

## Archbishop Bernardito Auza: The Mission of the Church in favor of Indigenous Peoples as an option from Laudato Si'



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**A Synodal Response from the Amazon Region and Other Biomes:**

**Essential Territories for the Care of our Common Home”**

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***The Mission of the Church in favor of Indigenous Peoples  
as an option from Laudato Si’  
(actions within the framework of the United Nations)***

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Participants in this International Conference,

Dear Friends,

It is a joy for me to participate in this international conference on integral ecology for the care of our common home throughout the world, and in a particular way, in the Amazon.

When the Catholic Church speaks about an integral ecology, we link not merely concern for our planet, but for all our brothers and sisters on this planet, our roommates in our common home. Pope Francis made clear in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* that "we are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis that is both social and environmental" (139). Therefore, he said, the Church's "true ecological approach" is necessarily a "social approach," hearing and responding to "both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (49).

When Pope Francis spoke to the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2015, he spoke in depth about this integral ecology, one linking environmental, economic, social, human and cultural ecology. "We human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it," he said. "Any harm done to the environment, therefore," he continued, "is harm done to humanity." He stressed that the misuse and destruction of the environment often comes from a defective anthropology, one that fails to see and respect the full dignity of others and to include them in decisions affecting them. This "relentless process of ... economic and social exclusion," this "selfish and boundless thirst for power and material prosperity," he noted, "leads both to the misuse of available natural resources and to the exclusion of the weak and disadvantage." It is a "complete denial of human fraternity and a grave offense of human rights and the environment," impacting the poor most of all and treating them as refuse in a "widespread and quietly growing 'culture of waste.'" The Holy Father minced no words in calling all government leaders to go beyond declarations and verbal commitments to taking effective, practical concrete steps both to preserve and improve the natural environment and to end as quickly as possible the phenomenon of social and economic exclusion. The diplomatic corps of the Holy See in general, and the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations in New York in particular, are trying to catalyze our institutions to be truly effective in the struggle against this two-fold scourge.

I have been asked to speak to you today about the mission of the Church in favor of indigenous peoples in light of *Laudato Si'* and United Nations frameworks. Thus, my talk will be basically divided into two parts: the first part will be the words and actions of Pope Francis toward the indigenous peoples, and second the indigenous peoples in the United Nations framework.

So, first, Pope Francis and the Indigenous Peoples:

Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* called all of us to "show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions" (146) not merely out of defense for their rights but in recognition of how much indigenous peoples have to teach the world about the integrated ecology that the Church

vigorously proclaims as part of the Gospel of Creation. For indigenous peoples, the Holy Father declared, “land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space” by which they “maintain their identity and values” and that they “care for it best” (146). He praised their “greater sense of responsibility, strong sense of community, readiness to protect others, spirit of creativity and deep love for the land” that they hope to “leave to their children and grandchildren” (179). They exemplify the wonder and gratitude for Creation, the value for all creatures, the respect for the common good and the common destination of goods, the lines of proper ecological conversion and ecological education that the Holy Father underlines elsewhere in the encyclical.

Special care for indigenous communities is nevertheless needed, Pope Francis emphasizes, because their lives, communities, and cultural traditions are gravely endangered. On various occasions, especially during his visits to Latin America, the Pope has expressed his desire “to be a spokesman for the deepest longings of indigenous peoples” and to cry out like a prophet about the fact that indigenous peoples continue to be “threatened in their identity and even in their existence.” He has sought to be a voice crying in the wilderness about how their lands, culture, rights and dignity are being overlooked, sacrificed or even trampled for the economic interests of others. These thoughts of Pope Francis apply in a particular way to the vast region of the Amazon, the largest tropical forest in the world, covering 2.1 million square miles and nine countries, embracing 2.8 million indigenous people, 390 indigenous tribes, 240 spoken languages and as yet 137 uncontacted peoples.

When Pope Francis went to Brazil in 2013, he accentuated the sense of responsibility and commitment that the Catholic Church has for the peoples and lands of the panamazonian region. The Church’s presence in the Amazon, he said, is “not that of someone with bags packed and ready to leave after having exploited everything possible. The Church [rather] has been present in the Amazon Basin from the beginning, in her missionaries, religious congregations, priests, laity and Bishops and she is still present and critical to the area’s future.” Nevertheless, he continued, the “Church’s work needs to be further encouraged and launched afresh,” especially through the training of Church workers, native teachers and clergy “suited to local conditions and committed to consolidating, as it were, the Church’s ‘Amazonian face.’” He urged everyone to be courageous in these efforts. The upcoming Synod on the Amazon, focused on “new paths for the Church and for integral ecology,” is an opportunity to show this Amazonian face to the world, to appreciate its beauty, to behold its suffering, to assuage its tears, and to embolden its determination in the face of existential threats.

Last year Pope Francis visited the Amazon and met personally with indigenous peoples in Puerto Maldonado, Peru, the gateway to the Amazon jungle. We have here His Eminence Pedro Cardinal Barreto Jimeno, who was practically the Pope’s guide during that visit. He should be the one to tell us what the Holy Father said during his visit in Puerto Maldonado regarding the situation of the indigenous peoples in that area. I would, however, cite a passage from what the Holy Father said there. After listening at length to the indigenous explain their needs and hopes, he spoke, seeking to awaken the consciences of those across the world to what is happening to the peoples of the region. “The native Amazonian peoples,” he emphasized, “have probably never been so threatened on their own lands as they are at present.” He spoke of two particular challenges they face.

The first comes, he said, from what he termed “neo-extractivism and the pressure being exerted by great business interests that want to lay hands on its petroleum, gas, lumber, gold and forms of agro-industrial monocultivation.” This new wave of extractive exploitation, he said, also leads to a “devastating assault on life linked to [the] environmental contamination [fostered] by illegal mining.”

The second challenge, he underlined, comes from “the distortion of certain policies aimed at the ‘conservation’ of nature without taking into account the men and women... who inhabit it.” He was describing “movements that, under the guise of preserving the forest, hoard great expanses of woodland and negotiate with them, leading to situations of oppression for the native peoples; as a

result, they lose access to the land and its natural resources [as] these problems strangle [indigenous] peoples and provoke the migration of the young due to the lack of local alternatives.” He clamored against the tendency of some environmental conservationists to reduce indigenous cultures to an “idealized image of a natural state, much less a kind of museum of a bygone way of life.” Such an approach to keep the Amazon as a museum for ecological tourism, he underlined, doesn’t help the situation of the indigenous peoples. The peoples themselves, and not just their lands, need to be defended and promoted.

Doing so, he said, involves first breaking “the historical paradigm that views Amazonia as an inexhaustible source of supplies for other countries without concern for its inhabitants.” As he wrote in *Laudato Si’*, we cannot ignore “the huge global economic interests that, under the guise of protecting them, can undermine the sovereignty of individual nations” and serve only “the economic interests of transnational corporations.” All of us must, he said, “draw public attention to these issues,” “offer critical cooperation,” employ “legitimate means of pressure” and help each government to carry out “its proper and inalienable responsibility to preserve its country’s environment and natural resources, without capitulating to spurious local or international interests.”

The second element is “to acknowledge the existence of promising initiatives coming from [indigenous] communities and organizations [themselves], which advocate that the native peoples and communities themselves be the guardians of the woodlands,” and which trust in their “capacity for resilience and ... ability to respond to these difficult times.” This is the crucial work done by groups like REPAM and other networks to respond to and redress the violation of indigenous rights and to support and accompany indigenous peoples, particularly those who are most excluded and in need, with courage and determination as they assert those rights and assume their responsibilities to serve as guardians of their lands and cultures.

In this defense of indigenous peoples, cultures and lands, the peoples of the region and the Catholic Church with its Amazonian face are certainly not alone. The United Nations is very concerned and involved.

So, in this second part of my talk, I would like to highlight four ways with which the United Nations see the indigenous peoples and the issues dear to them.

The first is through the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, which is held for two weeks each year in late April or early May.

The UN people love it for many reasons, not least for its color and folklore, so much so that it is popularly called the “most colorful” fortnight of the UN year, as indigenous leaders from all over the world, often in traditional dress, come to New York with a mandate to discuss indigenous issues under six headings: economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health and human rights. The PFII, as it is called, was established in July 2000 by the UN’s Economic and Social Council to provide expert advice and recommendations to ECOSOC and through it to UN agencies, programs and funds on these six themes.

The Holy See participates actively in the Permanent Forum, often intervening in the general debate, attending the many side events held by Member States, NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, and often sponsoring conferences ourselves with REPAM and other groups from the region, giving indigenous leaders a forum to voice their concerns.

In 2017, the Holy See sponsored an event entitled, “People First: Indigenous Communities Accompanied by Faith Based Organizations: Protection for Integral Human Development,” in which Chief Arnaldo Kaba Munduruku of the Sawre Muybu Village in Brazil, and Archbishop Gustavo

Rodríguez of Yucatán, Mexico, joined UN Special Rapporteur Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, REPAM's Mauricio Lopez and me, in focusing on what is happening among the indigenous communities of Brazil, Mexico and beyond.

Last year, the Holy See Mission held a conference, entitled, "Violation of Human Rights in the Amazon: Networks to Respond to and Redress them," in which indigenous speakers from the Dordillera de Cóndor in Ecuador, the Awajún Ingenous Community of Peru, joined Ms. Tauli-Corpuz and me in focusing on the harm being done by extractive industries in their communities and what the international community needed to know and do about it.

During the upcoming Permanent Forum, we intend to sponsor a conference dedicated specifically on steps needed to be taken toward an integral ecology, responding to the urgent cries and horizons of the Amazon region, which will also be an occasion for us to inform the UN community and indigenous leaders across the globe about what to expect from the Synod this October.

These events are always televised on UN WebTV and are available on demand via the website of the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See, which is [holyseemission.org](http://holyseemission.org), which I would urge you to view. In each of the events, we bring experts from the region to focus on what is really happening in order to inform and transform, to catalyze action, in line with the needs, rights and cries of the peoples of the region, and the responsibilities corresponding to those rights on behalf of governments and the international community.

The second major way the U.N. has fostered the protection and promotion of indigenous peoples is through the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This Declaration, adopted overwhelmingly on September 13, 2007, was the culmination of 25 years of patient and persistent advocacy and work and is the most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of indigenous peoples, including a universal framework of minimal standards for their survival, dignity and well-being. Like all political declarations, it is not legally binding, but provides an interpretation and application to indigenous circumstances of human rights enshrined in binding human rights instruments and therefore serves as a guide to the development of national, regional and international legal norms. It has 23 preambular clauses and 46 articles, defining a long list of the rights of indigenous peoples. Because this is one of the most historic achievements in the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples, it is important for us to be aware of how thorough these acknowledged rights are. So please permit me to list them, because the international community has committed itself to defend and promote each one:

Indigenous persons and peoples have the right, the Declaration affirms, to all those rights enshrined in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights law; to be free from any kind of discrimination; to self-determination, autonomy and self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs; to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions; to participate fully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State; to a nationality; to life, physical and mental integrity, liberty and security of person; to not be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture; to belong to an indigenous community or nation, in accordance with the traditions and customs of the community or nation concerned; to not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories; to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs; to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies; to maintain, protect, and have access in privacy to their religious and cultural sites; to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures; to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons; to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own language; to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination; to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination;

to enjoy fully all rights established under applicable international and domestic labour law; to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights; to maintain and develop their political, economic and social systems or institutions and to engage freely in all their traditional and other economic activities; to determine and develop priorities and strategies for exercising their right to development; to maintain their traditional medicines and health practices as well as to access, without any discrimination, to all social and health services; to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas; to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired; to fair, independent, impartial, open and transparent processes for the adjudication of their rights and to participate in this process; to redress, restitution, or when impossible, fair and equitable compensation for their traditional lands, territories and resources that have been confiscated or damaged without their free, prior and informed consent; to the conservation and protection of the environment and the productive capacity of their lands or territories and resources; to be free of military activities in their lands and territories, unless justified by relevant public interest or otherwise agreed to; to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions and have control over their intellectual property; to determine and develop priorities and strategies for the development or use of their lands or territories and other resources; to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions; to promote, develop and maintain their institutional structures and their distinctive customs, spirituality, traditions, procedures, practices, and juridical systems, in accordance with international human rights standards; to determine the responsibilities of individuals to their communities; to develop contacts, relations and cooperation, including activities for spiritual, cultural, political, economic and social purposes, with their own members across international borders; to the recognition, observance and enforcement of treaties, agreements and other constructive arrangements concluded with States or their successors and to have States honour and respect such treaties; to have access to financial and technical assistance from States and through international cooperation; to access just and fair procedures for the resolution of conflicts and disputes with States or other parties, as well as to effective remedies for all infringements of their individual and collective rights.

In brief, it is a comprehensive list on their rights to self-determination, to protect their culture, to self-govern and participate in their economic, environmental, social, human and cultural development, to health, and to land rights. It serves as the most comprehensive references for states and the international community.

The third means of UN concern for indigenous peoples and lands is through the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This takes place in Geneva under the supervision of the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights. It is a subsidiary expert mechanism of the Human Rights Council with a specific mandate to provide thematic expertise on the rights of indigenous peoples to the Human Rights Council, which is the UN's main human rights body, and to assist Member States, upon request, in achieving the ends of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The fourth UN institution I would mention does not need much introduction, because the person directly responsible is here with us. I am referring to the office of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and Rapporteur Victoria Tauli-Corpus. She happens to be from the Philippines like myself.

This office was founded in 2001 by the then UN Commission on Human Rights, now the UN Human Rights Council, in order to promote good practices, including new laws, government programs, and constructive agreements between indigenous peoples and states, to implement international standards concerning the rights of indigenous peoples, to report on the overall human rights situation of indigenous peoples in specific countries, to address specific cases of alleged violations of the rights of indigenous peoples through communications with governments and other involved parties, and to conduct thematic studies on topics of special importance regarding the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples.

Since 2014, the Special Rapporteur has been Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, an indigenous leader from the Kankana-ey Igorot people of the Cordillera Region of the Philippines, who spoke to us this morning, and who was the former Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the chairperson of the Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations, and was actively engaged in drafting and the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Special Rapporteur is asked to work in close cooperation with the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and to participate in its annual session as well as to attend and contribute to the annual meeting of the UN Human Rights Council's Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Holy See in particular, and the Catholic Church in general, through scores of Catholic-inspired NGOs, interact with the Special Rapporteur in the fulfillment of her mandate.

I would like to conclude the second part of my talk by underlining four emphases of the Holy See in our official statements on indigenous issues before the United Nations. These highlight what we believe are neuralgic issues in the implementation of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in other words, rights that, while defined, are not yet fully enjoyed by indigenous persons and peoples.

The first emphasis is the harmonization of their right to cultural and social development alongside their economic development. This tension is especially clear when economic activities are planned that interfere with indigenous people's cultures and their ancestral relationship to the earth and to nature and when not properly managed lead to confrontation and conflict of interests. This is also a potential cause of tensions even among and within indigenous communities themselves, because many times it would appear that they must forego or resist economic development to preserve their ancestral lands and their cultural rights.

The second is the "prior and informed consent" of indigenous peoples for initiatives that affect them, be they government initiatives or private sector projects, as specified by Article 32 of the Declaration. Indigenous peoples should be treated as dignified partners, both within this United Nations system and in their relationship with States and society at large. The just demand of the indigenous peoples that nothing should be done about them without them should be given utmost consideration. The Holy See has praised those national policies that require consultations with, and the informed consent of, indigenous peoples before development projects in their ancestral lands are approved and implemented.

The third is respect for their indigenous identity in participation at the local and national levels. In various places, there is lack of respect for this identity, which can lead to marginalization and a lack of integration into society, leaving them behind.

The fourth is the collective right of indigenous peoples to their lands and resources. This not only provides a guarantee that their voices are heard, but that they be given the political, economic and social space necessary to affirm their identity and to become agents of their own development and destiny.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the Church has a mission before the nations of the world to be salt, light and leaven not only with regard to the mystery of salvation but also to the gift of creation, the earth and the seas and all they contain, pronounced by God as good, and especially the gift of each other, made in God's image, and pronounced by him as very good.

The exegesis of the Book of Genesis is complemented by the exegesis of the book of nature, which shows us the one and indivisible link between our care for our common home and the care for our roommates, our brothers and sisters, in that common home. Integral ecology is fundamental part of the Church's proclamation of the Gospel and the concrete exercise of charity. And to proclaim it well, we have an urgent need for a new solidarity, between developed and developing nations, between young and old, right and left, rich and poor, between immigrants and indigenous peoples.

In a particular way, we need the solidarity with the indigenous peoples everywhere and in particular in the Amazon, which Pope Francis calls in *Laudato Si'* the "richly biodiverse lungs of our planet," crucial "for the entire earth and for the future of humanity" (38). Like people sharing an oxygen tank underwater, the indigenous peoples of the Amazon and the peoples of the world need to breathe together for each to survive and thrive.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.