Miner Freddy Flores shows a stone with gold mineral at San Sebastian mine in Santa Rosa de Lima, El Salvador, April 26, 2017. Catholics in El Salvador, including religious sisters, oppose a December 2024 law that reverses a 2017 law banning metal mining nationwide. (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Cabezas)

by Rhina Guidos

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SAN SALVADOR EL SALVADOR — March 10, 2025

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Sisters in El Salvador are joining the church's campaign "Yes to life, no to mining," calling for the restoration of a law against metal mining in El Salvador.

"Let's stick together; let's truly be those oases where we can say 'yes' to life and 'no' to that which goes against it," Sr. Marta Dolores Castro Pineda of the Servants of the Mercy of God in San Salvador said on YSUCA radio on Feb. 7. The church in El Salvador that day invited Catholics to fast and pray and to collect signatures. The bishops have said they will present those signatures to the country's legislative body, asking for a repeal of a new law allowing mining.

El Salvador's president and supporters say mining is necessary for the country's economic development.

Castro said that her congregation fasted and held the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament Feb. 7, adding that the effort is based on the words of Pope Francis who "has greatly encouraged us to take care of our common home." The church, Castro said, also is following the example of the pope's namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, "who loved creation so much and stood up for it."

> #NoAlaMinería | Hermana Martha Dolores, de la congregación Siervas de la Misericordia de Dios, explica que al mediodía se repicarán las campanas de la iglesia San Francisco para decir "sí a la vida, no a la minería". pic.twitter.com/U6paKQ8gXr
>
> — Radio YSUCA 91.7 FM (@ysuca91siete) February 7, 2025

Organizations representing religious life, such as the Conference of Religious of El Salvador, as well as local congregations of sisters, brothers and the Red Eclesial Ecológica Mesoamericana (Mesoamerican Ecclesial-Ecological Network), have supported a statement from the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador calling on the president and lawmakers to respect "the will of the people."

A December 2024 opinion poll from the Jesuit University in San Salvador's Instituto Universitario de Opinion Publica found that the majority of Salvadorans say El Salvador is not a "suitable" country for mining and oppose it.

Mining supporters have posted tweets threatening violence and abuse, yelled at protesters in the streets and ransacked the home of at least one anti-mining critic. Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele wrote on his X account on Feb. 1: "Such an effort against mining by the world's largest proprietors of gold."

> 'The mining thing, it's going to be like the Spaniards, who took the gold. Nobody believes they are going to share it with everyone. That's a lie.'
> —Natividad Chicas Rivera
>
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In 2017, El Salvador became the first country in the world to ban metal mining nationwide, arguing that extraction in speculative mining sites would contaminate the country's largest source of water, which begins in the northern part of the country and connects to the Lempa River. Metal mining requires vast amounts of water to process. Extraction also uses toxic chemicals such as mercury, cyanide, lead and arsenic, which can contaminate ecosystems and waterways, as well as endanger people's health.

The new law passed in December allows for the exploration, extraction and processing of "potential gold deposits" in the country, the government says on a website. It also allows exploration of minerals such as "lithium, cobalt, nickel, which are used to make renewable energy storage batteries."

A representative of Titan Resources Ltd., the first company to publicly announce its interest in mining in El Salvador, said in a Feb. 19 interview with El Diario de Hoy that mining can be carried out responsibly.

Women and men religious, priests, bishops and lay people have let the president and legislators know that they will march and petition the government to ensure that they respect the ban established in 2017. The country's Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez also told Catholics in a Dec. 28 homily to resist, "including physically, if necessary," although he did not explain what that could entail. While bishops have said they will take the signed petition to the legislative assembly, they haven't said

when they will do so.

Ivania Cruz, a lawyer and spokesperson for the Human and Community Rights Defense Unit of El Salvador, told Global Sisters Report Jan. 12 the goal of those who protest is to stop the 2024 law that many consider "unconstitutional." It is also about defending the human rights of the poor, she told GSR. They would have to drink contaminated water since few would be able to afford bottled water, she said.

Salvadorans protest Jan. 12 in San Salvador, El Salvador, against mining in their country, which had been banned since 2017. A law passed in December allowing it. The Catholic Church in El Salvador has launched a “no to mining, yes to life” campaign. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

That's what prompted Natividad Chicas Rivera, a Catholic from Osicala, El Salvador, to participate for the first time in an anti-government march Jan. 12.

"The mining thing, it's going to be like the Spaniards, who took the gold. Nobody believes they are going to share it with everyone. That's a lie," she told GSR.

Pollution is all the people of El Salvador will be left with, she added.

Rubidia García, a Catholic mother and grandmother from San Salvador, also participated in the demonstration. She said that although she lives in the capital, she is concerned about the pollution that will affect all water use, including agriculture and food. She said that she is proud of the church's anti-mining effort and that so many members have come together to protect the country's water.

Some Catholics have accompanied the marches shouting, "Romero would say no to mining," referring to El Salvador's St. Oscar Romero, who advocated for the poor and was assassinated in 1980.

"The church is supporting us," García told GSR. "They agree that water should not be poisoned and I see the need to fight against it."

Two women participate in a Jan. 12 protest in San Salvador, El Salvador, against mining in their country. Catholics, including bishops, women and men religious and laity, have spoken against mining, saying it will contaminate the country’s largest water source. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Catholics also have spoken out against mining in nearby countries including Guatemala and Honduras, advocating for the health and well-being of the poor and the environment.

This land belongs to all, Sr. Castro said. She urged people to participate as instruments of peace in the democratic petition process and "be a sign of hope."

Insults and threats have not deterred Catholics, including women religious, from speaking out or joining mass demonstrations in San Salvador's city center. Cruz, the lawyer, says mining critics face political persecution for speaking out. On Feb. 25, agents from the country's national police and the attorney general's office raided her home without explanation and arrested her coworker, she said.

"They are trying to silence the critical voice of human rights defenders," Cruz said in a video posted on X Feb. 26.

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