

El Salvador Catholic Church supports a gang truce rejected by government

by [Magally Zelaya](#) in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* El Salvador's Catholic Church has been openly engaging in talks with gang members, raising hopes that a truce reached by gang leaders earlier this year will have the support it needs to curb violence in a country with one of the highest murder rates in the world.

“Dialogue should be open to everyone, and everyone has to be an actor in this peace process,” said auxiliary bishop Gregorio Rosa Chávez after mass at the Metropolitan Cathedral on February 8. “No one can be excluded.”

This is the first time the church has come out in full support of starting a dialogue with the gangs. While one bishop was heavily involved in a 2012 gang truce facilitated by the government, the church was divided on its involvement and eventually denounced the truce. Its latest call for support is giving some hope that this agreement can bring about a more tenable solution and lasting peace.

“In this equation, I think they’re the only partner with enough credibility to make it happen,” said Héctor Silva, a Salvadoran author and research fellow at American University. “They have the authority and the good will to engage honestly in the pursuit of a real solution.”

The seeds of such a solution may already be in place. On January 17, El Salvador’s biggest gangs—including MS-13 and Barrio 18—reached a “unilateral” truce without government brokering.

Murder rates immediately dropped by almost half, averaging 7.6 a day between January 18 and January 29 compared to 14.1 for the first two weeks of 2015.

“You can’t keep ignoring the gangs as they can be an important part of the solution,” said gang leaders in their joint statement on the truce.

The left-wing FMLN government, however, is holding firm to its official position that it “does not negotiate with any criminal groups.”

President Salvador Sánchez Cerén said gang members “are outside the law, they are lawbreakers, and so our duty is to pursue them and punish them.”

The government has since approved a new policy that allows police to shoot gang members “without fear of consequences.”

In part, this hard-line stance comes in response to the high murder toll at the beginning of the year, which included seven policemen.

Bishop Rosa Chávez took pains to emphasize that these new talks with gang members are just that, talks.

“The word *negotiation* does not enter into our vocabulary, it absolutely does not enter. The word *dialogue* does,” he said.

That word is enough to make a difference, said Jeanne Ridders of FESPAD, a Salvadoran human rights organization. She said the truce will not be sustainable without government participation. But she thinks the church’s decision to embrace a discussion with gang members will influence how much support the government gives.

“It’s setting a new tone that this isn’t a political issue; it’s a moral issue, it’s a social issue, it’s a human rights issue,” Ridders said. “And for the church to play that role is very important.”