



March 9, 2015

The Most Reverend Carlos Aguiar Retes
Archbishop of Tlalnepantla
President
Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano
Carrera 5 N° 118 – 31
Bogotá D.C., Colombia

Your Excellency,

I am writing on behalf of all the Bishops in Canada to express our solidarity with and support for the Episcopal Council of Latin America in its hearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Extracting natural resources from the earth is an ancient practice which can be an important component in integral human development. Mining and the extraction of other resources is capable of providing economic development, as well as the raw material so basic in our day to creating higher standards of living and more stable societies. However, the situation in Latin America has in general not yet produced these benefits. We have become aware, and even alarmed, that as a result of weak regulatory schemes in many Latin American countries and the frequent failures of some international companies to fully respect the environment and human rights, there are numerous abuses committed in connection with various mining operations, particularly in, but not restricted to, the Amazon Basin. While there are companies that have taken positive steps toward social responsibility, human rights, and the protection of the environment, their efforts are overshadowed by the overall magnitude of damage done by others in the industry and by the extent of the challenges that remain to be resolved.

It is a particular concern to us as well that the majority of mining operations in Latin America are controlled by companies registered in Canada. It is also unfortunate to observe that in many cases those most negatively affected by extractive industries are Indigenous peoples. The Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations recently highlighted “the importance of just laws to regulate the relationship between indigenous peoples and extractive industries operating in ancestral lands.”¹ This is why the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has supported the call in our country for our federal government to establish an ombudsman to respond to complaints about the operations of Canadian mining companies abroad. We also support in principle the creation of a law in our country that would allow these companies to be prosecuted, under Canadian law, for crimes committed abroad.

¹ Archbishop Bernardito Auza, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, at the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples Interactive round table 2: “Implementation of the rights of indigenous peoples at the national and local level”. New York, 22 September 2014.

As you are well aware, the Catholic Church teaches that the goods of the earth belong to all. The well-known principle of the universal destination of goods “is an invitation to develop an economic vision inspired by moral values that permit people not to lose sight of the origin or purpose of these goods, so as to bring about a world of fairness and solidarity, in which the creation of wealth can take on a positive function” (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 174). This principle also requires that everyone work for the integral development of all.

A world of fairness and solidarity can only be created if the natural environment in which we live is respected and nurtured. As Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now Francis have all clearly pointed out, natural ecology is closely tied to human ecology, so that efforts to preserve our environment are inextricably linked to efforts to bring about human conversion and the transformation of sinful social structures. The Commission on Justice and Peace of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops stated in 2013, “Any solutions that attempt to solve environmental problems but are based only on utilitarian factors will not provide authentic solutions. This is because both economic activity and the use of technology are human actions and therefore always contain a moral component” (*Building a New Culture*, n. 5).

The current problems surrounding mining in Latin America are multi-layered. Their solution will require not only legislative action in the companies’ countries of origin and of operation, but also ongoing dialogue between communities and industry. It will likewise demand changes in behaviour on the part of those mining companies guilty of or compliant with abuses. It is therefore our hope that all stakeholders – legislators, community groups, individual citizens, and the companies themselves – might work together so that mining development in Latin America would truly become a source of integral development and a blessing to all the people of the Americas and the world.

Fraternally united with you in faith and solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Paul-André Durocher". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

+ Paul-André Durocher
Archbishop of Gatineau
President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic
Bishops