

Exposing the Spirits:



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The synod on the Amazon will be remembered as the moment that bishops gathered in Rome asked the pope to ordain married men in order better to stand with the wretched and vulnerable in defense of their lives and land. Whatever Pope Francis does now with that request, it is an important moment for the church, a sign that the pastoral and sacramental demands of the people of God in a particular place need not always be sacrificed on the altar of uniformity. Perhaps ecclesialogists will say it was the moment that the great unresolved issue of Vatican II—whether the local or the universal should take precedence—finally settled on a proper balance.

But the three-week gathering of close to 300 people (182 of whom could vote on the final document) was about much more. Francis came closest to expressing the shift it represented in his end-of-synod address, when he urged reporters not to focus only on the who-won-what in “minor disciplinary matters” but to “take time to look at the diagnoses, which is the dense part, the part where the synod expressed itself best.” The Amazon was being stripped, plundered, burned; its native people, guardians of the ecosystem, were desperate for help, looking to the church to stand with them. To come close, the church had to change, to embrace new thinking—especially on what they called *ministerialidad*, the question of ministries. Grasping the problem didn’t mean more study but conversion. And conversion began with a shift of perspective—with coming to see the world a bit more as God does.

The really exceptional thing, Fr. Antonio Spadaro, SJ, of *La Civiltà Cattolica* said, was the “radically pastoral” nature of the synod. Spadaro, who sat through all three weeks of the speeches and small-group meetings, was struck by how the bishops from Amazonia who made up the bulk of the “synod fathers” (those who can vote) shared the same pastoral challenge: how the church could better serve their hurting people, how it could stand with them against what the final document calls “the predatory extractivism that responds to the logic of greed, typical of the dominant technocratic paradigm.” The beauty of the synod was not only that it asked that question, but that, through frank and honest exchanges, in prayer and in dialogue, it got some answers.

The native peoples’ leaders at the synod were key to its pastoral conversion. Their stories of suffering and of the astonishing violence directed against them formed a constant backdrop, as did their expressions of faith in Jesus and in his church. “The politicians don’t listen to us, but you are listening to us” was the message many of them gave the bishops. José Gregorio Díaz Mirabal, a Venezuelan leader from the Curripaco people, said the Catholic Church was “the only institution that is asking the world to wake up to what’s happening, and to save us.” He had asked the pope to “stop the invasions from outside” and to protect his people, because when they stood up for their rights they were imprisoned or even killed.

What the Amazon Synod Decided and What It Revealed

Yesica Patiachi Tayori, a bilingual teacher from the Harakbut people in Peru, stood up to tell the pope: “Brother Francis, you seem alone, but you are not alone. The native peoples of the Amazon are with you!”

The question was how the church could in turn be with them. The ecological question was also the “ministries” question. When almost all the local players in the region—the politicians, the foreign investors, mining companies, cattle ranchers, the prosperity-gospel evangelists—are in thrall to what the pope has called the technocratic paradigm, who but Catholic Amazonians will defend the integral ecology of the Kingdom of God? Yet how, in remote areas where they might be able to celebrate the Eucharist no more than once a year?



Bishops walk in procession as they arrive for the concluding Mass of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon celebrated by Pope Francis at the Vatican Oct. 27, 2019. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

To answer that question—the synod had to ask

what kind of church it would be if it heard the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth as one cry, and responded as Christ would. The way toward an answer was in the final document: a church that is permanently undergoing a fourfold conversion—cultural, pastoral, ecological, and synodal—to become Samaritan, merciful, missionary, “inserted and inculturated,” a servant church, educating and evangelizing, standing with the people in defense of their rights and their land.

The pope asked the synod more than once for *un desborde*, a Spanish word that means a river breaking its banks in response to a sudden flow of water. He wanted to open up the synod’s thinking like that, so that the Holy Spirit could overflow. What emerged was a vision and a mission. “We may not be able to modify immediately the destructive model of extractivist development, but we do need to know and make clear where we stand, whose side we are on,” the final document reads. The church had to defend the life of the poor: of the people, of crea-

tion, of family, of culture. In asking how the church could do so given its paucity of resources, the vast distances involved, and the great powers it must face down, the Amazon synod was doing what synods do best, not just repeating familiar propositions, but searching for new answers to urgent pastoral questions.

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Dom Neri José Tondello, bishop of Juína in Brazil’s Mato Grosso, led Portuguese A, one of the small groups that boldly called—as more than half of them did—for a women’s diaconate and married priests. Juína diocese is on the edge of the Amazon region, at least two days’ drive from Manaus, and covers around fifty thousand square miles.

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It has 130,000 Catholics—including seven thousand indigenous in twenty-seven villages and eleven ethnic groups—spread over thirteen immense parishes or mission areas, each of which has dozens of “base ecclesial communities.” Dom Neri has twenty priests, ten permanent deacons, and sixteen women religious, plus many hundreds of catechists and “animators”—essentially leaders of the base communities.

Dom Neri and most of the other Amazonian synod fathers supported the proposal made in the synod by retired bishop of Xingu and local church hero Dom Erwin Krätzler to ordain suitable married “elders” of proven virtue, *virii probati*, who would in most cases be the “animators” of those communities. They argued that priests rushing from community to community cannot possibly “know the smell of their sheep,” to use the pope’s famous phrase, and therefore a new type of priest—not replacing the celibate priesthood, but alongside it—is needed, at least in these missionary zones.

The move was key to moving from a pastoral model based on visits to one based on presence. By introducing ordained ministry back into the community, the church could enable access to the sacraments but also better inculturate the priesthood. This question was also linked to the principle of synodality: good priests don’t just fly in and make arbitrary decisions but consult with local people. In dioceses like Dom Neri’s, therefore, a priesthood like that of the first millennium—local married elders, rather than young men trained in far-off seminaries as a separate class—made far more sense.

But inside the synod hall the Amazonian bishops faced intense opposition from the minority of curial cardinals, who said this was a universal question: the impact of ordaining *virii probati* in one region would be to undermine celibacy worldwide. Some said no such decision could be made by this synod, but would require its own special synod. Those who took their inspiration from Dom Erwin Krätzler replied that the Amazonian bishops should not be prevented from discussing a proposal for their own region as long as that proposal did not directly affect the church elsewhere. The law of celibacy was not intrinsic to

priesthood, and the church had made other exceptions to it. The Eucharist, by contrast, was essential to the sustenance of the People of God, and to sacrifice it to a clerical discipline was not the Gospel.

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There were many positions in between. Many of the non-Amazonian but also non-curial synod fathers wanted to respect the discernment of the local church but worried that the *virii probati* proposal would be too “fungible,” as one archbishop put it to me. His concern was that his seminarians would look over to the Amazon and ask, “Why do I have to be celibate?” He believed there needed to be a clear answer to that question, a way of showing that Amazonia was indeed a special case. Others wanted to be sure that the *virii probati* were on a distinct track, so you didn’t get, say, a seminarian on his way to ordination deciding to get married.

You can see traces of the struggling and the horsetrading in the final document’s paragraph 111—the one proposing the ordination of *virii probati*. It received a majority of more than two-thirds (128 votes) but also the largest number of negative votes (41). The synod fathers said celibacy was “a gift of God to the extent that this gift enables the missionary disciple, ordained to the priesthood, to dedicate himself fully to the service of the Holy People of God.” But they had no truck with the argument made by some of the conservative *curiali*, that there was some kind ontological connection between being a priest and not marrying. Celibacy has “many reasons of convenience” with the priesthood, the synod fathers said, but is not required by it. Appealing to the argument from *Lumen Gentium* 13 that “legitimate diversity does not harm the community and unity of the

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Church, but expresses and serves it,” paragraph 111 proposed to establish “criteria and dispositions on the part of the competent authority” to ordain *virī probatī*—essentially a dispensation from celibacy.

Significantly, the final document proposes ordaining not “elders”—the term used in the Kräutler/Lobinger proposal—but rather “suitable and recognized men of the community” who have “a fruitful permanent diaconate” along with a “legitimately constituted and stable family.” In other words, these are long-standing permanent deacons, not seminarians with doubts about celibacy. In order to allay fears of fungibility, paragraph 111 adds that the mission of these *virī probatī* is geographically confined to “sustain the life of the Christian community through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments in the most remote areas of the Amazon region.”

The archbishop worried about the effect on his seminarians was happy. So was Dom Neri. When I meet him the day after the vote, he was sending the key paragraph to one of his permanent deacons. Now in his fifties, the deacon left seminary in order to marry, but went on to have a fruitful diaconate, and hopes one day to be ordained a priest. “It’s what was possible,” Dom Neri says of the text. “They were wise: they didn’t force it, but they opened the door.” Of course, the pope has to respond in an exhortation likely to be out before the end of the year.

But Dom Neri thinks much will now depend on the new pan-Amazonian bishops’ body the document calls for (“a permanent and representative episcopal organism that promotes synodality in the Amazon region”). He thinks that body—the pope described it in his speech as a kind of bishops’ conference for the region—will eventually request that the pope delegate to it his authority to dispense from celibacy on a case-by-case basis. Dom Neri also sees a way forward in the Amazonian Rite that the synod’s final report also proposes. This could start as a special liturgical rite incorporating aboriginal symbols and rituals

but eventually evolve into a *sui iuris* church like that of the Copts or the Chaldeans. Because most of the twenty-three different rites in the Catholic Church already have some form of married priest-



Last Supper by Bohdan Piasecki (1998) commissioned by B.A.S.I.C. Dublin, Ireland (basic@indigo.ie)

hood, this would make the Amazonian *virī probatī* even less threatening to a Latin Rite that for the past millennium has insisted on mandatory celibacy. In his end-of-synod speech, the pope seemed to want the Amazonian bishops to push in that direction, noting that many of the twenty-three churches with their own rites “started out small, but building traditions as the Lord led them.” He said they “shouldn’t be afraid” of pushing out in that direction, always under the guidance of the universal Church.

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It was after the conquistador Francisco de Orellana saw women fighting pitched battles on its banks that he named the Amazon after the Greek warrior women of myth. The three dozen women taking part as experts and auditors at the synod were tough too: indigenous leaders fighting for land and human rights, religious sisters on the frontline of the fight against human trafficking, as well as women church leaders who act as catechists and animators, in effect running the base communities that are the basic unit of the church in the Amazon. Some 60 percent of Catholic communities in the region are led by women.

Time and again the women who participated in the synod expressed their satisfaction that they were treated as equals, even dubbing themselves “synod mothers.” Many of them urged that their leadership be formally recognized in the Amazon, through the female diaconate and in other ways. Sr. Inés Azucena Zambrano Jara, an Ecuadorian nun working in Colombia to protect and enhance the place of native women, said that a female diaconate would “confirm our identities, our baptismal nature” and most of the Amazonian bishops also favored a female diaconate in order to strengthen the church’s presence through a whole variety of new ministries.

Dom Neri’s group, for example, urged that the “minor orders” of lector and acolyte also be opened to women. Another Brazilian group argued that if Vatican II had opened the permanent diaconate to men for the good of the church, “the same argument is valid to create a diaconate for women in Amazonia.”

The final document fell short of backing that call, offering instead to “share our experiences and reflections” with the experts Francis appointed in 2016 to look into the issue. That might look like a damp squib—and many women observers and participants were indeed disappointed—but almost everyone failed to notice that the document offers something far more radical: a call for “the institution of ministry for female leadership of the community” in recognition of “the ministry that Jesus reserved for women.” True, the expansion of leadership

roles for women mentioned in the document mostly concerns leadership roles for lay people in general, such as “special ministries for the care of our common home.”

But paragraph 95 calls for the church in the Amazon “to promote and confer ministries for men and women in an equitable manner,” adding that “the Bishop may entrust, for a specific

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period of time, in the absence of priests, the exercise of pastoral care of the communities to a person not invested with the priestly character.” It adds that the bishop “may constitute this ministry on behalf of the Christian community with an official mandate through a ritual act so that the person responsible for the community is also recognized at the civil and local levels.”

Given that most people with pastoral duties in Amazonia are lay women, this means bishops will be conferring on lay women the presidency of local Catholic communities. Mauricio López, one of the synod organizers, told me: “In many ways this is much bigger than the female diaconate. Many women have been saying: we don’t want to be clergy, we want to have our leadership and authority recognized by the bishop. Here it is.”

Close to the end of the synod, a letter was handed to the pope asking that the general superiors of women’s religious congregations be allowed to vote on the final document, given the absurd anomaly that delegates who are non-ordained religious brothers could do so.

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It didn't happen this time, but in his closing speech Francis said the religious sisters had laid down a gauntlet that he would pick up. To applause, he said he would reopen the women's-diaconate commission, with new members and with more weight, under the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith.

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Every Francis synod has its shenanigans—old-fashioned Roman power games that the curia remains expert in—as well its attacks, both ideological and spiritual. This synod was no exception. There was disgust, for example, at the way Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, the outgoing synod general secretary, removed Dom Erwin Kräutler and others from the commission that redacted the synod's final document, one of



many attempts by the curia to try to exclude members of the Latin-American group linked to REPAM, the Pan-Amazonian church network created in 2013 that has organized the remarkable three-year preparation of the synod in the region.

Perhaps because of that gutting of the redaction committee, the draft of the final document handed to synod fathers at the beginning of the final week was a huge shock. “The *virii probati* and the female diaconate were there, but it wholly failed to capture the thinking and vision that had emerged in the synod (“totally uninspiring!” one synod father told me.)

A group of bishops went to the pope, who agreed that a major revision was needed. The redaction commission was reformed, and experts were brought in to help incorporate into a new *relatio synodi* the 831 modi, or amendments, produced by the twelve small groups. In just two days and one long night, the commission had hammered out an uplifting 33-page document, every paragraph of which passed with a two-thirds majority.

The attacks on the synod began long before the bishops gathered in Rome, mostly from an alliance of ideological convenience

between right-wing traditionalists clustered around an integralist Brazilian movement called Tradition, Family and Property (TFP), populist nationalists linked to Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, who has backed exploitation of the Amazon and accused the church of interfering with state sovereignty, and the North American conservative Catholic media such as LifeSite News and EWTN, whose assumption is that all

change is a surrender to modernity.

Prior to the synod they ran interviews and articles that sought to portray the synod as heretical, syncretistic, Marxist, and a back-door attempt by Francis to impose his “liberal agenda” on the church.

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The original story by an EWTN-owned news agency claimed that knee-high wooden figurines (bare-breasted, pregnant Amazonian women) were pagan fertility symbols belonging to pre-Colombian earth-worship.

The truth later emerged that the objects, bought in Manaus market, were simply a craftsman's expression of *buen vivir*, the typically Amazonian respect for all created life.

But by the time these clarifications emerged, a frenzy had been whipped up, and the opposition media at the synod continued to demand from bewildered Vatican officials a definitive statement as to whether or not the figurines were "pagan." Other journalists publicly offered an apology to the native peoples of the Amazon for the contempt and disrespect they were being shown.

Then, on October 21, LifeSite News publicized a video showing two unidentified men removing the figurines from a church close to the Vatican that was the base for the groups accompanying the synod. Just like ISIS videos depicting the smashing of statues of the Madonna in Baghdad churches, the video showed the men tossing the statuettes into the Tiber from the Ponte Sant'Angelo.

As news spread, so did the disgust within the synod. Indigenous leaders were amazed at the contrast between the respect they were shown inside—where the pope had at one point bowed his head and asked for their blessing—and the contempt from North American Catholic media. "You may not recognize or like the forms we have to express ourselves," one native leader, shaking with emotion, told journalists, "but at the heart of everything we do and believe is Jesus Christ."

The Vatican accused ultra-conservative Catholic social media of fomenting hate, saying the statues were "an effigy of maternity and the sacredness of life." Cardinal Pedro Barreto, who co-

presided at the assembly, said the theft of the images contradicted one of the key lessons of the synod, which was respect for culture as the "seed of the Word" and showed astonishing ignorance.

The controversy was of course a distraction from the synod, but in another way it highlighted the need for conversion that the synod was addressing. In Ignatian terms, this episode had exposed the spirits: the spirit of the synod—joyful, respectful, pastoral, close to the poor—and its opposite: the spirit of hate, contempt, fear.

Which makes the final document's triumph, especially on the topic of inculturation, even more beautiful. "Christ in His incarnation left aside his divine prerogative and became man in a concrete culture in order to identify himself with all humanity," the document notes, quoting St Irenaeus that "what is not assumed is not redeemed."

"Only an inserted and inculturated missionary Church will promote the emergence of particular autochthonous Churches, with an Amazonian face and heart, rooted in the cultures and traditions proper to the people," the document went on, before describing how those cultures offered the "seeds of the Word" in their ancestral values, their "integrating vision"—and of course their connectedness to nature.

The day before the vote, the pope announced that three of the stolen figurines had been recovered from the Tiber by policemen and were back on display inside the synod hall, looking peaceful and quite unperturbed by the violence done to them by unnamed fanatics. The brief period during which they were missing happened to coincide with the extraordinary effort to save the synod's final document.

Judging by the result, it was the first beautiful miracle of Our Lady of the Amazon and the Tiber.