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AMAZONIAN REFORM

Alyssa Maty

Abstract Pope Francis' ecclesiology and environmental consciousness are intimately related. Pope Francis calls on the church as a community to preserve important environments like the Amazon rainforest from devastation. This communal call is similar to how Pope Francis uniquely calls on the local church to be involved in general ecclesial matters.

BACKGROUND

Pope Francis is currently stirring things up in the Church as he works towards reform in a positive way. He aims to specifically promote re-balance between Rome and the local churches of the Universal church. A question that arises, however, is this: What does this mean for local churches today? Pope Francis emphasizes the terms “synodality” and “collegiality” to help us further understand his mission. He refers to collegiality as his governing of the Church, in collaboration with local church bishops, through relationships founded on respect. Moreover, he describes synodality as a practical expression of the participation of the local Church in the governance of the Universal Church through deliberative bodies.¹

Pope Francis is the first Pope who has been recognized as a past president of a national body. He was elected twice as the head of the Argentinian Bishops Conference and was also the first

Pope to be involved in a supra-national bishops body known as the CELAM (Consejo Episcopal Latino Americano).² In addition, Pope Francis chaired the last CELAM bishop gathering in 2007.³

Looking through the lens of Pope Francis' papal encyclical *Laudato Si*, which emphasizes the importance of the Amazon as critical to all of humanity, his radical actions of reform will be considered in relationship to structured Church models of the past.

INTRODUCTION

“Papa Francisco a los Obispos de Brasil sugirió reflexionar de manera decidida lo que dice Aparaccida en relación a la necesidad de crear conciencia en las Américas sobre la importancia de la Amazonía para toda la humanidad.”⁴ This statement highlights the importance of the Amazon in a message Pope Francis shared with the bishops of Brazil just a few years ago. Through these important words, Pope Francis points to the need for the Americas to care for all of creation, in particular the Amazon rainforest. He accentuates its integral point of existence for all of humanity.

According to National Geographic, within the past 40 years, close to 20% of the Amazon rainforest has been cut down.⁵ If this continues, additional losses will be suffered related to biodiversity and certain species of animals. Joining Pope Francis, CELAM has continued to promote and encourage the care of all creation. The Pope views this important issue as: (a) that of mystery, and (b) as a great problem. Together, CELAM and Pope Francis offer us examples of how to live out the ways that the Gospel calls us to care for nature by naming three categories of conciencia de naturaleza (conscience of nature), responsabilidad cuidadosa (caring responsibility), vivir con creciente radicalidad a la vocación de la familia del padre (living radically as part of the family of the Heavenly Father).⁶

CONCIENCIA DE NATURALEZA

St. Francis of Assisi passed by a certain area frequently at the Vatican, and he had asked for this particular friary garden to be left untouched in order that wild flowers might grow in the space.⁷ As we consider this simple request, we can begin to understand the thought process of Saint Francis at the time. As he thought about the wild flowers and herbs that would grow there, he also thought about those who would see them there. He envisioned that in the process, many persons would be able to raise their minds to God in these moments; the creator of all beauty.⁸ Perhaps, from the reflections shared by Pope Francis, one can relate to his awareness that something only needs to be contemplated with gladness, openness, and appreciation without seeking an immediate solution to a problem. In other words, it may be best for land and beauty given to us by God simply to be marveled at. Instead of viewing land as something that needs to be fixed in order to look similar to other areas of land in other countries, it could remain unique like the friary garden at the Vatican.

Pope Francis not only views nature as mysterious beauty but also as something that needs to be cared for in order to remain alive. For him, the Amazon is a beautiful creation that is also a great problem. Since rainforests protect dangerous gases from entering into the ozone by trapping them in the leaves of trees, loss and destruction of trees in the Amazon is of serious concern. In addition, the rainforest is also home to diverse wildlife, some of which has yet to be discovered. Thus, the continued destruction of the Amazon rainforest will lead to an overall worsening in the conditions of planet earth.

In a recent review, scientists have documented a fear related to the loss of an additional 20% of trees in the Amazon rainforest over the next two decades.⁹ Due to rapid destruction over the past several decades, there is an important kind of consciousness

that the Pope is calling to mind: The Amazon should be a concern for all people in the world because it is important to our way of living. Accordingly, in recent news, scientists have also discovered that the Amazon has produced half of its own rainfall through the moisture it releases in the atmosphere. This is a positive contribution to the additional problem of global warming the world currently faces.¹⁰

In light of these statistics, the Pope begins his environmental encyclical message by first calling attention to his reasons for choosing ‘Francis’ as part of his holy papal name. Known as man who was deeply concerned about God’s creation, St. Francis was someone who aimed to live in harmony with the nature around him throughout his life. Due to this diligence, St. Bonaventure—a follower of St. Francis—stated that St. Francis was best known for calling creatures by the name of “brother” or “sister”, no matter how small they were.¹¹ In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis boldly stated that there should be a “refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.”¹² Moreover, Pope Francis specifically asserted the following:

Let us mention, for example, those richly biodiverse lungs of our planet which are the Amazon and the Congo basins, or the great aquifers and glaciers. We know how important these are for the entire earth and for the future of humanity. The ecosystems of tropical forests possess an enormously complex biodiversity which is almost impossible to appreciate fully, yet when these forests are burned down or leveled for purposes of cultivation, within the space of a few years countless species are lost and the areas frequently become arid wastelands.¹³

So many lived human experiences play into our own contribution toward deforestation around the world. It is evident that the image of the Amazon not only speaks to the need for environmental awareness but it also speaks to the importance of understanding the

nature of the Church more fully.

In previous decades, many different popes followed either the first or second millennium models that provided knowledge of the nature of changing Church governance. In the first millennium, the Church understood itself to be a witness to the apostolic tradition.¹⁴ This witness model displayed the understanding of the early Church as that of all being equal and thus they received their power from Christ alone. Tradition was fixed in nature; it did not change. In this model, Rome was considered the most important center of the ecclesial community and its bishops were regarded as witness to, and protector of, the tradition of the Apostles Peter and Paul.¹⁵ Even though there was less emphasis on local churches, episcopal collegiality was a constitutive element in the apostolicity of the Church and an expression of its structure as a community of churches through the lens of a *communio* model.¹⁶ This witness model allowed for multiple witnesses of the Church's tradition, with higher authority over the single testimony of the Pope that ultimately allowed for more diversity.

In contrast, the second millennium model brought new understanding of the Church as there was shift from witnessing the apostolic tradition to a call for tradition to be redefined in accordance with the signs of the times. In this model, the Church self-identity became closely tied to the Pope and papal primacy. As tradition had to adapt to speak to multiple generations of people, unity and uniformity was stressed. In this monarch model, the Pope was seen as a figure who received his power from Christ which was then delegated and/or distributed to the bishops. Therefore, the bishops were viewed as care-takers of the Church, and deemed important to the implementation of the Pope's shaping. It is evident in the second millennium that this new perspective radiated out to the world brightly in that the Church was conceptualized as a "society of human beings whose unity and independence were

maintained and protected by laws.”¹⁷ Thus, in order to understand the radical changes Pope Francis is offering today in the Church, it is important to understand these previous structured models of the Church.

RESPONSIBILIDAD CUIDADOSA

Just a few years ago, when Pope Francis was named Pope, his first words to the people before him were, “I thank you for this welcome by the diocesan community of Rome to its bishop.”¹⁸ He explained that the Church of Rome would lead all churches into the foreseeable future in a spirit of charity, love and trust. In fact, what Pope Francis conveyed in these first few words was an emphasis on a new governing role of the Universal Church that he hoped to enact within local churches.

Ruling in prudent ways, Pope Francis exemplifies his lived experiences of collegiality and synodality. For example, when he is in Rome, he speaks only in Italian and when he is visiting other parts of the world he dresses with humility. This allows him to be seen by other bishops as someone who continues to strive to work alongside them as well as a person who presides in charity over them; exuding *a primer inter pares*. In addition, he does not comment quickly on world issues, rather, he allows local bishops to have the first words of response for their individual dioceses. Allowing for all parts of the Church to work together, he follows the same premise as CELAM used related to the Amazon rainforest; everyone is considered a vital part in the whole of humanity. In addition, the Pope has appointed a council of cardinals each representing different parts of the world.

The appointment of cardinals is important for two reasons. First, it allows for all deliberative bodies to work together in order to join their voices in terms of church governance. There appears to be an important theme present in the Pope’s actions. Not only

are cardinals from different countries represented, but, similar to CELAM, there is a unity in the diversity of the gathered persons in Rome. This unity is something that is critical to note in church structures. Recalling Vatican II, which aimed to bring harmony across all churches, Pope Francis is reiterating this same theme of unity as he welcomes and listens to numerous cardinals from a wide variety of diverse cultures. The Pope calls to mind that synodality and collegiality are not designed to modernize the Church rather, they help the Church to become what Jesus intended it to be.¹⁹ Secondly, as Pope Francis works towards creating a vision of new church governance, he is aware that strengthening the council of the cardinals as a whole is important for future synods and meetings that address important topics in the Church and in the world. His vision is related to bringing many voices together to discuss a number of important topics. In the process, he recognizes that there will be challenges and that it will be vital to “find a path for coordination between synodality and the bishop of Rome.”²⁰ What is clear is that, despite challenges, Pope Francis offers guidance through a caring responsibility for the entire Universal Church.

VIVIR CON CRECIENTE RADICALIDAD A LA VOCACIÓN DE LA FAMILIA DEL PADRE

To live radically in the vocation as part of the heavenly family, Francis calls for only one authority to communally prevail, which is that of service.²¹ Through service, members of the family can find time to not only serve others in action but also listen to one another. The Pope states that this authority is, “more than simply hearing, but a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn.”²² For example, while conducting the synod on the family less than two years ago in the United States, Francis was able to find a *sensus fidei* or a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals gathered from lived experiences among families.

He noted that it was impossible to hold the synod on the family without engaging families themselves and listening to their stories. He encouraged more faithful of the Church to listen to one another's joys, hopes, and sorrows. It appears that Pope Francis, through the act of listening, intentionally works toward creating a Church that widely partakes in the spiritual practice of narrative theology.

Narrative theology encompasses story-telling. This is a type of theology that appears to be relevant today, for it seems to have roots related to story, ritual, and tradition that individuals respond to in a community in a positive way. There are many stories that have been handed down from generation to generation. Stories help individuals recall past events such as a childhood family tale or a Christian story one learned in a CCD or religious education class. Each story is unique in its own way and shapes a person as he or she continues to develop values and traditions. Ultimately, these values and traditions assist the individual in the way they have chosen to live their life in a community or cultural space. It could be said that the key to building a sense of belonging and community can take place through the sharing of these stories, wherein one is able to witness the life of another. Pope Francis appears to be encouraging the faithful to listen, share stories and intentionally witness one another's lived experiences.

In Francis' papal address commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the synod of bishops, he spoke of this group as the "point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life."²³ Recognizing all bishops as guardians and caregivers, it may follow that the Pope can continue to encourage a model of narrative theology even further. While it is vital to listen to one another's stories, it is also most appropriate to glean from the stories the needs that are present in the Universal Church. This could be viewed as similar to the way

that a local church minister might seek the current needs of his or her parish members through gathered information from stories shared in the community.

If bishops are sent out to go forth and meet the needs of the people in their home diocese, then it is important for them to also know that each parish has its own unique church story. By understanding these unique stories, bishops can further understand the members of their parish communities and the parish itself in a more intimate way. A spiritual narrative practice thus expands the word *community* by recognizing others as well as their unique stories.

While there is not one right way to promote a listening Church, what appears to be necessary is the ability to welcome one another with a true spirit of hospitality, a willingness to serve, a listening presence, and an openness to unique stories shared. As Pope Francis takes the time to extend his hand out to diverse persons and communities, multiple voices can be heard and increased collaboration can take place among local churches. In the process, stronger connections vital to a listening Church can continue to be made.

Notes

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15. *Ibid.*
16. Hermann J. Pottmeyer, *Towards a Papacy in Communion: Perspectives from Vatican Councils I and II*, (New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 26.
17. Hermann J. Pottmeyer, *Towards a Papacy in Communion: Perspectives from Vatican Councils I and II*, (New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 29.
18. “Synodality, Collegiality: two keys to the coming Francis reform,” *Catholic Voice Comment*, last modified August 28, 2013, <https://cvcomment.org/2013/08/28/synodality-collegiality-two-keys-to-the-coming-francis-reform/>.
19. “Synodality, Collegiality: two keys to the coming Francis reform,” *Catholic Voice Comment*, last modified August 28, 2013, <https://cvcomment.org/2013/08/28/synodality-collegiality-two-keys-to-the-coming-francis-reform/>.
20. *Ibid.*
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22. Pope Francis, “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops” (address, Paul VI Audience Hall, Vatican City, Italy, October 17, 2015).
23. Pope Francis, “Ceremony Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops” (address, Paul VI Audience Hall, Vatican City, Italy, October 17, 2015).