News

Consuelo Gómez, left, a Catholic Salvadoran mother of two sons captured during a crackdown in El Salvador, protests outside the Salvadoran embassy in Washington, D.C., May 30, 2025. Gómez said she welcomed news of Salvadoran bishops' pastoral letter saying the country's prisons shouldn't be used to advance another country's anti-immigrant agenda. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

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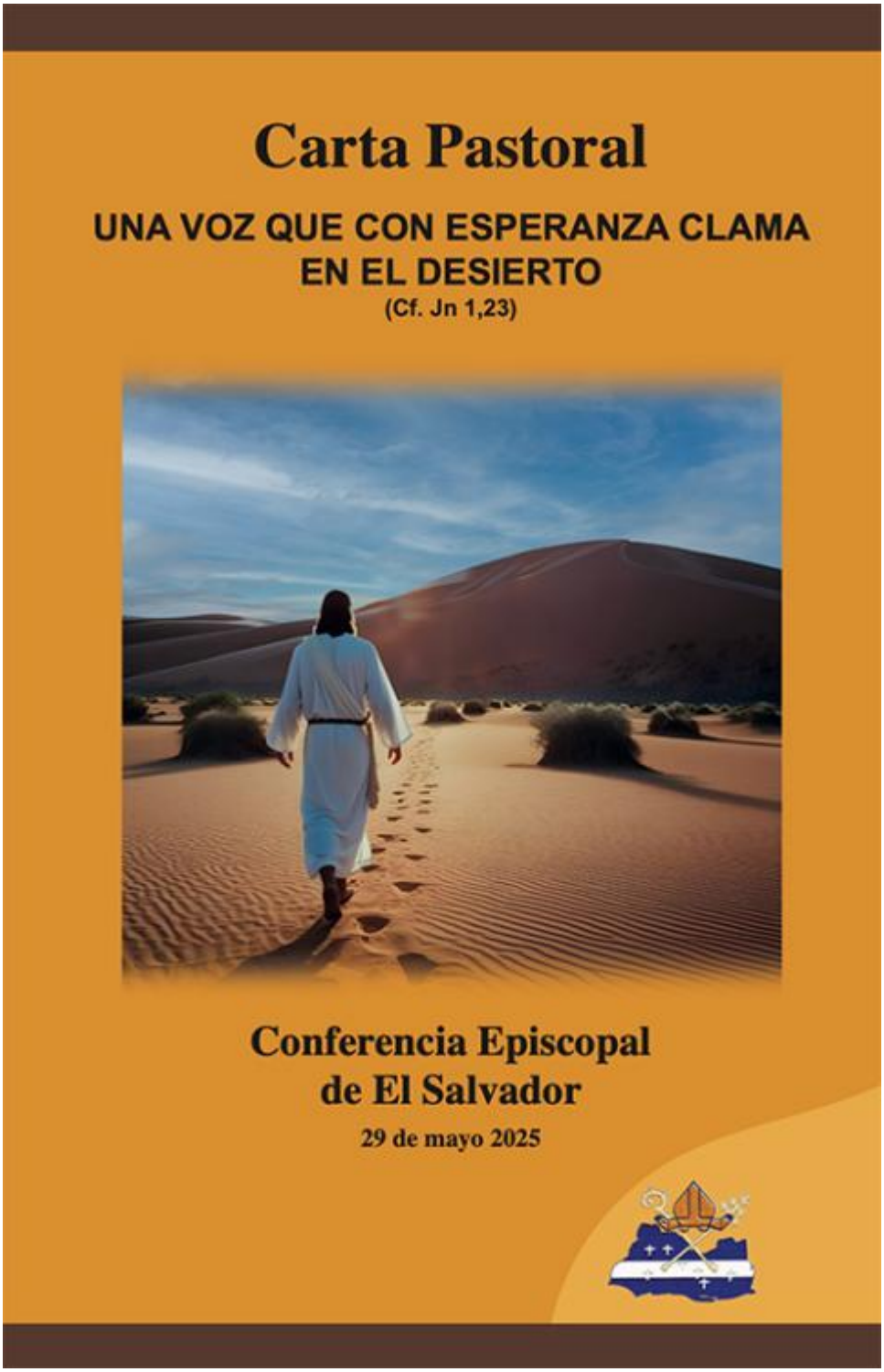
In a pastoral letter that seems to take a shot at both the U.S. government and its own, the Salvadoran Catholic bishops' conference said El Salvador's prisons shouldn't be used to advance another country's anti-immigrant agenda.

It was one of many instances in which the bishops' May 29 letter, available online in Spanish, pleaded for a change in policy, and demanded a stop to attacks on migrants, including falsely depicting them as criminals.

"They are people looking for better opportunities. They are our brothers and sisters," the bishops wrote, while pleading with the Salvadoran government not to participate in the "fight of great colonizing countries against migrants."



The cover of the pastoral letter released May 29, 2025, by the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador (NCR screenshot)

In March, more than 200 Venezuelan men detained by the U.S. for immigration-related violations were deported to El Salvador. Most deportees who haven't

committed crimes are allowed to go free once they hit foreign soil, but the U.S. paid El Salvador $6 million to keep the group detained inside its Terrorism Confinement Center, or CECOT maximum-security prison designed for gang members.

While U.S. officials said the group was made up of violent members of a Venezuelan gang and deserve to be in the notorious prison, a May 30 ProPublica investigation found that just six in that group had been convicted of violent crimes such as assault or kidnapping. The majority had no criminal record in the U.S., ProPublica reported.

The Salvadoran government long has used the prison as a photo op to appear tough on gangs, and now Republicans from the U.S. have steadily streamed in to take photos of themselves there and appear tough on immigration.

El Salvador is getting international attention for its cooperation, but not the right kind, the bishops said in the letter.

"We ask our leaders not to promote this country as if it were one huge international prison," they said. "We urge them to think carefully about what they are doing."

In the letter, published on the feast of St. Pope Paul VI, the bishops also urged the government to stop persecution of human rights advocates and free Salvadorans who have been wrongfully detained.

> 'We ask our leaders not to promote this country as if it were one huge international prison.'
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They also asked the government to end a crackdown put in place three years ago to combat gangs in El Salvador. They wrote that the crackdown was considered successful for capturing gang members but that its time seems to have passed and they consider it is now unnecessary. The country's vice president, Felix Ulloa, has admitted the crackdown resulted in the capture of an unknown number of innocent civilians. Human rights organizations, such as the faith-based Cristosal, have said some of the innocent civilians captured have died under detention.

While the crackdown reduced crime and changed the lives of Salvadorans terrorized for decades by gang violence, it did so by suspending the rights of all citizens to legally defend themselves. More than 110,000 Salvadorans have been imprisoned,

and 85,000 are believed to have been detained, accused of being gang members or affiliated with them, with no opportunity to prove otherwise, according to the Washington Office on Latin America, which promotes human rights.

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The measure, which was supposed to suspend legal protections for 30 days, has instead become a permanent government feature.

The bishops wrote that Salvadorans need to follow laws because it is the right thing to do, not because they fear what the government might do to them.

"Choosing to do what is good out of fear is coercion and doing it out of obligation is repression," the bishops said, adding that laws allowing citizens to defend themselves should be restored and the innocent allowed to go free.

In Washington, Consuelo Gómez, a Catholic Salvadoran mother of two sons captured during the crackdown, welcomed news of the bishops' call to the government as she protested outside the Salvadoran embassy May 30.

"This is our fight and we won't rest because these are our children," said Gómez, who is part of a U.S.-based group for victims of the crackdown called MOVIR, which has included the family of Kilmar Abrego, a Maryland man deported with the group of Venezuelans to the Salvadoran prison.

A man holds a poster criticizing Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele outside the Embassy of El Salvador in Washington May 30, 2025. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"No more deportations and no more extraditions to that prison, which serves as a business deal for [Salvadoran President Nayib] Bukele," Gómez told National Catholic Reporter. "I condemn Bukele and Donald Trump here in the United States for his persecution of people."

She said that she welcomed faith leaders of any denomination who stand up for those under attack by their own government and that it reminded her of St. Óscar Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop who stood up for the poor in the late 1970s until he was assassinated in 1980. It's not about politics, it's about the Gospel and defending those who have no one to defend them, Gómez said.

In the letter, the bishops outlined the country's main woes: lack of education, environmental degradation, lack of jobs, lack of respect for human rights and its advocates, and worries about the approval of metal mining in the country.

As pastors, the bishops pleaded with the government to dialogue with the people and listen to their petitions and necessities.

The bishops of El Salvador, seen in this undated photo, published a pastoral letter May 29, 2025, criticizing use of one of the country's maximum prisons to incarcerate migrants deported from the U.S. (Courtesy of Episcopal Conference of El Salvador)

The bishops said they were not speaking out because of ideological motives but out of a true concern as pastors for the less privileged in Salvadoran society, inspired by Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* ("The Progress of Peoples"), a 1967 encyclical centered on the church's solidarity with the world's poor. The bishops recalled Paul VI speaking on the right of humanity to be free of misery and to be able to participate in a stable occupation as a means to provide for their subsistence.

Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute in El Paso, Texas, said he supported the message El Salvador's bishops are sending in the name of the church.

"The church in El Salvador, in line with the prophetic legacy of Romero, is right to denounce the instrumentalization of the country by the United States in its campaign to target immigrants as well as the grave violations of human rights taking place at places like the CECOT mega-prison," said Corbett, who works with migrants. "Just as in the past, the suffering, moral voice and witness of people of faith in Central America is a strong indictment of the blind ambition and exclusionary politics driving much of U.S. policy right now."

Even as discontent rises in El Salvador, Bukele remains incredibly popular inside and outside the country. In its latest poll, one of the country's largest newspapers, La Prensa Grafica, showed Bukele has an 85.2% approval rating in his sixth year into his presidency.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.