

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE LATIN AMERICAN EPISCOPAL COUNCIL (CELAM)<sup>1</sup>

**MISSIONARY DISCIPLES: CUSTODIANS OF OUR COMMON HOME**  
**Discernment in Light of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'***

Bogotá, Colombia, January 2018

**CIDSE summary of key messages**

\*\*\*\* Unofficial translation \*\*\*\*

The Latin American bishops, in communion with Pope Francis, want to use this Pastoral Letter to *enter into dialogue with all people about our common home* and especially *about the way we are shaping the future of the planet*, which implies that *together we can seek paths of liberation* that lead to *true wisdom* and to the approach of *comprehensive solutions*.

*Because we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental, a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*

By “extractivism” we understand an unbridled tendency of the economic system to convert the goods of nature into capital. The action of “extracting” the greatest amount of materials in the shortest possible time, converting them into raw materials and inputs that industry will use, that will then be transformed into products and services that others will market, society will consume and then nature itself will receive in the form of polluting waste—that is the consumerist loop that is being generated at ever greater speed and ever greater risk.

What is most serious about this logic of relationship with nature is that the resources are running out and we are rapidly approaching the physical limits of the Earth. Since the 1970s, it’s been being said that the pretense of infinite growth in an infinite world is not sustainable. Neither is it sustainable that, in the eagerness to generate material wealth, the living conditions of entire peoples are being sacrificed and valuable ecosystems are being deteriorated, as reiterated by the Pope in *Laudato si'*. The greedy interest in exploiting Mother Earth until the last drop is leading to drastically transformed landscapes—cutting down forests, diverting rivers, tracing roads, destroying the vegetation layer, and finally, generating a series of impacts that deserve to be subjected to an ethical and moral evaluation in dialogue with the sciences.

We bishops urge the Catholic communities of the continent to: see and touch reality, contemplating in it the Gospel of Creation and perceiving the action of the Holy Spirit in human history, in order to analyze, interpret and discern what are appropriate or inappropriate extractive activities in the territories; then, propose, plan, and act to transform our own way of life, to influence the mining and energy policies of states and governments, and in the policies and strategies of companies dedicated to extractivism, all for the purpose of achieving the common good and a genuine human development that is integral and sustainable.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The full version of the Pastoral letter (original text in Spanish) can be downloaded [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> LS 18

## I. OUR WORD AS PASTORS

We wish to discern the signs of our time, one of which is the accelerated and large-scale advancement of extractive activities and the industries that derive from them, causing multiple impacts on the lives and health of populations close to the projects, on the environment and throughout our region, paying special attention to the strategic biomes to maintain life on the planet.

Concrete evidence of joint work between ecclesiastical sectors and entrepreneurs must be reflected in inhabitants' living conditions, in reparations for victims that are just and generous and sustainability of the affected ecosystems.

Hence our appeal to entrepreneurs, investors and governments to review the scope of economic activities based on extractivism, so that the sustainability of the life of the territories and its inhabitants is prioritized over any other financial interest.

This requires a deep reflection, but it is also an exercise that invites creativity in the search for human fulfilment. To that end, it is very important to listen respectfully to the stories of those affected by mining projects, assertively adopt the scientific data and design platforms for transparent and honest dialogue aimed at caring for life in our common home.

## II. MILESTONES ON A ROAD TRAVELLED

26. In the last 10 years socio-environmental conflicts increased alarmingly, there were reports of serious human rights violations and negative repercussions from extractive activities on the health of neighbouring communities and the land.

29. In August 2016, an agreement was signed between CELAM and the IACHR, in which both parties mutually committed themselves to work together in defending human rights. In March 2017, REPAM presented—to the IACHR and other forums in the United States of America—other complaints of human rights violations committed by extractive companies against Indigenous peoples.

31. One month after the publication of *Laudato Si'*, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (PCJP) organized—in July 2015, in collaboration with the Latin American *Churches and Mining Network*—a meeting in Rome of representatives from communities affected by mining activities. The meeting was held under the motto “United to God, We Hear a Cry” and included the participation of leaders from 18 countries from around the world. From the Americas, there were leaders from Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, the United States, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru and the Dominican Republic. Representatives from communities affected by mining denounced the serious violations of human rights and the contamination and destruction of their territories, of which they were victims. Peter Cardinal Turkson, president of the PCJP (which, since January 1, 2017, has been included in the work of the new Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development, of which Cardinal Turkson is its first prefect) reported that the principal objective of this meeting was to recognize the dignity of the people and communities affected.

He stressed: “We are aware of their isolation, of the violation of their human rights, of the persecution, of the imbalance of power.”

32. In April 2017, El Salvador passed the Law for the Prohibition of Metal Mining. This ban was the result of more than a decade of struggle, of the joint effort of social, environmental and educational organizations and the decisive influence of the Catholic Church. The Law establishes the principle that mining metals affects the environment and the health of people and constitutes “a threat to the development and welfare of families”. The prohibition includes the activities of exploration, extraction, exploitation and processing, both open air and underground, and also bans the use of toxic chemicals in any metallic mining process.

## **A. Economic model, extractivism and environment**

34. We observe the crisis of an economic model whose policies have led, in many countries, to accentuate the levels of poverty, inequality, depletion of natural assets and environmental destruction, and that it is happening on a planetary scale. There is an irrational exploitation *that is leaving ruin and even death in its wake, throughout our region.*<sup>3</sup>

A utilitarian mindset is placed in service to the idolatry of capital, where it loses all sense of the sacredness of and reconnection with nature; that is why Pope Francis devotes Chapter 3 of *Laudato Si'* to analyzing the human roots of the ecological crisis that are reflected in that perverse alliance between technology and finances that has given rise to a throwaway culture, feeds a reductionist and skewed anthropocentrism and facilitates a moral relativism that leads to the exploitation of people as if they were merchandise. The destruction of ecosystems, human trafficking, labour exploitation and other forms of modern slavery follow the same pattern of social sin.

35. We observe that, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the same logic has generated an “extractive” production pattern, i.e., oriented towards the exploitation of nature's goods under three basic characteristics: as non-exhaustible sources (unlimited production), occupation of broad geographical areas (extensive production) and high productivity (intensive production). The tendency is to exploit the largest amount of material in the shortest possible time, causing huge impacts on ecosystems and affecting the lives of the inhabitants of the territories.

## **B. The impact of extractive activities on climate and water**

41. *Many of these symptoms indicate that such effects will continue to worsen if we continue with current models of production and consumption.*<sup>4</sup> In that framework, it is necessary to understand that extractive megaprojects generate huge works that transform the landscape through the construction of roads, the setting-up of camps, the felling of trees, the changing of land use, among others, all of which is directly related to climate change, all the more so when the pattern of development is based *on the intensive use of fossil fuels* (oil, coal, natural gas).<sup>5</sup>

44. We also join the call of specialists on the need to put limits on the intensive extraction of natural assets through megaprojects, especially those related to mining and energy, because their continent-wide expansion is contributing, indirectly, to significant changes in climate processes, seriously affecting biodiversity and the use of land for agriculture for the purpose of food security.

## **C. Extractive activities and poverty**

46. We denounce the violations of the human rights—both individual and collective—of the indigenous or native peoples, both traditional and farming populations, principally those of the Amazon, caused by companies that carry out extractive activities, whether they involve agriculture, forestry, mining or energy.

## **D. Socio-environmental conflicts and State action**

48. We express our concern about the growing number of social conflicts that have become recurrent in Latin America, particularly those of a socio-environmental nature, caused by the presence of large companies.

49. We believe that, faced with these situations, States should be guided by principles and criteria of justice and equity, so that their actions respond to the public interest and the common good.

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<sup>3</sup> AD 473

## **E. State responsibility**

54. We welcome the fact that progress has been made in several Latin American countries in legislation and regulations regarding prior and informed consultation as required by ILO Convention 169. But many claims have come to us from Indigenous populations, from people of African descent and from Mestizos in Latin America, because in practice their right to this consultation prior to the State granting concessions to companies to carry out extractive activities in their territories has been violated by these very same States.

55. We want to remind the States of their great responsibility to ensure that companies do not pollute the environment by the spreading and deposition of chemical substances and toxic waste of different natures, thus risking degradation of the environment and serious damage to the health of the population. It is also their responsibility to enforce social, labour and environmental laws and to sanction companies that do not comply.

56. The problems of extractivism—and ecological problems in general—cannot be addressed in all their complexity and magnitude by private individuals, nor even by individual states. The repercussions of these problems are so great that they require continental and global consensus, which translates into supranational normative bodies and an authority that oversees their realization and application. We call on the relevant international bodies to put more effort into working towards that goal.

### **46 Responsibility of businesses**

59 We have heard numerous testimonies from our priests and pastoral agents that companies—transnational and national, private and state—often do not comply with internationally recognized socio-cultural and environmental standards. There are complaints of corrupt practices, of causing discord among populations adjacent to extractive projects, of intimidation and even serious violations of human rights in pursuit of the company's goals, at any human, social or environmental cost. We observe that what often prevails is the only criterion of action is the maximum benefit in production<sup>6</sup> and not human beings, their just needs or the common good.

60 We want to warn you about the existence of initiatives to reflect on mining and faith, and proposals of carrying out mining operations “in alliance”, in which extractivist companies purport that sectors of the Church are supporters of their megaprojects, in exchange for works, money, benefits, etc. Fittingly, this pastoral letter provides tools for the communities to discern each particular case, without manipulating the principles of faith and the criteria of the Social Doctrine of the Church, but always keeping in mind the common good for the weaker, the abandoned and the mistreated of society, among whom is our “burdened and laid waste” Mother Earth.

### **“Everything is related” (LS 90)**

78 In our world, everything is related. Questions about extractive activities, their benefits and negative impacts must be addressed from a systemic vision that overcomes the shortcomings of fragmentary visions, for they do not allow us to perceive that “everything is related”<sup>7</sup> to everything else.

Faced with growing pollution and a deep ecological and social crisis, it is urgent to become more aware of the close relationship that exists between the “environment,” that is, *nature and the society which lives in it*. *Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it* (LS 139).

80 We denounce *the current economic model which prizes unfettered pursuit of riches over the life of individual persons and peoples and rational respect for nature* (AD 473). Nor does this model respect the

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<sup>6</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

<sup>7</sup> LS 23, 70, 92, 120, 137 and 142.

relations of interdependence and constant interaction between nature and human society. Many times a utilitarian vision of nature and ambition is imposed for maximum profit that leads to a large-scale extraction of renewable and non-renewable natural goods, *when they fail to control and offset their harmful effects on the surrounding environment* (AD 473) or do so highly inadequately.

### **The central role of the Common Good**

83. We wish to emphasize that an *integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics* (LS 156). Together with the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, this principle must be taken into account in decisions about extractive projects.

84 The common good is the responsibility and duty of society as a whole, but the State has a particular obligation to *defend and promote the common good* (LS 157). That implies that it is the responsibility of the State to keep watch to ensure that decisions concerning the projects of extractive companies are not dominated by selfish and short-term visions guided by maximum return in a minimum time, but rather by the sincere concern for the good of all citizens, especially the poor, the marginalized and the most vulnerable sectors of the population as well as for the good of the earth, our common home.

### **Caring for common goods: land, water, climate**

We remind everyone that the environment with its water sources, ecosystems and biodiversity *is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others* (LS 95). Therefore, as pastors of our peoples, we want to express our great concern about the reality that in several Latin American countries there are thousands of high-risk environmental liabilities that, in addition to polluting water, soil and air, affect the health of people living in the surrounding areas.

89. We urge States to use justice, prudence and foresight in administering water and other environmental factors that are 'public goods' and as such contribute to the global common good.

91. From the viewpoint of the Christian faith, facing increasing climate change, we have the responsibility to collaborate with others to take care of the climate and significantly reduce activities that increase the emission of greenhouse gases, which exacerbate the situation, causing global warming, with severe consequences on the planetary environment.

### **In defense of the Amazon**

95. The Amazon is certainly among the places that are of enormous importance for the world, both in terms of ecosystems and the global climate; together with the tropical forests of the equatorial belt in Africa and Asia, these regions balance life on the planet.

### **The danger of “technocracy”**

98. That is why, along with Pope Francis, we want to warn of the great danger in our time that technology is no longer only a means, but that it has been transformed into an end in itself. The Pope speaks of 'technocracy', that is, a situation in which the human being does not dominate technology, but is dominated by it and wrongly believes that technology is the solution to all the serious ecological and social problems that we suffer in the present (see LS 106-114).

99. We also want to draw attention to the fact that the “reductionist” and “efficiency-driven” paradigm (LS 104) of technocracy is absolutely contrary to an economy at the service of human life and the ecosystems with their great biodiversity. It is necessary to bear in mind that the causes of the dramatic ecological crisis are precisely the large-scale technical interventions of human being in our world.

### **Active participation of communities in project decisions**

102. We emphasize that these communities should not be considered as *merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed* (LS 146).

104. As we can see in many parts of Latin America, when these communities *remain on their land, they themselves care for it best* (LS 146).

### **Radical change in the understanding and practice of the economy**

109. It is absolutely necessary *to change models of global development* (LS 194). This will require a responsible reflection *on the meaning of the economy and its goals with an eye to correcting its malfunctions and misappropriations* (LS 194).

112. Remember that: *Economy, as the very word indicates, should be the art of achieving a fitting management of our common home, which is the world as a whole. Each meaningful economic decision made in one part of the world has repercussions everywhere else; consequently, no government can act without regard for shared responsibility* (EG 206).

114. Furthermore, the myth of unlimited growth must be urgently dismantled by showing that unlimited growth on a finite planet is unsustainable for physical, ecological and social reasons. In order to achieve fulfillment of the common good, care for collective goods and climate, *there is urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life* (LS 189).

### **Need for “a bold cultural revolution”**

117. A consumerist vision of what it means to be a human being generates an insatiable hunger for natural goods and energy, with a dangerous voracity, indifferent to the ecological and social damage that this lifestyle generates; it easily leads people to a very self-centred way of living, with their focus fixed solely on their individualistic interests, without taking into account that everything is related and, for that reason, that there is a shared responsibility for our land and for others, especially for the most vulnerable.

118. We need *a bold cultural revolution* (LS 114) and therefore an ecological conversion towards the care of the earth, our common home, and of the people, especially of the poor. This integral ecological conversion must lead us to concrete and lasting commitments at a personal, family, local, regional, national and international level.

119. The ancestral wisdom of the indigenous peoples is a living memory of an alternative to the throwaway culture,<sup>8</sup>

## **V. FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS DEAD**

We reaffirm our commitment to accompany and support communities affected by conflicts caused by extractive activities, with the willingness to contribute from the spirit of the Gospel so that those conflicts may be resolved peacefully and with justice and respect for the rights of peoples and cultures.

126. We will continue to use democratic means in our efforts to put necessary pressure on governments in the Global North to enact laws requiring transnational companies to be transparent in informing their countries of origin about the sources of natural goods and in what ecological and social conditions they have been extracted or generated. In that way, when it is found that natural goods have been generated on the basis of socio-environmental conflict, with great injustices committed against local populations and workers,

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<sup>8</sup> LS 22, 43, 123

their import and use can be avoided. Within that framework, we recognize the importance of a binding treaty on transnational corporations and human rights, just as is currently being debated in the UN, with the support of the Vatican itself.

128. We strongly support communities in their claims for their right to participate in decisions being made about extractivist projects on their lands because of the huge impact these projects have on the life and culture of the communities and the surrounding environment. These local communities affected by mining activities must be guaranteed the right of consultation, consent and veto. Communities can say “no” to mining proposals if, in their assessment, the ventures would generate more damages than benefits.

135. It is necessary to envisage establishing in the legal systems of our countries something like what mining countries such as Australia and Canada have, i.e., “Mining-free areas” that include protected areas, water catchments areas for urban centres, places of historical importance, primary forests, etc.

139. We must build alternatives to an economic model that impoverishes, excludes majorities and degrades the Common Home.

### **FOR AN INTEGRAL ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION**

140. The papal Encyclical *Laudato Si'* calls us to an Ecological Conversion.

141. We urge every Episcopal Conference of Latin America and all dioceses to consider establishing an Integral Ecology Commission or Ecology Ministry that will help the ecclesial community to take care of creation in an active way, collaborating actively with the pastoral social dimensions in the social dimension of Evangelization.