

Article

The 'Church of the Poor and the Earth' in Latin American Mining Conflicts

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Abstract: Conflicts over large-scale mining in Latin America have received growing scholarly attention. Whereas this scholarship has provided very valuable insights into the anatomies of these conflicts, the role of religious ideas and actors has received scant attention. This is remarkable, since the largest church of Latin America, the Catholic Church, seems to be in the midst of an ecological reorientation and increasingly emphasizes its image of the 'Church of the poor and the Earth'. This research aims to fill this gap and examines the role of Catholic ideas and organizations in mining conflicts. Combining document analysis and ethnographic research on a mining project in Ecuador, the paper argues that Catholic ideas and actors play a significant role in discourses regarding nature and the subsoil, and in configuring the power relations part of conflicts. However, when engaging a historical and gendered perspective, it becomes clear that this role is not without ambiguities and tensions. The paper particularly urges researchers to remain critical of the reinforcements of a patriarchal system of power as well as the essentialization of indigenous cosmologies that continue to undergird present-day discourses and interactions of Catholic organizations in mining conflicts.

Keywords: extraction; mining conflict; Catholic Church; Laudato Si'; gender; indigenous cosmologies; political ecology; Latin America



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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Latin America has seen an increased interest and investment in the large-scale, industrial extraction of minerals. The feverish search for mineral deposits by transnational mining companies unleashed a true 'mining boom' (Monaldi 2014) that was welcomed by both conservative and progressive governments across the region. However, as the mining frontier expanded into the vulnerable ecosystems of the Andean highlands, the cloud forests and the Amazonian lowlands, conflicts ensued over the sector's environmental and social impacts (Helwege 2015). These mining conflicts have since become a growing matter of concern among Latin American(ist) scholars (Bebbington et al. 2013). This resulted in a wealth of (case) studies on the actors involved in mining conflicts as well as the power relations that mold the interactions among them.

Typically, this scholarship analyses the discourses and positions of transnational companies, governments and local pro-mining groups who use references to 'responsible mining', employment, local development and, lately, post-COVID recovery to legitimate mining among local inhabitants (Gudynas 2016; Godfrid 2016; van Teijlingen and Fernández-Salvador 2021; Benites and Bebbington 2020). These discourses and the mining projects they seek to legitimate are generally confronted by peasants, indigenous groups and local tourist operators who fear the encroachment of their land and rivers, with detrimental effects on their livelihoods. These groups often ally with national and transnational NGOs and ecologist movements that denounce the environmental impacts and human rights abuses associated with large-scale mining and seek to challenge mining-based development models, both at a local and national level (Urkidi and Walter 2011; Acuña 2015; Conde 2017; Jenkins 2017).¹

Whereas these analyses have provided very valuable insights into the anatomies of mining conflicts in Latin America, some aspects of these conflicts have received relatively less attention. One such aspect is the role of religion and religious institutions in the coming-into-being of clashing discourses regarding nature and the subsoil, and in the course that mining conflicts take. This is remarkable, for religion and religious actors pervade the many spheres of political, cultural, and social life in Latin America (Löwy 1996; Thornton 2018). Particularly Catholicism, which is the focus of this paper, long enjoyed the position of “hegemonic religion” (Parker 2016, p. 17) and has shaped Latin America in untraceable ways ranging from the daily habits and morals of many of its inhabitants to collective cultural expressions, and from subaltern struggles to elite politics (Levine 2014b; Wood 2014). Despite the fast-growing influence of Protestant Evangelicalism that challenges this Catholic hegemony and authority, Catholicism is still the dominant religion in Latin America (Thornton 2018).

My motivation to focus on the role of Catholic ideas and actors in mining conflicts goes beyond the sheer numbers. More important is the relatively strong influence of the Catholic Church in shaping human-nature relations in Latin America, although this influence has shifted over time. There is a broad acknowledgement of Catholicism’s historical role in buttressing the extractive and exploitative nature of colonial and post-colonial regimes and promoting the subordination of nature that marks extractive policies to present (Galeano 1973; Alimonda 2015). Since the 1960s, progressive groups within the Latin American Catholic Church have made considerable efforts stand up against repressive and dictatorial regimes and position the Catholic Church as ‘the Church of the Poor’.² As part of this progressive wave, liberation- and eco- theologians tried to connect Catholicism (both in teaching and in practice) with struggles for land and environmental justice (Boff 1996; Levine 2014a). Recently, these undercurrents seem to have gained force and incited an unprecedented, but not uncontested, ecological reorientation within the Catholic Church (Wilkins 2020). Since the publication of the encyclical *Laudato Si’* (Francis 2015), the protection of “the common home” has become central to the Church’s agenda and the Church of the Poor seems to increasingly profile itself as the ‘Church of the Poor and the Earth’.³ The special synodal assembly on the Amazon and the apostolic exhortation ‘*Querida Amazonía*’ (Beloved Amazon) furthermore show that Latin America, and particularly the Amazon, hold a special place in this new ‘green’ agenda.

Considering this ecological reorientation and the remarkable focus on the environmental challenges of Latin America, the Catholic Church’s understudied engagement with mining, as one of the region’s most pressing environmental issues, is well worth our attention. This paper therefore asks: what role do Catholic ideas and actors play in mining conflicts across Latin America? To explore possible answers to this question, I will look at how the Catholic faith, and particularly the ideas expressed in *Laudato Si’*, are mobilized as a source of valuation, motivation and legitimation by actors involved in mining conflicts. I will also examine the organizational, material, and political support that Catholic actors provide to grassroots movements and anti-mining struggles by means of a case-study on mining in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

It should be noted that these Catholic actors, i.e., the representatives of the Church hierarchy, missionaries, pastoral workers, and civil society organizations directly related to or financed by the Catholic Church, are predominantly (led by) non-indigenous men. This reality of the Catholic church as a patriarchal institution and its (historical) contribution to shaping gender and race relations in Latin America (Gebara 2008) motivated me to take a critical look at the position of women and indigenous people within the Church’s green agenda and practices that follow from this agenda. Such a critical perspective is all the more relevant given the fact that a focus on gender and race is missing in the current literature on this topic. While almost all authors emphasize the emancipatory nature of the Church’s role in mining conflicts (Holden and Jacobson 2009; Arellano-Yanguas 2014; Nadelman 2015), they generally fail to consider the ambiguities and tensions that characterize the Church’s emancipatory efforts. As I will show in this article, the scars of

the violent and racist interference of Catholic churches and missions during the conquest of Abya Yala⁴ and more recent histories of internal colonization of the Amazon are still present in current conflicts (Holst 2016; Gudynas 2018). Similarly, a patriarchal ideology and conservative ideas on gender hierarchies and the family continue to pervade Catholic discourses on the environment, the poor and their liberation (Aquino 2002; Gebara 2008, 2017; Flores 2018; O'Brien 2019). So, despite the celebrated emphasis on indigenous people and women in the Church's new green agenda (Francis 2020), this paper remains critical of possible reinforcements of patriarchal power relations as well as the essentialization of indigenous cosmologies that may curtail the potentially emancipatory influence of Catholic organizations in mining conflicts.

To this end, the article is structured as follows. First, I give a brief overview of the literature on mining conflicts in Latin America, and the limited ways in which this scholarship has dealt with the role of religion and religious organizations. Here, I will also introduce the critical political ecologist approach to religion (Wilkins 2021) that informs this paper. Then, I present an analysis of the *Laudato Si'* and in particular the Pope's love letter to the Amazon: '*Querida Amazonía*' (Francis 2020), and map the actors, i.e., churches, missions, charities, and movements, that seek to operationalize the Catholic Church's green agenda in Latin America. To study how Catholic ideas and actors influence the discourses regarding nature and the subsoil and the practices of grassroots movements, I will zoom in on the controversy around mining in Ecuador and in particular the conflict around the country's first large-scale copper mine: El Mirador in the Ecuadorian Amazon region. Based on this case study, I will flesh out some of the tensions and ambiguities that should be part of the study of the role of the Catholic Church in conflicts over mining in Latin America.

Methodologically, the findings presented in the article are based on a combination of document analysis and ethnographic fieldwork. The analysed documents include official Church documents and statements, such as *Laudato Si'* and *Querida Amazonía* written by Pope Francis; websites and reports of Catholic NGOs and missions; media commentaries about the green reorientation of the Church; and historical archives about the role of missionaries and indigenous organizations in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The ethnographic data included in the paper was gathered during a total of 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork on mining conflicts in Ecuador. This fieldwork took place between April 2012 and July 2019 and involved interviews, participant observation, and workshops with actors involved in the nation-wide controversy over the desirability of mining in general, and the Mirador mine in particular. This open-pit copper mine is owned by the Chinese-owned Ecuacorriente S.A (hereafter ECSA) and entered into production in 2019. It is located in the forested hills of Tundayme, a small village in canton El Pangui in south-east Ecuador. This Amazonian region was originally inhabited by semi-nomadic Shuar families, but this has changed after missionaries and settlers from the highlands moved into the area in the 1960s–1980s in a process of internal colonisation (Warnaars and van Teijlingen 2017). The arrival of the mining project in this area already ridden with land conflicts, has sparked different waves of conflict over the past decades (van Teijlingen 2019b).

2. Religion in the Literature on Mining Conflicts in Latin America

Over the last 10 to 15 years, the expansion of (large-scale) mineral mining emerged as a topic of inquiry and vivid debate among Latin American(ist) scholars. This recent upsurge in studies on mining in Latin America has everything to do with the latest boom of Latin America's extractive sectors due to high commodity prices and a growing demand for resources by particularly China (Bury and Bebbington 2013; Hogenboom 2014; Ciccantell and Patten 2016). The ensuing expansion of the exploration and exploitation of the subsoil spurred profound socio-environmental transformations, conflicts, and social mobilizations all the way from México to Argentina (Ellner 2020). This has attracted the attention of scholars from across the social science disciplines, but particularly from anthropology, political science, and human geography. With theoretical foundations in political ecology and social movement theory, they have set out to unravel the strategies of corporations

and governments to promote mining, the social and environmental consequences for those regions where mining touches ground, and the efforts to resist mining by grassroots groups and environmental movements (Bebbington et al. 2013; Deonandan and Dougherty 2016). The extractive boom moreover brought back to life national and regional debates on Latin America's long-standing dependency on export commodities, as well as on the possibility of post-extractive development (Svampa 2013b).

Many of these studies converge on the notion that mining conflicts find their origin in distinct ways of valuing and relating to nature that are held by the involved actors (Conde 2017). This idea of clashing valuations was made popular by Joan Martinez-Alier (2001, 2009), who introduced the concept of "valuation languages" to refer to the plural standards and frames that are used to assign value to nature. Environmental conflicts, he contends, often involve disputes over incommensurable values, expressed through different valuation languages (Martinez-Alier 2008).⁵ This conceptualization inspired various authors to trace the articulation of such divergent valuation languages or discourses in the context of concrete mining conflicts (Svampa 2013a; Duarte-Abadía and Boelens 2016; Tetreault 2019).

Another, yet very related, strand of the literature focuses on those who mobilize against mining and asks "how and under what circumstances social collective action emerges" (Dietz and Engels 2017, p. 8). Informed by social movement theory (Tarrow and Tilly 2009), these studies look at the actor constellations that make up an anti-mining movement in a particular context, and the way in which (multi-scalar) alliances give shape to how they frame their claims as well as their strategies of political action (Bebbington et al. 2008; Li 2016). The latter are also referred to as repertoires of contention (Dietz 2017), and often include a creative combination of marches, roadblocks, media campaigns, sit-ins, participatory mapping, petitions, lobbying politicians, environmental education programs, the construction of alternative territories, taking companies to court, community monitoring, and popular consultations, among others (Kuecker 2007; Spalding 2018; Ulloa et al. 2021).

Whereas this scholarship on the mining boom has expanded our understanding of the "anatomies of conflict" (Bebbington et al. 2013, p. 241), limited research has been done on the role religion and religious actors play in the recent upsurge of mining conflicts.⁶ Analyses of the coming-into-being of human-nature relations and valuation languages in the context of mining conflicts do not generally address religious values, references to religious sources or the divine. Similarly, the studies of the 'actor constellations' around mining conflicts typically focus on the members of communities near mining projects, local indigenous or peasant organizations, environmental NGOs, (transnational) mining corporations and national and local governments as main actors in mining conflicts (Dietz 2017, p. 114). Religious actors, such as Catholic priests, pastoral workers, missionaries, or faith-based organizations, while occupying important positions in environmental struggles across Latin America (Berry and Albro 2018), are often not considered.⁷

The few studies that have been done, however, suggests the scholarship on mining conflicts could benefit from a more substantial engagement with the role of religious ideas and actors. Holden and Jacobson (2009), for example, survey the involvement of the Catholic Church in conflicts over mining in Guatemala. They show how bishops and priests got inspired by liberation theology's attention to the emancipation of 'the poor and the environment' and became pivotal in convincing community members of the hazards associated with the mining industry and providing institutional support to the anti-mining protests (Holden and Jacobson 2009). Nadelman's (2015) study of the Church's role in the campaign to ban mining from El Salvador, provides a similar account. Principles of liberation theology and the pastoral work of *Cáritas* with local anti-mining groups motivated the Salvadoran Church to see mining as a major threat to God's creation. Even the Archbishops actively joined the call for a ban on mining and, as Spalding (2018) confirms, their support has been decisive in enforcing such a ban.

Another contribution is by Arellano-Yanguas (2014), who documents how the Catholic Church in Northern Peru incorporated environmental and human-rights concerns into religious doctrine and supported indigenous anti-mining activists. While acknowledg-

ing the influence of liberation theology ideology, he argues that the Church's involvement was predominantly a consequence of its embeddedness in local social networks and the agency of community members who compelled the Church to "follow the people" (Arellano-Yanguas 2014, p. 73). Graeter (2017) analyses the leading role of the Catholic Church in setting up a community monitoring programme in one of the most contaminated towns of Peru: La Oroya, home to a smelter owned by a US-based company. With data on lead contamination gathered by this programme, an alliance of local activists and the Catholic Church set up a quite successful campaign to enforce better regulation. In addition to these studies that place religious actors at the centre of their analysis, there are a few others that mention their role as part of a broader examination of a mining conflict (Kuecker 2007; Li 2015; Spalding 2018).

Despite the different motivations and practices of representatives of the Catholic Church that these authors report, all coincide on two key issues. First, that these actors' engagement was generally decisive in the course of the anti-mining protests. Representatives of the Church possess an unique form of leverage and authority, for they are assigned impartiality and "moral conscience" (Holden and Jacobson 2009, p. 151; Nadelman 2015) and have often built relations of trust with communities long before mining companies arrived (Kuecker 2007; Graeter 2017).⁸ Within communities, their discourses on social and environmental justice may thus create awareness, spark protest, and unify communities or movements in their positions vis-à-vis mining. They can moreover provide infrastructural, financial, and legal support, and connect local struggles to those at a national or international level (Arellano-Yanguas 2014). In relation to corporations and governments, they may be able to mediate in conflict situations or use their position of relative impartiality to give community claims more weight (Nadelman 2015; Spalding 2018), especially with the production of scientific data (Li 2015; Graeter 2017). A second issue on which all these authors coincide is the emancipatory nature of this engagement: all papers cited here report that Church representatives, following liberation theologian principles, sided with poor and marginalized groups in their struggles for environmental justice. Curiously, while highlighting the emancipatory contribution of Church actors, there is very limited attention to the gendered and racial dimensions of these actors and the type of emancipation they promote.

In this article, I build on these findings but also contribute new insights by highlighting the ambiguities and tensions that mark the ostensibly emancipatory role of Catholic ideas and actors in mining conflicts. To this end, I follow Wilkins (2021, p. 286) critical political ecologist approach to religion. This approach seeks the "deconstruction of religion as a universal or natural category" and reconceptualizes religion as both *produced* and *productive*. That is, as a socially, politically, and historically constructed category that in turn influences how people interpret, value, and act in relation to nature (Wilkins 2021). This approach involves looking at the situated, historical processes that gave shape to the role of religion and religious institutions in certain conflicts, with particular emphasis on religion's (continuing) relation to colonial power (Greenberg 2016; Gudynas 2018).

It furthermore requires assessing the gender and racial relations that are involved in the discourses and practices of those who claim to speak or act in the name of religion (Olson 2006; Wilkins 2021). One of the fields that places power relation of the centre of their study of religion is Feminist Theology. As feminist theologians argue, Catholicism has traditionally promoted an inferior position of women by endorsing a particular narrative of the nature-of-women following the image of Mary (Aquino 2002; Gebara 2008). This has produced, as Isherwood and McEwan (2001, p. 18) state, "many justifications for stereotyping women and telling them what to do and what not to do" both in society and within Church hierarchies. Some even describe the Catholic Church as an oppressive institution (Aquino 2002; Gebara 2008). Although the influence of Liberation Theology in the Latin American Catholic Church slightly tempered this oppression, the Catholic Church continues to be seen as a patriarchal stronghold that continue to limit the emancipation of women.

Another debate that may be of help is the debate on religious pluralism. In Latin American(ist) scholarship, this term is often used to describe the rising popularity of Evangelist Churches and the end of the “monopoly position” of Catholicism (Parker 2016, p. 13; Hagopian 2009). Although this growing competition between Evangelist and Catholic Churches may influence mining conflicts, the definition of religious pluralism I am interested in here is broader. Following Eck (2007, 2015) and Levine (2009), I use religious pluralism to refer not only to the presence of multiple religious and spiritual orientations in one society, but also to the ways in which different traditions interact, shape each other, hybridize; and how their interactions co-create (particular aspects of) society. In the Latin American context, this conceptualization helps to emphasize how religious are often dynamic assemblages of Christian and indigenous traditions (Berry and Albro 2018, p. 10; Norget 1997).

When it comes to religious pluralism in recent debates over the environment in Latin America, particularly indigenous traditions deserve further attention. Concepts with roots in Andean and Amazonian cosmologies, such as *Sumak Kawsay* or *Buen Vivir* (the good living) and *Pachamama* (Mother Earth), have become commonplace in discourses of environmental movements and anti-mining groups (van Teijlingen and Hogenboom 2016). Interestingly, these terms now also figure quite centrally in the new green discourse of the Catholic Church. On first sight, the ubiquity of these concepts may be regarded as a proof of the successful lobby of indigenous grassroots movements or the formation of what Norget (1997, 2009) in other contexts described as an “indigenous theology” resulting from interactions or syncretism between Catholicism and indigenous cosmologies. Some authors have even lauded the uptake of Andean and Amazonian cosmologies by the Catholic Church as a potentially decolonising approach to development (Deneulin 2021) or indicative of the presence of “ontological openings” within the Church’s teachings (Gudynas 2018, p. 239). However, as Norget shows in many of her writings (e.g., Norget 2009, 2021), such interactions are not taking place on “an equal social and political field” (Norget 2009, p. 93). In line with this caveat, in this article, I show that we should remain critical of the power relations that undergird the growing use of indigenous concepts within the Church’s ecological reorientation.

3. *Laudato Si’* and the Greening of the Church of the Poor

Since the rise of Liberation Theology in the 1960s, there have been ongoing calls to redirect the priorities of the Catholic Church and its pastoral work towards the poor and their liberation from repression and exploitative class conditions. Although these calls have been answered very unevenly and ambiguously (Drogus 1995), the Liberation Theologians’ efforts to position the Catholic Church as the “Church of the Poor” have certainly left fingerprints on the teachings, positionings and practices of the Church in Latin America and beyond. In the 1990s, the founders of Liberation Theology sought to extend their notions of social justice to include the earth (Boff 1996), but a genuine interest in the environment has long remained marginal to the liturgy and praxis of the Catholic Church. However, with the appointment of Pope Francis in 2013 and particularly with the publication of his encyclical *Laudato Si’* in 2015, the world’s alarming environmental issues and the need for justice for the earth seem to have reached the highest echelons of the Church (Kerber 2018b).

The encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* has been characterised “as one of the most significant statements on human-environment relationships ever made within the Catholic Church” (Wilkins 2020, p. 361). Timely published a few months before the UN Assembly on the Sustainable Development Goals and the Conference on the Climate Accord in Paris, the letter called both Catholic and non-Catholic to protect ‘our common home’ against climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation. According to the encyclical, these problems are rooted in “our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption” that are marked by modernity, an excessive anthropocentrism and a blind confidence in technology and the market (Francis 2015, p. 43). Humans, the Pope writes, have

adopted an attitude of “masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs” that has led to “unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us” (Francis 2015, pp. 11, 20). To counter this destruction, the *Laudato Si'* urges us to restore our harmony “with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself” and to “recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes” (Francis 2015, pp. 48, 50). More practically, the document invites Catholics and non-Catholics to a series of changes in consumption, culture and modes of production and advocates for bold political action along the lines of social justice and integral ecology (Francis 2015).

A few years after the publication of the encyclical, the Pope published what can be considered the Latin American version of *Laudato Si'* (Duncan 2020). In 2019, the Vatican organized a two-year synodal process on the Amazon, after which Pope Francis shared his reflections in the synodal exhortation titled *Querida Amazonía* (Beloved Amazon).⁹ Glorifying the splendour and mystery of the Amazon, this document goes straight to the point: the degradation of this region is caused by “the colonizing interests that have continued to expand, legally and illegally, the timber and mining industries, and have expelled or marginalized the indigenous people” (Francis 2020, p. 7).

In addition to the confrontational tone, two other issues call the attention. First, much more than *Laudato Si'*, this text calls for an ‘inculturation’ of the Catholic Church in the Amazon and a dialogue with indigenous cosmologies.¹⁰ For this, the Church actors should “esteem the indigenous mysticism that sees the interconnection and interdependence of the whole of creation” and not necessarily consider indigenous symbols as idolatry (Francis 2020, pp. 54, 58). This aspiration to form a ‘Church with an indigenous face’ was also expressed during the closing event of the Amazonian Synod, where the Pope attended a very much contested ritual around a statue representing Mother Nature (see Figure 1).¹¹ This brings me to the second issue, which is the special place that *Querida Amazonía* reserves for Amazonian women. The document praises them for they sustain communities, “keep them together and care for them” showing a “kind of power that is typically theirs” (Francis 2020, p. 70). Describing this as “the gift of women”, *Querida Amazonia* encourages the church to allow women to take leadership roles “in a way that reflects their womanhood” (Francis 2020, p. 71). As I will analyse in more detail in Section 4, the image of women promoted in *Querida Amazonía* and by the statue shown in Figure 1 only emphasize their caring and reproductive qualities and precisely reproduces the image so criticized by feminist theologians.

Although one should not assume the power of texts like *Laudato Si'* and *Querida Amazonia* a priori since they may be interpreted in myriad ways and their concrete effects may vary over time and space, both are indicative of a significant push towards the ‘greening’ of the Catholic doctrine (Kerber 2018b). The encyclical furthermore set in motion what Naomi Klein called “the millennia-old engine designed to proselytize”¹², to raise awareness regarding the environment, especially climate change, and implement the Pope’s call to action (McCallum 2019). Since its publication, an overwhelming amount of conferences, seminars, reading groups and grassroots education cycles have been organized at regional, national and local levels as to reflect on the encyclical message.¹³ Bishops, priests, missionaries, pastoral agents, Catholic aid, organizations, theologians, Holy See diplomats, and Catholic media outlets across the globe have included teachings of *Laudato Si'* in their work, and even entire organizations have been established in its name (Bagir 2019). In doing so, the encyclical as well as the Amazonian Synod forged the formation of new alliances and networks with previously separately operating environmental movements, indigenous organizations, and conservation NGOs (Kerber 2018a). Equally important is what could be considered the political economy of *Laudato si'*; that is, the way texts like these re-channel resources to programmes and grassroots organizations that promote the protection of nature through concrete action (Bartosch et al. 2017).



Figure 1. One of the statues representing ‘Mother Earth’ at the opening ceremony of the Amazonian Synod. Source: Vincenzo Pinto/AFP.

Many examples of organizations and programs that operationalize *Laudato Si’* and the more recent *Querida Amazonía* can be found across Latin America. One such example relevant for the scope of this article is the work of the *Red Iglesias y Minería* (Churches and Mining Network) that unites over 70 Catholic grassroots organizations that resist the expansion of large-scale mining across Latin America. Since the publication of *Laudato Si’*, they have (quite successfully) lobbied to position the struggle against mining as part of the implementation of the encyclical and generate increased support from the Vatican. Their discourse adopted messages from the *Laudato Si’* intermingled with the idiom developed by indigenous groups and environmental activists in Latin America, including references to *Pachamama* (“Mother Earth”) and *Sumak Kawsay* (Good Living). The same goes for the *Red Ecclesial Pan-Amazónico* (Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network, REPAM), which has placed the struggle against the extractive industries at the centre of their contribution to the implementation of *Laudato Si’*. REPAM was furthermore the force behind the realization of the Amazonian Synod.

While the ‘greening’ of the Catholic Church has been received with much enthusiasm, there has also been critique (Buckley 2020). The messages of *Laudato Si’* and *Querida Amazonía* have received criticism from conservative factions of the Church. Some of them echo earlier objections against the Liberation Theology’s “preferential option for the poor” and consider the encyclical’s calls for structural change as too political or Marxist (Barger 2018, p. 2). As was to be expected, groups that have publicly denied anthropogenic

climate change outrightly rejected the message conveyed in *Laudato Si'* (DiLeo 2020). Others disapproved Pope Francis for rubbing elbows with (secular) climate scientist or embracing indigenous symbology and rites (Duncan 2020). Some commentators even qualified the opening ceremony of the Amazonian Synod as an “act of idolatrous worship of the pagan goddess Pachamama”.¹⁴ At the same time, some more progressive groups have aired criticism regarding the Vatican’s openness to corporate lobby. Over the past years, Francis hosted several meetings with CEOs of large mining companies with titles like “Mining for the Common Good” and “Reimagining the Future of Mining” which have been seen as attempts to greenwash the industry.¹⁵ This shows that the greening of the Catholic Church has been far from straightforward, and that Catholic notions can be mobilized very differently when it comes to the mining industry. The next section further discusses this dubious role of Catholic ideas and organizations by concentrating on the controversies over large-scale mining in Ecuador.

4. Catholic Ideas and Organizations at Ecuador’s Mining Frontier

Since Ecuador’s first barrel of oil was extracted in 1972, the subsoil and its riches have been a source of political and territorial dispute (Ortiz 1995). From 2007, the extraction of metals was added to this polemic. In that year, the progressive president Rafael Correa came to office and promised to promote *Buen Vivir*,¹⁶ the rights of nature and indigenous rights while relentlessly defending the advent of the large-scale mining industry (van Teijlingen and Fernández-Salvador 2021). As the Correa government opened its doors to transnational mining companies, the portion of the national territory covered by mining concession grew from 3.6 to 15.7 percent (van Teijlingen 2019a). This caused an upsurge of local as well as national struggles over whether mining should be seen as an engine of development, or as a threat due to its adverse social, environmental, and economic impacts, or anything in between. Although Correa’s successors changed their discourse and promote more neoliberal policies, they continue to promote the expansion of large-scale mining and thus conflicts persist. Both these national debates and the controversies around the Mirador mine allow for an analysis of how religious ideas regarding nature and the subsoil are produced and mobilized in conflicts over mining, and of the complex role of Catholic actors in such conflicts.

4.1. Mobilizing God’s Gift in Favor and against Mining

The stained-glass windows of the Vicariate of Zamora scattered the sunlight entering the large hall into a colorful palette, just as colorful as the group of people gathered inside. It is June 2012, and priests, bishops, pastoral workers, missionaries, laymen, environmental activists, academics, indigenous representatives, peasants, majors, and some government representatives, the majority of them men, have come together for a forum on the role of the Church in the context of large-scale mining. Zamora is the capital of the most southern province of the Ecuadorian Amazon region, which is home to two of the five large-scale mining projects being explored in the entire country, including the Mirador project. Just a few months earlier, the Ecuadorian government signed a contract with a Chinese investment consortium that allowed the project to move towards the exploitation phase. This motivated the pastoral agency *Cáritas* to call for reflection on the impacts of this industry.

The Bishop of Zamora, who opened the forum, called those present to work “towards the respect and defense of life and the entire creation”. “We should care for what God placed in our hands” he pledged, and “look after the rights of communities and nature’s rights that are currently threatened by these large-scale mining projects”. Catholics of good faith should adopt an ecological culture, a colleague from another dioceses continued, since “going against God’s creation is going against God himself”. Long before *Laudato Si'* was written, the speakers at the event connected Liberation Theology’s teaching to environmental concerns. They critiqued how the poor, nature, and life itself are being subordinated to economic gains and a “globalization without solidarity”. The solution,

the Church actors asserted, is adopting a new ethic towards the environment, one that is based on harmony, peace, and justice. On what such ethics meant in practice, however, the speakers disagreed. The bishops proposed working closely with the government to ensure the application of sustainability measures, environmental controls and participatory mechanisms. A priest from the highlands urged for a more radical response: “Based on my hope and my faith, I chose the path of resistance and I will explain why. I consider resistance as something sacred. Since life is sacred, resistance that defends life is sacred too.”

This last response garnered much applause, and that did not surprise me. During my time in the province, I met many activists to whom the care for God’s gift motivated them to mobilize against mining. Ecuador’s principal anti-mining campaigner Gloria Chicaiza, for example, joined the movement led by the famous Liberation Theologian Leonidas Proaño as a young girl and took her teachings with her when she started working for the famous environmentalist NGO Acción Ecológica. Although later she increasingly embraced ecofeminist instead of Catholic values, these early years taught her the art of “accompaniment” of the struggles of rural communities as a crucial aspect of environmental activism.¹⁷ Moreover, various men of the local resistance movement against the Mirador mine have worked as pastoral agents, and told me that this experience made them aware of the impact of mining on God’s creation. Working with the Church, one of them told me, “helped me to realize that these conflicts are not about money, it is about dignity and about respecting the environment”.¹⁸ In a similar vein, a male indigenous leader of a community nearby the Mirador mine explained his resistance by invoking the value of nature as something sacred: “our land is a sacred temple to us, given to us by God, [. . .] and that is why we defend it so jealously”.¹⁹

Like these activists and local leaders, the male Church representatives speaking at the forum in Zamora did not hesitate to combine biblical texts and papal documents with concepts, such as *Pachamama*, *Sumak Kawsay*, and the personhood of nature. These concepts find their origin in indigenous cosmologies and were developed further in Ecuadorian political discourse during years of social mobilization against neoliberal policies by indigenous organizations and the lobby for their rights in Ecuador’s latest Constitution. Environmental activists that allied with these movements were quick to adopt these terms in their struggles against extractivism and so were, now it seems, Church actors. “Pachamama, our sister Mother Earth, is in agony. We should listen to her call” a bishop declared with a solemn voice. The new Christian ethic on the environment, his colleague advocated, should align with *Sumak Kawsay* or *Buen Vivir*. “The construction of *Buen Vivir*, which is now part of the Constitution but which we understand from the perspective of the Gospel, should focus on creating material and spiritual conditions of life”.

Just when the temperatures inside the sunny hall of the Vicariate started to rise and turned careful listening into a daunting task, a wholly different understanding of God’s gift was put up for debate. It was the turn of a middle-aged mestizo man of the Ministry of Mining, who started his presentation by sharing that he too was concerned with defending life, respecting God’s creation and reach *Buen Vivir*. However, given the high rates of poverty in the country, he claimed, life was currently not being respected in Ecuador. His government therefore turned to that other gift of God: the subsoil. With this particular mobilization of the notion that nature was handed to humans for their benefit, he echoed what President Correa repeatedly said in response to anti-miners: “we have to exploit our oil, our mines. Where will the resources to improve education come from if we do not take advantage of those resources that God so generously gave us in order to get out of poverty?”²⁰ “Fortunately”, the government representative said as he continued to repeat the cliché pro-mining discourse of the President, “modern mining does not harm the environment”. To the contrary, “the mining his government aims for is responsible, ethical and just with the country, the economy, the community and the environment”.

The government official’s account caused consternation among the audience in the Vicariate. Various attendees showed their disapproval, some started to shout “*fuera minería*” (get out miners!). An environmental activist got up and demanded the Bishop to take

position: “do you have faith in this promise of sustainable mining, do you think such thing exists?” However, the careful observer was also able to see how others applauded and nodded when the need for development was brought up. The lure of God’s gift hidden in the subsoil did surely have appeal beyond government circles, particularly in this part of the country where sentiments of marginalization and abandonment linger just below the surface.²¹ It could even lead to some novel sense of entitlement, I learned a few years later from a mestizo peasant living near the Mirador project site. While he looked at the forested hills at the horizon, he sighted: “You know what I sometimes ask myself? Why did God Almighty place those metals precisely here, in Tundayme? He must have had his reasons. He surely entrusted them to us so we can mine them and use them to our benefit.”²² Statements like these show that the notion of God’s Gift (and God’s will) are not only mobilized by those who resist mining, as the literature has indicated so far (Holden and Jacobson 2009; Arellano-Yanguas 2014; Graeter 2017). Instead, religious ideas regarding nature and the subsoil are produced and mobilized in multiple and very opposing ways in the situated debates about mining.

4.2. Catholic Actors’ Role in the Mirador Conflict

Similarly ambivalent is the role that actors related to the Catholic Church have played and continue to play in the conflict around the Mirador mine. On the one hand, the predominantly male-led pastoral organizations support and finance local resistance groups, implementing the notion of the ‘Church of the Poor and the Earth’. *Cáritas* and REPAM, for example, run programs that support the anti-mining groups across the Ecuadorian Amazon. REPAM has furthermore provided legal support to peasants that were displaced by the mine and brought their case to court in Quito and to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. While decisions on these cases are still pending, REPAM continues to publish reports and build the capacity of community leaders on mining. *Cáritas* has set up a local Network of Water Defenders, who were trained to detect and denounce water contamination and lobby for the protection of water in mining areas including Mirador. Misereor, the German Catholic Bishops’ Organisation for Development Cooperation, is financing popular education projects to youngsters who defend their territory from mining. In addition, various national NGOs that have been important actors in the Mirador conflict, such as CEDHU and Acción Ecológica, also receive funding from Catholic development organizations. Altogether, Catholic organizations are currently the main sources of support to anti-mining groups around this mine. This confirms what other studies reported about the importance of Catholic organizations in what can be called the ‘political economy’ of resistance against large-scale mining in Latin America (Holden and Jacobson 2009; Arellano-Yanguas 2014; Spalding 2018).

Representatives of the local Catholic hierarchy, on the other hand, have been less supportive to those who resist the Mirador mine. In 2014, the mining company operating the project approached the local priest for permission to demolish the chapel of San Marcos. The company had planned one of the storage facilities for mining waste right over this little peasant community and had already bought the land of a few of its (mainly mestizo) inhabitants. The company offered the priest a financial contribution to expand and paint the church in the nearby village, so this church could “receive the relocated faithful from San Marcos”.²³ The priest readily accepted this proposal, and a few weeks later the chapel was fenced off and demolished (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. The chapel of San Marcos, with a sign reading ‘private property’. Source: INREDH.

This caused an outrage among the remaining inhabitants of San Marcos, whose male community president claimed that the demolition represented the “desecration of this holy place of worship”. However, more than a sacred place, the little chapel represented communal spirit for the inhabitants of San Marcos. In my conversations with them, they would proudly tell how they built it themselves through collective action.²⁴ They considered the chapel a collective property, not owned by the Church or the priest. The chapel also functioned as the home of a sculpture of Saint Marcos, the patron saint of the dairy farmers after which they named their community and whose patron day was the most important community feast (Figure 3). In the years preceding the demolition, the chapel had furthermore functioned as a gathering place for those community members who refused to sell their land to the insistent lawyers of the company. As such, the demolished chapel was soon converted into a symbol of the unjust dispossession and loss of the San Marcos community, and the open-air masses that the community organized after the event became one of the many sites of articulation for new resistance actions against the mine. These included the abovementioned court cases, as well as the construction of the New San Marcos community.²⁵ The case of the chapel shows that local priests may have very different interpretations of the ‘Church of the Poor and the Earth’, and may in their practices side with exactly those capitalist interest that documents like *Laudato Si’* denounce. This again renders the Church’s role in mining conflicts more ambiguous than previously reported.



Figure 3. The festivities in honor to the patron saint San Marcos in the San Marcos Community. Source: CASCOMI.

4.3. Indigenous Cosmologies and the Historical Legacy of Catholic Missions in the Amazon

With the aim of further unpacking the tensions that mark the role of Catholic actors in the Mirador mining conflict, this section turns to one of the elements that stand out in the ecological reorientation of the Church: the renewed interest in indigenous cosmologies. *Querida Amazonia* goes a long way in describing indigenous people as noble, as “they do not destroy things needlessly, they care for ecosystems and they recognize that the earth, while serving as a generous source of support for their life, also has a maternal dimension that evokes respect and tender love” (Francis 2020, p. 53). Equally remarkable is the adoption of notions from indigenous cosmologies, such as *Sumak Kawsay* and *Pachamama*, within the ecological reorientation of the Church. In *Querida Amazonía*, the Pope writes that indigenous people have much to teach us about their conceptualization of and relation with nature. We should start to see that “the forest is not a resource to be exploited; it is a being or various beings, with which we have to relate” (Francis 2020, p. 32). Counter to the nature/culture divide that customarily figures in Christian texts, the document states that if “we can feel intimately part of it, [. . .] then the Amazon region will once more become like a mother to us” (Francis 2020, p. 41).

The Papal endorsement of terms, such as *Pachamama* and *Buen Vivir*, made them even more popular than they already were among Church actors operating in Latin America. They are regularly used in reports and website text of organizations like *Cáritas* and *Iglesia y Minería* and continue to be used in speeches by priests and bishops. To what extent this embrace of indigenous cosmologies goes beyond mere discourse is hard to say, though. The organisations that support anti-mining movements locally do not necessarily seem to privilege indigenous organisations or their agendas of territorial autonomy in their work. What is more: it seems that most of the resources that the organizations like REPAM and *Cáritas* have available are channelled to non-indigenous peasant (settler) organizations.

The relation of Catholic actors with indigenous groups becomes even more dubious, however, if one considers the complex historical legacy of Catholic missionaries in this part of the Amazon (Esvetit Cobes 2014; Leifsen 2021). At the beginning of the 20th century, the Spanish descendants who governed the young republic of Ecuador were determined to claim national sovereignty over the ‘empty’ lands and riches of what they saw as ‘their’ chunk of the vast Amazon region. They started the construction of roads from the Andes, supported landless peasants from the Andes to settle in the Amazon and contracted various Catholic missions to “introduce civilization to those hordes of

savages that occupy the richest portions of our territory".²⁶ These 'savages' were the Shuar, a semi-nomadic indigenous group that inhabited the south of what we now know as the Ecuadorian Amazon. Due to their fierce resistance against the futile Spanish attempts to invade and conquer their territory, the Shuar figured as barbaric cannibals and treacherous killers in the accounts of the Spanish historians. Moreover, the missionaries who travelled into this part of the Amazon wrote about the Shuar as "infidel creatures" of a "primitive race".²⁷ They were horrified about what they saw as the "diabolic" way of living of the Shuar: their polygamy, their guttural and so-called simplistic language and their belief in supernatural powers and witchcraft.

The task of "civilizing" and "pacifying" the Shuar was eagerly embraced by the Catholic missionaries, who saw it as an opportunity to reinvent themselves in the post-colonial context and connect their evangelization efforts to the ambitions of the nascent nation (Esvetit Cobes 2001). Their initial presence in the southern Amazon was thus infused with racial ideas of difference and inferiority of the Shuar, and of Shuar women in particular. They sought to take the "unfortunate creatures" "out of the darkness of ignorance" and "paganism", and convert them into cultured, literate, and Christian humans (Bottasso 1986, pp. 154–55). An important step "into the light" for the Shuar was baptism, and the adoption of a sedentary life in the settlements around the church (Bustamante 1988). Another strategy central to the process of conversion was the education of young Shuar children and youth in boarding schools (Salazar 1989).²⁸ This is confirmed by accounts of my Shuar interlocutors, who remembered how the missionaries took them away from their families, changed their names, and forbid them to speak the "satanic" Shuar language.²⁹

This process of cultural dispossession was accompanied by the material occupation of Shuar territory by settlers from the highlands, who violently displaced the Shuar or forced them to "sell" their lands in exchange for a radio, a piece of clothing or a mirror. The settler colonists were backed in this endeavour by the colonization laws of the unfolding state apparatus exclusively governed by whites and mestizos (Bustamante 1988). Although the missionaries effectively facilitated this colonization of the Amazon region (Esvetit Cobes 2014), the ongoing abuse of the Shuar population and the influences of Liberation Theology made them adopt a different role around 1960. In addition to their evangelization and education work, they positioned themselves as the, albeit paternalistic, interlocutors vis-à-vis government actors and colonists, and tried to improve the rights of the Shuar (Salazar 1989; Leifsen 2021). An important step in this process was the establishment of Shuar reserves, which were collectively owned by various Shuar families. According to Rubenstein (2005), these reserves created a new historical consciousness of the Shuar as an ethnic group with common interest and gave rise to new forms of organization among the Shuar. This emerging indigenous identity and these forms of representation stood at the basis of the indigenous political organizations that are currently present in Ecuador, and that are among the principal actors of the anti-mining movement (Riofrancos 2020).³⁰

The legacy of the Catholic missionaries in this part of the Ecuadorian Amazon thus has two faces (Leifsen 2021). On the one hand, particularly the Salesian missionaries stood at the cradle of the indigenous identity and organizations that are now pivotal in struggles against mining in this part of the Amazon. Over the past decades, the missions furthermore continued to seek the emancipation of the Shuar and promotion of their indigenous identity through community radios, bilingual education, promotion of the Shuar-Chicham language, leadership training, and material support (Salazar 1986; Esvetit Cobes 2014). On the other hand, they were key in the construction of the racialized Other and the suppression of cosmovisions and spiritual sensibilities other than those pertaining to Christianity and modernity (Gudynas 2018). Imparting Christian values of a nature/culture divide, they were also complicit in depicting the Amazon as a source of wealth that should be tamed and exploited, a vision that has proven remarkably persistent (Descola 2013). In this way, they have also played a part in the processes of deforestation and the expansion of mining at the expense of nature (Alimonda 2015).

This marginalization of the Shuar population can still be clearly noticed in the region where the Mirador mine is located. My interviewees continue to define themselves as either Shuar or settler, and these categories are important in structuring social relations and local conflicts (van Teijlingen and Warnaars 2017). A considerable number of mestizo settlers I met continue to hold outright racist positions and see the Shuar as “savages” or “thugs” who are “mentally incapable”, “untrustworthy” and “lazy”.³¹ Also some Shuar I interviewed referred to the Shuar lifestyle as “backwards”, “animal-like” or “uncivilized”.³² These racist notions of the differences between the Shuar and settlers are reflected by the highly unequal local power structures and cultural expressions. No single local government authority in El Pangui is of Shuar descent, neither do they pertain to the local elite of shop owners, and salaried government or police officials.

The racial differences and notions of Shuar inferiority that were fomented by Catholic missions also continue to have a pervasive effect on the conflict over the Mirador project. They shape, for example, the way in which local government officials mediate in land conflicts between the Shuar, peasants, and the mining company. Racism also marks the way in which local policy authorities work³³ and is reflected by the high rate of Shuar representatives and organizations that are criminalized and brought to court for their resistance acts. Finally, racial notions of backwardness characterize the government interventions in support of mining, as shown elsewhere (van Teijlingen and Fernández-Salvador 2021).

In the light of this (historical) context, the question rises to what extent the adoption of indigenous cosmologies as part of the Church’s new green discourse can be seen as a sign of religious pluralism or ‘syncretism’ of an emancipating kind. Various authors have suggested this is the case. Deneulin (2021), for example, has argued that the ecological conversion proposed in *Laudato Si’* and *Querida Amazonía* is an example of a more inclusive, participatory, and even decolonizing approach to development in the Amazon. These documents, this author furthermore notes, indicate a shift to biocentrism of which development studies should take heed (Deneulin 2021). Gudynas (2018) and Bagir (2019), although much more critical of the Church’s history with indigenous peoples, are similarly optimistic about the transformative potential of the Church’s green stance. Gudynas (2018, p. 239), borrowing the notion of ‘ontological opening’ coined by de la Cadena (2014), asserted that “assuming stances like those reflected in the rights of Nature, Pacha Mama, or Buen Vivir necessarily requires ontological openings, accepting that our own cosmovision is not the only possible one.”

Based on my findings in the Ecuadorian Amazon and my reading of *Laudato Si’* and *Querida Amazonía*, however, I think we should be wary of calling the Church’s adoption of indigenous and biocentric concepts a shift towards decolonization or ontological openness. According to *Querida Amazonía*, the inculturated spirituality that the Church pursues is “certainly centred on the one God and Lord” and should be keen on finding the presence of Jesus hidden in indigenous symbols (Francis 2020, p. 58). Indigenous myths may furthermore “be used to advantage” in the process of evangelization, and rites and festivals may be subjected to a “gradual process of purification and maturation” (Francis 2020, p. 58). These passages from *Querida Amazonía* evidence the complexity, if not impossibility, of accommodating the “many worlds” within the Catholic conception of the “one-world” (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, p. 4). The tensions that arise from “the Church’s inexorable need to defend the authority of ‘universal’ Catholic doctrine while extending an openness to local cultures and lifeworlds” (Norget 2021, p. 4) thus remain unresolved within the Church’s new green agenda. The ‘inculturated’ approach promoted by this agenda rather indicates a strategic and paternalistic engagement that flattens out of much of the meaning of indigenous cosmologies and reproduces the essentialist image of purity of indigenous culture.³⁴ It moreover does so in a way that backgrounds the Church’s role in constructing the racialized Other in spaces like the Ecuadorian Amazon and this seriously curtail its transformative potential.³⁵

4.4. *The Gift of Women: Religion and Gender in Struggles against Mining*

Another aspect that deserves scrutiny are the gender relations that permeate the role of the Catholic Church in mining conflicts. As I discussed before, both *Laudato Si'* and *Querida Amazonía* highlight the role of women in (Amazonian) communities as well as in the Church and urge for the reevaluation of women and womanhood in the Church. Particularly women in rural and indigenous communities are praised for their efforts to keep communities together and engage in environmental struggles with a particular charism, referred to as the 'Gift of Women'. However, as can be noticed in my ethnographic accounts, the interactions around the Mirador mine are very male dominated. This was particularly the case for the event in the Vicariate of Zamora, where virtually all speakers were men. Only to the very end of the event, a Shuar woman was invited to share a brief testimony on her experience with mining. Her contribution was introduced by the facilitator of the event as one of an "indigenous woman and a mother". In her speech, the Shuar woman herself would also recall that she offered her testimony "as a Shuar woman and mother of my children".

This course of events is exemplary of the gender hierarchies in Ecuadorian public life as well as indigenous and non-indigenous organizations, including those who take part in the resistance against the Mirador project (Yépez and van Teijlingen 2017). Virtually all local authorities and leaders of the communities and civil society organizations around Mirador are men, and public arenas of representation and negotiation within the mining conflict are male dominated. In the community assemblies I participated in, women often made up most of the attendees, but debates were held between the few men present. Women would only occasionally speak out, but generally performed the administrative tasks of making notes and documenting the attendance or cooking for the attendees. When important decisions were to be made, e.g., about the financial contribution to the organization or collective land titles, the leaders often advised the female attendees to "talk it over at home" and consult their husbands.

The intricate and intimate nature of these unequal gender hierarchies is also illustrated by a case I came across when researching the conflict over the chapel and the expropriation of lands in San Marcos. A few months after its demolition, I visited an older, widowed woman living in an old farmhouse right in front of the Church and who had witnessed the demolition up-close. Still shocked, she told me that she waited for the excavators of the company to leave in order to rush to the ruins of the chapel to rescue the sculpture of Saint Marcos, as well as that of baby Jesus in his cradle. She "could not stand the fact he (Saint Marcos) would become homeless, without a roof over his head" so she kept them in her house (see Figure 4). Despite her new status as saviour of the community saint and her visible anger with the company and the priest, she did not dare to speak out on the issue. That, she said, is the work of her sons and the leaders of the community. "I don't know how to write or read, I don't know about those issues".³⁶ Due to her illiteracy, her sons were also the ones who were approached by the mining company to sell the land owned by their mother. In what her son himself described as "a lust for money", they negotiated her land without her full consent. In hindsight he regretted the land deal, but the company did not accept to his request to undo it. Two years after my visit, I passed by San Marcos again: the widow's home was gone.

Here, again, we should consider the legacy of the Catholic Missions in the historical formation of the social fabric in the region. From their very start, the Shuar organizations I discussed in the previous section were entirely made up of men. This male domination certainly resembled the gendered inequalities present in Shuar society prior to colonization (Karsten 1935; Harner 1984), but these were further exacerbated through the process of colonization and evangelization. The introduction of a sedentary lifestyle and private property turned the men into the main landowners. Similarly, the manufactured goods and wage labour that were introduced with the colonization were controlled by men, and the increased interactions with external actors positioned men as main interlocutors (Vallejo et al. 2019). The Church contributed to this by reinforcing these male-dominated positions of interlocution and authority: they initially only educated boys for which women

were often not able to speak, read, or write Spanish; and appointed men as the leaders of the emerging Shuar organizations (Mader 1997; Seymour-Smith 1991). The Missionaries' teachings of Christianity furthermore promoted the nuclear family, including gendered divisions of labour, both among the Shuar and the settler population of the Ecuadorian Amazon (Garcés 2006).



Figure 4. The settler widow with patron saint San Marcos (right in the box) and some other artefacts from the chapel which she 'saved' when it was demolished. Picture by author.

Programs sponsored by the Church, as well as by other actors, do occasionally address the role of women in their work, but they have not been particularly successful in changing the gender hierarchies within these organizations. To the contrary, they may continue to contribute to the positions of men as interlocutors and leaders, as they are the ones who negotiate with external organizations and manage resources. They are often also the ones who receive capacity-building, travel to other cities or abroad, and as such build a particular political and social capital that reinstates their positions of leaders (Jenkins 2017).

It is unlikely that the emphasis on women within the green agenda of the Church will bring a significant change to these gender inequalities. Invoking the image of Mary, women are only described for their charisma, caring capacity, and tenderness that keep communities together (Francis 2020). Moreover, in the working documents that were part of the Amazonian Synod, women are mainly valued for the reproductive work they perform within communities: "they instruct children and transmit faith and the Gospel, they inspire and support human development".³⁷ Women's qualities to disrupt, be leaders, exert autonomy over their own bodies, and break loose from the restrictive patriarchal power structures of their societies are not part of this discourse (Flores 2018). It also does not enable women to be part of the hierarchies of the Church and ignores the enormous difficulties that women activists experience in their work in a patriarchal society (Aquino 2002; Gebara 2008, 2017). As a female leader of an Ecuadorian indigenous organization illustrated the multiple, gendered struggles they have to confront: "First we have to deal with the *machismo* of our comrades. Second, we just have no time. We have our jobs, the care for our children and husbands, and now we also have to find time for *la lucha*? This an impossible task."³⁸

These difficulties are increasingly denounced by other indigenous women that are part of environmental struggles in Ecuador. In 2013, a group of Amazonian women called *Mujeres Amazónicas* (Amazonian Women) marched to the city of Puyo to denounce the interconnected layers of violence they experienced: that of an extractivist capitalist state, that of a racist nation-state, and that of the patriarchal society. They make visible the connection between their territory and their bodies, and how the struggle for territorial autonomy cannot be seen separate from their struggle for autonomy over their lives and bodies (Moreano Venegas and van Teijlingen 2021). Their demands include feminist claims for radical action against gender-based sexual violence and reproductive rights, while they seek to mobilize and support female leadership within their organizations and beyond.³⁹ These demands run against to the conservative position taken by the Catholic Church in debates about gender-related issues in Ecuador and beyond (Gebara 2017; Flores 2018), and are certainly not part of the “gift of women” envisioned by Pope Francis. The appraisal of women within the green Church’s discourse, how well intended it may seem, is thus rather more restrictive than emancipating.

5. Concluding Remarks on the “Church of the Poor and the Earth” in Mining Conflicts

Both the existing literature and my own research findings show that the role of Catholic discourses and actors play a considerable role in conflicts over mining. Catholic notions on the protection of God’s Creation and socio-environmental justice inspire activists, movements, civil society actors, and Church actors themselves to resist the expansion of mining and think of alternative ways of relating to nature. Church authorities, who enjoy high levels of trust among the population and leverage vis-à-vis governments, furthermore use their position to actively influence policies or give legitimacy to anti-mining protests. This also translates in flows of resources, organizational efforts, and material/legal support towards anti-mining movements that are often essential in the functioning of these movements. The progressive ‘greening’ of the Catholic Church emanating from the publication of *Laudato Si’* seems to only further strengthen the construction of the ‘Church of the Poor and the Earth’ in the context of mining conflicts. These findings evidence the need for a more structural engagement with religious ideas and actors by the scholarship on mining in Latin America.

My research on the role of Catholic ideas and actors, however, has also shown that such engagement should take other directions than those taken so far. Whereas the existing literature mainly points at the emancipatory influence of Catholic actors, this paper has nuanced this image on various points. First, I have shown that the ideas of God’s gift and God’s will are also being mobilized by those who defend the expansion of mining. Second, and more importantly, and I have shown that the influence of the Catholic Church in the recent history of internal colonization of Amazonian human and more-than-human worlds still endures in today’s mining conflicts. Although *Laudato Si’* and *Querida Amazonía* both show a renewed commitment to the role of indigenous people and women, the Catholic Church has not been able to undo this not-too-distant past. In fact, patriarchal power structures and the reproduction of the image of women as caring and reproductive beings that feminist theologians have denounced for decades are very much alive (Isherwood and McEwan 2001). Similarly, the paternalistic essentialization of indigenous cosmologies that find their roots in colonial times (Rohloff 2010) still undergird the discourse of the Church of the Poor and the Earth today. This limits the transformative or liberating nature of the ecological reorientation that the Catholic Church is currently undertaking, and stresses the importance of attending to the power relations that shape the role of the Church (Gebara 2008; Norget 2009, p. 93). These tensions and limitations should not be underestimated or overlooked by Church actors, nor by those who study them.

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Notes

¹ Although this debate falls outside the scope of this paper, it is worthwhile to mention that the narrative of ‘David vs. Goliath’ struggles that dominates the literature is increasingly being questioned. Various authors have sought to destabilize the image of transnational, capitalist companies pitted against unified, resistant local communities by pointing at the diverse community responses that mining yields (van Teijlingen 2019b; Gajardo 2021) or by reporting on community members setting up mining enterprises themselves (Marston and Perreault 2017; Lalander et al. 2020).

² The notion of the Church of the Poor comes from the work of Gustavo Gutierrez, a famous Peruvian liberation theologian (Nickoloff 1993), and has become a popular term to emphasize the Church’s concerns with the poor and socially marginalized promoted by Liberation Theologians (see Holden and Jacobson 2009 for a more elaborate account on the term).

³ The notion of ‘the Church of the Poor and the Earth’ that I use here and in the title of this article connects Gutierrez’ typification of the role of the Catholic Church with *Laudato Si’s* call to “hear the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor” (Francis 2015, p. 35). With references to ‘the Church of the Poor and the Earth’ I thus refer to the ambition of the Catholic Church to place ecological and social concerns at the centre of its agenda.

⁴ Abya Yala is the name indigenous people use to refer to the region that is now known as Latin America.

⁵ Other authors take this analysis further and look into the multiple ontologies that are at play in mining conflicts (de la Cadena 2015; Li 2013; Escobar 2016).

⁶ The role of religion, spirituality and rituals did receive some attention by anthropologists studying mining communities and labour situation in Latin American mines in the 1970s and 1980s (Taussig 1980; Nash 2001). Although these works have become important contributions to the literature on miners’ culture and popular Andean culture in general, I focus here on the literature on the boom of mining since the 2000s and related conflicts.

⁷ As Nair (2015) and Wilkins (2021) have pointed out, this disengagement with religion is not unique to the scholarship on mining; also within the broader field of political ecology religion is largely missing.

⁸ The moral conscience and authority that the Catholic Church enjoys across Latin America are often related to the Catholic Church’s key-role during the dictatorships, civil wars and state repression that swept Latin America during the 1960–1980s. Inspired by liberation theology, Church authorities in many countries stood up against oppressive regimes or functioned as impartial observers of peace negotiations (Barger 2018).

⁹ The synodal process took two years and involved a consultation with about 87,000 Amazonian people and the participation of indigenous and women groups. In 2019, the world’s bishops as well as involved organizations met in Rome for 3 weeks as to discuss the final document of the synodal process, titled ‘The Amazon: New paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology’ (Duncan 2020).

¹⁰ The Catholic Church’s interest in reconnecting with indigenous groups and with environmental concerns should also be seen within the context of expansion of the Evangelism across the continent, and the competition between both religions for the ‘hearts and minds’ of particularly indigenous communities that this expansion has ensued (Berry and Albro 2018; Hagopian 2009).

¹¹ See <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2019-10/synthesis-synod-eighth-general-congregation.html>; (accessed on 12 August 2021). The increased openness to indigenous cosmologies shown during the Amazonian Synod has led to fierce critique by more conservative forces within the Church on whether or not this implied idolatry (Duncan 2020).

¹² “A Radical Vatican?” by Naomi Klein in the New Yorker, published 10 July 2015. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-visit-to-the-vatican>; (accessed on 24 July 2021).

¹³ “Year-old Laudato Si’ has stirred up action for Earth” by the National Catholic Reporter, published 16 June 2016. <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/encyclical-boost-year-old-laudato-si-has-stirred-action-earth>; (accessed on 21 July 2021).

¹⁴ See the petition titled “Contra Recentia Sacrilegia. Protest against Pope Francis’s sacrilegious acts” launched in 2019. <https://www.contrarecentiasacrilegia.org/>; (accessed on 23 July 2021).

¹⁵ See <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/earthbeat/eco-catholic/francis-mining-industry-need-radical-paradigm-change>; (accessed on 10 August 2021).

¹⁶ *Buen Vivir* is also referred to as the Good Living or *Sumak Kawsay* (in Kichwa). With origins in indigenous cosmologies, this concept sets forth a way of living in harmony with Pachamama that is presented as an alternative to mainstream development. See (Lalander 2016; Beling et al. 2021) for further debates about Buen Vivir.

¹⁷ Interview with Gloria Chicaiza in Quito, May 2012.

¹⁸ Interview with leader of a peasant group opposing the Mirador project, Gualaquiza.

- 19 Interview with indigenous leader in Tundayme, January 2015.
- 20 President Rafael Correa during an inaugural speech of a school in Huaquillas, April 2010.
- 21 See van Teijlingen (2016) for a more in-depth analysis of the historical origins and present-day expressions of these sentiments.
- 22 Interview with a male mestizo peasant, El Pangui, October 2015.
- 23 Letter by the Vicariate of Zamora, issued in May 2014.
- 24 Interview with mestizo man and woman and one of the first settlers of San Marcos, August 2015.
- 25 See for more detailed description of this counter-territorialization van Teijlingen (2019a).
- 26 Address to the national congress in 1871 by President García Moreno. See Esvertit Cobes (2001, p. 559) for full quote.
- 27 The words of Padre José Manuel Plaza and Friar José Preto cited by Celi Jaramillo (1998) and Rubenstein (2002), respectively.
- 28 Once “acculturated”, alumni were seen as key actors in multiplying the efforts of the mission, as they were encouraged to return to their homes to build new chapels and create “centres” of converted Shuar across the region (Rubenstein 2005).
- 29 Interview with a Shuar man from the surroundings of El Pangui, November 2015. To recruit students, missionaries often resorted to ‘kidnapping’ Shuar children. This forced separation of children from their families was legitimized by the “low morality” that the missionaries found within Shuar families (Salazar 1989, p. 64).
- 30 Examples of these are the Shuar association Pueblo Shuar Arutam (PSHA), Interprovincial Federation of Shuar Centres (FICSH), Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE) and Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE).
- 31 Interviews with colono men from El Pangui and Guisime (including local government officials) in November 2014, January 2014, October 2015 and November 2015.
- 32 Interviews with a Shuar woman from the Mirador community, October 2015, and a Shuar woman from Tundayme, November 2015.
- 33 This is exemplified by the case of José Tendetza, a Shuar man and critic of the Mirador mine who was found death in 2014. The local police initially buried him in an anonymous grave. When his family demanded the exhumation of the corpse, they found out that his hands and legs had been tied together with a rope, and his body revealed traces of a violent death. Only then did the police start to investigate the murder but it has remained unsolved up to the writing of this article.
- 34 This finding is in line with (Rohloff 2010) critique on liberation theologians in Guatemala.
- 35 *Querida Amazonía* does refer to the history of colonization in the Amazon, and also admits that “the wheat was mixed with the tares, and that the missionaries did not always take the side of the oppressed” (p. 15). The document however mainly emphasizes the ‘emancipatory’ and almost heroic role of missionaries in the history of colonization: “many missionaries came to bring the Gospel, leaving their homes and leading an austere and demanding life alongside those who were most defenceless. [. . .] It was often the priests who protected the indigenous peoples from their plunderers and abusers . . . ” (Francis 2020, pp. 14–15).
- 36 Interview with settler woman and her son, November 2014.
- 37 Paragraph 101 of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, published by the Vatican in June 2018. See: <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html>; (accessed on 20 July 2021).
- 38 Personal communication, June 2020.
- 39 See their letter to the President here: <https://amazonwatch.org/assets/files/2018-03-mandate-from-amazonian-women-grassroots-defenders.pdf>; (accessed on 12 June 2021).

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