

AMAZON SYNOD FACES REAL DILEMMAS

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on the upcoming Amazon synod:

The upcoming Amazon Synod of Bishops, October 6-27, has generated a lot of controversy, much of it dealing with the prospect of “married men of virtue” in the Amazon region being ordained as priests. That, and much more, is discussed in the synod’s working document.

There is a larger issue, however, that poses a real dilemma for the Church: how to respect the culture of indigenous peoples while at the same time acknowledging inherent deficiencies in it. An even bigger problem is coming to terms with the logical prescriptions for progress and the anti-modernist vision of the working document on this subject.

Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino notes the working document “seems to consider the Indians or original peoples and culture as the whole of the Amazonian population, not taking into account the urban and *criollas* (white and mixed-race) population of cities and towns.” The Venezuelan cardinal is correct. I would go even further.

Sociologist Steven Goldberg, in his landmark book, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, which explained why every society in the history of the world has been ruled by men, noted that there has never been an “Amazonian society.” What exists in the hinterlands of Brazil, and nearby territories, are mostly tribes. It is these tribal peoples that the working document addresses. Who are these people? Are they primitive, at least by our Western standards? The working document finds the terms “savages” and “primitive” to be an example of “contempt for the people and customs of the Amazon territory.” To be sure,

racists have seized on such terms as a way to denigrate the people in this part of the world, but is it accurate to say that such terminology is inherently racist?

I raise this question because many social scientists would find fault with such a dismissive attitude. No anthropologist did more to challenge the conventional wisdom of the noble savage—in the Amazon region—than Napoleon Chagnon. His book, *Yanomami: The Fierce People*, detailed how incredibly violent these Indians were. “Yanomami life was one of ‘incessant warfare,’” he said. In fact, “men who killed were more highly esteemed and had more wives and children than men who did not.”

Despite politically motivated attempts to smear his reputation, Chagnon was elected to the National Academy of Scientists in 2012.

In short, there is nothing noble about savages—quite the opposite. This must be said because the working document offers a romanticized portrait of the indigenous people of the Amazon region. Over and over again we learn how “connected” they are to each other and to nature, and how corrupt the developed world is. Consider the following excerpts.

- “A contemplative, attentive and respectful look at their brothers and sisters, and also at nature—the brother tree, the sister flower, the sisters birds, the brothers fish, and even the smallest sisters like ants, larvae, fungi or insects—allows the Amazonian communities to discover how everything is connected...”
- “The care of life [that they exhibit] is opposed to the throwaway culture, to the culture of exploitation, oppression and *lying*.” (My italic.)
- “Everything is shared; private spaces, so typical of modernity, are minimal. Life proceeds on a communal path where tasks and responsibilities are distributed and shared for the sake of the common good. There is no

place for the idea of an individual detached from the community or its territory.”

- “The Amazon cosmovision and the Christian worldview are both in crisis due to the imposition of mercantilism, secularization, the throwaway culture, and idolatry of money.”
- “The original peoples of the Amazon have much to teach us.”
- “The invasion of huge so-called ‘development’ projects which actually destroy both lands and peoples” is decried, citing “hydroelectric projects” that cause much “pain.”
- Also denounced are the “agents of the techno-economic model,” and “infrastructural mega-projects like hydroelectric dams and international highways.”

According to this portrait, it would be better for these people not to adopt the ways of the developed nations. Yet even the authors of the working document call attention to the backward ways of the people in this region. “Inefficiency of health/sanitation services” are noted. There is also a “Lack of quality in education and dropping out of school.” The public authorities are cited for responding slowly to developing “infrastructure and the promotion of employment.”

This is the dilemma for the bishops: How can the well being of the indigenous peoples be improved if modern methods are rejected? Take health care. This is how current conditions are described in the working document. “Health care of the inhabitants involves detailed knowledge of medicinal plants and other traditional elements that are part of the healing process.”

Should such quaint practices be encouraged or would it be more humane to introduce them to modern medicine? Why is it considered respectful to allow them to live in the dark ages when they don’t have to? Can sanitation services be expected to improve, and can infrastructure be built, if there is an

animus to the “techno-economic model” and “international highways”? No matter, it seems the authors of the working document have made up their minds.

“Faced with these new diseases, inhabitants are forced to buy medicines from pharmaceutical companies using the same plants from the Amazon. Once marketed, these same drugs are beyond their financial reach for reasons that include patenting of drugs and overpricing. Therefore, it is proposed to value traditional medicine, the wisdom of the elders and indigenous rituals, and at the same time to facilitate access to medicines that cure new diseases.”

If the contradictions evident in this observation have to be explained, then the situation is hopeless.

It is striking to read some of the suggestions by well-educated persons from the West. “Reject alliance with the dominant culture and with political and economic power in order to promote the cultures and rights of indigenous people, of the poor and of the territory.”

If that is what these people want, then so be it. But it must be noted that this is ineluctably a recipe for stagnation and poverty. Moreover, it is a prescription that the authors have clearly rejected for themselves.

I would like to end on a happy note. The working document is not totally against modernity. Toward the end it recommends greater dissemination of the “infrastructure of media, especially radio stations, which are its principal means of communication.”

To that end, I would recommend a special collection for the great work of EWTN, the proceeds of which would finance radio outreach in the Amazon region.