

Synod for the Amazonia and Human Rights: Peoples, Communities and States in Dialogue



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Pope Francis addressed the following words to the indigenous peoples of the Amazonian region: "The Church is not alien to your problems and your lives, she does not want to be aloof from your way of life and organization. We need the native peoples to shape the culture of the local Church in Amazonia." [1]

Starting from the fundamental premises of dialogue and the quest for the common good, the upcoming Special Synod for the Amazon wishes to contribute to the development of new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology. The objective is to create the conditions that will allow the peoples who live in the vast and important Amazonian territory to live with dignity and to look to the future with confidence, always in the framework of mutual respect and recognition of their differentiated and complementary responsibilities as social, political and religious protagonists.

The Synod for the Amazon and, more widely, the mission of the Church in this territory are in fact expressions of a significant accompaniment to the daily life of the peoples and communities who live there. The presence of the Church can in no way be considered a threat to the stability or sovereignty of individual countries. On the contrary, it is actually a prism that makes it possible to identify the fragile points in the responses by States and societies as such, in the face of urgent situations, with regard to which, independently of the Church, there are concrete and historical needs that cannot be evaded.

On the other hand, the opportunity to look at the identity of these peoples and at their ability to protect ecosystems according to their cultural traditions and worldview can enable our non-Amazonian societies to create appropriate conditions for appreciating, respecting and learning from them. In this way we endeavor to overcome the misconception that this territory is an empty or "backward" space;

indeed, we will draw useful guidelines from it to identify the reason for our own failures as a society with regard to caring for our “common home.”

In this regard the Church can make a contribution on the basis of an historically long and legitimate presence (despite the shadows and with her particular lights), and with her projection toward a future presence with a long-term vision.

We hope that on the basis of these premises some governments will overcome ingrained suspicion and listen more carefully to the often unheard and urgent appeals coming from the territory. Here, the Church wants to be a companion along the way and a spokesperson, Samaritan and prophet, as stated in Part III of the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod.

In this moment of singular importance in which the pope has convened the special Synod, we can say that the Working Document, presented on June 17, is an expression of the voice of the people of God. In fact, an extensive consultation process across this territory was carried out in order to broaden the participation by members of the local population and people of the Church, through assemblies, thematic forums and debates, reaching over 87,000 people (22,000 in events organized by the *Red eclesial panamazónica* [REPAM][2] and about 65,000 in the preparatory stages) in the nine countries involved with the Amazon Basin.[3] Therefore, the document largely expresses the feelings and desires of multiple representatives of the Amazon people.[4]

This is an unprecedented experience for a special Synod, and it is therefore – without losing sight of the fact that it is an eminently ecclesial event – a good indicator of what is happening in this territory. We believe that the expression of this wealth can bring, beyond any suspicious position, elements for a better understanding of a reality that is crying out for attention.

Vulnerability and the importance of the region

Historically, the Amazon basin was seen as a space to be occupied and divided for the benefit of external interests. In fact, at first this region was considered an unoccupied territory. Once its natural resources were discovered, it began to be considered as a region of considerable economic potential. However, Amazonia continues to be perceived as backward, a world cut off from the urban centers, one that represents a demographic void: these are connotations that allow the interests of certain groups to consider it available for development, while its riches in terms of culture, fauna and flora are often rendered invisible.

The area covers a total expanse of about 7.5 million square kilometers. It is divided between eight South American countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela), plus the overseas territory of French Guyana. It accounts for 43 percent of the surface area of South America. The Amazon region is home to 20 percent of the earth's fresh, unfrozen water. It is home to 34 percent of the primary forests of the planet, which in turn are home to between 30 percent and 40 percent of the world's flora and fauna.

It is a biome, i.e. a living system, which acts as a regional and global climate stabilizer, keeping the air humid. And it receives a third of the rainfall that nourishes the Earth. It reflects great social diversity since it is inhabited by about 2.8 million indigenous people who belong to 390 peoples, 137 of which are isolated or without external contacts; 240 languages are spoken there, belonging to 49 different linguistic families. Its inhabitants number around 33 million.

Pope Francis knows the Amazonian peoples and the questions they ask. He has said: “The native Amazonian peoples have probably never been so threatened on their own lands as they are at present. Amazonia is being disputed on various fronts. On the one hand, there is neo-extractivism

and the pressure being exerted by major business interests that want to lay hands on its petroleum, gas, wood, gold and to establish forms of agro-industrial monocultivation.

On the other hand, its lands are being threatened by the distortion of certain policies aimed at the 'conservation' of nature without taking into account the men and women, specifically you, my Amazonian brothers and sisters, who inhabit it... I consider it essential to begin creating institutional expressions of respect, recognition and dialogue with the native peoples, acknowledging and recovering their native cultures, languages, traditions, rights and spirituality. An intercultural dialogue in which you yourselves will be 'the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting your land are proposed' (*Laudato Si'* [LS], 146). Recognition and dialogue will be the best way to transform relationships whose history is marked by exclusion and discrimination.”[5]

The Church in the Amazonian basin

In the context of the Amazon, the Church, from the beginning, has gone out to meet cultures, with lights and shadows. Following the Gospel command, it accompanies the rhythm with which the poorest people proceed. In these realities one perceives the missionary vitality of the Church in the Amazon. This portion of the planet is the biome in which life is expressed in its extraordinary diversity as a gift of God to all those who inhabit it and to all humanity. However, it is an increasingly devastated and threatened territory.

According to the social doctrine of the Church, the mission of every Christian includes a prophetic commitment to justice, peace, the dignity of every human being without distinction, and to the integrity of creation in response to a predominant model of society that leads to exclusion and inequality and causes what Pope Francis has called a real “culture of waste” and a “globalization of indifference.”

As already mentioned, in addition to being “a source of life in the heart of the Church” and one of the territories of greatest biodiversity in the world, this biome is also a place where for centuries numerous cultures have thrived. But now they see their existence and identity threatened by the strongly neo-extractivist model imposed today.[6]

With all the means at the Church's disposal, with legitimacy at the local, regional and international levels, with her historical perspective and with a view to the future, the Church can collaborate with all government institutions, with civil society organizations and especially with peoples themselves, in the certainty that the promotion, defense and enforceability of human rights are in the genuine interest of all.

Together, for the sake of the indigenous peoples, we are all called, each in his or her own space, to create the conditions for the “serene future” to which Pope Francis referred in summoning this special Synod. He wrote in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*: “A consumerist vision of human beings, encouraged by the mechanisms of today's globalized economy, has a levelling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity... There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process that takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their own culture” (LS 144).

This must lead us to reflect on the need to seek and find new ways of harmonizing respect for human rights and the environment with economic, social and productive development. With this in mind, we feel called to seek a model of development that takes into account the intercultural reality of the Amazon and ensures the protection of the assets of creation.

The pope has written: “In this sense, it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions... For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and

from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. Nevertheless, in various parts of the world, pressure is being put on them to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects that are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture” (LS 146).

To this end, in September 2014, the *Red eclesial panamazónica* (REPAM) was created, which received the approval of the Holy See by means of a letter from Pope Francis, sent through Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State. It states: “We cannot live alone, closed in on ourselves... Only in this way, thanks to the network, can Christian witness reach the human existential peripheries, allowing the Christian leaven to fertilize and advance the living cultures of the Amazon and their values.”

States, foreign companies and rights of peoples in Pan-Amazonia

Decades of pastoral experience and more recent initiatives such as REPAM help us understand that those responsible include not only the countries where the extractive industries are active, but also some foreign companies and their countries of origin, namely, those that support and encourage extractive investment, public or private, outside their national borders, taking advantage of the wealth of the land at the cost of a devastating impact on the Amazon environment and its inhabitants.

Most of the States in this territory have signed the main international conventions on human rights and related instruments associated with the rights of indigenous peoples and the care of the environment. We are therefore sure that they will commit themselves to observing them. The Church desires to be a bridge and collaborator in order to achieve this goal, aimed at the good of each of the countries that encompass this territory, that is, the worthy and full life of the peoples who live there and the care of this ecosystem, which is essential for the present and for the future of the planet.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (approved on September 13, 2007), to which the pope has referred on several occasions, contains important rights such as the right to self-determination, by virtue of which those peoples freely decide their political status and freely pursue their own economic, social and cultural development (Art. 3). In exercising their right to self-determination, indigenous peoples may claim autonomy in matters concerning their internal and local affairs (Art. 4). And in Article 6 of Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of 1989, we see their right not to be subject to legislative or administrative measures that may directly affect them without first having been consulted “in good faith and in a form appropriate to the circumstances,” so that they give their free, informed and prior consent.

We particularly welcome the fact that the following countries have ratified ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples: Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru and Venezuela. Similarly, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, France (French Guyana), Peru, Suriname and Venezuela voted in favor of the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

As for the firm response to climate change, which is an unavoidable global ecological crisis, all the nations in the Amazon basin are signatories to the Paris Agreement, and we are convinced of their commitment with their respective contributions planned and determined at the national level. On the other hand, given the “climate emergency”[7] we are facing today, we must ask much more of them, just as the whole of society must operate much more effectively for this same purpose. Maintaining this ecosystem is essential to achieving the objectives of the Paris Accord. Pope Francis himself observes that the native peoples “when they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best” (LS 146).

At the national level, some Amazonian states have progressively included in their constitutions these same rights to free and informed prior consultation. They have also developed environmental standards to reduce deforestation and created mechanisms to ensure respect for natural resources and the recognition of indigenous lands for ancestral possession. On the other hand, and this must be clearly stated, there are serious limits and, in some cases, there is a lack of effective commitment and explicit willingness to implement these plans.

At the same time, indigenous small-farming populations and other grassroots sectors in each country have developed political and organizational processes that focus on agendas with legitimate rights that must be recognized and respected if they fall under the rule of law.

Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation or free peoples

Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation (PIAV) must be considered with the utmost care because of their high degree of vulnerability, their specific anthropological condition, and the need to protect them from any process that may result in a violation of their human rights. Pope Francis has said: “Their primitive lifestyle made them isolated even from their own ethnic groups; they went into seclusion in the most inaccessible reaches of the forest in order to live in freedom. Continue to defend these most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters. Their presence reminds us that we cannot use goods meant for all as consumerist greed dictates.”[8]

The need to protect them is a fundamental ethical requirement, which for the Church translates into a moral imperative consistent with the perspective of integral ecology proposed by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’*.

Let us make the challenge our own

As a Church, following the appeals of the pontiff and desiring communion among all our societies, we want to live a “culture of encounter” in the Amazon with the indigenous peoples, with the communities that inhabit the banks of the rivers, the Afro-descendants, the small farmers, the residents of the cities, the communities of faith, and establish a respectful and constructive dialogue with other religions and political and social entities.

In this spirit, the official representatives of the Holy See and of REPAM accompany the members of the peoples and communities of the Amazon in various international and regional spheres of the United Nations system so that they may present their concerns about particular situations.

As for us members of the Catholic Church in the Amazon, we want to be living witnesses to hope and cooperation. We want to continue to provide an evangelizing service rooted in the fertile soil where our Amazon peoples and their cultures live. In this sense, as an ecclesial event, the Synod can be an important sign of the effective response promoting justice and the defense of the dignity of the people most affected. In general, we believe that everyone – society, governments and the Church – must pay attention to these voices in order to assume more consistently our respective differentiated and potentially complementary responsibilities.

We want to make our own the enormous challenge that Pope Francis proposes to us when he says: “I believe that the essential problem is how to reconcile the right to development, including the social and cultural right, with the protection of the characteristics of the indigenous peoples and their territories. In this sense, the right to prior and informed consent should always prevail.”[9]

[1] Francis, *Meeting with Indigenous People of Amazonia*, Puerto Maldonado (Peru), January 19, 2018.

[2] REPAM is an entity co-founded by the regional institutions of the Catholic Church: CELAM (Council of Episcopal Conferences of Latin America), CLAR (Confederation of Latin American Religious), Caritas (the pastoral-charity arm of the Church in Latin America, CNBB (Episcopal Commission for the Amazon of the Bishops of Brazil), with the support of the Vatican Dicastery for the Service of Integral Human Development. It brings together all the different representatives of the Catholic Church who work in the pastoral accompaniment and integral defense of vulnerable groups (with special attention to indigenous peoples and other minorities) and their rights, and in the promotion of existential alternatives for peoples and communities that inhabit this territory. Cf. A. Spadaro, "Preparing for the Synod on Amazonia: An interview with Cardinal Claudio Hummes," *Civ. Catt. En.* May 2019, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/preparing-for-the-synod-on-amazonia-an-interview-with-cardinal-claudio-hummes/>

[3] Together with the direct consultation of the same Episcopal Conferences (and of the jurisdictions present on the territory) of the Amazonian countries.

[4] This text elaborates my speech at the meeting with the pontifical representatives and ambassadors of the countries that make up the Amazonian territory. The meeting took place at the Secretariat of State last June.

[5] Francis, *Meeting with Indigenous People of Amazonia*, *op. cit.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Francis, *Address to participants at the meeting promoted by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the theme "Energy transition & care of our common home,"* June 14, 2019.

[8] *Id.* , *Meeting with Indigenous People of Amazonia*, *op. cit.*

[9] *Id.* , *Address to representatives of indigenous peoples meeting in Rome for the 40th session of the Board of Governors of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)*, February 15, 2017.