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Visitors hold up a flag from Peru in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican March 26, 2023. Accordir

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Pope Francis on Saturday sided with a group of Peruvian villagers who have complained that companies linked to a powerful South American church group have tried to evict them from their land using lawsuits and obscure land titling schemes.

In a video recorded at his residence in the Vatican, the pope sent a message of support to members of the San Juan Bautista de Catacaos farmers community in northern Peru, who have been fending off lawsuits from companies associated with the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae since 2014.

"I know what happened to you," the pope said in Spanish. "Defend your land and don't let them steal it."

The Sodalitium is a lay group that runs schools and spiritual retirement centers in several South American countries, but is also involved in real estate, agriculture and construction companies.

The conservative group was founded in Peru in 1971 and gained thousands of members in South America, where it also ran homes housing consecrated members.

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But the Sodalitium has come under increased scrutiny in recent years after its founder and some of its main leaders were accused of committing sexual abuses against children.

Peruvian prosecutors have also launched investigations into the Sodalitium's finances and have accused the group of hiding money in offshore bank accounts.

Last July, the Vatican sent a high level commission to Peru to investigate the Sodalitium's actions and determine whether the group should be dissolved. The commission was led by one of the Vatican's top prosecutors for sexual abuse cases and members spoke with journalists, Sodalitium leaders and survivors of abuse.

During the visit, the Vatican's investigators also met with members of the Catacaos farmers community.

The villagers accused the Sodalitium of trying to take over 1900 hectares (4,000 acres) of land farmed by their community for centuries, through forged documents that claim the land has been purchased by a group of local companies.

The villagers also claimed they have been harassed with dozens of lawsuits.

> "Defend your land and don't let them steal it."
>
> *-Pope Francis*
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A Peruvian court is still reviewing the land dispute.

On Saturday, Francis urged the Catacaos villagers to persist in their efforts to defend the land, where they raise cattle and produce honey.

"Thanks for doing what you do" the pope said. "I give you my blessing and don't forget to pray for me."

The pope's message was shared on Saturday as the Catacaos community celebrates its 466th anniversary. Its current leader, Marcelino Ynga, thanked the pope for his message and said he hoped the Vatican will soon make a decision about the group's future.

The community's lawyer, Carlos Rodriguez, said the pope's message provides some "reparation" to the villagers and "recognizes their struggle."

"These farmers are not delinquents" he said. "They are defenders of their land."