

Fr. Perozich comments —

I served as missionary in San Pedro Sula Honduras 3 years. Fr. Lasarte served 25 in Angola. His long experience reflects my short experience. I have bolded and italicized some lines below. I was told by my own bishop that what I preach and write are not Catholic; and he, with no experience outside the academic world, has been chosen to make policy for the Amazon synod along with other westerners and with those long serving in mission who have failed to evangelize and announce the name of Jesus Christ, those in mission who were not missionaries but social workers despite sacred orders.

Here are the highlights. The whole article is worth the read.

- *engrained clericalism. [...] A Church has been created where the laity do not see themselves as protagonists and where there is little or no sense of belonging, a Church that, if there is no "priest", does not work. This is an ecclesiological and pastoral aberration. Our faith, as Christians, is rooted in baptism, not in priestly ordination.*
- *Despite the scarcity of priests for all the communities, it is a local Church rich in indigenous priestly vocations, where even female and male religious congregations of totally local origin have been founded.*
- *"viri probati" as a solution to evangelization is an illusory, almost magical proposal that goes nowhere near to addressing the real underlying problem.*
- *Wherever there is life, fervor and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations will arise". [...]*
- *Cultural anthropologism*
In 1971, a group of 12 anthropologists wrote the famous Declaration of Barbados, which stated that the Good News of Jesus was bad news for indigenous peoples.
- *I remember cases of nuns who decided not to announce Jesus Christ, nor to do catechesis, "out of respect for indigenous culture". They would limited themselves to witness and service. [...]*
- *Sometimes the insistence on witness is such as to demand it replace proclamation.*

- Paul VI, in the fundamental document on evangelization “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” (22) tells us: “Nevertheless this always remains insufficient, because even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified - what Peter called always having “your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have”[52] - and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus. The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed”.
- “When people need services, they come to us (the Catholic Church), but when they look for meaning in their lives, they go to others (evangelicals etc.)”. It is startlingly clear and evident that the Church, in an attempt to be “a Samaritan Church”, has forgotten that it is a “Magdalene Church”: it is a Church that provides services but does not announce the joy of the Lord's resurrection.
- The Church’s social commitment, in the evangelical option for the poorest, ... The problem arises when this kind of activity absorbs all of the life and dynamism of the Church, casting a shadow over or even silencing the other dimensions: kerygmatic, catechetical, liturgical, koinonia. We are in an unresolved tension between Martha and Mary. [...]
- In the Latin American Church, the enormous hemorrhage of Catholics towards the constellation of the Evangelical and Neo-Pentecostal Churches is undoubtedly due to various factors, so one cannot be simplistic, but certainly the lack of an overtly “more religious” and “less sociologized” ministry has greatly influenced an emigration towards the Evangelical Churches and new religious movements, where in the Word, in a fraternal and warm welcome, in a constant presence, in a strong sense of belonging, they find a “meaning” and a company for their life. [...]
- the European missionaries who systematically “dis-evangelized” the region: “We do not favor superstition, but human dignity”. That says it all.

The Church in some places has turned into a great services manager (health, education, promotional, advocacy ...), but little in the mother of faith. [...]

- *A Church is secularized, when its pastoral workers internalize the dynamics of a secularized mentality: the absence or very timid manifestation of the faith almost asking forgiveness.*
- ***No one leaves everything to be a social animator; no one gives his life to an "opinion"; no one offers the absolute of his life to something relative, but only to the Absolute of God.** When this theological and religious dimension is not evident, clear and alive in mission, there will never be options of evangelical radicalism, which is an indication that evangelization has touched the soul of a Christian community.*
- *A Christian community that does not generate priestly and religious vocations is a community affected by some spiritual illness. We can ordain the viri probati and others, but the basic problems will remain: an evangelization without the Gospel, a Christianity without Christ, a spirituality without the Holy Spirit.*

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A Missionary Called By the Pope To the Synod On the Amazon Explains What the Church Gets Wrong

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Fr. Martín Lasarte Topolanski, the author of the text hosted on this page, a Uruguayan on mission in Angola, is the head of

missionary outreach in Africa and Latin America for the Salesian congregation to which he belongs.

Pope Francis included him among the 33 churchmen he personally invited to take part in the synod on the Amazon.

The following text was written and published before this synod. But it is as if Fr. Lasarte had delivered it in the assembly just now, for the cutting clarity with which he addresses its crucial questions, starting with the widespread request - which he rejects - to ordain married men as priests.

The complete text of the contribution came out in Italian in “**Settimana News**” on August 12 2019. And “Asia News,” the agency of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, published an extensive excerpt of it in two parts, on **October 10** and **October 11**.

This is an even more abbreviated synopsis. But absolutely a must-read, if one wishes to get to the heart of this dramatic synod on the Amazon.

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THE THREE DISEASES THAT STERILIZE THE EVANGELIZATION OF THE AMAZON

by Martín Lasarte

It is said that the priestly ordination of married laymen in distant communities is necessary, because of the difficulty encountered by ministrants in reaching them. In my view, the setting of the problem in these terms reveals **engrained clericalism**. [...] **A Church has been created where the laity do not see themselves as protagonists and where there is little or no sense of belonging, a Church that, if there is no "priest", does not work.** This is an ecclesiological and pastoral aberration. **Our faith, as Christians, is rooted in baptism, not in priestly ordination.**

Sometimes I have the impression that we want to clericalize the laity. First of all we need a Church of baptized protagonists,

disciples and missionaries. In various parts of our America, one has the impression that it has been sacramentalised but not evangelized. [...] We need to broaden the horizon and look at the life and experience of the Church in its universal context.

The examples of Korea, Japan, Angola, Guatemala

The Church of Korea was born from the evangelization of the laity. The layman Yi Seung-hun, baptized in China, spread the Catholic Church throughout the country, baptizing himself. For 51 years from its foundation (1784-1835), the Korean Church was evangelized by the laity, with the occasional presence of a priest. That Catholic community flourished and spread far and wide, despite the terrible persecutions, thanks to the protagonism of the baptized.

The Church of Japan, founded by St. Francis Xavier (1549), blossomed vertiginously for three centuries even under persecution; the missionaries were expelled and the last priest was martyred in 1644. Only after more than 200 years could priests (French missionaries) return. And when they did they found a new Church formed by kakure kirishitan (hidden Christians). In Christian communities there were various ministries: a person in charge, catechists, baptizers, preachers. The criterion that the Christians guarded until the arrival of the new priests in the 19th century is interesting: the Church will return to Japan and you will know from these three signs: “the priests will be celibate, there will be a statue of Mary and they will obey the Pope sama of Rome”.

Allow me to move on to something more personal, to my 25-year missionary experience in Africa (Angola). Once the civil war ended in 2002, I was able to visit Christian communities that, for 30 years, had not had the Eucharist, nor seen a priest, but remained firm in the faith and were dynamic communities, led by

the "catechist", which is a fundamental ministry in Africa, and by other ministers: evangelizers, prayer leaders, the pastoral care of women, service to the poorest. A living and secular Church in the absence of a priest.

In Latin America there is no lack of positive examples, such as among the Quetchi of central Guatemala (Verapaz) where, despite the absence of priests in some communities, lay ministers have living communities, rich in ministries, liturgies, catechetical itineraries, missions, among the which the evangelical groups have been able to penetrate very little. **Despite the scarcity of priests for all the communities, it is a local Church rich in indigenous priestly vocations, where even female and male religious congregations of totally local origin have been founded.**

But in the Amazon the opposite is happening

Is the lack of vocations to the priesthood and religious life in the Amazon a pastoral challenge or is it rather the consequence of theological-pastoral options that have not given the expected results or only partial results? In my opinion, the proposal of the **"viri probati" as a solution to evangelization is an illusory, almost magical proposal that goes nowhere near to addressing the real underlying problem.**

Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii gaudium* 107: " Many places are experiencing a dearth of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. This is often due to a lack of contagious apostolic fervor in communities which results in a cooling of enthusiasm and attractiveness. **Wherever there is life, fervor and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations will arise**". [...]

The Pope touches on the key to the problem. It is not the lack of vocations, but the lack of proposal, the lack of apostolic fervor, the lack of fraternity and prayer; the lack of serious and profound evangelization processes. [...]

Two more examples, from India and the Congo

In north-eastern India, evangelization has progressed decisively since 1923, thanks to a small Catholic community that did not reach 1,000 Christians. According to data from 2018, this region today consists of 1,647,765 Catholics, with 3,756 religious and 1,621 priests (half of them belonging to local ethnic minorities and the rest missionaries from other parts of India). There are 15 dioceses rooted in ethnic minorities with about 220 local languages (Naga, Khasi, Wancho, Nocte, Jaintia, Apatani, Goro, Ahom, War, Bodo ...). These populations, like the Amazon ones, have remained isolated for centuries from Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, taking refuge in the mountains and forests of the Himalayas, living their ancestral practices. An impressive change took place over 90 years. The ratio between Catholics and Catholic priests today is 1 to 1,000, which is excellent. Many Christians of these "tribal" minorities have occupied significant positions in India's local and national politics.

The other "biome" is the Congo River, with the surrounding countries: over 500 populations and languages. Christianity has gone through various difficulties, the same as in other contexts, with the added challenge of being considered the religion of colonialism during the period of decolonization (1960s and 1970s). Despite everything, the flowering of the African Churches is evident and promising. In that "biome," priestly vocations have grown by 32% in the last 10 years and the trend seems to continue.

We could bring other examples from Vietnam, Indonesia (the most populous Muslim country in the world), East Timor, Oceania ... but certainly not from our secularized Europe. In all geographical regions there are challenges and difficulties in Christian communities; but we see that where there is a work of serious, authentic and continuous evangelization, vocations to the priesthood are not lacking.

Why is the Amazon so sterile?

The inevitable question that arises is: how is it possible that peoples with so many anthropological-cultural riches and similarities with the Amazonian peoples, in their rituals, myths, a strong sense of community, communion with the cosmos, with profound religious openness ... have vibrant Christian communities and flourishing priestly vocations while in some parts of the Amazon, after 200, 400 years, there is ecclesial and vocational sterility? There are dioceses and congregations present for over a century and which do not have a single local indigenous vocation. Is there an extra gene or one missing, or is the problem something else? [...]

I think that in various parts of Latin America, and in particular Amazonia, one of the pastoral problems is the insistence on "old paths". There is great conservatism in different Churches and ecclesial structures. I am not referring only to pre-conciliar traditionalists, but to pastoral lines, a mentality that took root in 1968 and the 1970s and 1980s. [...]

In my opinion, there are three types of pastoral Alzheimer's that affect the evangelizing sterility of the Amazon.

1. Cultural anthropologism

In 1971, a group of 12 anthropologists wrote the famous Declaration of Barbados, which stated that the Good News of Jesus was bad news for indigenous peoples. Undoubtedly, this provocation gave rise to a fruitful dialogue between anthropologists and missionaries developed in various parts, which served to provide mutual enrichment. But in other places it became self-censorship, it resulted in a loss of the "joy of evangelizing" ("Evangelii Gaudium" 1-13). **I remember**

cases of nuns who decided not to announce Jesus Christ, nor to do catechesis, "out of respect for indigenous culture". They would limited themselves to witness and service. [...]

Sometimes the insistence on witness is such as to demand it replace proclamation. In this regard, Paul VI, in the fundamental document on evangelization "Evangelii Nuntiandi" (22) tells us: **"Nevertheless this always remains insufficient, because even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified - what Peter called always having "your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have"[52] - and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus.** The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. **There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed".**

2. Social Moralism

In more than one place I have heard expressions of this kind from pastoral workers: **"When people need services, they come to us (the Catholic Church), but when they look for meaning in their lives, they go to others (evangelicals etc.)"**. It is startlingly clear and evident **that the Church, in an attempt to be "a Samaritan Church", has forgotten that it is a "Magdalene Church": it is a Church that provides services but does not announce the joy of the Lord's resurrection.**

The Church's social commitment, in the evangelical option for the poorest, [...] has undoubtedly been and continues to be a constitutive aspect of the process of evangelization, which expresses the diaconal dimension of the

Church. Such a commitment has been a great source of wealth not only for the Latin American Church, but for the universal Church.

The problem arises when this kind of activity absorbs all of the life and dynamism of the Church, casting a shadow over or even silencing the other dimensions: kerigmatic, catechetical, liturgical, koinonia. We are in an unresolved tension between Martha and Mary. [...]

Thank God, when academic pastoral planning omits that "spirituality embodied in the culture of the simple", the Virgin herself intercedes taking care of her children and touching the popular heart, not with great reflections, but with simple popular piety: rich, simple, direct, full of affection, profoundly interiorized by the "little ones". Here we can point to the great Amazonian devotion to the Virgin of Nazareth, when in October, in Belém de Pará, about two million pilgrims accompany the procession of the "Cirio de Nazaret" (image of the Virgin of Nazareth).

In the Latin American Church, the enormous hemorrhage of Catholics towards the constellation of the Evangelical and Neo-Pentecostal Churches is undoubtedly due to various factors, so one cannot be simplistic, but certainly **the lack of an overtly "more religious" and "less sociologized" ministry has greatly influenced an emigration towards the Evangelical Churches and new religious movements, where in the Word, in a fraternal and warm welcome, in a constant presence, in a strong sense of belonging, they find a "meaning" and a company for their life. [...]**

I visited a diocese, where 95% of the population were Catholics in the early 1980s; today they are 20%. I remember the comment of one of **the European missionaries who systematically "dis-evangelized" the region: "We do not favor superstition, but human dignity". That says it all.**

The Church in some places has turned into a great services manager (health, education, promotional, advocacy ...), but little in the mother of faith. [...]

3. Secularism

A third side affect of this pastoral Alzheimer's is secularism. [...] **A Church is secularized, when its pastoral workers internalize the dynamics of a secularized mentality: the absence or very timid manifestation of the faith almost asking forgiveness.**

The consequences of these options or pastoral influences, without a doubt, are reflected in the vocational sterility or lack of perseverance in the path undertaken, due to the absence of deep motivations. **No one leaves everything to be a social animator; no one gives his life to an "opinion"; no one offers the absolute of his life to something relative, but only to the Absolute of God.** *When this theological and religious dimension is not evident, clear and alive in mission, there will never be options of evangelical radicalism, which is an indication that evangelization has touched the soul of a Christian community.*

A Christian community that does not generate priestly and religious vocations is a community affected by some spiritual illness. We can ordain the viri probati and others, but the basic problems will remain: an evangelization without the Gospel, a Christianity without Christ, a spirituality without the Holy Spirit.

Logically, in the horizontal vision of the dominant culture, in which God is absent, or reduced to some symbolic, cultural or moral concepts, it is impossible for a young person to come to appreciate the fruitful spiritual and pastoral value of priestly celibacy as a precious gift of God and of the total and sublime disposition of love and service to the Church and to humanity.

There will be authentic priestly vocations only when an authentic, demanding, free and personal relationship is established with the person of Christ. Perhaps it is very simplistic but, in my view, the "new path" for the evangelization of the Amazon is the novelty of Christ.