

A Synod on Amazonia

The forthcoming Synod on Amazonia exceeds the strictly ecclesial scope of Amazonia because it is relevant to the universal Church and to the future of the whole planet. **David Romero SJ**, born in New Iberia, Louisiana, USA, has spent over thirty years in Brazil and has been in the Amazon region for sixteen years.

In October 2017, Pope Francis summoned the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Amazonia for October 2019, with the theme 'Amazonia: new paths for the Church and towards an Integral Ecology'. The synod is a permanent institution of the Church, created by Pope St Paul VI after the Second Vatican Council, to keep alive the spirit of collegiality of the conciliar experience. An assembly of bishops representing the Catholic episcopate, it assists the pope in the government of the universal Church with its advice. The goal is to identify new paths for the evangelisation of that portion of the People of God, especially the indigenous people, who are often forgotten and without prospects for development, and is an opportunity to reflect on and respond to the grave social environmental



crisis affecting the Amazon region and indeed our planet.

The Amazon basin is a complex network of relationships, inter-knowledge, inter-recognition and inter-dependence covering 2.7 million square miles over nine nations. This unique perspective helps us to understand the relationship of territories with apparently intangible aspects such as culture and spirituality, along with the natural surroundings that generate life. Indeed, the Amazon region represents a biome or an ecological unit, which is a living system of complex aspects of flora, fauna and mega-biodiversity.

In January 2018, during the meeting with indigenous peoples, in Peru,



Photo © Shutterstock.com

Pope Francis spoke about the richness of indigenous knowledge and diversity. He also expressed the urgent need to defend the Amazon and the peoples of this region, commenting on the threats that these peoples suffer because of economic interests in their territories.

The Synod on Amazonia will be:

(1) A synod to *comprehend* the wealth of the biome, the knowledge and diversity of the Amazonian peoples, especially the indigenous peoples, their struggles for an integral ecology, their dreams and hopes.

(2) A synod to *recognise* the struggles and resistance of the Amazonian peoples facing more than 500 years of

colonisation with excessive exploitation and destruction of the forest and natural resources.

(3) A synod for *learning* from Amazonia, through the simple, respectful lifestyle of its peoples, with its resources of collective use shared in a non-capitalist way of life.

(4) A synod to defend Amazonia, its biome and its peoples threatened in their territories, wrongly expelled from their lands, tortured and murdered in agrarian and social environmental conflicts, humiliated by the powerful agribusiness and major developmental economic projects.

According to the preparatory document, the synod will reflect on the elaboration of new paths of evangelisation for and with the people of God that inhabit the Amazon region: inhabitants of communities and rural areas, of cities and large metropolis, migrant and displaced people, and especially indigenous peoples. The reflections of the synod exceed the strictly ecclesial scope of Amazonia because they are relevant to the universal Church and to the future of the whole planet. Starting from a specific territory, the desire is to bridge the other essential biomes in our world: the Congo River Basin, the biological corridor of Central America, the tropical forests of Asia and the Pacific, the Guarani aquifer, among others.

The preparatory document indicates some subjects that should be on the agenda of the Synod on Amazonia: the distinctive face (characteristics) of the peoples of the Amazon region; the abounding natural wealth at risk



Photo © Shutterstock.com

through unreasonable exploitation; the way of life of the Amazonian peoples based on 'well-being' (harmonious living); the reality of the cities of the nine countries that make up the Pan-Amazon and the predominance of social, economic, cultural and political inequalities.

The preparatory process for the Synod was completed by the middle of this year with the publication of the *Instrumentum Laboris*. This stage consisted of a wide-ranged listening process, firstly with all the communities living in the Amazon. The pre-synod phase raised many important questions, including the following: 'We want to know how they (indigenous peoples) imagine a "peaceful future" and "well-being" for future generations. How can we collaborate in the construction of a world capable of breaking with the structures that sacrifice life, and with the mentalities of colonisation to build networks of solidarity among cultures? Above all, we want to know: What is the specific mission of the Church today, faced with this reality?' Pope Francis has indicated that the question of a married priesthood might emerge.

The hope is that the Synod on Amazonia will embrace the challenge to announce the Gospel in the midst of extremely complex conditions of fragmentation and life-threatening forces from the increasing forms of domination, extermination and extractive activity in the Amazon territory. The synod must be open to the recognition of the grace and revelation of God in the midst of the cultural diversity of its original (indigenous) peoples and other communities, and the way in which they live out their hopes to survive and remain there. This is a huge challenge, but it is also a real opportunity for the necessary and longed-for change in the Church and its way of being present and 'walking together' in the Amazon region. 

The Season of Creation is celebrated throughout the Christian world from 1 September to 4 October 2019, the Feast of St Francis of Assisi. Due to the urgency in tackling climate change, the Catholic Church has united for 2019 with the Orthodox, Anglican and World Council of Churches in celebrating this special creation time. The Laudato Si' Working Group of the Irish Bishops' Council for Catechetics have prepared a resource pack for use in Sunday and other liturgies and meetings. See www.catholicbishops.ie.