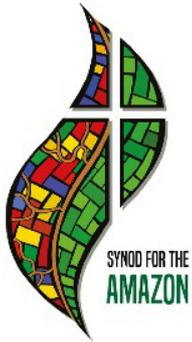


Synod preview: Reimagining a 'Church with an Amazonian face'



The Catholic Church has never convened a Synod of Bishops to discuss a territory.

There have been synods where bishops and others studied and analyzed the Church's challenges in regions and continents, such as Africa and the Middle East. But territories such as the Amazon River Basin have never been the focus of a synod, until now.

"There is something new arising, and we feel this is part of God's permanent revelation of Jesus Christ, so we are called to pay attention to it," said Mauricio Lopez, the executive secretary of the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network, also known as REPAM.



A member of the Shanenawa tribe in Brazil observes an indigenous dance during a

festival to celebrate nature and ask for an end to the burning of the Amazon. CNS photo/Ueslei Marcelino, Reuters

Lopez, whose organization promotes the rights and dignity of people living in the Amazon and organized listening sessions throughout the territory in preparation for the synod, told Our Sunday Visitor that he believes the upcoming Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, which will be held in Rome from Oct. 6-27, is emblematic of a new direction the Holy Spirit is guiding the Church.

“I hope this *kairos*, this God-given moment, is not taken for granted, and that the whole Catholic Church can really connect with it,” Lopez said. “Because the Amazon has a message for the world. And if we fail the Amazon, we will have failed as a Church and as a society altogether.”

Protecting the ‘lungs of the world’

On Oct. 15, 2017, Pope Francis convened a Special Synodal Assembly on the Pan-Amazon Region. The synod’s main objective, the pope said, was “to find new ways for the evangelization of that portion of the People of God, especially the indigenous, often forgotten and without the perspective of a good future.”

In addition, the pope said the synod would touch upon the crisis of the Amazonian rainforest, which he described as a “lung of fundamental importance for our planet.”

The Amazon “is a representative and decisive place,” [Pope Francis told the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*](#) in an Aug. 6 interview.

“Together with the oceans it contributes decisively to the survival of the planet,” the pope said. “Much of the oxygen we

breathe comes from there. That's why deforestation means killing humanity. And then the Amazon involves nine states, so it doesn't concern a single nation. And I'm thinking of the richness of the Amazonian plant and animal biodiversity: It's wonderful."

Related Reading
Key figure unpacks Amazonian synod

Anyone who has read Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si* ("On Care for Our Common Home") will recognize those familiar themes of integral ecology. In several media interviews, the pope has described the upcoming synod as "a child" of *Laudato Si*.

"Those who have not read it will never understand the Synod on the Amazon," Pope Francis told *La Stampa*.

In the pope's view, the degradation and exploitation of the environment that is often discussed in a global context, especially when talking about climate change, is being seen and felt in a particularly tangible way in the Amazon.

In the Amazon territory, powerful political and business interests are harming the land, clearing millions of acres of vital forestland and polluting waterways. People are being displaced, impoverished and left to fend for themselves.

"What happens to the Amazon is not just a local issue, but is of global reach. If the Amazon suffers, the world suffers," the leaders of the Latin American Catholic bishops' council, known by its Spanish acronym, CELAM, said in an Aug. 22 statement.

The Latin American bishops were [calling attention to destructive wildfires](#) that at one point were burning the equivalent of 1 1/2 soccer fields per minute in the Amazon. The fires darkened the skylines of major Brazilian cities and

helped to produce a dark rain full of toxic substances that originate in biomass fires.



A tract of the Amazon jungle in Porto Velho, Brazil, burns as it is cleared by loggers and farmers Aug. 24, 2019. (CNS photo/Ueslei Marcelino, Reuters)

“We urge the governments of the Amazonian countries, especially Brazil and Bolivia, the United Nations and the international community to take serious measures to save the lungs of the world,” the CELAM bishops said in their statement.

Defending human dignity

Closely related to the environmental degradation of the Amazon has been the systematic oppression and exploitation of the people who live in the nine countries that encompass the territory.

The residents of the Amazon, especially indigenous communities, have been forced off their lands and had their human rights violated. Indigenous leaders have been killed and

kidnapped. Vulnerable people have been extorted and fallen victim to human trafficking schemes.

“Violence, chaos and corruption are rampant. The territory has become a place of strife and of extermination of peoples, cultures and generations,” declares the *instrumentum laboris*, the synod’s working document.

The document adds that Amazonia today is a “wounded and deformed beauty, a place of pain and violence.” Those who are forced to leave their lands often fall into the traps of organized crime, child labor, child prostitution and drug trafficking.

“Mercantilism, secularization, the throwaway culture and the idolatry of money ... is endangering the presence of the Catholic Church among the indigenous peoples of the Amazon,” Cardinal-designate Michael Czerny and Bishop David Martinez De Aguirre Guinea wrote in a Sept. 12 article in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a Jesuit journal.

Cardinal-designate Czerny and Bishop Guinea – the special secretaries of the synod – said the gathering will help the Catholic Church make its presence felt and its voice heard in a region that they said is dangerously approaching “a point of no return.”

“The Amazon region is huge, and its challenges are immense. If destroyed, the impacts will be felt worldwide,” they wrote.

Key figures in the Pan-Amazon Region synod

1. Cardinal-designate Michael Czerny, special secretary of the synod



Father Czerny, 73, founded the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice in Toronto in 1979. He was in Brazil on Sept. 1 when Pope Francis announced that he would make Father Czerny a cardinal on Oct. 5.

Father Czerny has demonstrated a deep interest and passion for social justice initiatives. In 2002, he moved to Africa and became the founding director of the African Jesuit AIDS Network. He spent two years in El Salvador carrying out the work of fellow Jesuits who were murdered in 1989 during that country's Civil War. From 1992 to 2002, Father Czerny served as Secretary for Social Justice at Jesuit headquarters in Rome and subsequently spent six years assisting in the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

Since 2016, Father Czerny – who speaks English, French, German, Italian and Spanish – has worked as a Vatican undersecretary of the Section for Migrants and Refugees at the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

2. Bishop David Martínez De Aguirre Guinea, special secretary of the synod



Bishop Guinea, 49, has served as apostolic vicar of Puerto Maldonado, Peru, since 2015. He has held a number of pastoral positions in Peru, leading a church and mission of Kirigueti, teaching Biblical theology at a seminary and serving as a councillor of the Regional Vicariate of St. Rose of Lima.

In a 2018 interview with Catholic News Service, Bishop Guinea described his hopes for the Synod on the Pan-Amazon Region: "We hope that the synod will raise awareness that the Amazon region is not just a pantry to be raided for its resources, but a space to protect. We are an Amazon Church, with the Amazon at its heart. We have to ensure the peoples of the Amazon have a stronger participation in the Church, and that their contribution shows us the face of Christ and can enrich us."

3. Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes, relator general of the synod



Cardinal Hummes, 85, is the retired archbishop of Sao Paulo, Brazil. As relator general, he will be responsible for providing a comprehensive outline of the synod's theme when the gathering begins on Oct. 6. He will also be tasked with summarizing the speeches of synod members before concrete proposals are synthesized and presented to Pope Francis. Cardinal Hummes, a member of the Order of Friars Minor, currently serves as president of the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network.

Cardinal Hummes has been an outspoken proponent of social justice, criticizing the spread of unbridled global capitalism, condemning attacks on indigenous communities in Brazil and calling for drastic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions to combat climate change.

In 2013, Pope Francis made him a cardinal. At his election that year, Pope Francis told journalists that Cardinal Hummes had hugged and kissed him and said, "Don't forget the poor."

Envisioning a ‘prophetic Church’

A call to ecological conversion – the kind that Pope Francis emphasized in *Laudato Si* and that Pope St. John Paul II first articulated the need for in 2001 – is a theme that runs through the synod’s preparatory and working documents.

The *instrumentum laboris* discusses the terrible damage done in the region by economic interests linked to the gas, lumber, gold, oil and agricultural industries that seek to obtain “maximum profit” at the expense of the environment and people’s human dignity.

“The aggression toward this vital zone of Mother Earth and its inhabitants threatens their subsistence, their culture and their spirituality. It also affects the life of all humanity, particularly the poor, the excluded, the marginalized, the persecuted,” the *instrumentum laboris* states.

With those kinds of existential threats facing the region, the synod envisions a prophetic Church in the Amazon, one with a renewed spirit, reflecting the territory’s cultural and spiritual heritage, driven by a motivated sense of missionary discipleship and clearly on the side of the poor and downtrodden.

“The new paths of evangelization must be built in dialogue with the ancestral wisdom in which the seeds of the Word become manifest,” the *instrumentum laboris* states.

To “relaunch” the work of the Church in the Amazon, the synod’s working document lists dozens of proposals and ideas that the synod participants are expected to discuss. These items include increasing access to the sacraments within the region, discussing the possibility of [ordaining married](#) men to the priesthood in some remote locations, affirming the important role that women in the territory have in building up the Church, promoting alternative and prophetic models for

consecrated life, forging productive relationships with Pentecostal communities that have grown in the region, evangelizing and providing pastoral care in the cities, and caring for migrants, among other topics.

A culturally Amazonian Church

The synod will also look to explore how to deepen the process of inculturation. Pope Francis has spoken of the need for “native peoples to shape the culture of the local Churches in Amazonia.” The Amazonian face of the Church is to be manifested “in the multiplicity of its peoples, cultures and ecosystems.”



A girl dances with other children as they participate in a group activity in the office of Caritas in Manaus, Brazil, April 7, 2019. (CNS Photo/Paul Jeffrey)

That means an Amazonian Church that looks, sounds and feels less European, and more indigenous to South America. The working document states that the process of inculturation has happened from the beginning of the early Church, when the

Hebrew apostles discovered the “seeds of the Word” in the different cultures they brought the Gospel to, including the Greek world.

A “Church with an Amazonian face” will require, the *instrumentum laboris* says, “the local church to reconfigure in all its dimensions: ministries, liturgy, sacraments, theology and social services.” To some Western ears, that sounds like the synod is opening the door to embracing pre-Christian pagan ideas or even affirming postmodern notions that threaten to water down the Church’s moral teachings.

Jesuit Father Adelson Araujo dos Santos, a professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University’s Institute of Spirituality in Rome, told Catholic News Service in July that being open to what indigenous cultures and spiritualities have to offer about caring for creation has “nothing to do with a return to paganism, nor does it deny the centrality of Christ and of humanity in the history of salvation.”

“This is the reason why dialogue with the religious views of the world’s indigenous peoples, with their care and respect for other living things, help us restore, in our Christian faith and spirituality ... our identity as beings in relation with God, with others and with the world – the place where we encounter Jesus Christ, the Lord of all creation and history,” Father dos Santos told CNS.

Lopez, of REPAM, said the synod does not aim to change the universal Church, but rather challenges believers to think about how the Church in a specific cultural and geographical context can make itself relevant and present to people who are living in challenging circumstances.

“This is about the needs of the community. It’s about responding to what they need there right now,” Lopez said. “Otherwise we might as well just thank them for having been part of our Catholic Church and let them go. That is something

that we cannot do.”

Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.

What is the reason for discussing married priests?

Many important topics are expected to be discussed during the upcoming Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region.

Integral ecology and protecting a rainforest that provides a lion's share of the world's oxygen are obvious issues of concern, as are the needs to respect and affirm the human dignity of local and indigenous communities who are exploited by powerful political and business interests.

But what has generated the most headlines, and caused the most consternation among some critics in the West, is a section in the synod's *instrumentum laboris* that proposes the ordination of married men to the priesthood.

Pope Francis and other Church leaders have repeatedly sought to tamp down those concerns. In an Aug. 6 interview with the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, the pope said ordaining married men is "simply a topic" of the synod's working document. Asked if that would be a main theme, the pontiff responded, "Absolutely not." "The important thing will be the ministries of evangelization," Pope Francis told the newspaper.

In the context of the Amazon territory, the possibility of ordaining married men to the priesthood is rooted in the reality that many rural, isolated Catholic communities in the Amazon Basin find it difficult to celebrate the Eucharist frequently because of the lack of priests. Some communities are lucky to see a priest twice a year.

Noting that the Catholic Church draws her life from the Eucharist, the Catholics who live and work in those communities are requesting some changes in the criteria for selecting and preparing ministers who are authorized to celebrate the Eucharist.

Rather than calling the celibate priesthood into question, the synod's working document affirms that "celibacy is a gift for the Church." The document then requests consideration of the possibility of priestly ordination for older, married men "for the most remote areas of the region."

Those who would be ordained in such a context would preferably be indigenous men who are "respected and accepted by their community," even if they have an existing and stable family. That possibility would be considered "to ensure availability of the Sacraments that accompany and sustain the Christian life," the working document states.

The possibility of ordaining married priests has the backing of at least one Church leader in the territory. Archbishop Rafael Cob of Puyo in Ecuador told journalists on Sept. 4 that he supports the ordination of *viri probati* – tested married men – to serve isolated rural communities.

"The *viri probati* respond to a very concrete challenge in the Amazon region, and it's not meant to question the ordinary norm of celibacy," Archbishop Cob said, according to a report in *Crux*.

The archbishop also reportedly spoke about giving women a broader role in the Church, which is also discussed in the synod's *instrumentum laboris*. Noting that women play a central role in the Church throughout the Amazon, the text calls for the synod to "identify the type of official ministry that can be conferred on women."

The document also requests that women's voices "be heard, that they be consulted and participate in decision-making, and thus be able to contribute with their sensitivity to ecclesial synodality."

In presenting the *instrumentum laboris* to the press earlier this year, Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, the secretary general of the Synod of Bishops, emphasized that the document's call for a greater role for women does not include ordaining them to the diaconate.