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Pope Francis accepts offertory gifts from Indigenous people at the concluding Mass of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican in this Oct. 27, 2019, file photo. The Vatican on Feb. 12, 2020, released the pope's apostolic exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, which offers his conclusions from the synod. He wrote: "The businesses, national or international, which harm the Amazon and fail to respect the right of the original peoples to the land and its boundaries, and to self-determination and prior consent, should be called for what they are: injustice and crime." (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Shortly after a 2013 Pew report revealed that the majority of the 1.3 billion member Catholic Church was now based in the Global South after a century-long shift away from the church's traditional center in Europe, the College of Cardinals elected the first Latin American pope.

Pope Francis — who was previously Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina — came from a continent where Catholicism took root as a result of papal bulls that authorized violent colonial conquest, conversion and domination.



Valentina Napolitano, a professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto who is currently a visiting scholar at the Berkeley Center for the Study of Religion, has written about Francis as a "Criollo Pope."

"Criollo" is a term that dates back to colonization, and Napolitano's use literally refers to Francis being the Argentine-born son of an Italian immigrant father and an Italian-descended mother.

Throughout Latin American history, criollos have been both leaders of revolutionary independence movements and "extremely conservative," Napolitano told NCR, explaining that she recognizes both impulses in Francis.

Napolitano said that the term "Criollo Pope" may also explain why some critics see Francis as something of a trickster. Francis "jolts the passionate machine of the Catholic Church by decentering and rescaling its locations of power," Napolitano wrote in a 2019 journal article.

Congolese Jesuit Fr. Jacques Mwanga Nzumbu told NCR that Francis is the first pope "who is facing seriously this problem of colonialism."

Throughout his 10 years as pope, Francis has denounced continuing forms of colonialism.



Valentina Napolitano (Courtesy of Valentina Napolitano)

"Colonialism is not just about repatriation in archeology or condemning what has been done, but really is engaging with the transformative traces of colonialism into the present," said Napolitano.

Most recently, when he arrived in the Democratic Republic of Congo in February, Francis said, "Stop choking Africa: It is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered," referring to the exploitation of Congo's natural and mineral resources by countries such as China and the United States.

Nzumbu, who began studying mining in the Congo after he witnessed the devastating impacts of mineral-driven wars on his secondary school students, said Francis' words have "remained the strongest message on colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa."

Tania Avila Meneses, a Quechua theologian from Oruro, Bolivia, also praised Francis' teaching on extractivism as a form of colonialism, especially in *Querida Amazonia*, his 2020 apostolic exhortation after the Synod of Bishops for the nine-nation Amazon region.

Francis declared in that document: "The businesses, national or international, which harm the Amazon and fail to respect the right of the original peoples to the land and its boundaries, and to self-determination and prior consent, should be called for what they are: injustice and crime."

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Meneses said: "I think the pope is very brave in making himself part of an alliance with the communities and looking for boundaries, self-determination, and prior consent."

"This is already a process of decolonization," she said.

Meneses also highlighted Francis' later statement in *Querida Amazonia* that colonization "has been changed, disguised and concealed, while losing none of its contempt for the life of the poor and the fragility of the environment."

"In many church situations, this also happens," Meneses said. "Sometimes, with a false solidarity with [Indigenous] peoples, one begins to belittle the peoples and put yourself above other people. So, one must be careful with this attitude of disguising colonialism, even with kindness."



Laurel Marshall Potter (Courtesy of Laurel Marshall Potter)

Laurel Marshall Potter, a doctoral candidate in systematic and comparative theology at Boston College and co-author of the 2022 volume *Re-membering the Reign of God: The Decolonial Witness of El Salvador's Church of the Poor*, also celebrated *Querida Amazonia*.

She said that, while many people were disappointed that the document did not endorse the Amazonian bishops' call for the ordination of women deacons and married priests to address a lack of ministers across the region, she perceived Francis to be stepping back into his role as bishop of Rome.

"For the church to really assume decoloniality, the whole people of God have to assume decoloniality," said Potter.

"Where Francis is hesitant to mandate practices or make sweeping changes, as frustrating as that can be, I hope that there's a wisdom there also in letting decisions be made when there is actually consensus," she said, calling this a more "decolonial" practice.

For Meneses, another important accomplishment of Francis' papacy is creating listening spaces. "I think a real way of confronting, of stopping colonialism is permitting different voices to express themselves and to be heard," she said, emphasizing that this goes beyond "being a voice for the voiceless or giving voice to the other."

Nzumbu agreed, writing, "Synodality will reduce the impression of a still colonial church in the Global South," adding that he thought other institutions, like the United Nations, should take note of Francis' approach.

'Ideological colonization'

Since 2015, Francis has frequently used the term "ideological colonization" to criticize how societies in the Global North might impose their values on those in the

Global South. He has also used the phrase to generally criticize what he calls "gender theory" or "gender ideology."

Dani Dempsey, an associate professor of religious studies at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada, who studied Francis' use of the term for their dissertation, says Francis uses "ideological colonization" to refer to feminism, trans inclusion and queer and same-sex attraction inclusion.

However, Dempsey, who uses all gender pronouns, said that Francis' analysis is ahistorical. Dempsey said that the Roman Catholic Church and other types of Christianity enforced normative ideas about "the connection between sex, gender and sexuality" through settler colonialism.

"Being born with a penis or a vagina dictated the social and psychological expectations of those humans," Dempsey said.

Given Francis' understanding of colonialism, his well-publicized statements of outreach and welcome to LGBTQ+ people don't sit well with Dempsey, because the academic says Francis has not changed official church policy with regard to gender identity and non-heterosexual relationships.



Dani Dempsey (Courtesy of Dani Dempsey)

"That queer and trans people and women and other gender minorities haven't suffered enough to warrant the intention of institutional social doctrinal change, to me, suggests a level of insincerity, at least in fact, if not in theory," said Dempsey.

Dempsey hopes to see the church frame these issues as "a preferential option for the marginalized" and that the church will begin to "take seriously the suffering of some of these humans."

Catholic women and scholars also critiqued Francis' position on gender and sexuality as confusing or inconsistent, given the pope's other anticolonial work. However, other women said that Francis is limited by the vigorous opposition that he faces.

Mercy Sr. Ana María Siufi of Neuquén province in Argentina said that, while there is more work to be done on issues of inclusion of women in church governance and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, "Neither can we believe that [Francis] will accomplish the miracle of transforming the entire church."

Siufi said that throughout all the sectors of the church, there are people "who don't understand the responsibility of the church, or they don't want to see it, that responsibility for Indigenous genocide or for colonization."



Pope Francis and Chief Wilton Littlechild say farewell to each other July 29, 2022, in Iqaluit, Nunavut, as the pope prepares to return to the Vatican after a six-day visit. Littlechild, a 78-year-old lawyer, survivor of abuse in a residential school and former grand chief of the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations, had lobbied hard for the pope to visit Canada and apologize to residential school survivors. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Repairing past harm

As Catholics look ahead to the future of Francis' papacy, many hope the pope turns his attention to the church's historic role in colonialism.

"In Africa, in the Global South, the church has been a colonial church," said Nzumbu. "Africa suffered a lot for slavery."



Jesuit Fr. Jacques Mwanga Nzumbu (Courtesy Jacques Mwanga Nzumbu)

"Are we ready to go deeper in our church to see what the church did in all continents, not only here in America and to repair this?" Nzumbu asked.

In 2022, Francis visited Canada, where Nzumbu is currently studying for his doctorate, and asked forgiveness for what he called the "genocidal work" of the church in the country's residential schools, a network of boarding schools for Indigenous people that removed children from their families and forced assimilation into the dominant culture.

Francis also labeled the Doctrine of Discovery, a papal policy from the 15th century that provided theological justification for colonization, "evil and unjust." However, the pope has yet to formally rescind the doctrine, even though Indigenous nations have visited the Vatican to ask for its official retraction.

Another point of pain for some Indigenous people is Francis' decision to canonize Junipero Serra, an 18th-century Spanish Franciscan who founded missions in California. While advocates for Serra portray him as a defender of Indigenous peoples, critics of Serra highlight forced labor and corporal punishments in the missions, as well as the dramatic decline of the Indigenous population during the mission period.

Pope Francis celebrates the canonization Mass for St. Junipero Serra outside the Basilica of th

Pope Francis celebrates the canonization Mass for St. Junipero Serra outside the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception Sept. 23, 2015, in Washington. (CNS/Paul Haring)

In Latin America, members of ecclesial base communities told NCR that their anti-hierarchical practice of worshiping in small communities is the decolonial way forward for the church.

Rossy Iraheta in the Bajo Lempa area of El Salvador and Daniel Parra Toledo in Frutillar, Chile, both participate in ecclesial base communities that operate autonomously from the institutional church.

Iraheta said that the communities represent a way to break from oppressive and patriarchal norms that have been passed down through the institutional church since colonizers converted Indigenous Latin Americans by force.

Not all ecclesial base communities operate autonomously of the institutional church. Sr. Fátima Espínola of the congregation Compañía de María accompanies ecclesial base communities in Santa María de Fe, Paraguay.

Espínola said throughout Francis' papacy the possibility of big changes in the church has been exciting, especially with regard to hopes for better empowerment of laypeople and poor people.

Iraheta's community continues to learn from Francis, studying the 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*' and the 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, and she appreciated the opportunity for dialogue with the hierarchy in the ongoing three-year process for the current Synod of Bishops. However, she said she thinks Francis is limited by his own life experiences in his approach to women in the church.

Parra believes that Francis will not be able to adequately address colonialism in the church despite his good intentions. "I see him struggling by himself against all those powers, and it's difficult. It's difficult to change such a big structure," Parra said.

"We believe that the only possible solution is to encourage communities," he said.

This story appears in the **10 years with Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.

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