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Pope Francis prays during a memorial Mass for deceased cardinals and bishops in this file photo from Nov. 4, 2024. According to Fides, the news agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies, eight priests and five laymen were killed around the world in 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez).

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Vatican City — December 30, 2024

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Thirteen Catholic "missionaries" were killed in 2024, most of them during the commission of a robbery, but several obviously were targeted for the church work they did.

In its annual report on pastoral workers killed, Fides, the news agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies, listed eight priests and five laymen. Six were killed in Africa, five in Central or South America, and two were killed in Europe.

Relying on police and witness reports, Fides said Dec. 30 that among those who were targeted for their church work was Juan Antonio López, coordinator of social pastoral care in the Diocese of Trujillo, Honduras, and a founding member of the Honduran church's organization for promoting integral ecology.

López, a Catholic human rights and environmental activist, was killed in his car by a hitman Sept. 14 after attending Mass, Vatican News reported. The 46-year-old husband and father of two had been working to shut down an iron oxide mine in a national park that was said to be contaminating two rivers in the area and threatening the local population's water supply.

"López's murder is part of a growing repression against human rights activists in Honduras," Fides said.

Fides said that its list "considers the term 'missionary' in a broader context" than just people ministering in the church's traditional mission territories.

The list includes "all Catholics who were involved in some way in pastoral works and ecclesial activities and who died violently, even if they did not die expressly 'in hatred of the faith,'" it said. "For this reason, we prefer not to use the term 'martyrs'" but to call them witnesses of faith. The technical judgment of whether they are martyrs would be made by the pope if their sainthood causes eventually are introduced.

"From 2000 to 2024, a total of 608 missionaries and pastoral workers were killed," Fides said. The stories of their lives and deaths show that few ministered in the spotlight, but rather "worked to bear witness to their faith in everyday life," often in contexts marked by violence and conflict.

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The deaths of two lay catechists in Burkina Faso appeared to be part of the ongoing anti-Christian violence of jihadist rebels in the country, Fides reported.

In an area where most Christians have fled, volunteer catechist François Kabore was killed in February in Essakane, Burkina Faso, while leading a prayer service for a community without a priest. In April, catechist Edouard Zoetyenga Yougbare was kidnapped and killed near Saatenga. Fides said his throat was slit, his hands were tied behind his back and his body showed signs of torture.

In September, in violence-ridden eastern Congo, Edmond Bahati Monja, coordinator of Radio Maria/Goma, died in Goma; he was one of at least a dozen journalists killed in and around the city in the past two years. Bahati had been investigating the violence of the armed militias in the region, Fides said.

Father Marcelo Pérez, an Indigenous Mexican, was slain in October after celebrating Mass in the southern state of Chiapas. He endured death threats for his work accompanying victims of violence.

The two priests killed in Europe in 2024 were attacked in their residences, Fides said.

Franciscan Father Juan Antonio Llorente died in November after a man armed with a stick and a glass bottle broke into the monastery where he lived in Gilet, Spain. Shouting "I am Jesus Christ," the man beat up several of the friars, who had to be hospitalized. Father Llorente, 76, died of his injuries two days later.

Also in November, in Szczytno, Poland, a man broke into the parish rectory armed with an ax and intent on robbery. He attacked Father Lech Lachowicz, 72, who died the next day of his injuries, including a fractured skull.