

# DILEMMAS FACED BY AMAZON SYNOD

The Amazon Synod of Bishops took place October 6-27. It 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, was discussed in the synod’s working document.

If there was one issue that posed a real dilemma for the bishops it was this: How to respect the culture of indigenous peoples while at the same time acknowledging inherent deficiencies in it. An even bigger problem was 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.”

Similarly, it should be 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 addressed.

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?

This question must be raised 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.”

Chagnon to the contrary, the working document offered a romanticized portrait of the indigenous people of the Amazon region. 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.” (Our italic.)
- “Everything is shared; private spaces, so typical of modernity, are minimal.”
- “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 “agents of the techno-economic model” are denounced, as are “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.”

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? 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.

They rail against buying medicine from pharmaceutical companies, complaining about the “patenting of drugs and overpricing.” What to do? “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.

The Holy Father will ultimately decide what recommendations he will accept from this consultative body. Time will tell.