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## **MEXICO | Catholic Priest Honored for Investigating Attacks**

Father Omar Sotelo Aguilar, a Catholic priest who has documented attacks on priests and other Catholic Church members by criminal groups in Mexico for over a decade, was honored for his work by the National Club of Journalists.

Father Sotelo is the director of the Catholic Multimedia Centre (CCM). On March 30, he received the National Journalism Award in the category of Human Rights for his December 2016 investigative report “The Tragedy and Crucible of the Priesthood in Mexico: Ten Years of Persecution.”

Three priests and four catechists were murdered last year, making 2016 the eighth consecutive year that Mexico was ranked by the Catholic Church to be the most dangerous country in the world for priests. On March 26, another priest was killed in the state of Nayarit. A statement from the Mexican Bishops’ Conference indicated that criminal groups are believed to be responsible.

Father Sotelo’s report covers the 10 year period between 2006 and 2016 when “the assassinations of 31 priests were registered...and 15 of those took place in just the last four years. It is necessary to recall that in the vast majority of these cases, the modus operandi has been: threats, extortion, kidnapping, torture and murder. These tragic numbers demonstrate that these crimes cannot be categorized alongside common crime, these are high impact crimes, without doubt. Neither any of the state prosecutors, nor the Attorney General have provided a clear or efficient response to this phenomenon. On the contrary, their investigations are full of irregularities and holes. More than 80% of the cases of murders of priests are unresolved or have been categorized as archived.”

In the introduction of the report, lawyer and human rights expert Guillermo Gazanini Espinoza wrote, “Mexico has become a country where there are no safety guarantees for the peaceful

exercise of the priestly ministry, and just like other professions, including journalists, the ministers of the Church are a target because of their pastoral activities in favor of the well-being of their fellow human beings.”

Upon receiving the award, Father Sotelo expressed gratitude to all those who had supported him in his work and dedicated the prize to “all of my brother priests, especially those who suffer persecution and violence in silence.”

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, “We at CSW were overjoyed to learn that Father Sotelo’s important work has been recognized at this high level by the National Club of Journalists. We have worked with Father Sotelo in raising awareness of his work on the international level for the past three years, and can speak to his commitment and courage in persistently speaking out on a subject that can have deadly repercussions. We call on the Mexican government at both the state and federal level to address the concerns raised in the report and to develop more effective responses to fully investigate all cases involving attacks on religious leaders and to bring those responsible to justice.”