



José Huizar, right, then a Los Angeles council member, is pictured with L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti showing their Metro cards as they ride the Angels Flight Aug. 31, 2017. Huizar has pleaded guilty to federal charges of racketeering and tax evasion and is scheduled to be sentenced in December. (AP/Damian Dovarganes)



by Gustavo Arellano

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

November 9, 2023

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Hundreds of people gathered on Oct. 24 in my mother's hometown of El Cargadero, Jerez, in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico, to celebrate the feast day of the *rancho's* (ranch's) patron saint, the archangel Raphael.

On Facebook and YouTube, I eagerly fast-forwarded through hours of videos that captured the days of parties and ceremonies leading up to and following the holy day. Some clips showed a group of elderly men, which included my father (who's from the neighboring *rancho* of Jomulquillo) carrying a large statue of St. Raphael the Archangel inside a box through El Cargadero's narrow streets toward its small church, Iglesia San Rafael. I saw my cousin Chepe sitting in the front pew with his wife as a thundering brass band offered *mañanitas* — serenades — to archangel Raphael before dawn.

People danced, people prayed, people ate. But I wasn't viewing all the footage to try and connect with my culture 1,500 miles away from my home in Orange County, California. I was trying to spot a criminal.

Someone in those crowds knows if he was there, because the felon is one of our own.

[José Huizar](#) was once a rising star in Los Angeles politics, a former school board member who became the first immigrant to serve on the L.A. city council when he won in 2005. Charming, tall and righteous, there were rumors that the lawyer by training had ambitions for the mayor's seat — or an even higher office.

But Huizar's career crashed in the summer of 2020, when federal agents arrested him on [corruption charges](#) at his home in Boyle Heights. The U.S. attorney's office placed him at the center of a vast conspiracy involving developers, bribes, extortion and more that took down another L.A. councilor, Mitchell Englander, and from which City Hall has yet to recover. Huizar quickly proclaimed his innocence, even as he lost his council seat and the respect of voters who had gladly reelected him three times.

In January, Huizar [pleaded guilty](#) to charges of racketeering and tax evasion. A judge will determine his sentence in December, although Huizar has already agreed to ask for no less than nine years in prison, and prosecutors will ask for no more than a 13-

year-term.

So what does all of this have to do with the archangel Raphael? Everything.



St. Raphael the Archangel, depicted here as a sculpture in Córdoba, Spain, is the patron saint of many *ranchos* in El Cargadero, Jerez, in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico. (Unsplash/Ryan Pohanic)

In September, Huizar's public defender filed a motion seeking permission from the federal government to let Huizar travel to Zacatecas between Oct. 22 and Oct. 30 so he could "attend religious ceremonies ... that are important to his Catholic faith." Huizar is from [Los Morales](#), the *ranchito* between El Cargadero and Jomuquillo. That makes him part of the same *Jerezano* diaspora as mine, one that numbers tens of thousands of people in Southern California alone and whose members descend on Jerez every October for the feast day of Raphael, patron saint of many of the surrounding ranchos.

We come to pray, yes, but mostly to party. And I suspect Huizar wanted to squeeze in one final *pachanga* before his stint in the Big House.

It's not my place to question someone's faith, especially that of a sinner who is about to face punishment for his crimes. But I have no hope that Huizar's trip to Zacatecas, if he even took it, was an actual pilgrimage, or that he has genuinely repented. Sadly, Huizar has wrapped himself before in Mexican Catholic iconography in desperate, public attempts for sympathy.

In the early morning hours of the day he was arrested back in 2020, he [posted](#) an image of the Santo Niño de Atocha — the patron saint of Zacatecas — on his Instagram account. Originally from Spain, [Santo Niño](#) is the patron saint of prisoners and the wrongfully accused, and he has a shrine in the city of Plateros that every good zacatecano has visited at least once. That's why Huizar's gesture outraged Los Angeles, where the Santo Niño is part of the city's landscape because of all the *zacatecanos* who have moved there over the past 120 years (as I've [written before](#) for NCR).

Advertisement

No way would we allow Huizar to appropriate our beloved saint for his pathetic needs.

Yet he made the same move on [Nov. 7, 2022](#) — this time, posting to Instagram an image of St. Jude Thaddeus, the patron saint of lost causes and perhaps Mexico's most favorite apostle. That day, his brother, Salvador Huizar, [testified](#) before a federal jury that he helped launder José Huizar's ill-gotten money. Shortly after Huizar's post, the same jury found a developer had paid Huizar over \$1 million in bribes.

Within two months, Huizar 'fessed up to the feds.

The spectacle of Huizar using Catholicism as an excuse to travel and elicit pity from the public is especially sad to me, because he is essentially family. My parents knew his parents, and Huizar's extended family lives in Anaheim, where I grew up and where thousands of people from El Cargadero have settled. He was our hometown hero, the kid who did good and someone the rest of us should emulate.

We also embraced him because Huizar proudly wore his Catholicism: He was a graduate of Bishop Mora Salesian High in Boyle Heights and enrolled his four children in parochial schools. His Catholicism was my Catholicism: unashamed and tied back to Mexico. He made a mockery of it, and us all.

There is another saint close to Huizar's heart to whom he has yet to publicly tie himself: St. Joseph. The father of Jesus is the patron saint of Los Morales, and his life of humility and devotion would be a wise model for Huizar to follow in prison. I'm reminded of the passage at the beginning of the [Gospel of Mark](#), where Joseph thinks about leaving Mary after he learned of her pregnancy. He changes his mind after an unnamed angel advises him to accept Mary and Jesus as his own family, because Jesus "will [save his people](#) from their sins."

That can be Huizar. At this point, the best hope he has to redeem himself is to serve as an example for the rest of us to not go down his path of hubris and heresy. May God grant mercy to José's soul — and may he repent in silence.