Opinion
Editorial



Members of Amazon indigenous populations pray at the end of a Via Crucis (Way of the Cross) procession from St. Angelo Castle to the Vatican, Saturday, Oct. 19. The female figure, center, was later stolen and knocked into the Tiber River. (RNS/AP/Andrew Medichini)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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"*¿No estoy yo aquí que soy tu madre?*" Am I not here, I who am your mother? These are the words spoken to Juan Diego by the Virgin of Guadalupe. Almost. That is how Mexican Catholics recall the question, but Juan Diego heard the Blessed Mother speaking to him in Nahuatl, the native language of the Aztecs of which he was a member. Devotion to the Virgin under this title spread throughout Mexico and beyond. In 1999, St. Pope John Paul II proclaimed the Virgin of Guadalupe "Empress of the Americas."

The fact that the Blessed Mother is known to have appeared in different places — at Tepeyac Hill, in La Salette and Lourdes, Fátima and Knock — is something characteristic of Catholicism. Ours is an incarnational faith. Crucifixes in Africa portray Jesus as black, just as the most popular images of Jesus in this country make him look whiter than would a first-century Jew. In Asia, Christ and the Blessed Mother are rendered with Asian features.

In the Amazon, as elsewhere, symbols of faith arise from an indigenous culture. Their desecration in Rome, apparently by ecclesial thugs, was a despicable act and should be condemned by all. Nothing is yet known of the motivation of those who actually committed the theft and destruction, but a video appearance on far right Catholic websites and the cheering from that corner of the church certainly raises legitimate suspicion.

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The Gospel has, since the Council of Jerusalem, been accessible to all, regardless of nationality or race or gender. "In Christ there is no East or West, in Him no North or South," we sing in that beautiful English hymn.

For some Catholics today, however, the Gospel is suited to only one culture, Western culture circa 1955. Since Pope Francis planted a tree on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, and indigenous peoples of the Amazon brought some of their spiritual symbols to the brief prayer service that accompanied the tree-planting, the pope's critics have been in a lather, complaining about the presence of pagan idols within the walls of the Vatican, specifically an image of a pregnant woman.

Vatican officials have declined to specify whether or not the image is that of "Our Lady of the Amazon," so it might just be an image of a pregnant woman, even a

symbol of Mother Earth. St. Francis of Assisi, in his canticle of Creation, prays "Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Earth, our Mother," but we do not recall protesters heading to the hill town of Assisi to denounce Francis for syncretism. The predictable media outlets — EWTN, LifeSite News, the National Catholic Register, the Catholic News Agency — stoked the conservative unease to a fever pitch.



Screengrab of video by a vandal carrying carved figures stolen from a side altar of the Church of Santa Maria in Traspontina in Rome's Borgo district (RNS)

So it should not surprise that two young men took it upon themselves to vandalize a church near the Vatican, steal the statue of the pregnant woman and toss it into the Tiber River. We wonder whether the Swiss Guard has placed sentries at Raphael's "School of Athens" in the papal apartments, seeing as it features many noteworthy pagans including Plato and Aristotle.

What is going on? It is the Trumpifcation of a segment of the conservative Catholic community. Our vulgar president, who traffics in racial epithets and the demonization of minorities, has given permission to racists to strut their stuff, to place their hatefulness on display, to videotape it and then shop it on the internet.

We do not use the term "racists" lightly, but what else is it? Can you imagine the conservative outcry if someone tossed the image of Our Lady of Czestochowa into the Tiber? Or made fun of a Western image of a pregnant woman of the kind found on many signs at the annual March for Life? That would be an insult to the culture of life. There are many layers to this story, but our outrage compels us to speak immediately and denounce the racism that so obviously animated this cowardly act

and the Twitterverse that both encouraged and praised it.

Vandalism is always ugly. It takes its name from the non-Christian tribes who invaded Europe and eventually were converted to Arianism. They were masters of destruction, and they sacked Rome in 455. They did not, obviously, defeat the Catholic faith then, and their 21st-century imitators will not fare any better. There is a new wind blowing through the church, a wind of engagement and discernment, of accompaniment and mercy. They might not like it, but they can no more command it to stop than they can command the wind itself.



Screengrab of video by vandal who displays several carved figures before knocking them into the Tiber River in Rome (RNS)

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