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Escobar sits at table, speaking into microphone. He wears plain black clerics.

Archbishop José Escobar Alas of San Salvador is pictured in Washington April 13, 2018. Archbishop Escobar told reporters at a Dec. 1. 2024, news conference that President Nayib Bukele's nascent enthusiasm for gold mining would "cause grave, irrevocable damage to people's lives and health and that doesn't have a price." (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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Catholic leaders in Central America expressed alarm over the idea of repealing a national prohibition on extractive activities in El Salvador — putting the church in opposition to the country's popular president.

Archbishop José Luis Escobar Alas of San Salvador told reporters at a Dec. 1 press conference that President Nayib Bukele's nascent enthusiasm for gold mining would "cause grave, irrevocable damage to people's lives and health and that doesn't have a price."

"They take everything," the archbishop said of multinational mining companies in the region. "What they have left to these countries is 1 percent of what they declare. How is that possible? It's plunder." He continued, "They say today that there is mining that doesn't harm the environment. It's a lie. It's all a lie. All mining damages the environment. All without exception."

Central American bishops, meanwhile, said in a Nov. 29 statement after its 82nd general assembly held in El Salvador, "We urgently call on governments to adopt responsible and sustainable policies that respect the dignity of peoples and our common home and that do not allow mining exploitation as it is necessary to prioritize human life and the environment over economic interests that perpetuate social and ecological damage."

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The Catholic Church has advocated for environmental issues and water preservation in El Salvador — a small, arid country the size of Massachusetts with a long history of poverty, violence and outward migration. The church joined with nongovernmental groups and civil society to achieve a ban on mining and extractive activities in the country in 2017 as a measure to protect scarce water resources from contamination.

On Nov. 27, Bukele posted a thread on X, outlining El Salvador's gold mining potential with the headline, "God placed a giant treasure under our feet."

Bukele claimed the gold reserves in El Salvador were valued at 8,800% of GDP. "Exploiting this wealth could transform El Salvador … And all this with modern and sustainable mining, taking care of our environment."

He added, "This wealth, given by God, can be harnessed responsibly to bring unprecedented economic and social development to our people."

Bukele has been popular in El Salvador for a crackdown on criminal gangs — drastically driving down the homicide rate, while swelling the country's prison population. His party controls congress, making any measure repealing the mining ban likely to be approved.

The Catholic Church in El Salvador has avoided conflicts with Bukele, who responds forcefully against critics.

Escobar said in a Dec. 1 statement, issued by the Archdiocese of San Salvador, that El Salvador's resources had already been overexploited and "could not bear another mining pillage as it would increase deforestation, erosion, the loss of fertile soil and, worst of all, the contamination of air and water."