Vatican
News



Amazon rainforest advocates in Rio de Janeiro demand more protection Aug. 25. The sign reads "Amazonia is life." (CNS/Sergio Moraes, Reuters)



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The fundamental basis for the discussions at next month's Vatican meeting of bishops from the Amazon region will be the unique needs of the millions of people who live in or near the world's largest rainforest, say organizers and consultants for the three-week gathering.

Although controversial pastoral issues such as married priests and ministry for women will be discussed, as well as controversial political issues such as exploitative mining practices and illegal deforestation, the central focus will remain on the needs of those whose lives are now threatened by unprecedented levels of ecological destruction, say the organizers.

In a series of NCR interviews over the past month, those involved with preparing the meeting, known as a synod, struck back at the unprecedented level of criticism the gathering has already received, pointing to a first of its kind 18-month-long preparation effort that consulted with hundreds of communities across nine South American nations.

That process, which centered around the hosting of nearly 300 local, national and regional assemblies throughout the Amazon region, resulted in the creation of the working document the bishops will use throughout their Oct. 6-27 discussions, known as the *instrumentum laboris*.



Fr. Augusto Zampini Davies, a priest from Argentina, works at the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development where he focuses on "integral ecology," which includes development, the environment and spirituality. (CNS/Cindy Wooden)

Fr. Augusto Zampini Davies, a Vatican official who was one of eight experts appointed to read through the results of the local gatherings for consideration in the drafting of the *instrumentum*, said simply that he "can't understand" those who criticize the document.

"Listening is not easy," said the priest, who works for the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. "But if you want to listen, this is what happens. You might listen to things that you are not comfortable with — but you have to listen."

"Then, we prepare [the document] and these are the things that the bishops have to discuss," Zampini described the process. "It's not a doctrinal document. It's the very thorough outcome of the process of consultation, based on this idea of listening in order to discern before deciding what to do."

"When you listen to God, when you listen to the people of the Amazon, when you listen to the Earth, this is what you get," said Zampini.

Mauricio López Oropeza, who leads the primary group that helped organize the consultative assemblies, said his goal was to try and reach as many people as possible. He estimated that, if you include delegates who came to events on behalf of their communities, some 90,000 people were involved.



Mauricio López Oropeza is seen in Washington March 21, 2017. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

"We were trying to transform the way the church participates in the different territories in the Amazon region, and trying to come to listen," he said.

López, who is executive secretary of the Pan-Amazon Church Network (often known by its Spanish-language acronym, REPAM), inferred that some of the people

criticizing the topics raised up in the consultation process do not understand the dynamics of the Amazon region.

"They have not even tried to go to the territory and experience the reality there," said the lay official.

"Anyone who wants to have an opinion on this synod should have at least taken the time to go there, stay there for a little bit, experience what it's like to be there, to be there in mission for the church," López suggested.

Zampini and López, who will both be attending the synod as non-voting participants, were referring to the high levels of criticism the gathering has already received, especially from some conservative quarters in the U.S. and European church.

U.S. Cardinal Raymond Burke, for example, announced earlier in the month that he would be undertaking a 40-day "crusade of prayer and fasting" in hopes that the *instrumentum* document, which he alleges contains "theological errors and heresies," would not be approved by the synod.

The document has also been openly criticized by German Cardinals Walter Brandmüller, a former president of the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences, and Gerhard Müller, a former prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The Synod of Bishops for the Amazon will be the fourth of Francis' six-year papacy, but the first to focus on the church's work in a particular region of the world. The pope previously held two synods, in 2014 and 2015, on family issues, and one, in 2018, on young people.



Narivaldo Dos Santos paddles a boat on the Ituqui River near his home in the Quilombo Bom Jardim, March 10 outside Santarem, Brazil. (CNS/Paul Jeffrey)

The upcoming synod, which formally carries the title "The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for Integral Ecology," will officially open Oct. 6 with a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica, celebrated by the pope.

The Amazon region includes eight countries and one European territory spread across the South American continent: Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana.

The vast majority of the 184 bishops and priests and one religious brother taking part in the three-week synod as voting members will be coming from those countries. They will be joined by 80 non-voting lay experts and auditors, including 33 women.

Three U.S. bishops will be taking part: Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy, and Cardinal Kevin Farrell, who leads the Vatican's Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life.

'Very powerful statements from women'

The special synod for the Amazon, which Francis first announced in October 2017, comes as ecological destruction across the region is in the global spotlight after annual wildfires during the rainforest's dry season spiraled out of control this summer.

Brazil, which contains about 60 percent of the rainforest within its national boundaries, has reported a 77 percent year-to-year increase in destruction, with some 80,000 fires burning across the country in 2019, as of August.

Climate scientists have pointed to the clearing of wide swaths of the rainforest in recent years, to make the land usable for agriculture, livestock production, or mining activity, as a key cause of increased fires.



A fire burns a tract of Amazon jungle Sept. 2, as it is cleared by a farmer in Machadinho do Oeste, Brazil. (CNS/Ricardo Moraes, Reuters)

The synod is expected to focus most of its attention on such environmental matters. But the breadth of topics covered in the *instrumentum laboris*, which spans 147 numbered paragraphs over 54 pages, gives a sense of how the nature of the discussions may go far beyond any one or two topics.

The three parts — focusing first on lifting up the voices of the people of the Amazon, then on the need for a new, integral ecology in the face of so much environmental destruction, and finally on the challenges the church in the region faces in being more prophetic — are each quite detailed.

The second part alone has nine chapters, each focusing on separate specific and sometimes technical issues, such as: how various sorts of mining have impacted the earth in different ways, the threats against the some 200 communities of indigenous that live in voluntary isolation from modern society, and how rapid urbanization is changing family and cultural dynamics.

But two issues mentioned in the synod's working document have attracted the most attention from critics.

One is the suggestion that due to the unique needs of the vast, largely rural Amazon that there be consideration of ordination of older married men as priests for service in especially remote areas. Another is language that calls on the church to "identify the type of official ministry that can be conferred on women, taking into account the central role they play today in the Church in the Amazon."

Zampini, who is originally from Argentina but has worked at the Vatican for about two years, said he was surprised by the frank tone of many of the submissions the Vatican received from the consultation process.



A woman prays during Mass in St. Ignatius, Guyana. (CNS/Paul Jeffrey)

"Living in Rome in a very clerical environment, personally for me it was a refreshing surprise to see that they had no fear in saying whatever they want," said the priest, who noted that many of the local assemblies sending in their thoughts were dayslong affairs.

"They talked, particularly the women," he said. "That was a surprise. Very, very powerful statements from women. It was quite refreshing."

López, who attended a great number of the consultative assemblies and helped draft some of the material later sent to Rome, said simply that he was moved by the impact of women's voices at the events.

"The presence of the church and its possibility to continue in the future is clearly determined by the very presence of women … because they are the ones maintaining the faith, the tradition, and even the presence of the Catholic Church," he said. "So, it was very sorrowful to hear how neglected or excluded they feel in many ways."

"The tradition, the structures, do not allow them to be acknowledged for what they already are, which is the very presence of the church -- maintaining the continuity of the Gospel and the presence of the church in the midst of the indigenous communities," he added, calling the process of hearing from women "very, very moving."

Although none of the organizers or consultants was quite sure where the conversation about women would end up during the synod, each, like López, focused on the need to acknowledge the many ways women minister in the Amazon church, most often without formal recognition.



Marta Barral, a Xavierian lay missionary from Spain, helps a girl read during an educational program sponsored by the Catholic Church in Atalaia do Norte, in Brazil's Amazon region. The afterschool tutoring program helps kids keep up with their school work. (CNS/Paul Jeffrey)

Rafael Luciani, who is coming to Rome to help advise Repam members during the Synod, said that from his experience "women are practically the ones who are

leading communities of faith in Latin America."

"That's the fact and the reality, but at the same time, many of the things they are doing are not yet acknowledged as ministries," said Luciani, a Venezuelan who teaches at Boston College and is also a theological advisor to the regional council of Latin American bishops (Celam).

Referencing the pope's frequent aphorism that women should not be "clericalized," the theologian said Francis wants to ask: "How do we recognize and acknowledge many of the services that are already being led by women and can be acknowledged now as real ministries?"

"They would have the same authority as other ministries in a community," said Luciani. "I think the problem is more on that acknowledgment of an authority in the different ministries and new ministries have to be created or acknowledged or put into practice, rather than just filling new positions with women to put them at the same level as clergy."

Different understandings of ministry

Behind some of the willingness of Amazon synod organizers to consider issues such as married priests and women's ministry lies in the ways theology has developed differently in Latin American than in the U.S. or Europe, say Luciani and other theologians.

For example, Luciani pointed to the ways that Latin Americans generally understanding a calling to ministry differently than Europeans.

"It's a communitarian-oriented way of understanding ministry," said the theologian. "It's not about the individual that feels a vocation towards a community. It's the opposite: a community that has needs and decides among the community people that might serve those needs."

"Ministry is understood very differently in the U.S.," he said.



Spanish Bishop Rafael Cob, apostolic vicar of Puyo, Ecuador, foreground in blue vest, speaks with journalists Sept. 14 in Quito. Cob said the ordination of married elders — "viri probati" or "men of proven virtue" — would be a possible solution to the lack of priests and missionaries in the Amazon region. (CNS/Junno Arocho Esteves)

Hosffman Ospino, a Colombian theologian who also teaches at Boston College, explained the Latin American understanding of a calling to ministry in similar terms.

Mentioning the critiques over the synod's expected consideration of married priests, Ospino spoke about how Francis has always focused on the church's need to be evangelical, or to create, as the pope called it in his 2013 exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"), "missionary disciples."

"I think that [the] critiques, in many ways, miss the point," said Ospino. "Francis actually is more concerned about what does it mean to bring the Gospel and to bring the sacraments in a context where there are not enough priests."

"It's about evangelization: how do we keep doing the work for which the church exists?" said the theologian. "And if that means being creative in terms of our practices, the pope is willing and open to explore possibilities."

Other theologians said the synod may face particular difficulties in its efforts to bring forward voices from the various indigenous peoples who live in the Amazon. Although the *instrumentum* mentions the needs of indigenous at many points, it remains unclear how many indigenous leaders will be invited to take part in the synod.

Cecilia Titziano, a Bolivian graduate student at the Graduate Theological Union who is focusing on indigenous theologies and philosophies, suggested that the first step in having fruitful conversations between indigenous and non-indigenous people during the synod would be very basic.



Shanenawa people dance Sept. 1, during a festival to celebrate nature and ask for an end to the burning of the Amazon, in the indigenous village of Morada Nova near Feijo, Brazil. The Brazilian Catholic bishops are pressuring the government to guarantee the safety of several Amazonian indigenous peoples. (CNS/Ueslei

Marcelino, Reuters)

Non-indigenous, she said, have to come to those conversations with the simple understanding that indigenous need to be treated as equals, with "the basic assumption that the other person invited to the table is at the same level that you are."

"The hearing needs to be done, opening to the possibility that what we have in front of us is a very different system of thought that we haven't paid attention to, or we have not been able to hear it," she said.

"Equal-based conversations take time," she said. "It requires you to move outside your comfort zone, or the way you see the world."

Titziano also focused on the particular needs of indigenous women, saying that for many Amazon communities "they are the bearers of the tradition and the faith."

"It needs to be very clear: we already know in our churches … women are the ones who do the work," she said. "But they are not the ones who are sitting at the table. And there are many reasons why."

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Pope will have last word

If the Amazon synod follows the format of the three previous synods of Francis' papacy, each week will start with general sessions in the Vatican's synod hall. Later in the week, the prelates will break into small groups, divided by working language, for more manageable discussions.

Each small group will likely create some sort of discussion document on the week's material, in hopes of leading to a final document from the synod, the text of which will be considered in the gathering's final general sessions before the synod's official closing Mass on Oct. 27.

But although the gathering's final document will probably be published immediately after it is approved on Oct. 25 or Oct. 26, it is not likely to be the last word on the subject. As he has after the previous synods held during his papacy, Francis is

expected to then adopt the synod's final text into his own document, known as an apostolic exhortation.

After the 2014 and 2015 family synods, for example, the pope wrote 2016's *Amoris Laetitia* ("The Joy of Love.") After the 2018 youth synod, he wrote 2019's *Christus Vivit* ("Christ is alive.")

López, who is originally from Mexico but now lives in Ecuador, stressed that at the end of the synod process it will be the pope who decides how matters are resolved.



Pope Francis meets with members of the preparatory council for the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon region at the Vatican in this photo dated April 12-13 and released by the Vatican April 14. (CNS/Vatican Media)

"People need to know that the synod as a structure is a body that serves the pope," said López. "It's not a democratic space. It's not a parliament in which there will be only voting procedures."

"At the end of the day, the pope is the one making the call on what he thinks is really crucial and most relevant in light of his magisterium," he said.

"People need to know this is an ongoing discernment," said López. "They cannot attack or reject the synod because of what's written in the *instrumentum laboris*."

"This will be done in a very respectful way," he said. "And it is for the pope to have the final say. This is a discerning body, at the service of the pope."

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This story appears in the **Synod for the Amazon** feature series. View the full series .

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