



Amazonia as a mirror of humanity

Joel Thompson SJ

This week, the Jesuit parish of St Ignatius, Lethem, in the interior of Guyana, is hosting part of the consultation process ahead of next year's meeting of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region. Joel Thompson SJ outlines the context in which the synod will take place and reflects on Pope Francis' objectives for the meeting. 'As an invitation to discern the "signs of the times", it comes at a critical moment.'

On 15 October 2017, Pope Francis announced his intention to convene a Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region, in Rome in October 2019. The synod's theme is 'Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology'. A process of [listening and consultation](#) is now underway in every country of the Pan-Amazon region (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela) in preparation for the synod.

The pope's announcement was perhaps surprising, since it marks the first time that he has called a synod for a specific territory, but it follows on from his discussion in *Laudato si'* (§38) of the great importance, for the future of humanity and the entire earth, of protecting the Amazon and the Congo basins and their rich biodiversity. The synod's reflections will therefore not only be relevant for the 'ecclesial-Amazonian sphere' but are essential for articulating and enriching the current mission of the universal Church.

In 2014, the Latin American Bishops' Conference formed a transnational ecclesial network called REPAM (*Red Eclesial Pan-Amazónica*) in order to focus on and explore the common social, environmental and spiritual challenges facing Amazonian peoples. REPAM is responsible for coordinating the process of reflection across the Amazon, and by the end of this year, it will have convened 45 'pre-synodal regional assemblies' to gather data in response to the question-



naire in the Preparatory Document for the synod.¹ This 'consultation of the bases' will provide depth to the synodal process as the respective reports will be collated to form part of the *Instrumentum Laboris* or 'Working Document', which will be the reference text for participants in the synodal assembly as they discern new paths.

THREE AIMS FOR THE SYNOD

The convocation of the synod is a recognition of the significant role and contribution of the communities and Churches in the Amazon to the universal mission of the Church at this critical time for the planet. The introduction to the Preparatory Document notes that:

The Amazon is a region with rich biodiversity; it is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multireligious; it is a mirror of all humanity which, in defense of life, requires structural and personal changes by all human beings, by nations, and by the Church.

The pope has outlined three main objectives for the synod.

'Seeing'

The first is 'seeing', being aware of, the crisis in and destruction of the Amazon biome, the largest green lung on the planet. This destruction, by businesses that seize its petroleum, gas, wood, water and minerals, is driven by the demand of the world's people for Amazonia's resources.

Amazonia is home to around 390 different peoples and nationalities, who make up approximately 3 million of the world's 370 million indigenous peoples. The Amazon provides around 20% of all the earth's fresh water and about 25% of its oxygen. With 10% of earth's biodiversity, it is the most biodiverse place on the planet. Therefore focusing on the people of and the threats affecting this region is of great importance for us all.

The Preparatory Document recognises the protection of indigenous peoples and their lands as 'a fundamental ethical imperative and a basic commitment to human rights.' (§5) Indigenous peoples, who live in harmony with their surroundings, will be most affected by environmental change yet have historically been marginalised from decision-making processes. On a practical level, too, respecting, defending and upholding their right to their territories – which cover around a quarter of the earth's land surface but hold 80% of its biodiversity – is important given the fact that forests and lands managed by indigenous peoples and communities with secure land rights have deforestation rates which are 2-4 times lower than other forests.²

In other words, the synod provides an opportunity to build bridges of solidarity and encounter within Amazonia and from Amazonia to the rest of the world, particularly to other important biomes such as the Congo basin, the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, the tropical forests of the Asia-Pacific region and the Guarani Aquifer. Connections or 'bridges' exist between Amazonia and other regions of the world already, but they are often marked by an extractivist mentality, which views Amazonia as an inexhaustible resource for other countries, without concern for its inhabitants or for the environment.

'Accompanying'

The second objective involves accompanying the people of Amazonia, especially indigenous peoples. The relationship between the pastoral accompaniment of Amazonia's peoples and care for the environment is emphasised throughout the Preparatory Document. Pope Francis places great emphasis on listening to and learning from indigenous peoples. Earlier this year, he met with indigenous representatives during his apostolic visit to Peru. He observed that the 'native Amazonian peoples have probably

never been so threatened on their own lands as they are at present'.³ Presently, they are facing the dual pressures of neo-extractivism and of distorted conservation policies that exclude them and undermine their sovereignty. What is needed is a process of reciprocal listening, a dialogue with indigenous peoples about their holistic ways of 'living well' and establishing right relationships with all of creation.

'Evangelisation'

The third objective is to design new ways of evangelisation for and with the People of God in the Amazon. This integrates the other two objectives, so that the Church's evangelising activity does not appear, 'alien to the promotion of care for the territory (nature) and its peoples (cultures).' (Preparatory Document, §9) These new ways of evangelisation can help to generate global processes of solidarity, resisting an instrumental way of viewing Amazonia. The cultural ecology called for by *Laudato si'* (§143-146) encourages us to build bridges of dialogue with indigenous cultures to connect their wisdom with contemporary knowledge (theological, philosophical, scientific, etc.).

Evangelisation is explored in the Preparatory Document across five dimensions: the biblical-theological, social, ecological, sacramental and the ecclesial-missionary. The synod is meant to stimulate an open and frank discussion about the various roles of local women and men in official ministry, reflect on fostering local and indigenous clergy, and explore ways in which communities can have more frequent access to sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The media has zoomed in on the question of married clergy and women clergy, but this misses the broad aim of promoting 'a Church with an Amazonian face'. Given the 'precariously-thin presence' of the Church in Amazonia, a lack of missionaries and clergy coupled with the great distances between communities, means that new paths need to be discerned and bold proposals explored in relation to ministry and service. The synodal consultation process aims to gather the reflections of local communities on these issues as the Church discusses them.

Identifying elements of indigenous culture that can facilitate the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ is an important step in inculturating sacramental practice into the lived experience of indigenous peoples. During some of the consultations within

Guyana so far, indigenous communities expressed a strong desire for having liturgies and catechesis in their own languages, as well as more local religious sisters and clergy. Although some liturgies are already conducted in the local languages, inculturation is a broad process that means not merely translating texts, readings and hymns but respecting the culture. These new paths for evangelisation will be faithful to the tradition yet intelligible to the culture and will be mutually enriching to both the Church and the culture. This re-launching of the work of the Church in the Amazon aims to affirm culture and traditions in the face of global attitudes that tend to belittle and misunderstand indigenous peoples.

Within Amazonia, human trafficking, violence against women, sexual exploitation, injustice, poverty and discrimination are some of the evils that are concomitant with extractive industries. Evangelisation in the Church is linked with the process of integral human development and is therefore an invitation to, 'strive against social inequalities and the lack of solidarity [globalisation of indifference] through the promotion of charity, justice, compassion, and care amongst ourselves and with animals, plants, and all creation.' (Preparatory Document, §8) The mission of a Samaritan Church is to accompany, share the pain of and collaborate in healing the wounds of our neighbour – the earth and its inhabitants – while being attentive to its relationship with God.

A KAIROS MOMENT

The very recent UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report⁴ on the impacts of 1.5°C global warming tells us that the world only has twelve years to act before we start seeing more of the devastating effects of a warmer climate, such as species and ecosystem loss, flooding, droughts, greater poverty and inequality, extreme weather events and slow economic growth. This excludes the inevitable impacts on cultural heritage and ecosystem services. 1.5°C, although dangerous, is much safer than the often-touted 2°C upper limit at which corals, for example, would disappear. The report is clear that even half a degree is critical and therefore the 2°C limit is very unsafe.

Addressed to policymakers, the report's major take-away is that the world needs to cut its carbon pollution as quickly as possible and transition to a 'net

zero' emissions pathway by 2050. The scale of the global transition required is unprecedented in terms of scale, and rapid changes are required to, for example, energy generation, land use, cities (buildings and transportation) and industrial systems. It will therefore be the largest collective project that humanity has ever undertaken. Political inaction and an underwhelming response from governments means that given the current emissions commitments, the world is currently moving closer to 3°C warming by 2100.

This is the global context in which Pope Francis has called the Synod for the Amazon. As an invitation to discern the 'signs of the times', it comes at a critical moment. What is new and refreshing about the IPCC report is that it recognises the key role of personal behavioural change in strengthening the global response to climate change. For example, in the transition of the energy sector, the consumption patterns of the consumer and their choice of suppliers that utilise renewable sources are very important. The report also acknowledges the important role of indigenous and local knowledge in dialogue with state actors to help to accelerate wide scale behavioural changes and ambitious actions to limit global warming to 1.5°C.⁵ One of the fruits of the synod will be a deepened understanding of how individuals, communities, nations and Church can work towards an ecological conversion (*Laudato si'*, §211) in our daily lives and through our actions.

The choice to eat meat and dairy, for example, daily or in large amounts, has disastrous consequences for the planet. They provide only 18% of calories and 37% of protein in the average daily diet, but use 83% of global farmland and produce 60% of agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions.⁶ Statistics can appear cold and faceless, but the reality is that many livestock are reared by deforesting thousands of hectares of forest globally, including in the Amazon. The great demand for them leads to forest settlements, legal as well as illegal, which directly affect the indigenous communities who are displaced. Catholic traditions such as the Friday abstinence from meat can be enriched by considering the plight of our brothers and sisters in Amazonia and in other parts of the world, and can become not only an expression of penitence but also an act of solidarity, which can lead to further behavioural change.

TOWARDS A GOOD LIFE

There is a need for a global dialogue on what constitutes a 'good' life. One of the consultation questions in the Preparatory Document is: 'How do you imagine your "serene future" and the "good life" of future generations?' During pre-synod consultations with indigenous peoples in Guyana, their general response to the question was always spoken of in communal terms: having good relationships within the family and community, attending church, spending time in nature, participating in communal village works and working on the farm. Money and wealth were rarely mentioned. Many shared that they do not experience a good life when they leave their lands, friends and families to live and work in towns. Exploitation, discrimination and loneliness are common. They are often left broken and disillusioned by the promises of the good life promoted by the media.

The current narrative that well-being is primarily based on individual wealth and having 'stuff' is causing overconsumption. Annually, we are using the equivalent of 1.7 Earths⁷ to provide resources and absorb the waste generated by the 'throwaway culture'. Communities in Amazonia, under the pretext of 'progress' and 'development', are encouraged to abandon farming, get 'real' jobs, join markets and engage in consumption in order to become 'rich'. They are not ignorant of the possibilities of a growth and progress mindset, but consciously choose to have a more harmonious relationship with their environment. They live an integral ecology, since they recognise that the 'good' life is grounded in relationships of solidarity and reciprocity with each other and with the earth. As the pope recognises, the central issue is how to reconcile their basic human right to live with dignity with the protection of their particular cultural characteristics. (Preparatory Document, §5).

The Synod for the Amazon is an important step in the process of creating institutions and paths for respectful dialogue with Amazonian peoples and indigenous peoples within the Church. Dialogue enables us to see that indigenous peoples are not merely 'objects' that we have to save from the harmful effects of climate change – they are subjects whose vision can challenge prevailing conceptions of the good life while dispelling romantic notions about their lifestyles. Let us pray that the synod makes clearer our moral imperative to stand in solidarity with the peoples of Amazonia against the injustices they are facing while we strive to live an integral ecology.

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To read more about the pre-synod meeting of the eastern region of Amazonia, please visit:

<http://www.jesuit.org.uk/jesuits-host-pre-synod-meeting-amazon-lethem-guyana>

¹ Pope Francis, *Preparatory Document of the Synod of Bishops for the Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazon Region* (2018):

<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/06/08/180608a.html>

² Henry Ding, et al., 'Climate Benefits, Tenure Costs: The Economic Case for Securing Indigenous Land Rights in the Amazon' (2016):

<https://www.wri.org/publication/climate-benefits-tenure-costs>

³ Pope Francis, *Address of the Holy Father to the Meeting with Indigenous Peoples of Amazonia* (2018):

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/january/documents/papa-francesco_20180119_peru-puertomaldonado-popoliamazonia.html

⁴ International Panel on Climate Change, *Global Warming of 1.5°C* (2018):

http://report.ipcc.ch/sr15/pdf/sr15_spm_final.pdf

⁵ IPCC, *Global Warming of 1.5°C*, D 5.6 (p. 29) and D7 (p. 30).

⁶ Joseph Poore and Thomas Nemecek: 'Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers', *Science* 360.6392 (2018): 987-992.

<https://josephpoore.com/Science%20360%206392%20987%20-%20Accepted%20Manuscript.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/our-work/ecological-footprint/>