

Catholic Approaches to Mining: Cases of Impact

The Quebradona Copper Mining project, Antioquia, Diocese of Jericó, Colombia

Municipality of Jericó, Department of Antioquia, Colombia

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Summary

In 2007, the South African company AngloGold Ashanti entered the southwest region of the department of Antioquia in the Colombian Andes with the aim of extracting gold and copper, known as the Quebradona mining project. In 2007, it obtained an exploration license but has not yet received the permit to start operations. The case documents how the Catholic community, led by its diocesan bishop and a women religious community, has trained local communities in the teachings of integral ecology, and accompanied them in mobilizing against illegal attempts of the company to start drilling activities. The case highlights three main areas of response. First, is community support in the form of participation in mobilization activities and in legal defense. A second area is formation in integral ecology and consciousness-raising of the environmental impacts of mining. This is especially important in the context of community division about the potential benefits of mining activities in their region. A third area is advocacy to prevent the expansion of mining in ecologically fragile areas, and to promote better distribution of mining revenues and environmental remediation where mining activities already take place. Overall, the case documents how theological frameworks are translated into actions to protect human dignity and care of creation, while also underlining the role of ecclesial leadership.

1. Background

Mining is an economic activity historically linked to the formation of Colombian society. However, as is currently the case in many countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, the prioritization of mining as a source for economic growth has fuelled a form of neo-extractivism with serious consequences for many local communities and their territories (Sánchez, 2016).

The extraction of metals from the subsoil and their export represent a very significant sector of Colombia's international trade. Although contributing only 0.99% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2025, the sector accounted for approximately 22.1% of the total value of national exports (ANM, 2025). The main mineral products traded by Colombia in that same year were coal (44%), gold (39%), ferronickel (4.2%) and emeralds (1.1%). The mining sector (excluding hydrocarbon extraction) employed 260,141 people in 2025 (ANM, 2025), representing only 1.04% of the Colombian workforce of 25 million.

Alongside mining companies that operate legally and to whose interests Colombian legislation is tailored (Urrea and Rodríguez, 2014, pp. 92–100), illegal mining has increasingly become a source of funding for armed groups who operate outside the law, and who engage in other illicit trade such as cannabis, coca and poppies. These armed groups use forced displacement of the civil population as a criminal strategy to take control of the territory, and this often leads to the concentration of land ownership (CNMH, 2016, pp. 76–81). Colombia has one of the worst land distribution rates in the world with a 0.89 Gini index (IGAC, 2024); that is, 10% of landowners own more than 80% of rural land. Forced displacement and land concentration have been linked to the rise in both legal and illegal mining. According to a study (Ruiz, Castillo and Forero, 2018, p. 27), more than half of Colombia's municipalities report a correlation between high rates of displacement on the one hand and registering mining and energy extraction activities on the other.

In such a context, the exploitation of marginalised and impoverished communities, as well as the devastating plundering of their subsoil, has become a cause for concern amongst some sectors of the Colombian Catholic Church, as reflected in the final message of the 92nd Plenary Assembly of the Colombian Bishops' Conference (*Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia*, CEC) in 2012 (CEC, 2012). In their message, the bishops expressed grave concern over the presence of mining projects in the territories of peasant, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and their social and environmental impacts, such as deforestation, the undermining of agriculture, the rise in unemployment, poverty and morbidity, and the emergence of new forms of violence.

Whilst small-scale mining has been practised without any state regulation by Colombian Afro-descendant, Indigenous and rural communities for centuries as part of their cultural traditions, in recent years, illegal armed groups have turned to mining as a new way of financing their criminal activities. The bishops' message therefore also warned against conflating informal mining practised by many ancestral communities with illegal mining promoted by various armed groups.



Inspired by the divine mandate to manage creation responsibly (Gen 2:15), the Colombian bishops advocated in their 2012 document for a development model centred on respect for human dignity and fundamental human rights. They called on the Colombian state to formulate a new, modern and fair mining code, based on consultations with communities, and urged the mining industry to invest its profits ethically, with justice and equity, in national and regional development. Furthermore, they asked that Colombian society be mindful of its responsibility towards creation and encouraged citizens to strengthen democracy and promote a model of development in harmony with nature. In their message, the bishops committed to standing with the Colombian people “in the search for truth and justice in the service of life, promoting constructive dialogue and avoiding violence”, as well as to accompanying “the State, the mining industry and the Colombian people in promoting a human development that is holistic, based on solidarity, and sustainable” (CEC, 2012).

Three years after the CEC message and prompted by the publication of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* in June 2015, twelve bishops from the ecclesiastical provinces of Medellín and Santafé de Antioquia signed a pastoral letter to express their concern about the serious impacts of mining in the departments of Antioquia and Chocó. They described how the replacement of traditional mining with mechanised and large-scale mining had triggered environmental destruction and the intensification of social conflicts. In addition to the depletion of water sources and their contamination with chemical waste, the granting of mining licences to exploit areas intended for agriculture had imposed cultural changes that threatened the identity of many communities and excluded them from decision-making processes. They noted that traditional agricultural and fishing practices were progressively being abandoned due to the displacement of the population as a result of large-scale mining.

The twelve bishops from Antioquia and Chocó highlighted how the political and economic power of certain mining companies enabled them to exert influence over local governments, secure tax exemptions, and evade fiscal oversight. They warned that mining practices—both legal and illegal—provided fertile ground for corruption and criminality by facilitating bribery and state capture. They also pointed out that Colombian mining legislation, especially Law 685 of 2001, which grants benefits to foreign and domestic mining companies and remains in force today, was not geared towards the common good and that many Indigenous, Afro-descendant and rural communities felt abandoned (Bishops of Medellín and Santafé de Antioquia, 2015). They mentioned family breakdown, alcoholism, prostitution, child sexual abuse, violence, corruption, greed and the violation of collective rights as phenomena associated with large-scale mining in their territories. To address these, the twelve bishops encouraged pastoral workers to keep themselves properly informed of the consequences of mining, to form themselves in integral ecology, and to lead simple lifestyles that promote the care of our common home. Echoing the 2012 CEC document, the twelve bishops advocated for a development model in harmony with nature and centred on the dignity of the human person and their fundamental rights. They called on the government to review mining legislation and free trade agreements, and to ensure environmental control. They emphasised the need to organise and legitimise artisanal mining, and to monitor and regulate industrialised mining. Whilst acknowledging that some mining companies engaged in dialogue with local communities, acted with ecological prudence and demonstrated social awareness, they called for all mining projects to be put to public consultation, and for a more equitable distribution of mining profits.

In addition to these two official statements, the CEC, in collaboration with Caritas Colombia, conducted a semi-structured survey in 2013 to explore the perception of the mining industry's impacts among seventy-four Catholic representatives from different ecclesiastical jurisdictions. The survey focused on the links between the mining industry and the intensification of conflict, the exploitation and use of resources, the presence of illegal armed groups, and the displacement of communities (Polanía and Henao, 2022). In 2020, Caritas Colombia conducted a new survey among 104 representatives from all the country's ecclesiastical jurisdictions to assess the social, political, economic, cultural and environmental impacts of the extractive economy. Using the 2013 survey as a baseline, the 2020 survey results brought to light a worsening of the social, environmental, economic and cultural indicators since 2016, the year in which the Colombian government signed a peace agreement with the FARC-EP guerrilla group. The new study revealed high rates of poverty, a decline in quality of life and damage to the social fabric within communities. It also revealed a widespread lack of commitment on the part of mining companies towards local communities, and their failure to comply with the mandatory process of prior or public consultation, thus violating a fundamental right (Polanía and Henao, 2022, p. 38).

Only half of the ecclesial jurisdictions surveyed considered mining a necessary activity for the local economy, and very few participants mentioned its positive effects, such as economic revitalisation, increased employment and social benefits through taxation. The majority of respondents reported negative economic effects such as distortions in the local economy, rising prices and the disappearance of traditional mining activities. For 58% of the mining projects mentioned in the survey, no positive social effects were recorded, and in 82% of the dioceses, no positive environmental effects were reported.

The survey results provided a record of the Church's role in accompanying mining-affected communities. Among the actions reported by those surveyed were direct participation in political processes, dissemination of information, training in negotiation skills, and mediation between local communities and government authorities. The surveys also uncovered that in each ecclesiastical jurisdiction, dedicated webpages have been established to provide information about the extractive sector and its consequences. Other support activities reported included emotional, social, pastoral and spiritual support, provision of direct services to affected communities, advocacy work, training community leaders, raising awareness about the mining situation at local, national and international levels, and facilitating dialogue with government and mining companies to encourage them to comply with environmental regulation and respect the rights of local communities (Polanía and Henao, 2022, p. 40).

Alongside CEC and Caritas, another Catholic institution that has worked hand in hand with communities affected by mining in various regions of Colombia is the Centre for Research and Popular Education (*Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular*, CINEP), which was founded in 1972 by the Society of Jesus. In addition to its research work, which feeds into important publicly accessible databases, CINEP offers training and support to affected communities. It now works in conjunction with the Peace Programme (*Programa Por la Paz*, PPP). CINEP/PPP publishes the journal *Controversia*, which has had several special issues on mining, such as one published in July 2017 on neo-extractivism and the re-primarisation of the economy as a consequence of international agreements on raw materials (Duarte, 2017), and one published in November 2025 on environmental justice and popular resistance to corporate power (Matiz González and Ortiz Fonseca, 2025).

CINEP/PPP has published various reports on mining to highlight the situation in different regions affected by neo-extractivism, such as *Environment, Mining and Post-Conflict in Colombia: The Cases of Catatumbo and Southern Bolívar* (Aponte, Arboleda and Barrera, 2016); *Gold Mining and Local Communities in Southern Córdoba in Colombia: The Case of the El Alacrán Mine* (Medina, Cuenca, Serrano and Carrillo, 2019); *Does Cerrejón Always Win? Between Corporate Impunity for Human Rights Violations and the Search for Comprehensive Reparation in Times of Transition* (Censat Agua Viva and CINEP/PPP, 2023); and *Communities and their Relationship with the Mining and Energy Sector in the 21st century* (CINEP/PPP and UPME, 2024). CINEP/PPP has also published several books in collaboration with other organisations, including *Extractivism and Post-Conflict in Colombia: Challenges for Territorial Peace* (Ulloa and Coronado, 2016), "As Long as We Dream". *Extractivism and Interculturality in Southern La Guajira* (Archila et al., 2015), which deals with the process of

prior and autonomous consultation with the Wayúu people in El Cerrejón.¹

A recent example of support to affected communities provided by CINEP/PPP was the submission of a report to the United Nations on the environmental impacts of mercury water contamination and the risks faced by human rights defenders in the territories of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples in the Lower Atrato region of Chocó. After presenting the report in February 2025, a CINEP/PPP team attended the hearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in November 2025 alongside community representatives.

The above statements of Colombian bishops and brief overview of the actions taken by the Catholic Church in support of communities affected by neo-extractivism in Colombia (as reported in the 2020 Caritas survey) provide some background to the case of the Quebradona copper mining project in the municipality of Jericó (Department of Antioquia, northwest Colombia) and the non-violent resistance of the local community against the mining company AngloGold Ashanti, based in South Africa. The Quebradona project is the object of this case study as it is one of the cases that best illustrates the Colombian Catholic Church's direct and active involvement in caring for our common home in the face of the threat posed by mining.



2. The Quebradona project and non-violent community resistance

The south-west of the department of Antioquia in the Colombian Andes is characterised by a very rich biodiversity, with abundant water sources that sustain the lives of numerous plant and animal species, but its subsoil also contains large deposits of copper, gold and silver. In 2007, AngloGold Ashanti entered the area with the aim of extracting 4.9 million tonnes of these minerals, known as the Quebradona mining project.

In 2007, the company first obtained permission from the departmental government to explore and acquired five land titles for plots covering 7,595 hectares. The initial exploration phase lasted eleven years (initially three years with four two-year extensions), which is the maximum allowed under the Colombian mining code. The company then merged the five plots in 2018 in order to obtain a new exploration licence and buy more time (Hernández, 2025). In 2019, AngloGold Ashanti applied to the National Environmental Licensing Authority (*Autoridad Nacional de Licencias Ambientales*, ANLA) for a licence to begin mining the copper and gold deposits. However, in 2021, ANLA shelved the application due to shortcomings in the environmental impact assessment submitted by the company (Giraldo, 2025c).

Despite this pause in the application, the mayor of the municipality of Jericó allowed the company to carry out some work on a public property known as Lusitania. As the site also contains a water reservoir, its purpose is to protect the water supply for one of the rural aqueducts. The company took the opportunity to set up a rig and carry out drilling on the site. In November 2022, a group of AngloGold Ashanti workers in plain clothes sneaked onto a farmer's property in the Vallecitos zone to set up drilling rigs without authorisation (Sánchez, 2025b). This unauthorised activity sparked a non-

¹ See also the book chapters in CINEP/PPP's publication "La Guajira: Between the creation of sacrifice zones and the comprehensive protection of the territory" (Ortiz and Perneth, 2024), and the article "Territorial Disputes with Mining Projects in Cañaverale, La Guajira" (Giraldo Salazar, 2022).

violent protest by the rural community to halt drilling in this protected area. The clandestine activities of the company's workers ultimately served to strengthen the social mobilisation of the community, which had organised through the Imagina Jericó Collective (IPC, 2023).²

AngloGold Ashanti's presence in Jericó has divided the population and profoundly ruptured the social fabric by creating a clash between two different visions of development, one guided by a capitalist logic of accumulation and profit at any cost, and another based on cultural heritage and the defence of traditional lifestyles and ecosystems (Sánchez, 2025b). Some residents have been persuaded by the company's arguments that the project would bring benefits to local populations through the creation of new jobs and the attraction of financial investment. The company promised that, when fully operational, the mine would generate an annual profit of USD 5 million and at least 3,000 jobs (Landis, 2024).

In 2016, AngloGold Ashanti paid the travel expenses of the head teachers of Jericó's three state schools so that they could visit one of its mining projects in Brazil and subsequently influence the education of younger generations (Rutas del conflicto, 2024). Furthermore, the mining company is paying the salaries of some teachers and covering the cost of school transport, thereby taking on a responsibility that falls to the municipality. The company has also devoted significant resources to engaging the community through "a youth sports programme, a music band, the refurbishment of a secondary school, a nursery and tree planting, the promotion of tourism, and other direct investments in small local businesses" (Landis, 2024). Although these actions may be viewed as part of the company's corporate social responsibility, they are in fact strategies through which the mining company seeks to gain the support of the inhabitants.

Even though AngloGold Ashanti denies the existence of underground water sources in the area and dismisses concerns for subsidence, some residents are aware of the potential risks posed by the project due to the damage it could cause to aquifers, rivers and land. According to the organisation Visión Suroeste, AngloGold Ashanti would need to remove 130 million tonnes of rock to extract the copper and other minerals. This would cause the subsidence of 73 hectares of land and generate 119 million tonnes of toxic waste, which would be contained in a tailings dam only two kilometres from the Cauca River. Due to torrential rains, droughts and ground instability, the waste could enter the river and contaminate the water on which local populations rely for living (Hernández, 2025).

On 2 December 2025, the National Mining Agency (*Agencia Nacional de Minería*, ANM) denied a new extension of the exploration permit for the Quebradona project for two years on the grounds of weakened social relations within the territory and lack of effort to secure environmental viability (Giraldo, 2025b).

AngloGold Ashanti uses Colombian law to delegitimise and criminalise peaceful protest and intimidate the population. While claiming respect for peaceful protests and no involvement in illegal exploration, the company alleges that the protests disrupt public order, cause damage to property and interfere with its operations (Wallace, 2025). However, according to a lawyer defending the protestors, no violence was used in the nine acts of resistance organised by the community between 2022 and 2023, and all were expressions of civil and political rights such as sit-ins and permanent assemblies (Giraldo, 2025a).

In October 2025, there were armed clashes in Palocabildo (a district of the municipality of Jericó) between the National Army and the Clan del Golfo, which signalled the presence of criminal armed groups operating in the area. It is hoped that the authorities will guarantee the safety of the population and prevent the violence of the armed conflict from interfering with community-led processes of non-violent resistance. However, this new presence of criminal groups complicates the context in which the Catholic Church and other sectors of civil society are acting in defence of the collective rights of human communities and the rights of nature (Corporación Jurídica Libertad, 2025).

² Founded in 2021 by local young people to resist mining activities in Jericó, the Collective mobilises through sit-ins, artistic activism, legal support and spiritual activities in coordination with the Catholic Church.

The next section analyses some of the support, training and advocacy initiatives carried out by the Catholic Church in Jericó. The active participation of certain Church representatives highlights the importance of theological frameworks that critique economic activities within the paradigm of integral ecology, and their translations into actions that promote the protection of human dignity and the care of creation (Galvis and López, 2026).

3. Actions by the Catholic Church regarding the Quebradona Project

Community Support

The Quebradona Project has not yet been given the legal authorisation to progress beyond the exploration phase. The company's clandestine drilling attempts, which were aimed at commencing exploitation of the deposits before legal authorisation, have been thwarted by non-violent community resistance. The case brings to light the scant regard AngloGold Ashanti has shown for the communities' free, prior and informed consent (FPIC). This situation constitutes a serious violation of the community's rights, as the right to say “no” to mining activity is a fundamental component of the right to FPIC (Deneulin and Montevecchio, 2025).

In response to the environmental threat posed by a new illegal drilling attempt, on 13 December 2023, more than fifty people from the affected villages, including two nuns from a Colombian religious congregation (the Missionaries of Mother Laura), prevented the company's workers from continuing their clandestine operations in the area. The peaceful demonstrators called on the police, the mayor, and the Ombudsman's Office to come to the scene and remove the employees from the property. However, company employees instead accused the local population of holding them hostage (Hernández, 2025).



The Congregation of the Missionaries of Mother Laura has been present in Jericó since 1964, and their members have supported the community's resistance since AngloGold arrived in 2007. Sister Elizabeth Rúa explains that her motivation for supporting the community in this collective act of resistance is the protection of the land. “If there is no land”, she says, “if the water is damaged, everything is damaged, just to bring wealth to others. The land is the mother; it is where we must sow in order to have food, and they look after the land, they look after the water” (Sánchez, 2025a).

During the protest, some farmers carried machetes and other sharp objects as part of their traditional agricultural attire. However, the mining company reported these to the authorities as the illegal carrying of weapons. One of the farmers brought his dog to the protest, and the animal bit one of the workers during the altercation (Hernández, 2025). As a result, eleven farmers who participated in the non-violent protest were charged with kidnapping and causing bodily harm. Furthermore, some protesters who had previously worked at the mining company's site dismantled the drills and handed them over to the police to be returned to AngloGold Ashanti (as drilling activity was unauthorised). They were charged instead with aggravated theft.

The Public Prosecutor's Office requested house arrest because, allegedly, the eleven farmers posed a risk to the community and to the victims. Their defence lawyer characterises these farmers instead as members of citizens' oversight committees and social organisations such as the Jericó Environmental Committee,³ as chairpersons of the Community Action Boards

³ The Jericó Environmental Committee (*Mesa Ambiental de Jericó*) is a forum for citizen participation and community dialogue. It was created in 2008 by some coffee farming families to defend water and land.

and authorities in community water supply associations (Giraldo, 2025a). This case is a clear instantiation of the rising trend globally of the criminalisation of social protest,⁴ and the use of criminal law to attack the weaker party in a socio-environmental conflict (Hernández, 2025). The complaints with which AngloGold has sought to portray the farmers who defend their territory as a threat aim to delegitimise non-violent community resistance and instil fear in the peasant population. Such criminalisation of protest weakens organisational processes and intimidates communities (Sánchez, 2025c).



According to the Ombudsman's Office, in cases of criminalisation of social protest, it is the state's role to protect those who peacefully defend their rights and their land. As it stated shortly after their arrest: "We express our concern regarding the prosecution of eleven peasant leaders and environmental defenders in the municipality of Jericó. The Colombian State has an obligation to guarantee the right to defend rights. This includes those who defend water, forests and life from within the territories" (Hernández, 2025). On 2 June 2025, the municipal court of Jericó ruled that the eleven peasants did not need to be deprived of their liberty, and that it was sufficient to prevent them from leaving the country so that they could appear before the court periodically.

Besides the direct implication of the Missionaries of Mother Laura in the non-violent resistance, the Catholic Church has supported the non-violent resistance of the community, providing emotional, social, pastoral and spiritual advice through its participation in the Iglesias y Minería network. The Colombian chapter of this inter-ecclesial organisation has brought the Quebradona case to international attention and raised awareness about the criminalisation of the protesters, adding its voice to the chorus "Water, yes; mining, no" (Iglesias y Minería, 2025).

Defence of Rights

Another significant initiative by the Catholic Church in Jericó is the defence of human and environmental rights, and for which the training of the church community and its pastors has been crucial. As one of the eleven accused protesters explains: "We are deeply Catholic and, in this struggle, God is with us" (Hernández, 2025). This farmer recalls having gone to Medellín in September 2017 to see Pope Francis, with his words kept alive in his heart: "His Holiness's message that day was very clear: look after this planet, for it is the only thing you have" (Hernández, 2025).

His words reveal how much the Church's teachings in the encyclical *Laudato Si'* have meant for the peasant community of Jericó. Sister Magnolia Parra expresses what the community has learnt from studying the encyclical as follows: "We cannot sacrifice the life of a people, or of peoples, for economic interests. The same goes for the wealth of the earth, the true wealth; not gold, nor copper, nor anything of the sort" (Abondano, 2025).

Bishop Noel Antonio Londoño has also supported the community's resistance since his appointment to the diocese of Jericó in 2013. At the start of his episcopal ministry, people asked him whether the project was good for the community or not. He subsequently studied the matter and attended academic debates, scholarly forums, and even the events organised by the company itself (Zuleta, 2023).

Bishop Londoño found a gap in the training of the diocese's clergy and set out to address it. As he explains, "I became convinced of one thing: the clergy does not know what ecology means because they have never been taught it. So, for the current seminarians and those recently ordained, I have personally taught a course called 'ecothology', based on Pope

⁴ See the report from the Business and Human Rights Centre (BHRC, 2026) which highlights judicial harassment as one of the main forms of attacks against land and environmental defenders.

Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*" (Zuleta, 2023). This course renewed the local clergy's theological understanding of the relationship between humanity and our common home through the lens of care, drawing on the teachings of *Laudato Si'*. God entrusted Nature and all that it contains to the care of humankind, and fields need to be cultivated and minerals extracted with the obligation that the Earth be preserved (Zuleta, 2023).

In a letter of solidarity in response to the persecution by some politicians in the region, fifty church organisations, as well as fifty members of Iglesias y Minería, acknowledged Bishop Londoño's work in promoting Church teachings on integral ecology.⁵ Their letter reads: "Thank you, Monsignor Noel, for raising your voice and calling on the Christian community of the Diocese of Jericó to recognise the relationship between the Christian message and the care of our common home through the booklet disseminating Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* and the pastoral letter Reflections on Mining" (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz, 2022).

Regarding the Quebradona Project, one of Bishop Londoño's greatest concerns is the construction of tailings dams if the project goes ahead. Referring to the tragedies in Mariana in 2015 and Brumadinho in 2019 in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais (see the Brazil Belo Sun case study in this collection), he noted that the mining company had sold the tailings dams to the state before they collapsed, and that the Brazilian state considered itself to bear no responsibility for the disaster. He feared that the construction of tailings dams near the Cauca River could contaminate its waters in the long term (Londoño, 2026).

The bishop's publicly expressed reservations regarding the Quebradona project have drawn criticism from some members of Jericó's political and economic class. A business leader, a former councillor, and a former mayor wrote an open letter in January 2023 to reproach the bishop for saying in the media that "AngloGold Ashanti came to Jericó with lies and [...] that the company gives pittance donations, cycling shirts to the children, monthly payments to the Mayor's Office, and that most of Jericó's councillors have been co-opted" (Salas, 2023).

Alongside the participation of religious and priests in the non-violent community resistance, the efforts in favour of human rights by the Jericó Environmental Committee (*Mesa Ambiental de Jericó*) have been recognised at national and international levels. In 2025, the National Human Rights Prize, which is awarded by Diakonia and Act Church of Sweden with the support of the Swedish Embassy, recognised the process of non-violent resistance in Jericó as the collective experience of the year. The struggle of these farming families centred on defending their land against large-scale mining through peaceful mobilisation and community education has become an example of rural dignity in Colombia and all over the world (Redacción Colombia +20, 2025).

Political Advocacy

Bishop Londoño argues that responsibility for the consequences of mining borne by people in the region lies not only with the mining companies themselves but also with the state – state authorities have granted a total of 1,329 mining permits in the Department of Antioquia (GDIAM, 2019, p. 12). As he expressed in an interview: "The conduct of the Antioquia Mining Secretariat ... has been crude and shameful ... Antioquia is the department with the most concessions (22% of the total territory has mining titles as of 2021). If you go to the Ombudsman's Office and ask for the map of mining titles, you realise that almost all of Antioquia has been handed over or is in the process of being handed over" (Zuleta, 2023). In another interview, he explains: "The root of the problems is mining laws, which are tailor-made for multinationals. That is the crux of the situation, and it must be changed in the Senate through a law of the Republic" (Hernández, 2025). Mining companies operating in Colombia benefit from legislation that sacrifices the common good and sustainability for the sake of quick profits. As he notes, "Whoever is in power in Antioquia for four years draws up contracts and signs agreements that last a lifetime" (Estupiñán, 2022).

⁵ The diocese produced a short booklet to promote integral ecology teachings. The booklet included some excerpts of *Laudato Si'* and the document signed by twelve bishops from departments of Antioquia and Chocó cited earlier.

The bishop of the diocese of Jericó is not opposed to mining per se, but rather to the way AngloGold Ashanti intends to carry out mining operations in an area unsuitable for them. As he elaborates in a TV interview: “Mining, yes, because we will always need it; but not like this, not with heavy machinery-driven extractivism. Until two hundred years ago, there was no problem with nature because the mining carried out in Fredonia, in Amagá,⁶ was done with pick and shovel” (Londoño, 2026). He acknowledges the need for responsible mining within a certain legal framework to prevent mining companies from exploiting local populations, and critiques mining laws that do not protect people and land: “Of course mining is necessary; we use it in our daily lives. But the Mining Code in Colombia is illegitimate, and that is why we have companies like AngloGold Ashanti, which arrive lying to the farmers, deceive them to carry out their exploration, and carry on as if nothing had happened” (Zuleta, 2023). The bishop is also deeply concerned with the social changes brought about by large-scale industrial mining. By bringing in miners from other parts of Antioquia, the country and beyond, large-scale mining profoundly affects local community structures (Estupiñán, 2022).

Bishop Londoño condemns the lack of transparency of AngloGold Ashanti and its attempts to manipulate the state and civil society. As he exclaims: “The company came in lying, saying it was coming to look at the mountains and suggest crops. The whole process has been conducted behind closed doors. There has never been any clear consultation with the people. [...] In recent years, the company has been paying money to the mayor’s office on a monthly basis. The municipal council, to a large extent, is on the mining company’s side because a significant portion of the campaign funds for most councillors was provided by AngloGold Ashanti” (Estupiñán, 2022). He often repeats a phrase that has become popular among the farmers: “Mining, yes, but not like this, and not here” (Londoño, 2026).

Jericó is the birthplace of the first Colombian woman to have been canonised, María Laura de Jesús Montoya Upegui, an important figure for everyone in the village. The bishop recalls the day when several AngloGold Ashanti executives tried to pressure him by offering to build a copper cathedral in honour of Saint Laura Montoya in order to seek his support and blessing: “At that moment, the Holy Spirit inspired me; I didn’t say a word, but I opened the door and showed them out” (Hernández, 2025). From that day on, he reports never having been blackmailed again.

In line with the final message of the 92nd Plenary Assembly of the Colombian Episcopal Conference in 2012 and the 2015 pastoral letter (see section 1), the Church in Jericó advocates for a review of the legal framework so that it leads to better environmental protection and greater state revenues to enable funding for mitigating the long-term ecological damage caused by mining. In October 2024, Bishop Londoño participated in a meeting in Panama of fifteen Latin American and Caribbean bishops whose dioceses were most affected by mining.⁷ In the meeting, he stated that one of the solutions proposed by the Colombian Church is “a change to the mining code [...] this current regulation, which was designed with the advice of foreign companies, favours exploitation and offers few benefits to the country” (Medina, 2024).

The Jericó Environmental Committee has also been campaigning to bring state policies into line with human rights. Its members know that, in order to bring about this change, it is necessary to gather different forces and a range of social organisations. To this end, they have brought together various sectors of society in Jericó and Támesis to agree on common strategies and put them into practice. Among other initiatives, through publications and meetings, they have widely publicised the threat posed by large-scale mining to the whole of south-western Antioquia. This is a collective effort driven by the creation of permanent forums for coordination, and by participation in other civil society platforms within the department of Antioquia and across Colombia. The Jericó Environmental Committee has formed a Citizens’ Oversight Committee to monitor and scrutinise AngloGold Ashanti’s activities, and document how it is undermining a healthy environment, social harmony and citizen participation –all of which are human rights. Furthermore, they maintain constant and open communication with regional and national government bodies, to whom they raise their concerns and put forward their demands.

⁶ Fredonia and Amagá are two municipalities in the department of Antioquia located more than 40 kilometres north of Jericó.

⁷ 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)

4. Concluding Reflections

The case of the Quebradona project and the divisions it has created within the population present a significant challenge for the Catholic Church and other organisations supporting community-led processes of non-violent resistance. On the one hand, the project has the potential to create jobs for unskilled workers, as well as to allocate resources to fund educational and training services for young people, and improve living conditions in the short term. On the other hand, as Deneulin and Montevecchio (2025, p. 5) have warned, one must bear in mind that, when they disrupt ecological balance through deforestation and pollution of water, air and land, mining activities do not contribute to integral human development. It is therefore urgent to provide affected populations with tools so that they can “challenge the narratives on job creation and social improvement, and expose the strategies used by companies to obtain consent and a social licence to operate” (Deneulin and Montevecchio, 2025, pp. 8–9). In this regard, the contribution made by the Catholic Church in Jericó through accompaniment, defence of rights, and political advocacy, in collaboration with civil society organisations, is particularly valuable.



The Quebradona project has highlighted a significant tension between, on the one hand, the national government, at least in its authority to deliver environmental licences to mining companies, and the local governments of the department of Antioquia and the municipality of Jericó, on the other. The current balance of power, in which local governments have sought to favour the mining company whilst national authorities have not granted a licence to extract minerals from the subsoil, is subject to change according to the political convictions and economic interests of those who may come to power. There is a pressing need to reform mining legislation in order to protect the rights of human communities and nature, as well as to prevent corruption. However, the new national government (2026–2030) appears to be aligned with the interests of foreign mining companies, rather than with the common good of Colombian society or the care of the environment.

Beyond possible changes in the political landscape, which are inherent to a democratic society, the Church’s actions need to be geared towards fostering informed participation among the population. Only when fully informed and formed can citizens make appropriate decisions in the interests of the human community and all beings that make up our common home. The recent arrival of armed groups in the area has made the community’s political participation more complex, due to the constraints imposed by them. In such a context, the local church must ensure that relations between civil society and the state promote the security and well-being of the population. To this end, it would be advisable for the local church to work in partnership with the Territorial Councils for Peace, Reconciliation and Coexistence (CTPRC) of the department of Antioquia and the municipality of Jericó. These councils were established in 1998 as advisory and consultative bodies to collaborate with local authorities across the country in the construction of peace.

Furthermore, church representatives in Jericó must broaden the scope of cooperation at the national level so that, in addition to pastoral and spiritual support, concrete proposals for reforming the mining code are put forward. Broad cooperation with other organisations is also needed for interdisciplinary work so that emotional and social support to the population is facilitated by qualified personnel. Collaborative work with legal civil society organisations responsible for defending rights in the face of AngloGold Ashanti’s manipulation of the law to incriminate land defenders, such as Corporación Jurídica Libertad mentioned earlier, is a valuable precedent that could lead to legislative proposals to change mining legislation in Colombia. Interdisciplinary cooperation can also help prevent and mitigate potential psychosocial harm to land defenders and their families by involving professionals from various health sectors.

The local church's advocacy work also needs to be extended to the international level so that it is more effective and so that social and environmental injustices at the local level (driven by international demand for copper) become more visible to those driving demand for minerals. Forming broad-based coalitions to pressure mining companies to change practices is also needed. In the Quebradona case, South-South cooperation could take shape through cooperation between academics from Colombian and South African universities (as AngloGold Ashanti is based in South Africa) to research the effects of mining on territories and local communities, and advance justice in national legislation and international trade relations. In that regard, the growing cooperation among Catholic churches in the Global South presents a significant opportunity for the Churches of Colombia and South Africa to strengthen ties of cooperation and joint action in the face of AngloGold Ashanti's plans in Jericó. This cooperation has recently been evident in the joint message from the Catholic Episcopal Conferences and Councils of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean on the occasion of COP30 on climate change (CELAM, FABC and SECAM, 2025), as well as in the message issued on the occasion of the second ICARRD+20 international conference on comprehensive agrarian reform and rural development (CELAM, FABC and SECAM, 2026).

Although the sisters of the Mother Laura missionary congregation will continue to accompany the community of Jericó, as their founder was born there, Bishop Londoño has reached retirement age, and a new bishop, Diego Luis Rendón, has been appointed in July 2026. Such changes are part and parcel of church life, but they highlight the importance of building strong grassroots ecclesial communities that remain committed to defending their rights. It is to be hoped that Bishop Rendón will maintain the perspective of integral ecology that has enabled Bishop Londoño to inspire the local Catholic Church in its prophetic work of accompaniment, formation and advocacy amidst the complexities surrounding the situation of the Jericó community.

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