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“Let Us Not Clip the Wings of the Holy Spirit”

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“LET US NOT CLIP THE WINGS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT”

QUERIDA AMAZONIA

Pope Francis’ response to the synod represents a pivotal moment in his papacy. It has captivated some, disappointed others, and frustrated many. But for one of his biographers his purpose is clear: to guide the Church on the path of enculturation, towards becoming a Church of the Amazon.

While the world was waiting with bated breath for a historic decision on whether to ordain married men in the Amazon region, Pope Francis was busy moving fast in a very different direction—one he had clearly marked out at last October’s synod. Yet even after days of digesting *Querida Amazonia* its reception remains overshadowed by the idea that the synod’s main purpose was to resolve that question, thus illustrating—with splendid irony—the need for the Pope’s deeper move. The reactions of relieved conservatives and disappointed progressives share the assumption that the Pope chose not to accept the majority vote at the synod in order to avoid deepening divisions. It was, it has been said, his *Humanae vitae* moment: like Paul VI, Francis had dared to put the issue on the table, but like him, had snatched it back again after trembling before the tribunal of history.

QUERIDA AMAZONIA: DISCERNMENT BY POPE FRANCIS

Whether or not that is a fair depiction of what Paul did, it is certainly not what happened last week. *Querida Amazonia* did not rule against ordaining married men in the Amazon, as so many headlines claimed. There was no reaffirmation of the celibacy rule. In fact, he did not mention celibacy at all. Nor did he reject the Amazonian synod’s call for such a move in its final report. Indeed, he praised the final report, recognizing it as the discernment of the local Church, and urged everyone to read it.

Querida Amazonia is, rather, the Pope’s own discernment in response to that discernment. What it offers is a hermeneutic key—a lens, a mindset, a way of seeing—that for Francis is the grace that God is offering at this time. It is the means offered by the Holy Spirit to save a people, land and creatures facing extermination, and by extension to save a world whose survival depends in turn on Amazonia’s. Only by receiving



Pope Francis meets indigenous people from the Amazonian region during last year's synod.

PHOTO: CNS/VATICAN MEDIA

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this grace will the Church be able to undergo the conversion it needs to be a means of that salvation. The grace is that of the Incarnation, which calls for enculturation: to contemplate Amazonia, not analyze her; to love her, not use her; “to feel intimately united to her and not just defend her,” as Francis puts it early on.

INTERIOR CONVERSION

The task, in short, is an “interior conversion” in which believers are invited to hear from the burning rainforests where God is calling. That conversion risks being avoided or diluted by the false consolation of a functional response. Just as the real challenge of an integral ecology—a call to conversion of mindset and lifestyles—can be avoided or postponed by focusing on the political or juridical, so can the Church avoid the call to an enculturated evangelization by becoming consumed by a sterile polarization. That, at least, is what Francis seems to suggest at the end of the document, when he offers a revealing window on to his thinking. He is not ducking a necessary choice nor avoiding conflict, neither of which he is afraid of; he is responding, rather, to the call he sees the Spirit making to the Church, and not letting the Church be distracted from hearing it.

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TRANSCENDING TWO APPROACHES

In paragraph 104, the Pope observes that when pastoral workers propose “opposed forms of ecclesial organization” in response to challenges, the true answer likely lies in “transcending the two approaches and finding other, better ways, perhaps not yet even imagined.” Solutions, he goes on to say, often come in the form of a “greater gift” that God is offering from which “there will pour forth as from an overflowing fountain the answers that contraposition did not allow us to see.” This is vintage Bergoglio: the devil distracts Christ’s followers from their mission by consuming them in a false choice. Of course, sometimes there is a real choice, a genuine contradiction—good vs evil—and we must choose the former; but more often it is a false polarization between two paths that are not bad in themselves but may be more or less good, and must be discerned. But discernment cannot occur in a context of false polarization, because discernment is always a choice between goods.

In a context of false polarization the greatest mistake a leader makes is to resolve it by allowing one side to defeat the other. Rather, the task of the leader is patiently and lovingly to hold together the polarity—positions that pull in a different direction, but are not per se in contradiction, as in the case of a celibate and a married priesthood—and thus open the space for a “third way” that the Holy Spirit will in time reveal.

TRUTH AND MERCY

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This is exactly what the Pope did at the twin family synods that led to *Amoris laetitia* in April 2016. The false polarization was between “truth” and “mercy”: a blanket exclusion of the divorced and remarried from the sacraments in order to defend indissolubility, or a general relaxation of sacramental law in order to enable a blanket integration of the divorced and remarried. Francis held together the warring teams until a solution peacefully emerged that he would develop in *Amoris*: the truth (law and doctrine) was upheld, but applied mercifully, case by case.

At last October’s synod, it was clear that positions over the so-called *virī probati* were becoming more, not less entrenched. Around two-thirds of the Amazonian bishops arriving in Rome favored in principle a move to ordain married men to enable the Eucharist to reach far-flung communities, but were cautious about the impact of the change. Opposition from the curial cardinals, meanwhile, was intense.

Some of this opposition was hysterical; but much was thoughtful and heartfelt. Moderate curial cardinals closely aligned with the pontificate or appointed to the synod by Francis himself lined up to warn that the precious gift of

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celibacy could not be suspended in one area of the Latin Church without undermining it in the rest of the Latin Church, and so this had to be a worldwide decision of the bishops, not just of a region.

By the second week of the synod, the Pope was troubled by the deepening divide. Although the synod final document's paragraph 111 got more than two-thirds (128) of the votes, it also attracted the largest number of negative votes (41). In Jesuit "discernment in common", a sign of the Spirit is a peaceful consensus that results from conversion of hearts and minds; there is movement, and deeper understanding. In the family synod of October 2015, for example, the two-thirds majority reflected a real shift on the part of synod fathers to seeing the Eucharist for the divorced as a matter of case-by-case discernment, not solely of law and doctrine. There was no such conversion in the October 2019 synod on the *virī probati* issue.

As Francis recently told a visiting bishop from the United States, he didn't see the Holy Spirit "at work" in that issue. Without such a sign, Francis was never going to move either way on a disputed question. Yet *Querida Amazonia* does not close off the possibility in the future, and even points a way to it: Francis notes the need for enculturated liturgy and the synod bishops' call for an Amazonian rite, which—he does not need to spell out—could enable a married clergy without undermining Latin-rite celibacy.

ATTACKED BY THE BAD SPIRIT

But overall, *Querida Amazonia* punts down a very different stream, the one that Francis saw the Spirit lighting up throughout the synod. He saw it clearly because it was where the synod was most aggressively attacked by the bad spirit. The attack came exactly in what he calls "a renewed enculturation of the Gospel in the Amazon region".

This was the real task of the synod, as Francis came to see it. The mission is prior to the Church, which is a means not an end. The mission is the enculturation of the Gospel. As the Gospel spreads, the hermeneutic (the way the world is seen) changes: we begin to love, not use; value, not exploit; serve, not dominate. For Francis, the battleground of Amazonia is epitomized in the call of Christ in the *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, which Satan seeks to undermine by tempting Christ's followers with riches, honor, and pride.

A TALE OF TWO SIDES

Thus we have the technocratic or colonialist lens that sees Amazonia as "an enormous space to be filled, a source of raw

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resources to be developed, a wild expanse to be domesticated,” that leads naturally to exploiting and enslaving the people, destroying their resources for profit, despising their culture. On the other, we have the Gospel hermeneutic which draws close to the people and their lands, admiring and understanding their culture, awestruck by the beauty of their place, and listening to the poorest among them. What is “foreign,” to be used and despised, becomes “ours,” to be cherished. We no longer see the peoples of the Amazonia as pagan savages, but—as we learn about them and from them—start to see the wonderful things God has done for them.

Only then can we imagine and work for an alternative future: other methods of herding and agriculture and sources of energy; other ways of earning a living that do not destroy people and the environment. This new future can only come about in partnership with the poor of the region, and with the native peoples whose ancestral connectedness with the natural world is where God’s summons can be heard.

This is the hermeneutic shift that Francis sees the Spirit calling us to, the shift that—in its beauty and lyricism, its epideictic language, its use of dreams—*Querida Amazonia* brilliantly performs. And it was this “renewed enculturation of the Gospel” that came under intense attack at the synod, when right-wing American media became obsessed with the notion that enculturation was a fancy word for syncretism, and accused the synod of surrendering to paganism and idolatry. The frenzied fears and accusations eventually found a focus in some innocent statuettes of a native pregnant woman brought from a market in Manaus that missionaries included in some of the liturgies, along with canoes and fishing nets. The hysteria ended—as the timeless rituals of scapegoating demanded—with an Austrian traditionalist throwing the “Pachamama” statues into the Tiber, from which some were later discreetly rescued by police.

Francis dedicates only a gentle paragraph to the issue, and in the most indirect fashion. “It is possible to take up an indigenous symbol in some way, without necessarily considering it idolatry,” the Pope notes, adding that “a myth charged with spiritual meaning can be used to advantage and not always considered a pagan error.” In a sign that the “Pachamama” furor was simple hysteria, the paragraph was barely noticed in the same media congratulating Francis for not agreeing to ordain married men.

PERFORMING INCARNATION

Yet the furore in October showed the real action was there, in the question of enculturation. Why else would the

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devil bother, if the Gospel itself were not at stake? As Francis constantly makes clear in *Querida Amazonia*, to enculturate the Gospel is to perform the Incarnation. “Preaching must become incarnate, spirituality must become incarnate, ecclesial structures must become incarnate,” he notes right at the start. His entire text can be read as an attempt to move that process along, and to identify the obstacles and temptations that impede it.

It is against this background that Francis’ move over ministries can best be understood. The greatest impediment to enculturate the Gospel would be to fail to see what the Spirit is already doing in the Amazonian Church. In paragraph 94, Francis notes that “wherever there is a particular need, [God] has already poured out the charisms that can meet it.” He then points to the way almost all of the region’s Catholic communities are run by lay people, 60 per cent of them women; only a tiny proportion have resident clergy. Meanwhile, in the most discreet way possible, he notes in footnote 132 how “in some countries of the Amazon Basin, more missionaries go to Europe or the United States than remain to assist their own Vicariates in the Amazon region.” In other words: what is the real problem here? Is it really lack of clergy?

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Francis, who has followed the synod process intensely, is in no doubt where the Spirit is pointing. A Church with Amazonian features capable of newly enculturating the Gospel requires “the stable presence of mature and lay leaders endowed with authority,” he notes, adding that such people are “familiar with the languages, cultures, spiritual experience and communal way of life” of the region. A Church “open to the Spirit’s boldness” will allow “the growth of a specific ecclesial culture that is distinctively lay,” he suggests.

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Of course Francis calls for greater access to the sacraments, quoting *Amoris laetitia*, along with more vocations and missionaries. But he is quick to add that a greater presence of ordained ministers would be a “very narrow aim were we not also to strive to awaken new life in communities.” The mission is a new enculturation of the Gospel, not to build up the institution, and sacraments alone are not sufficient to evangelize. The objective is to “promote an encounter with God’s word and growth in holiness” for which “various kinds of lay service” are necessary. “Let us be fearless,” he says earlier. “Let us not clip the wings of the Holy Spirit.”

GOD’S GIFT: CREATIVE NEW THINKING

Then come paragraphs 99 to 103, which is where Francis discerns the grace: God’s gift of creative new thinking. The synod final report had called for bishops to be able to endow

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lay or religious men and women with authority “through a ritual act” on behalf of the Christian community, such that their authority would be recognized also “at the civil and local levels.” At the time, one of the synod’s organizers told me that this was “much bigger than the female diaconate”, given the number of women who lead Amazon communities, and better reflected the desire of those women to have their authority recognized but without being clericalized.

In *Querida Amazonia* Francis takes this idea and copper-bottoms it, stamping it with his approval—specifically for women who play a central role in Amazonian communities. They should be given leadership roles that do not require ordination, he says, adding that “these services entail stability, public recognition and a commission from the bishop.” This, he says, “would also allow women to have a real and effective impact on the organization, in the most important decisions and in the direction of communities, while continuing to do so in a way that reflects their womanhood.” (The Vatican translation misses something of the Spanish: “. . . but without ceasing to do so with a distinctively female stamp.”)

In other words, the Spirit is raising up from the Amazon something the name of the great river itself suggests: a strong female leader, not a cleric manqué but endowed with charisms our times call for. Two paragraphs later he notes how “in this historical moment, the Amazon region challenges us to transcend limited perspectives and ‘pragmatic’ solutions mired in partial approaches, in order to seek paths of enculturation that are broader and bolder.” Proclaiming an enculturated Gospel, in other words, calls for the enculturation of ministries.

EMBRACE CHANGE: SPIRIT CALLING

Perhaps the greatest paradox of *Querida Amazonia* is that, just at the moment when it appears to reject an anticipated change in the Church’s practice, it asks the Church to embrace another change—the one the Pope hears the Spirit calling for, which is far more radical than the one the world thinks Francis has nervously avoided.

So far the exhortation has captivated some, disappointed others, perplexed many and frustrated not a few. But one thing is clear: this is a Pope who takes seriously government of the Church by discernment. And who will follow the Spirit when it blows where it wills, along the great river.

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