

Catholic Approaches to Mining: Cases of Impact

The Pascua Lama Project, Diocese of Copiapó, Chile

Alto del Carmen District, Huasco Province, Atacama Desert

Cristián Borgoño

Assistant Professor of Theological Ethics, School of Theology, Pontifical Catholic University of Santiago, Chile



Summary

This study examines the role of the Catholic Church in Chile's Atacama region in opposing the Pascua Lama mining project, a major transnational gold-silver open-pit initiative by Barrick Gold on the Chile-Argentina border. Despite Chile's deep cultural and economic identification with mining, the diocese of Copiapó emerged as a significant voice defending the Huasco Valley's water resources, particularly the glaciers Toro I, II, and Esperanza, which were threatened by the project. Through grassroots accompaniment, the diocese's pastoral for the safeguarding of creation, led largely by religious sisters and lay catechists, mobilized local farming communities. Key actions included public education via homilies, radio broadcasts, murals, and marches; documentation of environmental damage; alliances with civil society and indigenous Diaguita groups; and active participation in legal challenges that ultimately led to the project's definitive closure in 2020. The response evolved from local concerns into a coordinated diocesan effort, emphasizing the right to water, care for our Common Home, and rejection of mining donations to avoid conflicts of interest. This case stands out as an exceptional prophetic witness within Chile's generally mining-friendly ecclesial context, demonstrating how a small, resource-limited diocese could challenge powerful economic and political interests through faith-inspired, non-violent resistance and ecological advocacy.

1. Background

Chile defines itself as a mining country. The phrase “Chile is a mining country” appears in countless speeches by heads of state and government officials. It is also affirmed by the Chilean Copper Corporation, CODELCO, the world's largest state-owned mining company, which has encouraged celebrations of a “Chilean Copper Day” to commemorate its nationalization on 31 July 1971 under President Salvador Allende. The nationalization law was passed with unanimous Congress approval (CODELCO, 2023). Even those who question mining as an engine of economic development recognise Chile as a mining country (Rodríguez, Ortiz, and Broitman, 2020). In 2012 and 2013, the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* ran a series of special Sunday supplements, “Chile, a Mining Country,” whose aim was “to educate and disseminate the importance of mining activities for Chilean society.” The newspaper supplements were published in collaboration with the National Society of Mining (SONAMI and *El Mercurio*, 2012/3).

Since the start of the 20th century, around 20% of Chile's GDP, though with some fluctuations, has depended directly or indirectly on mining activities (Cardemil, 2023). Copper is by far the country's most important mineral product. It is only in the 21st century that lithium has gained some prominence, but it does not account for even a fifth of the economic value of copper to the Chilean state.¹

In this context, it is therefore not surprising that mining is deeply rooted in Chilean society. In northern Chile, it is estimated that more than half the workforce in the northern region of Antofagasta works directly or indirectly in mining (Fundación Chile, 2021). Even in Chile's capital city, Santiago, a significant number of qualified professionals, particularly engineers from the country's top universities, work in the mining industry and travel frequently during the week to the mining areas in the North.

¹ Even in a good year for lithium and a bad one for copper, the latter accounts for approximately five times as much in terms of tax revenue (Sepúlveda, 2022).



Given how woven mining is in Chile's economy and society, questioning mining as a desirable economic activity is practically inconceivable. Working in the mining sector and benefiting from social services paid for by mining tax revenues has become normalised as a way of life for many members of Chilean society. It is only recently, in connection with the so-called "social uprising" of October 2019, and the failure of adopting a new constitution in the 2022 national plebiscite,² that environmental movements have managed to bring some attention to the catastrophic environmental consequences of mining activities, though they have done so with great difficulty (Marín, 2025, p. 154).

Despite being mitigated with increasing sophistication, for example, through water desalination and pumping water from the sea to bring it more than 300 km inland and 3000 m high (Heikkinen, 2025), mining activities have inevitable ecological consequences and transform landscapes, primarily due to the contamination of aquifers, airborne dust from blasting and, in some cases, such as Pascua Lama, the destruction of glaciers. Mining areas have become known among environmental groups as "sacrifice zones" where the lives of ecosystems and people who inhabit them are sacrificed for the sake of other people's consumption. These sacrifice zones are, however, located in remote areas at high altitudes in the Andes with very low population density and where practically only those who work in the mines can bear direct witness to what is happening. This is why, although deeply ingrained in Chilean public opinion, the concept "sacrifice zones" is rarely associated with mining in Chile, and is rather associated with industrial activity in general, as in the emblematic case of the Puchuncaví area.³ Consequently, due to the invisibility of the damage, the balance between economic benefit and local ecological harm, which typically characterises mining activities, is decisively tilting towards the economic benefits.

Historically, the Catholic Church in Chile has focused its intervention in the mining industry on the working conditions of miners.⁴ The concern of who would become Cardinal José María Caro⁵ during his time as Apostolic Vicar of Tarapacá (in northern Chile, near the border with Peru) in the 1920s regarding the conditions of the saltpetre workers is well known among Chileans (Castro, 2005). When the "worker priests" movement took root in Chile,⁶ some priests were working in the mining sector (Alcántara Rojas, 2023). Furthermore, given its economic importance, mining also carries significant political weight. This is why the Catholic Church supported the nationalization of the copper mining industry in the late 1960s, and only commented on the specific manner in which it should be implemented. However, in line with its historical position, the Church never questioned mining as such, nor had it done so until the Pascua Lama conflict in the early 2000s, as we shall discuss later.

The Chilean mines are also sites of popular piety. Although not unique to Chile (one might think of the Virgen del Socavón in Bolivia or the Virgen de los Remedios in Zacatecas, Mexico), there are Marian shrines strongly associated with mining, such as the Virgen del Rosario de Andacollo in northern Chile. The image itself was found in the late 16th century in a copper mine and was quickly invoked as the protector of miners. At that time, as it is still today, mining is a risky activity, as the case of the rescue in 2010 of 33 miners trapped for 69 days from a depth of 700 m in a mine in northern Chile, which dominated global media at the time, has highlighted. Andacollo is essentially a mining town, and it was not until 2018 that the Marian shrine and its implicit support of mining as a desirable economic activity for the region began to be

² The "social uprising" is the name given to the self-organized political demonstrations which took place from October 2019 onwards and which led to a national referendum in 2020 to revise the constitution. However, the constitutional proposal drafted by a Constituent Convention elected by popular vote in 2021 was rejected by a large majority (62%) in September 2022.

³ Puchuncaví is an industrial area in the Province of Valparaíso in central Chile. It is home to fossil fuel refineries and thermoelectric power stations that have caused severe air and soil pollution in the region. The scale of its industrial activity, coupled with its proximity to the country's capital, means it has attracted more attention than other similarly polluting industrial activities in other areas.

⁴ It is important to note that historical research into the Church's role in social issues has been carried out by clergy and laypeople without professional qualifications as historians; consequently, the quality of the sources on which this reconstruction is based is highly uneven (Valdivieso, 1999).

⁵ Cardinal José María Caro (1866-1958) was the first Chilean Cardinal, and therefore highly influential in the Chilean Catholic Church. He was Archbishop of Santiago for more than 20 years, and received the title of Cardinal from Pope Pius XII.

⁶ These were groups of priests who, following the Second Vatican Council, chose, in agreement with their bishops, to work in factories in order to be closer to the working class and share their living conditions. It originated in Europe and spread to some Latin American countries.

questioned following a controversy over a mining company's royalties and distribution of social benefits (Opazo, 2019). Even in the Pascua Lama area itself (some 200 km from Andacollo), the town of Copiapó has a Marian shrine (Virgin of La Candelaria) strongly associated with mining. Similarly, from the start of mining activities during colonial times, Saint Lawrence was invoked as patron and protector of miners, as he was in other Latin American countries. Thus, popular piety also clearly reflects the acceptance of mining in general.

With the improvement in safety conditions that has accompanied the gradual replacement of artisanal mining by industrial mining,⁷ mining workers in Chile benefit from relatively safe and fair labour conditions, with the exception of the small proportion of artisanal miners (Meller and Meller, 2021). Most miners benefit from relatively high wages in comparison with the rest of the population, typically around double (Minería y Futuro, 2025). This has meant that the focus of the Church's pastoral concern has centred on the family consequences of mining work, such as prolonged absences from home, and problems stemming from the living conditions of miners and their relatively high purchasing power, such as substance abuse or prostitution. Nevertheless, despite remaining a dangerous and physically demanding activity, mining is attractive to a significant number of people.

As mentioned above, mining has become so accepted as the norm in Chilean public consciousness that no Chilean bishop or Church representative attended a meeting in Panama in October 2024 of fifteen Latin American and Caribbean bishops whose dioceses were most affected by mining.⁸ This is a notable absence, given that mining accounts for 20% of Chile's economy. This contrasts with most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, where there is a high level of awareness of the socio-environmental issues associated with mining. This "Chilean exceptionalism," so to speak, makes it all the more important to highlight the impact of an initiative led by a small diocese and a handful of consecrated and lay pastoral workers. Their opposition to the Pascua Lama mining project was highly prophetic in nature, although its communication was limited in a centralised country such as Chile. In other words, the Church-led initiative that developed around this mining project can be described as entirely exceptional. This is why it is particularly important to understand its details.

2. The Pascua Lama mining project

Pascua Lama is a transnational mining project situated in the Andes at the border between Chile and Argentina in the northern region of Atacama. Its very name reflects this transnational character, as Pascua is the Chilean place name and Lama the Argentine one. It is primarily a gold-silver project with estimated reserves of almost 18 million ounces, and only secondarily a copper project, due to the extraction of the ore by flotation. It is estimated to contain approximately 1% of the world's gold reserves (U.S. Geological Survey, 2025). However, like conventional methods for extracting gold, it is characterised by open-pit mining, that is, extraction from the surface. This amplifies the environmental damage, which is generally greater in open-pit than in underground mining.

The first prospecting in the area took place in the 1970s, driven by the opening up of the Chilean mining sector to international capital under the Pinochet regime. Barrick Gold acquired the mine in the early 1990s, and in 1997, following the approval of a treaty regulating transnational mining, Barrick Gold submitted the mining project, which began the regulatory process (Herr, 2021, 170). In 2006, it obtained environmental approval from both the Chilean and Argentine governments, and in 2009, pre-exploitation work began. Construction work commenced in 2011. The mine was expected to come into production in 2013. On October 31, 2013, construction work stopped, and the project was suspended due to legal disputes brought by Chilean communities, and supported by the Diocese of Copiapó (which will be detailed in the next section). In 2018, Chile's Superintendency of the Environment ordered its total and definitive closure, which was upheld in 2020 by a ruling of the Antofagasta Court of Appeal, which the mining company accepted.

⁷ It is estimated that the total number of "pirquineros" (as artisanal miners are known in Chile) represents less than 10% of the total number of people working in mining in Chile, some 15,000 people (Meller and Meller, 2021, 25).

⁸ The results of the meeting's discussions were published in July 2025 under the title "Pastoral Orientations of Catholic Churches in the face of Mining" (CELAM, 2025).



Open-pit mining involves the handling of extremely large volumes of soil, as it consists of blasting the mountain, collecting the rubble, separating what is usable from what is not (which is usually less than 1% of the material), using large quantities of water, and moving the rubble and waste to another location, the so-called mine tailings. In the case of Pascua Lama, the main environmental impact was on water reserves, which, given its high altitude, are contained in glaciers, the Earth's most important freshwater storage (Bórquez et al., 2006). This consequently affected the supply of surface water and the aquifers themselves. The mine was situated beneath three glaciers (Toro I and II and Esperanza), which fed the Huasco river basin (roughly an area of 10,000 sq km), and which

supported agriculture in the Valley and the life of its population (about 70,000 people). In addition to significant water use, the extractive process would have led to soil and water pollution and destroyed high-altitude wetlands (known as “bofedales”). These act as a natural filter for the heavy metals found in the mountains that run off with the water. Their disappearance would thus have affected water conservation and purification (Pérez et al., 2024). On the Argentine side, the impact was less significant, but there were concerns about pollution from the cyanide used in the gold extraction process, and the large quantities of water it requires.⁹ That Pascua Lama was the first large-scale mining project in the Huasco valley's history, likely influenced opposition to the project. Mining was entering uncharted territory, unlike most of the mining expansion of the 1990s, which occurred in Chile and which took place through the expansion of existing mining operations (Recabarren, 2026).

Visible opposition to the project began in the early 2000s (Urkidi, 2008) in connection with the launch of the community consultation process required by Chilean environmental law (Law 19.300). It was initially organized by a grassroots group which called itself “Huasco River and its Tributaries Watch Committee,” and which brought together some 2,000 farmers from the Valley and was granted legal status. Barrick Gold offered them \$60 million over 20 years to secure their support (Salinas and Karmy, 2009, 26). With the 2005 presidential elections, the project became the subject of widespread public debate. It was approved in February 2006, one month before the new government of Michelle Bachelet was due to take office. Opposition to the project took on international dimensions after this point (Salinas and Karmy, 2009, 27–28).¹⁰ The opposition had to contend not only with the economic power of mining interests but also with political power, given that the project was unanimously supported by political authorities at all levels, from local authorities to the presidency.

The Catholic Church was not the main driving force behind the opposition, but because the population of the Huasco Valley is relatively small and predominantly rural,¹¹ the Church was by definition a significant social actor given its presence in the area. Around 2006, a new pastoral for the safeguarding of creation (*pastoral de salvaguardia de la creación*) emerged in the diocese of Copiapó, largely led at first instance by women religious. It organized talks, mural painting (a typical form of peaceful protest in Latin America), documentary screenings and other awareness-raising activities for the community. The Church's opposition reached its peak in 2008, with a march that ended with a Mass at Our Lady of the Rosary Cathedral in Copiapó attended by 40 priests and nuns – practically the entire clergy of the diocese. After that event, the Church's opposition was mainly expressed through participation, individually by clergy or lay people or

⁹ Every stage of the mining process requires water: to drill and cool equipment, to suppress dust, to separate ore from waste rock, and to transport slurry through pipelines. It is estimated that one kilo of gold requires, on average, 265,000 litres of water to produce (Lezak et al. 2023). This places enormous pressure on local watersheds. In gold mining specifically, cyanide is the chemical of choice for extracting gold from low-grade ore through a process called heap leaching, in which a cyanide solution is percolated through crushed rock to dissolve microscopic gold particles. While highly effective, cyanide is toxic to aquatic life and lethal to birds and mammals even at very low concentrations. The principal risk is accidental release.

¹⁰ Salinas and Karmy (2009) provide a detailed account of civil society's opposition to the project, though not focusing on the role of the Catholic Church.

¹¹ The average population density is approximately 7 inhabitants per square kilometre; by way of comparison, the Santiago Metropolitan Region has 480 inhabitants per square kilometre.

collectively (under the aforementioned pastoral for the safeguarding of creation) as part of a broad coalition of civil society organisations that pursued legal action culminating in the project's definitive closure. The next section analyses the Church's actions in response to the Pascua Lama project since its announcement to its closure. The author undertook a 4-day visit to the Huasco Valley and Copiapó in May 2026 and talked to a range of actors involved in the Church's opposition, mainly pastoral workers, priests, and nuns, including the current diocesan bishop.¹²

3. The Catholic community's response

Before detailing the Church's actions, a short description of the local Church helps situate its involvement in its response to the Pascua Lama project. The Diocese of Copiapó is one of the 27 dioceses in Chile, and is situated in the desert region of Atacama in northern Chile. It is one of the largest dioceses (80,000 square kilometres, the size of Austria or the Czech Republic) but also one of the least populated (300,000 inhabitants). Much of its territory consists of the Atacama Desert, the world's driest region. Three valleys criss-cross the diocese: the Chañaral or Northern Valley, the Copiapó or Central Valley, where the regional capital is located (with a population of approximately 150,000), and the Huasco or Southern Valley, whose main town is Vallenar. The Pascua Lama project was located in the territory of the parish of Alto del Carmen in the Southern Valley. The parish territory was the main area affected by the project, although given the project's impact on the glaciers as noted earlier, the damage would have extended across the entire Huasco valley, right down to its mouth on the Pacific Ocean at the port of Huasco. Catholic communities were organized around the parishes of Alto del Carmen, Vallenar, Freirina, and Huasco.¹³ The parish of Alto del Carmen is structured around two valleys of the Huasco River's tributaries, with 30 communities distributed in two linear groups, each about 70 km long. It is thus a very extensive and sparsely populated parish. It is usually served by a priest who resides in the city of Alto del Carmen, and by nuns based in El Tránsito, the most populous settlement, located in the El Tránsito valley, also known as "Valle de los Naturales".

Accompaniment

It is residents of the upper part of the Valley who first raised the alarm about the project. According to a parish catechist, it was a woman who gathered medicinal herbs who first noticed the mining company's activities in the late 1990s when the herbs were withering for no apparent reason. The heavy lorry traffic also gave a clear indication of the mine construction activities. Oil spills in the river and other forms of water pollution also sparked concern among local farmers.

As mentioned in the introduction, the normalisation of mining in Chile meant that the nuns at the parish, upon hearing of mining activities, held a favourable view, given the economic development and employment opportunities it would provide for the area. However, through their pastoral work with local communities, the nuns soon gathered different information about the project. A parish catechist had access to the Environmental Impact Assessment and shared it with the nuns. This sowed concern about the environmental damage the project entailed.

The changed position by the nuns quickly enabled the forging of first alliances with people outside the community and gave rise to a set of initial actions. These mainly consisted of disseminating information about the environmental damage of the project and the false promises made by Barrick Gold (San Juan, 2011, 273). As mentioned earlier, this was the first mining project ever in the Valley. A sort of "road trip" was organized: a nun and a parish catechist travelled throughout the Valley, gathering the local population in each town and in each rural settlement, informing them about the project. The response thus began at the grassroots level and was decidedly "bottom-up". The first to mobilise were lay Catholics and consecrated persons who joined Christians from other denominations and non-believers in their concern over a serious and shared problem for all valley's residents: the threat to the Huasco Valley's water source, essential for the life of local communities in the area.

¹² The bishop who led the opposition, Gaspar Quintana died in late December 2025 after the case study was commissioned and before the visit took place. He was bishop of Copiapó between 2001 and 2014.

¹³ During the opposition to the Pascua Lama project, the parish of Freirina was also participating in opposing the expansion of an intensive pig farm which had adverse ecological consequences for the area.

This support, and the Church's presence throughout the vast and sparsely populated territory, led all the communities of the Huasco Valley, from Alto del Carmen to the river's mouth in the Pacific Ocean, to mobilise together against the project. Priests, nuns, and laypeople used homilies, catechesis sessions, and the traditional novenas¹⁴ during patron saint festivals to raise concern about the dangers the project posed to the Valley's population. In this way, virtually the entire population received information about the project and its ecological impacts.

Barrick Gold ran its own campaign, promoting the economic benefits of the project and providing substantial resources to the communities to win their favour, including the financing of the celebration of religious festivals. This created a deep division within the local population and within the Christian communities themselves, which persists to this day (the mining company continues to seek to offer money to local communities and to the Church). Against this backdrop, the Church in Atacama continues to stand alongside civil society through various initiatives aimed at highlighting the need to prioritise environmental safeguarding over the project's promised economic benefits.

A distinctive feature of the Church's response to the Pascua Lama project was the progressive involvement of the different levels of the Church. What began as a local initiative within a single parish evolved into a deanery initiative (involving all the parishes in the Valley) and eventually became diocesan, with the bishop himself leading the actions. In other words, it was the community itself that made its pastors organise a structured response. For their part, the pastors deserve credit for allowing themselves to be challenged and informed by their communities. This led to the full involvement of the entire ecclesial community, from parishioners to the bishop, as a cohesive body.

There was also a proactive effort to collaborate with secular organisations, civil society groups, and other religious denominations, including Indigenous communities in the area (the Diaguitas). Such broad-based mobilization was based on a conviction that all the inhabitants of the Valley shared a common concern that their way of life would be harmed by the Pascua Lama project. In this way, from the outset, the Catholic Church sought to collaborate with all the other initiatives taking place in the Valley to protect the water sources threatened by the mining project. Such accompaniment by the pastors of the Catholic Church enabled local communities not to feel alone, and made them feel part of a wider network of people concerned for safeguarding the glaciers and what Pope Francis would call "our common home," planet Earth. They also helped local Catholic communities name what they were experiencing: a wound to Creation and to the lives of their brothers and sisters who saw their means of subsistence threatened. This effort to reach beyond the confines of the Christian community was a hallmark of the approach to accompaniment that the diocese of Copiapó decided to undertake.

Documentation and Communications

As mentioned in the introduction, and as is typical of mining in general, mining in Chile takes place in remote and hard-to-reach areas. The local Church worked with civil society organisations to document and raise awareness of the damage the project entailed. For example, they collaborated on analyzing river water to detect pollutants, and on carrying out on-site inspections to document what was happening in the high mountains, particularly the condition of the glaciers and wetlands, which were being damaged by Barrick Gold's exploration and construction activities.

The work of the diocese's communications office was particularly noteworthy. It served as the primary channel for disseminating the Church's opposition to Pascua Lama, why the Church opposed it, and what it was doing to prevent it. There were regular updates posted on the website of Chile's Episcopal Conference on the Church's activities in relation to the project. For example, it published a widely circulated open letter from the priests and religious of the Huasco Valley

¹⁴ Novenas are a traditional Catholic practice in which people say special prayers (to Mary or patron saints) every day for nine days. Due to the high number of Catholic communities in rural settings without permanent presence of clergy or nuns, pastoral activities in those places tend to concentrate during novenas, which take place in different communities at different times of the year. The local priest stays there during the preparation and celebration of the Patronal Feast. In this way, once a year, pastoral activities concentrate and allow people to gather and interact with each other.

entitled “Man does not live by bread alone” to all the residents of the Valley (CEC, 2005). Furthermore, the diocese also established a new radio station, Radio Profeta, in 2001 in Freirina, and which covered the entire Southern Valley. It is still operating today. Radio is a medium with significant reach in local communities, particularly rural ones, as there are not usually many local media outlets in these areas. National newspapers or television rarely report in any detail on what is happening in small communities. The creation of Radio Profeta ensured that information flowed continuously and reached everyone.

On a smaller scale, the local Church also participated in the dissemination of information through leaflets and other written materials. This kept the population informed about the development of the dispute with Barrick Gold and about the various activities organized in opposition to the project. This dissemination of information was unsurprisingly met with fierce opposition from the mining company, which devoted vast resources to an aggressive communications campaign highlighting the project’s benefits. The data collected and disseminated by workers in collaboration with other environmental activists, bolstered by the Church’s communications infrastructure, helped counter this communications offensive by the mining company.

As is often the case in socio-environmental disputes in relation to mining, there were also forms of harassment directed at those who opposed the project, including priests and nuns. They cited the deflation of vehicle tires, rendering them unusable, or the making of disturbing noises around the residences of priests and nuns in the early hours of the morning. There were also offers of money to buy silence. In short, the Church made its communications infrastructure and capacity available to safeguard creation. This succeeded in uniting rural communities, which are often poorly organized due to their geographical dispersion.

Education and Capacity Building

Raising awareness of the ecological consequences of the Pascua Lama project was not sufficient. It was also necessary to highlight the underlying reasons why it was imperative to protect the environment (water sources in this case) in the face of immense potential damage, which had already manifested itself in incidents such as those described above. In this context, the creation of the aforementioned pastoral for the safeguarding of creation within diocesan structures was fundamental. Like the whole of this process, this initiative arose from the grassroots, from the pastoral workers, especially women religious, directly involved with the communities in the mining-affected area. In other words, the pastoral for the safeguarding of creation was the name that allowed the nature of the pastoral work already being carried out to be defined and identified.



Pastoral workers quickly began to conduct their own research into the theological grounds for defending the environment in a way that was accessible to the Catholic faithful and would raise their awareness of the threat looming over them. To this end, they drew not only on Sacred Scripture but also on the documents of the Church’s Magisterium that addressed the care of the environment. This was before the publication of Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for our Common Home*, published in 2015, when ecological concern by the Church gained public prominence. There was already a collection of magisterial texts to underpin the Church’s action in relation to the Pascua Lama project. Among them was the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, published in 2004 by the then Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and which contains a chapter on safeguarding the environment (PCJP, 2004, chapter 10). There were also texts focusing on the right to water, such as Pope John Paul II’s Message to the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops for

their 2004 Lenten campaign “Water, Source of Life” (John Paul II, 2004). And the Aparecida Document, published in 2007 as the outcome of a meeting of the Episcopal Council for Latin America and the Caribbean, had many paragraphs devoted to the environment (CELAM 2007, par. 470-475).

As the central concern was the issue of water (due to damage to the glaciers and pollution of the Huasco River), John Paul II’s text on the subject had a particular impact. Furthermore, the issue of water was also at the heart of other environmental disputes, such as that surrounding the Hidroaysén dam in southern Chile.¹⁵ The pastoral letter by the Bishop of Aysén, Bishop Luigi Infanti, dedicated to the protection of water sources (Infanti, 2008), also resonated particularly strongly as a contribution to the Pascua Lama case. Bishop Infanti himself visited the diocese of Copiapó on several occasions to share his reflections with the ecclesial community of the Atacama region.

Thus, drawing on these sources, pastoral workers set out to inspire a commitment to protect the environment from a Catholic faith perspective. The main forums for formation were homilies (the Pascua Lama project and its ecological impacts were a recurring theme in preaching), especially during events that drew large crowds, such as novenas for patronal feasts. Public letters were also written, such as those mentioned above, in which the motivations for opposing the project were set out with rigour and conciseness. Catechesis programmes, particularly family catechesis on initiation into the Eucharistic life—which in Chile involves the whole family and not only children—were also occasions where the topic of safeguarding creation was addressed. What began as an initiative by a handful of pastoral workers evolved into a diocesan-level initiative that engaged the entire Church of northern Chile and beyond.

The country’s religious men and women, organized within the National Conference of Religious (Conferencia de Religiosas y Religiosos de Chile, CONFERRE), were also a great source of support for local nuns. They were actively participating in and supporting local pastoral work. Their presence at events such as Masses and training sessions was particularly symbolic.

Unfortunately, there was little support at the level of Chile’s Episcopal Conference beyond making their website available for information dissemination. Apart from the collaboration of Bishop Infanti of the diocese of Aysén in Patagonia, Chilean bishops never made any statement or publicly expressed their support for the bishop of the diocese of Copiapó of the time, Gaspar Quintana. This is another element that illustrates the prophetic nature of grassroots pastoral action, in this case, of “bottom-up” mobilization (though facilitated by bishops’ statements from other regions such as CELAM and the Brazilian Bishops’ conference Lenten campaign on water mentioned above).

Regrettably, the Atacama region lacks robust higher education institutions, at least compared to those found in other parts of the country. And there is no Catholic higher education presence either. Nevertheless, in collaboration with other civil society organisations, various large-scale educational activities were organized for the public, such as lectures by scientists, particularly glaciologists, given the centrality of the water issue. The aim was to reach the more educated sectors of society to raise awareness of the environmental problem. Collaboration with the Latin American Observatory of Environmental Conflicts (Observatorio Latino-americano de Conflictos Ambientales, OLCA) was key.

On a smaller scale, collaboration with outstanding young professionals was also significant. Through the *Servicio País* programme,¹⁶ young people dedicate some years to practise their profession in more remote areas with fewer human resources. Many who were posted in the Atacama region participated with great enthusiasm in the various training initiatives for environmental stewardship. There was, however, no collaboration with Catholic higher education institutions in the country, despite some of them possessing considerable expertise in ecological matters, such as the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile or the Catholic University of the North.

¹⁵ For an analysis of the social mobilization around the Hidroaysén dam, see Schiappacasse et al. (2024).

¹⁶ *Servicio País* is a privately funded volunteer program that seeks to attract talent into public service in rural areas recruiting young professionals who work in public service after completing their undergraduate degree.

On the part of the Diego de Medellín Ecumenical Centre,¹⁷ there was partial monitoring of the case. The Centre published short articles on the Pascua Lama case in its journal (the *Revista de Pastoral Popular*), to which the Catholic community contributed in order to disseminate information and educate the wider public about the ecological consequences of the Pascua Lama project.

In short, with the limited resources at its disposal and through self-management, the Church in Atacama mobilised its educational initiatives to address the ecological impacts of Barrick Gold's mining activities. It succeeded in collaborating with other civil society organisations, enabling the Catholic faithful to receive training on environmental care as well as expert information on the case.

Defence of Rights

Chile's environmental legal framework comprises a series of processes designed to ensure respect for environmental rights. In 2010, Chile's environmental institutional framework was significantly strengthened when Law 20-147 established the Environmental Assessment Service (*Servicio de Evaluación Ambiental*, SEA) and the Superintendency of the Environment (*Superintendencia del Medio Ambiente*, SMA). These replaced the former National Environmental Commission that had operated at the time of the project's initial approval in 2006. This new institutional environmental legal structure explains to some extent why the project was ultimately shut down.

To carry out a mining project, a concession of rights is first required; in the case of Pascua Lama, this was obtained in 1994. However, as a cross-border project, it was also governed by a treaty between Chile and Argentina in 1997 and a Specific Additional Protocol in 2004, as mentioned in section 2.

As the first stage of the process for exploitation, any large-scale mining project in Chile requires an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). As mentioned above, it was this document, approved in 2001, that raised the community's concerns and proved to be the decisive instrument underpinning the opposition to the project. For this reason, one of the first actions taken by local communities was to closely monitor the company's EIA required by law.

The project was situated on the ancestral lands of the Diaguita people, an Indigenous group. At that time of the EIA in 2001, it had no legal recognition; this would be granted later, in 2006, under Law 20.117 (Gajardo, 2014, 75). Not being recognized as Indigenous, they had not been formally consulted, as required by ILO Convention 169 (adopted in 1989 but ratified by Chile in 2008). Diaguita communities did participate formally in later stages of the process. Like the entire population of the Valley, they were, however, also divided. Therefore, the issue of ancestral rights did not hold sufficient weight as a legal instrument to halt the project. But despite this division, it was the Diaguita communities, supported by the local Church, who secured the first legal victory against Barrick Gold in 2012, namely an application for protection before the Copiapó Court of Appeal. Following this appeal, upheld by the Court in judgment No. 300/2012, construction works of the mine were halted for the first time. It should be noted that the ruling was not based on the recognition of, or potential infringement of, ancestral rights, but on the environmental damage caused by the project.

During this period of legal battle, which was ongoing primarily from 2012 until the mine's definite closure in 2020, the pastoral for the safeguarding of creation of the diocese and the Guasco Alto Water Assembly—which involved pastoral workers throughout the process—took part from the beginning in various legal actions at different levels. This participation was supported, sustained, and endorsed by the Church of Atacama and was conceived as an ecclesial action in its own right. It was an expression of solidarity and a way of sharing the concerns and struggles of the people whom the Church serves. In November 2013, the bishop of Copiapó, Bishop Quintana, gave his testimony before the Investigative Commission of the Chilean Chamber of Deputies regarding the Pascua Lama project. He emphasised that, "According to

¹⁷ Diego de Medellín Centre is a Christian association engaged in social justice work and awareness-raising activities around different social justice issues.

the principles of the Church's social doctrine, Nature cannot be reduced to a mere instrument, to be manipulated and exploited" (Cámara de Diputados de la República de Chile, 2014, 71).

However, the most powerful symbolic gestures of non-violent resistance did not take place at that moment in 2013. They reached their peak of intensity towards the end of the naught years, well before legal actions began to yield some success. Nonetheless, the mobilization of civil society was an important factor in the subsequent legal victory, bringing the issue to the attention of local and national public opinion.



Non-violent Civil Resistance

Clergy, religious, and lay Catholics in general were actively involved in civil society actions. They participated, protested, and helped others mobilise. Civil resistance took mainly the form of various protest actions designed to attract large crowds, particularly Masses held at iconic locations, such as in Chollay, the last village in the Valley, in 2006. There were also marches, which often culminated in liturgical ceremonies and drew hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of people. The liturgy was also enriched by symbolic language in relation to the Pascua Lama project. Water was presented as an offering in the form of ice to highlight the critical importance of glaciers for life. A green-and-white flag was carried during the marches to symbolise both the earth and water in frozen form. As Cortez and Maillet (2018, 15) acknowledge, the people involved in the protests were “fundamentally associated with the Catholic Church.”

In 2007, a large group of priests and nuns from the province of Huasco, in the diocese of Copiapó, issued a public statement entitled “For the God of Life, in the service of Life,” which was posted on the Episcopal Conference website (CEC, 2007). One of the most significant moments, which also received extensive media coverage, was a march from the bridge over the Copiapó River in the city of Copiapó to the diocesan cathedral on August 5, 2008. In his homily during Mass, Bishop Quintana mentioned, citing the Aparecida document and John Paul II, that mining projects that harm creation and human beings must be rejected. The diocesan pastoral for the safeguarding of creation also carried out various activities linked to World Water Day, established by the UN in 1993, as a means of defending the right to water, a resource so precious in a desert environment such as the Atacama.

In keeping with the Chilean tradition of peaceful protest,¹⁸ murals were also used as an emblematic way of raising awareness of the environmental cause. In the early 2000s, a community mural, designed by the artist Víctor Pacha and dedicated to the Valley and the Virgin of Carmen, patron saint of the town, was painted on the façade of the Church of Alto del Carmen (Luna, Padilla and Alcayaga, 2004). On the lower level, using black and dark tones, the mural depicted mining activity as a deadly threat to the Valley.

In this context of non-violent resistance, one cannot overlook what has been colloquially termed the “eleventh commandment of the Diocese of Copiapó.” This refers to the decision, endorsed and promoted by Bishop Quintana, that the Church should not accept money from mining companies. As mentioned above, it is a common strategy for mining companies in Chile (and elsewhere) to donate large sums of money to local communities to win their favour. Among these, churches are often a company's preferred recipients. Money is donated for the repair of places of worship, parish halls, educational institutions or other Church infrastructure. In a poor diocese such as one in the Atacama region, where mining is the most thriving economic activity, refusing a mining company donation entails a high degree of heroism and is practised with remarkable consistency by the clergy.

¹⁸ Murals are paintings made in public spaces, especially walls or facades that are very common in Chile as a way of bringing attention into social issues. It is a mixture between art and public protest.

It is worth recalling two episodes in this regard. The first is the rejection of an \$800,000 donation from Barrick Gold to a religious congregation for the construction of a care home in Vallenar. The mining company contacted the congregation and publicly announced the donation, but Bishop Quintana issued a categorical order to the religious community: if they accepted the donation, they would have to leave the diocese.¹⁹ Another significant case, which also reflects the division within the Church on this issue, was the campaign promoted by the chaplain of the organisation “Un Techo Para Chile” (now Techo), which builds homes in marginalised areas. Barrick Gold offered large sums of money to the project and even arranged for the chaplain to visit the Huasco Valley to speak to Catholics about the benefits of the project. The Church in Atacama responded unanimously. First, a delegation from the Church met in Santiago with the chaplain’s superior, asking for his non-involvement. Then, after the chaplain’s public criticism, they issued a public letter expressing their opposition to his promoting the mining project and the discrepancy with the diocese’s official stance on the matter.

This ecclesiastical stance is not only a public condemnation of the environmental damage caused by mining activity but also highlights how conflicts of interest significantly exacerbate the tension between economic interests and environmental stewardship. In many economic sectors, conflicts of interest can compromise the validity of research, data collection, and the dissemination of information on environmental damage, making them a disruptive factor that must be actively addressed. In this light, the prohibition on Church actors receiving money from mining companies – “Atacama’s eleventh commandment” – functions primarily as a safeguard against such conflicts of interest, preserving the credibility and independence of those who speak on behalf of affected communities and ecosystems. Whether this constitutes a form of resistance depends on how broadly one defines the term. In the strict sense, refusing donations is not an act of resistance in itself: it is a prophylactic measure, not a direct challenge to mining operations. In a wider sense, however, by insulating Church actors from economic capture, it creates the conditions of independence necessary for genuine advocacy, and in that respect it can be understood as a structural precondition for non-violent resistance to the roll-out of mining projects, even if it does not constitute such resistance in its own right.

4. Concluding Reflections

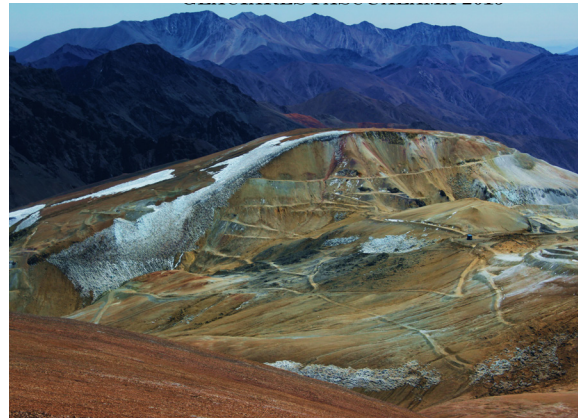
As this case study was being written (May 2026), Barrick Gold launched a new attempt to revive the project. It submitted a new environmental assessment application to the Environmental Assessment Service for a new project in the same area, called “El Alto” (BN Americas, 2026). This is a reminder that a mining project is never stopped once and for all. The economic interests driving mining projects are so great that a constant state of vigilance is required.

Unlike the Catholic Church in some other countries (like in Colombia or the Philippines in this case study collection), the Chilean Church has no history of official or clearly articulated positions on mining, for reasons detailed in the first section. This lends the Pascua Lama case even greater significance in terms of the prophetic action undertaken by the Church, and is a fundamental justification for this case study selection. Quite literally, the Catholic community in Atacama was, and still is, a “voice crying in the wilderness” (John 1:23).

The opposition of the Church in Atacama entailed an unequal struggle not only against the economic power of the mining industry, but also against the political power that acted monolithically in defence of the mining project. Taking advantage of an environmental regulatory framework that was not yet fully established and, above all, the promise of job creation and economic development of the region, politicians steadfastly supported the Pascua Lama project, as they generally support all other mining projects in Chile. In this case, the environmental damage was so glaring and evident that the judiciary, specifically the environmental courts, had no choice but to acknowledge that the environmental costs exceeded what was permitted by law. The violation of the right to water was the most serious and striking issue, particularly in a desert area.

¹⁹ Organisations defending the Huasco Valley drafted an open letter to the Bishop of Talca, which the congregation in question depended on, to asking him to compel the congregation to reject the money. The text details the sum involved, \$800,000 (which is practically the entire amount required for the construction of the project), and explicitly mentions the opposition of Bishop Quintana (Comunidades del Valle del Huasco, 2012).

It is likely that Barrick Gold placed excessive confidence in the broad and sustained support of Chilean society and the state for mining activity. In its communication strategy, it maintained that it was possible to relocate glaciers. This goes not only against scientific evidence but also against the common sense of most people. In a valley that depends so heavily on agriculture for its livelihood and where there is such sensitivity regarding the value of water, the right to water became the main argument for environmental protection and opposition to mining. The inviolability of the glaciers became an inalienable principle that should also be upheld against other mining projects in the area.



As has been consistently emphasised in the above sections, the action of the Church in Atacama was built from the ground up. Listening to the people of the Huasco Valley, and pastors journeying together with local populations allowed for the development of a broad and deep awareness of the value of water as a source of life, and consequently, of Creation as a gift from God. From this listening to the people's cry and to the Word of God, a coordinated and widespread campaign was structured, enabling the water issue that the mining project raised to permeate the region deeply. The mobilization involved various actors at various levels and many forms, but its organic nature must be highlighted, as reflected in the active commitment of the Church in Atacama, each person from their own life circumstances and personal situations, from the layperson to the bishop.

From the narrative of the previous section, several phases can be discerned, culminating in the legal victory that led to the project's closure. Initially, the key was listening to the land and the people the Church serves—in this case, the farmers of the Huasco Valley. Indeed, as noted, it was difficult to overcome the prejudice in favour of mining that is deeply rooted in Chilean society, especially in northern Chile. Once the value of Creation and the need to defend it against the threat of Pascua Lama had been understood, what followed was a slow, quiet, and fruitful effort to speak the truth about the environmental damage caused by the project. Research was conducted not only into the facts (such as its impact on water systems), but also into the theological and ethical foundations for safeguarding the environment, which enabled a solid and convincing pastoral response. The pastoral for the safeguarding of creation, which in a sense embodies in a single initiative what was the pastoral work of the Church in Atacama, was built from the ground up and only later acquired the coherence and prophetic spirit that were its hallmark.

The pastoral for the safeguarding of creation was never conceived as a purely intra-ecclesial reality and diocesan organisation. From the outset, it was open to the rest of civil society and provided a framework for forming alliances that were decisive for the final court ruling in 2020. Initially, this alliance-making was to ensure that social mobilization visibly expressed the widespread discontent over the threat of environmental damage. It later strengthened the educational and legal processes. As Marín (2025, 150) points out, when legal institutions are receptive to environmental concerns, as in this case, it is the most effective way to protect the glaciers and the region's water sources. Weaving networks was key to the effectiveness of the pastoral action to safeguard creation, which continues to this day.

The organic nature of the Church's action was also evident in the absence of strongmen acting as mavericks or creating divisions within the Church community. Each person played the role required at any given moment: the various parish priests who served in Alto del Carmen during the mobilization, the nuns, and the laypeople themselves, who underwent a process of renewal over time. People moved from parishes, and nuns and priests were assigned elsewhere; faces changed, but the community remained, regardless of the varying intensity of the conflict at different times.

In addition to close collaboration and strong networking with civil society organisations, the Church action also had an ecumenical scope. Although there is no conspicuous presence of other Christian communities in the Valley, there was a close alliance with the Presbyterian community of the Valley. For this reason, in the final stage of the mobilization against Pascua Lama, the Church's work became part of the Huasco Valley Assembly, a collective that led the social resistance to the project.

There is one aspect of the Catholic responses to mining suggested in the *Framework for Reflection, Planning and Action* (Montevecchio and Deneulin 2025) which has not been explicitly addressed by the Catholic community of the Huasco valley, and this case study could serve that purpose, namely, critical self-examination. Members of the community that this study's author talked to expressed great satisfaction with what had been achieved. They also conveyed a sense of complacency, situating the mobilization in the past and basking now in its successes. But as is to be expected, there are, and will be, new mining projects in the diocese, and for this reason, it seems essential to remain vigilant and not to waste the experience gained and the lessons learnt during the opposition to Pascua Lama.

Regardless of the Pascua Lama project's outcome, this case study reflects the inherent tension between the technological transformation of nature—of which mining is one of the most incisive forms—and the care of Creation. In this regard, it is worth considering whether mining activity, at least large-scale mining, can be described as intrinsically disordered, or whether a distinction can be made between responsible and irresponsible mining.²⁰ Mining cannot be considered in isolation from the processes of production and consumption as the bishops of Africa, Latin America, and Asia stressed in their joint message for COP30 (CELAM, FABC and SECAM, 2025). Although a thorough and comprehensive reflection is needed to deepen the criteria that should guide the governance of human technological power, it is necessary to raise this question so that the relationship between the Church and mining can combine the integral development of the human person with the care of Creation, as Pope Francis proposed to us based on the concept of integral ecology, developed in *Laudato Si'*. Also recently, in his first encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* published in May 2026, Pope Leo XIV has raised concerns on mining as it provides the material basis for artificial intelligence development (Leo XIV, 2026, 101), so we should expect the race for critical minerals will continue to prompt new mining activities all over the world.

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- ²⁰ In this regard, the contribution of the document Pastoral Guidelines of the Catholic Churches on Mining (CELAM, 2025) is particularly noteworthy.

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