

Fr. Perozich comments —

The mission of the church was defined by Jesus himself in Matthew 28:18ff

“Go, therefore,* and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.* And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

While the church, consisting of living members in the body with Jesus as head, might address specific difficulties to assist her faithful in their earthly lives so that the faithful can live out their gospel mandate, the earthly concerns cannot substitute for the person and message of Jesus in Word and Sacrament.

It seems that very comfortable, well fed men and women with degrees from first world institutions of western thought may be substituting **themselves** for the Savior: **their** thoughts, **their** ideas, **their** plans, **their** “I know better attitude”, **their** “I will save the church by **my** ideas and use Jesus’ name to justify **my** plans.”

Some of the bold highlighting below is my own. This is for me an excellent analysis of the current crisis in a church which is emptying itself of the person of Jesus and His missionary mandate and giving away to other sects her greatest treasure after the Savior Himself, the baptized faithful, through the emptying of the proclamation of salvation from sin, from death, from isolation for goodness, eternal life, and communion with God and one another.

Priests who continue to preach the message of Jesus are either silenced or pushed aside by the powers in the church who wish to promote the new message.

It is not only the Amazon that is emptying of faithful Catholics because of lack of sound catechesis and evangelization; the pews in the western world are emptying just as quickly.

The Catholic Church is essential to salvation for all men, but if she does not recognize that and continue her mission, she will be emptied for centuries until Jesus intervenes, Jesus who promised to be with her until the end of the ages.

Stay in the church. If you are getting verbose homilies and clergy propaganda of same sex nonsense, ecological, immigration, income distribution, women priests/deacons, solidarity, accompaniment, environmentalism, socialism, neo colonialization,

etc., and are not hearing Jesus Christ and Him crucified, CONTINUE TO PRAY, RECEIVE EUCHARIST, STUDY THE BIBLE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, not some sect.

At the same time, if you cannot find a priest and parish that preaches the full gospel of Jesus, you will have to go directly to Jesus, to the Bible and catechism of the church for clear unambiguous understanding to undergird your faith until such time that Jesus restores to us leaders to care for all the faithful rather than those who use us to promote their ideas and themselves.

Reports and Commentary from Rome and elsewhere, on the special Assembly of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region: New paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology

- Xavier Rynne II – 10-07-19

The many mysteries of the Synod – 2019

Part I

Eighty years ago, on October 1, 1939, a month after the German invasion of Poland launched World War II in Europe, Winston Churchill, then the First Lord of the Admiralty, made a radio broadcast on the Chamberlain government's war strategy, during which he famously described Russia (which had also invaded Poland on September 17, 1939) as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

The same might be said about the synodal Special Assembly on Amazonia, which was formally opened by Pope Francis on Sunday, October 6, at a Mass in St. Peter's in the Vatican.

As its double-barreled title -“New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology- suggests, Synod-2019 has, on the surface, a dual focus: the pastoral life of the Church in a vast region of Latin America, and the environmental issues raised by development efforts in “Amazonia.” The tacit concession implied by the synod’s title is that evangelization in Amazonia has been something of a failure, despite the fact that the Church has been active in Latin America for over half a millennium (and despite the Latin American Church’s recommitment to a grand strategy of vigorous evangelization at the Aparecida Conference of Latin American bishops in 2007, in which a leading role was played by Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ, of Buenos Aires - who is now, of course, Pope Francis). The tacit proposal inside the synod’s title is that a robust Catholic response to Amazonia’s ecological challenges is something of a prerequisite for the evangelization of the area. Whether the next three weeks of synod “interventions” (addresses to the entire synod membership, which includes 184 bishops and some 70 advisers and consultants) and small-group discussions succeeds in bringing the Amazonian Synod’s two focal points into alignment remains to be seen—as it remains to be seen precisely how these October deliberations and the synod’s final report shape the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation that Pope Francis will issue; recent experience suggests that the connection between synod and post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation can be tenuous.

But as the sharp debate preceding Synod-2019 ought to have made clear, much more will be going on in Rome

over the next three weeks than debates about evangelization, environmentalism, and their possible connection.

The Pre-Synod Scrum

The debates within a synod of bishops are framed by its *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document, or IL). And while the working documents for the synods of 2014, 2015, and 2018 were subject to criticism, the Catholic Church has rarely seen anything like the scorn heaped on the IL for Synod-2019.

Some senior churchmen flatly pronounced the IL heretical: an exercise in Gaia-worship that had little to do with Christianity and far too much to do with the wooliest elements of contemporary eco-theology, one of the many variants on the theologies of liberation that caused such an uproar in the Catholic Church in the 1970s and 1980s. Others found the IL an oversized word salad displaying an incontinent affection for politicized gobbledygook. (Canadian author David Warren lifted out of the IL some of its riper expressions: “Agro-industrial mono-cultivation ... ideological colonialisms ... neo-colonialism of the extractive industries ... mercantilist vision, ... colonizing mentalities ... networks of solidarity and inter-culturality ... xenophobia and criminalization of migrants and displaced persons ... victims of a ferocious neocolonialism, ... colonizing project ... ferocious neocolonialism.” All of which, Warren noted, were flowing down “the Amazon, the mother and father river of all.”)

Then there was the debate over the IL's proposal that the synod discuss the possibility of ordaining *viri probati* (trusted married men) to the priesthood in response to what was claimed to be Amazonia's severe sacramental deficit, with some Catholic communities only able to celebrate the Eucharist once or twice a year. One of the synod's key organizers, the Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes (who will also serve as the synod's "Relator General"), has long been an advocate of ordaining *viri probati* (although he prudently dropped the subject after being appointed Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy under Pope Benedict XVI). In a pre-synod press conference obviously aimed at meeting some of the criticisms that had been directed to the IL, Hummes claimed that this proposal emerged from "the voice of the local Church," but did not explain how the ordination of minimally-prepared indigenous elders, solely for the celebration of sacramental rites, would distinguish these Catholic priests from local shamans in the minds and hearts of the unevangelized.

Then there was the debate over what struck some as the IL's too-effusive embrace of indigenous religions, which seemed to suggest that indigenous religions contained far more than what the Church had traditionally described as *semina Verbi*, seeds of the Word that, in divine providence, could prepare the ground for genuine Christian evangelization. This concern was not assuaged when, a few days before the synod, what was described as an "indigenous ecological ritual" was celebrated in the Vatican gardens by Amazonians. The "ritual" included a

male fertility totem with a distinctively male, er, profile; the entire exercise seemed to surprise Pope Francis, watching it at a distance. He declined to give his prepared address and left abruptly after reciting the Lord's Prayer.

At the same press conference at which Cardinal Hummes spoke, the General Secretary of the synod of bishops, Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, made an interesting attempt to deflect attention from the IL his office had issued, claiming that it, like previous synodal working documents, was really a "martyr document," written to be superseded by the synod's final report. That may have struck some as reassuring; it certainly raised eyebrows among others who remembered with some asperity that Cardinal Baldisseri had insisted that the much-criticized IL for Synod-2018 was part of that synod's permanent record.

The Issues beneath the Issues

The *viri probati* issue will be the most mediagenic at the synod, but the debate over the IL and eco-theology with which it is redolent raise some very fundamental issues for Christian orthodoxy. Among them are several noted by the Canadian theologian Douglas Farrow of McGill University, who saw in the IL an expression of concerns about its theological direction that had been raised throughout the present pontificate:

◆ Does the IL and the theology underlying it substitute for divine revelation a self-referentiality in which we are a revelation to ourselves?

◆ How does the IL's discussion of the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the peoples of Amazonia square with the Holy Spirit who guides the Church - for the IL seems to propose a Holy Spirit disconnected from Christ, the incarnate Word of God?

◆ Doesn't the IL's tendency to place Christianity alongside, even "within," human religiosity mean a rejection of the Cross? And if so, doesn't that mean that what is being proposed is not a way of grace but a 21st-century way of works-righteousness?

◆ Where is the Great Commission in all this, and how does the IL's eagerness for doctrinal, liturgical, and pastoral experimentation square with the dominical injunction to teach "all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20)?

◆ Where, if anywhere, is the bright line between the IL's insistence on "synodality" and a Protestant ecclesiology that erodes the universal authority of the Church in faith, morals, and worship, so that the boundary between Catholicism and not-Catholicism becomes so porous (as in liberal Protestant denominations) as to be virtually invisible?

To which one might add:

◆ Are there elements of indigenous Amazonian religiosity that are contrary to the letter and spirit of the gospel and must be identified as such in any true evangelization of Amazonia?

◆ Are the IL's references to the Earth as a living being that "speaks" to us far too close for comfort to a pantheism that denies the reality of the God of the Bible?

◆ Why, when the people of Amazonia are said to “speak” to the Church during a multi-year pre-synodal listening period, do these indigenous reflections speak in the accents of German theology and Western preoccupations?

And on the empirical/historical side of things:

◆ What is the evidence that Amazonia is a Catholic region being denied the Eucharist because of a lack of priests? Would it not be more accurate to say that Amazonia is a territory crying out for evangelization, which is the responsibility of the entire Catholic community, not just its clergy, as the Aparecida Document and Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) insisted?

◆ What is the relationship between Amazonia’s priest-deficit and the historic reluctance of white clergy of Spanish or Portuguese origin to work with indigenous peoples?

In Sum...

Whatever its declared purpose, the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region is going to expose, in what one expects will be a heightened way, theological and indeed doctrinal tensions within Catholicism that have roiled the Church for the past half-century - many of which were once thought resolved, but which have been resuscitated over the past six and a half years. **In this sense, the Amazonian Synod will be yet another battle in the war over the proper interpretation of the Second Vatican Council and**

its call to engage the modern world in order to convert it to the truth of God in Christ, which is also the truth about our humanity and its destiny. Given the way in which the correlation of forces in Synod-2019 has been arranged by Synod General Secretary Baldisseri to his satisfaction, there may be little doubt as to how the battle will unfold over the next three weeks. **But that by no means will suggest that the larger struggle over Vatican II's legacy has been resolved; it will, however, sharpen the world Church's understanding of what is involved in that struggle, which is nothing less than the integrity of Catholic faith and the Church's obedience to its Lord's command to teach all that he commanded.**

Xavier Rynne II

A Note to Readers

Unlike its predecessors -*Letters from the Synod-2015*, *Letters from the Synod-2018*, and *Letters from the Vatican* during the February 2019 abuse summit-these *Letters* will not appear on a daily basis, but as occasion demands during the course of Synod-2019. Your editor is deeply grateful to his colleagues at First Things in New York, at the *Catholic Herald* in London, and at the *Catholic Weekly* in Sydney for their collaboration. Readers throughout the Anglosphere are encouraged to watch their websites for future *Letters from Synod-2019*, and for other information about what's afoot in Rome in October 2019. ***XR II***

#2

The tensions of a Pontificate

Formally opening Synod-2019 at Mass in the Papal Basilica of St. Peter on October 6, Pope Francis preached a moving homily focused on the nature of the episcopate, during which he drew heavily on the second reading assigned for the Twenty-Seventh Sunday of the Year (2 Timothy 1:6–8, 13–14). Some excerpts from the homily are worth pondering in themselves; they also set the stage for a reflection on the pontificate and the tensions within it.

We are bishops because we have received a gift of God. We did not sign an agreement; we were not handed an employment contract. Rather, hands were laid on our heads so that we in turn might be hands raised to intercede before the Father, helping hands extended to our brothers and sisters. We received a gift so that we might become a gift. Gifts are not bought, traded, or sold; they are received and given away. If we hold on to them, if we make ourselves the center and not the gift we have received, we become bureaucrats, not shepherds. We turn the gift into a job and its gratuitousness vanishes. We end up serving ourselves and using the Church. To be faithful to our calling, our mission, Saint Paul reminds us that our gift has to be rekindled. The verb he uses in the original text ... means stoking a fire (anazopyrein).

The gift we have received is a fire, a burning love for God and for our brothers and sisters. A fire does not burn by itself; it has to be fed or else it dies; it

turns into ashes. If everything continues as it was, if we spend our days content that “this is the way things have always been done,” then the gift vanishes, smothered by the ashes of fear and concern for defending the status quo ... the Church is always on the move, always going out and never withdrawn into itself. Jesus did not come to bring a gentle breeze but to light a fire on the earth.

The fire that rekindles the gift is the Holy Spirit. So Saint Paul goes on to say ... “God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and prudence... .” What is this prudence of the Spirit? As the Catechism teaches, prudence “is not to be confused with timidity or fear”; rather, it is “the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.”

Fidelity to the newness of the Spirit is a grace that we must ask for in prayer. May the Spirit, who makes all things new, give us his own daring prudence, may he inspire our Synod to renew the paths of the Church in Amazonia, so that the fire of mission will continue to burn.

The proclamation of the Gospel is the chief criterion of the Church’s life, it is her mission, her identity ... [for the] liberating power of the Gospel [is] the Church’s caress of love.

It would be a hard heart indeed that was not moved by those evangelically passionate words.

Here, it seemed, spoke the Jorge Mario Bergoglio who was a principal architect of the 2007 Aparecida Document of the Latin American bishops, which called the Church on the world's most demographically Catholic continent to "a deep and profound rethinking of its mission ... out of a personal and community encounter with Jesus Christ that raises up disciples and missionaries." Here, it seemed, spoke the Pope Francis who, in the 2013 apostolic exhortation [*Evangelii Gaudium*](#) (The Joy of the Gospel), challenged all of Catholicism to follow the vision of Aparecida and become a Church "permanently in mission," a Church composed of "missionary disciples," a Church in which every Catholic understood himself or herself to have received a missionary mandate at baptism, a Church in which every Catholic knew that "mission territory" is everywhere. Here, it seemed, was a Bishop of Rome committed to extending the New Evangelization proclaimed by St. John Paul II as the Catholic Church's grand strategy for the twenty-first century and third millennium of Christian history in the apostolic letter closing the Great Jubilee of 2000, [*Novo Millennio Ineunte*](#) (Entering the New Millennium).

Yet even amid gratitude for the pope's lifting up this vision of a Church energized by evangelical zeal, one could not help but remember events of the past six and a half years that cast a different light on this pontificate: the appointment of manifestly bureaucratic men to high office, while bishops with solid evangelical records have been marginalized and deplored as "rigid"; the failure to thoroughly clean out the Augean stables of Vatican

finance; the bullying and manipulation of synods by the synod general secretariat; the constant chastisement of priests; the interference with local churches' efforts to get to grips with the crisis of clerical sexual abuse, the failure to deal with that crisis in other locales, and the metastasis of the crisis within the Vatican itself; the cartoon depiction of critics who have respectfully questioned aspects of the pontificate; the lack of attention to pastoral initiatives that successfully embody the New Evangelization; the ambiguity of teaching, not least on settled moral questions; the tolerance of views that are beyond the pale of orthodoxy; the vandalism wrought on distinguished institutions of Catholic high learning like the once-vibrant John Paul II Institute on Marriage and the Family; the unevangelical deal-making with major-league tyrants in China; the softness toward minor-league, but still lethal, tyrannies in Latin America; the absolutism on migrants (which, as one senior European diplomat observed two years ago, has shrunk the space on which a reasonable political accommodation could have been reached); the seeming papal endorsement of forms of environmentalism that breathe the spirit of pantheism rather than the spirit of Genesis and the divine injunction that human beings must be the stewards of Creation; the curious (to put it gently) view of other world religions in the economy of salvation; the poisonous atmosphere within the Vatican, where senior figures who speak their minds suffer not only disfavor, but public humiliation.

At World Youth Day-2013 in Brazil, Pope Francis urged young Catholics to “make a mess” -which,

interpreted benignly, was a challenge to try new pastoral initiatives and fresh methods of evangelization without fear of occasional failure. And that is no bad challenge to everyone. There is, and there always should be, a holy restlessness about our work as missionary disciples; and as no one has all the answers to the demands of evangelization in an increasingly fractious postmodern world (much less in Stone Age societies like those of Amazonia), it is imperative that Catholics try new ways and means to share the gift we have been given: the gift of faith and friendship with Jesus Christ, who is the answer to the question that is every human life. But surely there is a difference between making a mess -in the sense of trying, failing, and learning from failure in order to try again- and fostering a mess. Fostering messes would not seem to be part of the job description of the Office of Peter as authoritatively defined in *Pastor Aeternus* (the First Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ) and [*Lumen Gentium*](#) (the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church).

And this is precisely what a dynamic, evangelically vibrant African archbishop worried about in recent conversation: **the mess of ambiguity that has been fostered during this pontificate. Moreover, his concerns were not merely theoretical. "We don't know how to answer our faithful anymore," he said, when they ask questions about the Catholic understanding of the permanence of marriage, or the pastoral care of persons experiencing same-sex attraction, or the gift of celibacy in the**

priesthood. This bishop -and it is another sad reflection on the present moment that even the daring prudence commended by Pope Francis in his October 6 homily precludes citing him by name- leads a local Church composed largely of first- and second-generation Christians, in a Third World setting where the cultural preoccupations and intellectual gyrations of First World theologians have no traction. His are people of a simple but vibrant faith, who have been attracted to Catholicism because they discovered in the gospel a true liberation from what they perceive as the bondage of pagan ways: whether those be pagan attitudes toward the spiritual life, toward women, or toward marriage. These Catholics are living a New Testament experience of faith, and, the archbishop said, they are scandalized by what strike them as betrayals of the truths they have embraced as beautiful, empowering, and liberating.

These new Christians, as well as the living parts of the world Church in the West, are also disturbed and dispirited by a Catholicism that increasingly presents itself, in its Roman face, as a global NGO whose primary concerns are political rather than spiritual: a Vatican that seems more attuned to Greta Thunberg than Catherine of Siena. That particular tension in the current pontificate is embodied in two bronze sculptures a few hundred yards away from each other in Rome.

The first is the newest addition to the decoration of St. Peter's Square: a massive sculpture of a small boat packed to the gunwales with refugees and migrants, which has been erected behind a wooden barrier on the left side of

the piazza as the visitor or pilgrim faces the basilica. The other, at the bottom of the Via della Conciliazione, is just inside the door of the oratory known as *L'Annunziata*: St. Mary of the Annunciation. It's a large bronze depiction of St. Michael the Archangel giving a tonsillectomy to Satan, who is pinned beneath the angel's feet. This is the city of Bernini and Michelangelo, so the local sculptural standard is a very high one. By modern standards, though, both these compositions are rather fine, in that they depict recognizable characters and are well-executed. They do suggest, however, quite different sensibilities.

There are no discernible religious motifs in the sculpture of the boat people in the Square: The entire composition is far more a political statement than a religious one, and there is nothing in the sculpture itself that invites a gospel-centered reflection on the moral and spiritual demands of solidarity. That is certainly not the case with the sculpture in *L'Annunziata*, whose custodians have driven home the religious message of the composition by posting at the entrance of the oratory Pope Leo XIII's famous prayer:

St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world, seeking the ruin of souls.

Two sculptures. Two sensibilities. Two ecclesiastical visions, one might suggest.

These tensions in the pontificate of Pope Francis will be fully on display as Synod-2019 continues its work over the next three weeks. This display will undoubtedly cause further distress in some Catholic quarters. That distress should, however, be tempered, if not assuaged, by a recognition that Synod-2019 is going to make unmistakably clear the nature of the issues facing the world Church in the immediate future. The gravity of those issues -and the choices they pose- can no longer be denied. They can only be faced, with both courage and charity, in the firm conviction that, as we used to say in Latin, *Veritas vos liberabit* - “The truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

#3

The neo-colonialism of Bishop Kräutler

There has been considerable venting about “neo-colonialism” in the first week of Synod-2019, the neo-colonialists in question being various businesses, often headquartered outside the Amazon region, which are involved in economic development projects in Amazonia. And no doubt some of those enterprises expose a face of private enterprise that needs refreshing and, in some cases, a major face-lift. At the same time, denunciations of “neo-colonialism” from churchmen who are rather comfortably placed can have something of a strange ring to it; **the poor of Amazonia need the economic opportunity that will come from properly functioning and regulated free enterprise far**

more than they need homilies cast in the old vocabulary of politicized liberation theologies.

There is, however, another “neo-colonialism” evident at Synod-2019, and it involves matters closer to the Catholic Church’s specific competence - and indeed closer to the Church’s basic mission. It’s the neo-colonialism of dumbed-down expectations compounded by the imposition of First World preoccupations on Third World societies, shaken and stirred by a view of indigenous religiosity that is far more redolent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Margaret Mead than of biblical revelation.

Elements of this ideological neo-colonialism were on display at the synodal press briefing on October 9, which featured Bishop Erwin Kräutler, C.P.P.S., an octogenarian Missionary of the Precious Blood from Austria, who is bishop emeritus of the territorial prelature of Xingu in northeastern Brazil. Ever since the release of Synod-2019’s *Instrumentum Laboris*, Bishop Kräutler has claimed a measure of credit for many of its ideas, and at the press conference he vigorously flogged one of his favorite themes, stating “with great sincerity, [that] there is no other option” than the ordination of *viri probati* (mature married men, presumably village or tribal elders) as priests to celebrate the sacraments in Amazonia. That Bishop Kräutler should take this line was no surprise; what was striking was the rationale he offered:

“The indigenous people do not understand celibacy. For them, at least those I have met ... they cannot

understand this thing that a man is not married, that he does not have a woman taking care of the house, of the home.”

Thus did a thoroughly neo-colonialist view of the intellectual and imaginative capacities of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon (“they cannot understand”) meet some good old-fashioned gender stereotyping (“a woman taking care of the house”).

On first reading Bishop Kräutler’s comments, the first thing that came to mind was the second reading in the Office of Readings for the Memorial of St. Peter Claver, the 17th-century Spanish Jesuit who gave his life in service to African slaves in the New Kingdom of Granada (today’s Colombia). Claver is estimated to have baptized some 300,000 slaves, and his reflection on his ministry in a letter sent back to Europe is worth quoting in full:

Yesterday, May 30, 1627, on the feast of the Most Holy Trinity, numerous blacks, brought from the rivers of Africa, disembarked from a large ship. Carrying two baskets of oranges, lemons, sweet biscuits, and I know not what else, we hurried toward them. When we approached their quarters, we thought we were entering another Guinea. We had to force our way through the crowd until we reached the sick. Large numbers of the sick were lying on the wet ground or rather in puddles of mud. To prevent excessive dampness, someone had thought of building up a

mound with a mixture of tiles and broken pieces of bricks. This, then, was their couch, a very uncomfortable one not only for that reason, but especially because they were naked, without any clothing to protect them.

We laid aside our cloaks, therefore, and brought from a warehouse whatever was handy to build a platform. In that way we covered a space to which we at last transferred the sick, by forcing a passage through bands of slaves. Then we divided the sick into two groups: one group my companion approached with an interpreter, while I addressed the other group. There were two blacks, nearer death than life, already cold, whose pulse could scarcely be detected. With the help of a tile we pulled some live coals together and placed them in the middle near the dying men. Into this fire we tossed aromatics. Of these we had two wallets full, and we used them all up on this occasion. Then, using our own cloaks, for they had nothing of this sort, and to ask the owners for others would have been a waste of words, we provided for them a smoke treatment, by which they seemed to recover their warmth and the breath of life. The joy in their eyes as they looked at us was something to see.

This was how we spoke to them, not with words but with our hands and our actions. And in fact, convinced as they were that they had been brought here to be eaten, any other language

would have proved utterly useless. Then we sat, or rather knelt, beside them and bathed their faces and bodies with wine. We made every effort to encourage them with friendly gestures and displayed in their presence the emotions which somehow naturally tend to hearten the sick. After this we began an elementary instruction about baptism, that is, the wonderful effects of the sacrament on body and soul. When by their answers to our questions they showed they had sufficiently understood this, we went on to a more extensive instruction, namely, about the one God, who rewards and punishes each one according to his merit, and the rest.

We asked them to make an act of contrition and to manifest their detestation of their sins. Finally, when they appeared sufficiently prepared, we declared to them the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Passion. Showing them Christ fastened to the cross, as he is depicted on the baptismal font on which streams of blood flow down from his wounds, we led them in reciting an act of contrition in their own language.

Bishop Krautler spent thirty-four years, from 1981 to 2015, in what must have been a very difficult and challenging episcopal ministry, for which sacrifice he deserves full marks. Nonetheless, his attitude toward indigenous peoples starkly contrasts with Peter Claver's.

The contemporary Austrian missionary, Bishop Kräutler, claims that indigenous peoples do not, and presumably cannot, understand celibacy, a discipline directly related to the gospel concept of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God - and indeed to the exemplification of that in the life of the Lord Jesus. The 17th-century Spanish missionary, Father Claver, believed that even the most hard-pressed and ill-educated people could grasp essential truths about “the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Passion,” the meaning of “sin” and “confession,” and the superabundance of divine grace available through a humble embrace of the Cross of Christ.

Which of these two missionaries speaks more powerfully to the heart and mind of the first Jesuit to be elected Bishop of Rome? That is certainly one question to ponder as Synod-2019 unfolds, and as the Church awaits Pope Francis’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation.

Synod-2019’s second and third weeks will likely take up the complex question of the “inculturation” of the gospel in Amazonia. The Synod’s *Instrumentum Laboris* displayed a very positive -some would say, highly uncritical- view of indigenous religions, so among the questions that ought to be discussed in both the synod general assembly and the synod’s language-based discussion groups is whether there are elements of indigenous religion in Amazonia that are incompatible with Christianity - the answer to which question should bear on proposals for an “Amazonian” adaption of the liturgy. (For one striking description of the challenges at the farther limits of “inculturation” in Amazonia, the

synod Fathers might consult Beth Conklin's study of the postmortem rituals of the Wari' people of the western Amazonian rainforest, [*Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society*](#), published by the University of Texas Press and hailed by one reviewer as "a classic, an ethnography of exceptional depth and clarity by an anthropologist whose sensitivity and insight are apparent on every page.")

As the discussion of the religious salience of indigenous pieties unfolds at Synod-2019, it would be helpful to keep in mind something pointed out to me recently by my longtime friend and former colleague Robert Royal, president of the Faith and Reason Institute, editor of *The Catholic Thing*, and a knowledgeable student of Latin American affairs who is conversant in both Spanish and Portuguese. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, Dr. Royal pointed out, was a secular man with little affection for the Catholic Church. But in parsing the cultural development of Mexico in a book entitled [*The Buried Mirror*](#), Fuentes observed that it was quite a dramatic, even astonishing, event -one that was decisive for the development of Mexico's rich and complex culture-when Catholic missionaries announced to the indigenous population a God who sacrifices himself (in the person of his Son) for human beings, in stark contrast to the indigenous gods who demanded the sacrifice of (often living) human beings.

If Carlos Fuentes could grasp that, surely the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region can.

—*George Weigel*

The Synod debates that might have been

At a news conference in Rome the week before Synod-2019, Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, was at pains to insist (with reference to the impending synod) that “now, more than ever, there’s freedom of expression” in the Church. The cardinal’s view was dutifully amplified by Robert Mickens of La Croix International, who wrote that “Pope Francis has completely transformed the Synod of Bishops from a rubber-stamping body with a tightly controlled agenda dictated by the Roman Curia into a protected space for deep discernment and fearless debate that takes place after widespread and ongoing consultation with the People of God.” One understands the impulse to defend one’s side in today’s Catholic debates; but these descriptions of recent synod practice and experience do prompt the thought, “Mr. Orwell, call your office.”

One remembers the interim report during Synod-2014, prepared by the synod general secretariat, which so blatantly misrepresented the discussions that had taken place during that synod’s first days that it created an uproar among the synod Fathers and the de facto rejection of the interim report.

One remembers the procedures originally decreed for Synod-2015, which seemed so incompatible with genuine debate, and so lacking in a mechanism for determining the mind of the synod, that a group of thirteen cardinals wrote

Pope Francis, asking him to alter the procedures to permit both a real exchange of views and a determinative expression, by votes on propositions, of the synod Fathers' judgments (both of which requests, it should be noted, the pope granted).

One remembers the flawed process that characterized both Synod-2015 and Synod- 2018, at which drafts of the Final Report on which the synod Fathers were to vote were not circulated in a timely fashion, and then only in Italian, Cardinal Baldisseri vociferously objecting to translations and harrumphing after a stormy session in 2018 that “the next time, it will be in Latin!”

It is certainly true that very few churchmen have been happy with the way synods have been conducted over the past half-century, since the institution of the Synod of Bishops was created by Pope Paul VI. There have been improvements in recent decades, including more time spent in language-based discussion groups, which tend to facilitate a degree of honest exchange that is difficult in the synod's general assemblies (which feature a disconnected series of four- or five-minute “interventions” or speeches, with little back-and-forth). But it is preposterous to suggest that the current synod process involves a great turn toward open debate and “deep discernment”; the synods of 2014, 2015, and 2018 were obviously orchestrated, if not manipulated, to achieve the result that the synod general secretariat wanted from the outset—an orchestration intensified in 2018 by quiet warnings to Third World bishops not to get involved with American bishops, said to be “against the Pope” (which was a lie).

Synod-2019 will suffer from the same structural deficiencies of its predecessors, and more than a few members of the synod will find themselves nodding off during the lengthy speechmaking in the Synod Hall. (The late Cardinal Francis George once said, of his brother-cardinal Karl Lehmann, “I don’t mind that he sleeps; we all do. But he snores!”) This year’s synodal process will be even more flawed, however, by the fact that churchmen critical of the preparatory process for Synod-2019 have been excluded from the synod itself, and by what seems to have been the selection of synod delegates to avoid any serious challenge to the themes in the synod’s oft-criticized working document, the *Instrumentum Laboris*.

To honor the principles of “synodality” and “collegiality,” and to give our readership a sense of the kind of robust debate that might have occurred at Synod-2019, had such a debate really been sought by the synod’s organizers, *LETTERS FROM THE SYNOD-2019* herewith offers two “debates,” drawn from pre-synod commentaries and interviews, so that some of the serious issues engaged here in Rome this month might be seen in wider focus, rather than through the myopic lens created by the synod general secretariat.

The participants in these “debates” include (among those present at Synod-2019), Cardinal Claudio Hummes, OFM, the emeritus archbishop of São Paulo and the synod’s General Relator or Rapporteur, and (among the uninvited) Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino, emeritus archbishop of Caracas, and Bishop José Luis Azcona, a native of Spain who served as a missionary bishop in the

Amazon region for twenty-nine years, from 1987 until retirement in 2016. Best thanks to our colleagues at CRUX NOW, the Catholic News Agency, and Die Tagespost for the interviews and stories from which these excerpts are drawn, and to Charles Paternina for a translation of Bishop Azcona's interview with Die Tagespost. [**Xavier Rynne II**]

Debate 1.

On reading the signs of the times in Amazonia.

Cardinal Hummes:

“Ours is a Church that is aware that its religious mission, in keeping with its faith in Jesus Christ, inevitably involves ‘care of the common home.’ This bond also proves that the cries of the land and those of the poor in this region are one and the same.

“This synod is held within the context of a serious and urgent climatic and ecological crisis, which involves our entire planet. The planet is experiencing galloping devastation, depredation, and degradation of Earth's resources, all fostered by a globalized, predatory, and devastating technocratic paradigm... . The Earth cannot take this any more.”

[And the threats in Amazonia with which the synod must contend, as summarized from the cardinal's remarks by CRUX?]

- Criminalization and assassination of leaders and defenders of the territory.

- Appropriations and privatization of natural goods such as water.
- Predatory hunting and fishing, mainly in rivers.
- Mega-projects, such as hydroelectric and forest concessions, logging for monocultural production, construction of roads and highways, or mining and oil projects.
- Pollution caused by the entire extractive industry that causes problems and diseases, especially among children and young people.
- Drug trafficking.

Resulting social problems associated with these threats such as alcoholism, violence against women, sex work, human trafficking, loss of original culture and identity, and conditions of poverty.

[And thus the “core issues” for the Synod, again summarized by CRUX from the cardinal’s opening address to the synod?]

- An outgoing Church and its new pathways in Amazonia.
- The Church’s Amazonian face: Inculturation and inter-culturality in a missionary-ecclesial context.
- Ministries in the Church in Amazonia: Presbyterate, diaconate, ministries and the role played by women.
- The work done by the Church in looking after our “shared home”; listening to the Earth and to the poor; integral environmental, economic, social, and cultural ecology.
- The Amazonian Church in the urban reality.
- Issues concerning water.

[from *Crux Now*, October 7, 2019]

Cardinal Urosa:

“There is an imbalance [in the Synod’s *Instrumentum Laboris*] because the main work of the Church is evangelization, bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world, to all populations, both the indigenous and the urban population in the Amazon—there are millions living in cities like Manaus, Belen de Para, Iquitos, not only the indigenous in isolated areas... .

“The [*Instrumentum Laboris*] presents an almost idyllic Amazonian population, the perfect man, the noble savage of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. [But these] are normal people, human beings with the same problems, virtues, and defects as all people in the whole world. And to them, too, we have to bring the Gospel.

“The [*Instrumentum Laboris*] talks a lot about accompanying, following, understanding, and dialoguing-with, but little about the need to announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And that, in some ways, explains the reality of the growth of the Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in the region, while the Catholic faith in the Amazon is not growing with the same force.

“We must make a serious study, a good examination of the ecclesial reality of the population of the Amazon. We must ask ourselves why Evangelicals and Pentecostals grow, and the Church does not ...

“There is no analysis of the reality of the [Amazonian] Church [in the *Instrumentum Laboris*]. There is an

analysis of the ecological, economic, and cultural situation, but not of the situation of the Church. Jesus Christ is not spoken of as the one who gives the explanation of the reality of man, as the Second Vatican Council teaches.

“Jesus Christ is referred to as ‘the good Samaritan.’ Jesus Christ never presented himself as the good Samaritan. The good Samaritan is the person we have to imitate by helping others. Jesus Christ presented himself as the Redeemer, as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, as the Resurrection, as the Light of the World... .”

[from *Crux Now*, September 25, 2019]

Bishop Azcona:

“... the Amazon, at least the Brazilian Amazon, is no longer Catholic ... If the Amazon has a Pentecostal majority, it is necessary to address that reality thoroughly. **Any nostalgia for an Amazon that no longer exists is fatal to its integral evangelization [today]. Even in some areas of the Amazon the Pentecostal majority reaches 80%... . This is today’s Amazonian face! [And] there’s not one word about this in the *Instrumentum Laboris*.**”

“Unfortunately the Synod doesn’t know, or knowing doesn’t understand, the significance, for the present and the future of the Amazon, of the faces of the anguished, re-victimized, and denigrated children, [abused] by their own parents and relatives, subjected to a slavery that forms an essential part of the abandoned and destroyed face of Jesus in the Amazon... . If during approximately one year

there were 100,000 abused children in [the Brazilian state of] Pará, isn't this face of destroyed children an essential part of the Amazonian face?"

[from *Catholic News Agency*, August 21, 2019, and *Die Tagespost*]

Debate 2.

On the ordination of *virī probati* (mature married men) for service as priests in Amazonia.

Cardinal Hummes:

“Another issue consists in the lack of priests at the service of local communities in the area, with a consequent lack of the Eucharist, at least on Sundays, as well as other sacraments... . This means pastoral care made up of sporadic visits instead of adequate daily pastoral care.

“Participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, at least on Sundays, is essential for the full and progressive development of Christian communities and a true experience of the Word of God in people's lives. It will be necessary to define new paths for the future.

“During the consultation stages, local communities, missionaries, and indigenous persons, faced with the urgent need experienced by most of the Catholic communities in Amazonia, requested that the path be opened for the ordination of married men resident in their

communities, albeit confirming the great importance of the charism of celibacy in the Church.”

[from *CRUX NOW*, October 7, 2019]

Cardinal Urosa:

“We have had in Venezuela, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, a situation of a great shortage of priests in much of the territory; however, the faith was lived and maintained. It is not just a matter of receiving or not receiving the sacraments, but of the experience of the faith that was had, that arrived through the catechists to the families, that communicated them to their children.

“The problem is not in the shortage or not of priests, but in the evangelization that can be done, not only with priests but through catechists. And that was the salvation of the Church in the plains and in [the] eastern region of Venezuela.

“The problem of the lack of priests is not the cause of the lack of growth. The problem is that perhaps, and I stress the word ‘perhaps,’ there has been little emphasis on evangelization, on catechesis, on the experience of faith in families.”

[from *CRUX NOW*, September 25, 2019]

Bishop Azcona:

“The ordination of *viri probati* is going to be useless” because “it’s placing a piece of new cloth on old cloth. The tear is bigger!”

“The clergy in the Amazon need, as does the entire Church, repentance, conversion, the faith that saves in the strict sense... . The meaning of the priestly ministry and specifically in the Amazon is lost or is dead in the lives or in the authentic pastoral conversion of priests. Why ordain *virii probati* within a priesthood in crisis?”

“... The fundamental root of this shortage of vocations in the Church and also in the Amazon, including the evangelized indigenous peoples, is due to an alarming lack of faith or the absence of faith that works in practice through love, and necessarily in history and society ...”

“Is this the love of the Church in the Amazon? Is this the love of God that sufficiently pervades the criteria for pastoral care ... or is it ... Pelagius [who] commands the ship of the Church in the Amazon?”