

The Special Synod on the Amazon: A Call to the Universal Church to Consider New Pathways and an Integral Ecology.

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"See, I am making all thing new." Rev 21:5

Introduction

In October, 2017, Pope Francis, conscious of the grave situation in the Pan Amazon Region, called for a Special Assembly, a Synod of the Amazon entitled *New Pathways for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*, which will take place from 6-27 October 2019. The Pan Amazon Region contains the most diverse rainforest in the world and is home to 2,779,478 indigenous people, belonging to 390 groups-nationalities, with at least 137 isolated or uncontactable groups. There are 240 spoken languages belonging to 49 linguistic families. The region is often referred to as the "lungs of the planet" as it is a significant absorber of carbon dioxide. Therefore, the Amazon Region contributes to the clean air we breathe and it contains 20% of the frozen water of the entire planet. For decades, this region has been exploited and used by global corporations, governments and international financial institutions. Today, we are witnessing a level of deforestation of the Amazon as never before in our history from the excessive growth of agriculture, extractive industries, and logging activities. Most forest clearing occurs around the "arc of deforestation" from Para in the north to Mato Grosso in the south and the Brazil-Peru-Bolivia area in the southwest.¹ Such activities damage the ecological diversity of the region as well as the social and cultural wealth of indigenous communities.

The oppression of indigenous communities forces them to migrate and leaves many open to exploitation and human trafficking. Recently, approximately 80,000 wildfires have been raging through the rainforest, provoking global leaders to call it an international crisis. These wildfires are mainly set by loggers and farmers, to clear land for pasture for cattle or soya bean production. Today, as throughout history, the Pan Amazon Region is a victim of bio-piracy. The illegal appropriation of the resources of indigenous communities continues without any recompense or recognition of indigenous ownership.

The Synod, *New Pathways for the Church and Integral Ecology* is a call to the universal Church. We are called to become aware of our duties towards our planet and to the indigenous communities who have been deemed "insignificant" throughout the course of history. This Special Synod transcends the strictly ecclesial-Amazonian sphere as it concerns the future of our entire planet. In the Preparatory Document it states: "We begin with a specific geographical area in order to build a bridge to the other important biomes of our world: the Congo basin, the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, the tropical forests of the Asia Pacific region, and the Guarani Aquifer, among others."² Therefore, this Synod offers a golden

¹ Global Forest Atlas: <https://globalforestatlas.yale.edu/amazon/land-use>

² Preparatory Document for the Synod for the Amazon: Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for Integral Ecology, Preamble.

opportunity for all of us who are part of the universal Church. We are asked to recognise the 'ecological debt' that we owe to the South (*Laudato Si*, 51), in this case the Amazon Region, and to begin to listen to what the people of the Amazon have to say through this Synod. It is imperative that we listen as the future of our planet is at stake.

In this article, I will outline the historical context to which the Synod is situated as it does not begin from a *Tabula rasa*, (clean slate). In highlighting some of the broad historical trends I hope to enable the reader to link the past with the present to illustrate why this Synod will be one of the most vital of our time.

There is no intention in this article to present the complete history of the Catholic Church in Latin America nor the process of colonisation by Spain or Portugal in the Americas. This in itself would be almost impossible due to the complexities therein. However, it is possible to highlight some of the historical events that in my opinion provide an understanding as to why this particular Synod is both a challenge and an opportunity for the universal Church today.

Historical Context

The Catholic Church in the continent of Latin America has struggled, and continues to do so, with shaping its own identity. It has experienced tension throughout the centuries with authoritarianism, imperialism and centralism, first with Spain and Portugal and then with Rome. The Church combined the power of the Conquest with the organisation of the "New World." The collusion of the Catholic Church in the colonisation of the Americas was a consequence of the decree in the bull *Inter Caetera*³ from Pope Alexander VI in 1493. This decree delegated authority to Spain and Portugal to colonise the Americas and to look on its Native peoples as subjects. Spain and Portugal were given the right to enslave and force the people through the Inquisition, to convert to Catholicism in the name of God. Colonisation and mission went hand in hand in Latin America and there is no denying the cruelty suffered by the people there. There were, however, people within the Church who challenged the authorities' treatment of the people. One of the best known is Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Spanish bishop, who went through his own process of conversion seeing the enslavement of the Indians as a mortal sin. He came to realise that the people of the Indies were persons in their own right. They deserved to be respected but they were "dying before their time." He became a defender of the rights of the indigenous population. He believed that "without the consent of native peoples the presence of the Europeans was illegitimate."⁴

³ This papal bull or decree authorised Spain and Portugal to colonize the Americas and its Native peoples as subjects. The decree asserts the rights of Spain and Portugal to colonize, convert, and enslave. It is sometimes referred to as the Doctrine of Discovery. It also justifies the enslavement of Africans. Unfortunately, this Papal Bull is still on the books. The Church has yet to revoke this decree. See Pope Alexander VI *Intra Caetera*: Division of the Undiscovered World between Spain and Portugal <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/alex06/alex06inter.htm>. For the full document.

⁴ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Las Casas, In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, New York: Orbis Books, 1993: 14.

The continent of Latin America had and still has enormous natural resources and it was these resources that attracted the first Europeans. Eduardo Galeano notes:

In the Middle Ages a small bag of pepper was worth more than a man's [person's] life but gold and silver were used by the Renaissance to open the doors of paradise in heaven and of the capitalist mercantilism on earth. The epic of the Spaniards and Portuguese in America combined propagation of the Christian faith with usurpation and plunder of native wealth.⁵

It was always the indigenous populations who suffered. They lost their land, as well as many aspects of their culture and were exploited as cheap labour. This has continued until the present day. The colonisation of the Americas was exceptionally cruel and brought with it the death of large proportions of the population who were unable to resist the powerful forces that came to their lands. The Europeans brought with them "biblical plagues like smallpox, tetanus, various lung, intestinal and venereal diseases, trachoma, typhus, leprosy, yellow fever, and death-rotting caries. The Indians died like flies; their organisms had no defence against the new diseases".⁶ Millions of people in the Americas died. Eduardo Galeano, estimates that the population dropped from between 70-90 million people to 3.5 million in 150 years.⁷ This was a demographic catastrophe and is well documented by the Conquistadores. The Europeans regarded the indigenous people as inferior, instilling in them the idea that European society was superior. For the indigenous peoples of the Americas the arrival of the Europeans resulted in the end of their way of life, their silencing and their overall destruction. In many ways the Europeans pillaged, raped and murdered, much more than an isolated set of individuals: a world died with them. The organic whole, or as the indigenous people would put it "the web of life" was broken and disrupted. Those who invaded the lands were blinded by what we now call social sin. They saw the rich resources of this continent as compensation for their work of "evangelisation."

Therefore, during the course of history, the Catholic Church has constantly struggled to both highlight and deal with the many abuses committed against the indigenous peoples of the Americas. For example, in 1741, Pope Benedict XIV in *Immensa Pastorum* demanded more humane treatment of the indigenous peoples in Brazil and Paraguay. In 1912, Pope Pius X issued a Papal Encyclical entitled *Lacrimabili Statu Indorum* in which he stated:

For what can be so cruel and so barbarous as to scourge men and brand them with hot iron, often for most trivial causes, often for a mere lust of cruelty; or, having suddenly overthrown them, to slay hundreds or thousands in one unceasing massacre; or to waste villages and districts and slaughter the inhabitants, so that some tribes, as

⁵ Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, trans. By Cedric Belfrage (NY: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

we understand, have become extinct in these last few years? The lust of lucre has done much to make the minds of men so barbarous.⁸

Some of this horrendous treatment was inflicted on the people in the Amazon rainforest in the last century. There was a demand in Europe for latex rubber and the Amazon region was one of the most productive zones for rubber extraction. One of the most abusive companies was the Peruvian Amazon Company which was financed through the City of London Stock Exchange, and later by British Global Investment. The scandal of abuse inflicted on the people of the region was highlighted by an Irishman called Roger Casement, who was then the British Consul General in Brazil. He was requested by the British Foreign Office to undertake an investigation into the treatment of the people in the rubber plantations. He focused particularly on the plight of the people in Putumayo. His work, which is well documented, highlighted for the world the many injustices inflicted on the native peoples, which eventually contributed to the collapse of the rubber industry.⁹

Neither the governments nor indeed the Church at times, wanted to believe what was happening to the indigenous people. The evidence from those working on the ground, such as missionaries and Roger Casement, forced them to listen. Pope Pius X stated:

We hesitated for some time to give credence to such atrocities, since they certainly seemed to be incredible. But after we had been assured by abundant witnesses - to wit, by many of yourselves, Venerable Brethren, by the Delegates of the Apostolic See, by the missionaries, and by other men wholly worthy of belief - we can no longer have any doubt as to the truth of these statements.¹⁰

Even though the rubber industry collapsed, other forms of abuse continued because of the rich natural resources of this region.

In 1962, Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council, to bring about renewal that was greatly needed in the Church. This enabled the Church as a whole to reflect on what was happening in the world. It was a call for dialogue between the church and the modern world (*Gaudium et Spes*, 92, 44), for a greater awareness of anthropology as central to the proclamation of the gospel (*GS*, 3), the importance of reading the "signs of the times in light of Gospel" (*GS*, 4), along with the awareness of the relationship between faith and culture (*GS*, 57-58). Most of all, Vatican II reaffirmed the world as the *locus* of salvation. We needed to see ourselves not as separate from world but fully immersed in it. We were challenged as the people of God, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to listen to and distinguish the many voices of our times and to interpret them in the light of the divine Word (*GS*, 44).

⁸ Pope Pius X *Lacrimabili Statu Indorum* http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_07061912_lacrimabili-statu.html

⁹ For more information see: *The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement*, Roger Casement, Editor Angus Mitchell Anaconda Editions Ltd. 1997.

¹⁰ Pope Pius X *Lacrimabili Statu Indorum*, No.3.

This was the beginning of the process in which the Latin American Church claimed its own identity. The Episcopal Conference in Medellín, Columbia in 1968¹¹ produced a document which became a watershed in the history of the Catholic Church in Latin America and indeed the universal Church. It was the first Church document to highlight material poverty as a sin, a form of institutional violence. It asked Christians to be in solidarity with the poor in their struggle. Jon Sobrino in reflecting on the importance of this conference stated:

Despite the fact that many of the succeeding conferences produced better texts than Medellín, it remains true that the spirit of Medellín has been continued on and it is that spirit that preserves what is fundamental: that the church must go to the poor of this world and incarnate itself in them, defend them and take risks for them, denounce their oppressors.¹²

The Church in Latin America had made what is now known throughout the world as a *preferential option for the poor*. This was the inspiration for the prophetic vision which led to a Church that began to raise her voice against injustice and the persecution of the Latin American people.

This year we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the third CELAM Conference which took place in Puebla in 1979. This conference deepened the work that had begun in Medellín, enforcing the option for the poor and liberation in its three dimensions, social, personal and soteriological.¹³ In the search to be faithful to the option for the poor based on Gospel values, thousands of people lost their lives. Some of the more notable are Blessed Oscar Romero, Jean Donovan, Ita Forde, Maura Clarke, Dorothy Kazel, and Dorothy Stang.

The fourth Episcopal Conference was organised to coincide with the 500 years of colonisation and took place in Santo Domingo (1992). This conference attempted to reflect on the challenge of what it meant to evangelise within a given culture and to reflect on the 'new evangelisation'. This was an opportune time for the Catholic Church to ask forgiveness from the indigenous peoples for the way in which the Catholic Church had evangelised. Instead, it ended up as a conference that tried to undo the work of the previous two conferences by replacing the methodology of see-judge-act with that of judge-see-act. It was obvious that the challenge of seeing God from the margins created fear. This conference was "a lost opportunity, for example, to say to the powers of the North, the United Nations and other international forums, that they should hear, respect and encourage the voice of the periphery and not-as usually happens-impose their will on it."¹⁴

Thankfully, the fifth CELAM Conference in 2007, in Aparecida, Brazil, marked a return to the central themes of Medellín and Puebla. Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio (Pope Francis) took part in

¹¹ CELAM, *Medellín*, 1968.

¹² Jon Sobrino, S.J., "The Winds in Santo Domingo and the Evangelization of Culture" in *Santo Domingo and beyond Documents and Commentaries from the Historic Meeting of Latin American Bishops' Conference*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly, S.J. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 168.

¹³ CELAM, *Puebla*, 1979, 321-329.

¹⁴ Jon Sobrino, S.J., "Winds in Santo Domingo," 171.

this conference and was chosen by his peers to lead the committee that would draft the concluding document for the conference. The return of *preferential option for the poor* is one of the distinctive characteristics of the Latin American and the Caribbean Church (Documento Aparecida, 19). There was also reinstating of the methodology “see-judge-act”: “to discover the signs of the times and in them to listen to God’s word which questions and help us to “see-judge-act” in order to be able to build equal and just relationships.” (DA,19). The Christological foundations for the option for the poor were also reaffirmed (DA, 391).

There is no doubt that the CELAM conferences were influential in the development of the Catholic Church in Latin America. Each of the popes who participated in them approved each of the final documents.¹⁵ The historic memory of the suffering never formed part of the narrative as the Church was too close to the conquest. Yet, the prophetic stance of the church of the poor, of those who remain “insignificant” is still vibrant in the midst of an ever-changing landscape.

It is not only the CELAM conferences which have influenced the universal Church, but also the work of the many world-renowned theologians from this continent who pioneered a theology, one that reflected the context from which they lived, which became known as ‘liberation theology’. People such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, Ivone Gebara, Maria Clara Bingemer and Elza Tamez, to name a few. This theology challenged many of the European theologians and the Roman Curia. The work of these theologians and many others from Latin America continue to influence theological thinking around the world today.

I will now turn to how Pope Francis has been building on this history and how it has, in my view, influenced his calling to the universal Church to move into a moment of change.

Pope Francis and the winds of change:

In 2014 inspired by Pope Francis, a transnational organisation called the Pan-Amazonia Ecclesial Network (REPAM)¹⁶ was formed. This was the first time Catholic organisations working across the Amazon Region had formed such a network. Their aim was and is to respond to the fragility of the Amazon, its indigenous peoples, their environment and culture. The network is also building bridges with other biomes / territories essential for the planetary future, such as the Ecclesial Network of the Congo Basin –REBAC.

¹⁵ Paul VI was at Medellín (1968), John Paul II was at Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992) and Benedict XVI in Aparecida (2007) and Cardinal Bergoglio was a participant now Pope Francis.

¹⁶ This network is made up of members from Justice and Solidarity Department of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano CELAM), the Episcopal Commission for the Amazon of the Brazilian Conference of Bishops (Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil), the Latin American Confederation of Religious Orders (Confederación Caribeña y Latinoamericana de Religiosas or CLAR), and Caritas Regional Secretariat for Latin America and the Caribbean (Cáritas América Latina y el Caribe). Cardinal Claudio Hummes, Archbishop Emeritus of Sao Paulo, is the President. For further information see <https://redamazonica.org/en/>.

This organisation has received invitations from the European and German parliaments to discuss issues in relation to the Amazon Region. They have met with representatives from the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights and UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples. This organisation has been vital in assisting with the preparations for the Synod. It has organised numerous meetings with diverse groups throughout the region, thus providing valuable information to the synodal process

In May, 2015 Pope Francis marked the fiftieth anniversary of the closure of the Second Vatican Council by publishing his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*. Drawing on the insights of Vatican II and the documents from CELAM conferences, Pope Francis took a radical step and dedicated an entire magisterial document as important as an encyclical to the topic of ecology. He combined the 'cry of the poor and the cry of the earth' as a unified cry, calling on all people of goodwill to a profound ecological conversation. He emphasised how everything in the world is 'interconnected' (LS, 16, 91,240), 'interrelated' (LS, 91,92,120,137,141,142), and 'interdependent' (LS, 164). He called on human beings to come to "a new way of thinking" (LS 215), which cannot be achieved "without an adequate anthropology" (LS, 118). He recognised both the inadequacy and weakness of a Christian anthropology and theologies which led to a wrong understanding of the place of human beings in the world. He criticised the homogenisation of cultures and warns us that "the disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, as the disappearance of a species of plant or animal" (LS, 145). Here Pope Francis recognised the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples.

In reference to our economic model which is "based on a lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods' which 'leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit' (LS 106), this document is rich, but there is not sufficient space in this article to go into it in depth. I have presented a brief outline to indicate that this document was a precursor to the Special Synod on the Amazon.

Another important event also took place in 2015 when Pope Francis addressed the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. Here he addressed the evils of colonisation:

Colonialism, both old and new, which reduces poor countries to mere providers of raw material and cheap labor, engenders violence, poverty, forced migrations and all the evils which go hand in hand with these, precisely because, by placing the periphery at the service of the center, it denies those countries the right to an integral development. That is inequality, brothers and sisters, and inequality generates a violence which no police, military, or intelligence resources can control. Let us say NO, then, to forms of colonialism old and new. Let us say YES to the encounter between peoples and cultures.¹⁷

¹⁷ Pope Francis, Participation at The Second World Meeting Of Popular Movements

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html 3.2.

More importantly Pope Francis went on to say "when the Pope speaks of colonialism, he overlooks certain actions of the Church. I say this to you with regret: many grave sins were committed against the native peoples of America in the name of God."¹⁸ So, in the presence of Bolivia's first-ever indigenous president, Evo Morales Pope Francis said, "I humbly ask forgiveness, not only for the offences of the Church herself, but also for the many grave sins that were committed against the native peoples of America in the name of God during the so-called conquest of America."¹⁹ This was ground-breaking. It was the first time that a Pope openly acknowledged the cruelty and collusion of the Church during the historical period of colonisation.

While Pope Francis acknowledged that St. John Paul II, during the Santo Domingo conference recognised the "pain and suffering" caused to the continent's indigenous people during the colonisation, it must be stated that he failed to apologise for the harm done. Pope Francis did make amends for this omission when he clarified the issue and apologised with "regret" and more importantly stated "we had never apologised, so I now ask for forgiveness."²⁰

His apology was also significant in the light of Pope Benedict's visit to the continent in 2007. Pope Benedict claimed that the indigenous people wanted to be christianised and said "in effect, the proclamation of Jesus and of his Gospel did not at any point involve an alienation of the pre-Columbian cultures, nor was it the imposition of a foreign culture."²¹ The indigenous people reacted negatively to this statement. Pope Benedict subsequently acknowledged that "shadows accompanied the work of evangelising" in the continent. He also noted that European colonisers inflicted "sufferings and injustices" on indigenous populations. But Pope Benedict failed to apologise.

The significance of Pope Francis' apology should not be underestimated, but unfortunately, the decree *Inter Caetera* from Pope Alexander VI still has to be revoked. The apology was welcomed by the indigenous and other grassroots groups gathered at the world summit of popular movements and by many others. Like *Laudato Si*, it is another building block for the Synod on the Amazon. As I said at the beginning of this article, the Amazon Synod is not a *tabula rasa*. All the events above have contributed to this crucial moment. The past informs the present.

Synod of Bishops for the Pan Amazon-Region

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.2

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Inaugural Session of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, 13th May 2007 http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070513_conference-aparecida.html.

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The Synod for the Pan Amazon-Region was inaugurated in January 2018 when Pope Francis' made an historic visit to the Amazon region in Puerto Maldonado, Peru. Pope Francis did not begin his visit to Peru in Lima, the capital, but in Puerto Maldonado, with the Amazonian peoples. People came from all over the Amazonian Region to be present that day.²² In his address, Pope Francis said the following:

We have to break with the historical paradigm that views Amazonia as an inexhaustible source of supplies for other countries without concern for its inhabitants. I consider it essential to begin creating institutional expressions of respect, recognition and dialogue with the native peoples, acknowledging and recovering their native cultures, languages, traditions, rights and spirituality. An intercultural dialogue in which you yourselves will be "the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting your land are proposed".[1] Recognition and dialogue will be the best way to transform relationships whose history is marked by exclusion and discrimination.²³

He concluded his address by convoking a Synod for the Amazon Region and held the first meeting of the Pre Synodal-Council that afternoon. The key to this Synod is that it is the people of the Region who are the "principal dialogue partners". Since then, REPAM has held many territorial meetings which have been supported by the active participation from the 100 Apostolic Vicariates and local Churches throughout the region, all contributing to the working document.

In June 2019, the Synod's *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL)²⁴, the Preparatory Document, was released. The Synod is an opportunity for a conversation. The people of the Amazon, as the principal contributors, are being asked:

How do you imagine your "serene future" and the "good life" of future generations? How can we work together toward the construction of a world which breaks with structures that take life and with colonising mentalities, in order to build networks of solidarity and inter-culturality? And, above all, what is the Church's particular mission today in the face of this reality?²⁵

The document brings together requests and suggestions. It is a detailed document. The methodology used is familiar to the Latin American Church: "See, Judge, Act". Therefore, the document is divided into three parts: Seeing: Identity and cries of the Pan-Amazonian Region,

²² There were representatives from the Harakbut, Esse-ejas, Matsiguenkas, Yines, Shipibos, Asháninkas, Yaneshas, Kakintes, Nahuas, Yaminahuas, Juni Kuin, Madijá, Manchineris, Kukamas, Kandozi, Quichuas, Huitotos, Shawis, Achuar, Boras, Awajún, Wampís.

²³ Pope Francis, Participation at The Second World Meeting Of Popular Movements

²⁴ Preparatory Document for the Synod on the Amazon: *Amazonia: New Pathways for the Church and for Integral Ecology*: <http://www.synod.va/content/synod/it/attualita/synod-for-the-amazon--preparatory-document--amazonia--new-paths-.html.8>.

²⁵ Preparatory Document for the Synod on the Amazon: *Amazonia: New Pathways for the Church and for Integral Ecology* 1.

Judge (Discern) Towards a Pastoral and Ecological Conversion and Action: New Paths for a Church with an Amazonian Face.²⁶ This document will help to frame the agenda for the Special Synod. Pope Francis has appointed Cardinal Claudio Hummes, former prefect for clergy, to be the relator general for the Synod.

The Special Synod takes place in October 2019, which is Mission Month. However, Pope Francis, has announced October 2019 as the *Extraordinary* Month of Mission (EMM2019). It marks the 100th anniversary of Pope Benedict XV's Apostolic Letter *Maxmimum illud* on overseas mission. Our entire planet is affected by what is happening in the Pan Amazon Region, therefore, as the Preparatory Document states: "The Special Synod transcends the strictly ecclesial-Amazonian sphere, because it focuses on the universal Church, as well as on the future of the entire planet."²⁷

The people of the Pan-Amazonian Region are calling on all of us who are part of the universal Church, to reevaluate how we do mission and to hear the 'cry of earth and cry of the poor'. We in the North hemisphere must own our culpability with historical honesty, ask forgiveness and change our behaviour. We cannot continue doing mission as we did before. This Synod and the Extraordinary Month of Mission offer an opportunity to be creative in our discussion on a "new evangelisation." We need to take into account the unprecedented aspects of our current situation. As Elizabeth Johnson states:

A flourishing humanity on a thriving planet rich in species in an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God: such is the vision that must guide us at this critical time of Earth's distress, to practical and critical effect. Ignoring this view keeps people of faith and their churches locked into irrelevance while a terrible drama of life and death is being played out in the real world. By contrast, living the ecological vocation in the power of the Spirit sets off on a great adventure of mind and heart, expanding the repertoire of our love.²⁸

This is an opportune moment listen to that "larger community of all living species" and with the people from the Pan Amazon Region live our "ecological vocation in the power of the Spirit" so that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past but "expand the repertoire of our love".

Conclusion

In this article I have given a brief outline of historical events, in order to recover the memory of all the complexity of what has occurred throughout the history of the Catholic Church in Latin America. Some of these events have contributed to the calling of a Special Synod of the Amazon by Pope Francis. We can see that it is greed and arrogance which have been the destructive forces in our world. It is always the poor and our fragile planet who suffer most.

²⁶ Ibid., 2.

²⁷ Ibid., 1.

²⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2014: 286.

Our Church was complicit in the past and indeed in the present. We need to change our behaviour and be honest about our own history in order to let go of our prejudices and our narrow view of God.

The people of the Amazon Region give impassioned witness to what is happening to the “lungs of our planet.” The Synod on the Amazon offers a unique opportunity to the universal Church to reflect on her mission, recalling that the “Church herself is a missionary disciple (EG,40)”. We all have to listen to the indigenous voices as the Church “has made an option for the poor (EG 198)”, while growing in greater awareness that “everything is interconnected (EG,138).” Each of us “by virtue of our baptism, are members of the People of God and have become missionary disciples (EG,120).” All of us are called to think anew. We cannot continue to put ‘old wine into new wineskins.’ The people of the Pan Amazon Region are leading the way and we must choose to follow.

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