

Pope Francis, the Amazon Synod and Australia

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Pope Francis's response to the Amazon Synod carries a message for Australia also concerning our Indigenous peoples, since he sees them as very important in teaching us how to love and care our common home.

'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 advance.' 'We cannot allow globalisation to become "a new version of colonialism".' (F. No. 14)

'The challenge, in short, is to ensure a globalisation in solidarity, a globalisation without marginalisation', empowering the Indigenous and the poor to lead an authentically human life. (17).

The Amazon crisis

Francis called the Amazon Synod because the oppression of Indigenous peoples and others in the Amazon is powering ahead under a new colonialism controlled by national and international companies in pursuit of huge profits.

The Pope asked Christians there to listen carefully to how the Holy Spirit was inspiring all people of good will to respond. After consultations involving 87,000 people throughout the Amazon, comprising parts of nine countries in Latin America, the Synod of Bishops and representatives from Latin America met in Rome in October 2019 and produced a final document: 'The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and the for an Integral Ecology'.

In February 2020, Pope Francis issued his personal response to the Synod in '*Querida Amazonia*', meaning 'Beloved Amazon', with the subtitle: 'Post-Synodal Exhortation to the People of God and all Persons of good will.' He did not duplicate the Synod document, but encouraged people to read it 'in full', as he officially presented it in its entirety. (Nos. 2, 3)

Echoing Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* on the problems of inequality and climate change, the Synod focused on how the Amazon peoples were under threat as never before, with 17% of the Amazon forests destroyed, threatening 'the survival of the entire ecosystem', in order to exploit the timber, open huge mines or level the forest to grow soya beans and graze cattle for first-world markets.

This despoliation not only robbed the Indigenous and other peoples, the 'river people', Afro-descendants and peasants of their traditional lands, but threatened to damage the global climate and propel further global warming.

Yet in a defiant message, a wave of fires was lit and burnt huge sections of the Amazon in 2019. Other Amazon people were being driven from their ancestral lands and forests with many killed, including church, environmental and human rights workers (10, 15).

Listen to and empower Indigenous voices

To help prevent an 'ecological disaster' in the Amazon, Francis is trying to mobilise consciences everywhere, especially by listening to the voices of Indigenous and other marginalised people. The original people are 'our principal dialogue partners, those from whom we have the most to learn, to whom we need to listen out of a duty of justice, and from whom we must ask permission before presenting our proposals.' Their words, their hopes and their fears should be the most authoritative voice in any dialogue. (26).

To protect the Amazon, 'it is good to combine ancestral wisdom with contemporary technical knowledge. The original peoples have a right to full 'information about projects' to assess risks and benefits for themselves, 'and thus to give or withhold their consent, or propose alternatives.' (51).

Celebrating Indigenous cultures

Francis encouraged the Amazon peoples to be more bold in using Indigenous rituals and symbols in worship: 'Let us be fearless; let us not clip the wings of the Holy Spirit'. (69) 'Let us imagine a holiness with Amazonian features, called to challenge the universal Church' (77), and not 'be quick to describe as superstition or paganism certain religious practices that arise spontaneously from the life of the peoples.' (78).

'It means that we can take up into the liturgy many elements proper to the experience of indigenous peoples in their contact with nature, and respect native forms of expression in song, dance, rituals, gestures and symbols.... We still have far to go along these lines.' (82).

This is true of Australia as well, though many parishes and churches feature Aboriginal art and symbols, like the message stick in a place of honour, and use Aboriginal music on occasion. But this must not just be decorative display. Why should not the Church invite our Indigenous people to develop a special rite of the liturgy that could be used more widely?

Struggles of Indigenous peoples

In words that resonate strongly with the experience of many Australian Aborigines, the exploitation of the Amazon fails to recognise 'the rights of the original peoples; it simply ignores them as if they did not exist, or acts as if the lands on which they live do not belong to them. .. the indigenous were viewed as intruders or usurpers... they were considered more an obstacle needing to be eliminated than as human beings with the same dignity as others'. (12).

Francis continues that failing 'to respect the rights of the original peoples to the land and its boundaries, and to self-determination and prior consent, should be called for what they are *injustice and crime*'. (14)

In the Amazon, some economic relationships have 'become an instrument of death', along with new forms of slavery and human trafficking, especially of women (14). 'Nor has colonisation ended: in many places, it has been changed, disguised and concealed', with 'unscrupulous plundering of the region'. (F.16).

After the unprecedented bushfires in 2019-20, many Australians are looking to Aboriginal people for insight into how to prevent huge conflagrations. More people are realising that we have much to learn from our Indigenous peoples about their cultures and values, their strength and endurance after so much suffering and dispossession. Internationally Aboriginal people have won renown for their unique expression in art, dance and music, as well as in sport.

In Australia we have made significant progress along the path of reconciliation, but there is much more to do. Pope Francis is calling us to fresh efforts to include Indigenous peoples in the urgent struggle to preserve our planet and work for a just sharing of goods and resources for everyone.

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