Death of Priest Raises Questions About the Meaning of "Sanctuary"

***The Wired Word* for the Week of November 8, 2026**

In the News

Last month, a Catholic priest in Ecuador was giving a sermon about the fleeting nature of life. Father Patricio Sánchez Molinari reflected on the words of Jesus and told his congregation that they should not waste their lives scrolling on their phones. Instead, they should dedicate their lives to God and their loved ones.

"One day, all of us here will also die, and sometimes the time we've spent on things doesn't have as much meaning as the time we spend with God," he said. "The quality time we give to God, to our brothers and sisters, to our husbands, wives, children, and family -- that time is the best spent."

Molinari asked God to bless his congregation and began to pray. Then, reports the *New York Post*, the giant crucifix behind him suddenly fell off the wall and landed on him, a shocking incident that was caught on the livestream of the service. Panicked members of the congregation screamed as they rushed to help the priest and call an ambulance.

First responders arrived at the scene, but Molinari was declared dead. There is no immediate explanation for why the heavy crucifix detached and fell from the wall.

Father Molinari belonged to the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, a Roman Catholic religious order founded in 1732. "We announce that our beloved Father Patricio Alfredo Sánchez Molinari, who served as parish priest of the Perpetual Help church in the Central Vicariate, has departed to the Father's House to enjoy His presence and His glory," the church said in a statement.

Days later, a gunman opened fire at a Greek Orthodox church in Karak, Jordan, about 55 miles south of the capital, Amman. Nine people were killed, and another 40 wounded. According to the *Associated Press*, Jordan's government described the attack as a terrorist act, and King Abdullah II directed authorities to respond with "an iron fist" against what he called "the outlaws of Islam" and anyone attempting to undermine the unity of the Jordanian people. Karak is home to a minority Christian population.

The attack occurred as people gathered for a funeral. "All of a sudden, three masked men appeared, armed with automatic weapons, and began firing indiscriminately at those of us standing outside," recalled a witness named Saed al-Halaseh. And "they weren't satisfied with just the initial casualties. They went back and fired on everyone again." He dropped to the ground and crawled behind a nearby car, which he said saved him.

"They returned to finish off those who had already been hit," al-Halaseh added. "Even then, they weren't finished; they came and stood right here, firing at the facade of the church." Jordan -- and Karak in particular -- has been seen as a symbol of religious coexistence, according to al-Halaseh. "The sense of security we once had, the very foundation we grew up with, has, sadly, vanished."

In the United States, severe storms swept through St. Louis in May 2025, including a possible tornado. The storms tore roofs off buildings, ripped

bricks off of siding, and knocked down trees and power lines. At least five people died.

One of the dead was a woman pulled from Centennial Christian Church after a portion of the church building crumbled, reported *Fox 2 Now*. Two other people were rescued from the church by the City of St. Louis Fire Department.

The dead woman was Patricia Penelton, described by her son-in-law as a very active church volunteer who had many roles in the life of the church, including being part of the choir. "Pray for our church," said a post on the Centennial Christian Facebook page.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Priest Gave Sermon on Spontaneity of Death Just Before Falling Crucifix Killed Him During Livestreamed Mass. *New York Post*

Survivor of Deadly Attack on Jordan Church Describes People Crawling for Their Lives. *Associated Press*

Three Pulled From Wreckage After Storm Crumbles St. Louis Church; One Killed. *Fox 2 News*

Applying the News Story

The word "sanctuary" means a place of safety, protection or holiness. But clearly many people have suffered tragic deaths in places of worship. Discuss what sanctuary means to you, and how God provides for us in a world of danger.

The Big Questions

1. How do you respond to news of people suffering death in church? Where do you see the hand of God in these tragedies, if anywhere?

2. What does sanctuary mean to you? How is it a holy place for you? What kind of safety and protection do you expect to find in church?

3. Although Father Molinari was killed by a falling crucifix, his church said that he "has departed to the Father's House to enjoy His presence and His glory." What enables Christians to talk openly and honestly about both death and salvation? When does this conversation happen in your church, if at all?

4. In a world of terrorist attacks, violent storms and deadly diseases, what kind of help does God provide to us, if any? Where do you find peace and security?

5. How can you do God's will in the face of danger and death? Be specific.

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

1 Kings 1:50-51

Adonijah, fearing Solomon, got up and went to grasp the horns of the altar. Solomon was informed, "Adonijah is afraid of King Solomon; see, he has laid hold of the horns of the altar, saying, 'Let King Solomon swear to me first that he will not kill his servant with the sword.'" (For context, read 1 Kings 1:38-53.)

The first book of Kings begins with a struggle for royal succession. King David is "old and advanced in years" (v. 1), and his sons Adonijah and Solomon are competing to be the next king. Joab, the commander of the army, supports Adonijah, but David's bodyguards and his warriors do not. The priesthood is divided as well, with Abiathar taking Adonijah's side and Zadok taking Solomon's side.

In the end, David chooses Solomon to succeed him as king. The priest Zadok takes "the horn of oil from the tent" and anoints Solomon. The trumpet is

blown and the people say, "Long live King Solomon!" (v. 39). When Joab hears the sound of the trumpet, he asks why the city is in an uproar. He and Adonijah receive word that "King David has made Solomon king" (v. 43).

This news is distressing to Adonijah, so he gets up and goes to "grasp the horns of the altar." The altar may have functioned as a place of refuge, a sanctuary, a sacred site where fugitives or outlaws could claim temporary immunity from arrest or execution. Adonijah requests that King Solomon swear to him "that he will not kill his servant with the sword." Solomon agrees to spare Adonijah if "he proves to be a worthy man" (v. 52). Adonijah is brought to Solomon and he bows down before him. Then Solomon sends him home.

Questions: How can the church be a place of refuge and sanctuary today? What mercy and assistance do you expect to receive in your place of worship?

Ezekiel 11:16

Therefore say: Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far away among the nations and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone. (For context, read Ezekiel 11:14-21.)

The prophet Ezekiel delivers the word of God to the people of Israel while they are in exile in Babylon. In chapter 11, God tells the people that he has been "a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone." In this passage, the sanctuary is not a physical place -- such as the horns of the altar or the temple in Jerusalem. Instead, God himself is a sanctuary for those who trust him, and who desire to rest in his presence.

God then promises that he will restore Israel, assembling the people out of the countries where they have been scattered. When they return to their

homeland, God promises, "I will give them one heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh" (v. 19). When the people follow God's statutes and ordinances, the vision of God will come to life: "they shall be my people, and I will be their God" (v. 20).

Questions: How is God a sanctuary for you, if at all? What help do you get from this kind of sanctuary, regardless of your location and situation in life? When, if ever, have you felt restored by God?

Luke 13:1-3

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will all perish as they did." (For context, read Luke 13:1-5.)

The 13th chapter of the gospel of Luke begins with Jesus calling his listeners to repentance. Two incidents involving gruesome deaths are recounted, the first being the story of "the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." It appears that a group of Galileans had come to the temple to make sacrifices, and the cruel governor Pilate had slaughtered them in that sacred place.

Jesus asks his listeners if they think that these Galileans suffered because they "were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" Answering his own question, he says, "No, ... but unless you repent you will all perish as they did." Jesus wants his listeners to turn their lives around and begin to walk in God's way, in order to avoid destruction. He then tells the story of the deadly fall of the tower of Siloam which killed 18 people, and he ends with the same call to repentance.

Questions: Why does Jesus use two deadly tragedies as the setup for a call to repentance? What does it mean to you to repent and turn your life around? How does this save you from destruction, if at all?

Hebrews 8:1-2

Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up. (For context, read Hebrews 8:1-7.)

The letter to the Hebrews is written to followers of Jesus who have been raised in the Jewish faith. In the eighth chapter, the author makes the point that Jesus is unsurpassed as a high priest, because he is seated at the right hand of God and is "a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord" has set up.

The Jewish people have priests "who offer gifts according to the law" (v. 4). The author does not criticize this practice, but he makes clear that they "offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and a shadow of the heavenly one" (v. 5). Much better is the "more excellent ministry" that Jesus has obtained, because he is "the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on the basis of better promises" (v. 6).

A covenant is a promise-based relationship between two parties, and the mediator serves as the liaison between the parties. In this case, the two parties are God and humanity. Moses mediated the first covenant at Sinai, and now Jesus mediates a new covenant. "For if that first covenant had been faultless," says the letter to the Hebrews, "there would have been no need to look for a second one" (v. 7). But as far back as Jeremiah, the need for a new covenant had been prophesied (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Questions: How do you understand Jesus to be a minister in a heavenly sanctuary? What does he do for you, from this powerful position? How does your church present Jesus as a high priest and as the mediator of a better covenant, if at all?

For Further Discussion

1. The author Annie Dillard, who just died, wrote often about danger in church. In her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, she argues that wearing fancy hats to church is madness -- that people "should all be wearing crash helmets," and ushers should issue "life preservers and signal flares" or "lash us to our pews" because of the wild, uncontainable holiness of God. When, if ever, have you experienced God as wild and uncontainable? Why is a crash helmet better than a fancy hat when standing before God?

2. TWW Team Member Stan Purdum recalls that one church he pastored had a large cross in the sanctuary suspended by two chains. "When one of the chains broke, the trustees took the cross down until repairs could be made. They left the cross leaning against the front wall of the sanctuary. When my second son, Scott, who was in sixth grade and was the most resistant of our three kids to attending church, happened to walk by the cross, it fell over and hit him on the head, causing a small cut. Scott was sure it was God getting back at him for his attitude toward church attendance." How does God punish us, if at all, for failing to attend church or participate in a community of faith? What does an injury from a falling cross say about the nature of God, if anything?

3. Tension between the United States government and religious communities over immigration has flared on and off ever since the birth of the "sanctuary movement " in the early 1980s, notes *National Catholic Reporter*. That is "when churches and synagogues began offering shelter and support for undocumented immigrants, believing they were obeying a higher moral

obligation than U.S. laws. Today the movement continues -- and is still led by clergy and religious groups -- though the focus has shifted from offering physical shelter to providing aid to immigrants too fearful to leave their homes." What connection do you make, if any, between today's sanctuary movement and the biblical understanding of sanctuary? What kind of refuge would you be willing to provide to a vulnerable person -- whether an immigrant or another person in need? Why is such action an important aspect of Christian life?

4. "One day, all of us here will also die, and sometimes the time we've spent on things doesn't have as much meaning as the time we spend with God," said Father Patricio Sánchez Molinari before his death from a falling crucifix. "The quality time we give to God, to our brothers and sisters, to our husbands, wives, children, and family -- that time is the best spent." What are you doing, if anything, to prepare yourself for the end of life? How are you spending your time, and what changes do you think you should make?

Responding to the News

Think about how you can provide sanctuary to a person in need, whether they be a family member, a friend, a neighbor or a fellow church member. Offer them safety, protection and a sense of peace. Look at your church sanctuary as more than a place to worship God, but as a space to find refuge, to repent, to rest in God's presence, and to encounter Jesus the high priest. When you come to your next service, enter the sanctuary with an expectation that you will receive these gifts.

Prayer

Almighty God, you are our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Help us to put our trust in you, and to rest in your holy presence. Give us a deeper sense that you are with us as we face the dangers of life,

and assure us that nothing in all creation -- not even death itself -- can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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