

# Vatican's Amazon Synod Uses Third World As Totems Of Marxist Revival

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By **Maureen Mullarkey** The Federalist, AUGUST 29, 2019

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The extraordinary Synod of Bishops for the Pan Amazon region, coming to the Vatican in October, is a very big deal. It would be a mistake to dismiss it as inside baseball among Catholics. Far-reaching issues of broad societal concern are at work here under cover of ecological ideals and social justice rhetoric delivered in a Christian idiom.

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By hosting the conference in Rome, instead of Brazil or the seven other countries that touch the Amazon basin, the Vatican signals endorsement of the eco-spirituality that ran *sotto voce* through the 2015 encyclical “Laudato Sí: Care for Our Common Home.” The synod is a stalking horse for a Marxist-inflected reordering of political, social, and economic priorities along ecological lines hostile to Judeo-Christian tradition or askance of it.

Condemned by the Vatican in 1984, liberation theology did not disappear. It mutated to subtler pretexts for its premises and presuppositions. The old language of class struggle has been recast into the more digestible—and clichéd—terms of sustainability. And in the name of the church’s historic concern for the poor comes a relatively modern disdain for modernity.

‘A Long Journey...Reaches Maturity’

Peruvian Cardinal Pedro Barreto, a Jesuit sympathetic to liberation theology, welcomes the event: “With this synod, a long journey of 30-40 years reaches maturity.” Maryknoll priests carrying AK-47s have given way to tribal activists

hip to the charismatic appeal of beaded headdresses, tattooed chests, and the PR value of identity politics.

**Emerson Sbardolotti Tavares**, a Jack-of-all-studies from mysticism to fundamentals of tourism, addressed the 2012 International Congress of Theology in São Leopoldo, Brazil: “Ecology is the new paradigm that . . . brings cosmocentrism, that is, the centrality of ecology, which replaces anthropocentrism, at the core of theological reflection.” A **concluding statement** of the Congress reads:

*We have confirmed that Liberation Theology is alive and continues to inspire . . . new generations of theologians. Sometimes, however, it is an ember hidden beneath ashes. This congress has breathed on it and rekindled the fire of this theology so it can spread through the Church and society. . . . Another theology is possible and is a way of making another world possible.*

In 1988, the 20th anniversary of the pivotal Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Columbia, liberation theologians from around the world met at Maryknoll Seminary in New York to discuss the need to move beyond Marxism. Julio Loredó, a Peruvian-born academic, **summarizes its migrations:**

*They began to recycle their doctrines, adapting to new tendencies. They began to look for new ‘oppressions.’ Thus, the oppression of women . . . whence Feminist Liberation Theology. The oppression of black people, whence Black Liberation Theology. The oppression of Indians, whence Indigenist Liberation Theology. The oppression of homosexuals, whence Gay and Lesbian Liberation Theology. Later, they developed an Eco-Theology of Liberation, proposing the liberation of the Earth from man’s oppression.*

Promoted by Leonardo Boff, former Franciscan and close advisor to Pope Francis, this latest strain of progressive theology animated “Laudato Sì” and shapes the synod’s working document: “Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology.” It declares the Amazon “a mirror of all humanity which . . . requires structural and personal changes by all human beings, by nations, and by the Church.”

That phrase *by the Church* is code for ordaining married men to compensate for a shortfall in priests. A rainforest dispensation is a camouflaged effort to dissolve the rule of celibacy and move eventually toward ordaining women. For Catholics, these issues are charged with significance. In themselves, though, they are disciplinary matters that do not cut to the heart of Christian belief.

### Polytheistic, New Age ‘Catholicism’

What does touch central articles of faith—and extends to policy-making in the developed world—is the document’s cosmology. A dizzying blend of New Age piety, latter-day anti-colonial resentment, and antagonism to industrialization, it sacralizes Amazonia as a “*locus theologicus*,” a site of revelation. Tribal animism (“intercultural spiritualities”) is smiled upon as a corrective to the biblical mind that has wreaked—in Boff’s words—“massive destruction of the many-colored universe of polytheism and its anthropological significance.”

The text institutionalizes Francis’ 2018 address in Puerto Maldonado, Peru, **where he declared** indigenous peoples the “heart of the Church.” It enshrines Francis’ vision of “a Church with an Amazonian face and a Church with a native face.” Grandiose in sweep, the manifesto applies itself “to the future of the entire planet,” biome by sacred biome. “People of the waters” fight to defend not only their own rights, but “the life of the universe and of all creation.”

*They live in communion with the soil, water, trees, animals, and with day and night. Wise elders . . . promote the harmony of people among themselves and with the cosmos.*

This is messianism in a minor key levied on a people whose exalted status hinges on their poverty. It raises the question whether Vatican exertions in the Amazon are in service to the poor or in service to poverty.

Synodal euphoria over “the identity of the cosmos, its life-giving harmony, and its future” is fraught with political implication. It positions the Vatican squarely in the camp of ideologues chafing at Western affluence, and antagonistic to the

industrialization and accompanying infrastructure needed to raise living standards in developing countries.

The synod elevates indigenous poverty from a condition to be addressed to a teaching to be venerated. Depicted in prelapsarian terms, the Amazonian poor are an oracular people whose “worldview and wisdom” has “much to teach those of us [“non-indigenous”] who do not belong to their culture.” The rainforest retains a hint of Eden. Its natives are agents of redemption for the developed world. They are apotheosized as “hunter-gatherers *par excellence*” whose aboriginal culture was “formed in harmony with the environment.”

### Irrational Fantasies about Premodern Culture

Underlying that panegyric are anthropological phantasms useful for reviving the limits-to-growth agenda of the Club of Rome, a gathering of end-of-days technophobes in the 1960s and ‘70s. (The sole scientist present at the introduction of *Laudato Sí* was Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, a member of the Club of Rome.)

The document’s obliviousness to the grimmer realities of aboriginal culture is stupefying. Gone is all memory of customs that contributed to high mortality rates and short lives: infanticide, cannibalism—funerary and gustatory—inter-tribal slave-raiding, and warfare. Eco-romance erases record of traditional practices, living conditions, diseases, and infections common to tribal life in the tropics. Lest anyone get the wrong impression of “the otherness of native peoples,” realistic portrayals are taboo.

In the end, indigenous peoples provide a blank slate on which left-leaning bishops can write their animus against the developed world. The myth of the Noble Savage, an enduring Western trope, has furnished a critique of civilization since Ovid. The synod extends the theme to include the Eco-Savage. Its ultimate aim is not to solve particular problems in one portion of a suffering world, but to hammer home a nihilistic appraisal of modern, growth-oriented economies:

*The dominant culture of consumerism and waste turns the planet into one giant landfill. The Pope denounces this model of development as faceless, suffocating, and motherless, and as obsessed only with material goods and the idols of money and power. New ideological colonialisms hidden under the myth of progress are being imposed.*

(*Motherless*. A nice touch. It nods to wise Mother Earth, and to fertility goddesses in every matrilineal agrarian society under the rubber trees.)

## Using the Third World to Beat on the First

The document rails against “colonizing mentalities” while insensitive to its own mode of occupation. Sympathetic glorification of the Amazonians bears odd resemblance to the attitude of global elites toward the Palestinians. The wellbeing of Palestinian people frequently matters less than the usefulness of their circumstances as a stick for beating Israel. Israeli novelist Amos Oz once called the Palestinian situation a way of settling accounts with Western culture.

Seemingly in mimicry of bien-pensant antagonism to Israel, the rights and property claims of indigenous peoples—many of them nomadic or semi-nomadic—are contorted into a weapon against Western means. The working document presents native people less as flesh-and-blood human beings than as a concept for bashing the West.

In 1969, Georges Montaron, a French journalist and anti-colonial activist well-known among the Catholic left at the time, wrote: “Jesus Christ is on the side of the Palestinians . . . as soon as they are poor they are the refugees, the true holy places in Palestine, the true witnesses to the living God.” Fifty years later, the Vatican locates Christ on the side of Amazonia itself—“God’s extended body,” to use Boff’s phrasing.

## Reversing Conversion

The incongruity of this looming pan-Amazon pageant is illustrated unawares by Fr. Corrado Delmonego who has lived 11 years among the Yanomami. He is pleased to admit that the Catamari Mission, in the Amazon since the late 1960s, **has made no conversions** among Yanomami in 53 years.

Polygynous like many other tribes, **the Yanomami are** traditional practitioners of infanticide and ritual cannibalism, and given to warring. No matter. The Italian missionary admires Yanomami ability to mix shamanism with the white man's God: "They do not give up [ancestral beliefs] but simply appropriate something else. Why should you not do this also as a Church?" Conversion, it seems, has gone in reverse.

The conservative Catholic press is beginning to scent something unwholesome in the scheduled Amazon Synod. After this essay was written came a warning from Archbishop Carlo Viganò, a high-ranking mandarin in the Vatican bureaucracy and diplomatic circles. He noted in dismay what Peruvian Cardinal Barreto had earlier cheered:

*What we are now seeing is the triumph of a 60-year-old plan, the successful execution of a well-thought out plan to bring a new sort of thinking into the heart of the Church, a thinking rooted in elements of Liberation Theology containing strands of Marxism . . . . And now this plan has achieved one of its supreme goals, with a Jesuit on the See of Peter.*

At the same time, *America*, the flagship publication of Jesuits in the United States, decided the time was right to run "A Catholic Case for Communism."

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