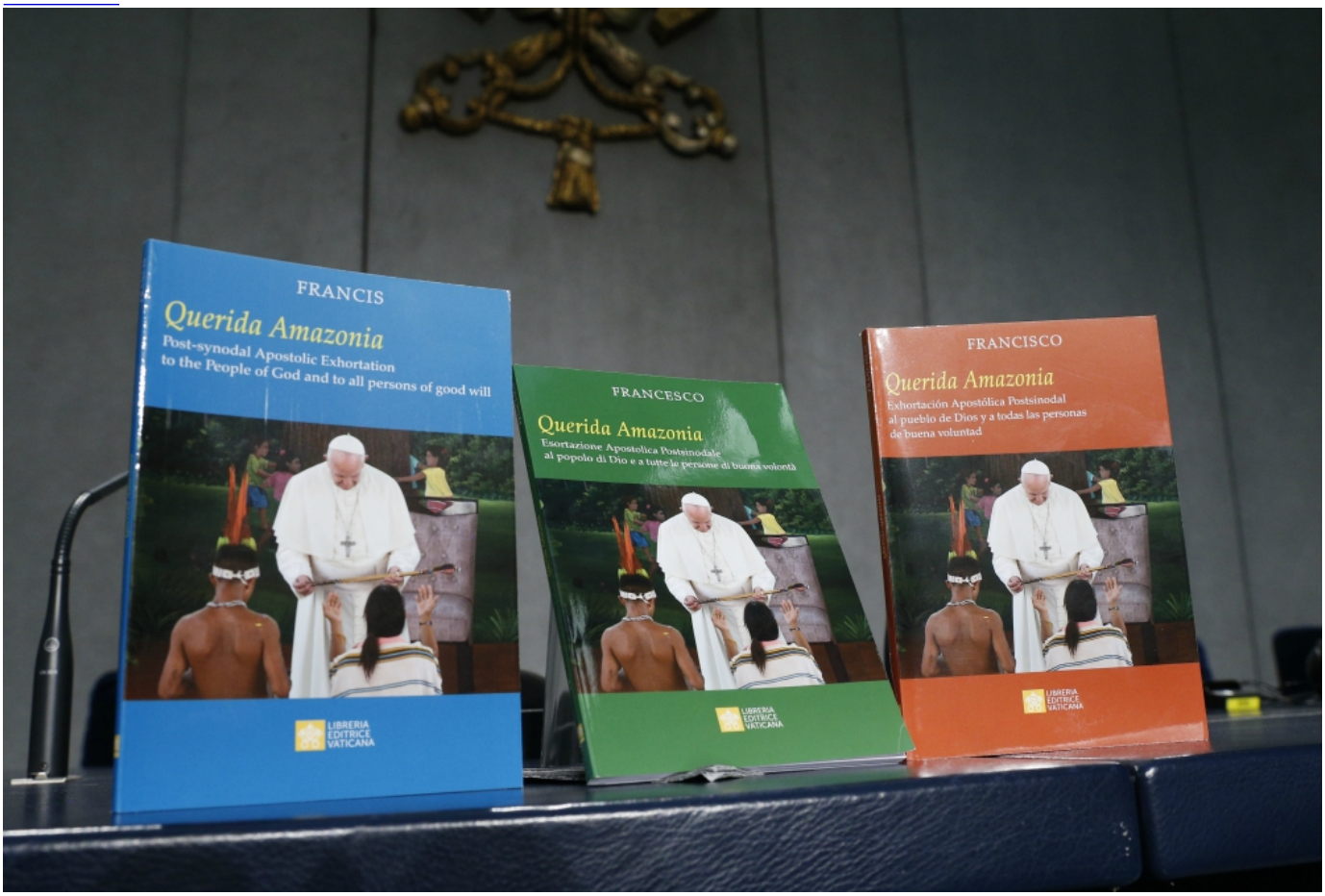
Opinion
Vatican



Copies of Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, "Querida Amazonia" ("Beloved Amazonia"), are pictured at a news conference for the release of the exhortation at the Vatican Feb. 12. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia* is a multifaceted document. I would like to look at what I found the most striking aspect of the text, its ecclesiological significance.

Many NCR readers will be disappointed that the pope did not move forward on either ordaining *viri probati* to the priesthood, older deacons who could then preside at Eucharist and absolve sins in the sacrament of penance, or ordaining women deacons. Certainly, the final document of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon last October invited him to address both these issues.

Why didn't he? I think the pope is looking for a deeper change. His emphasis on synodality has become one of the most dominant themes of his pontificate and holds the potential to help the church step away from the Ultramontane excesses of the 19th and 20th centuries. Synods are consultative bodies, and they usually leave the difficult decisions to the pope. But Francis wants us to move away from that monarchical model and engage the whole church in the process of discernment on issues like bringing back the female diaconate.

You can't achieve synodality if you continually look to the pope to make the tough calls. It reminds me of those politicians who argue we need to get big money out of politics and call for a constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United* v. *FEC*, but in the meantime continue to collect a lot of that big money as they run for office. Real change never works that way. The proof of the pudding must be in the eating, not in any rationalizations.

Right at the beginning, the Holy Father indicates a significant departure from past practice in which all synodal processes ultimately resulted in papal decisions. Here, Francis proposes a different model of relationship between the final document from the synod fathers and his own exhortation.

> In this Exhortation, I wish to offer my own response to this process of dialogue and discernment. I will not go into all of the issues treated at length in the final document. Nor do I claim to replace that text or to duplicate it. I wish merely to propose a brief framework for reflection that can apply concretely to the life of the Amazon region a *synthesis* of some of the larger concerns that I have expressed in earlier documents, and that can help guide us to a harmonious, creative and fruitful reception of the entire synodal process.

Indeed, the pope even breaks from his own previous practice in deciding not to cite the final document from the synod in this text.

"At the same time, I would like to officially present the Final Document, which sets forth the conclusions of the Synod, which profited from the participation of many people who know better than myself or the Roman Curia the problems and issues of the Amazon region, since they live there, they experience its suffering and they love it passionately," he writes. "I have preferred not to cite the Final Document in this Exhortation, because I would encourage everyone to read it in full."



Pope Francis attends the final session of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican Oct. 26, 2019. (CNS/Paul Haring)

This is quite remarkable. Instead of the synod being a consultative body that helps the pope form his own judgment, here he is giving the outcome of the synod's deliberations its own standing and status. The line about the synod fathers knowing more about the region than the pope and the Curia is not something one would find in, say, the teachings of Pope Pius X. I had not anticipated this and, so far as I can tell, neither did anyone else.

The second major ecclesiological issue is Francis' effort at grounding the church's methods of evangelization in a specifically Catholic doctrinal approach. Francis has been clear since the beginning of his pontificate that he does not conceive of spirituality or ethics in the individualistic manner of some Protestants. The Gospel is never reduced to a personal disposition. Neither is the Gospel ever presented as some pie-in-the-sky dream.

"Everything that the Church has to offer must become incarnate in a distinctive way in each part of the world, so that the Bride of Christ can take on a variety of faces that better manifest the inexhaustible riches of God's grace," Francis writes, setting forth the theological grounds for his stance. "Preaching must become incarnate, spirituality must become incarnate, ecclesial structures must become incarnate."

This is the answer to those who oppose the pope and charge him with breaking from the tradition of the church. The pope's opponents seem to think that St. Thomas Aquinas was the final word on inculturation. As H. Richard Niebuhr observes in his book *Christ and Culture*:

> Yet Leo XIII and all who followed him in calling for a new synthesis on a Thomistic basis are not synthesists. The synthesis of Christ and culture is doubtless their goal but they do not synthesize Christ with present culture, present philosophy, present institutions as Thomas did. … What is sought here is not the synthesis of Christ with present culture but the re-establishment of the philosophy and the institutions of another culture … the reign and Lordship of Jesus have been so identified with the dogmas, organization, and mores of a cultural religious institution that the dynamic

> counterpoises characteristic of Thomas' synthesis have disappeared, save in the accepted theory itself.

For the pope, inculturation is always a sort of two-way street. On the one hand, the church "constantly reshapes her identity through listening and dialogue with the people, the realities and the history of the lands in which she finds herself. In this way, she is able to engage increasingly in a necessary process of inculturation that rejects nothing of the goodness that already exists in Amazonian cultures, but brings it to fulfilment in the light of the Gospel." Neither does the church "scorn the richness of Christian wisdom handed down through the centuries, presuming to ignore the history in which God has worked in many ways."



Deacon Shainkiam Yampik Wananch prays in a chapel in Wijint, a village in the Peruvian Amazon, Aug. 20, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Maria Cervantes)

Only those who think of the tradition as a kind of museum piece fail to grasp this dynamic of inculturation and fail to appreciate its value. They are the ones who charge the pope with being a Hegelian. One need not subscribe to the philosophy of

the great German thinker to recognize the dynamic of dialogue between God and man that characterizes the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospels. The Incarnation makes inculturation obvious and necessary. "Inculturation elevates and fulfills," the pope writes.

Thirdly, the pope continues to invite the church to be less self-referential and more focused on the needs of others, especially the poor and, in this case, the planet. When the synod met, the Amazon basin was literally burning. The forests of the region have rightly been called "the earth's lungs" and so damage there has the potential to wreak havoc with the entire planet.

As the pope made clear in "*Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home*," there are not two crises in the Amazon, one environmental and the other social, but one crisis that is both environmental and social. Damage to the environment will necessarily damage the society and culture of the people of the region, people who have long and lovingly cared for the Earth.

To allow the church to get sidetracked on the particulars of presbyteral or diaconal ordination, important though they may be, when the people of the world need to galvanize themselves to save the Amazon ecosystem that sustains all human life would be like criticizing the curtains in a house that is on fire.

Finally, the pope clearly believes that there must be a conversion of heart and mind before the church can begin changing its structures. Quoting from *Amoris Laetitia*, he writes, "the Church must be particularly concerned to offer understanding, comfort and acceptance, rather than imposing straightaway a set of rules that only lead people to feel judged and abandoned by the very Mother called to show them God's mercy."

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Francis also seems as suspicious of the legalism of the reformers as the legalism of the traditionalists. He writes, "It is not simply a question of facilitating a greater presence of ordained ministers who can celebrate the Eucharist. That would be a very narrow aim, were we not also to strive to awaken new life in communities. We need to promote an encounter with God's word and growth in holiness through various kinds of lay service that call for a process of education — biblical, doctrinal,

spiritual and practical — and a variety of programmes of ongoing formation."

In the subchapter titled "The strength and gift of women" we see how differently the pope approaches these issues from the way they are most often discussed here in the U.S.

> This summons us to broaden our vision, lest we restrict our understanding of the Church to her functional structures. Such a reductionism would lead us to believe that women would be granted a greater status and participation in the Church only if they were admitted to Holy Orders. But that approach would in fact narrow our vision; it would lead us to clericalize women, diminish the great value of what they have already accomplished, and subtly make their indispensable contribution less effective. ... Without women, the Church breaks down, and how many communities in the Amazon would have collapsed, had women not been there to sustain them, keep them together and care for them. This shows the kind of power that is typically theirs.

At a time when almost the entire church in the United States is clamoring for an end to a clericalism that has replaced a primacy of service with a mere accumulation of power, it is strange to hear some clamor for an end to the all-male priesthood because that robs women of power. French philosopher Michel Foucault was many things, but he was not an apostle.

Bishop Jerry Kicanas, the bishop emeritus of Tucson, Arizona, was part of the recent *ad limina* visits, and he said something that points to a reason why the pope thinks there needs to be more discernment on these neuralgic issues.



Jesuit Fr. Alfredo Ferro celebrates Mass July 14, 2019, in the indigenous community of Nazaret, Colombia. (CNS/David Agren)

"I think he senses that there's a kind of, his phrase would be, a spiritual worldliness that has taken over and not having the sense of living my life in a sacrificial way, in a serving kind of way, in a giving kind of way, in a generous way," Kicanas said after his group's meeting with the pope.

Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, said something similar: "The pope, very gently and very calmly, said, 'You know, this point was really not a big point. ... I don't even think at this point that it's something we're going to move on because I haven't sensed that the Holy Spirit is at work in that right now.' "

To be clear, Kicanas and Wester were not speaking specifically about this text, but it is the case that even many faithful Catholics have adopted essentially political frames of reference for understanding the church, frames that Francis has been resisting since he was superior of the Jesuits in Argentina many decades ago.

It is an open question whether the pope's call for a spiritual renewal will lead to the kinds of structural changes many of us would like to see. Francis is clearly suspicious of self-will and its ability to obstruct the movement of the Spirit.

On the other hand, it is surely impossible for him not to see that sometimes structures and laws must change in order to facilitate spiritual renewal. I am reminded of an old New Yorker cartoon that portrayed a chicken and an egg in bed, both of them smoking, and the caption read, "Should we tell them?" I will continue to give him the benefit of the doubt because his discernment seems so much more holy than my calculations.

I understand why others, and especially women, will find it more difficult to give him the benefit of the doubt after this document. In preparing this column, a woman friend expressed not just disappointment but hurt, and it is always painful to witness someone I love be hurt, and especially hurt by a pope we both admire. Many Catholics will have similar experiences in the days ahead.

It should be noted, however, that Francis closes no doors in this document. None. There is a section in this exhortation after which you expect to find the pope write that the church has no authority to ordain woman, or that the subject is closed, but here we find only a call to continued discernment and dialogue.

I hope that in the case of clergy sex abuse, when the pope listened to victims and that altered his perspective, the pope will listen to those who suffer because of the church's theology of human sexuality and gender. The most powerful evidence of the Christian faith is love immanent in the world, and such love often, indeed usually, is manifested in the form of suffering. As theologian Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar used to say, "Only love is credible."

There are other aspects of this document that warrant examination, most especially the Holy Father's intense spirituality of the environment and appreciation for the spirituality of the indigenous peoples and his use of poetry to not just echo but to instantiate the doctrinal points he is making. His insight into the problem of Christ and culture is further revealed in all its complexity. His attentiveness to the promptings of the Spirit is remarkable.

In trying to return the Petrine ministry to something that continues to serve as a source of unity while undoing the suffocating uniformity produced by the Ultramontanism of the past 200 years, through the mechanism of synodality, Francis is attempting something almost impossible to conceive. Unless you truly believe that with God all things are possible. Do we?

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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