

‘A saint on earth’: How one Oakland priest comforts the grieving during city’s most violent, tragic moments

Sarah Ravani, San Francisco Chronicle

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Father Jayson Landeza blows out a candle while leading mass at St. Lawrence O’Toole Church in Oakland.
Noah Berger, Freelance / Special to The Chronicle

Just before midnight on Dec. 9, Father Jayson Landeza was settling into his bed at the rectory of St. Benedict Church in East Oakland when his phone rang. It was the Oakland police. Two people had been shot less than a mile away, including a 16-year-old who was killed. Police wanted to know if Landeza could go to the scene and comfort the family.

At that moment, the father didn’t think about the holiday luncheon he was hosting for nearly 50 of his parishioners the next day, nor the hours of confession he was scheduled to hear, nor the Mass he would be leading in the evening, nor the Christmas tree lighting after that. He ran out of the church and drove to the scene, where a growing number of family members and friends had gathered, sobbing. It was the 114th homicide recorded by Oakland in 2022.

Landeza is among a group of often unseen frontline workers in Oakland who respond to the city’s surging gun violence. Oakland counted 129 homicides in 2021, the deadliest year since 2012. The number for 2022 was down slightly at 118 unlawful killings.

Like police officers and EMTs, Landeza is a vital part of the city’s response to these tragedies. The Catholic priest, who has been the chaplain for the Oakland police and fire departments, the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office and other federal law enforcement agencies, has been on the scene of hundreds of homicides over the past 22 years. He often goes to offer support to the family members of victims and law enforcement officers — either through prayer or by just being there as they grieve and vent. He also tries to answer questions about what may have just unfolded.

The scenes are familiar, and the trauma he’s witnessed stays with him. This year alone, he has responded to a triple homicide, the fatal shooting of a beloved dentist in the Little Saigon neighborhood and a school shooting where two gunmen fired 30 rounds total, among other shootings. In 1999, Landeza started hammering crosses into the lawn of St. Columba Church in West Oakland, where he served as pastor until 2009, as a reminder of the toll — which the current pastor has continued to do today.

At times, the deaths make Landeza question God.

“Sometimes when you see that kind of suffering, I think, what the hell is that about?” Landeza said. “That’s the frustrating part. As a person of faith, you’d like to be able to see God’s presence.”



Jayson Landeza at the evening service at St. Benedict Catholic Church in Oakland.
Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Just as Landeza has struggled to make sense of the violence, politicians have struggled to address it. Former Mayor Libby Schaaf said she believed the city's flagship anti-violence program, called Ceasefire, is key. The program creates a partnership between law enforcement, local clergy and nonprofits. But Ceasefire went largely silent during the pandemic when participants were forced to work remotely and the program lost staffing. The Police Department said Ceasefire's staffing is back up, but whether it can make up for what was lost during the pandemic remains to be seen.

As Mayor Sheng Thao takes over, public safety is one of several crises she will have to tackle as many Oaklanders remain on edge. A recent poll from the Oakland Chamber of Commerce found that respondents were overwhelmingly concerned with gun violence: 97% said it's an extremely or very serious problem, and 88% said the same about crime.

Thao has promised a comprehensive response that focuses on building up the Police Department's staffing to budgeted levels and investing in violence prevention, job training and social services. But Thao faces a \$200 million budget shortfall over the next two years. If early projections are correct, she will have to contend with tough budget cuts to prevent financial collapse and many of her plans may be stalled.

Despite the challenges and moments of doubt, Landeza can't help but find some hope amid the despair, such as the mother who showed a strong faith in God even after learning her son was killed and the residents who come together from so many neighborhoods to support one another in the wake of devastation.

Landeza recalled the agony after a beloved 60-year-old dentist, Lili Xu, was shot and killed last August. City leaders and residents were outraged at the violence that unfolded

in broad daylight — two months before Xu's longtime partner was arrested in what law enforcement allege was a murder-for-hire case.

In the days following the shooting, community members held at least two separate vigils, both of which Landeza attended. Landeza said he was struck by the people who attended — from all corners of the city. That kind of unity and support, he said, is what Oakland should be known for.

"Oakland, in the midst of tragedy, knows how to bring itself together and coalesce," Landeza said.

It's in those moments where Landeza said, "I could still see goodness in the midst of the tragedy."

When six adults were shot at a high school in East Oakland in September, Landeza immediately searched for family members. And then he turned his attention to the school staff, who he said were standing off to the corner, clearly in shock.

"You are there as a resource, you're not there to push anything," Landeza said.

When Landeza looks back on incidents he has responded to over the last year, he thinks about how moved he was by the grandparents he met in June who remained stoic and strong when they learned their 16-year-old grandson was shot to death.



Father Jayson Landeza hugs parishioner Trècher Clay during a Christmas party at St. Benedict Catholic Church in Oakland.
Noah Berger, Freelance / Special to The Chronicle

Sometimes there are multiple casualties and the mourning goes on for weeks. For example, Landeza stayed at the scene of the Ghost Ship fire, which killed 36 people in 2016, comforting family members for nearly two weeks.

“This guy is literally a saint on Earth,” said Barry Donelan, the president of the police union. “What I’m amazed at is how many people lean on this guy and he doesn’t break. He’s always there.”

Donelan said Landeza has held private prayers with different officers, whether it’s to offer support after a traumatic crime scene they witnessed on the job or because of an incident in their personal lives. Donelan recalled the time Landeza held a private Mass for him and his father after his aunt died to “try and smooth the pain for my dad.”

It’s not just Landeza helping the community. The community has helped him. When Landeza’s car was completely wrecked after it was stolen earlier this year, several Oakland officers chipped in and purchased him a new car.

“Who am I to deserve this?” Landeza said. But the city’s police and firefighters disagree.

“We’d be sunk” if Landeza wasn’t around, Donelan said.

Amid the tragedies, Landeza said he doesn’t allow himself to be overwhelmed by the pain or otherwise he “would be a mess.”

He sees a therapist who helps him process the trauma he witnesses and as a Catholic priest, he confides in another priest who helps him see where God is in all this. One source of comfort is live music. When he

attends shows, he leaves the police scanner that’s usually attached to him at home and turns off his phone. That escape is crucial even if only for an hour.

Around the holidays, he revels in ministering to his congregations. At a mid-December holiday luncheon he hosted at St. Benedict Church, he ate enchiladas with his flock. James Brown’s “Go Power At Christmas Time” played on the radio near a Christmas tree, twinkling with colorful lights. Most of Landeza’s parishioners were unaware that the night before he had been called to the scene of a homicide. They didn’t talk about the suffering and pain, instead laughing as they drank cupfuls of eggnog.

As Landeza prepared to leave for confession, attendees pulled out their holiday-themed bingo cards. Clarence Boyd, an Oakland resident who has attended St. Benedict’s for 20 years, clasped his hand over Landeza’s and said goodbye.

“He actually is a godsend,” Boyd said as Landeza ran out the door.

Despite the suffering he’s witnessed over the past year, Landeza is hopeful the city can turn a corner.

“The hope is always that the new year will bring some kind of healing to the city,” he said.

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<https://www.sfchronicle.com/eastbay/article/oakland-priest-17679796.php>



Chaplain Jayson Landeza at the scene of the Ghost Ship fire in Oakland on Dec. 7, 2016.
Michael Macor, Staff / The Chronicle