

# **A SYNOD FOR THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: CULTURE, MINISTRY AND EUCHARIST IN THE AMAZON (PART I)**

Pablo Mora, S.J.<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

The pastoral work of the Church with the indigenous peoples in the Amazon is done from a context that shows many challenges: a gigantic territory with very limited access by roads, hundreds of native and river peoples who show very diverse cultures and languages. Contrary to those who think that these peoples have been trapped in the nets of the past, the phenomenon of modernization far from the region has already knocked on the doors of many communities. To the more traditional means of communication and the radio, have come the television, and in the last decade the introduction of the cell phone. Competition from the telephone companies for these new clients, along the river and in aboriginal villages, has rapidly shortened the distance between them and the cities. Everything is now literally "within reach".

Unfortunately, the transmission of the good news by the Catholic Church has not achieved the same speed to reach the original peoples; on the contrary, it has stagnated for many years and we no longer have the capacity to convoke them as a Christian community. All this is very regrettable in a region where hope is beaten down and massacred by so many evils such as family violence, drug trafficking, slave labour, human trafficking and the constant insecurity that the most vulnerable will lose their land.

In this context the Pan-Amazonian Synod appears as a breath of the Spirit, a *kairos*, which wants to renew and recreate the Church of the Amazon region. With its breath it wants to infuse life and to cover with sinews, flesh and skin what appear to be "dry bones" (Cf. Ezekiel 37: 5-10). The new paths of evangelization expected from the Synod are of such great importance to the original Amazonian peoples that it could also be called the "Synod of Indigenous Peoples"<sup>2</sup>.

All this is an invitation to review themes such as culture, interculturality and inculturation and the limitations of a "Ministry of Visit" in the Amazonian region (Part I). This will lead us to finally address a central theme for the reflection of the Synod: the need for a "Ministry of Presence" and the essential role of the Eucharist in the Church in the Amazon (Part II).

## **The encounter between cultures**

The pastoral work of the Church in this region is done in a multicultural context where the message of Jesus Christ and evangelical values should be incarnated in the Amazonian culture. But why should we continue to think of two or more different cultures or of interculturality and inculturation, when in reality many indigenous peoples seem to be blending in with modern culture? We reach a distant town or an indigenous community and we realize that young people wear jeans or they dress like those in the city do; they know Ronaldo, Messi, Neymar well; they ask "how much is the dollar exchange rate?" and they watch the most popular music videos and the national and world

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<sup>1</sup> Fr. Pablo Mora SJ is currently collaborating in the preparation of the Pan-Amazonian Synod as an official of the Synod of Bishops in Rome. The content of this article does not reflect the official opinion of the General Secretariat of the Synod of the Bishops. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the article lies entirely with the author.

<sup>2</sup> In the convocation of the Pan-Amazonian Synod, when Pope Francis referred to the new ways of evangelization in the Amazon, he stressed "especially (of) the indigenous peoples, often forgotten and without the prospect of a peaceful future" (PF, 15/10/2017)

news on their cell phones. Typical costumes are only used for tourists , important ceremonies or for certain serious occasions such as demands for the defense of their own rights.

However, all this in itself speaks to us of the existence of a relationship between two cultures in which one of them, the “western”, is offering some products and the other culture, the native, has been accepting them. Nonetheless there are some questions that deserve consideration such as: Do the cultures of the original peoples accept everything that the western culture offers or only select what they really desire? And also, if we look only at the epidermal part of a culture, does it mean that everything in it is already fully uniform? Doesn't this catch our attention or do we just consider some things absurd simply because we don't understand? Don't we sometimes suspect, when they respond to our curiosity, that they tell us what we really want to hear? Moreover, have we not idealized indigenous peoples, turning them into perfect living "saints," without defects or vices, marginalizing them from the rest of us “poor sinners”? These and other questions cannot be answered on a tourist or immersion trip, it takes spending more time with them, perhaps years, to do so.

### **Interculturality and inculturation as seen from the point of view of the “missionary.”<sup>3</sup>**

Intercultural relations are very much the concern of the evangelizing Church. However it seems that the reflection on the work of inculturation of the Church for many years has focused much on the person of the missionary, and this also applies to the Amazon region. The intercultural relationship between the missionary and the culture with which he or she interacts is never neutral. In the evangelizing mission, the missionaries carry with them their own culture, worldview, and cultural values, probably different from those they evangelize. In this sense, and by way of illustration, the missionary's attitudes towards culture move between two poles.

In one of them, we find the missionaries who, although they do not want to, show an "ethnocentric" tendency. In this case, their own culture and the values they bring with them, will channel the evangelizing impetus. Thus, a pragmatic and immediate attitude prevails of seeking the "development" of the native people, building chapels, schools, executing community-based projects, etc. But in this intercultural relationship one can fall into a paternalistic attitude with the other culture in which the "father" or “mother” makes the decisions for the children. Therefore, the pastoral accompaniment of the community is done from the parameters of the one who comes from outside and who is convinced that "we show them", "we protect them", "we provide for them", "we educate them" etc.

This tendency is found especially in those missionaries or pastors who come from other regions and who soon feel overwhelmed by the number of communities to be pastorally served along the rivers. Pastoral zeal quickly leads them to activism, although it is inevitable that contact with each community will be minimal and therefore with a schedule focused on Mass and some urgent development project.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those missionaries who, before turning to concrete projects and making hasty decisions, prefer to know more about the native people with whom their evangelizing work will be carried out. They are more interested in a longer contact with them, they value dialogue, observing their habits and customs, participating in their meetings, works and activities. They establish friendly relationships where dialogue and mutual listening lay the foundation for the future.<sup>4</sup> And so, they begin to experience a people with different cultural traits and worldviews.

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<sup>3</sup> I use this term in a restricted way and as a collective term, "mutatis mutandis," which refers especially to religious men and women, priests, lay men and women dedicated above all to pastoral work with indigenous and river communities in the Amazon.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. The Amazon: new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology. Instrumentum Laboris, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019, p.36, n.39: “Many peoples of the Amazon are inherently people of dialogue and communication.”

In short, these are the missionaries who want to take a certain distance from their own cultural parameters before “acting”.

This missionary attitude of wanting "to be with them" or "to waste time with them" indicates a different route because what is important at the beginning of the mission is not so much "to do" but "to let oneself be done to", to allow oneself to be molded by the culture of the other. It is a good beginning, all the more so if it has led one to live where they live and to make the effort of speaking the language they speak. Thus what was simply an intercultural relationship becomes an "inculturation", a desire to know the culture "from within," a deeper penetration into the culture of the other and in some cases even wanting to embrace and imitate the other. These missionaries earn the trust of the people and thus begin a precious work on various levels. Culturally they can begin a work of collection and translation of myths, stories, legends, customs, songs, dances, etc., of the people who have welcomed them and who will help in the future in the work of evangelization. On the social level, these missionaries identify better with the sufferings and pains of the people with whom they live and, for the same reason, are involved in struggles for their human rights.

At the same time, this missionary attitude makes us understand the need for a reasonably long presence of the missionary in the Amazon region. Only in this way, he or she will be able to establish solid, lasting, stable relationships with the peoples with whom they work and will allow them, little by little, to enter the “jungle” of the local cultural symbols and to know how to decipher them over time. It is an exercise that will greatly help in the work of evangelization.

### **Inculturation of the Gospel by the community**

In reality, the inculturation of the missionary into another culture has its limits. They will never become "the other," and it is enough that they can be considered as part of the native family. In addition, the missionary should ask him or herself whether the mission she carries out and the efforts she makes are helping the community in their own *active* inculturation of the gospel. Bishop David Martinez de Aguirre expresses this concern very well: "Something is not working well when...indigenous peoples let us do, are receptive and grateful, but they do not get involved; (when) they see us in the Church as a friendly, kind entity, but alien to its social structure; (when) they do not feel part of it; we do not make them leaders of the institutions and projects of the Church; (when) they do not assume control of the Christian Community, and it is not they who commit themselves".<sup>5</sup>

In the end, what is important is to recognize that the main protagonist of inculturation is not the missionary but the people, the community where he or she works. **The community is the main actor of inculturation.**<sup>6</sup> The indigenous community hears the message and translates it into its own cultural codes and assimilates it according to its own cosmovision. Thus it makes its own synthesis, that is to say, it contextualizes the Gospel in its own life, i.e., “inculturating” the message of Jesus.

We must not idealize this process of inculturation. It is framed in the logic of the mystery of the incarnation, death and resurrection: “It begins with an effort to express faith in the categories and modes proper to that culture, in an attempt at incarnation. In the second step, the Gospel discerns that culture so that it can shed what is opposed to it. From the death of elements that are not compatible and therefore not able to be assimilated, a new original Christian culture resurrects.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Presentation on "Inculturation", Study Seminar "Towards the Special Synod for the Amazon: Regional and Universal Dimension" Rome, February 25-27, 2019

<sup>6</sup> Cf. The Amazon: new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology. *Instrumentum Laboris*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019, p.103, n.122: “The active subjects of inculturation are the indigenous peoples themselves”

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ., “*Cultura y Religiosidad Popular*”, January 19, 2008.

At the same time, unless missionaries make the effort to inculturate themselves into the local culture, they will not be able to accompany the community in this process that has already begun since the previous proclamation of the gospel by other missionaries. That is, to accompany the community in the process of making their own that Jesus who has already been announced to them, the process of the community of inculturating the gospel into their own experience and cultural context.

### **Inculturation and the limitations of a “Ministry of Visit”**

If we are honest, we must admit that the intercultural relationship in the Amazon has never been rooted in a dynamic of consistent inculturation on the part of the missionaries. Thus, in this last century only a very few missionaries have been able to communicate in the native language or lived in, or at least very close to, these communities, or have identified so much with the indigenous peoples to the point of shedding their blood for their sake.<sup>8</sup>

The most common situation is that of the missionary who travels from the parish centre or mission post in which he or she lives, towards the river and indigenous peoples. It is therefore a “Ministry of Visit”, along the river, staying in each community just a few days. He celebrates Mass and other sacraments in the community, perhaps organizes a short day of formation or attends the community assembly to listen to their demands or to look for ways to solve some of their problems. In such a short period of time there is no time for more. Other communities are waiting for the same ritual of work.

In the "ministry of visit" to these peoples, an "intercultural relationship" is established that touches only superficially the cultural themes, in accordance with the lack of a more consistent pastoral accompaniment in the growth of faith of the community. And this happens for several reasons, one of them is the excessive cost of the trips by river. Visiting these river communities along with other nearby indigenous communities, triples the expense compared to making pastoral visits by road. As a result, visits to these more remote indigenous communities are made only once or twice a year, at best.

Along with the economic factor, there are other limitations that impact more seriously the “ministry of visit”, especially fewer religious, priests, or lay missionaries, i.e., the lack of vocations. In addition, for many of these, this itinerant pastoral ministry of visits is viewed with too many inconveniences and too few results. In the end, despite good intentions, there is only one word to describe the pastoral care experienced by the most remote indigenous or river side communities: abandonment.

### **The presence of other religious groups in the indigenous communities**

There are many other denominations or religious sects which have filled or want to fill the gap that the Catholic Church has left in the indigenous communities of the Amazon region. They are primarily of three different types: evangelical, pentecostal and messianic. The religious fractioning of the communities of the Amazon is evident. It is not uncommon to see in a small community, next to the small Catholic chapel, many "places of worship" of different religious denominations.

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<sup>8</sup> I mention only some notorious missionaries or martyrs of the Amazon: Dorothy Mae Stang S.N.D (1931-2005), martyr in Anapú, Pará, Brazil; Fr. Manuel García-Rendueles, SJ. (1946-2006) lived among the Awajún-Wampis peoples in Peru; Fr. Luigi Bolla, sdb, "Yankuam" (1932-2013), lived among the Achuar people in Ecuador and Peru; Brother Vicente Cañas, SJ., "Kiwxi" (1939-1987), martyr, lived among the Enawene-Nawe in Brazil; Mons. Alejandro Labaka OFM, Cap. (1920-1987), lived among the Huaorani people, and later, together with Sr. Inés Arango, TC (1937-1987), were martyrs among Tagaeri people in Ecuador, E; P. José Álvarez Fernández, OP, “Apaktone” (1890-1970), gran misionero in Madre de Dios, Peru.

We must recognize that some evangelical groups have done a meritorious job in translating the Bible into indigenous languages and training pastors chosen from among the native population to preach the Word of God among these Amazonian peoples. Other groups, like the Pentecostals, have had a big expansion in the Brazilian Amazon, insisting on spiritual healing, the expulsion of demons and a more individual and economic welfare vision. There are also religious groups, like the "Israelites of the universal New Covenant" in Peru, who in their religious vision combine the Old Testament and cultural beliefs of the Andean region from which they have migrated to the Amazon, considering it **"the promised land."**

Although the Church has always shown an inclination to dialogue with the pastors of these different groups, their usual defensive and proselytizing attitude **often** impedes a true rapprochement during these conversations.

### **Population Emptying of the Communities: displacement to the cities**

The "competition" between religious groups to obtain and even to maintain the quota of followers is quite fierce, and more so in the face of another adversary: the emptying of communities by the migration of families, especially their young people and adolescents. The objective is to study, work and settle in the city. Otherwise, there is the strategy of beginning to move to intermediate towns that bring them closer to the city to achieve their dreams, even though later and in many cases, these become a nightmare.

Often the Church, faithful to its social work, acts as an intermediary or bridge between the members of the community and the city. For the same reason, there are boarding schools for children and young people run by diocesan priests or religious congregations. At the same time, the parishes, especially on the peripheries, are becoming aware that ministry for the indigenous people is already a pastoral concern in the cities because of the large number of migrants coming from distant communities.

### **What remains of Catholicism in the indigenous communities and river peoples?**

Can we speak of a real presence of the Catholic Church in the indigenous communities or **river** communities? A bishop of the Brazilian Amazon commented: "We have already lost half of the indigenous peoples in pastoral work. We must seriously ask ourselves if we want to lose the other half."

The catechists, if there are any, live and work with the popular religiosity of the indigenous peoples and remote communities, so that the smoking embers of Catholicism are not extinguished among them. This has contributed greatly to sustaining the Catholic faith, in these more distant communities, in the midst of aggressive proselytism by other religious or sectarian groups.

One significant factor in popular religiosity is the patronal feast days. All missionary posts, we know, were entrusted to the protection of a patron saint and many communities still retain their names. The "patron saint" of the communities are considered to be one of their living intercessors. Celebrating the feast of the "patron saint", in many cases, still nourishes and helps to sustain the faith of the baptized in the community.

Along with this religious feast day, there are other well known expressions of popular devotion: the praying of the rosary, novenas, sacred images, scapulars, Holy Week processions, pilgrimages, etc. This popular devotion is still a protective lifeline of faith in the absence of the missionary in the community, and the feeling of abandonment in which they find themselves.

This popular Catholic devotion, sensitive, emotional and not abstract or rational, is rooted in culture in such a way that it is not easy for other religious groups to pull it out. It also shows that the

popular piety that permeates cultural realities and at the same time is enriched by them, is a model of inculturation of faith.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The crisis situation of the pastoral care in the Amazon where "geographical distances give rise to cultural and pastoral distances,"<sup>10</sup> is also an opportunity to look for new ways of evangelization. It is important not only to "be" with the indigenous people but also "how" to be with them, that is, how to accompany them and be accompanied by them in the process of inculturation of the gospel.

But we have seen, because of the scarce presence of missionaries and other difficulties in this vast region, this work of evangelization has been largely left in the hands of the remaining faithful catechists, who accompany the Christian community. But it is not enough and the burden is already very heavy.

What to do? In Part Two of this article, we look in another direction, but this time to one where we have always been without having seen it: precisely in the Christian community of those remote places. It is time to turn our eyes to a "Ministry of Presence" in which the Eucharist plays a central role.

### ***About the author:***

*Pablo Mora SJ, Doctor of Ministry, was born in the Peruvian Amazon. He worked pastorally for twelve years with indigenous Andean communities in the Archdiocese of Cusco. During that time, he developed and directed an adult formation and communication media program in the Quechua language for indigenous catechists. After that he was a missionary in China for six years and then worked for the Jesuit Service to the Pan-Amazonia (SJPAM) and the Pan-Amazonian Church Network (REPAM). He is currently collaborating in the preparation of the Pan-Amazonian Synod as an official of the Synod of Bishops in Rome and is author of the recent article: "The Pan-Amazonian Synod: Towards an Amazonian Episcopal Conference?".*

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ., "*Cultura y Religiosidad Popular*", January 19, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. The Amazon: new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology. *Instrumentum Laboris*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019, p.110, n.128