News
Social Justice



Benedictine Sr. Mary Elizabeth Schweiger holds a petition against mining in El Salvador March 24 signed by women religious at Mount St. Scholastica monastery in Atchison, Kansas. The Benedictines joined the Sisters of Charity in nearby Leavenworth as well as other Catholics from Kansas showing solidarity with the Catholic Church in El Salvador fighting a new law that allows metal mining. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



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Atchison, Kansas — March 31, 2025

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Benedictine Sr. Mary Elizabeth Schweiger said it's been a long time since she visited El Salvador, but she has never forgotten its people. That's why she recently joined an effort to reverse a new law that allows mining in the country.

Some 80 Benedictines at the Mount St. Scholastica community near Kansas City joined Schweiger, their prioress, in signing a "Yes to life, no to mining" petition they sent to El Salvador. The slogan is part of a campaign that the Catholic Church has launched hoping to get Salvadoran lawmakers and the country's president to reverse a December 2024 law that allows mining. El Salvador's bishops on March 17 took more than 150,000 signatures to the general assembly from Catholic Salvadorans around the country asking lawmakers to reconsider. Women and men religious, priests, along with other Catholics and non-Catholics accompanied the bishops as they dropped off the petitions.

Related: 'Yes to life, no to mining': Sisters in El Salvador join church's protest

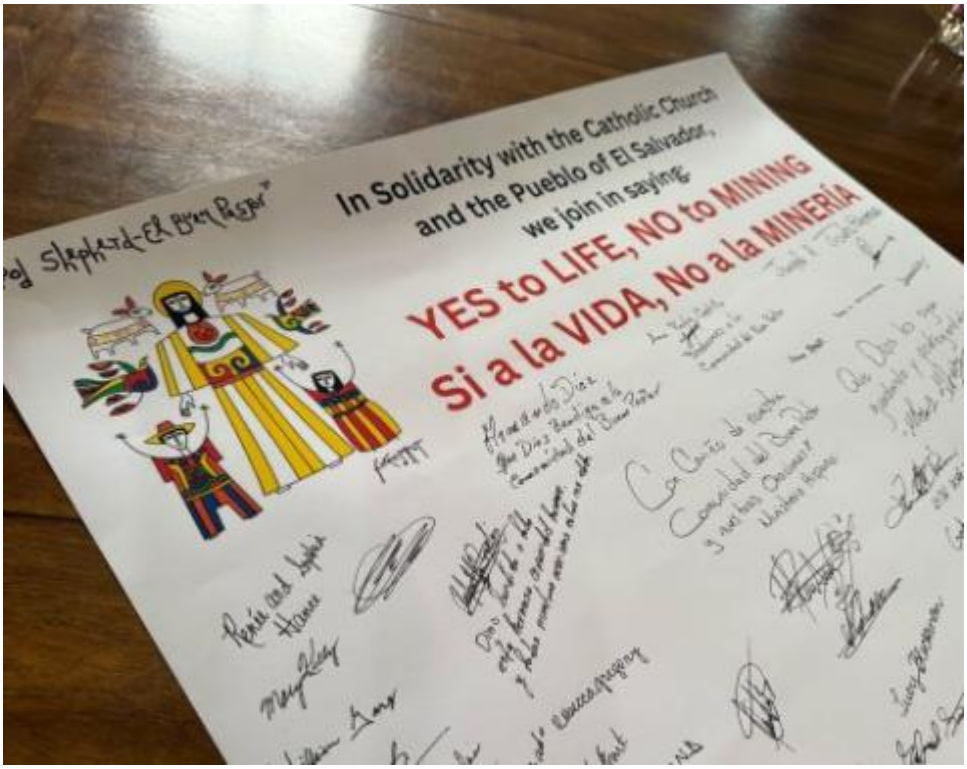
Though the Benedictines are not Salvadoran citizens, they sent their signatures to show support, Schweiger said.

"It's to show solidarity that we're very much their partners. We just feel like they've gone through so much," she told Global Sisters Report March 25. "And we went through some of that with them in terms of all the sister parishes that were in Kansas City. We just continue to offer our support in whatever way we can."

The Benedictine sisters of Atchison are no strangers to matters of social justice. They made headlines in 2024 for investing minimal amounts of money in some corporations so that, as shareholders, they could have a say in some of the companies' policies.

Schweiger said she came across the petition via friend Teresa Aley, of Good Shepherd parish in nearby Shawnee, Kansas, who has been circulating the document. Aley also took the petition to the Sisters of Charity in Leavenworth. Some

of them, too, signed the document along with other Catholics in the greater Kansas City area.



A poster at Good Shepherd Parish in Kansas March 24, 2025 holds the signatures of Catholics in Kansas showing solidarity with the Catholic Church in El Salvador as it fights metal mining in the country. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Those communities' relationship to El Salvador goes back to the time of the country's civil war, Aley told GSR. In fact, Good Shepherd parish has a St. Oscar Romero chapel, in honor of the Salvadoran archbishop martyred in 1980. It also has devotional images of Blessed Rutilio Grande, a Salvadoran Jesuit killed in 1977 along with two companions, as well as of three sisters and a laywoman from the U.S. killed in El Salvador a few months after Romero.

Kansan Catholics were part of a U.S. delegation present for a ceremonial act commemorating the lives of four environmentalists who opposed mining killed in Cabañas, north-central El Salvador in 2009, Aley said.

"It was the most powerful experience that I have had with a delegation" because they met with the father of a young environmentalist who was killed, she said. "To hear the story, to meet that person … it left a lasting impression on us."

At Good Shepherd, those with ties to El Salvador were "very happy," Aley said, when in 2017 the country became the first in the world to ban metal mining nationwide. And yet they were disappointed to hear late last year that a new group of lawmakers and the president wanted to reverse the ban.

"So, I think that's what resonated with many of us at Good Shepherd, to hear that the law was overturned," she said. "And it was very easy just to speak about this to the parishioners and to get them to be very willing to sign the petition and to feel that solidarity."

On the social media platform X, many questioned why Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele said he reversed a decision to close a government-subsidized pet hospital after 8,000 complained online and why he wouldn't do the same after seeing the tens of thousands of signatures the church collected against mining.

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A December 2024 opinion poll from the Jesuit University in San Salvador's Instituto Universitario de Opinion Publica found that the majority of Salvadorans say El Salvador is not a "suitable" country for mining and oppose it. But lawmakers say they voted for the new law because it will "spur economic development."

The petitions signed by the sisters, as well as one signed by Good Shepherd parishioners, were given to Salvadoran Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez during his visit to Kansas in late March for the feast of St. Romero, Aley said.

"We've always been more about action, not just going to El Salvador and coming back, but also feeling like we want to continue to accompany them," Aley said. "So, when situations like this happen, it's just a way of taking some action."