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Marcivana Rodrigues Paiva, representing the Satere-Mawe indigenous people in Brazil, carries a plant in the offertory procession as Pope Francis celebrates the concluding Mass of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican Oct. 27, 2019. (CNS photo/Paul Haring) See POPE-SYNOD-MASS Oct. 27, 2019.

by Felicio Pontes Jr.

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The UN climate conference in Madrid ended earlier this month on a sad note, as indigenous leaders returned virtually empty-handed to their tropical forest homes in Latin America, Indonesia and the Congo. Despite fierce protests on the margins of the meeting known as COP 25, negotiators ignored the plea to include protections for human rights in a document that is meant to guide how governments address climate change.

At a time when the killing and criminalization of indigenous environmental defenders is in the news, the lack of progress in Madrid raises dramatically the importance and visibility of the Catholic Church in conserving the Amazon and protecting its traditional inhabitants.

For three weeks in October, I was among the guests invited to Rome during the historic Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region. The session culminated in the release of a statement that turned on its head a doctrine imposed more than 500 years ago. No longer would the church defend "the imposition of some people's ways of life on others, whether economically, culturally or religiously."

Instead, the bishops—called to Rome by Pope Francis—voted overwhelmingly to recognize Amazonian society as multi-ethnic and multicultural. They recognized the rights of Nature and embraced three fundamental rights for indigenous peoples and local communities—the right to self-determination, the right to the recognition of their traditional territories and to free, the right to prior and informed consent whenever any development project threatens to impact their way of life.

The Amazon Synod confirmed the evolution of the Catholic Church into an institution that promotes environmental rights and the rights of rural peoples and communities not just in the Amazon, but globally.

This journey began in Latin America in 1972, when the Brazilian bishops approved the Santarém Charter that denounced a model of development imposed during that time by the dictatorial regime that threatened the environment and rural communities.

As environmental and social degradation increased over time, statements from church leaders have become increasingly forceful, leading to the Pope's encyclical in 2015, known as the Laudato Sí.

In his writings, Pope Francis transposed the Amazon, taking it from the periphery to the center of how we envision the planet. In advocating for the vital role of the rainforests in regulating the climate, the Pope united the forces of science and religion. He made clear that what happens to the rainforests affects the peoples of the Amazon and all its continents. Its recovery, the Pope said, is urgent.

The commitment of the Catholic Church to the peoples of the Amazon can be seen clearly in the story of the Catrimani Mission, established in the forests of the Yanomami in the Brazilian state of Roraima in the 1960s. At the time, rumors that the region contained massive stores of gold and diamonds ran rampant, but it was the opening of a road through the forests of Roraima that allowed the invasion of prospectors and loggers and, with them, measles epidemics that eventually decimated 50% of the inhabitants of three villages.

The tragedy could have been worse, but the Catholic missionaries were able to vaccinate the natives who lived near the rivers and the road, but not those who lived in the remote forests. The epidemics and other societal and environmental impacts led the Church of Roraima to speak out forcefully against the government and the invaders.

The missionaries, who joined Yanomami leaders in advocating for the titling of their ancestral lands, were accused of "paralyzing the development of the state." The government sought to evict the missionaries from the region, but with the adoption of Brazil’s new Constitution in 1988, the Catrimani Mission rose again.

In 1992, the government recognized the territories of the Yanomami, furthering a relationship with the Catholic Church that is now anchored in a deep respect for the humanity and spirituality of these traditional peoples.

This transformative vision has been the antidote to the violence that Yanomami suffered at the time and still suffer.

Today, the Yanomami—now numbering more than 35,000 people—are threatened by a new gold rush. The Catrimani Mission remains at their side and the Church of Roraima continues to advocate for the rights of these Indigenous Peoples, seeing them and their traditional ways as fundamental to conservation of the Amazon and our precious biodiversity.

It is a vision that is too little known and hardly present in the laws of Brazil and, by extension, absent at the UN’s climate conferences: There is no need to change Native peoples. Amerindian societies, like any other society, must be understood and respected for their differences.

Influenced by the experiences of Catholic missions like that of the Catrimani in the remote forests of the Yanomami, Pope Francis and his bishops have embraced this vision. The UN’s own scientists have shown that Indigenous Peoples and local communities are fierce and effective guardians of the forests that represent the only safe, affordable, existing, large-scale system for capturing and storing the carbon that fuels climate change.

To save the planet, the UN’s climate negotiators would do well to return to the drawing board at COP 26 in 2020, guided by science and by the outcome document of the Amazon Synod. If national legal systems adopt the principles at the heart of the Synod’s final document, they will slow climate change by recognizing the rights of the communities who honor the value of nature as it exists today, and not for what can be earned from its destruction.

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