

# Synod for the Amazon: Why Get Involved and How?



editoriale



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**A**nother synodal event is coming up for the Church: from 6 to 27 October, the Special Assembly<sup>1</sup> of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, entitled “**Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology**”, will be held. The Synod’s focus is on a territory whose specificity is being reaffirmed: “The Amazon is a region with rich biodiversity; it is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious; 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” (PD, Introduction). Today, it is experiencing “a deep crisis [that] has been triggered by prolonged human intervention, in which a ‘culture of waste’ and an extractivist mentality prevail.” At the same time, the reflections of the Synod – which will not by accident take place in the Vatican and will include representatives of countries and Churches far removed from the Amazon – “transcend the strictly ecclesial-Amazonian sphere, because they focus on the universal Church, as well as on the future of the entire planet” (*ibid.*).

<sup>1</sup> The Assembly has been preceded by an articulated process of preparation and by the publication of the *Preparatory Document* (PD, 8 June 2018) and the *Instrumentum laboris* (IL, 17 June 2019). The texts, together with a great deal of other informative material, are available on the website <[www.sinodoamazonico.va](http://www.sinodoamazonico.va)>. The role played by the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM) in the preparation of the Synod is unprecedented. REPAM was established in 2014 with the aim of finding the best ways “to incarnate the Gospel among a particularly vulnerable section of the people of God”, according to the words used by its coordinator, Mauricio López (see “REPAM: per una Chiesa dal volto amazzonico”, in *Aggiornamenti Sociali*, 6-7 [2019] 512-516).

This is why **dealing with the Synod for the Amazon is not an exotic flight from our local, hardly insignificant problems**, though. Over the next few pages, we will try to explore the relevance of this Synod to “non-Amazonians” by offering some basic information about the process and above all by showing its benefit for our context as well.

## **Connections between the Global and the Local**

This Synod is probably the first experiment in articulating the local and global dimensions within the paradigm of an integral ecology. Paying attention to bonds and connections allows us to grasp what gives the Amazon its peculiar unity, beyond the borders that cross it; furthermore, it helps us discover what connects it to the rest of the planet, the contribution that it makes to the world in terms of the environment and biodiversity, as well as the exploitation which it suffers and which poses a threat to the entire planet.

**The dynamic between the global and the local is the main key to interpreting the development of this Synodal process and understanding how to participate in genuine, albeit different ways.** The Synod clearly challenges those who live in the Amazon and those who do not in different ways: the issues affect us all, but not in the same way. It is vital to respect the choice of the Synod to focus on one specific region, and therefore to avoid imposing extrinsic perspectives or “globalizing” it by adding themes relevant in other contexts. The same attitude will be required when we receive the Synod’s conclusions, which will be appropriate only for that particular social and ecclesial context, and cannot be applied elsewhere or on a global scale in an automatic and uncritical way without betraying their specificity.

This does not mean that the Synod for the Amazon is remote or irrelevant to non-Amazonians. Quite the contrary: it requires us to be willing to listen deeply to a view of the world that we are not accustomed to hearing, and to the pressing demands that the Amazon is addressing to the rest of the planet in order to overcome the crisis that grips it. Doing so will benefit us all. Secondly, while applying proposals and solutions identified for the Amazonian context elsewhere would be a short circuit, we all have to learn what facing the specific problems of a territory through a synodal method means.

## **An Original Subject: the Amazon Biome**

An essential first step for following this Synod is comprehending the complexity of the Amazon, and the characteristics which make it unique in so many ways. It is a huge territory of approximately

7.5 million square kilometers (more or less the same as Australia), extending over 9 countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Surinam, Venezuela, plus French Guiana). None of these, however, is entirely in the territory of the Amazon region: the majority of the populations of these countries lives in areas outside it. Therefore, despite its vastness, the Amazon is always a minority.

There are almost 3 million indigenous people among the inhabitants of this immense territory, who belong to about 390 peoples and nationalities, as well as some 110 to 130 indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation. They speak 330 different languages, half of which are spoken by less than 500 people. Inhabitants of other origins who have arrived over the centuries are far more numerous. These people speak the national languages of their countries (mainly Spanish and Portuguese) and make up the majority of the urban population of the region. Recently, a new population trend is on the rise: that of urbanised indigenous people, some of whom remain recognizable, while others tend to be assimilated into the majority population.

The importance of the Amazon is also quite specific from an environmental perspective: it is the main reserve of biodiversity, where between 30% and 50% of our planet's living species (animals and plants) live. It also contains about 20% of unfrozen freshwater on the Earth's surface, and functions as a lung for the whole of Latin America and beyond.

Within this immense variety, which allows us to speak of the Amazon as a plurality, "it is water – through its gorges, rivers, and lakes – that becomes the region's organizing and integrating element, with its main axis being the Amazon, the mother and father river of all." (PD, no. 1). This applies not just to the natural environment but also to the human population in economic, cultural and symbolic terms, given that it is precisely the rivers that allow people to move in a region almost entirely covered by a dense forest.

**The term chosen by the Synodal documents to express this complex identity, which is geographical, anthropic and environmental at the same time, is "biome", i.e. a large area of the biosphere characterized by a certain dominant vegetation or fauna.** The term is applied to other similar contexts: the Congo basin, the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, the tropical forests of the Asia Pacific region, and the Guarani Aquifer. We could probably add the regions of the Arctic and, with the important criterion of the absence of a stable population and thus of specific cultures, the ones of the Antarctic.

The choice of such a technical term indicates that ordinary categories based on political or administrative boundaries (i.e. the State and its subdivisions) cannot account for the complex reality that we have described and the balance that the peoples have been able to maintain with the environment over the centuries. This context challenges us to make the effort to increase the number of perspectives from which we describe it, and to bring them together in a more appropriate manner. As the encyclical *Laudato si'* teaches, not doing this renders us unable to identify all the dimensions of an issue and denies us the possibility of finding truly effective solutions. This also applies at the level of the Church: it is decidedly innovative to dedicate a Synod to a territory that does not correspond to a set of Episcopal Conferences, traditionally organized on a national basis.

For “non-Amazonians”, this is **an invitation to question the boundaries, perspectives and categories we usually employ to characterize a territory and analyse its problems**, as they are insufficient to account for this reality. An example closer to home that can help us understand this is that of the Alpine regions: regardless of the political and administrative boundaries, they are characterized by major environmental and natural similarities, local populations that possess common cultural traits, as well as a history which binds them together. Barriers that are considered from the lowlands to be insurmountable, are not for the people who live there. The Alps and the people who live there share with the Amazon the fact that they are divided among different countries in which they are always a minority. Frequently, tensions and conflict with “the lowlands” and its population break out, usually around major infrastructural projects or resource management (e.g., water basins that are the source of hydroelectric power), the benefits of which are not distributed proportionally to their costs.

The dynamics are similar, even if the levels of exploitation and violence that the Amazon experiences are incomparably higher. The final characteristic marking the Amazon in a significant way is its relationship with the rest of the world, which sees it first and foremost as a gigantic reserve of resources to use and often to plunder, without taking into account the rights of those who have always lived there.

## A Treasure Trove of Wisdom

“Those of us who do not live in these lands need your wisdom and knowledge to enable us to enter into, without destroying, the treasures that this region holds” (Pope Francis, *Address at the Meet-*

ing with the Peoples of Amazonia, Puerto Maldonado, Peru, 19 January 2018). **Listening to the indigenous people and all of the communities living in the Amazon is essential for us to enrich our own perspective**, which is not only global but also “otherwise local.” Before “we lend our voice to their causes”, offer solutions or, even worse, impose our agenda and our problems on them, we are called to “to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (*Evangelii gaudium*, no. 198). This is not easy, especially at a distance, even if in recent times “indigenous peoples have begun to write down their own history and to document more formally their own cultures, customs, traditions, and knowledge” (PD, no. 3), making their worldview more accessible.

This worldview and the lifestyle derived from it is often encapsulated in the expression *buen vivir* (in English, “good living”), the Spanish translation of expressions from different Amazonian languages, such as *sumak kawsay*, *alli káusai* or *shien pujut*. **It is a way of life that has its roots in the indigenous traditions and refers not so much to a codified doctrine, but rather to practices related to creating relationships between individuals and groups through the bond with the land.** Therefore, at the core of this worldview are the relationships between water, land, the natural environment, community life and culture. As stated in no. 12 of the IL, quoting an official document of the Amazonian peoples, “It is about living in “harmony with oneself, with nature, with human beings and with the supreme being, since there is an inter-communication between the whole cosmos, where there is neither excluding nor excluded, and that among all of us we can forge a project of full life.” *Buen vivir* is a question of contemplation, respect and care of the biome of which you are a part (cf. *ibid.*, no. 95), which “influences health, life together, education, cultivation of the land, the living relationship with nature and ‘Mother Earth’, the capacities of resistance and resiliency of women in particular, rites and religious expressions, relationships with ancestors, the contemplative attitude, the sense of gratuity, celebration and festivity, and the sacred meaning of the territory” (*ibid.*, no. 121).

For us Westerners, it is essential to listen to these words with our minds empty of the heavy baggage that can weigh us down: from the myth of the “noble savage” to the tension between perceived backwardness and modernity. The Amazonian cultures are something else completely: a highly complex civilization which for centuries has dealt with the challenges of modernization and colonization, and continues to come to terms with both internal and

external conflicts and contradictions, envy, anger, violence, aggression, corruption, etc. *Buen vivir* is not an idyllic condition taken for granted once and for all, but is a path as real as it is fragile. Moreover, it does not exclude a relationship with other cultures: for example, its logic incorporates access to education, health services and other fundamental rights that indigenous people enjoy like any other citizen.

The important thing is to respect the Amazonian peoples' autonomy in defining the parameters and the components of the *buen vivir* without applying indicators of poverty, well-being or development, which they find alien and possibly incomprehensible. The Western definition of quality of life cannot do without some economic comfort and the attainment of certain levels of consumption. This makes it very difficult for us to understand how people with few material goods and with very limited "security" in life - like most Amazonian peoples - can boast of good living.

**At this point, a radical question arises about the definition of "a good life" that is at the foundation of a Western model of progress.** In order to take up this healthy provocation, **we need to free ourselves from the stereotypes and prejudices that do not allow us to take the Amazonian peoples seriously so that we can enter into an authentic dialogue with them**, one free from any sense of paternalism. As no. 111 of the IL admits, the problem also applies to the Church: "It has a tendency at times to impose a culture alien to the Amazon that prevents us from understanding its peoples and appreciating their worldviews." So much so that some radical criticism of the Church claims that no evangelization project is free from a colonial attitude. Pope Francis urges us not to fall prey to these risks: "We need urgently to appreciate the essential contribution that they [indigenous peoples] bring to society as a whole, and not reduce their cultures to an idealized image of a natural state, much less a kind of museum of a bygone way of life. Their cosmic vision and their wisdom, have much to teach those of us who are not part of their culture" (*Address to the Meeting with Indigenous People of Amazonia*, cit.).

For us "non-Amazonians", this means getting used to seeing things from a range of perspectives and accepting being questioned by those of other peoples; rather than acknowledging other perspectives passively out of a Western guilt complex, we should be stimulated by other peoples and in turn stimulate them. Identifying the limits and ideological biases of social and economic analyses coming from Latin American contexts is legitimate, but on the condition that we simultaneously accept their right to draw the conclusion

that **our ideal of “a good life” is imbued with materialism**; that our culture, even our ecclesial culture, exudes not only secularization, but secularism, and finds it difficult to allow a discernible space for transcendence. Moreover, that the individualism in which we are immersed without even noticing it anymore, makes us incapable of thinking in terms of collective actors, of communities and peoples.

Something similar also applies to a more explicitly Christian and theological agenda: finding suspicious echoes of paganism in certain expressions of the faith must go hand in hand with renouncing the idea that there exists a Christian culture par excellence, an unquestionable paradigm against which other models can be judged. **The polyhedral perspective of *Evangelii gaudium* and the primacy of dialogue in the paradigm of integral ecology, can also inform the relationship between forms of Christianity enculturated in different contexts.** Each must open up to recognize and be grateful for the contribution of the other.

## New Paths

The title of the Synod also indicates its objective: “new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology”. **“New” should be understood here in in the radical sense that the term takes on in the encyclical *Laudato si’* when it refers to ecological conversion**, stating that it is essential to “once more broaden our vision” if we want to build a progress “which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral” (no. 112). This is why a genuine ecological culture “cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm” (*ibid.*, no. 111). An entity that is so delicate and rich in bonds between its different dimensions such as the Amazonian biome is an emblematic example of this need.

**The term “paths” chosen for the title of the Synod suggests an icon of the challenge that awaits us, that of the means of communication**, which is one of the critical points for the Amazon. The “new paths” it needs are not the highways that many want to lay down - which would contribute to its destruction, with serious consequences for the entire planet. Nor do these “new paths” entail re-proposing the dugout canoes that glide along the rivers, if it means locking the peoples of the Amazon into an idealized past.



**Let's see how the Synodal Assembly and the processes that come out of it will lay out these "new paths". First of all, it is about involving the communities and peoples of the Amazon with all their variety and differences,** being aware that "shaping a Church with an Amazonian face includes an ecclesial, social, ecological and pastoral dimension, often conflictual" (IL, no 111).

This project involves us non-Amazonians more than we think. First of all, because we benefit from the positive effects of the Amazon region in global environmental terms; and secondly because the contradictions threatening its very survival originate elsewhere and intertwine with the way our global economy works: with models of progress and economic growth that still see the environment as a resource to be plundered, with the choices of large multinationals which are driven only by the quest of maximising short-term profit, and with lifestyles built on the logic of consumerism. **On its own, the Amazon will not be able to withstand these formidable pressures: in order for it to continue to exist with its own face, it needs the rest of the world to give it the space to do so.** This is a responsibility that involves us all: as consumers, investors, citizens and voters, calling on the creativity of everyone with a view to building genuinely sustainable alternatives.

As we work in this direction, we can also be inspired not so much by the solutions that the synodal process will identify - as they are unlikely to be appropriate for other contexts - but rather by its invitation to creativity and its example of inclusion of a plurality of perspectives: even beyond the borders of the Amazon, there is no shortage of situations in which this approach could prove effective. This could be the case in the Mediterranean, with its many similarities and differences from the Amazon: it is a region with a specific environmental identity, in which thousands of years of relations, trade and conflict have interwoven the cultures that inhabit its shores and given them common traits beyond the many linguistic, religious and ethnic differences. This applies also to the level of material and popular culture: just think of food, without even mentioning a globalized brand such as the Mediterranean diet. At the heart of all this is a sea - yet another body of water. Throughout history it has always brought together (for better or for worse) what people have and who they are, but today some would like to turn it into a wall to keep away people perceived as a threat. All too often, this sea becomes their grave.

**Is it really impossible to look at the Mediterranean from alternative perspectives, which enable us to overcome the contradictions which keep tripping us up and the problems that we**



**seem unable to solve?** While Pope Francis was promoting the Synod for the Amazon and was accompanying its preparation, he was also involved in a number of initiatives that cast new light on Mediterranean issues: from the Document on human fraternity signed in Abu Dhabi together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar (February 2019), to the trip to Morocco (March 2019), to the speech delivered in Naples on 21 June on the role of theology in the context of the Mediterranean. In this line, why can't we dream of a Synod for the Mediterranean, without leaving it to the Pope to undertake all the major initiatives? The new paths of integral ecology certainly concern the Amazon, but not exclusively.