

## **QUERIDA AMAZONIA AND ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS**

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### **Abstract**

*This chapter focuses on the ecological concerns in Querida Amazonia. It attends to the following questions: How do we manage our environment? How do we challenge our political and religious powers to address the social realities of the people, from justice in debates on the use of the environment to justice in the demand for good living? It focused on care of the earth, missionary vocation, and harmony of difference.*

**Keywords:** *Querida Amazonia, Ecology, Pope Francis, Amazon, Environment*

### **Introduction**

The post-synodal apostolic exhortation ‘*Querida Amazonia*’ (Beloved Amazon) was released by the Supreme Pontiff – Pope Francis on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2020. It was written at the conclusion of the synodal process of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region, which was celebrated in October 2019. *Querida Amazonia* (QA) is a 111-paragraph text that outlines the environmental, ecological, economic, religious crisis facing the Amazon region.

### **A Brief Introduction of the Amazon Region**

The Amazon region cuts across 9 countries in South America (Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Guyana. Others are French Guiana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela). It has a population of “33.6 million inhabitants, of whom between 2 and 2.5 million are indigenous.”<sup>83</sup>

### **Background to Synod:**

The Amazon has become an endangered region in the light of the "crisis" of the Amazon rainforest's deforestation. Culturally, the region is diverse with the indigenous populations grouped under at least 305

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<sup>83</sup> Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region, “The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology - Final Document,” Vatican (26 October 2019), no. 6, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/synod/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc\\_20191026\\_sinodo-amazonia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20191026_sinodo-amazonia_en.html) (accessed 18.12.2019).

ethnic groups and 274 diverse languages. Geographically, the Amazon region has a landmass of 7.5million square kilometres. It means the Amazon forests are 40% of the global tropical forests. Surely, any adversity on the Amazonian forests has impact on the earth.<sup>84</sup> Life in the Amazonian region has been precarious in recent decades (a) deforestation – as a result of cattle ranching, large scale cutting down of trees for stake holders and businesses, and Amazon fire is destroying Earth's largest rainforest. Hence, the Synod became a moment of discerning what the Spirit is saying to the Church regarding this endangered region.

**The Key elements treated *Querida Amazonia*:** Care of the Earth, Missionary Vocation, and Harmony of Difference.

### **Care of the earth**

The synod was truly a *kairos*, a moment of grace, for the Church to be reconciled with the Amazonian peoples. For a long time, the indigenous peoples of the Amazon region are often called “the forgotten and without the prospect of a peaceful future.”<sup>85</sup> The type of business that takes place in the Amazon, the Pope says destroys one of the Earth's critical ecosystems and disenfranchises its indigenous peoples who for centuries have served as its caretakers. The pope decries it as a form of injustice and crime to the earth and humanity: How do we manage our environment? How do we challenge our political and religious powers to address the social realities of the people, from justice in debates on the use of the environment to justice in the demand for good living? *QA* presents us with some schemes, in the form of dreams, from which we can draw lines of action.

A: The Social Dream: *I dream of an Amazon region that fights for the rights of the poor, the original peoples and the least of our brothers and sisters, where their voices can be heard and their dignity advanced.* (7)

The social dream decries the ecological and human injustices melted on Amazonian people and calls for a genuine social motivation to “build networks of solidarity” and promote “a globalization without

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<sup>84</sup> Antonio Spadaro, “Why a Synod for the Pan-Amazon region?,” 6; “Greater commitment for the rights of the indigenous: Fifth and Sixth General Congregations,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 44 (18 October 2019), 9.

<sup>85</sup> Antonio Spadaro, “Why a Synod for the Pan-Amazon region? Contributing to the reflection ahead of the Assembly,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 39 (27 September 2019), 6.

marginalization” [QA no. 17]. Any form of activity within the region, either environmental or business (local or international) must be established based on a dialogue among the various stake holders, a dialogue where the victims take the lead.

*B: The cultural Dream: I dream of an Amazon region that can preserve its distinctive cultural riches, where the beauty of our humanity shines forth in so many varied ways.*

The cultural dream affirms that no culture is superior to the other and no culture is in a permanent state to suppress the other. In the cultural dream, the document notes how the growing industrialisation and development has led to the overcoming of indigenous cultural identities and values so considered uncivilised, in exchange for culture that isolates the people from cultural roots that gave them a sense of dignity and identity, and the loss of the values that had previously sustained them. Pope Francis dreams of an Amazon region that can preserve, harness, and foster the richness of the ‘different cultures and others forms of civilization’ that mark the Amazon rather than destroying them [no. 28].

*C: The Ecological Dream: I dream of an Amazon region that can jealously preserve its overwhelming natural beauty and the superabundant life teeming in its rivers and forests.*

In the ecological dream, the pontiff decries the destruction of the ecosystem on a global scale that in turn is destroying humanity. At this point, the Holy Father launches into poetic hymn in praise of the life-giving waters of the Amazon. The hymn is full of wonder, but it also recognizes the painful cry of the earth when it suffers from violence at the hands of humans. (47)

The ecological dream invites the Amazonians to jealously preserve its overwhelming natural beauty and the superabundant life teeming in its rivers and forests [no. 7]. The care of the people and the care of the ecosystems are inseparable, he argues. Putting the environment at risk by “the conquest and exploitation of its resources” is tantamount to putting human life at risk [no. 48]. In the same way, treating the environment with much respect and care will reduce the human sufferings, and restore the good of the Amazon and of humanity at large [no. 48]. Thus, the Pontiff dreams of protecting the whole

ecosystem in a combination of ancestral wisdom with contemporary technology and a legal framework to fight environmental injustice [nos. 49-52].

D. *The Ecclesial Dream: I dream of Christian communities capable of generous commitment, incarnate in the Amazon region, and giving the Church new faces with Amazonian features.*

The ecclesial dream calls the Church to “journey alongside the people of the Amazon region” in faith and love, spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ and God’s love for every man and woman [no. 61]. The Pontiff advocates for the inculturation of the Christian message in the Amazonian culture, such that, the message of Christ not only becomes a part of the culture but also refines and purifies the goodness that already exists in Amazonian cultures, bringing it to fulfilment in the light of the Gospel [ no. 66].

**In the Ecclesial dream is our Missionary Vocation.**

According to the introductory report on Amazon Synod, by the General Relator of the synod, Cardinal Claudio Hummes, OFM, the reality of Amazonian cultural diversity challenges the Church to be open to inculturation, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and preferential attention to the poor. The exhortation acknowledges the role of the Episcopal Conferences in making use of the document in way that can suit their needs. In the ecclesial dream, the Pontiff left the action plan for the episcopal conference to dissect the important things and address them according to their peculiar needs. It also advocates for “the growth of a specific ecclesial culture that is distinctively lay” [no. 94].

The Church’s missionary mandate has to be felt anew in the Amazon. Hence, the Church had to consider new paths to missionary outreach in a region that is grossly deficient in ecclesial personnel. The need for renewed missionary passion in the Amazon connects to inculturation. If the faith will grow and be sustained in the Amazonian region, it must take root and become flesh. Taking the flesh of each missionary context, we must be open to diverse ministries and services that might be peculiar to each context. This is how we can understand some of the synod’s resolutions like instituting a female lay ministry considering that women currently lead about 60% of local Church communities in

the Amazonian Region.<sup>86</sup> The missionary mandate and the shortfall of personnel equally informed the somewhat controversial resolution of *virī probati*. 'Virī probati' refers to the recurring suggestion of ordaining reputable married men in the Amazonian region in order to make the expansive Catholic communities celebrate the Eucharist more.<sup>87</sup> Presently, more than 80% of the peoples only have a priest to celebrate the Mass for them once in one and a half years.<sup>88</sup> So, the Church must transit from the model of 'pastoral visit' to 'pastoral presence'.<sup>89</sup>

This is an admirable move to motivate the bishops to involve various portions of the People of God, especially theological institutions, to come up with more contextually suitable approaches to the works of evangelisation and evangelical witnessing. However, what are the processes that could be set in place to realize the dreams? What does a genuine collaboration in the context of the ministry involve? More importantly, where every believer is given the opportunity to collaborate in the mission, will the Church and its activities still be priest-centered?

### **Harmony of Differences: A Synod beyond Regional Impact**

According to the Pope, unity can coexist with diversity. Pope Francis draws on a favored image, the polyhedron, to illustrate how unity can coexist with diversity. He dreams of intercultural encounter and education that preserve the beauty and uniqueness of indigenous cultures, while allowing for fruitful development. The exhortation challenges us beyond the synod of the indispensability of harmony in the face of differences. We must not be afraid of differences. United with and under the Pope, our distinctness can be harmonised without negating unity, inspired by the doctrine of the Trinity, three Persons in one God. In a region that has several cultures, traditions, and languages, the synod first focus challenges the Church to embrace interculturality. Hence, the message that the Church must have "an indigenous, peasant and afro-descendant face."<sup>90</sup> It is a Church that must draw peoples at the peripheries to the centre of our faith. This

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<sup>86</sup> "Synod for the Pan-Amazon Region Concludes," *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 44 (1 November 2019), 4.

<sup>87</sup> "Defence of Human Rights," *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 41 (11 October 2019), 11.

<sup>88</sup> "Eleventh and Twelfth Congregations: Pastoral action to defend mankind and the planet," *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 42 (18 October 2019), 11.

<sup>89</sup> "Defence of Human Rights," *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 41 (11 October 2019), 11.

<sup>90</sup> Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region, "Final Document," no. 27.

message extends beyond the Amazonian Region. It relates to the demands in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

### **Amazonian Synod and Challenges to the Mission Churches**

I. *A Church with an Indigenous Face*: The way the value of indigenous theology took central place at during the Synod tells us in the mission territories of the importance of what Pope Francis desires. According to *L'Osservatore Romano* report on the synod on October 18, 2019, the Pope desires "a Church with an indigenous face, in a way that repropose the essential elements of the Catholic universe with an indigenous hermeneutic."<sup>91</sup> The pope is restating the Church's commitment to inculturation. This is the process of adapting and adopting indigenous symbols and modes of expressions to communicate the unchanging truths of our faith. Inculturation is a way of fostering a faith that is truly Catholic, and truly indigenous. Inculturation has always been the way of the Church. Mission territories must never be content with just receiving the universal truths. Mission territories must attempt to make the kerygma and its basic doctrines meaningful to the people's lived experiences. The Amazonian synod challenges the mission territories, especially the pastors, the local leaders and theologians, to resist the temptation of homogeneity, or what Pope Francis, at the opening of the Synod, called "'homogenative' centralism" that "has not allowed the peoples' authenticity to emerge."<sup>92</sup> Mission in the Church always goes with heterogeneous expressions and celebrations of the faith. The Amazonian synod calls all mission territories to be courageous. They must possess what the Holy Father calls the Holy Spirit's "own daring prudence,"<sup>93</sup> in renewing the paths of the Church in mission territories.

II. *Caring for Our Common Home*: The Amazonian synod challenges the Church, particularly in mission territories, about ongoing disastrous environmental activities, and the need for integral ecology anchored on ecological conversion. Some activities, especially in natural resource rich communities, have destroyed lots of ecosystems. They have impacted negatively on the host communities. The Church must always act prophetically on behalf of the people of God at the peripheries who do not have voices. We must increase our responsibility to care for our

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<sup>91</sup> "Fifth and Sixth General Congregations: Greater commitment for rights of the indigenous," *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 42 (October 18, 2019), 9.

<sup>92</sup> Pope Francis, "Indigenous peoples: protagonists of their history," *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 41 (11 October 2019), 10.

<sup>93</sup> Pope Francis, "May God preserve us from the greed of new forms of colonialism," *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 41 (October 11, 2019), 8.

common home; we must be more conscious of our 'ecological citizenship'.<sup>94</sup> We must help the movements that resist a globalisation that simply cares about extracting natural resources, from forests and water to oil and minerals, without caring about the poor people who feel the brunt most. The peoples of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria know exactly what it feels like in the Amazon. What the Church has done on a global scale for the Amazonian peoples should inspire similar ones for the peoples of the Niger Delta, the mining towns of South Africa, for the coastal towns around East Africa's Lake Victoria, and the endangered indigenous peoples across the world.

"Today the Church can be no less committed," he writes. "She is called to hear the plea of the Amazonian peoples and 'to exercise with transparency her prophetic mission of speaking up.'" He presents a vision of the Catholic Church in the Amazon united in defence of its tribes, trees, tradition and tributaries, offering an example for the wider church to adopt in other corners of the globe. "The beloved Amazon region stands before the world in all its splendor, its drama and its mystery," Querida Amazonia addresses the whole world" in an effort "to help awaken our affection and concern for the land which is 'ours,' and to invite us to value it and acknowledge it as a sacred mystery." The institutional destruction and endangerment of life and environment is an open-ended debate. Environmental crises relate to the urgency of caring for our Common Home as a part of our faith. The Amazonian forests are as important as the ice caps of the North Pole that continues to shrink due to climate change. The indigenous peoples of the Amazon bear the brunt of the negative actions on the forests. They have been suffering in silence because they are poor and peripheral. So, the Amazonian synod was a prophetic moment of the Church. With the Church bringing the fate of the Amazonian peoples to global attention, the Church is prophetically standing up to its commitment of preferential option for the people at the peripheries.

### **Concluding Remarks**

We must remember the big picture beyond the hue and cry about the Amazonian synod. Inculturation remains an urgent task for the church in mission territories for the church to have an indigenous face everywhere. We must consider the words of an African theologian, Fr

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<sup>94</sup> Michael Czerny, "The prophetic commitment to the dignity of all," *L'Osservatore Romano*, no. 31 (2 August 2019), 9.

Laurenti Magesa in his *Anatomy of Inculturation*, "If anything, the lesson here is that the church must learn to be flexible. It should not fear inculturation as an attack against the integrity of the faith." Going forward with faith, we accept the counsel of St Augustine, which we find in the closing chapter of Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. St Augustine says, "Let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and Charity in everything."

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