

Is *Querida Amazonia* the Beginning of a Creative New Reception of the Synodal Path? (Part 1)

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THE PONTIFICATE of Pope Francis is initiating a new phase in the reception of the Second Vatican Council. The Church in transition is being guided and inspired by the magisterium, by Latin American ecclesial life, and by Ignatian tradition. In this transitional phase, two different ecclesiological models coexist and have produced new debates about the reception of the Council and the evolution of the magisterium. The clerical, pyramidal model has led to an institutional breakdown that became evident with the revelation of the reasons for the resignation of Benedict XVI, among other things.

Given this context, Francis has begun to promote a creative reception of the Council. More than reforming Church structures, Francis has tried to convert mentalities and redirect the institutional ways of proceeding toward a model of Church that is more missionary and

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synodal. It is at this crossroads that the present discussion of the 2020 Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* is taking place. The *parrhesia* that boldly relates ecological and cultural-theological factors to the inculturation processes of the indigenous peoples forces us to engage in the serious hermeneutical and ecclesiological considerations that are needed to deal with the conflicting interpretations that have arisen.

If the ecological dimension of *Querida Amazonia* fails to get translated into a new ecclesiology, we will not be able to progress further in the institutional reform that is possible and needed. We can speak of a new age for the Latin American Church since the present phase of Francis's pontificate presents the Church with a new challenge, placing it at a ministerial and ecclesiological crossroads.¹

1. 'Not all discussions of doctrinal, moral, or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium' (*Amoris Laetitia*, n. 3)

Francis usually provides some keys for reading and interpreting at the beginning of his exhortations. In *Amoris Laetitia* he clearly envisions a method of interpreting the magisterium emerging from the relations established between the local Churches and the cultures in which they live and by which they are shaped. In this process, greater value is placed on the inculturation of doctrine than on the formulation of universal laws since 'cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle ... needs to be inculturated if it is to be respected and applied' (*Amoris Laetitia*, n. 3). The Pope explains this principle more fully:

Since time is greater than space, I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral, or pastoral issues need to

1. Rafael Luciani elaborates his argument in five sections. Sections 1, 2 and 3 appear in this issue; Sections 4 and 5 will be carried in Part 2, in the March issue – Editor

be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. ... Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle ... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied (*Amoris Laetitia*, n. 3).

This perspective reveals the complex novelty of a magisterium located within a pontificate of reform, a pontificate of transition that is seeking new paths for the Church in creative fidelity to the spirit of Vatican II. It also allows us to consider the cultural-theological evolution of doctrine that results from the inculturation processes of each local church. It is therefore extremely important to understand the criterion provided by *Amoris Laetitia* when it states that 'not all discussions of doctrinal, moral, or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium.' The reason is found in the same text: 'Every general principle ... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied.' This hermeneutic of the magisterium has been applied by Francis not only in doctrinal matters but also in relation to the Church's social teaching. For example, we read in *Laudato Si'*: 'The development of the Church's social teaching represents such a synthesis with regard to social issues; this teaching is called to be enriched by taking up new challenges' (n. 63).

While it is true that inculturation is a basic element for understanding the genesis of ecclesial life (ecclesiogenesis), it happens by initiating processes rather than by structural reforms. Primacy is therefore granted to the exercise of discernment and to the evolution of cultural-theological models that sustain both doctrine and church structures. Francis explains this by alluding to the principle 'time is greater than space' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 222) because 'giving prior-

ity to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces. Time governs spaces, illumines them, and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 223). Therefore, 'the principal aim of these participatory processes should not be ecclesiastical organization but rather the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 31).

PROCESSES

This logic of processes, which takes place through a genetic-inductive evolution, defines the style and the nature of Francis's magisterium. In these processes the evolution of a particular aspect affects all the rest, according to the principle: 'everything is connected' (*Laudato Si'*, n. 91). For example, we cannot speak of being related to God without speaking also of being related to others and to nature. Likewise, we cannot speak of integral ecology or inculturation if there are no local ecclesial channels or pathways giving rise to new ministries that affect the whole of the Church's way of being.

This method of interpretation that we see emerging in the magisterium of Francis has deep roots in his experience as a Jesuit. Even at the beginning of his pontificate it could be seen in two basic concepts that were spelled out in his exhortations: the option for processes of discernment rather than the imposition of doctrinal rigidity and the notion of thought as incomplete, open-ended reality. The conjunction of these two principles inevitably produces a healthy evolution of doctrine, as Francis has shown in the introductions to his post-synodal exhortations. He explained this well in a 2013 interview he gave to Antonio Spadaro S.J.:

The style of the Society is not discussion but discernment, which obviously supposes discussion. The mystical aura never defines its edges; it does not complete thought. The Jesu-

it should be a person of incomplete thought, of open-ended thought. (*L'Osservatore Romano*, vol. XLV, no 39. 27 September 2013).

We can thus understand why the Pope rejects both the indifference of some and the unseemly urgency of others when it comes time to seeking solutions to conflicts, whether social, pastoral, or ecclesial. Francis proposes instead a 'third way, which is the best way to deal with conflict. It is the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it, and to make it a link in the chain of a new process' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 227). In this way, he says, a "profound and higher unity" will be attained (*Evangelii Gaudium*, nn. 226-230).

Keeping in mind the different ecclesiological positions that entered into conflict during the Amazon Synod, the Pope wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation:

The real response to the challenges of evangelization lies in transcending the 'two approaches' and finding other, better ways, perhaps not yet even imagined. Conflict is overcome at a higher level, where each group can join the other in a new reality, while remaining faithful to itself. Everything is resolved 'on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides.' Otherwise, conflict traps us; 'we lose our perspective, our horizons shrink and reality itself begins to fall apart' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 104).

The third way provides the solution by seeking a new link that gives rise to another process. We see again an open-ended hermeneutic that never closes off themes but keeps opening them to new processes, which in turn lead to a new link surpassing the former themes and challenging us to consider what is not yet even imagined.

There can be a danger, however, in limiting our discernment to the opposed positions in the synodal hall and failing to acknowledge the theological authority of the synodal processes as a whole, in all

their complexity. Only if these processes are binding on the Synod will they yield a new synodal ecclesiology capable of representing the whole People of God. Synodality should not be confused with synods, nor should a synod be understood as the supreme example of synodality. For the sake of ecclesial reform, the present situation requires that we accept as coherent and binding the unity that exists between the *sensus fidei fidelium* and the *depositum fidei*. Otherwise, we will not advance beyond the clerical, pyramidal model that has so far prevailed and that continues to discourage new pathways leading to the construction of a synodal Church.

2. 'A harmonious, creative, and fruitful reception of the entire synodal process' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 2)

In light of what has already been said, the Amazon Synod should be understood as an open-ended, processual event. We cannot read the new Apostolic Exhortation as an isolated text that has no relation to the pre-synodal process, the actual celebration of the assembly in Rome, or the post-synodal process now under way. It is essential that all three components – the Amazon Synod itself (before, during, and after), the Final Document of the Synod, and the new Pastoral Exhortation *Querida Amazonia* – be interpreted in an interconnected and open-ended manner, for we know that this relation can open up a new phase in the reception of Francis' pontificate.

This phase could see the first appearance of the principle of evolution of doctrine even if there is no full or explicit consciousness of that happening. Indeed, even though the Exhortation does not go that far, it provides the elements needed to advance in this direction, provided there is an authoritative, interconnected reading that binds together the different links of the 'pre-during-after' synodal process, within the frame of a new hermeneutics.

Some commentators, having read the Exhortation as an isolated

text by itself and not as part of an event, have claimed the present pontificate has suffered a rupture comparable to what happened with *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, during the pontificate of Paul VI. Others have spoken of the dark hour of Latin America and the betrayal of synodality because there was no explicit confirmation of some of the things that were voted on and requested by a majority of those in the synodal assembly.

In both cases we run the risk of understanding the magisterium of Francis according to the criteria and the styles of earlier pontificates, and we fail to appreciate the novelty of an ecclesiology that

We fail to appreciate the novelty of an ecclesiology that concedes primacy to the local Churches and their own processes of inculturation, with the consequent evolution of the magisterium that this can produce.

concedes primacy to the local Churches and their own processes of inculturation, with the consequent evolution of the magisterium that this can produce. For Francis, the initial processes always lead to

other processes and to ‘new links’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 223) that are ‘difficult and lengthy’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 24), ‘unfinished and called to grow’ (AL 218), forged over a “long stretch” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 225) because ‘it is more important to start processes than to dominate spaces’ (*Amoris Laetitia*, n. 261), spaces that are both intellectual and existential.

The Exhortation therefore needs to be viewed in the light of the whole synodal process, which, with its advances in the ecological-cultural sphere and its deficiencies in the ecclesiological-ministerial sphere, remains open to new possibilities that will require all persons and institutions to keep offering new contributions – or links, as Francis calls them. In order for progress to be made, the Exhortation must be read within the framework of a circular method of interpretation – proposed by Francis himself – that alternates between the Final Synod Document and the Apostolic Exhortation.

He offers this interpretive key in the first paragraphs of the Exhortation, where he states that the Exhortation does not take the place of the Final Synod Document (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 2) but assumes it (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 3); he recommends that the Exhortation be read integrally (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 3) and *implemented* (*Querida Amazonia*, n.). This is how he puts it:

I will not go into all of the issues treated at length in the final document. Nor do I claim to replace that text or to duplicate it. I wish merely to propose a brief framework for reflection that can apply concretely to the life of the Amazon region a synthesis of some of the larger concerns that I have expressed in earlier documents, and that can help guide us to a harmonious, creative, and fruitful reception of the entire synodal process (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 2).

Independently of the way these first paragraphs are interpreted, the Pope is, for the first time in the universal magisterium, introducing a hermeneutical circularity between the weight of the Final Document of a regional synod and the pontifical Magisterium that follows it, and he even calls on the faithful to apply the synodal document as part of a 'harmonious, creative, and fruitful reception of the entire synodal process' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 2). The Exhortation is integrated into this process of reception as one more link, Francis explains: 'In this Exhortation, I wish to offer my own response to this process of dialogue and discernment' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 2). The same hermeneutic – between a Final Document of a Synod and a Post-Synodal Exhortation – already appears, although incipiently, in *Christus Vivit*, n. 4. It is explained, more clearly, in his Message for the Thirty-fifth World Youth Day, 11 February 2020:

As you can see, the verb 'arise' or 'stand up' appears in all three themes. These words also speak of resurrection, of awakening to new life. They are words that constantly appear in the Ex-

hortation *Christus Vivit* (Christ is Alive!) that I addressed to you following the 2018 Synod and that, together with the Final Document, the church offers you as a lamp to shed light on your path in life.

The Synod did not end with the Exhortation, nor does the Exhortation express a unidirectional position with regard to all that was discussed and approved in the Synod. For Francis, genuine progress requires that the whole People of God be involved in the pathways that have been opened up. Thus, he says emphatically, almost as a shout: 'God wants the entire Church to be enriched and challenged by the work of the synodal assembly. May pastors, consecrated men and women, and lay faithful of the Amazon region strive to apply it' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 4).

This leaves the door open for a collaborative discernment that leads to implementing the Synod through the interactions that take place among the different subjects who make up the people of God – lay persons, pastors, and consecrated women and men. This task will require an even more precise definition of what synodality is and how it is exercised in the Church.

Despite this vision that encompasses the whole magisterium of Francis, there remains the great and still unresolved question of the difference between synodality and synod. In this case, it has produced a sort of rupture between the pre-synodal process and the post-synodal results. In the first stage of the process, synodality was at work,, working from below and following an ecclesiology of the People of God: thus the genetic-inductive method of this hermeneutic was applied and developed impeccably. As an ecclesiological contribution, however this process was not recognized as binding with theological authority in the Exhortation. Since the territory was recognized as a theological locus not only in its ecological dimension but above all in its sociocultural reality, then it needs to be asked whether the *sensus fidei fidelium* is valid only for the ecological dimension, which was

admirably developed and accepted, but not for the ecclesiological dimension. Acknowledging and assuming the validity of the latter would require the reform not only of mentalities but also of structures, and especially ecclesial ministries.

3. 'A collaborative ministry with differentiated priorities' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 97)

The Latin American Church now has the challenge of making this synodal process advance, or not. We have been urged to accept the whole of the synodal process (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 2) and not just the Exhortation. We are therefore at a critical stage that will determine whether our regional Church has the wherewithal and prophetic ability to meet this challenge: will it truly be inspired by the Pope's call during the Synod to 'go all out' in formulating a new ministerial ecclesiology, one that promotes 'a specific ecclesial culture that is distinctively lay' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 94), rather than clerical?

To understand the ecclesial style and framework that Pope Francis envisions, it is helpful to read what he says in *Querida Amazonia*, n. 61 about the reception of the Council. He first cites Medellín (1968) as emblematic of a source Church which presented a new ecclesial model by making its preferential option for the poor. He then refers to Santo Domingo (1992), the bishops' conference that put forth the notion of pastoral conversion. He continues with Puebla (1979) which defined the Church as a community of communities and made an option for young people. Finally, he mentioned Aparecida (2007) which provided the ecclesiological basis for *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), and proposed new paths and forms of expression, calling for the construction of a missionary Church of discipleship that goes forth to the new peripheries.

On 3 October 2019, in his discourse on the fortieth anniversary of Puebla – the third General Conference of Latin American Bishops

(1979) – the Pope traced with greater precision that same line of reception that he presents here in *Querida Amazonia*, n. 61. He spoke about the Council, pointed out the relation of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* to the synodal path undertaken by Paul VI, and mentioned the Conferences of Puebla and Aparecida in reference to the Latin American magisterium. In this chain of ecclesial events, said Francis, are to be found the roots of *Evangelii Gaudium*, which provides the programmatic vision of his pontificate. At the same time, he made it clear that we cannot forget the People of God ecclesiology of Puebla, and he acknowledged the prophetic work and contribution of Gustavo Gutiérrez, the founder of liberation theology.

LATIN AMERICA A SOURCE CHURCH

The contribution of ecclesiology is what has produced a source Church in Latin America. The influence of Latin America on the magisterium of Francis recalls the reciprocity between the magisterium of Paul VI and that of the Latin American Church in the years after the Council. Just as Medellín eagerly received *Populorum Progressio*, especially as regards human promotion (*Populorum Progressio*, n. 20), so Paul VI was inspired by Medellín's option for the poor in the triad Evangelization, Justice, and Liberation, and this became a theme of the Second General Assembly of the of the Synod of Bishops on Justice in the World in 1971.

The theme was taken up again in the Third General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1974, which treated Evangelization in the Contemporary World. The fruit of Paul VI's reception of the Latin American magisterium was incorporated into the universal magisterium by the encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, published in 1975. This same circularity can be found in Francis's teaching, with the Latin American magisterium nourishing the universal magisterium, especially in the ecclesiological vision of Aparecida and *Evangelii Gaudium*.

The genius of Latin America was its development of the option for

the poor into a complete ecclesiology inspired by the model of a poor Church for the poor.

MINISTERIAL CONVERSION

This same challenge presents itself now in *Querida Amazonia*, whose call to integral ecological conversion still needs to be developed into a new ecclesiology, that of a synodal Church (cf. Francis, Discourse on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015). The new ecclesiology must re-conceive ministry so that it becomes inculturated and multi-faceted, inspired by the ecclesial model of the People of God, as stated in the Final Synod Document.

The present phase of Francis's pontificate thus derives from a process of ecclesiogenesis that assumes different levels of conversion that converge among themselves: pastoral conversion represents the genuine root of Latin America's reception of Vatican II; synodal conversion expresses the continuity and deepening of the spirit of the Council; and ecological conversion opens the Church to a new intercultural, decolonial and interdisciplinary relationship with the natural and cultural world. However, these three conversions will be meaningful only if they are related to a new way of being Church and are illuminated by an ecclesiology that ushers in the new era of ministerial conversion. If there is no cohesion among the different levels of conversion, then the danger of missing the *kairos* of the ecclesiological moment will be great.

This pastoral-theological horizon marks a new phase of the Latin American Church after the Amazon Synod; it is a horizon that will be decisive for continuing the reception of the synodal process in the light of a new ecclesiological model. What complicates this phase is that it is still transitional: we do not yet have a new model. Francis speaks of what is 'not yet even imagined' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 104). We live in the tension between the traditional dominant model,

based on a clerical ecclesial culture that has failed, and another model that is just emerging. The new model will generate a lay ecclesial culture that will seek out the best ways to respond to the new pastoral challenges that the Church faces today.

The Exhortation speaks of the creation of a new regional ecclesial organism (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 97), which would be a key structure for forging unity between integral ecological conversion and ministerial ecclesiological conversion. This conjunction will contribute to a Church with an Amazonian face (*Querida Amazonia*, nn. 61, 77, 94), whose nature and functions are quite different from those of an NGO (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 64). In the interview published in the book *Without Him We Can Do Nothing*, Pope Francis reminds journalist Gianni Valente that since the Church is not an NGO, the new ecclesial structure cannot concentrate only on social and environmental concerns; it must also articulate and implement ‘a collaborative ministry with differentiated priorities’ (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 97).

A MISSIONARY CHURCH OF DISCIPLES

Such a ministry involves rescuing the authority of the local Churches within the structure of a missionary Church of discipleship. At the level of ecclesiology, the cultural-theological discernment processes will help to formulate and implement the ‘new ministries’ and ‘localized rites’ that were requested by the Synod. Only thus will there be a proper pastoral response to the new sociocultural challenges of the local Churches in that region, with a view to fulfilling the evangelizing mission of the whole Church.

This new organism that will be set up by the ‘local Churches of different South American countries’ will reflect a non-universalist ecclesiology of local Churches. Francis describes it thus:

I encourage the growth of the collaborative efforts being made through the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network and other asso-

ciations to implement the proposal of Aparecida to ‘establish a collaborative ministry among the local churches of the various South American countries in the Amazon basin, with differentiated priorities.’ This applies particularly to relations between Churches located on the borders between nations.

For all these reasons we can state that we are at the beginning of a new era of the Latin American Church, which presents us with an opportunity and a challenge. Nothing has been closed. ‘The path for the reception of the whole synodal process continues’ (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 2-4), but now it takes place in a new way: under the responsibility and the *parrhesia* of the local Churches of the region, which will make use of the tradition and maturity of the Latin American Church as a source Church.

Part 2 will appear in *Doctrine & Life* next month

4. ‘An incarnate form of ecclesial organization and ministry’ (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 85)
5. Are the *virii probati* a provisional but necessary solution in this transition to ‘Christian base communities as the first and most basic ecclesial nucleus’ (Medellín 15, 10)

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Is *Querida Amazonia* the Beginning of a Creative New Reception of the Synodal Path? (Part 2)

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THE first part of this article appeared in the issue for February 2021, and examined the topic in three sections: (1) 'Not all discussions of doctrinal, moral, or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium' (*Amoris Laetitia*, n. 3); (2) 'A harmonious, creative and fruitful reception of the entire synodal process' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 2); (3) 'A collaborative ministry with differentiated priorities' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 97)

4. 'An incarnate form of ecclesial organization and ministry' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 85)

Querida Amazonia represents a magisterium that is open and in process, the fruit of a stage of reform that seeks new paths 'not yet even imagined' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 104). The key to this search is to be

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found in the relation between inculturation and ministry:

Inculturation should also be increasingly reflected in an incarnate form of ecclesial organization and ministry. If we are to inculturate spirituality, holiness, and the Gospel itself, how can we not consider an inculturation of the ways we structure and carry out ecclesial ministries? (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 85)

The pre-conciliar theology of missions, which saw missionaries as those sent to mission lands, is now surpassed. The evangelization process that Francis presents in *Querida Amazonia* is closer to that found in the Vatican II Decree on Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, which speaks of the evangelical witness (*Ad Gentes*, n. 24) given by small base communities made up of all the faithful gathered around the Word (*Ad Gentes*, n. 15) and engaged in dialogue with the local reality (*Ad Gentes*, nn. 6, 11). This first experience of inculturation should give rise to new ministerial expressions that respond to each cultural-theological reality (*Ad Gentes*, nn. 15, 19). *Ad Gentes* indicates clearly:

It is not enough that the Christian people be present and be organized in a given nation, nor is it enough to carry out an apostolate by way of example. ... In order to plant the Church and to make the Christian community grow, various ministries are needed, which are raised up by divine calling from the midst of the faithful congregation and are to be carefully fostered and tended to by all. Among these are the offices of priests, of deacons, and of catechists, and Catholic action (n. 15).

According to the Pope, 'it is not simply a question of facilitating a greater presence of ordained ministers who can celebrate the Eucharist' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 93). This kind of thinking would only replicate the clerical schema. 'That,' says the Pope, 'would be a very narrow aim, were we not also to strive to awaken new life in communities' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 93). Thought must be given to

reforming the entire life of ecclesial communities, which would mean activating not only new ministries but new charisms as well.

A Church of Amazonian features requires the stable presence of mature lay leaders endowed with authority and familiar with the languages, cultures, spiritual experience and communal way of life in the different places. ... [The aim is] to permit the growth of a specific ecclesial culture that is distinctively lay, ... and this is possible only through the vigorous, broad, and active involvement of the laity (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 94).

In contrast to the clericalized pastoral culture that still prevails, the Exhortation urges us to consider the new forms that can emerge from a 'ecclesial culture that is distinctively lay' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 94). We will advance little toward making the Church more synodal and ministerial if our pastoral schemas continue to insist on clerical forms of accompanying communities. Following the Latin American tradition, the Exhortation echoes Medellín's call in 1968 to move from a pastoral ministry of sacramentalization to one of evangelization. In 2007, Aparecida for its part called for the Latin American Church to move beyond a pastoral ministry of conservation, centered on parish and sacraments, and to begin a process of pastoral and missionary conversion. This helps us to comprehend the historical importance of this synodal process: it is calling us to take a further step toward a new ecclesiology.

In this context we can say that if the proposal to ordain *viri probati* as priests is based on the traditional model of 'sacred priesthood' whose unique purpose and 'exclusive identity' is to provide sacraments such as the Eucharist and Reconciliation, then the dominance of clerical culture in Catholic pastoral ministry will be maintained. The Exhortation falls into a serious contradiction when it presents the figure of the presbyterate under the definition of priesthood. This understanding of the ordained ministry – as we will see below – prevents the communities from being made the central focus of ministe-

rial service. A proposal to initiate new ministries would make sense only if they were to be conceived and implemented by the communities themselves, recognized as the central organizing axis that helps us move from a basic ecclesial sensibility towards an ecclesiology of the People of God. Medellín – the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in 1968 – spoke prophetically of this when it said that communities had to be the fundamental nuclei of all ecclesiology.

CRITERIA

From the Exhortation we can garner several important criteria for creating new ministries and thus add a new link to the chain. The Pope recommends that the new ministries created for women should ‘entail stability, public recognition, and a commission from the bishop’ (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 103). Moreover, these new ministries should aim to ‘to have a real and effective impact on the organization, the most important decisions, and the direction of communities’ (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 103). The Pope also states that ‘thought should be given to itinerant missionary teams’ (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 98).

Nevertheless, along with these criteria, we find in Chapter 4 a clash of ecclesiologies that prevents any advance in ministerial reform or conversion. As a whole, this chapter fails to move beyond the dominant clerical ecclesial culture, whereas the Final Document did so. As a consequence, when the Exhortation is read as an isolated text, it is ecclesialogically contradictory and even pre-conciliar in some of its statements about priestly ministry and the role of women.

The Exhortation takes a contradictory step backward in its reference to the figure of the priest. The Council Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* states clearly (and in a missionary key) that ‘priests, as co-workers with their bishops, have the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel of God to all. In this way they fulfil the command of the Lord:

“Going into the whole world, preach the Gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15)’ (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 4). This is the primary role of priestly ministry, according to the Council: ‘*primum habent officium Evangelium Dei omnibus evangelizandi*’ (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 4). In other words, the identity of the priest (as presbyter) is ‘primarily’ in the Word.

In contrast, the Exhortation uses the word ‘priesthood’ more than it does the word ‘presbyter,’ and it speaks of a ‘hierarchical priesthood’ (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 87) that ‘pours out grace’ (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 88) and whose ‘great power’ is most evident in the sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation. This cultic, quasi-ontological power, says the Exhortation, is what gives priesthood its ‘exclusive identity’ (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 88), whereas the Council established

It is impossible to have a genuinely synodal Church along with the notion of priesthood as sacred and cultic.

that the *primum officium* of the priest (as presbyter) was the Word, that is, announcing the Gospel (*Presbyterorum Or-*

dinis, n. 4). If this vision of the figure of the priest, understood as sacred and cultic (priesthood, rather than presbyter), continues to reign supreme, then all the originality embodied in the synodality of the present ecclesial epoch will fall by the wayside. It is impossible to have a genuinely synodal Church along with this notion of priesthood.

Besides representing an involution with respect to the Council, the Exhortation also contains a clear contradiction. On the one hand, it insists on the need for celebration of the Eucharist in places where there are no priests, but on the other, it offers no pastoral solution to this concrete need. What does it mean to say that lay people are responsible for leading the communities when we all know that there are no priests available in the region to preside at the sacrament of Eucharist and Reconciliation? This was the argument presented by the synodal fathers, but the Exhortation foresees no solution. Even when it acknowledges that a true Christian community is built around the

Eucharist and the Word (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 84), it fails to offer a solution by which the Church can honor the communities' right to celebrate the sacraments.

A NEW CLERICALIZATION?

The problem presented in *Querida Amazonia* is more complex than simply the approval of *virī probati* for ordination. Without a process of ministerial inculturation that arises from the communities themselves through a genetic-inductive process, we will end up creating a new process of clericalization.

A very important point made by the Exhortation is that the inculturation process involves moving beyond Western culture, 'decolonizing' (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 28): 'Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression, and we would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous' (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 69). This is a clear call to change the monocultural theological model that has prevailed in ecclesiology during the second millennium.

What are we to do, then, while we wait for the emergence of a new model that is distinctively lay and centered on the communities, a model that stresses evangelization more than sacramentalization, as Medellín and Aparecida requested? How are we to understand what was stated in the Final Document about the need to approve *virī probati*? The ordained ministry of the *virī probati* represents a possible solution, but given the great need to provide pastoral care, it can be seen only as a provisional, transitory measure. Consequently, even if the measure was not approved by means of the Exhortation, its implementation is no less urgent and should be done using the already existing ecclesiastical legislation until there is an authentic reform of ministerial practice.

5. Are the *Viri probati* a provisional but necessary solution in this transition to 'Christian base communities as the first and most basic ecclesial nucleus'? (Medellín 15,10)

Many observers were expecting the approval of the *viri probati* since two-thirds of the synodal fathers voted in favour. Even though the substance of *Querida Amazonia* cannot be reduced to the approval or non-approval of the *viri probati*, neither can we ignore that issue, given the urgent pastoral need to take this step in the Church. For the time being there is no solution for the region except the institutionalization of the *viri probati*, and the issue is not closed, in fact. On the contrary, it is still open in the larger ecclesial process wherein the Pope decides how he will apply the Final Document – as we have explained above. The practical application of the Final Document may actually give rise to a new process of pastoral discernment that will lead in turn to the evolution of sacramental doctrine and to the reform of ordained ministry.

Given the Final Document's request for a solution and the Exhortation's assumption of that Document, we can assert without fear that the doors have been opened so that local Churches can initiate processes of pastoral 'discernment and decision-making' on the basis of what the Code of Canon Law already establishes in this regard. The important question is whether the two-thirds of the synodal fathers who voted to approve the *viri probati* are able and willing to implement these processes in their respective dioceses and to take the steps that are needed. The *Exhortation* itself sets out this challenge:

In the specific circumstances of the Amazon region, particularly in its forests and more remote places, a way must be found to ensure this priestly ministry. The laity can proclaim God's word, teach, organize communities, celebrate certain sacraments, seek different ways to express popular devotion, and develop the multitude of gifts that the Spirit pours out in their midst. But they need the celebration of the Eucharist because it

‘makes the Church.’ We can even say that ‘no Christian community is built up which does not grow from and hinge on the celebration of the most holy Eucharist.’ (*Querida Amazonia*, n. 89)

This statement places those opposed to the *virī probati* in sad contradiction to the Church’s mission and to the rights of the faithful, because in the end they are effectively saying that there are no Christian communities in most of the Amazon region (or in other countries and regions that lack clergy) because there is no celebration of the Eucharist there. Since the text treats the issue from the perspective of a purely sacramental ecclesiology, there would appear to be an immense contradiction that makes it impossible for the Church to carry out its mission. Regarding this issue, the Final Document had proposed the following solution:

Many of the Church communities in the Amazonian territory have enormous difficulties in attending the Eucharist. Sometimes it takes not just months but even several years before a priest can return to a community to celebrate the Eucharist, offer the sacrament of reconciliation or anoint the sick in the community. We appreciate celibacy as a gift of God (*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, n. 1) to the extent that this gift enables the missionary disciple, ordained to the priesthood, to dedicate himself fully to the service of the Holy People of God. It stimulates pastoral charity, and we pray that there will be many vocations living the celibate priesthood. We know that this discipline “is not demanded by the very nature of the priesthood” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 16) although there are many practical reasons for it. In his encyclical on priestly celibacy, St Paul VI maintained this law and set out theological, spiritual and pastoral motivations that support it. In 1992, the post-synodal exhortation of St John Paul II on priestly formation confirmed this tradition in the Latin Church (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 29). Considering that legitimate diversity does not harm the

communion and unity of the Church, but rather expresses and serves it (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 13; *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, n. 6), witness the plurality of existing rites and disciplines, we propose that criteria and dispositions be established by the competent authority, within the framework of *Lumen Gentium* 26, to ordain as priests suitable and respected men of the community with a legitimately constituted and stable family, who have had a fruitful permanent diaconate and receive an adequate formation for the priesthood, in order to sustain the life of the Christian community through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments in the most remote areas of the Amazon region. In this regard, some were in favor of a more universal approach to the subject (Final Document of the Pan-Amazon Synod. *New Paths for the Church and for Integral Ecology*, 111)

The provisional solution that Francis is leaving open – following all that we have said above – is having recourse to the procedure already established in the Code of Canon Law. The procedure allows bishops, after discerning the needs of their communities, to request permission to ordain married men and to establish the diaconate for the purpose of meeting the sacramental needs of the communi-

The sacraments are an inalienable right that the faithful have as members of the People of God; and that right must be respected. Church authorities have the duty to listen to the faithful and protect their rights.

ties. According to the Church's canonical regulations, 'being a married man' constitutes an impediment to being ordained, but this is not an irregularity (canon 1042); it is an 'impediment of ecclesiastical right,' not

of 'divine right.' It is a matter, therefore, not of dogma or doctrine but simply of ecclesiastical discipline (cf. canon 85).

Whenever there is an impediment, the Latin Church's Code of Canon Law provides the possibility of obtaining a 'dispensation' that

can be confirmed by the Apostolic See (*reservatio*: cf. canon 1047, §2,3) once the local bishop requests it. The Code establishes that there must be a 'just and reasonable cause' for granting such a dispensation (cf. canon 90; also canon 97, §1, canon 88).

In this instance, the sacraments are not just a concession granted to the faithful by the ecclesiastical institution; rather, they are an inalienable right that the faithful have as members of the People of God, and that right must be respected. Church authorities have the duty to listen to the faithful and protect their rights. If they fail to do so, they are remiss in fulfilling the very mission of the Church in which they serve. What is more, they are effectively denying that the already existing communities of the faithful are authentically Christian.

A THOROUGH REFORM OF MINISTRY

Though necessary for the pastoral care of the communities, this type of solution would be only provisional and would last only until a decision is made to undertake a thorough reform of ministry in the Church. Something new would be established, but in such a way that 'the new forms emerge out of already existing forms through a certain organic development' (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 23). As Yves Congar argued: 'It is impossible to derive from the New Testament a type of organization that can be imposed *jure divino* in an absolutely normative manner. The Churches organize ministries through their discipline, while keeping in mind what scripture says in that regard.'

Until a new synodal ecclesiology is developed and placed at the center of the community as its structural guide, the prevailing clerical culture cannot be overcome. During the Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, Francis indicated the direction that the reform should take:

The path of synodality is the path that God expects of the Church of the third millennium. What the Lord is asking of

us is already, in a certain sense, completely contained in the word ‘synod,’ which means ‘walking together’ – lay people, pastors, the Bishop of Rome (Pope Francis, Discourse at the Commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015).

This implies that

In the Church, synodality is a way of serving the mission. *Ecclesia perigrans natura sua missionaria est*, ‘the Church exists to evangelize.’ The whole People of God is the agent for announcing the Gospel. Every Baptized person is called to be a protagonist of this mission because we are all missionary disciples. The Church is called to activate the ministries and charisms present in its life with synodal synergy in order to discern, by listening to the voice of the Spirit, the paths of evangelization’ (International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, n. 53).

A new ecclesial phase is opened – one that can be inspired by the prophetic vision of the Aparecida Conference (2007), in which the then Cardinal Bergoglio presided over the commission for the drafting of the Final Document. The bishops gathered there called for a *Pastoral Conversion* (Aparecida 368-370) in relation to ‘spiritual, pastoral and institutional reforms’ (Aparecida 367).

Therefore, they considered it necessary to ‘enter decidedly with all its might into the ongoing processes of missionary renewal and from giving up outdated structures that are no longer helpful for handing on the faith’ (Aparecida 365) As a first step to achieve a true reform, the Bishops proposed ‘moving from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry’ (Aparecida 370). This demands a new way of being Church: opening new ecclesial paths inspired in ‘collaborative ministry’¹ ... requiring

1. Original: ‘*pastoral orgánica*’.

that lay people must participate in discernment, decision making, planning and execution' (Aparecida 371). A new Latin American day is dawning. Will we be able to welcome and promote this new phase and become a synodal Church?

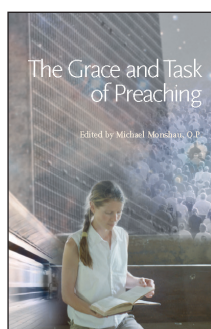
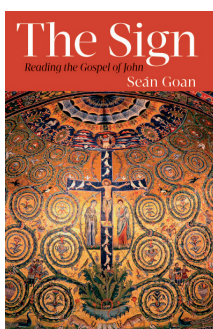
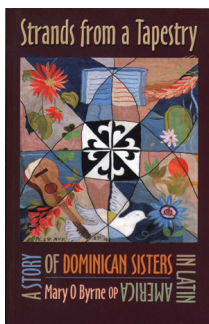
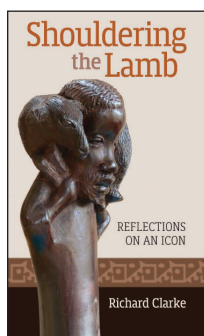
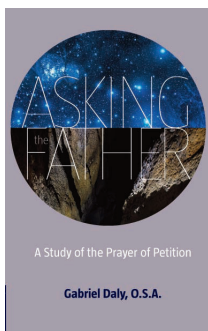
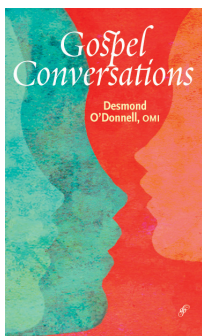
Inculturation and what the Council hoped for – The Church continues to expand in regions of the world that are home to widely diverse cultures. Why not allow liturgical variations that will speak to the hearts of people living in the Congo Basin? Or the Torres Straits Islands? Or the Amazon rainforest? Advocates of inculturation see it as an opportunity for evangelization. Unfortunately, one has only to recall the hysterical reaction to the presence of statuettes of a pregnant woman at the Amazon Synod to see that ignorance and negative assumptions about indigenous people can fuel opposition to inculturation. We cheerfully put an Advent wreath in a church (a custom derived from pre-Christian Scandinavia), but a piece of Amazonian folk art is presumed to be the product of idolatry.

At the official level, the greatest openness to inculturation occurred immediately after the council, during the pontificate of Paul VI. During the John Paul II and Benedict years, however, the atmosphere turned hostile. It's not as though no one tried. A rite was proposed for India. It was never approved. A rite for the Philippines was completed, but likewise sat on a desk in the Curia. The only liturgy that got through the net was the Congolese Rite. This is why the 'Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire' is so important. It's the sole example of what the council actually hoped for, and what Francis now seeks to revive.

Rita Ferrone, "Our Eucharist Is a Feast": Francis seriously Advocates for Liturgical Inculturation', *Commonweal*, 5 January 2021

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