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Pope Francis is pictured with Cardinal Pedro Barreto Jimeno of Huancayo, Peru, during a procession at the start of the first session Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican Oct. 7, 2019. (CNS/Vatican Media)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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Querida Amazonia, the document containing Pope Francis' thoughts on the recently concluded synod on the Amazon, is a profoundly loving and detailed embrace of an endangered segment of the globe and of its indigenous cultures.

That embrace is only possible because of the searing critique it also contains of the rapacious nature of dominant economies, originating largely in what previous popes have termed "the rich North," that savage the land and destroy culture. This current apostolic exhortation is not an expression of blind love but rather a love tested by enormous risk. Placing the church on the side of the powerless inhabitants of the Amazon region and squarely in the path of those, many Catholics included, who live well at the expense of that region, is not a route to easy popularity.

While the exhortation keys primarily on the effects of powerful forces that marginalize huge numbers of people and mindlessly exploit the planet, it also confronts the reality of sacramental poverty that endangers the very soul of communities throughout the Amazon region. Given that context, the undertaking was daunting from the start and disappointing in some respects at the end.

If there is consensus in the wide-ranging analysis of Francis' "synodal process" it would be that it is different from the past. And it certainly is.

Where once synods constituted a kind of papal performance art, discrete events well-choreographed, with clean lines, dull scripts and predictable outcomes, Francis from the outset raised new expectations. He drained the process of the fear of being wrong or of offending prevailing certitudes. He consistently invites the kind of "messiness" that can be disconcerting to some but is a result of a community that is not static and self-satisfied.

Francis has requested robust discussion, specifically encouraged those who disagreed to speak up and repeatedly said no topics are off the table. It is very clear he has sidelined those who loved to throw about anathemas. He has closed off the inbound lane once filled with the traffic of theologians and other thinkers who kept some offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith busy finding ways to silence them. Not even his severest critics, who range wildly into fantasies of papal heresy, are called before the court.

All of that unprecedented openness understandably sets up unprecedented expectations. Can substantial change be far behind?

The tension between such reasonable expectations and what in actuality can happen is evident in the pages of the document itself. Its soaring rhetoric, which inexorably bends toward poetry as the only adequate expression of certain themes, its boundless, cosmic portrayal of Christ in time and nature, all of it comes squarely against a stifling conformity. The expansive and generous depictions of inculturation — in symbol, practice, ministry — come hard against a seemingly ossified understanding of community.

A considerable gap exists between the vision that sacred imagination can provide and the rigidity of our laws and customs. The document can rebuke those who think the only way to evangelize is the imposition of Western traditions on Amazonian culture, but in the end, dealing with the most essential spiritual needs of the community, that is precisely what happens. Our laws have not yet caught up with our imagination. We remain stuck thinking that unity is synonymous with uniformity.

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Another significant difference in Francis' approach to synods is his understanding of these meetings as part of a far more extensive process than previously imagined. He has taken steps to decentralize the church and to divest the clerical and especially hierarchical culture of its privilege and isolation from ordinary believers. He apparently sees the gatherings in Rome as special moments, but only moments on a continuum along which synodality — a kind of collegial approach to making decisions about the life of the community, from the local to global levels — is a guiding practice.

It is a magnificent vision, inherently trusting of God's activity in ordinary lives and places. But it also, in practice, requires skills alien to bishops who have risen through a culture hostile to unsettling questions. It is disorienting for those hierarchs who served under previous popes when power was highly centralized and adherence to law and dogma was paramount. It requires acceptance of change and ambiguity. It requires entering deeply into the life of the community.

We're obviously not there.



Indigenous people stand on the banks of the Xingu River during a media event in Brazil's Xingu Indigenous Park Jan. 15, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/Ricardo Moraes)

Another major shortcoming in the synodal process as envisioned by Francis is a lack of method for getting from one point to the next. The flaw is evident in his exhortation. It is small consolation to women to have a pope advocate for inculturation and to speak glowingly of women's role in preserving the church but refuse to budge on the question of ordaining women deacons. What precisely does it mean to allow women "access to positions … that better signify the role that is theirs" and that "reflects their womanhood"? Little but dissonance is generated by that last phrase when employed with certainty out of an all-male, secretive culture that has, for centuries, demonstrated how ill-informed it is about women.

And what happened to the request for ordaining respected and elder lay men in the community? Why did that disappear from Francis' consideration? It is a puzzling omission, particularly given the fact that bishops from the region requested such consideration and that exceptions to the celibacy rule are abundantly evident in the

developed world and Eastern rite churches in union with Rome.

It is further confounding because bishops who spent an enormous amount of time preparing for and participating in the synod overwhelmingly asked for the exception only to find it completely ignored in the pope's reflections. What expectation can Francis have of the good faith of other bishops when they know that their work and requests can be simply disregarded?

Synodality, if it is to be a process, is in need of more predictability and accountability.

And so, perhaps, we just add to the messiness. It is not an idle observation, however, to say that compared to what went before, we prefer the new pathway that Francis has opened, as well as the language he has given the community. Those of us in the rich north, discouraged as some might be by the lack of movement on certain issues, have more than enough to ponder and to act on, given our participation in a global economy at the heart of the problem. As the document states: "The interest of a few powerful industries should not be considered more important than the good of the Amazon region and of humanity as a whole."

The charge to all of us is implicit in Francis' appeal that we "sit around the common table, a place of conversation and of shared hopes."

This story appears in the **Synod for the Amazon** feature series. View the full series
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