

NEW DREAMS AND PATHWAYS FROM THE AMAZON SYNOD

Cardinal Michael Czerny, SJ

This welcome publication from Orbis Books presents two important documents. The first is the Final Document (*The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*) approved by the fathers of the Pan-Amazonian Synod. At the conclusion of the synod this document was presented to Pope Francis, who has now commended it to the attention of the entire world. Second, it includes the text of *Querida Amazonia* (*Beloved Amazonia*), the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis. In this exhortation the pope presents his own thoughts about the synod and about the paths he invites us to pursue in relation to this vast green area of the planet, home to about thirty-three million inhabitants, three million of whom are indigenous people, as well as the greatest wealth in biodiversity and fresh water in the world. In what follows I offer a brief guide to these documents, especially to *Querida Amazonia*.

A Love Letter Recounting Four Dreams

Querida Amazonia is, first of all, a love letter—a love letter by Pope Francis to the region of the Amazon River and the peoples living there. In it Pope Francis shares four dreams—social,

Cardinal Michael Czerny, SJ, is Co-Undersecretary of the Migrants and Refugees Section, Co-Special Secretary of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region. For help in drafting and editing this preface, he especially thanks Mr. Robert Czerny (Ottawa) and Mr. Gerard O'Connell (Rome).

cultural, ecological, and pastoral—that he says the synod itself had inspired in him:

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.

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.

I dream of an Amazon Region that can jealously preserve its overwhelming natural beauty and the superabundant life teeming in its rivers and forests.

I dream of Christian communities capable of generous commitment, incarnate in the Amazon Region, and giving the Church new faces with Amazonian features. (no. 7)

He writes because he sees that what he loves is not only very beautiful but also in deep trouble. His dreams and his mood are meant to challenge and call forth a loving response not only from those who live in the Amazon Region, but from people across the world. No declaration of love has the form of a contract or a prescription.

As an apostolic exhortation, a text written by the Holy Father himself, *Querida Amazonia* certainly has primacy and prominence as a magisterial teaching. But the synod's Final Document is also a significant text because it is the result of an important synodal process convened by Pope Francis. So greatly does he value this Final Document that he has taken the unusual step of officially presenting it, explicitly recommending it, to church people in the Amazon and to "every person of good will" throughout the world.

Looking back on the whole synodal process, what remains most in my mind is the voices of the indigenous peoples: how they began to speak, how they kept on speaking, how their speaking was welcomed during the synod and in its final document and in the subsequent exhortation of the pope. In effect

they said, “Do not abandon us; continue to walk with us,” and the bishops said in reply, “We will not abandon you; we will continue to walk with you.”¹ I ask myself if there is any church experience over the centuries where you can trace the emergence of a voice like that. I think it is late in coming, but it is not too late. I find that very moving. Taken together with the careful preparatory work and the many other voices in the synod proceedings, this constitutes a huge, sincere, transparent engagement in reading the signs of the times and honestly discerning what those signs might mean.

The Two Documents in Relation to the Synod

The Pan-Amazonian Synod took place in the Vatican in October 2019. It was preceded by a two-year preparatory process in which some eighty-seven thousand people participated throughout the Amazonian region. Pope Francis visited Puerto Maldonado in the Peruvian Amazon in December 2018, and the following year he participated in the synod. In his introduction to *Querida Amazonia* he explains that he does not want to replace or repeat the synod’s Final Document; instead, he presents it officially and invites everyone to read it in its entirety. He hopes that the whole church will allow itself to be enriched and challenged by this document. Moreover, he asks all pastors, consecrated persons, and lay faithful in Amazonia and elsewhere in the world to commit themselves to applying the conclusions and proposals of the synod in their own situation, insofar as that is possible. He hopes that believers, as well as all people of good will, will be inspired by *Querida Amazonia* and enriched and challenged by the Final Document.

The synod’s Final Document was put to a vote on October 27, 2019, and Pope Francis immediately approved its publication (together with the votes for each section). It includes sections entitled:

¹ This is an echo of what missionaries recounted over a hundred years ago: “They begged insistently that we not abandon them and they extorted from us the promise that we would return” (QA, no. 18).

- “New Paths of Pastoral Conversion”
- “New Paths of Cultural Conversion”
- “New Paths of Ecological Conversion”
- “New Paths of Synodal Conversion”

It speaks very strongly on justice and calls on the church to stand with the poor and the indigenous peoples of the Amazon Region in defense of their rights and their homelands, including the rainforests that are so vital to the future of humanity. The synod’s *commitments, recommendations, and suggestions* are distributed throughout the entire document, and number nearly two hundred.

I am particularly struck by Pope Francis’s poetic formulation of his four dreams; they are warm, hopeful, and insistent, but they are also very realistic—they tell us like it is. The combination of prophetic and interpretative clarity with full engagement—the urgent call to get on with it—is so important for the Amazon Region and for the people there and throughout the whole world.

Fruitful Dreams

“Dreams are important,” Pope Francis told young people at a prayer vigil in the Circus Maximus on 8 August 2018. “They keep our eyes wide open, they help us to embrace the horizon, to cultivate hope in all daily action. . . . Dreams awaken us, take us further, they are the most luminous stars, the ones that indicate a different path for humanity.” The Bible, moreover, tells us that great dreams are capable of bearing fruit. Therefore, the dreams of the pope, which thanks to this book the reader will know better, are far from any ephemeral or utopian perspective; they are an indication of a path that, according to Francis, the whole church is called to follow. The beauty of the papal exhortation lies, not in dictating a series of precepts, but in seeing a horizon and sharing the vision.

Looking at the environmental devastation of the Amazon and the threats to the human dignity of its people, for example,

Pope Francis invites us to be indignant: “It is not good for us to become inured to evil” (QA, no. 15). He invites everyone to build networks of solidarity and development that overcome the various colonial mentalities. He also encourages us to seek alternatives in the form of sustainable livestock and agriculture, the use of energies that do not pollute, the exploitation of resources that does not bring about the destruction of the environment and of cultures. In short, Francis’s “great dreams” help us resist the lure of anesthetization; they invite us to a concrete and daily commitment.

Francis dreams of a commitment by bishops, priests, consecrated persons, and lay faithful in the church as well as people of good will everywhere to rise to the defense of the poorest, of the original peoples of the Amazon, as well as to the preservation of their cultures and protection of the Amazon’s overflowing life, including the rainforest that is so vital to humanity’s welfare and future. In his ecclesial dream he envisages Christian communities capable of incarnating themselves in the Amazon and building a church with an Amazonian face. Throughout his text, in sharing these dreams, he uses language that is rich in poetic quotations, as well as references to the preceding popes.

For the Whole World

Pope Francis wants to share *Querida Amazonia* with the whole world because—without going into all sorts of theories about globalization—he is convinced that the concerns of Amazonia are deeply relevant for the entire world. He already explained clearly in his encyclical *Laudato Si’* that the whole planet and its inhabitants are inextricably connected with the Amazon. Choices that people are making all over the world in what we consume, what we invest in, how we earn money, what goals we choose, our patterns of consumption, are often in contradiction with the very survival and flourishing of the Amazon and its peoples. On 12 February 2020, at the Vatican press conference when we presented *Querida Amazonia*, the

Brazilian Nobel Prize–winning scientist Carlos Nobre stated clearly in his Intervention that “the planet (at least the planet that we know) cannot live without Amazonia. But Amazonia is struggling, crying out, to the point that we are close to reaching some tipping points and to mutating from being the largest rainforest of the world to a savanna. This will have terrible consequences for the Amazonian territory, its people, and for the rest of the world.” Professor Nobre called for a development of the Amazon with the rivers flowing and the trees standing. It is very urgent to take up the challenge in the Amazon, and I’m delighted that the church will be promoting such healthy, sustainable, culturally sensitive, and future-oriented development there.

For the Entire Church

Francis has addressed *Querida Amazonia* to the whole church because he believes its conclusions, as reflected in the synod’s Final Document, have relevance not only in the Amazon Region but elsewhere too. It is significant that in *Querida Amazonia* Pope Francis puts the synod’s Final Document into the hands of the whole church, and he does this to allow churches in other places too, and not just in Amazonia, to discover its potential and fruitfulness for them. By joining the pope in loving the Amazon, it is hoped that they will be inspired to initiate their own synodal processes and to discover their own new paths.

Paths Ahead

Querida Amazonia does not intend to close any of the discussions or questions opened in the synod’s Final Document. Indeed, far from closing a synodal process or shutting it down, the aim is to stimulate and help initiate the crucial third phase of the synodal process, namely, the implementation that can and should continue. By officially presenting that document to the whole church, the pope gives it a moral weight. Even if

it is not a magisterial teaching, he nonetheless considers it an important text—the result of a synod in a particular area—and he wants the whole church to learn from it and to discuss the important issues it raises so that together we can move forward in understanding what the Holy Spirit is calling the church to be and to do at this moment in history.

It makes sense to ask what indicators would show that the synodal journey is continuing. As the first indicator, we can expect the emergence of some kind of new Amazonian ecclesial organization. A post-synodal regional Church organization for the Amazon Region, as suggested in the Final Document (no. 115), will emerge from the synodal journey, which has involved parts of nine countries, and from then on will animate the ongoing journey.

Local Leadership and Many-Faceted Collaboration

In this third phase of the synodal process there are issues on which a particular bishop can act; nobody else can do it for him, and he shouldn't be waiting for others. There are other things that bishops can only do collaboratively. And then there are many things—as Francis strongly insists here—that demand not just collaboration among bishops but bishops together with the religious men and women, the missionaries, the lay catechists, organizations, civil society, and so on. Francis in *Querida Amazonia* emphasizes the fundamental and vital role of the laity in the life of the church today and tomorrow. He calls for the development in the church of a lay culture. We can expect the response to be plural, pluralistic, and not just a bishop deciding by himself.

The response will depend on many factors. For example, in the area of migration that I am familiar with, one of the big calls of the synod was for more coordination. This is vital not just along borders, as is obvious, but within countries too, for as we discovered during the synod, the Amazon is not just a place to go to or to come from; it is a corridor. And if large numbers of people are passing through a region, that raises a whole range of economic, social, cultural, and pastoral issues that do not come

up with other forms of human movement. We can't minister to people moving in a corridor one diocese at a time.

One Gospel, Many Cultures

In *Querida Amazonia* Pope Francis emphasizes that the pastoral and missionary dimension is the essential one, since without “the passionate proclamation” of the gospel, the church and her projects run the risk of becoming indistinguishable from secular NGOs. He shows that the commitment to defend the poor, the indigenous peoples, the discarded peoples, implies the witness and the proposal of friendship with Jesus. He insists that the church's social message includes the proclamation of the gospel, and in its nucleus, the kerygma: “a God who infinitely loves every man and woman and has revealed this love fully in Jesus Christ, crucified for us and risen in our lives” (QA, no. 64).² The Good News includes concern for human life, human dignity, justice, peace, and the care for our common home.

At the same time, both the apostolic exhortation and the Final Document of the synod show us that, in proclaiming and witnessing the gospel, we must value all that each culture has produced that is good and beautiful, raising all this to its fullness in the light of the Christian faith. The Gospel is always proclaimed in this or that concrete place, not an abstract anywhere and everywhere. “Preaching must become incarnate, spirituality must become incarnate, ecclesial structures must become incarnate” (QA 6). At the same time, the church learns and enriches itself by coming into contact with what the Holy Spirit has already sown in each particular culture.

More Priests? Various Paths

One of the issues that the synod process brought into sharp focus, as does Francis in *Querida Amazonia*, is that many

² Pope Francis recommends rereading the brief summary of this “great message” found in *Christus vivit*, chap. 4.

believing communities in the Amazon are not able to participate in the eucharistic celebration except infrequently—a full year or even longer between celebrations—because of the shortage of priests in the region. The synod discussed the question of the ordination of mature married men (*virī probati*) and voted on a proposal to ordain married deacons as priests. This issue sparked great interest in the media. The discussion in the synod revealed that while the majority of synod fathers supported the proposal, a significant group opposed it. Pope Francis saw this division, and does not mention the proposal in *Querida Amazonia*. Instead, he notes that there are many priests from Amazonia working in Europe and North America, and many others do not want to work in the Amazon Region. He asks the bishops to encourage their priests to be more generous and offer to work there. He calls for a seminary to prepare indigenous men for the priesthood. He calls for more missionaries to come to the region, and for more married deacons in the region, where there are currently too few. He asks everyone to pray for more vocations, but he makes clear that vocations will not flourish without living faith communities. Contrary to what has been reported in the press, the pope does not reject the synod's proposal to ordain married men; he simply does not mention it. He clearly does not feel the moment is right for reaching a conclusion; the issue needs more reflection and discernment.

In the broad context of the eucharistic and ministerial life of the church, the pope affirms that this issue is not merely a matter of numbers; it would not be enough to increase the presence of priests. What is needed is a new life in the communities, a new missionary impulse, new lay services, ongoing formation, audacity, and creativity. Needed are lay people animated by a missionary spirit, capable of representing the authentic face of the Amazonian church, and radiating their influence in myriad directions. This is what holds out hope for a resurgence of vocations. The Amazon challenges us, writes Francis, to overcome limited perspectives and not to be content with solutions that remain boxed in to partial views. In other words, the great question is a renewed experience of faith and proclamation.

Women in Church Ministry: Various Paths

On the question of women and their role in church ministries in the Amazon, Francis makes clear that while he does not favor the ordination of women as deacons, he advocates a much greater role for them in ministries, in leadership, and in decision-making roles. He gratefully acknowledges that there are communities in Amazonia where the faith has been transmitted for decades without priests, thanks to strong and generous women who, impelled by the Holy Spirit, baptized, taught catechism and prayer, and kept the communities together.

Pope Francis says it is necessary to broaden and deepen our approach rather than equate a more significant role for women solely by means of ordination. Such a perspective, he says, could be seen as clericalizing women. This needs to be seen in the context of the overall magisterium of Pope Francis, which emphasizes the need to untie the priestly ministry from power, because this union gives rise to clericalism. I also believe that we should draw inspiration from the example of the women in the Amazon Region, which reminds us that power in the church is an expression of service, generosity, and freedom. Other charisms and services and charisms of women need to be encouraged and stimulated. The pope declares that women should have access to ecclesial functions and services for which ordination is not mandatory and which should be stable and publicly recognized with a mandate from the bishop. Surely it is time to review the ministries, functions, and roles already existing in the church, to return to their foundations and update them, to read them in the light of the reality and inspiration of the Spirit and the signs of the times, to open them to lay women unless restriction to ordained men is utterly essential, and at the same time to create other new stable ministries by mandate of the bishop that have public recognition and are open to women as well as men, for example, as the Final Document states, “a ministry of welcome for those who are displaced from their territories toward the cities” (no. 79).

The New and Most Urgent Work of Mercy

In *Querida Amazonia* Francis calls for creativity in opening up new roles for women. One of the ways mentioned in the document is the care of the common home, to recognize it as a church ministry open to men and women, to young people and older people, a ministry that would be publicly recognized and have the backing of the bishop. That opens up a whole series of possibilities. For instance, “green parishes” and “green dioceses” in many parts of the world already have a ministry of care for the common home. And that’s just one example of the new possibilities.

In the light of *Querida Amazonia* and the Final Document, let us continue the process of personal and institutional conversion. We are invited to convert culturally, ecologically, pastorally, and integrally. In this way the dreams of Pope Francis regarding the Amazon, the church, and the whole of our planet will come true. As a guide in this endeavor, I offer a reminder of the *eighth* work of mercy, which Pope Francis announced in his message for the 2016 World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, *Show Mercy to Our Common Home*. This new work of mercy is both corporal and spiritual. Repeating some passages of *Laudato Si’*, the pope writes that care for our common home calls for a “grateful contemplation of God’s world” (LS, no. 214) that “allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us” (LS, no. 85). As a corporal work of mercy, care for our common home requires “simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness” and “makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world” (LS, nos. 230–31).

The wonderful and continuing history of the traditional works of mercy tells us that everyone is capable of daily gestures of feeding the hungry and welcoming the stranger, of comforting the afflicted and forgiving offenses. As Pope Francis writes in *Gaudete et exsultate*, “Those who really wish to give glory to God by their lives, who truly long to grow in holiness, are called to be single-minded and tenacious in their practice

of the works of mercy” (no. 107). The same wise and energetic love that has enabled uncountable numbers of people inspired by Christ to carry out uncountable actions of healing and generous mercy—which has constituted goodness in our world through two millennia—needs to be extended to caring for our common home and all who dwell in it, now and in the future.

Entering a Process

As explained earlier, the Final Document of the synod and the pope’s *Querida Amazonia* two months later completed the formal synod process. However, neither of these documents is intended to set a terminus to the work in progress or to offer the last word on the subject. As long as the Amazon Region and its inhabitants continue to live in peril, and as long as the social, cultural, ecological, and pastoral dreams envisioned by Pope Francis remain unfulfilled, the work and reflection will continue. In his Greeting to the synod, also included in this volume, Pope Francis states that “being in synod means being encouraged to enter a process.” “Ecclesial processes,” he notes, “have a need: they must be protected, cared for like a baby, supported at the beginning, cared for delicately. They need the warmth of the community, they need the warmth of Mother Church. This is how an ecclesial process grows.”

In the Final Document of the synod and in *Querida Amazonia* this process has taken its first baby steps. May the process continue to grow. May it help foster a church in Amazonia that is truly rooted in the experience, culture, and challenges of the region. And may the ensuing witness of “holiness with an Amazonian face” truly challenge the universal church (QA, no. 77).