News
EarthBeat



Pope Francis and Peruvian Cardinal Pedro Barreto Jimeno join a procession before the first session of the Synod for the Amazon on Oct. 7, 2019. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)



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Editor's Note: *EarthBeat Weekly is your weekly newsletter about faith and climate change. Below is the Sept. 4 edition. To receive EarthBeat Weekly in your inbox, sign up here.*

Even popes need a conversion sometimes.

In conversations with Italian environmental activist Carlo Petrini, published in a new book, Pope Francis revealed that more than a decade ago, he did not understand why Brazil's bishops were so insistent about environmental issues in the Amazon.

His conversion in recent years to awareness of the importance of climate change, other environmental crises and land rights has strengthened the church's stance on those issues in Latin America and shown that the problems are not just regional, but global.

"That testimony of [then-Cardinal Jorge] Bergoglio's conversion is, in a way, a reflection of many conversions of clergy," Colombian theologian Alirio Cáceres, who advises the Latin American Cáritas network on integral ecology issues, told EarthBeat.

Francis took the first step along the road to conversion in Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007, where he headed the commission that wrote the document resulting from the Fifth General Conference of the Council of Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Journalists were not allowed to watch the deliberations, so we staked out bishops' hotels in an effort to snag an interview and attended a daily press conference at which three or four assembly delegates talked about the issues under discussion.

One that I particularly remember came toward the end of the assembly and focused on environmental issues. The participants included Bishop Erwin Kräutler of the

Prelature of Xingu in Brazil, the jurisdiction where Notre Dame de Namur Sr. Dorothy Stang was living and working among small farmers when she was martyred.

"It's five minutes to midnight for the Amazon," Kräutler said at the press conference. The phrase has resonated for me ever since, as I have spent time with indigenous villagers whose water and food sources have been fouled by pollution from oil spills or illegal gold mining; African-descended residents of quilombos in Brazil who are pressured by encroaching soybean plantations; Guaraní people whose high suicide rates are linked to the loss of their traditional lands; and smallholders and church workers who still battle the forces that led to Stang's murder.

For Kräutler and other bishops in the Brazilian Amazon, that had been the reality for decades, and their voice at Aparecida was strong enough that the conference's final document included a short section on "Biodiversity, ecology, the Amazon and the Antarctic."

"Traditional communities have been practically excluded from decisions on the wealth of biodiversity and nature," the bishops wrote. "Nature has been, and continues to be, assaulted. The land has been plundered. Water is being treated as though it were merchandise that could be traded by companies, and has been transformed into a good for which powerful nations compete. A major example of this situation is the Amazon."

But while Aparecida may have set Francis on his path to conversion on environmental issues, the seeds were planted earlier. For Cáceres, 1992 was a turning point, with the convergence of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and the Fourth General Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. At that meeting, Brazilian Bishop Luiz Demétrio Valentini spoke strongly enough about environmental concerns that they appeared — rather timidly — in the final document, along with mention of the importance of an inculturated evangelization that respected the worldviews or cosmovisions of indigenous and traditional peoples.



A woman in a community on Peru's Marañón River dips a stick into oil that spilled from a pipeline in August 2016. (Photo by Barbara Fraser)

Brazilian bishops working in Amazonia had already been meeting to discuss the deterioration of the region's environment and the situation of its indigenous peoples, as well as the pastoral challenges posed by ministering in such a vast and diverse region. The Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff had also been writing on liberation theology with an ethic of integral ecology, linking the "cry of the earth" with the "cry of the poor."

When Bergoglio was elected pope in 2013, he chose the name Francis mainly because of his commitment to the poor, Cáceres says. But at his installation Mass, on the Feast of St. Joseph, his homily hinted at his conversion. Invoking St. Joseph as protector of the family, Francis said that all are called to be protectors, which means "respecting each of God’s creatures and respecting the environment in which we live."

With that new wind blowing from the Vatican, in June 2013 a group of bishops, religious and lay people met in Ecuador and laid the groundwork for the Pan-Amazonian Church Network (REPAM in Spanish), which would guide the process that led to the Synod for the Amazon six years later.

Meanwhile, Francis was embracing his namesake saint's understanding of the interconnectedness of all things, taking the name of the Canticle of the Creatures, Laudato Si', as the name of his encyclical "on care of our common home." Expectation of an encyclical was high by mid-2014, but the text was not released unti June 2015, a full year later, in time to play an influential role in bringing people of faith together around climate-related issues ahead of the UN climate summit that led in December 2015 to the Paris Agreement on limiting greenhouse gas emissions.

It was not until January 2018, however, that Francis actually traveled to the Amazon as pope, during his trip to Peru. He has said he was particularly moved by conversation over lunch with ordinary people in the Amazonian town of Puerto Maldonado. In his address there to more than 2,000 Amazonian indigenous people, he said the land where they lived was holy ground. He also announced the beginning of the region-wide reflection and consultation process that preceded the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region, held in October 2019.

Environmental issues were prominent at the synod, although they received less media attention than discussions about ordaining married men to celebrate Eucharist in remote communities and allowing women to become deacons.

Not everyone in the church has embraced Francis' concept of integral ecology, which calls into question an economy based on uncontrolled consumption of natural resources and social inequalities that have been made starkly visible by the coronavirus pandemic, Cáceres says.

Nevertheless, a decade and a half after Aparecida, the pope's admission that he did not appreciate the urgency in the Brazilian bishops' call for attention to the Amazon offers hope that other doubters may follow his path to conversion. Meanwhile, Francis is looking beyond that specific region, by placing what he calls the "periphery" at the center of the church's concerns.

The pope's dreams for the Amazon, outlined in the papal exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, "are also the dreams for all the Amazons of the world," Cáceres says. "The dreams for the geographic Amazon, the biome, are the dreams for all of the

common home. There is a social ecological, cultural and ecclesial dream that applies to the entire world."

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Here's what else is new on Earthbeat this week:

- In Lens on Creation, photographer Paul Jeffrey continues to challenge us to understand our connection with the Earth and to think more deeply about how we use its bounty. Jeffrey links faith and action in the reflection series, which began Aug. 31 and continues until Oct. 4. To receive a new reflection in your inbox every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, sign up here. You can also view the entire series on the EarthBeat website in English and Spanish.
- Climate change is exacerbating land conflicts between farmers and nomadic herders in Nigeria's middle belt region, the country's food basket, Patrick Egwu reports for EarthBeat.
- The federal government may be dragging its feet, but some states hope to use pandemic stimulus funds for programs in rural areas for mitigating and adapting to climate change, report James Bruggers and colleagues at InsideClimate News. Andrew McCormick at The Nation notes that mayors of cities like Miami, Bogotá, Paris and Los Angeles also hope to use those funds to jump-start climate-smart investing.

In other climate-related news this week:

- As record high temperatures exacerbate wildfires raging across the western United States, Drew Kann and Brandon Miller at CNN note that scientists warned about increasing extreme weather in a warming climate. Half a million people in Oregon have evacuated and at least 28,000 firefighters are battling blazes that have burned an area the size of New Jersey, writes Grace Hauck at USA Today. California, Oregon and Washington have drawn the most attention, but this map shows fires burning from Texas north to Montana and west to the Pacific coast.
- It may be the wildfires or this year's punishing hurricane season, but three out of four Americans say they have seen impacts of climate change, according to a survey by the non-profit Resources for the Future. The same percentage

favors building codes that would reduce risk of damage from fires and flooding, increasing the number of firefighters and improving drainage systems. Requiring fire or flood insurance or prohibiting construction in fire- or flood-prone areas have less support, although it is still above 50%, the study found.

- Meanwhile, a new report commissioned by the Trump administration's Commodity Futures Trading Commission concluded that the costs of wildfires and extreme weather driven by climate change will threaten U.S. financial markets, write Coral Davenport and Jeanna Smialek in the New York Times. "A world wracked by frequent and devastating shocks from climate change cannot sustain the fundamental conditions supporting our financial system," the report titled "Managing Climate Risk in the Financial System" concluded.
- The Trump administration has backtracked on a proposal to expand offshore oil drilling to the eastern Gulf of Mexico and southern Atlantic coast, where states have opposed the proposal, Brady Dennis and Dino Grandoni report for The Washington Post.
- From the Philippines, Joseph Peter Calleja at UCAnews describes how Christians and Muslims came together to care for their common home by cleaning up garbage and plastic along the coast on the island of Palawa.
- And remember Tahlequah, the killer whale that carried her dead calf for 17 days through the Salish Sea off British Columbia two years ago? She's been spotted with a new baby, crossing the border from Washington State into Canada.

Coming events:

- As part of a series of online events for NCR Forward members, EarthBeat will sponsor "Understanding Our Place in Creation: A Call to Ecospirituality," a presentation by Sr. Caroljean Willie of EarthConnection, on Sept. 17. Not a member yet? You can sign up for just $5 a month to take part in our fall series of events, including a Sept. 24 conversation with Fr. Dan Horan, who will explore *Laudato Si*' as a “liminal text,” standing between the useful but still inadequate “stewardship model” of creation and the call to embrace a “kinship model” that recognizes humanity’s true place as part of God’s broader community of creation.
- The Global Catholic Climate Movement is sponsoring a Laudato Si' immersion retreat from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Eastern Time Sept. 12. Participants will "hear creation’s song," contemplating the glorious mystery of the world; "hear

Creation's cry," becoming aware of the ecological crisis; and "answer Creation's call," preparing for transformative action to care for our common home.

- "Climate Change, Our Faith Values & 2020," the second webinar in the Season of Creation series "On the Common Good and Our Common Home," will be held at 3 p.m. Eastern Time Sept. 14. Presenters include Dr. Katharine Hayhoe, PhD, endowed professor of political science and director of the Climate Center at Texas Tech University, and Susan Hendershot, president of Interfaith Power and Light.
- What can the world learn from Latin America for a more just recovery from the coronavirus pandemic? Panelists will explore that question in "A just transition for Latin America, the continent of hope" beginning at 9 a.m. Central Time Sept. 17 and 18. This event, sponsored by the Global Catholic Climate Movement, will be in Spanish and Portuguese, with simultaneous translation into English, Italian, French and Polish.

Closing beat:

Around the country and around the world, families, faith communities and religious congregations are renewing the face of the Earth during this Season of Creation by planting trees, lobbying legislators and educating or sharing ideas through webinars. What is your group doing? Tell us in 150 words or less in a Small Earth Story.

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