

Synod on Amazonia: An interview with Cardinal Claudio Hummes



We present an interview with Cardinal Claudio Hummes made by Fr. Antonio Spadaro for the "Civiltà Cattolica"

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On October 15, 2017, Pope Francis announced a Special Synod on the Pan-Amazonian Region to take place in Rome with its main objective being to “find new paths for the evangelization of that portion of the people of God, particularly the indigenous people who are often forgotten and often face a bleak future due to the crisis of the Amazon rainforest, a fundamental lung for our planet.” The preparatory document was published on June 8, 2018.

The Synod on Amazonia is a major ecclesial project that seeks to overcome limits and redefine pastoral strategies, adapting them to contemporary times. The Pan-Amazonian Region consists of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Suriname, Guyana and French Guyana. It is an important source of oxygen for the entire world as it is home to more than a third of the primary forestry reserves of the Earth. It is one of the largest areas of biodiversity on the planet.

Bishops chosen from all over the world will come to the synod, including all the bishops of the Amazonian Region. Pope Francis has appointed as relator general Cardinal Claudio Hummes, archbishop emeritus of Sao Paulo, Brazil and a Franciscan. Another important figure is Jesuit Cardinal Pedro Barreto, the archbishop of Huancayo, Peru. They are respectively the president and vice president of *Red Eclesial Panamazónica* (REPAM), the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network.

This transnational network seeks to create a harmonious collaboration between the various components of the Church: ecclesial districts, religious congregations, charitable organizations and various associations, Catholic foundations and lay groups. Among its main objectives is the defense of the life of Amazonian communities threatened by pollution, by radical and rapid changes of the ecosystem on which they depend, and by the lack of protection for basic human rights.

On October 31, 2006, Cardinal Hummes was nominated by Pope Benedict XVI as prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy. In May 2007 he participated at the Fifth Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) at Aparecida, Brazil, as a member appointed by the pope. Today he is the

president of the Amazonia Commission of the Brazilian Bishops' Conference. Given his experience and activities we decided to have a conversation with him to explore the significance of this synod and its themes.

Your Eminence, the synod on the Amazon is drawing near. It will be a great ecclesial event concerning a specific and particular part of the world, which is an enormous and incredibly rich and complex area. For this reason, some people fear the upcoming synod might have repercussions on the unity of the Church. What is your opinion?

Today, much is said about the unity of the Church. It is of fundamental and utmost importance. However, it has to be understood as a unity that welcomes diversity, following the model of the Most Holy Trinity. That is, it is equally necessary to highlight that unity can never destroy diversity. Concretely, the synod accentuates the diversity within that great unity. Diversity is the richness of unity, protecting it against becoming uniformity, against providing justifications to control.

Is diversity important for the Church?

The Church is open to diversity today more than ever. The Latin American countries of the Pan-Amazonian region are an expression of Latin American diversity, which has to be welcomed by the Church in Europe and the whole world without fear and with a great openness. I want to underline this because this synod is a recognition of our peculiarity. I see it this way: the Church of Latin America can bring new lights to the European Church and to the world, while the Church in Europe has to give us ancient lights, which are very important.

Initially, Christianity found a place for inculturation in European culture, and this good process has remained valid up until today. But that one act of inculturation does not suffice. The pope says that one culture alone cannot exhaust the richness of the Gospel. The Church does not wish to dominate other cultures, but respects that initial European inculturation.

We have to appreciate the diversity of cultures: the Church will be enriched by this, not undermined. Diversity does not attack the unity of the Church; it strengthens it. It is important not to be afraid of these things. So, if we speak among ourselves and manage to find new paths for the Church in Amazonia, this will be for the benefit of the whole Church. But always starting from a specific reflection on Amazonia.

The REPAM network of Pan-Amazonia ecclesial organizations met with Pope Francis. Can you tell us something about that meeting and the new things, challenges and hopes that the Holy Father places in the synodal process?

Last February 25, Cardinal Pedro Barreto, Mauricio Lopez (REPAM's general secretary) and I met with the pope. We told him about the process of preparation for the synod on completion of the phase of listening and consulting with the particular Churches of the Pan-Amazonian Region. We told him about all the work done so far. In this synodal process, our network has truly sought to "listen" and not only "see, judge, act." Listening comes before everything else. To prepare a synod you need to listen, not just organize and make plans.

So the mark of the synod is its ability to listen and overcome the mentality of plans and frameworks?

To truly “see” you need to listen. It is not enough to analyze what Amazonia is, or who the Church in Amazonia is and what it does. The synod is not an abstract coming together, a generic idea. For us, we need to listen above all to the very people of Amazonia. Their real situations need to be listened to; their cries need to be heard. Methodologically, this effort has greatly enriched our seeing, judging and acting. Our “seeing” has not been the detached analysis of those who examine a situation without being involved. We truly listened.

And your conversation with the pope?

We asked the pope if he had any recommendations for us. He replied that, first, the specific synod objective should not be watered down. This must not become an occasion for discussing everything, following an ancient Latin saying that states with irony: *de omni re scibili et de quibusdam aliis* (“concerning every knowable thing, and even certain other things”). The synod, according to the pope, does not have the aim of treating every topic, every challenge and every need of the global Church. We should not lose sight of our concrete goal. It is clear that its entire process has and will have universal repercussions, but the synod has an aim that needs to be focused so as not to remain generic. Pope Francis was very clear on this: do not lose sight of the objective, which is Amazonia. “New paths for the Church” means new paths for the Church in Amazonia and new paths for an integral ecology in Amazonia. This theme marks out the limits of the aim of the synod.

Francis often speaks of new processes, of walking and not stopping to repeat the past, but adhering to a tradition that grows and lets others grow without having to repeat the same things. Will you achieve this? Is it possible?

We are not going to the synod just to repeat things that have already been said, however important, beautiful or theologically significant they may be! There is no need to have a synod just to say what has already been said. Synods serve to identify new paths when the need is perceived. We have a great need for new paths, not to fear new things, not to obstruct them, not to oppose them. We have to avoid bringing along old things as though they were more important than new ones. Old and new need to be wed; what is new must strengthen and encourage the path. The affirmation that the pope makes is very strong: we have to walk and go forward without resisting change.

Pope Francis told us that we have to have trust in the Spirit who goes before us. Since the beginning of his pontificate he has exhorted and encouraged the Church to rise up and not remain static, resting on the laurels of her theology and vision of things with a defensive attitude. The past is not set in stone; it has to be part of our story, of a tradition that opens toward the future. Every generation has to continue going forward to contribute to the wealth of this great tradition. Can we do so? We entrust ourselves to the work of the Spirit.

The past is also marked by colonial heritage...

Sure. And colonial behavior is one of the bigger recriminations that the indigenous peoples make against some Protestant Pentecostal communities that have come – and are still coming – to our land.

The pope denounces every form of neocolonialism and exhorts the Church not to adopt its spirit or practice in her evangelizing mission. The pope’s call is to not make the Church in Amazonia a colonizing presence, to not try to colonize indigenous peoples concerning their faith, their spirituality and their experience of God.

How does the Church position itself before indigenous peoples? How does it intend to evangelize them?

Inculturation of the faith and interreligious dialogue are necessary from the undoubted fact that God has always been present in the original indigenous peoples, in their specific forms and expressions and in their history. They already have their own experience of God, just like other ancient peoples of the world, particularly those of the Old Testament. All have had a history where God has been present, a beautiful experience of divinity, transcendence and a consequent spirituality. We Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the true salvation and definitive revelation that must enlighten all the peoples. The evangelization of the indigenous peoples has to aim to raise up an indigenous Church for the indigenous community: as far as they welcome Jesus Christ they must be able to express their faith through their culture, identity, history and spirituality.

What resistance is this vision of an indigenous Church facing in different spheres as we journey toward the synod?

There is resistance and misunderstanding. Some people feel themselves somehow under threat and believe their projects and ideologies are not being respected, above all, I would say, those projects to colonize Amazonia that are animated even today by a spirit of dominion and theft: they come, use and then depart with their bags full, leaving behind degradation and poverty for the people of the place, people who find themselves impoverished and with their territory devastated and contaminated.

Industry, agriculture and many other forms of production keep saying their activities are “sustainable.” But what does it really mean to be sustainable? It means that everything we extract from the ground or give back to the ground as waste cannot impede the earth from regenerating and remaining fertile and healthy.

It is very important to recognize such resistance both in the Church and outside it, for example in governments, in businesses and everywhere. We have to discern how to behave before such opposition, and know what to do.

Why is there such resistance? What causes it?

Economic interests and the technocratic paradigm oppose all effort to change and are ready to impose themselves with force, violating the basic human rights of the peoples in the territory and the norms for the sustainability and protection of Amazonia. But we should not give up. It will be necessary to protest. Not in a violent way, but certainly decisively and prophetically.

Is dialogue or an encounter possible?

We cannot fall into the naïve thought that says everyone wants to dialogue. It's not true! There are many people who are simply unwilling to do so. First, we need to protest and prophesy, but then we have to negotiate, debate, to reach agreement, and so perhaps we'll reach the point where the other will be prepared to dialogue. Jesus himself invited us to negotiate situations of this sort: “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?” (*Luke 14:28*). The Church in Amazonia knows it has to be prophetic, not accommodating, because the situation is dramatic and sees constant and persistent violations of human rights and destruction of the common home. Worse still, mostly these crimes go unpunished.

The Church must be prophetic. We have had ample experience of this in Latin America following the Second Vatican Council, Medellín and the other great CELAM conferences. Our prophecy has grown, and it has also progressively become clearer.

What does it mean to be prophetic?

It is not just a matter of shouting, protesting and wagging fingers. Prophecy is something much greater. Perhaps this spirit of complaint and dialogue can be enriched with a bit of tenderness. How can we do so? Prophecy must continue, but it must explore new paths that are able to cast light on matters and help the other accept dialogue. I believe that in the dialogical encounter we are able to hear, to understand each other, and to open ourselves up to receiving the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Some people contrast inculturation, that is, immersion into a culture, with interculturality, the dialogue between cultures: these themes are very often present in a Church that seeks contact with the indigenous peoples of Pan-Amazonia. What do you think and how can this argument be brought into the synodal process in a creative and constructive way?

Inculturation and interculturality are not opposites. We shouldn't think they are. The two things go together. Inculturation is absolutely necessary, and so is interculturality, especially as in Amazonia there are many cultures. Inculturation and interculturality are very important, if we look at the quantity of indigenous peoples in the world and in Amazonia.

And the matter of how the Church should approach the indigenous people?

We should distinguish between a Church for the indigenous and a truly indigenous Church. Especially in the wake of the great conferences of the Latin American episcopate, we have been seeking to be a Church for the indigenous, which considers the indigenous as objects of pastoral work, but not yet as protagonists of their own experience of faith. This is not enough. We need to aim for a truly indigenous Church.

From what I understand, the Brazilian Indigenous Missionary Council (Conselho Indigenista Missionário), or CIMI, is doing some good work.

Certainly, CIMI is a shining example and does some extraordinary work. It provides data and offers us facts about episodes of violence, and it backs these up with numbers and statistics. The data is undeniable: the interpretation can be good or bad, but the facts cannot be denied. They highlight data about injustice, violations of human rights, assassinations, criminalization of defenders of rights. And CIMI is constantly on the alert. This embarrasses some governments and all those who have other interests.

In this case the Church for the indigenous becomes visible in a way that can be disturbing. But this confirms that for us especially, as Church, having data to present is important, something to show why we are upset. CIMI in Brazil has helped us to be a Church for the indigenous defending the rights of the indigenous; and not only of the indigenous, but of all peoples, especially of the missionary regions.

We felt called to be a Church that defends human rights, that defends indigenous rights, those of the *ribeirinhos*, the coastal peoples and others. This is a Church for the indigenous.

And what is the step to be taken to become a truly indigenous Church?

We now know there is another step to take: we have to promote an indigenous Church for the indigenous peoples, help give birth to and nurture the growth of an indigenous Church. The aboriginal communities that hear the Gospel proclamation in one way or another, and that embrace it, which is to say, they welcome Jesus Christ, have to be able to ensure that, through an opportune process,

their faith can become incarnate and inculturated in their traditional reality. Then, in the context of their culture, identity, history and spirituality, an indigenous Church can arise with its own pastors and ordained ministers, always united within itself, and in total communion with the universal Catholic Church, but inculturated in indigenous cultures.

Actually, in the history of the indigenous peoples there are many traces of God. God, as I was saying, is always present in their history. In their identity, their history and their culture, they can find clear signs of the presence of God. Those ancient peoples come from a different root than European culture, from another historical stock, just like the Africans, the peoples of India, the Chinese. So, within their history, their identity and their spirituality, starting from their relation with transcendence, we have to generate a Church with an indigenous face.

The theme of an indigenous Church is very important for Pan-Amazonia, but what sort of ministry is needed for this reality? What profiles of priests, missionaries and so on are necessary in this situation, in these cultures with the particular characteristics you have described?

So often we worry about managing to transplant the European models of priesthood onto the indigenous priests. But someone has rightly noted that too much concern is given to the profile of the ordained ministry, putting it before the community that receives it. It should be the other way around: the community is not there for its minister, but the minister is there for the community. The minister should respond to the needs of the community.

This need of the community, perhaps, should push us to think through differentiated ministries starting from the fact that a given community in a given place has a given need. Let us not spend ourselves defending a sort of historical figure that a minister has to align with, without possible variations, so that in this way the community must accept and keep it only because that is how we send it to them!

Yes, ministers are to be sent, but we have to know how to send them, in a way that respects the concrete community with its own specific needs. Ministers should be thought out starting from the community: from its culture, its history, its needs. This is what openness means.

The indigenous Church is not made by decrees. The synod has to open the way to start off a process that has sufficient freedom and that recognizes the true dignity of each Christian and each child of God. This is the greatness of this synod. The pope knows how historical it can be for all the Church. But the road to follow exhorts us to take care that we do not reproduce and repeat what already exists.

In his encyclical letter Laudato Si', the pope clearly stated that the current situation of a planetary crisis is undeniable. And he places this theme within the forthcoming synod with a call for an "integral ecology." How can we move forward, as a Church, in this situation of grave ecological crisis?

Integral ecology is a marvelously new thing that the pope has put before us. It poses fundamental challenges to the current models of development and production that, in turn, appeal to the modern lights of reason, science and technology, where the technocratic paradigm is rooted. These models are unwilling to accept the consequences of an integral ecology. The technocratic paradigm of domination wins. It imposes itself and obtains what it wants.

This technocratic scheme or paradigm actually comes from modernity. It is the result of the so-called "Copernican revolution" of modern philosophy: the object is no longer what is thought through and analyzed as it was in classical philosophy, but the thinking subject, subjectivity. This was a great step forward: in fact, the great richness of modernity.

But the great interests in play have transformed this progress into something different. They have turned it into subjectivism, into individualism, and then liberalism, which, alongside the Copernican philosophical revolution, has drawn on the birth of the modern sciences and their application in technology. An enormous technological progress has followed, always more and more sophisticated, that has placed in human hands an extraordinary power of intervention on nature. It has made us able to produce more and more goods at any cost, regardless of the nature both of people and of human communities. This increasingly sophisticated technology is used to exploit the planet; it is used as though we come from elsewhere, and the planet is just something we found along the way and can exploit, destroy and devour unscrupulously. Technology gives people the possibility today to accumulate more and more material goods. The indigenous peoples, on the other hand, do not accumulate goods; they gather social relations, with people and with everything; they do not collect material goods. They teach us that human relationships, community relationships are what are most important.

The technocratic paradigm you speak of is a great threat for our planet...

It is so because it does not accept an integral ecology; it does not accept that we are children of this earth. It is lived as if we had come here and found a treasure to be exploited in every manner possible. But no, we are children of this earth, and if we damage the earth, we end up hurting ourselves.

The Bible says that God formed us from the dust of the earth...

And this reminds us that we are born of the earth, so she is “mother” earth, we are children of the earth; we are born here, we do not come from elsewhere. Our body is made of earthly things. God breathed the spirit, the spirit of life, into this body that comes from the earth. As we come from the land, we are brothers and sisters of all creatures. And the pope also says that, insofar as we are blessed with intelligence and free will, we have a very special duty to take care of the earth, for God gave us intelligence and the ability to love, to care for, to manage the earth that sustains us. But we cannot procure this sustenance at the cost of other created beings and other brothers and sisters. It is all connected.

Does integral ecology have a theological foundation? Has it developed a theological vision?

Pope Francis has spoken about this. The most important aspect of integral ecology, he has said, is that God became definitively related to this earth in Jesus Christ. As God is in relation, everything is interconnected. God chose to become tied through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and Jesus is the culminating point we are all journeying toward. There are some splendid texts that describe this as the goal toward which all creatures are advancing, because they were not made for us. Their final end is not us. Their final purpose is transcendent; it is God. Certainly, in our turn, we need creatures to sustain us, but their vocation is transcendent and we, in their name, have to praise the Lord and lead them to God. In fact, one day all of them, in a mysterious way, in the logic of the resurrection, will take part in the definitive Kingdom. God will not destroy his creation, but will transform it in an Easter sense.

So, the risen Jesus Christ is the summit toward which we are all moving, and he is the model that gives a first revelation about how the path we are journeying will be. Humanity does not move in circles, without orientation and without sense. We have to walk. There is a real future. The risen Jesus Christ is the great transcendent point toward which we walk. So integral ecology is the union of all this.

This is why I often say that there is a need to rewrite Christology: St. Paul had referred to this culminating point in a path that continues. Teilhard de Chardin in turn spoke about it in his studies on evolution. All theology and Christology, as well as the theology of the sacraments, are to be reread starting from this great light for which “all is interconnected,” interrelated.

There is a Brazilian song that states that “*Tudo está interligado, como se fôssemos um, tudo está interligado nesta casa comum*” (All is interconnected, as though we were all one, all is interconnected in our common home). God is in relation, definitively, with our common home. I believe that the concept of integral ecology illuminates all the work that we have to do in Amazonia to be united in the synodal path.

Where does this Pan-Amazonian ecclesial network, REPAM, come from? It is part of the process preparing the synod.

The idea for the network came from the Fifth Conference of CELAM at Aparecida, which our dear Pope Benedict XVI attended. At the time, the presence and input of the pontiff was notable and was marked by an openness that surprised us all: the great openness of Pope Benedict XVI before a world that was not his own. He came from a European world, yet was open to a dialogue together with us, with the people, the territory and Latin America.

What happened at Aparecida? Bergoglio, as we all know, was there...

Yes, Cardinal Bergoglio, then the archbishop of Buenos Aires, was present. In that context the need was discussed to create a joint pastoral plan for Amazonia, and Pope Francis states that it was then that he became alert to the Amazonian challenge. Before, as an archbishop and citizen of Buenos Aires, Amazonia was for him a reality that was far distant from that of Argentina. Like a fantasy world. But he says that it was due to the insistence of the bishops of Brazil at Aparecida concerning the Amazonia issues that an interest stirred in him. That was when he understood that it was an important matter. He says that starting from that moment, he began to be interested in the entire reality of Amazonia. And that was when, as I said, the need was aired for a joint Latin American pastoral plan for the entire Pan-Amazonia Region. It was something a bit out of the ordinary, because episcopal conferences are national, but the Amazonian Region is not a nation but a transnational region that includes nine countries.

How have you created an effective network?

Before, the national episcopal conferences in the Amazon territory included their respective parts of Amazonia in their national plans. Now, after Aparecida and especially since the Synod on Amazonia was announced, there is a need to think of a specific pastoral plan for all of Pan-Amazonia. However, this does not take away from the respective national conferences their responsibilities for their Amazonian territories. So a new situation is created, a sort of new ecclesial subject, and it is necessary to manage to understand it and embrace it bit by bit. The pope speaks of decentralization, and every decentralization is somewhat painful because it undermines a part of the power and prestige of the center; we need to understand it, to walk together in this direction.

REPAM desires to do exactly this, offering a service that begins to create a network between all the realities of the nine Amazonian countries. A network that should not be seen as a further unit with its own projects, but as a service articulating all the entities, communities, missionaries, ecclesial agents on the ground, people and initiatives defending and looking after Amazonia, so that all enter into this network and do not feel isolated, lost in the forest. This is a service that will always depend on the local bishops, local missionaries, who need to feel welcome to take part in this network.

And the pope? When did he speak to you about the synod?

Back in 2015 the pope started to tell me: “I’m thinking of convening a meeting of all the bishops of Amazonia. As of yet, I don’t know what type of meeting or assembly, but I think that it could even be a synod.” He said to me: Let us pray about it together, and he began to speak to the bishops, to the episcopal conferences of the Amazonian region, about how to have an assembly, and so in his heart there grew the idea of a synod, and eventually in 2017 he convoked it. We have worked hard for the synod, and we will continue to do so in this very important service for the future. The synod serves to find and trace new paths for the Church.

Source: Civiltà Cattolica