

THE SYNOD FOR THE AMAZON

Marcelo Barros

- *The divine revelation that arrives late*¹ •

ABSTRACT

It is good news that the Synod of Catholic Bishops from around the world, convened by Pope Francis and which will take place in October in Rome, has been prepared with extensive consultation with Amazonian communities and civil organizations working with them. The novelty of this Synod is the call for the Church, instead of acting as a teacher, to listen and hear the voice of the Amazon. In doing so, the Church will discover how to confront the challenges and new possibilities for its mission; a new vision and in opposition to the colonization in which it was complicit.

KEYWORDS

Spiritual listening | Catholic Church | Earth cry | Amazon peoples | Walk together

There is no doubt that for the peoples of the Amazon, the news that Pope Francis convoked a Synod of Roman-Catholic Bishops from around the world to reflect about the appeals that the Amazon is making to the Universal Church (the body of Christian churches worldwide) was well-received. As Dom Roque Paloschi, president of the Indigenist Missionary Council in Brazil (Conselho Indigenista Missionário - CIMI), affirmed, “the Synod for the Amazon practically began in January of 2018, in Puerto Maldonado (Peru), during the Pope’s meeting with Amazonian people.”²

The Synod of Bishops is an institution that continues an old church custom and enacts the Church’s vocation as a sign and instrument of unity for all of humanity. The term *synod* comes from the Greek and means “to walk together.” Within the Catholic Church, after the Second Vatican Council in 1967, Pope Paul VI recreated and updated the institution of the Synod, which are meetings of Bishops from around the world meet from time to time to reflect with the Pope on topics that concern the universal Church or the problems of people and pastors of a specific region (canon 342 of the Code of Canon Law). The Pope called the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon for October of 2019 according to canon 345. This topic of this Synod is “the Amazon: new paths for the church and for integral ecology.”

On June 17, 2019, the Synod of Bishops published the document that will serve as the basis for the dialogue and work at the Synod for the Amazon (*Instrumentum laboris*). Elaborated using the Latin American methodology of Liberation Theology, the document has three parts: seeing, discernment (judgment), and action. In Part I, the document describes the reality of the territory and its peoples based on reports and accounts from the communities. The proposal is to *listen to the voice of the Amazon in the light of faith*. Part II seeks to respond to the cry of the Amazon people and territory for an integral ecology. Finally, in the third part, *A prophetic church in the Amazon: Challenges and Hope*, the document tries to discern new pathways for the prophetic mission of the Church in the Amazon.

It is consoling to know that this document and the topics that the Synod will cover were formulated based on a consultation that involved the Amazon communities, Catholic and non-Catholic groups and that it received opinions from scholars and people that accompany the reality of the Amazon in the diverse countries that make up the region.

Unfortunately, there is still a significant number of bishops, priests, and Catholic groups that do not recognize integral ecology, the social situation of the peoples, and politics as topics that are directly related to the mission of the Church. It seems as if they have forgotten or ignored that Jesus defined his mission as curing the sick, freeing the prisoners and announcing the good news of liberation to the poor.

1 • Long-standing challenges

Over 50 years ago, Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council taught us to read the “sign(s) of the times” as elements from which we learn to discern the word of God

and what he asks of us. In Latin America, the topic of the Second General Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops in Medellín (1968) was to look at the social and political reality in order to discover in it the challenges for the Church's mission, which then became the theological and spiritual proposal of Christian communities inserted in poor communities. In recent decades, Liberation Theology has taken on diverse and new forms, including African, Indigenous, Feminist, and Gay theologies as well as other autonomous reflections from the same liberatory line of thinking. Nevertheless, for the Roman magisterium and the Bishops gathered in a Synod in Rome, it is the first time that, after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and, for Latin America, after Medellín (1968), the social and political reality is understood as a "theologic category."

Because of this, we affirm that listening to the reality of and recognizing the theologic place of the diverse spiritual traditions of indigenous peoples is like a divine revelation that arrived late. Even though these traditions have been around for a very long time, it is only now that the Catholic hierarchy is truly recognizing that there is in them a divine revelation that it is open to receiving.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Episcopalian Communio* (2018), Pope Francis insisted that "the Synod should be a privileged instrument for listening to the people of God" (EC 6). The fact that the Synod has taken this orientation so seriously is important news. Although questionnaires for bishops and dioceses have always preceded Synods, no previous Synod took such care to listen to local voices and to the missionaries and scholars that work with the Churches' bases. The preparatory document describes the *Church as a listener* and reveals the importance of the pre-Synod listening process that is already bringing about results in the region. These results include an articulation of different countries to serve the Amazon region, and attention to ecological disasters, the harmful action of mining companies, and deforestation. The document makes it clear that this *listening process* should continue even after the event of the Synod in Rome (n. 3).

We all know of the contrarian reaction that Pope Francis often receives in the Vatican. Some people, even cardinals, are contesting the very fact of an upcoming Synod dedicated to the Amazon.³ Beyond this, the Synod is a consultative organ, without any deliberative power. It is coordinated by cardinals and bishops, many of whom do not know the region well. For many missionary brothers and sisters, as well as for people working with the bases, the *listening process* made official in the working document guarantees that the Synod goes beyond its limitations. They see that it has the potential to bring about an *Amazonization* of the Church, as the Synod inserts itself into the reality of the territory and its peoples in an alliance of humanity for life.

In this way, it seems like the Synod has already achieved, through dialogue, the construction of a necessary consensus within part of the Church that supports indigenous, river-dwelling communities and other sectors of the Amazon in their peaceful struggle against the timber and mining companies, as well as the search for an ecclesiastical mission based on listening,

dialogue and respect for cultures and spiritualities of diverse peoples and communities. The Synod working document even recognizes that the Amazon is “full of life and wisdom” (n. 5).

2 • Between the lines, a new “mission”

Some bishops and clergy in the Amazon region reject and maintain distance from this process, almost as if ignoring it. Even in these places where clergy are not participating in preparations for the Synod, the process has taken root among the bases.

Building consensus and the preparation of the Final Document to be delivered to the Pope at the end of the Synod demands “we walk together.” People must cede a bit here and there to concentrate efforts in critical areas.

One victory of this process and document is that it expresses a more systematic reading of the reality and the denouncement of a system that threatens life in the Amazon. It is also an achievement to see in a document sent from the Vatican the clear recognition that today, the Amazon is resisting the invasion of “new potential colonizers” (n. 7), the confession that “the Church was (or has been) an accomplice of the colonizers, suffocating the prophetic voice of the Gospel” (n. 38). Earlier, Popes, including John Paul II, asked for forgiveness for the errors of “some children of the Church,” but never recognized the Church itself had sinned.

This document also reveals new missiology. Beyond the mission of spreading the gospel to non-believers, it declares a mission related to securing justice and peace. The working document expresses that the mission can only be carried out through “dialogue with the ancestral wisdom of the Amazonian peoples” (n. 29) and that it “should be a dialogue in service of life and the future of the planet” (n. 35). Dialogue is not as a mere pedagogical strategy to better fundament the doctrinarian or religious conversion of the faithful.

These times reveal another conception of the mission. Even when the language seems to aim at the Church, it understands a *grassroots Church*, whose mission includes *Integral ecology* and the defense of life on the planet.

It is also essential to perceive that the document valorizes the autochthon spiritualities of the original peoples and the popular religion of even the Catholic communities in the Amazon. This view goes beyond basic respect for the rights of the peoples to their own religious culture, and tactical and pedagogical dialogues, to include the recognition that these spiritualities are “paths that seek to reveal the unfathomable mystery of God” (n. 39). They are expressions of Divine Spirit, present and acting in the peoples (n. 28) and, just like the territory and the social and political reality, the traditional spiritualities of the peoples are for us a theological space upon which they can rebuild, recuperate their health (n. 87), and serve as elements to transform reality and the mission (n. 93-94).

3 • Some provisional conclusions

In times of celebrating social forums and the multitudes protesting in plazas, the rituals of the Church need to return to a place of being expressive and prophetic. In the 1990s in São Félix do Araguaia, a theater group did a piece with a very suggestive title: *Hold on to the pan, the fire is coming up from below*. We must be clear on this: a Synod in Rome will not transform the reality in the Amazon.

We sincerely hope that the Synod for the Amazon accepts the proposal to decentralize the structures of our Church and does not uphold the classical structure of rural dioceses, parishes, and chapels. We must support a community Church and eliminate the division between clergy and laypeople. This change requires profound spiritual transformation and a new understanding of the Church's mission. We can propose this. It is a process.

We thank God for having a Pope, pastors and pastoral agents that “hold on to the pan,” that is, that give strength to and support the journey of the bases. The most decisive part will always be the local reality and the insertion into local Churches.

The Synod is the first step in a process that will be carried out through dialogue and partnership with the cultures, spirit, and peoples of the Amazon. It is a slow and dialectic process in which, like God, as each one of us, our celebrations are included and reveal which side they are on. We will realize what Salomon sings: “Through the praise of children and infants, you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.” (Psalm 8: 2).

NOTES

1 • This is an edited version of a longer text that the author generously granted to Sur.

2 • Roque Paloschi, “O Sínodo da Amazônia: Grito à Consciência, Memória da Missão, Opção pela Vida,” *Vida Pastoral* ano 60, no. 327 (May-June 2019): 17.

3 • Sandro Magister, “Herético y Apóstata. El

Cardenal Brandmuller Excomulga al Sínodo para la Amazonia.” *Revista IHU*, June 27, 2019, accessed August 12, 2019, <http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/78-noticias/590382-heretico-y-apostata-el-cardenal-brandmueller-excomulga-al-sinodo-para-la-amazonia>.



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