

One Amazon, Many Voices

Examining topics to be addressed at the Synod on the Amazon

Issue 2

Biodiversity

The Amazon River basin provides water, the source of all life, for much of South America, and even regulates water and carbon cycles on a planetary scale. Its dense tropical forest is also home for 30 to 50 percent of Earth's biodiversity, a complex assembly of plants and animals living together with a diverse human population intimately tied to the river's cycles.

The Synod on the Amazon's working document recognizes the rich biodiversity and cultures of the region as a "full and integral life, a life that sings, like the song of rivers. It is a life that dances and that represents the divinity and our relationship with it."

Threats to biodiversity will be an important topic at the Synod. The working document states, "The manifold destruction of human and environmental life, the diseases and pollution of rivers and lands, the felling and burning of trees, the massive loss of biodiversity, the disappearance of species (more than one million of the eight million animals and plants are at risk) constitute a brutal reality that challenges us all."

"We're fighting for soil, land, food, trees, water, birds. We're fighting for life."

– *Gregorio Mirabal, Indigenous leader and Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA)*

The Synod sees the destruction caused by large scale agriculture, mining, deforestation, and climate change as especially harmful to Amazonian communities: "The territory has become a space of discord and of extermination of peoples, cultures and generations."

In May 2019, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) released the most comprehensive study of global biodiversity to date, finding that one million species are at risk of extinction. "The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever," said IPBES Chair, Sir Robert

Watson. "We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide."

In addition to this existential threat, destroying nature hinders our ability to see God's presence in our lives. The Church has long taught that observing nature is a way to better understand God. In 2005, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace wrote, "The world presents itself before man's eyes as evidence of God, the place where God's creative, providential and redemptive power unfolds." Also, Pope Benedict said, "In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity."

The working document goes further, describing the detachment from nature as sin, and the exploitation of nature as breaking our covenant with God. The authors remind us that "[t]his sin, as St. John Paul II said, is not only personal but also social and structural."

We are now called to an integral conversion that is social, communal and ecological. "This conversion implies recognizing personal and social complicity in the structures of sin, unmasking the ideologies that justify a lifestyle that assaults creation," the Synod says.

The IPBES report indicates that, while it is not too late to protect biodiversity, it will require "a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values." Such transformative change will give rise to opposition from vested interests, but our focus on and care for the common good can unite us and prevail.

Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary

The Maryknoll Sisters founded the Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary in Baguio, Philippines, from the ruins of their Convent School, destroyed by a 7.8 earthquake in 1990. The disaster shook not only the foundations of their buildings, but also the foundations of their mission. They saw an urgent need to examine the community's needs in an ecological context.



The Sanctuary provides earth education to teachers and students at all levels, to religious congregations, and to the public. It promotes a holistic understanding of the Earth and articulates a new cosmology, based on scientific data, ancient tradition and indigenous cultures, and guided by religions and spiritualities that reconnect all of creation with the Eternal Spirit.

Sr. Anne Braudis, MM, co-founder of the Sanctuary explains: "A new perception of the Universe consists in knowing myself as dwelling within the unfolding mystery of creation. More than that, it is grasping that I am *of* the Earth; I, Ann Marie Braudis, *am* the Earth in human form, breathing, moving, reflecting, knowing, connecting."

Reflect

Which aspects of nature most clearly represent God's love to you?

In what ways would you be affected if these aspects of nature were lost?

Pray

Left: Every creature has a function, none is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God. (*Laudato Si'*, 84)

Right: Loving God, help us to recognize the love You have poured out for us in this beautiful planet.

Left: The Amazon's cry of pain echoes the cry of the people enslaved in Egypt whom God does not abandon. (*Instrumentum Laboris for the Synod on the Amazon*)

Right: Compassionate God, forgive us for our destruction of your beautiful Creation. Help us to change our ways.

All: O Lord, seize us with your power and light, help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of your Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. (*Laudato Si'*, 246)

What is the Synod for the Amazon

The Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region is scheduled to meet in Rome from October 6–27 2019. Pope Francis announced in 2017 that it would work "to identify new paths for the evangelization of God's people in that region," specifically the indigenous peoples who are experiencing the destruction and exploitation of their natural environment and live "often forgotten and without the prospect of a serene future." The Amazon, roughly the size of the forty-eight contiguous United States, with a population of 2.8 million divided among approximately 400 tribes, includes parts of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru, Venezuela, and Surinam, all countries where most of the population is Roman Catholic. <http://www.sinodoamazonico.va>