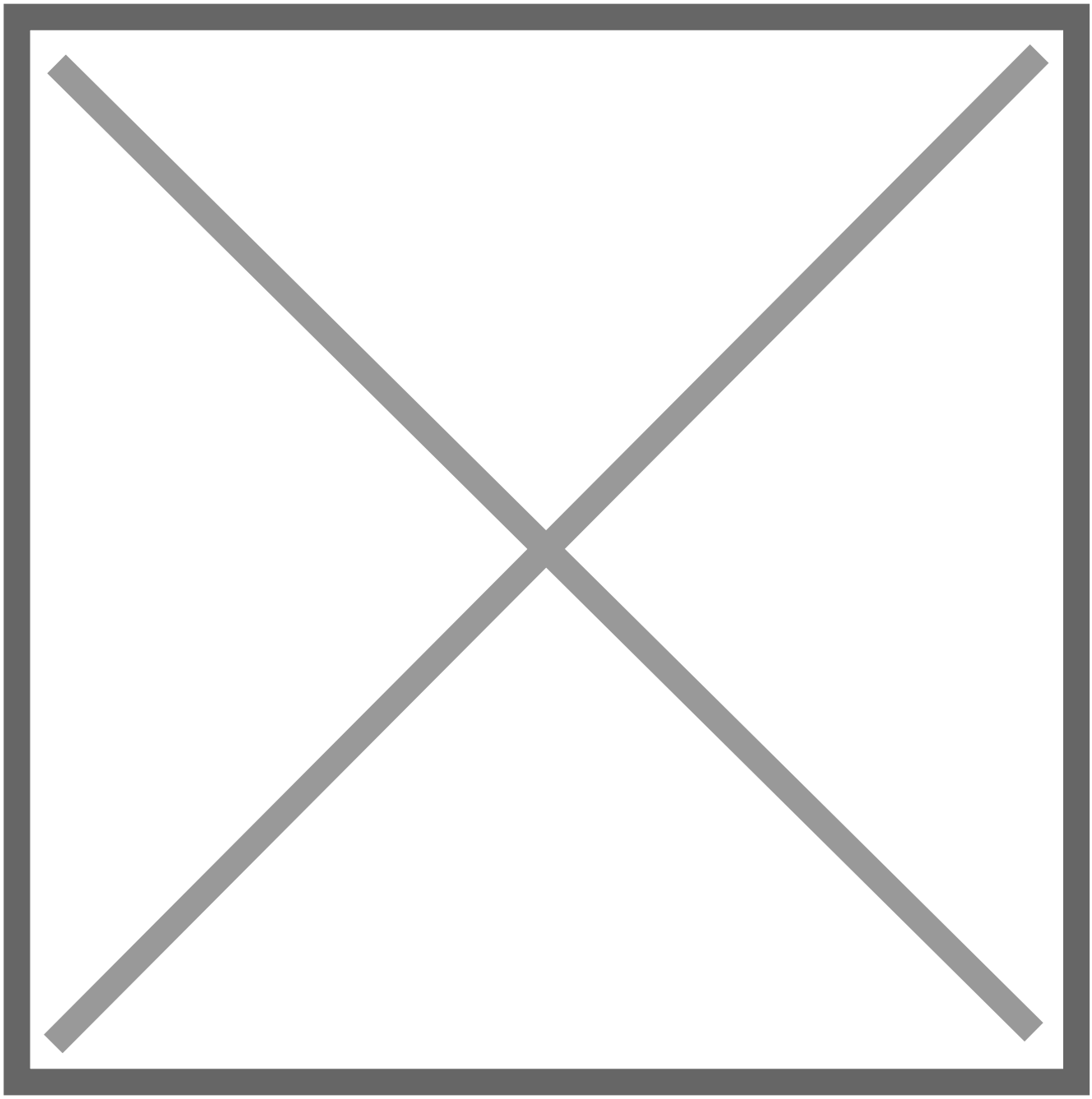


In El Salvador, Bishop Constantino Barrera of Sonsonate, Archbishop Luigi Roberto Cona, apostolic nuncio to the country, and John Briggs, Catholic Relief Services country representative for El Salvador, smile in front of a water tank in the El Nance hamlet in Metalío canton, Sonsonate, during a visit March 13, 2026. In its first phase to provide clean, drinkable water to El Nance, the Agua Segura (Safe Water) initiative has included providing disinfection kits, water tank impermeabilization and

the bettering of water system valves. Launched in December by the nuncio and CRS, Agua Segura will continue to expand thanks to a donation from Pope Leo XIV. (OSV News/Courtesy of CRS/Fernando Gómez)

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Pope Leo XIV has donated $100,000 to provide access to clean water in El Salvador, supporting a program launched by the papal nuncio to that nation and by Catholic Relief Services, the official humanitarian and development agency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The gift was announced in an April 20 press release issued by CRS and the apostolic nunciature in El Salvador, with a press conference taking place in *Comunidad Lindero, a remote village in the district of Nueva Concepción in Chalatenango, some

44 miles from the capital of San Salvador.

The funds will help expand the clean water project Agua Segura ("Safe Water") to four of the eight dioceses in El Salvador — Chalatenango, Santa Ana, San Miguel and Sonsonate — through the installation of chlorination devices and the construction of water treatment plants.

"Clean water is life," said CRS president and CEO Sean Callahan, noting he and the agency were "deeply honored" by Leo's donation.

An estimated 50,000 living in rural areas are ultimately expected to benefit from the Agua Segura initiative, with about 7,500 directly impacted by the papal contribution.

Archbishop Luigi Roberto Cona, apostolic nuncio to El Salvador, launched Agua Segura in December 2025 with his own $35,000 in seed money, having seen firsthand the devastating effects of water insecurity on human health.

In an interview with OSV News, Cona recalled a 2024 pastoral visit to a small village in Metalío — which is in the district of the port city of Acajutla, located in the Diocese of Sonsonate — where he witnessed the dire situation of rural families affected by storms.

"We were going to distribute food aid to the farmers who had been left with nothing — not only without food, but also without seeds, since they had lost everything in the torrential rains," said Cona.

But compounding that disaster was another, one that some researchers have called "a silent massacre" in Central America: chronic kidney disease among adults and children alike — with data indicating, among other factors, a link to unsafe water.

The archbishop said many he met during that pastoral visit "had a very low life expectancy — the average was 48 years — because they needed dialysis and other treatments."

However, "since they were so poor, few were able to receive the care needed to recover," he said.

In fact, El Salvador is considered one of the global hotspots for chronic kidney disease, with other concentrations found in Nicaragua, Sri Lanka and California's Central Valley.

At the same time, CRS said, only about 10% of El Salvador's surface water — drawn from streams, rivers and lakes — is safe for human consumption. The danger is due to heavy contamination from both industrial and domestic waste.

About half of the households in rural areas of the nation lack access to potable water, placing them at higher risk for waterborne illness.

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Biological and chemical contamination are the two key concerns for human water usage, said Rolando Wallusche Saul, CRS's humanitarian team lead for WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene).

In response to the need he had encountered, Cona approached CRS — which since 1960 has worked in El Salvador on a wide range of projects — with the idea of Agua Segura, kickstarted with his own funds.

The archbishop told OSV News he selected CRS since the agency focuses on promoting sustainable solutions, and can train the population to carry out "maintenance of the facility itself and the management of drinking water."

He noted CRS — which works with local partners on the ground — is also equipped to educate residents on "how to handle food and maintain personal hygiene, to avoid continuing to fall victim to diseases, parasites or other factors that subsequently compromise personal and community health."

Cona said that Agua Segura quickly produced results after its launch.

"In Metalío, we have already managed to resolve the problem by restoring access to drinking water, and now we will move on to another community," he said.

And the program will be able to do just that, thanks to some significant help from the first U.S. born pope, who spent more than two decades ministering in Peru.

During an audience with Leo, Cona presented a report on his work as papal nuncio in El Salvador, and discussed several community-based projects, including Agua Segura.

"I dared to say to him, 'Your Holiness, if you would like to help us,'" recalled Cona, adding, "I didn't think the pope would be so generous."

"I had asked him only for one installation, because we've actually seen that one installation isn't that expensive — around $10,000-$15,000," said the archbishop. "I thought the pope was going to give me only that contribution."

But "when I saw that something more had arrived in the nunciature's account, I was truly and deeply moved by such generosity," said the nuncio, who confirmed to OSV News that the funds were personally contributed by Leo.

"This gift demonstrates the Holy Father's personal experience with families and communities struggling to keep themselves healthy," Callahan said.

The support will significantly bolster Agua Segura, which Cona said was envisioned "on a national scale."

Gerson Mendoza, WASH project coordinator for CRS in El Salvador, told OSV News that Agua Segura addresses a multitude of needs.

"First and foremost is the issue of access to — and the sustainability of — water services," he explained. "The problem typically stems not only from a lack of physical access to water, but also from the inherent weaknesses of water systems that already exist within these communities."

Even where water infrastructure is in place, insufficient funding and maintenance capabilities can undermine "optimal operation and maintenance," he said.

He also pointed to "inadequate protection of water sources" that is "often due to a lack of awareness among certain populations or a lack of proper training."

Agua Segura focuses "on improving water quality through disinfection systems — specifically, through chlorination, which is the method we have adapted for use in our country," Mendoza said.

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Those systems range from injection pumps to T-chlorinators, in-line devices that can disinfect water without using electricity, "as well as slightly more complex treatment

methods designed for those areas facing particularly vulnerable conditions or dealing with more complex water contaminants," Mendoza said.

He added that "the project aims to strengthen community-level management capabilities."

Those capabilities have become particularly urgent as El Salvador — home to part of Central America's Dry Corridor, subject to long periods of drought — also faces pollution concerns from the controversial December 2024 lifting of its landmark ban on metals mining.

Amid multiple challenges to ensuring access to safe water worldwide — among them, climate change, water stress and lack of proper sanitation and treatment — Wallusche Saul stressed the need for "global governance" in "taking care of the environment."

"And that requires everybody working in the same direction," he said, adding, "Water has no borders; it starts in one country and flows down to another."

Cona — who in March was appointed by Pope Leo as nuncio to Syria, and is set to arrive there in May — said Agua Segura is set to "benefit around 48 communities, 48 facilities, and several families."

Mendoza said the project will "address the existing gap in technical expertise, thereby ensuring that the water systems we leave behind are truly sustainable over time."

Callahan said the project "embodies the mission of the Church and CRS."

"We serve those most in need — especially people who are too often overlooked or hard to reach — and this gift from Pope Leo helps make that possible," he said. "It tells our sisters and brothers in El Salvador that the Church stands with them, from the faithful in the U.S. to the Holy Father himself."

*Corrects spelling of village name.