Opinion
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A leader of the Celia Xakriaba peoples walks along the banks of the Xingu River in Brazil's Xingu Indigenous Park Jan. 15. (CNS/Reuters/Ricardo Moraes)



by Phyllis Zagano

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> The sudden appearance of new communities, linked to the personality of some preachers … can conceal the danger … of enclosing the experience of faith in protected and reassuring environments.
>
> — Pope Francis, to participants at the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Sept. 28, 2019.

The cult of personality is a very scary thing. No matter where or how it forms, it usually crashes and burns with the death or diminishment of the individual who gained a following. What Pope Francis spoke of here, to the assembled participants at the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was the theme of their conference: "Pentecostals, charismatics, and evangelicals: Impact on the concept of unity." His words found their way into the final document of the Amazon synod about a year later.

The dynamics in the Amazon region are clear: The largest numbers of former Catholics there now affiliate with one or another of these groups, too often tied to a single preacher in a single village for a limited time.

Why? One would hope that the gospel is the principal attraction for the adherents to whatever Pentecostal, charismatic or evangelical preacher has won their hearts. But one must recognize the underlying circumstances causing people to gather around him or, increasingly, her.

It often has to do with language and culture. The local preacher comes from the people, or somehow is inserted into the locality, and gains a following. He, or, we must remember, she, is, or at least becomes, a known quantity whose joys, hopes and fears echo those of the followers. The preacher knows them, knows how to heal their wounds, knows how to salve their sorrows. The people hear common sense mixed with promise.

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Elsewhere, when the discussion is political, the same scenario plays out. Now the cult of personality moves to a larger stage. Media pick up the promises, the claims, the arguments. Media carry the politician-preacher to the farthest reaches of the Earth. And when media do not present the politician in a favorable light, they are disparaged as the carriers of "fake news."

So, too with some televangelists, whose followers number in the hundreds of thousands and who live large on astronomical collections. Media exposés of lavish lifestyles are called comments from the Evil One.

Where are the Catholic churches in all this? The ongoing pandemic has displayed the preaching skills of hundreds of priests and bishops. Some are very good. Some are just plain awful. Sacraments, gone by the wayside, inch back into daily life endangered by the predicted second wave. Which brings the Catholic experience back to simple preaching, the skill so well-honed by Pentecostals, charismatics, evangelical and by certain politicians. Their words energize and excite and send individuals out with new purpose, new energy.

Meanwhile, the church languishes, in the Amazon and elsewhere.

What to do?

It is not enough to argue that ordaining married deacons as priests will bring people back to Catholicism. It is not enough to answer the synod participants' call to restore the tradition of ordaining women as deacons. It is certainly not enough to ask for more foreign missioners to take up residence in one or another country bereft of Catholic ministry.

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No, these solutions are not enough. While married priests and women deacons might address the twin problems of language and culture just about anywhere in the world, the church needs something else. The added benefit to restoring married

priests and women deacons, of course, would be to demonstrate belief that women do not defile the sacred and that women can indeed image Christ. But even that may not be enough.

The problem presents its own solution. Catholicism survives where it adapts to and is adopted by the local culture. Local languages and customs are the key. Respect for women must be unlocked.

We can only hope for today. Tomorrow may be too late.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. She will speak at the Oct. 3 online Voice of the Faithful Conference "Visions of a Just Church." Her books include *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (in Spanish as *Mujeres Diaconos: Pasado, Presente, Futuro*), published in France and Canada as *Des femmes diacres* and in Portugal as *Mulheres diáconos: Passado, presente, futuro*. Study Guides are available for free download at https://sites.hofstra.edu/phyllis-zagano/. Her most recent book is *Women: Icons of Christ*.]

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