

THE ROAD TO AN AMAZONIAN EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE

Implementing the Conclusions of the Pan-Amazonian Synod

P. Pablo Mora, S.J.¹

The Pan-Amazonian Synod will begin in October and will include the participation of all the bishops of the dioceses, apostolic vicariates and prelatures that make up the Amazon region. After an intense spiritual discernment of three weeks, they will make the decisions that will indicate new ways of evangelization in the Amazon. But a critical question remains as to how these decisions will be implemented.

This modest contribution wants to show, from a quick look at the territory, its difficult history and challenges, and the governments of the countries that make up the Amazon, that implementing new ways of evangelization will be a complex and challenging process. The emergence of a clearer consciousness beginning with the twentieth century, of the Amazon as an *integrated territory*, has begun to assist in this process. This vision, however, has not necessarily meant a better care for this precious part of our common home, as evidenced by the devastating fires in the Amazon this August (2019).

Nonetheless, this time in the Church continues to be a "kairos", a special time of grace for the Church in the Amazon region. This "kairos" time needed some prior seeds, a previous history and process in which primarily the Aparecida Document (Brazil, 2007)² and the birth of REPAM³ (Pan-Amazonian Church Network), 2014, played an essential role in the last decade. Now is a propitious time for our bishops of the Amazon to think of even newer possibilities, in particular, the creation of an Amazonian Episcopal Conference⁴ that can implement the new paths of evangelization that this region needs and is hoping for.

THE AMAZONIAN TERRITORY: AN INHABITED FOREST

The Pan-Amazonian Synod is called "special"⁵ because unlike other Synods, this Synod focuses on a very particular and determined territory, in this case, the Amazon region in South America, the largest forest in the world.

This forest covers 7.5 million km² and is shared by eight countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname, Venezuela) and one overseas region (French Guyana). It is a special territory, full of life, where the green brings rest to one's eyes, and cheers one's view, and where the Amazon

¹ Fr. Pablo Mora was born in Tarapoto, in the Peruvian Amazon; he studied Anthropology in Lima, Peru; Philosophy in Santiago, Chile and Theology in the Jesuit Faculty of Philosophy and Theology (FAJE), in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. He completed a doctorate in Pastoral Theology in the area of cross cultural studies at the Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago, USA. He is currently collaborating in the preparation of the Pan-Amazonian Synod as an official of the Synod of Bishops in Rome.

² V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, CELAM. Documento Conclusivo de Aparecida. [Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, 5ta, Mayo 13-31, 2007, Aparecida, Brasil] Bogotá: CELAM, 2007.

³ In Spanish, "Red Eclesial Panamazónica"

⁴ This is suggested by the "Instrumentum Laboris", working document of the Pan-Amazonian Synod: "Given the specific characteristics of the Amazon territory, the need for an Amazon episcopal structure ought to be considered". In: The Amazon: new paths for the Church and for integral ecology. INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS, Librería Editrice Vatican, 2019, p. 115.

⁵ The formal title of the Pan-Amazonian Synod is "Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazon".

River like an immense serpent, embraces it and coils through it with its hundreds of tributaries, giving life to a great variety of species of plants, insects, fish and mammals. The land in the Amazon has never had that nakedness that characterizes many other regions in the world. The land in the Amazon is always a forest, it is a land always clothed and adorned with life, it is "Mother Nature" who feeds, cures, clothes, gives shelter and work to humanity.

Water is the fertilizing fluid element of the Amazon forest; without water the Amazon would not be such. Rivers are to the Amazon region what roads or highways are to cities. The Amazon cannot be understood without these natural water roads and highways, sometimes narrow, and other times so wide that the viewer cannot see one shore from the other. Boats, not cars, large and small, of many shapes and materials, are the traditional means of transport between the different populations. The Amazon also gives rise to other types of rivers, the "aerial rivers", that is, the rains that make it possible for the "Amazon basin" to extend its territory as an Amazon "biome," rains that also fertilize other non-Amazonian countries of South America. The Amazon region is the natural source of water that quenches the thirst of over one-fifth of humanity.

A forest inhabited and distorted by greed: historical brushstrokes

For thousands of years the Amazon has never been an uninhabited territory; the Amazon has always been inhabited by hundreds of indigenous ethnic groups or "original peoples." They have learned to live, continually adapt, and find shelter in this jungle so full of life--but also so entangled, mysterious, and dangerous. The number of its native inhabitants is around three million and they are currently distributed among more than 360 indigenous ethnic groups and more than 100 groups of PIAV (Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation) who live a nomadic life, covering different stretches of the Amazon forest. Each of these groups has its own way of organizing itself socially, its own culture, its own unique way of being.

War is a constant threat among diverse ethnic groups and the Amazon was no stranger to this phenomenon, and until now is well known the courage of indigenous groups that were never subdued, e.g., the Awajún and Harakbut peoples. Into this world of ethnic diversity, came the conquering and colonizing enterprise of the European kingdoms from the 15th and 16th centuries. They arrived with ambition and greed, with the best military equipment, making alliances with Amazonian tribes hostile to each other; all this, added to the diseases they brought, unknown to the natives, and the recruitment of slave labor, decimated the indigenous population. The ambition for riches, ignited by the imagination of legends such as El Dorado, Paititi and the Land of Cinnamon put the Amazon in the sights of many collective enterprises from this era.

The missionaries, with their mission to evangelize, became the defenders of the indigenous peoples in the midst of the border conflicts of these foreign kingdoms and their slave policy in the Amazon. The context of insecurity, violence, and abuse left few possibilities to the indigenous people, who resigned themselves to live in the "reductions" or mission posts, where they felt more protected and were evangelized. Thus, with the zeal of the missionaries, the first seeds of evangelization were planted in the Amazon, watering it also, in many cases, with the blood of their first martyrs.

The Industrial Revolution of the 18th century will resonate with much delay in the Amazon, and between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century there is a dark period in the history of the indigenous ethnic groups. It is the time of rubber, the "white gold," which will serve especially for the rise of the automotive industry in the production of tires. Now the systematic genocide of the Amazonian indigenous ethnic groups takes place, such as those of the Putumayo River (which crosses Ecuador, Peru, Colombia and Brazil), where slave labor was used to obtain latex, this natural resource of

rubber. The Church reacts with Pope Pius X's encyclical "Lacrimabili Statu Indorum" on June 7, 1912, denouncing these abuses, but it had little impact.

The economic "rubber boom" and the injustice against the indigenous Amazonian which fed it, generated the mobilization of thousands of migrants from other regions. This was the origin of the big cities in the Amazon region, which still have a significant number of inhabitants today: Manaus (2 million) and Belém de Pará (1.5 million) in Brazil, and Iquitos (half a million) in Peru. Currently, the total population in the Amazon region totals approximately 34 million inhabitants.

THE AMAZON TODAY: A PRESSING SITUATION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

The gigantic advance of science and technology applied to the economy and production, in the hands of the big transnational companies, and negotiated with the governments of the Amazonian bordering countries, soon turned the Amazon into a coveted economic good for import and export in the 20th century. Within a more globalized world economy, the pressures of foreign powers are directed with greater attention to this part of the globe, and seek--with exact cartographic calculations of the territory, the exploitation of its natural resources such as oil, minerals and precious metals. In addition, these companies transmit their greedy desire to thousands of national migrants, who flood the cities of this region, seeking what now seems to be a common objective in the Amazon, to become rich quickly.

At the same time and at the regional level, it is interesting to note that in the mid-twentieth century, the new awareness of the importance of the Amazon region in the countries that share it, was establishing more and more a political will to understand it better and influence it from an overall view, i.e., as a Pan-Amazonian territory. Thus, a first agreement arose among all the Amazonian bordering countries, (with the exception of French Guyana,) known as the Amazon Cooperation Treaty (1978). Twenty years later it will be called ACTO (Organization of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty), headquartered in Brazil. It did take some joint actions to influence the region, although with very limited programs and results. A more pragmatic and aggressive agreement is the one that emerged from the first "South American Summit" (2000), "Initiative for the Integration of South American Regional Infrastructure" (IIRSA), which consists of a mega-project of gigantic highways, to promote and facilitate regional integration. It also implies greater access, getting closer to the Amazon, enjoying it better and crossing it, as well as facilitating and speeding up the transfer of its resources, for example, from the Pacific to the Atlantic Oceans. However, this mega-project has caused and continues to receive much resistance in the Pan-Amazonian region⁶.

This new awareness of the Amazonian bordering countries, to consider the Amazon as a whole and integrated region, with common characteristics that differentiate it from other regions, is also expressed by the World Wild Fund (WWF). This is a well-known international non-governmental organization (NGO), that works in the field of preservation of natural spaces and reduction of human impact on the environment. In their Living Amazon Report, 2016, WWF highlights two key messages: the need for **an integrated, Amazon-wide conservation strategy**, at the biome level, and a **coordinated approach** for the Amazon, that takes into account both conservation needs and those related to economic and social development.⁷ This also reminds us of the challenge posed by Pope Francis, for a Pan-Amazonian vision of development that respects the rights of the original peoples: "I believe that the central issue is how to

⁶ <https://www.salvalaselva.org/temas/infraestructuras>

⁷ Living Amazon Report 2016, pp. 16-17

reconcile the right to development, both social and cultural, with the protection of the particular characteristics of indigenous peoples and their territories.”⁸ However, it seems that the destruction of the Amazon does not stop. To the contrary, the greed and avarice of past centuries continues, only this time, it puts the Amazon at risk of being destroyed forever or turning into a sheet of sand.

In its same 2016 Report, WWF mentions 6 major threats throughout the Amazon region⁹: 1) **the mining concessions** that cover 15% of the Amazon biome, and to this is added that 37% of the indigenous territories are at risk for 500 contracts for the exploitation of minerals and hydrocarbons; 2) **the increase of hydroelectric dams**, which already total 154, and with the planned construction of another 277 dams, would leave only 3 rivers intact, endangering the ecology, economy and climate of the subcontinent; 3) **the construction of highways**, especially from east to west, linking them to markets in East Asia. In 2016 alone, more than 20 more projects exerted pressure on the Amazon, which would generate a rapid increase in the loss of forests; 4) **the expansion of intensive agriculture**, for the raising of livestock and crops such as soy and palm oil, have unleashed serious transformations in the use of forest land; 5) **deforestation**, to which the aforementioned threats contribute, calculating that by 2030 the Amazon may lose 27% of its territory (around 85.4 million hectares of forest); 6) **legislative weakness around forest protected areas**, reducing these spaces or eliminating their state of protection. In 2016, protected areas still accounted for more than 50% of the territory. We are certain that all these previous figures today have become even worse in recent years.

Pope Francis, in his message to the Amazonian populations in Puerto Maldonado, Peru, in 2018, expressed: “The native Amazonian peoples have probably never been so threatened on their own lands as they are at present.”¹⁰ His words confirm that only in these first two decades of the 21st century has the situation of the Amazon entered a critical phase as it has never been before.

THE CHURCH AND THE TERRITORY OF THE AMAZON

At the beginning, with the first evangelization of the XV-XVI centuries, it must be said that the Church saw the Amazon with the eyes of its time: as a vast region of spiritual conquest parallel or complementary to an era of political and military conquest, disputed between European kingdoms. Naturally, with the territorial division between kingdoms, began the political division within them and, almost at the same time, the demarcation of territories entrusted to the Church, that will become “ecclesiastical circumscriptions”. The evangelization of these territories was entrusted to the first religious congregations which arrived in this part of the continent.

The problem with the ecclesiastical circumscriptions.

After the independence of the new South American countries from the nineteenth century, the borders of the Amazon territory was demarcated definitively in the midst of frictions and wars between the countries that make up this territory. At the same time, the political division of the territories into departments, provinces or states took place within each country. As for the Church, the ecclesiastical division of the territory of a country into "ecclesiastical circumscriptions": dioceses, apostolic vicariates¹¹

⁸ Pope Francis, Address to participants in the 3rd Indigenous Peoples Forum convened by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 15 February 2017.

⁹ Cf. Living Amazon Report 2016, pp. 44-59

¹⁰ Pope Francis, Address to the Indigenous People of Amazonia, 19 January 2018

¹¹ In general we can say that apostolic vicariates are mission territories that depend directly on the Holy See, are entrusted to a bishop and have not yet been constituted in a diocese. The prelature has a

and prelatures also took place. They encompassed not only two or more political units (departments or provinces) but also different geographical and cultural regions, for example, the Andean mountain area and the jungle or forest area.¹² The territories were so vast for pastoral care that the bishops, apostolic religious vicars, invited other male and female religious congregations to join them in the mission of evangelization in those lands. And they have done so in various ways: as parish priests, itinerant missionaries, educators, health workers, etc.

Difficulty in reaching remote indigenous communities and the river peoples.

The mission among the most distant Amazonian peoples was soon limited in such a vast territory, with very complicated journeys and much sacrifice in the middle of the forest. Geographical distances were transformed into pastoral distances, which generated an inverse ratio: the greater the geographical distance to a community, the less it was visited pastorally (once or twice a year in the best of cases). Along with the lack of *human* resources, especially itinerant missionaries, which began to worsen in the 1970s, came the lack of *economic* resources needed to achieve a sustainable ministry. The itinerant pastoral ministry has always been very expensive, where travel expenses on the river are double or even triple those on roads. At present, the itinerant pastors and religious within an apostolic vicariate of the Amazon, really do the impossible to prevent the total paralysis of this type of ministry.

The Church has always shown great fidelity in its mission of evangelizing service in the Amazon, and Pope Francis reminds us of that: "The Church's presence in the Amazon Basin is not that of someone with bags packed and ready to leave after having exploited everything possible. The Church has been present in the Amazon Basin from the beginning, in her missionaries, religious congregations, priests, laity and Bishops and she is still present and critical to the area's future."¹³

REPAM (Pan-Amazonian Church Network): The Precursor of a Pan-Amazonian Episcopal Structure

This awareness of seeing the Amazon as a territory with a joint and differentiated pastoral ministry was crystallized in the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate in Brazil, in the Aparecida Document, where the need is articulated: "Create consciousness in the Americas of the importance of the Amazon for all humankind. Establish a collaborative ministry among the local churches of the various South American countries in the Amazon basin, with differentiated priorities for creating a development model that puts the poor first and serves the common good." (DA 475) From this period, and helped by a context of greater ecological consciousness at the world level, an accelerated process will begin to raise awareness of the Amazon as an ecclesial subject, with its own characteristics, which demand a joint pastoral ministry among all the countries that make up this regional church.

The importance of seeing the Amazon beyond one's own geographical and political borders or ecclesiastical circumscriptions, began timidly but with determination, in inter-institutional and inter-congregational experiences such as the birth in 1996 of the "Itinerant Team" in Brazil, whose inspiration was Father Claudio Perani, SJ. This group, made up of laity, religious congregations, and diocesan priests, continues to this day its missionary charism in the Amazon region.

Later a pastoral work more focalized was developed, working across and beyond the frontiers or ecclesiastical circumscriptions of a country, and with a Pan-Amazonian vision. Religious congregations

smaller territory that also depends on the Holy See, but the one who governs it is not necessarily a bishop.

¹² The vicariate of Puerto Maldonado, which the Pope visited in January 2018, is an example of this, covering different territories and cultures of three departments of Peru: Madre de Dios, Cusco and Pucallpa.

¹³ Pope Francis, Address to the Bishops of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, 28 July 2013

(e.g., Jesuits, Franciscans, Marists, etc.) entrust this vision to some of their members, to carry out a new mission, and also inter-congregational pastoral teams are formed on the borders of the Amazonian countries.

This process of seeing the Amazon pastorally as a unique territory with its own characteristics would reach a decisive point with the creation in 2014 of REPAM (Pan Amazonian Church Network). This was only possible with the support of the Department of Justice and Solidarity of CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Conference), the Commission for the Amazon of CNBB (National Conference of Bishops of Brazil), CLAR (Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Religious) and Caritas International, under the joint leadership of Cardinal Claudio Hummes, OFM as President of REPAM, of Cardinal Pedro Barreto, SJ, (then Archbishop), as Vice President, and of Mr. Mauricio López as Executive Secretary.

REPAM, as its name indicates, was created to be a network in which all the local churches of the Amazon feel connected in solidarity in their needs, challenges, struggles and expectations. For this reason REPAM accompanies and encourages the local Churches in a more organic and effective way, through nine areas of focus: Indigenous Peoples, Socio-environmental Justice, Human rights and Advocacy, Borders, Mining, Formation and pastoral methods, International networks, Research and Mapping and Communication.

Since the announcement of the Pan-Amazonian Synod by Pope Francis in 2017, REPAM has played a fundamental and coordinating role in the service of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops in the preparation of the Pan-Amazonian Synod. One of its significant contributions has been the organization of the pre-synodal territorial assemblies, which have taken place throughout the Amazon region. At these assemblies the local churches of this region, presided over by their bishops, met to answer the questions of the Preparatory Document, and those answers currently form the basis of the "Instrumentum Laboris", a working document for the Pan-Amazonian Synod to be held in October, 2019. These pre-synodal consultations also fortunately coincided with the publication of the Apostolic Constitution "Episcopalis Communio"¹⁴ (September 15, 2019), in which the Pope reminds us that the Church is a synodal Church, which walks together and united. This synodality expresses a close communion between the Pope and the bishops, and among themselves, as pastors with the faithful. In this way, the local Churches animated by their bishops are consulted on the themes that the Pope chooses for future Synods, for the good of the universal Church.

Need for a Pan-Amazonian Episcopal Conference

As *Instrumentum Laboris* suggests, the Amazon is better considered when it is seen as a new ecclesial subject¹⁵, in which a Church with an "Amazonian face" and a "native face"¹⁶ is more clearly identified, with fundamental and significant traits which make it different from churches in other regions. For the same reason, it is necessary to recognize a "territoriality", in the best sense, as part of this proper ecclesial identity. In *Instrumentum Laboris* the need for an Episcopal structure for the Amazon Region is raised.¹⁷ And this, if translated into a solid *ecclesial* organism, such as an *Amazonian* Episcopal Conference,

¹⁴ The topic of this Apostolic Constitution is the Synod of Bishops

¹⁵ Cf. The Amazon: new paths for the Church and for integral ecology. INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS, Librería Editrice Vatican, 2019, Introduction n.2, pp. 7-8

¹⁶ Pope Francis, Address to indigenous People of Amazonia, Puerto Maldonado, 19 January 2018

¹⁷ Cf. Book 2, Part 2, Section 2, Chapter 4: Conferences of Bishops, Title 2: Groupings of Particular Churches. nn, 447, 448 § 1-448 §2 in: **Code of Canon Law**, Promulgated by the Authority of John Paul II, Papa. Roma, 25 de Enero de 1983.

would mean considering the Amazonian territory, which is part of the present ecclesiastical circumscriptions (dioceses, vicariates and prelatures,) as its *center of attention*.

Currently, in the episcopal conference of each Amazonian country, the Amazon region is a territory of great proportion, compared to other non-Amazonian regions in the same country. However, the *population* of the *entire* Amazon region is a minority, 34 million, constituting only 10% of the total population of the Amazon countries. As a consequence, the Episcopal Conference of each country does not have the capacity to respond fully to the different and complex problems of this region, since the majority of the population of the local Churches in each country is greater in non-Amazonian regions. And while the Amazon territories have been entrusted mostly to apostolic vicariates administered by religious congregations, this does not necessarily mean that they are better attended.

REPAM does a good job of animation and coordination of projects in the service it provides to the ecclesiastical circumscriptions of the Amazon. But it does not have the power to execute and implement the conclusions of the Pan-Amazonian Synod, such as an Episcopal Conference could do in a more collegial way. Without a solid and united Episcopal organism, in the end, the Amazon runs the risk of becoming a marginal or secondary concern.

On the contrary, with the creation of an Amazonian Episcopal Conference, the eco-pastoral projection for the entire region would gain a new form of organization and new energy. The coordination in the search for common goals for the region would benefit everyone. The planning of projects would have a greater horizon, even when they are rooted in the local reality. The institutions and financial agencies supporting the mission in the Church could better discern the channeling of their resources, having knowledge of the common priorities of this Conference. There would be greater possibility of increased mobility and missionary exchanges among religious, laity and priests within the same region. The mission could be implemented more effectively and creatively, with human resources available from the point of view of inter-institutional and interdisciplinary work, in support of health, education, defense of the territory, etc.

Of course, there are concrete challenges for this new evangelization in the Amazon region, such as differences in cultures and ways of working, not to mention the different languages used by the majority of the population of the Amazon countries: Portuguese, Spanish, English and French. At the same time, this would give us the opportunity to better understand the core of our evangelizing stance in this region: to understand and work with the peoples of the Amazon, with their different cultures, languages or dialects and other ways of being.

Conclusion

The Pan-Amazonian Synod invites us to conceive ourselves also as a Pan-Amazonian regional Church, that is to say, with our own Amazonian ecclesial territory. A single Amazonian Episcopal Conference, would bring together dioceses, vicariates and prelatures from the countries that make up the Amazon. The relevance of the territory of the Amazon at this time, not only at the regional level but also at the world level, justifies paying special attention to the more specific themes and problems of the region. The unity and solidarity of local bishops coming together to form an Amazonian Episcopal Conference, would express in a more visible and effective way, the urgent need to take care of this special corner of the planet. This would be putting into practice the call of *Laudato Si*, and would witness the clear option of this Synod to make integral ecology an integral part of its evangelizing work. The "new wine", the new ways of evangelization that the Church will discover in the Pan-Amazonian Synod, will need "new wineskins", an ecclesial organism prepared to face the new and pressing circumstances in the Amazon, and to put into practice the conclusions of the Pan-Amazonian Synod. Otherwise, we may run the risk that the "new wine" of this extraordinary Synod will be lost.