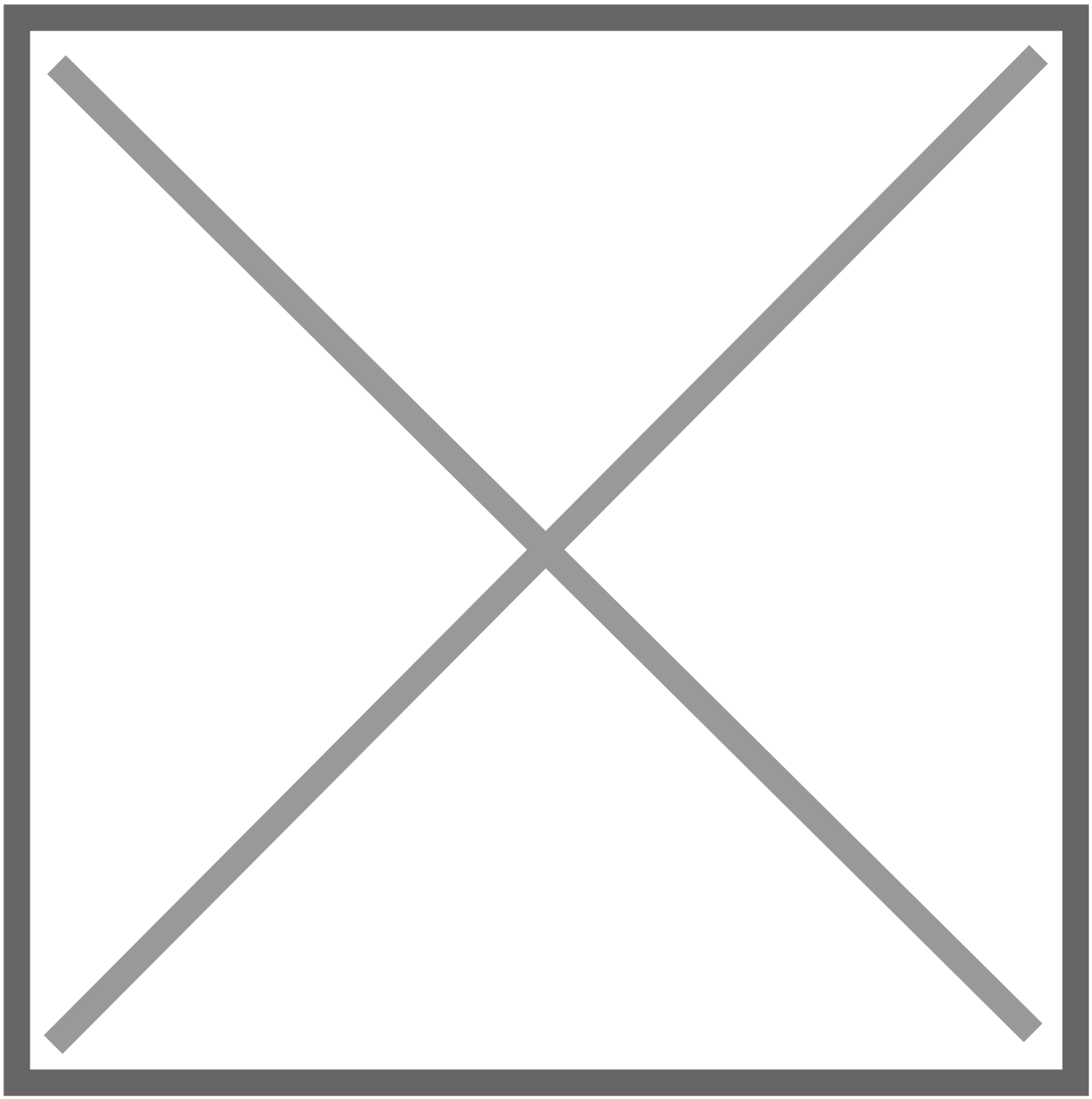
Opinion



Bishops arrive for the concluding Mass of the Amazon synod, celebrated by Pope Francis at the Vatican Oct. 27. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Phyllis Zagano

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The Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region is over. Its 185 synod members and some 80 auditors and experts mostly agreed on climate change, respect for the environment, the need to ordain married men as priests, and the restoration of women to the ordained diaconate.

On the sidelines, dissenters of every stripe complain and nay-sayers work to press their cause, as most of the church's 1.2 billion members wonder what all the excitement is about. Climate change is real, the environment is important, and married priests and women deacons are no big deal.

But for the far right, ordaining a few married priests or women deacons would cause the very foundation of St. Peter's Basilica to crumble. You would think they might agree on protecting the planet, but even there they disagree.

Then there was the theft of the indigenous statue of Our Lady of the Amazon from the Roman church of Santa Maria del Carmelo on the Via della Conciliazione. From the church steps, to the right you can see St. Peter's Basilica; to the left the Castel Sant'Angelo looms close.

Early the morning of Oct. 21, a young Austrian man and his videographer entered the church and stole several statues of naked and obviously pregnant native women, carried them to the Ponte Sant'Angelo and ceremoniously knocked them into the Tiber. Then, much to the delight of the right-wing blogosphere, they posted the video, bragging the theft would save the church (and possibly the world) from some imagined pagan idolatry.

Italian military divers recovered the statues a few days later and the pope apologized to those hurt by the clearly criminal act. But no one arrested the Austrian zealot, who has been touring the U.S. to present his personal brand of Catholicism funded by the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP), LifeSiteNews, and Taylor Marshall (a blogger and former Episcopal priest).

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Now, we can't really complain about individuals or groups who want to defend tradition as they see it. Nor can we get upset about those who wish to defend family and family values. But I don't get it when folks who say they want to defend property lionize someone who steals private property from a sacred space and destroys it. At first, the theft was known mostly to synod watchers. Now the thief has delivered talks about his conduct in New York, Virginia and Texas — so far.

Why?

The circus-like sideshow created first by the theft, now by the thief and his supporters, even includes an attack on U.S. Cardinal Blase Cupich, who spoke about gun violence at the recent meeting of the U.S. bishops' conference. There seems to be all-in-one packaging in the message of the thief and his gun-toting supporters: They deny climate change and decry married priests, women deacons, and the pope himself.



A wooden statue of a pregnant woman is pictured in the Church of St. Mary in Traspontina as part of exhibits on the Amazon region during the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon in Rome Oct. 18. Several copies of the statue were stolen from the church and thrown into the Tiber River Oct. 21. (CNS/Paul Haring)

And they say they support the Gospel?

The strung-out event has more to do with the Book of Revelation (Chapter 12) than with the defense of tradition, family and property. Consider the facts: a depiction of a dark-skinned pregnant indigenous women (called "ugly" by the young Austrian) was flung into waters that soon yielded her up. And they say they defend life?

Now the criminal and his cohort are enraged and wage war against the people who respect another culture's art, who keep God's commands to respect creation and who bear witness to Jesus' teaching that all are eligible for salvation.

That is the bottom line. The ultra-right's so-called defense against idolatry joins their climate change denial, support of gun rights, and angry criticism of the pope and his initiatives to form their priorities for proselytizing.

Where is the Gospel in all this?

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. She will speak Feb. 21-22, 2020 at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress in Anaheim, California. Her books include *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (in Spanish as *Mujeres Diaconos: Pasaso, Presente, Futuro*), published in France and Canada as *Des femmes diacres* and in Portugal as *Mulheres diáconos: Passado, presente, futuro*. Study guide is available for free download at https://sites.hofstra.edu/phyllis-zagano/.]

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