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



by Joshua J. McElwee

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European commentators known as strong supporters of Pope Francis have responded to his apostolic exhortation on last year's Synod of Bishops for the Amazon with a range of confusion, disappointment, and outright anger.

Taking to various outlets Feb. 13, the day after the release of *Querida Amazonia* ("Beloved Amazon"), most highlighted Francis' decision not to respond to the synod's requests for the priestly ordination of married men or for more ministerial opportunities for women.

Following are excerpts from some of the articles, translated by NCR.

Spanish Jesuit Fr. Jose Maria Castillo, a noted liberation theologian, commenting on the Religion Digital website:

> Pope Francis took the decision he had to take. The decision that would cause the least damage to the church in this moment. ...
>
> The decision is to keep the church united, avoiding the possible (and probable) threat of schism. A divided church is the most dangerous threat for a church in which fundamentalist clericalism continues to have too much strength. ...
>
> It is better to wait. Even if it might seem to be cowardice. It seems in this moment to be the lesser of the evils.

Marco Politi, former long-time Vatican correspondent for the Italian newspaper La Repubblica, writing in Il Fatto Quotidiano:

> Just at the moment of making a decision, Pope Francis pushed the brakes brusquely, knowing that the opposition was spread out and strong, even more so by the fact that it was underground.
>
> It is a defeat for the reforming impulse of the papacy. The opposition, commanded by Cardinal [Gerhard] Mueller ... sings victory. ...
>
> The difficulty in which [the pope] has placed himself is exacerbated by the fact that Bergoglio is now in open contradiction with himself. It was he who

openly encouraged the discussion on the theme of *viri probati*. ...

It was he who wanted the topic to be discussed at the synod, he who chose as relator general Cardinal Claudio Hummes, openly favorable to this solution, and he who authorized the preparatory document, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which contained a passage explicitly dedicated to the theme. ...

Above all else, Francis finds himself in contradiction with a principle he has fought for from the beginning of the papacy: the principle of synodality, under which the bishops are called to participate with the pope in the governance of the church. ...

And now that a synod like that of the Amazon takes a decision by a regular two-thirds majority, he skips the issue and does not mention it in any way. ...

Pope Francis finds himself today more alone, having caused disappointment in a considerable number of his supporters. The post-synodal document *Querida Amazonia* is very beautiful and stimulating in the parts that concern the injustices against indigenous peoples, the importance of protecting nature ... . And yet the blow of the failed development on married priests remains strong.

Because the problem of parishes without priests is dramatic everywhere. A pastor, charged with caring for five, six, or 10 parishes ... is no longer the leader of a community, but risks becoming a functionary that runs from one place to the other.

Nonetheless, the document of the synod, approved by the bishops, remains on the table. It represents a request of the Amazon's church hierarchy. It cannot be canceled out. Francis, they said in Buenos Aires, "has the head of a politician."

If spaces open up, he will always be able take the deliberations on ordaining married deacons as priests out of the drawer. They have a value that does not expire.

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Lucetta Scaraffia, an Italian historian and former editor of Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano's women's monthly, writing in La Nazione:

> The citations of popes considered "traditionalists," such as Benedict XVI and John Paul II, if limited to the social and ecological sphere, seem to show a total and unanimous continuity with the past. The traditional priesthood, strictly tied to the Eucharist, is not put in discussion, neither with regard to celibacy nor the question of power.
>
> For women, after repeated compliments, there comes no concrete recognition, no provision that permits them to continue the work of evangelization. ...
>
> In fact, the call for the growth in numbers of permanent deacons — obviously men — makes it understood that, lacking priests, the hope is that some man will arrive to take command of indigenous communities founded and run by women.
>
> And surely the conclusion of the paragraph that underlines the feminine characteristic — "in a way that reflects their womanhood," one reads — connects with the by now very criticized myth of the "feminine genius," evoked always to exclude women from the decision-making sphere.

Luigi Accattoli, former long-time Vatican correspondent for the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera, on his personal blog:

> We are dealing with a post-synodal exhortation that is very different from those known to date. It does not respond positively to the requests for reform that have been put forward, but neither does it reject them. In substance, the questions asked remain open. It is as if instead of saying "yes" or "no" the pope said: "let's wait."
>
> I don't think *Querida Amazonia* constitutes an anti-reformation turn for the Argentine pope, but it certainly signals a setback on the path to reform. Or

maybe … it is rather their postponement to better times.

The October synod had asked for a handful of true innovations with two-thirds majorities: priestly ordination for married permanent deacons, admission of women to the diaconate, the creation of an Amazon liturgical rite, the establishment of a body that would bring together the bishops of the region which today belong to the episcopal conferences of nine countries.

In the final document, the pope does not even mention these requests. The first two he does not name, the third he recalls in a note saying it "emerged in the synod," the fourth he alludes to indirectly. Nobody expected this line of abstention, given the tendency of Francis to face issues head-on.

Perhaps Bergoglio, in drawing up the conclusions of the work of the synod, felt that none of these matters was ripe enough to allow a normative, canonical decision. Perhaps the opposition of traditionalist circles made him want to postpone until the fruits are ripe.

The fact is that he has chosen not to enter into "disputed matters," as they say in ecclesiastical language. With this choice he has achieved — it seems to me — a double result: to loosen — at least momentarily — the traditionalist siege and to keep the questions open.

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