing human rights violations and urgently calling for best practices that guarantee the right to religious freedom both individually and collectively, including the right to manifest one's faith without fear of state sanction, the right to preach and disseminate the doctrine of faith without fear that it will be considered a criticism of communist postulates, the right to obtain the legal status that allows him to operate regularly in the country, the right to construct and renovate buildings used for purposes of worship, the right to form organizations that contribute to the objectives of the religious community, the right to exercise leadership of a faith community without being the target of hostilities, etc.

Source: "Pastor Alain Toledano arrives in the US with his family", ADN Cuba.



Although hostile actions against religious leaders and their faith communities have been continuous since Castro's coming to power in the country, they have intensified as the country's crisis has become unsustainable, significantly since the July 2021 protests. With it, it has also increased the risk of being considered and treated as an enemy when one acts consistently with one's professed faith if it is regarded as a threat to the interests of the regime. Among the most recent protests, we can consider those of September 2022. Protesters may face eviction threats, cancellation of religious activities without prior notice, closure of churches (including those operating inside private homes), confiscation of property, and unjustified arrest of religious leaders and activists for supporting demonstrators, participating in protests, and even refusing to support the ideological postulates behind the elaboration of the New Family Code or criticizing the legalization of religious repression imposed in the New Penal Code, confiscation of imported goods, the impediment to entry or exit from the country, acts of repudiation (which may include physical violence) and/or vandalism against temples of worship, smear campaigns by the authorities, threats of losing custody of children unfounded and arbitrary police summonses and/or unjustified detention by state agents, harassment at work and closure of private businesses, constant surveillance by police and community members.

It is worth mentioning that the Office of Attention to Religious Affairs – ORA is the office that coerces religious groups who are identified

as opponents or dissidents. Only those religious communities affiliated with the ORA enjoy minimal freedoms as long as they are loyal to the regime. However, all of them conduct their activities under the assumption that they are constantly monitored.

On the other hand, in **Venezuela**, although in the most critical moments of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no apparent signs of hostility towards religious groups, the government tried to give itself credit for its humanitarian work. This attitude changed as soon as the local electoral campaign began. In this context, attempts were made to silence religious groups when they denounced the lack of transparency of the process, the corruption of officials, and/or when they demanded the need to stop human rights abuses to restore democratic life in the country. In that sense, after the November 2021 elections, acts of intimidation continued against religious groups, even in alliance with criminal groups, with impunity. As religious leaders continue to represent a voice of authority in society, they will be seen as having a defiant attitude toward those who promote chaos and social disintegration. Any action that prevents those most in need from being dependent on the government is seen as an element that undermines citizens' unconditional loyalty to the regime. Despite this, it can also be noted that some religious groups – with little social representation – seek alliances with the government in exchange for economic or administrative favors.

Along the same line, the situation in **Nicaragua** has become much more worrying, particularly in the second half of 2022, to the point that both independent civil society organizations at the national level and international human rights organizations have indeed spoken out in favor of the victims of the oppression of the Ortega regime, including religious groups (especially the Catholic Church and some evangelical denominations) as a sector at constant risk, demanding positive change from the governmental sphere and imposing sanctions as a way to promote it.

This year and following the disputed electoral victory in November that proclaimed the Ortega-Murillo duo as winners despite high absenteeism rates, the siege against religious leaders who denounce abuses of power, corruption of officials, a lack of guarantees of human rights, and the absence of democratic practices in the country has dramatically intensified. Intimidation tactics, although mainly targeting leaders and worship ministers, also reach parishioners who defend them publicly or listen to their message. Arbitrary arrests, unfounded sentences, kidnappings, impediments to worship both outside and inside temples, massive closures of religious institutions and organizations, expulsions of religious leaders from the country and restrictions on their entry, extreme surveillance

of religious leaders, their relatives, and lay people close to them; a police siege of religious buildings; monitoring and criminalization for defending their faith are among these tactics.

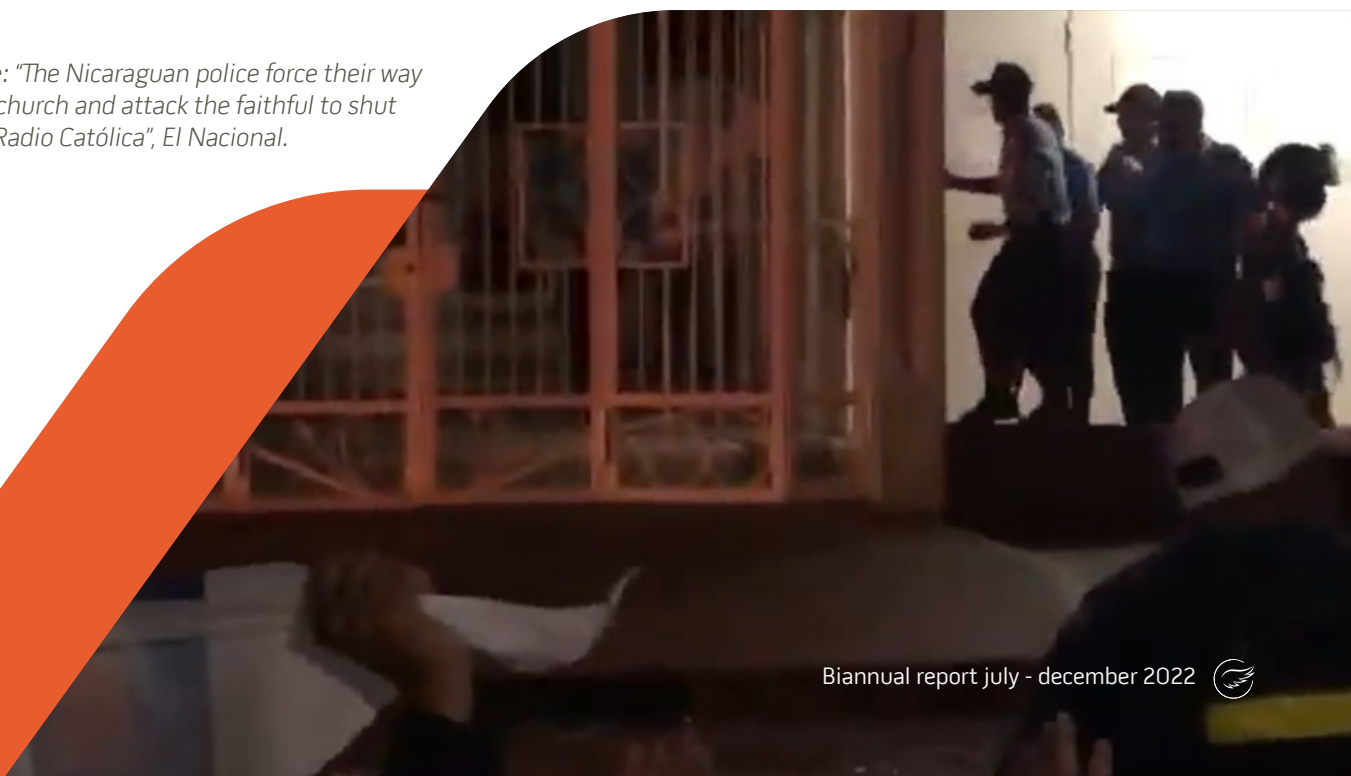
Not to mention the hostilities suffered by those members of religious groups who, without holding representative positions within them, are designated as “enemies of the government” and are harassed by their communities, paramilitary groups, and local police for their belonging to particular faith communities and for their closeness to the leaders of those communities. Additionally, it is essential to note that even when the government does not cease in its strategy of intimidation towards religious communities, it tries, at the same time, to give a specific appearance of closeness and affinity with them through the organization of its religious festivities and an apparent strengthening of ties with a sector of the Church (primarily evangelical) by trying to delegitimize the ecclesiastical authority of some communities and promoting acceptance and tolerance only towards those leaders of faith who are not considered opponents of the regime. In other words, it is common for them to manipulate religious references in their favor to try to contain citizen discontent against them.

As part of this situation of severe hostility, religious leaders openly critical of the regime continue to be monitored. Preaching or teaching inside and outside the church is observed not only by the national police but also by sympathizers of the regime. So that the state is the only voice of authority, even among the smallest, subrogating parental rights and duties, brainwashing children and adolescents in schools under the ideological guidelines of the ruling political party, which is clearly communist in inspiration. Thus, parents who express their disagreement or denounce cases of discrimination, either by teachers or fellow students, against their children because of the faith they profess are threatened and silenced in different spheres of their lives, within their community, and even at work. Similarly, teachers – like other state workers – are forced to participate in political activities, even when this contradicts their beliefs, under threat of being suspended or fired.

Finally, we can also mention the cases of **Honduras** and **El Salvador**. Both are scenarios of constant monitoring in the region since religious activities that challenge the criminal

mindset can be perceived as threats by criminal groups and by some sectors of the state structure that collude with criminal groups. In the case of Honduras, the recent experience in the country regarding intolerance towards religious leaders who do not coincide with the political vision of the administration in office has not yet been wholly eradicated despite the change of government; thus, there have been signs of rejection of the public defense of the doctrine of faith of some religious communities concerning issues such as marriage and the family when they contradict the public policies promoted by the government. On the other hand, in El Salvador, although the President continues to use religious references in his political speeches, it is common to see an attitude of hostility toward religious leaders whenever they criticize the human rights violations committed during the State of Exception or when they are vocal about the abuses explicitly committed against the religious sector that has developed projects of resocialization and integration for former gang members. Government officials have stigmatized pastoral work throughout the country.

Source: "The Nicaraguan police force their way into a church and attack the faithful to shut down Radio Católica", *El Nacional*.





Source: "Catholics are attacked in a basilica in Mexico while trying to prevent vandalization," Vardad en Libertad.

3.

Hostility towards religious expression by state and non-state actors

When the religious sector is involved in peace processes, the defense of human rights, or humanitarian assistance, its participation and influence in public space are not questioned – except in dictatorial governments. However, in other scenarios, under an erroneous interpretation of the principle of separation of Church and State, the defense of expressions of faith in the public sphere is criticized and seeks to be censored, especially when it comes to defending religious doctrine regarding the protection of life, family, and marriage, and this defense substantially contradicts the postulates promoted by some groups considered to be minorities or vulnerable sectors. In this situation, the public defense of faith-based positions is described as intolerant, “anti-rights,” retrograde, archaic, misogynistic, and criminal because they do not coincide with the mainstream postulates adopted by particular social groups.

Under the multidimensional human rights approach, it is essential to highlight that in these situations, the right to religious freedom is affected, as is the right to freedom of expression, especially if one considers that

there are increasing and more explicit attempts to silence the displays of faith (in the form of religious expressions or symbols) in the public sphere under the political or governmental consideration that certain doctrines of the faith (totally or partially) should not have a space in social life. In such a way that, with different nuances and intensities among Latin American countries, it is increasingly frequent –and therefore worrying—to identify a marked trend of attempts to censor the points of view of confessional actors and the approval of norms that promote anti-discrimination and that, in practice, not only foster a vision of greater intolerance towards religion but also prevent 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 or critical to issues such as abortion, sexual diversity, gender identity, same-sex marriage, same-sex couples’ adoption, and therapies for people suffering from gender dysphoria, among others.

A notorious effect of this type of social intolerance towards public expressions of faith that seeks to reduce religious manifestations only to the most private and intimate sphere is self-censorship among members of different faith communities. That is, faced with the fear of being attacked or socially singled out as “conservative,” “anti-rights,” or “discriminatory” for the mere defense of certain convictions of faith, especially in the work and political fields under the spectrum of public policies, legislation, or entrenched practices, the individual feels intimidated by social pressure and fear of facing severe consequences (sanctions, dismissals, constant mockery), and therefore, the freedom of expression is lost. The phenomena of the chilling effect and self-censorship are especially identifiable in social networks since these platforms have become spaces where certain religious postulates or terms are often not only criticized – as is very typical of free societies – but targets of continuous attacks.

At this point, it is worth noting that, while intolerance and social rejection are increasingly evident among certain religious denominations (particularly those associated with the Christian religion) for the reasons stated above, the opposite phenomenon, i.e., intolerance or stigmatization from certain religious groups toward other social actors or minorities, can be identified when there is a contradiction between

the postulates that both partake in. As a result, while this action lacks justification or legitimacy, it must be evaluated case by case. For no reason should this kind of misconduct be singled out for all members of the religious group or all faith communities.

Strictly speaking, this type of manifestation of intolerance can range from constant criticism for defending certain principles of faith to workplace bullying, pressure to receive training and promote an ideology contrary to the faith being professed, the impediment to expressing opinions or participating in public events because the postulates of faith are deemed harmful, limitations on exercising the right to conscientious objection, particularly in the medical and educational fields, impediments to educating and transmitting to children the religious convictions and beliefs of their parents; the accusation of discrimination against businessmen, ministers of worship and parents who are not willing to promote the postulates of minority groups, especially the LGBT community or radical feminist/secular groups; monitoring and surveillance of religious leaders and their teachings with the aim of accusing them of promoting “hate speech”; restrictions placed on faith-based institutions (including hospitals and schools) whenever these attempt to encourage a culture aligned with their religious ethos; among others.

Source: “It was not only the Primada Cathedral: images of the other vandalized church in Bogotá are known”, Noticias RCN.

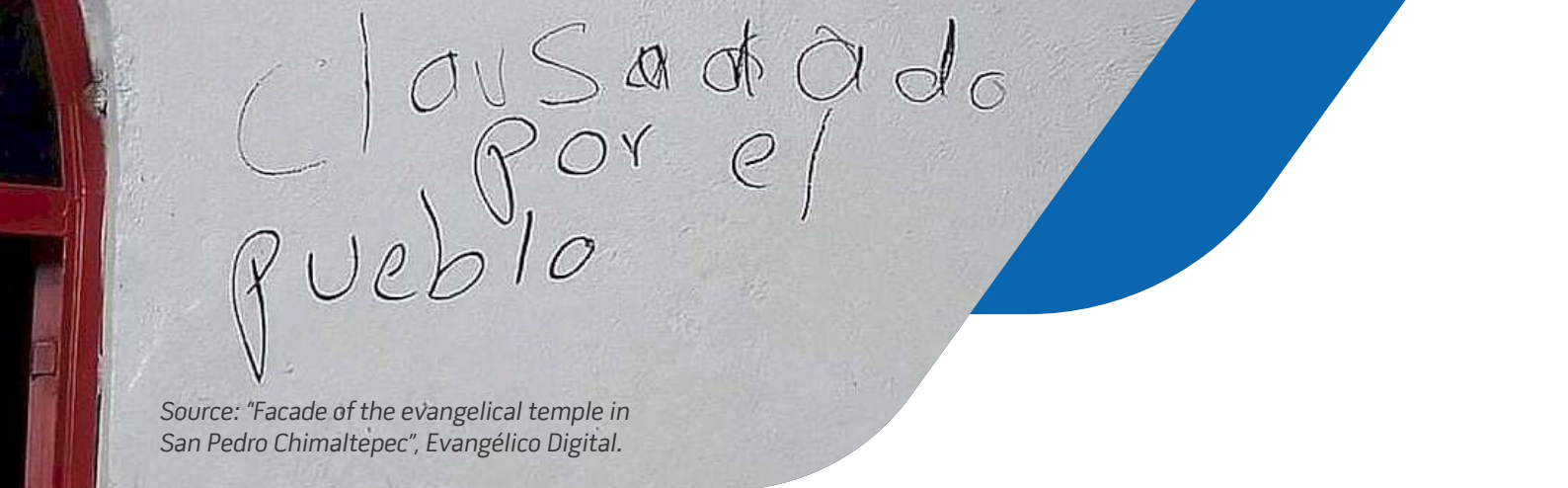


However, these actions of pressure are not the only manifestations of hostility towards religious expressions, as there is a worrying trend regarding acts of violence resulting from such religious intolerance. For example, as noted in the previous report, the dynamic of attacks on places of worship by some radical feminist groups in the framework of their celebrations and/or protests continues, as happened recently in Mexico and Colombia as part of the activities celebrating the “Global Day of Action for Safe and Legal Abortion.” In this scenario, the damage to religious buildings is justified by the consideration that religion – especially the Catholic Church – is a natural enemy of women’s rights and, therefore, is part of what must be abolished or eradicated to claim and promote women’s equality and non-discrimination. Thus, beyond the underlying contradictions that this way of thinking implicitly carries, no type of violent manifestation is justified by the apparent defense of rights and, unfortunately, the lack of attention and state diligence required to guarantee public order and avoid damage to religious buildings, particularly those with great cultural and spiritual value, contributes to the increased risk for the affected religious communities and the increase in the intimidating effect generated by this type of action.

It is also relevant to mention that, although this dynamic was recently observed in Brazil, another frequent action - within the framework of hostility towards public expressions or symbols of faith - is the attack on places of worship as a form of social and political protest. In the last report, vandalism and more severe damage against religious buildings also materialized in Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. The preceding, in the context of the development of social and political manifestations that do not have an immediate objective for the Church, but that

the Church 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 framework of elections); And therefore, it is part of the status quo that is intended to be revoked to enforce social requests towards the authorities and part of the solution to eradicate the structural inequalities and paradigms present in today’s society. It should be said that, in both cases, the scope of these attacks is not limited to the material damage caused but sometimes also prevents the continuity or steady development of religious activities and generates a feeling of insecurity and danger in the place of worship when some protest or social demonstration is carried out.

In this reporting period, it is also appropriate to give a special mention to what happened in Mexico since the situation of intolerance towards manifestations or public expressions of faith is presented with nuances that indicate greater vulnerability of religious communities. In that sense, on the one hand, the president intends to minimize religious communities’ legitimate requests for greater effectiveness in the fight against organized crime that affects citizens but also has claimed fatalities among religious leaders. Thus, the head of the Mexican government has accused the Church of favoring certain political groups with its claims and of being contrary to the ruling party. It has been attempted to reduce the violence experienced by religious communities in the country to a conflict of political interests, ignoring the fact that this is not the first time religious groups have spoken out against insecurity and government inefficiency. On the other hand, actions of mockery and stigmatization towards religious leaders instigated by government officials have also gone unpunished.



Clausado
por el
pueblo

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

4.

Hostility to religious conversion in indigenous communities

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 its members and reaches political, economic, and cultural aspects, including the relationship with the environment and religion. In this context, religious practices not only shape one's own identity but are also an indicator of cohesion and belonging to an ethnicity and form a tie with even greater value than the blood bond. Consequently, whoever departs from the religious rites of the community (of syncretic or ancestral tendency) is considered a traitor and, therefore, is no longer considered a member of the community, losing any right, faculty, or freedom, and becoming a victim of hostilities, as a sanction for its abandonment.

In Latin America, many indigenous communities exist in most of the region's countries. However, it must be said that not all of them have reported specific incidents when an indigenous member decides to abandon the community's religious practice and embrace another religious rite upon joining a new religion. Thus, Colombia and

Mexico continue to be the most representative countries regarding this type of case in which conversion - mainly to Christianity - is rejected by members and ethnic leaders and is sanctioned by them through different actions: loss of community rights (including registration in the state census); pressure to be part of religious rites; fines for not being part of religious rites; impediments to entry or exit from the community; imprisonment of converts and their families; prohibition of enrolling the children of converts 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 benefits granted by the State; impediment to transmit or speak of their faith even in the family sphere; destruction of the homes of converts, arbitrary detention in community prisons and sometimes prosecution by ethnic leaders coupled with episodes of physical violence, among others. All these hostile actions against the converts are intended to prevent them from continuing with the faith practices of the religious community to which they adhered and, through intimidation and defamation, to prevent new similar cases from occurring in the community.

It is essential to add that syncretic practices in some indigenous communities are usually related to the influence of the Catholic religion and that those who promote attacks on converts do so under the premise that it is a way of defending their doctrine. However, the proper mixing of ancestral and Catholic rites is not an officially endorsed practice by the Catholic Church. However, from the follow-up of this type of case, most hostilities against converts are not promoted by the Church they claim or appear to defend but respond to individual motivations or a misunderstanding of the faith they claim to profess.

In this type of context, given that the cultural and geographical barrier to accessing the reality of indigenous communities continues to be a great challenge for society and the State, on some occasions, the lack of clarity in the development of events and their relationship with personal and political conflicts have been the apparent justification on the part of the authorities for not giving a timely and efficient response in safeguarding the religious freedom of converts, especially in the aspect of their free choice to profess a different faith and exercise it without risk of coercion or pressure to change it. In addition to this, the apparent defense of

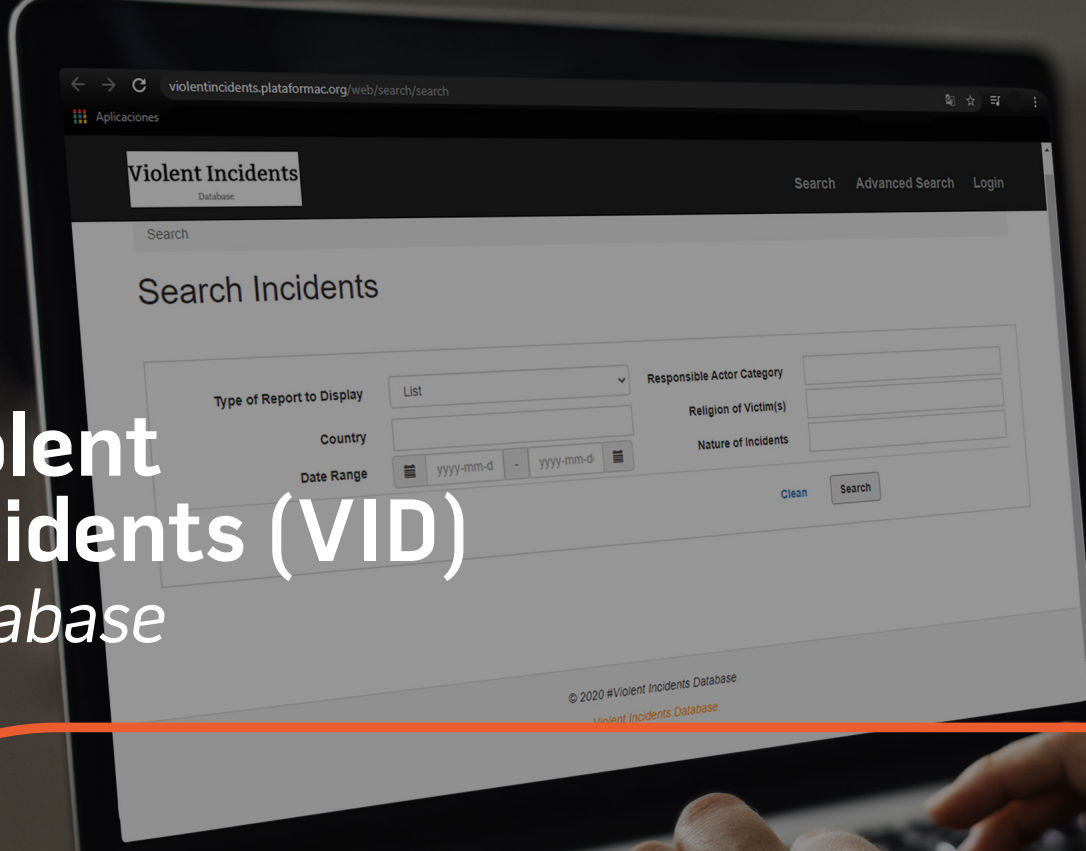
“indigenous autonomy” and its regulation of agreements to the “uses and customs” of each community has also been a recurring excuse for not carrying out actions of reparation to the victims of religious intolerance, much less preventive measures in the face of the severe violation of human rights they have experienced. Forced displacement for religious reasons is one of the most painful consequences since it not only implies the uprooting of the convert and his family from their community (taking into account its meaning in the indigenous worldview), but also the beginning of a whole cycle of violations of fundamental rights such as the right to life, personal integrity, freedom of movement, private security, housing, work, health, food, etc.

In any case, recognizing religious intolerance as one of the causes will help to design and implement affirmative measures that address the causes of the problem and, in the best of cases, to implement preventive measures that safeguard the right to religious freedom of the members of reservations or indigenous communities, respecting as far as possible the uses and customs of these groups, in line with the human rights of all residents.

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



Violent Incidents (VID) Database



The main activity of OLIRE is monitoring the state of religious freedom in the region, which can be divided into two main areas: physical violence and pressure (non-physical violence).

The tool used by OLIRE to document these incidents is the [Violent Incidents Database-VID](#), following specific [reference criteria](#).¹

The VID is designed to collect, record, and analyze incidents involving violations of religious freedom following an already-defined conceptual framework. Through research conducted by OLIRE and information provided by collaborators in the region, this tool aims not only to estimate the number of incidents against religious leaders or communities but also to be a source of information on the type and/or characteristics of this problem.

It is important to note that the VID is not presented as an exhaustive list. Many incidents are never made public and, therefore, cannot be included. On the other hand, on some occasions, media reports of incidents may be incorrect. While it is impossible to verify all incidents listed, when reports are marked as false or inaccurate, the corresponding entries are modified or deleted. As this database is continuously updated, newly reported cases will likely be included later.

By way of illustration, we present a limited list of some incidents reported and/or identified by OLIRE in the period July to December 2022:

¹ It is important to note that the Observatory team does not have the resources to validate each reported incident. If, after entering an incident, users or our collaborators detect that the information provided is not entirely correct or is incomplete, it may be deleted and/or modified.

I.

Forms of physical violence:

These are those violent actions that risk the human security of confessional actors, religious communities, and their members, either through physical abuse, kidnappings, murders, robberies, etc. They can also cause damage to temples of worship and other properties (businesses, residences, etc.) through vandalism or other means.



- November 2022, Buenos Aires: The parish community of the Basilica of Our Lady of Mercy denounced that in the early hours of November 27, criminals entered the temple to **steal**. Unknown people broke the doors, broke piggy banks, and took away bronze candlesticks.
- September 2022, Río Negro: During the conflict between Mapuche communities and national authorities in the area of Villa Mascardi, in the city of Villa Angostura, province of Río Negro, two Catholic churches were **vandalized** with graffiti and attempted arson. The chapel of Our Lady of the Assumption and the parish of Our Lady of Nahuel Huapi were affected.

- August 2022, Salta: Drones **forced** a side window of the parish to break in and steal. They took a metal chalice with hosts and defecated on the church's altar.



Source: "They condemn the vandalism in churches of Villa La Angostura", Aica.



- Monsignor Vicente Ferreira, auxiliary bishop of Belo Horizonte, received **death threats** from a group of Bolsonaroists, while celebrating a confirmation mass in the parish of São Caetano, in the city of Moeda, in the interior of the State of Minas Gerais. The Commission of Integral Ecology and Mining of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), of which Msgr. Vicente, secretary general, denounced that "the group shouted 'Out bishop' and 'there will be different'. The threats are a consequence of the prophetic attitude of the auxiliary bishop of Belo Horizonte, "in defense of the peoples and communities that are in conflict with mining, especially in defense of those affected by the collapse of the Vale (Mining Company) in Brumadinho," which has made him a target of threats.



Source: "Vandalo picha portas da igreja são vicente pallotti e imagem do santo, em arapongas", Aica.

- August 2022, Paraná. A man **destroyed** the façade of the parish of San Vicente Palotti by spraying paint on the façade of the temple and one of the religious images at its entrance.
- August 2022 Sao Paulo: A thief **broke** the main door of an evangelical temple in the Florida Paulista sector of the state of Sao Paulo. Security cameras captured how the man damaged the church's safe to steal money and escape.



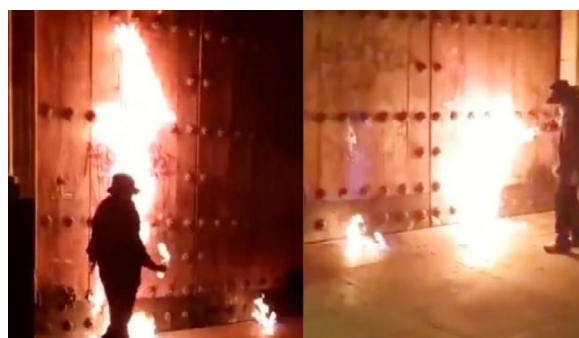
- November 2022. Araucanía: During the visit to the region made by the president of Chile, Gabriel Boric, the chapel of the parish of San Francisco de Asís was [set on fire](#). The 'Mapuche Malleco Resistance' (RMM) claimed responsibility for the arson attack.
- August 2022, Maule: Thieves enter the hermitage of Santa Cruz [stealing](#) species such as religious elements, the tabernacle, the chalice, hosts, sound equipment, stoves, and the door of the bronze tabernacle, among others.



Source: "Criminals took to the hosts from Sarmiento chapel." Radio Condell.



- September 2022, Tumaco: The daughters of two Christian leaders were threatened by members of a criminal group. They had to leave the church they attended.
- August 2022, Cartagena: Thieves entered to [rob](#) the old San Roque Church in the Getsemaní neighborhood, desecrated the tabernacle, and threw the consecrated hosts to the ground to steal the ciborium, the chalice, and a bronze.
- September 2022, Cundinamarca: As part of the marches for the legalization of abortion, dozens of radical feminists protested in front of the Catedral Primada de Bogotá and [set fire to](#) the door of the main entrance of the cathedral.



Source: "Women tried to set fire to the Primada Cathedral of Bogotá; Claudia López harshly criticized the Police. El País



- September 2022, Havana: Father David Pantaleón, superior of the Jesuit order in Cuba, was forced not to [return](#) to the country after the regime did not authorize the renewal of his residence permit. He was president of the Conference of Religious in Cuba and director of the Sunday bulletin Vida Cristiana, a space in which regime abuses were denounced.
- October 2022, Havana: The priest Kenny Fernández denounced that, during the early morning, some supporters of the regime [threw](#) garbage and debris in front of the parish church of the city of Madruga, in the province of Mayabeque.



Source: "Cuban regime expels priest David Pantaleon."
Diario Las Américas.

- December 2022, Santiago de Cuba: The wife of Pastor Lorenzo Rosales (11J protester) and human rights activists in Cuba denounced the [harassment](#) of the authorities against her. He was sentenced to seven years in the Boniato prison in Santiago de Cuba. According to the testimony of Maridilegnis Carballo, Rosales' wife, her husband is constantly harassed by prison officials and State Security agents.



- December 2022, El Salvador: Police reported that they captured six criminals who are part of a structure dedicated to [assaulting churches](#) and schools nationwide. According to the prosecutor of the case, with these arrests, they solved 21 cases of looting, of which 18 occurred in schools and three in evangelical and Catholic churches.
- August 2022, San Salvador: In the context of the government's state of emergency, multiple [arbitrary detentions](#) have been carried out. Gang members, now pastors or evangelical ministry assistants, have become targets of these measures. Ministry leaders have commented on police raids at their churches despite knowing

the suspects are not active gang members. Pastors who support reintegration projects agree that the emergency regime shattered these people's hope of leading a life away from gangs. (...)". They point out that at least 47 people who were part of their projects, located in the Metropolitan Area of San Salvador, were arrested.

- August 2022, El Salvador: José Mauricio Quintanilla Medrano, the pastor of Tabernacle Emanuel Church, was arrested in June during the state of emergency, accused of belonging to criminal groups. On August 4, his family was notified of his [death](#) at Zacamil hospital, with signs of being severely beaten and strangled.



- November 2022: Suchitepequez: Agents of the National Civil Police (PNC) arrested Axel Alexander Muj Azañón, 24, after a [robbery](#) complaint. The agents arrested him in the Catholic church of the municipality of Cuyotenango, Suchitepéquez, after receiving a complaint that indicated that a person entered by force.



- September 2022: A missionary sister said violence has also [affected](#) the orphanage where she was on her mission in one of the world's most dangerous favelas. "About a month ago, they set fire to our mission chapel. Everything is burned. We don't have an altar, pews... There is nothing anymore. The Blessed Sacrament is safe because for safety when I leave, I keep it in another safer place and thank God it was there."
- September 2022: Four Caritas offices were [destroyed](#). All of them suffered significant material damage, and, in addition, the Food for the Poor warehouses, where food and non-food products were stored, were looted. Caritas staff remain at home, trying to work remotely despite communication problems.
- September 2022, North West: A criminal gang [ransacked](#) one of the Jesuit Migrant Service (SJM)/Fwontalye-Haiti Solidarity helpers in Ouanaminthe, northern Haiti. The house was destroyed, and it is reported that all the goods inside were stolen, and the offices were damaged.



Source: "Four Caritas offices in Haiti looted in one month and work paralyzed." Apuntes.com



- September 2022, Areas of Nueva Ocotepeque, Concepción, and Gracias: Gang members from El Salvador, who have fled to Honduras because of Bukele's security strategy, have threatened Honduran citizens to hide in their homes for some time. Some ministries have been affected by such threats, in which they ask for money and asylum in their homes, putting their own families at risk. Four pastors of the ministries: "Here Your Kingdom," "Triumph of

Faith," "Water for Spiritual Thirst," and "Your Presence is My Salvation" from the areas of Nueva Ocotepeque, Concepción, and Gracias related such cases and how their daughters (5) had been harassed and they had been forced to give asylum to criminals for 5 or 6 weeks.

- September 2022, Intibucá: A criminal entered the Catholic Church of Hope and **took** the box of offerings and musical instruments.



- November 2022, Chiapas: The Episcopal Dimension of the Pastoral of Human Mobility denounced that on October 29, agents of the National Institute of Migration (INM) and the State Police of Chiapas **broke** into the Santo Domingo de Guzmán Parish in Escuintla, Chiapas, to detain migrants who were sheltered inside the place, where a Colombian woman who was pregnant was injured. There was allegedly excessive use of force by public servants.
- November 2022, Mexico City: A Christian pastor was **stabbed to death** by five people. His 78-year-old wife was beaten, and his 43-year-old daughter was raped, allegedly to steal 30,000 pesos that the victim had in a safe.
- October 2022, Guerrero: The director of the Center for the Rights of Victims of Violence, "Minerva Bello," A.C., Father José Filiberto Velázquez Florencio, denounced that armed



Source: "Catholics are attacked in a basilica in Mexico while trying to prevent vandalization," *Vardad en Libertad*.

individuals **intercepted** him in Zumpango. He indicated that he had gone to that place to officiate at several masses. When he returned in his car along the old road that connects that municipality with the capital, Chilpancingo, he was detained by a checkpoint of armed civilians, apparently members of organized crime. They let him continue after one of them recognized him as a local priest.

- September 2022, Federal District: A criminal gang **violently assaulted** eight parishes and a Catholic chapel in Mexico City. Police managed to arrest a suspect after identifying the gang's modus operandi. The thieves took valuable religious objects and alms from each parish they stole. The communities assaulted were San Lorenzo Deacon and Mártir, in Huipulco; St. Mary of the Apostles; Saints of America; Santo Cristo del Pedregal; Holy Kings and Lord of Mercy; Parish of the Purification of Our Lady of Candelaria twice, and a few weeks ago the Chapel of the Child Jesus, which belongs to the parish of San Juan Bautista.

- September 2022, Jalisco: During the "World Day of Action for Abortion" march, a group of radical feminist activists **attacked** Catholic parishioners who formed a barrier to protect the Basilica of the Blessed Sacrament in Guadalajara. While some women vandalized the church with graffiti on the outside, others insulted those praying and even beat a man who tried to defend himself from a bottle thrown at him.
- August 2022, Matehuala: Three men **stabbed** a pastor in Matehuala, in the State of San Luis Potosí. The religious leader survived and received several wounds to his arm while defending himself from the attacks.



- November 2022, Managua. Riot police violently arrested Father Enrique Martínez Gamboa, pastor of Santa Marta Church in Managua. He was taken forcibly to the Office of Judicial Assistance, known as El Chipote. The priest is being charged with an alleged conspiracy to commit a crime and the propagation of false news. Family members say he is being **tortured** in El Chipote because he is at risk of death for not being allowed to receive specialized medical attention or the admission of his medications for the hypertension he suffers, in addition to other worrying health conditions.
- December 2022, Matagalpa: Police raided the home of Maria Victoria Perez, a lawyer for the diocese of Matagalpa and wife of Manuel Obando, press director of the same diocese, who was **detained** by the government the night before.



Source: "Father Enrique Martínez is at risk of death in El Chipote", *Nicaragua Actual*.

- September 2022, Boaco: The National Police informed the Parish of San Francisco de Asís, in Camoapa, that they were **prohibited from** carrying out the procession of the patronal feast for alleged reasons of "public security."

- September 2022, Matagalpa: Five nuns from the Sacred Heart of Jesus congregation were forced to [leave](#) the country after the immigration authority did not renew the nuns' residence permit. The congregation received them in Mexico.
- August 2022: In the early hours of August 19, the National Police forcibly entered the Matagalpa Episcopal Curia to arbitrarily [detained](#) Bishop Rolando Alvarez and seven religious, who had been imprisoned for more than 15 days and were under police siege. Hours later, the National Police confirmed that the bishop was under home protection, although there are suspicions of the possible expulsion of the priest from the country. Catholic journalist Eduardo Montenegro announced that the police contacted him to defame Monsignor Rolando Álvarez and justify the priest's detention. He refused to do so, and for fear of being arrested himself, the journalist had to leave the country.



Source: "Nicaragua and the new departure of nuns that once again generates indignation", Aleteia.



Source: "Police in Nicaragua kidnap Monsignor Rolando Alvarez, take him from the episcopal curia", 100% Noticias.



- August 2022, La Guaira: Two armed men entered the Cathedral of St. Peter the Apostle during the night, [threatening](#) and then tying the hands of Father Abelardo Bazó. The thieves took valuables and money from the collection.
- November 2022, Carabobo: Jorge Eliécer Navarrete Grau, pastor of the Peniel Evangelistic Center, [disappeared](#) from his home on October 24 and appeared without signs of violence on November 2. No further information was provided on the circumstances of his disappearance.



Source: "Vargas | Godson planned the robbery of the parish priest of the Cathedral of San Pedro Apóstol de La Guaira", El Pitazo.

Table 1: Incidents of violence in Latin America (July-December 2022)

Countries	Killing	(Attempts) to destroy, vandalize, or desecrate places of worship or religious buildings	Closed places of worship or religious buildings	Arrests/ detentions	Sentences	Abduction	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	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Brazil	2	5	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Chile	0	5	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Colombia	5	9	0	0	0	0	17	0	0	8	0
Cuba	0	1	0	15	1	1	2	0	0	0	17
El Salvador	1	5	0	49	0	0	5	2	0	5	0
Haiti	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	0	0
Honduras	4	9	0	0	0	0	68	5	0	0	1
Mexico	1	21	0	8	0	2	23	5	0	2	0
Nicaragua	0	4	14	26	1	21	18	3	15	0	34
Venezuela	5	3	1	0	0	1	11	0	0	10	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](#)

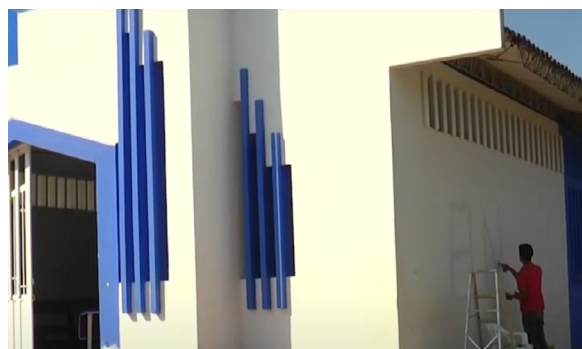
The data presented in this section has been obtained with the collaboration of the Latin America Research Unit of Open Doors International.

II. The second area of research

Corresponds to the monitoring and subsequent analysis of other forms of pressure, such as discrimination, social exclusion, and hostility.



- December 2022, Santander: The community of the Danubio neighborhood in Barrancabermeja, Santander, was on alert after finding four houses and La Sagrada Familia Church painted with graffiti with the acronym of the National Liberation Army (ELN) on their facades.



Source: "The ELN left a graffiti in a church in Barrancabermeja and this is how the community reacted." Infobae.



- September 2022, Havana: Catholic priest Kenny Fernández Delgado denounced that the regime prevented him from spreading the message of the Catholic Church about the new Family Code outside the religious headquarters. The authorities let him know that it was forbidden to distribute the message of the Catholic Bishops of Cuba on the Code of Families outside the temple.
- September 2022, Havana: Political prisoner María Cristina Garrida has been changed more than seven times in prison. This happens every time she meets with another prisoner to practice her Christian faith. The officers forbid her from forming relationships with anyone else.



- August 2022: The vice president of El Salvador said that 80% of pastors in the country are part of gangs in El Salvador.



- September 2022: The Bishops denounced how some radio hosts accused the Church of being involved in the arms trade and threatened violent acts against its representatives and buildings.



- November 2022, Coahuila: Deputy Laura Francisca Aguilar Tabares of the Parliamentary Group "National Regeneration Movement" of the Morena party launched an [initiative](#) intending to modify the State Education Law of the State of Coahuila de Zaragoza. This initiative proposes the addition of Sections XXI and XXII of Article 101, emphasizing that those involved in the provision of educational services may not promote, carry out, or allow any act or celebration that may foster a particular religious doctrine to take place within the school facilities, as this would be a violation of the Law.
- September 2022, Mexico City: Deputy Salma Luévano Luna (Morena), president of the Diversity Commission, presented an [initiative](#) to establish in the Law of Religious Associations and Public Worship that religious associations must refrain from uttering hate speech.



Source: "Mexican Christian psychologist obtains victory after they tried to take away his license for giving a Biblical discourse."
Mundo Cristiano

- September 2022, Baja California: The Autonomous University of Baja California has initiated [proceedings](#) against recent graduate Christian Cortez Pérez after some people were offended by his graduation speech. In his speech, he expressed his deep convictions regarding the importance of the family and the inviolability of life. The University Council ruled that "the arguments presented by the aggrieved party are unfounded, as well as the sanctions requested." Hence, it dismissed the sanctions requested for the student, including the retention of his university degree.



Source: "Deputy Laura Aguilar goes against discrimination for practicing a religious doctrine in schools." El Sol de la Laguna.



- September 2022: Daniel Ortega's regime **banned** two Catholic processions and the commemoration of the 453rd anniversary of translating the Bible into Spanish in some parts of the country.
- August 2022, Ciudad Darío: The parish in Ciudad Darío, municipality of Matagalpa, woke up besieged on Tuesday morning. Several agents were stationed in the area beginning before six a.m. to **prevent** Catholic faithful from entering the church.
- August 2022, Matagalpa: Father Fernando Isaías Calero Rodríguez, pastor of Our Lady of Fatima Church in Rancho Grande, **reported** that Sandinista police guards stripped him of his driver's license, circulation, and vehicle insurance when he intended to participate in a homily in the city of Matagalpa.
- November 2022, Managua: Daniel Ortega's regime, through the Ministry of Education (MINED), **prohibited** public schools from conducting high school promotions in Catholic and evangelical churches. Three public schools in the town forbid promotional events in parishes and temples.



Source: "The regime in Nicaragua prohibited two Catholic processions and the US denounced greater persecution against the Church." Infobae.



The updating of this database is continuous, so the number of incidents may vary as new cases are registered/identified. To view all incidents, click [here](#).



OBSERVATORY OF
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IN LATIN AMERICA

