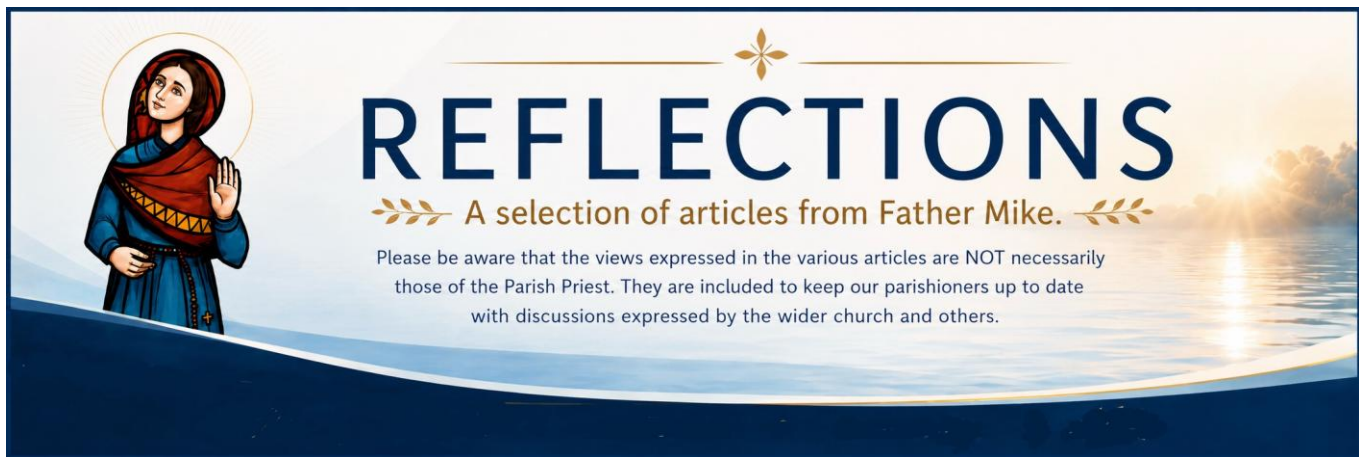




Interactive Content:

Click or tap the article title you wish to read, and you will be taken directly to that page.

[Green Justice: The resilience of Congolese Women](#)

[Polishing the rock of Massabielle](#)

[As a migrant bishop in Peru, Leo made immigration advocacy a priority in his diocese](#)

[Nun speaks out for first time about being detained by ICE while walking to Mass in Texas](#)

[Peruvians exposed to lead as children reach \\$150M settlement, with Catholic help](#)

Green Justice : The resilience of Congolese Women

• 12 Sep 2022

My story is not easy to tell. It is full of pain, one shared by countless women who work in mining in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). I live in the province of Lualaba, the cobalt capital of the world. Cobalt and copper are precious to you because you need this for the batteries of your phones, tablets and the solar panels and electric vehicles for your green energy transition. Your efforts to fight climate change are closely tied to our suffering, marginalization and exploitation at the hands of multinational mining companies, many of them from Canada. Our story, however, is not just about pain. It is also about resilience, empowerment and our fight for survival for ourselves and our families.

I was a young girl in the 1990's when multinational companies came to Lualaba. Their arrival and the liberalization of the Congolese mining sector in 2002 facilitated the quasi-privatization of Gécamines, our national mining company. The profit from Gécamines provided for the basic government social services given to local communities. With quasi-privatization however came the end of these services. People in our communities also lost their jobs. Foreign mining companies did not hire local people beyond manual labour because they said we did not have the necessary qualifications.

Families, including my own, fell into hard times. Our poverty was in great contrast to the multinationals who got richer by taking our country's wealth. Left to fend for ourselves, many of us went into artisanal or subsistence mining. This meant digging by hand for copper and cobalt ores contaminated with uranium. Our challenges were numerous: financial insecurity, forcible displacement, health issues due to radiation exposure and contact with contaminated water.

Women were the biggest losers. We experienced sexual harassment and violence. We were excluded from working directly in the industrial and artisanal mines. Traditional patriarchal beliefs forbid us from entering mine shafts. This left young girls and women no choice but to work in the cleaning and transport

of minerals, exposing us to toxic water. Worse, we sold our mining products to these multinationals and traders at really low prices. However, it was this hazardous and unsafe work that put food on my table and enabled me to finish my studies.

Since 2016, our communities have benefited from the support of the Jesuits through the Arrupe Centre for Research and Formation (CARF) in Lubumbashi. CARF has conducted capacity building on proper artisanal mining practices and legal compliance; health and safety practices; and human rights and environmental protection.

Today, we continue our fight against human rights abuses, especially against women and children. We seek alternatives to mining. However, all this is not enough. Multinational mining companies still operate with impunity and exploit us. We face huge challenges as the demand for copper and cobalt increases.

It is important that our partners like Canadian Jesuits International (CJI) advocate for a human rights due diligence law in Canada to make your companies accountable for the harm they do. Mining companies must adequately compensate and relocate displaced people. They must address the health impacts of polluted rivers on local communities, especially women and mothers.

We understand that development is necessary but not at a cost to our people. We need to promote sustainable development based on equality, justice, transparency and accountability. Mining companies need to respect Congolese people in accordance with our laws. Your own government must hold Canadian mining companies accountable for their actions in our country. This will allow the DRC to negotiate a just energy transition with multinational corporations on its own terms. The long-term survival of local communities and the empowerment of women in the DRC is at stake.

The article also contains information provided by Pastor Josué (Governance Initiative for the development of Fungurume and Tenke); Mandela Kizi (Mining cooperative for social development, Kolwezi); and Adrien Mutombo (CARF, Lubumbashi).

[Back to index](#)

11 JULY 2024, THE TABLET

Polishing the rock of Massabielle

by **Patrick Hudson**

It reminded me of a Lancashire mill town in an Ealing comedy: wholly ordered around a single industry

“Good morning Patrick, are you checked in? Then perhaps you could take Pierre-Philippe through security?” I shook Pierre-Philippe’s hand and tried to say good morning politely, but my head was still dozing in the car. Airport wheelchairs like the one he was sitting in are bulkier than the fold-up models we had pushed around outside Westminster Cathedral at the training evening a month earlier. By the time we had shuffled through the Stansted metal detectors and up to the gate I had figured out how the brakes worked. Just like that, we were on pilgrimage.

Two hours later, we were awkwardly arranged across the departure lounge waiting for something to happen. It was a broad church I recognised: Polish families, Ghanaian ladies in grand hats, earnestly nodding clergy, well-spoken people with monastic educations, Irish women and their husbands, the children and grandchildren of Irish women, all gathered around rough seating, and looking bored.

Getting to Lourdes has never been the fun part. Nineteenth-century Marian apparitions to the peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous drew nineteenth-century pilgrims, and while a meditative camino did not allow working people to get there and back again in the meagre holidays an industrial economy allowed them, the unromantic railways did. As miraculous stories spread, stretcher-fitted carriages brought many more sick pilgrims who in turn produced more miracles. (More desperate cases equals more apparently miraculous cures, whatever you think of their veracity.) So developed the unbeatably Catholic idea that the best thing to do with the seriously ill is to take them on long, uncomfortable journeys to the Pyrenees.

Pilgrimage began with hymns and prayers (and sometimes a drink) at the station in Milan or Liverpool, because not a few of the pilgrims might not reach the shrine to partake there. A Friday morning shunting a wheelchair through Stansted lacked the grandeur of those scenes in continental termini, as well as their trepidation, but achieved something oddly similar. Without much in the way of prayers or festivity, it felt like we were already playing by different rules. Nobody had rung a bell or told us to start acting holy; in fact, the preparation had been noticeably light on spiritual sentiments. We were there, we were told, to give ill or disabled pilgrims the best possible week, to empathise with them and be considerate and attentive – much as I liked to imagine I'd behave without prompting. A couple of hours of consciously attending to these primary-school pieties betrayed my conceit. It was exhausting and odd: even the exercise of making sure others made it on to a flight before I did felt alien.

Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées has the shed-in-a-field aesthetics of a Marian shrine airport that I recognised from Knock. Again, only notionally woken from my fitful sleep on the flight, I lugged suitcases from the carousel out to the coaches. Once these had parked in the centre of town, I lugged suitcases from the coaches into the accueil, the hospital-grade accommodation where some of the pilgrims stay. Pierre-Philippe wanted to go to the grotto straightaway, so we trotted down in a less cumbersome wheelchair and walked in the queue around the back of the cave, putting our hands to the wall to scrape away a few more molecules of rock as we went. One of the prayers in the Lourdes Shrine brochure remembers “the millions of pilgrims who, with their hands, have polished the rock of Massabielle”, as the cave is called in Bernadette Soubirous' Occitan dialect. The band of worn-smooth rock was just above shoulder height for Pierre-Philippe and just below waist height for me.

I had no trouble at all believing that Our Lady appeared to Bernadette 18 times in the alcove above the grotto in 1858. I didn't have to concentrate on the idea to make it stick, as I find I have to with the Real Presence; I didn't have to imagine away the centuries and re-enact the events in my head as at other holy places, even though the sanctuary has been tidied up. Lourdes did not feel like a pilgrim-cum-tourist

destination, or even like Blackpool in the holiday season (which a few people compared it to – not, I think, meaning to flatter Blackpool). It reminded me of a Lancashire mill town in an Ealing comedy: a place wholly ordered around a single industry that patterned not just the nuns' and the rosary vendors' business, but the bakers' and haberdashers' too. When the basilica bells chimed for the torchlit procession around the sanctuary at 9 p.m., the town seemed poised to break into a Broadway number. I had to push Pierre-Philippe back up the hill to the accueil sharpish, so we weren't trapped in the grotto while they processed.

It took me a few days of fetching and carrying and lifting things for people who couldn't to appreciate that this was my special charism for the week. It was another lesson from primary school – the one about being grateful for what we take for granted – dug up from beneath 15 years' of over-education. Other people could administer medicines, speak French, celebrate Mass. I could have been left feeling rather inadequate, but being able and willing to carry bags and things was a skill of equal standing. No sacrament will bring you a raincoat during a thunderstorm.

My job was mostly to assist a retired deacon staying in the accueil. He was very frail, but working to overcome his frailty with a stoicism it was hard to contemplate. Not all the assisted pilgrims – malades in the old parlance – were like that, which was good because that would have been eerie, but it was helpful for a first-timer like me to see grace quite so obviously at work. He was a sweetheart, charming to the schoolchildren who helped push him around and beloved by all the clergy of the pilgrimage who made sure we were looking after him properly. I admit I felt rather pleased with myself carrying my friend's alb and stole around in a rucksack and standing behind his wheelchair at the front of all the big processions. Each evening checked me: the real privilege was to be there, and to be helpful, as he did his ablutions and put himself to bed with great difficulty and dignity. When he was asleep, I would go to the bar and chat and laugh exhaustingly until it was time for the rest of us, too, to go to bed. After two days of this I declared I'd be back next year, a total hostage to fortune and a comment I had no cause to regret.

I believe in miraculous cures at Lourdes (or at least in Jack Traynor's – although he isn't on the medical bureau's books). They are, besides the giftshops, what most people have heard about, the thing that nice secular-minded people at home thought of – quizzically or cynically – when I told them I was going. But they were scarcely mentioned on the pilgrimage itself. You would pray, of course, that immersion in the waters would revive paralysed limbs, disappear cancers, cure dementia; but in the moment itself there seems so much else to be grateful for, in the love and the dignity of the scene, that you can forget to pray for miracles.

It's much easier to forget if you aren't suffering from paralysis or cancer. In the 1860s and '70s, stories of cures were what drew pilgrims from across the Pyrenees, and it was these claims rather than a fuzzy sense of well-being that later drew the poor of France, and then of Europe, to the shrine. The medical bureau was established on the direction of Pius X in 1905 to verify miraculous claims – though critics

claimed that it distorted clinical evidence to meet the exacting canonical standards for a “miracle”.

Any queasiness about this stuff can’t be conveniently left at Stansted: today’s sanctuary was built on those miracles – and, if you don’t buy them, on past generations’ credulity. It’s the awkward seam between scepticism and hope that Émile Zola picked at in his 1894 novel Lourdes. Even critics without a special animus against the Church (some within the Church, in fact) voice unease about the relationship between sick and healthy pilgrims. Do the malades come out of false hope? Are they brought more as aides to their helpers’ spiritual insight than as people? When those helpers harp, as I have done, on the “dignity” and “grace” of the sick in Lourdes, we should wonder who is getting what out of the exercise.

Factor in the shrine’s totemic place in a Church – in France and universally – which has neglected and harmed the vulnerable supposed to be its heart, which has sometimes fetishised their weakness, and there’s every cause for alarm. It was weird to contemplate Marko Rupnik’s mosaic spanning the embrace of the Rosary Square in front of the basilica, a few months after working on reports of the cascade of abuse allegations against him.

But if you’d warned somebody about unhealthy power structures during the pilgrimage, they’d have listened thoughtfully, agreed, and asked you to help them carry some dirty crockery to the kitchen. Later there’d be something more interesting to chat about over a pint. It didn’t come up because there was plenty else to do, to be done on the understanding that we were all pilgrims together, whatever our condition. Distorting hierarchies would get in the way of the schedule; condescension was a problem because it was antisocial and cringemaking.

I was reminded of this by demonstration rather than instruction. On the journey back from one outing I sat next to a woman who struggled to speak, but talked slowly and patiently to her about what a nice day it had been; that evening, I overheard one of the old hands in garrulous conversation with her about the diocese’s administrative support for the pilgrimage and the quality of music in the bar. The patience had all been hers. During the opening hymn at a Mass towards the end of the week, an Oratorian priest emerged from the congregation leading a boy with Down’s by the hand to stand with the music group. How sweet, I thought, they’ll let him pretend to conduct – and then he produced a baton and kept the beat with immaculate gestures. I felt daft, and a little emotional (I was, by then, very, very tired).

None of this stands up to argument or made much sense to talk about once I was home. The Pyrenean wine that tastes fantastic in a café doesn’t travel well. Bathing in the bitterly cold waters at the grotto only resumed this year post-Covid, but those who’ve been in the water like to comment on the mysterious, instantaneous way it dries off the skin even before you’ve left the cubicle. It belongs to its particular moment and place.

[Back to index](#)

As a migrant bishop in Peru, Leo made immigration advocacy a priority in his diocese

by Justin McLellan Vatican Correspondent NCR

Chiclayo, Peru — July 28, 2026

What began as a quiet, methodical but slow-moving pontificate was jolted awake when Pope Leo XIV called the treatment of immigrants in the United States under the Trump administration "inhuman" in response to questions from reporters.

Since that moment four months after being elected pope, Leo has repeatedly shown himself willing to stick his neck out and speak with particular force in defense of migrants — two of his trips outside of Rome, to Spain's Canary Islands and the Italian island of Lampedusa, have been explicitly tied to drawing attention to the plight of migrants.

But before placing himself firmly within the church's tradition of migrant advocacy, strongly reinvigorated by his predecessor Pope Francis, Leo confronted his own migration crisis in the rural diocese of Chiclayo in northern Peru where he was a bishop from 2014 to 2023.

By 2017, following years of food shortages, lack of medical supplies and hyperinflation, 1.5 million Venezuelans had fled their country and traveled to neighboring nations, often on foot, in pursuit of a better life. After passing through Colombia and Ecuador, thousands of migrants reached Chiclayo en route to the Peruvian capital of Lima, and some opted to stay throughout the surrounding region of Lambayeque.

After a large wave of arrivals in 2017, groups of migrants stood out in Chiclayo, a city of approximately 700,000. Various volunteers with the local diocese told the National Catholic Reporter that when migrant families sleeping in the city's central square became a mainstay, the church realized it was beyond time to act.

At the time, the diocese already had a human mobility and trafficking ministry, which primarily accompanied women in prostitution and organized campaigns against human trafficking. But as more migrants arrived, Bishop Robert Prevost asked diocesan volunteers to broaden the ministry's work.

Yolanda Díaz, the coordinator of what became the diocese's human mobility commission, recalled that as a bishop, the future pope "didn't tell us, 'do this or do that,' but rather he told us to go and see what could be done."

The commission eventually brought together approximately 14 people, including lay volunteers and members of different religious congregations operating throughout the diocese, to ramp up its activities and engage with Chiclayo's migrant population more directly.

Listening to migrants and forging legal pathways

At the same time, the local Caritas, the diocese's charitable arm, was providing immediate relief to migrants who arrived in Chiclayo with virtually nothing, helping to arrange healthcare, provide food and find housing options.

Together, the commission and Caritas worked to identify approximately 30 leaders within the Venezuelan community who could act as go-betweens for the migrant community and the commission. The commission began by asking the representatives of the migrant community what the diocese could do to assist them.

"Counter to what we originally thought, which was that they were going to ask for food, for clothes and housing, they told us, 'first regularize our migratory situation, because we are living in fear,'" Díaz said.

Augusto Ramírez, the head of the commission's legalization efforts, told NCR that "a migrant with an irregular status cannot have access to work, cannot have access to housing, to healthcare, their kids do not have access to education."

The commission relayed that information back to Prevost, who asked what he could do to help. Díaz recalled that the commission asked him to get in touch with the local immigration office directly.

Prevost called the head of the regional immigration office and asked them to work with the diocesan human mobility commission to provide information on how they could normalize the status for Chiclayo's migrants.

Eventually, the commission split the diocese into 14 zones and helped designate a representative among the migrant community within each zone, who they helped train to pass important information to their communities.

The commission and migrant leaders would organize meetings in each zone where representatives from the migration offices would come to provide information about how to normalize their migration status.

"We didn't have to go to the immigration [office], the immigration [office] came to us; that was all thanks to Prevost's efforts," Díaz said. "He acted as a mediator. He wasn't involved in every detail with us; he delegated things to us, trusted us, and did his part by making the connection with the authorities."

While representatives from the immigration office came to Chiclayo's migrant communities to provide information, migrants had to submit their paperwork in person at the branch of the Peruvian

government's foreign affairs office in Trujillo, about four hours away by car.

Prevost reached out to the foreign affairs office and had them agree to set aside specific time windows to handle cases for migrants coming from Chiclayo. The commission then organized transport to take groups of migrants to Trujillo during those periods to file their claims.

Ramírez recalled that at the height of their efforts, buses took between 100-200 people to Trujillo up to three times a week where they received designated attention and were able to submit their documentation without waiting in line.

For those who had some official documents, such as a passport, members of the commission helped request temporary residence permits. For those with nothing, they helped file asylum claims.

In those appointments, asylum applicants were also given documents that allowed them to freely travel throughout the country and to get a job, which were important steps in fully normalizing their situation and integrating into Peruvian society.



People hold newspapers in Chiclayo, Peru, May 9, 2025, reporting on the election of Pope Leo XIV, who is a dual U.S.-Peruvian citizen. (OSV News/Reuters/Sebastian Castaneda)

Yet the bureaucratic fees for submitting that paperwork, and the transportation to and from the appointments, was a large expense.

To help with those efforts, the human mobility commission began sending proposals to aid organizations, such as Save the Children and the German governmental development agency, GIZ, which Prevost signed partnerships with in order to fund the diocese's work on migration.

"The human mobility commission did not count with the resources to do these things because we are not an NGO, but these allies did, and through them we were able to put together projects to begin working on normalizing the migration [statuses] ourselves," Ramírez said. "Monsignor [Prevost] was

very willing to do that. The bridges he was building made that possible, it allowed us to complete all those procedures and regularize their situation."

Though thousands of migrants would continue south toward Lima, Ramírez said that through the church's assistance many migrants in Chiclayo have been able to put together a stable life.

"Of the 4,000 or so families we still have in the Lambayeque region, many of them have a home, many of their children can study without a problem, many of them have access to the public healthcare system," he said.

A church working toward integration

Beyond accompanying migrants through the migration process, the commission also worked to integrate migrants into local community life and structures, such as the healthcare system.

Díaz, the commission coordinator, told NCR that many migrant women who were close to giving birth had been denied treatment at hospitals because they did not have identification showing their enrollment in the public healthcare system. The human mobility commission engaged with the region's governmental ombudsman office which intervened on their behalf and insisted that migrants must be given care.

The commission managed to get various hospitals' social assistance offices, which subsidizes treatment for poor Peruvians, to apply similar discounts to migrants who were not enrolled in the healthcare system. The remaining sums would be paid by the diocese, its charitable arm Caritas or another NGO liaising with the church, such as Save the Children.

Additionally, members of the human mobility commission underscored that more than supporting migrants through charitable efforts, Prevost supported migrants by being their public advocate.

Díaz recalled sharing with Prevost the comments members of the human mobility commission heard from locals in Chiclayo who called migrants lazy and accused them of using their children to beg since they did not want to work.

Advertisement

"In his homilies, [Prevost] would encourage us in our work. He would talk about mercy. He would say, 'I am a migrant,' and he would speak about it, giving witness to his own experience as a migrant," she told NCR. "He would describe what life was like for a migrant here and say how important it is that we speak out, that Jesus was a migrant, and we were happy because we had such strong support from him."

Ramírez, the other member of the commission, said that in some parts of the diocese the commission

organized "sensibility campaigns" throughout the diocese where volunteers, along with migrants, would go into towns to clean the streets and pick up trash to show that they were active members of the community.

"The church, led by Prevost, looked far beyond welfare. It saw welfare as something to be coordinated with the state," he said. "The church was more concerned with the human element."

Among the migrant community, "some were [Catholic] faithful, some were nonbelievers, some were members of other churches," Diaz recalled.

"We weren't trying to convert people through our work, that wasn't our goal. Our goal was to stand with a people who were suffering, to ensure that their rights were respected, and if that served as a testimony to them of a church that reached out to them unconditionally — that was the testimony we wanted to share," she said. "I think Msgr. [Prevost] also shared that mentality."

[Back to index](#)

Nun speaks out for first time about being detained by ICE while walking to Mass in Texas

by [Jamie Stengle - Associated Press](#) and [Valerie Gonzalez – Associated Press](#) July 24, 2026

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — A nun who was taken into immigration custody last month in Texas said Thursday that she went into a cold sweat as two armed men approached her while she walked to Sunday Mass in her habit, thinking about the day's Bible readings and carrying little more than her rosary and cellphone.

"Honestly, in that moment, I did not understand what was going on, what was happening to me," Sister Leticia Ugboaja said at a news conference at Our Lady of Sorrows Church in McAllen, where she spoke out for the first time since U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers arrested her on June 28.

Ugboaja's attorney says she has for years been granted protection from removal to her native Nigeria because she was likely to face torture there.

Ugboaja, 56, was released several hours after being detained while on her way to church near the U.S.-Mexico border. Parish officials' posting about her on social media brought attention to her case, and Congress members ultimately intervened on her behalf. President Donald Trump made mass deportations a central promise of his second administration, with his immigration crackdown leading to

unusually aggressive tactics that have faced scrutiny.

Ugboaja, who has a check-in appointment with ICE on Tuesday, said she wanted to speak out to help others, and pleaded for people to have the chance to be heard before being taken into custody.

“There are many others in this same situation, people who have been given some form of protection under our laws, who have followed every rule asked of them, and who still live with uncertainty,” Ugboaja said.

While she’s grateful to those who helped her, she said, that “does not mean I can stay quiet about what happened to me, or about what is still happening to others.”

Her attorney, Carlos M. Garcia, sat next to Ugboaja at the news conference and provided details about her immigration case. He said that in 2019 an immigration judge denied her application for asylum but granted her protection from removal to Nigeria because she likely would be tortured there. Garcia said Ugboaja, who is a nurse, has complied with everything required of her and had permission to work in the U.S.

When ICE detained Ugboaja in June, she wasn’t given much explanation as to why she was taken into custody, her attorney said. But the U.S. planned to remove her to a third country, he added.

The Trump administration’s third-country removal policy has been criticized by lawyers and human rights groups and has faced legal challenges. The Department of Homeland Security has said the agreements allow people seeking asylum in the U.S. to pursue protection in the other country, and that the agreements are used to try to address large backlogs in immigration courts.

DHS and ICE did not respond to a request to comment on Ugboaja’s case on Thursday and did not respond to requests for comment after her detention in June.

Ugboaja is part of the Daughters of Mary Mother of Mercy and volunteered as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion at Our Lady of Sorrows Church, a spokesperson for the Diocese of Brownsville has said. Ugboaja is also a registered nurse at South Texas Health System and worked previously for 10 years as a certified nursing assistant in Edinburg, the spokesperson said.

Ugboaja said that on the day she was taken into custody, she begged the officers to let her attend Mass and receive Holy Communion, but was told she could not.

“For me, a nun, not to go to Mass on Sunday, not to receive Communion, it was very, very heartbreaking for me,” she said.

[Back to index](#)

Peruvians exposed to lead as children reach \$150M settlement, with Catholic help

by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent, *July 17, 2026*

Cardinal Pedro Barreto Jimeno was at the Vatican when he received the call from St. Louis, an ocean and continent away.

In a few days, the Peruvian church leader would depart Rome, where he was attending a meeting of cardinals in late June, for the United States where he was set to testify in a trial on behalf of 1,373 Peruvians who alleged lead poisoning as children and toxic contamination of their home of La Oroya by Missouri-based Doe Run Resources Corporation and its parent company the Renco Group.

During the phone call, Barreto learned his testimony was no longer needed.

Lawyers for the Peruvian plaintiffs reached a \$150 million global settlement June 22 — a day before the trial was set to begin — with Doe Run and the Renco Group, bringing an end to a 19-year lawsuit supported along the way by the Catholic Church in both Peru and the United States.

"Without Cardinal Barreto and the Catholic Church, there simply would have been no case brought," said Jerry Schlichter, lead attorney in the case for the St. Louis-based firm Schlichter Bogard.



The Catholic Church's Pastoral Center in La Oroya, Peru, is seen in 2017. (Wikimedia Commons/Jhonwikip)

Barreto, speaking to National Catholic Reporter through a translator, said the settlement signals "a historic precedent that is being set, showing that North American companies are obligated to take responsibility in the actions and the damages that they commit in other territories other than their own."

"These children are going to receive a sort of justice, not just for themselves but also for hopefully La

Oroya in the future," the cardinal said.

The settlement of the case, which had garnered global attention, did not include an admittance of wrongdoing by Doe Run. In a statement, Doe Run called the agreement "the right decision for our company and our people."

"While we would have liked to have had our day in court, we elected to put this behind us and focus on what matters — running our business, serving our customers, and investing in new technologies for the future," said Matt Wohl, Doe Run CEO and president.

Smelter takes health toll

In 2004, Barreto was appointed archbishop of Huancayo in Peru's central highlands roughly 200 miles inland of the capital city of Lima. Its boundaries include La Oroya, an impoverished community of 30,000 people more than 2 miles high in a part of the Andes Mountains rich in lead, copper, gold and other precious metals.

Shortly after his installation, Barreto met with a Presbyterian minister who raised concerns about health issues in La Oroya — among the world's most polluted places — stemming from a multi-metal smelting complex that for decades was pumping toxic emissions into the air and nearby Mantaro River, at times around the clock.

archbishop of Huancayo, Peru (Courtesy of St. Louis University/Kasi Williamson)

Long the town's economic engine, the smelter was constructed in 1922 by U.S.-based Cerro de Pasco Copper Corporation until the Peruvian government took over operations from 1974 to 1997. Doe Run acquired the mining facility through a subsidiary in 1997, at which point production ramped up. The subsidiary, Doe Run Peru, declared bankruptcy in 2009 and ceased operations. In 2022, a group of workers took control of the mineral complex.

When Barreto visited the mountain town early in his time as archbishop, he saw the ecological and health impacts firsthand. He heard stories of children who developed cancer and neurological issues, and of older people with extreme levels of lead in their blood who did not want the same fate for their grandchildren and future generations.

A heavy metal and neurotoxin, lead poses serious health risks for people of all ages but especially children, due to their smaller size and higher absorption rates. There is no safe level of lead exposure, which in children has been tied to acute lead encephalopathy and brain damage, leading to lower IQs, shorter attention spans and behavioral issues. Later in life it can increase blood pressure and the potential for heart disease, kidney damage and cancer.

Hearing the stories and seeing the impacts of lead and toxic pollution, Barreto and other religious

leaders felt compelled by faith to intervene.

"Not only did we need hope, but hope put into action," he said.

Testing for lead in La Oroya

Eventually, Barreto contacted fellow Jesuits at St. Louis University, located in the same Missouri city as Doe Run's headquarters. They connected him with Fernando Serrano, an assistant professor of environmental and occupational health in the university's School of Public Health who had studied lead poisoning in children.

In August 2005, Serrano led a team of more than 50 researchers and physicians from both the U.S. and Peru to study the extent of toxic contamination in La Oroya, checking the presence of 14 toxic heavy metals produced by the Doe Run smelter, including lead, cadmium and arsenic.

Serrano still recalls seeing the air quality deteriorate as he approached the city. Once there, he felt the extent of the pollution in congestion in his eyes and throat.

"Being there, breathing that air, I already knew that we were bound to find just very high levels of these toxic metals, but still, of course, we needed to do this study," he said.

The St. Louis University team went door to door collecting blood and urine samples from residents young and old. In all, they gathered more than 200 samples, which were then analyzed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

While many people welcomed the researchers, some did not. Flyers accused them of being "vampires" taking the blood of children, and hecklers hurled eggs. There were also death threats.

The study found 97% of children under 6 and 98% of children ages 7-12 had elevated blood lead levels, with children in the urban area closest to the smelter having levels near or approaching the threshold of a medical emergency. The findings affirmed those of past lead studies, including one conducted by the Peruvian health ministry. The St. Louis University study also found La Oroya residents registering higher levels of cadmium and arsenic, both associated with respiratory disease and cancer.

Serrano returned to Peru that December to deliver the report's findings to people in La Oroya and hand-delivered a copy to the national health ministry. In the 20 years since, he has made nearly a dozen trips to La Oroya to continue supporting the people in their pursuit of justice.

"I have been really blessed with the opportunity to do this for a community that needed our help," he said.

'How faith moves mountains'

The St. Louis University study helped form the basis of the lawsuit that Schlichter Bogard filed in 2007 in U.S. District Court in St. Louis initially on behalf of 17 children. Later case consolidations grew plaintiffs to more than 1,300.

"Without those [findings], we would not have had the scientific foundation to prove what we would need to prove" regarding the extreme levels of lead exposure, Schlichter told EarthBeat.

Serrano, who was also set to testify, called the settlement "a significant step towards full justice."

Along with Doe Run and the Renco Group, the plaintiffs also sued its owner, billionaire Ira Rennert.

Doe Run repeatedly attempted to have the case dismissed or relocated to Peru. Former Missouri Gov. Mike Parson tried to intervene on the company's behalf, as did the Trump administration, which in June argued the case should be dismissed due to "important foreign relations and international comity issues."

Advertisement

In its statement, Doe Run said that the Peruvian government bore the greatest responsibility for cleaning up pollution tied to the smelter. It added that the company invested more than \$300 million to improve health, infrastructure and environmental conditions in La Oroya, including conducting its own blood lead surveys.

A year after the Doe Run lawsuit was filed, La Oroya residents and environmental law groups filed a petition against the Peruvian government at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. In 2024, that commission ruled the government violated the community's right to a healthy environment by allowing the smelter to pollute and contaminate the area, including by issuing Doe Run multiple exemptions to environmental laws and extensions to install pollution controls.

Barreto, who also faced death threats, said he met with both Peruvian government representatives and Doe Run executives to express concern over the pollution and health crisis in La Oroya. In those meetings, he said, he was often told the problem was addressed or too complicated to solve.

"All of these different officials kept telling [me] about how impossible it was to come up with a solution to such a complex problem," he said.

In July 2012, both Barreto and Serrano testified alongside La Oroya activists and supporters at a hearing of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The \$150 million settlement came a day before the start of the first of four trials against Doe Run in the

cases represented by Schlichter Bogard. A separate lawsuit, with 1,900 plaintiffs presently, remains in court, with the next hearing set for July 28.

Despite his testimony no longer being needed, Barreto still traveled to St. Louis and met with Serrano, lawyers and others in the area to thank them for their two decades of support of the people of La Oroya.

A central figure in the Vatican's 2019 Amazon synod and leader in the church on environmental and Indigenous matters, Barreto told EarthBeat that both Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV — the latter the former bishop of Chiclayo, Peru — were aware of the struggle in La Oroya. The cardinal added that Leo will "become very happy" to learn of the settlement and with it, "the dignity of these children that has been recovered."

"It shows how faith can move mountains, as Jesus once described," Barreto said. "But also with scientific knowledge and evidence, we are able to do a lot more and use our faith for good."

[Back to index](#)