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Social Justice



Sr. María Suyapa Cacho Álvarez, left, and Fr. Francisco Hernández speak on a panel about Afro-descendants and the synod on synodality Oct. 8 at the Centro Internazionale San't Alberto in Rome. The event, sponsored by Amerindia, brought together prominent speakers like Cacho, a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, to tackle topics of justice and peace with a "Latin American-Caribbean" expression. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



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Racism, a virus worse than COVID-19 and one Catholics are not exempt from, must be addressed to walk together as a church, said a Honduran sister who is a leader in the Afro-Catholic world and a facilitator at the Vatican synod on synodality.

Sr. María Suyapa Cacho Álvarez, of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, said during an Oct. 8 panel in Rome that "indifference" toward racism and the associated suffering Afro-descendants face cannot continue, as the church already owes them a debt.

The church has to make it clear, Cacho said, that "whomever excludes a sister or brother excludes God."

Cacho, along with Fr. Francisco Gerardo Hernández Rojas, a synod delegate who works with pastoral programs at the Latin American bishops' council, known as CELAM, took part in the hourlong conversation. The event was organized by Amerindia, a network of bishops, lay theologians, communicators, women and men religious from Latin America and the Caribbean committed to social justice in the region.

The panels conducted at the Centro Internazionale Sant'Alberto during the synod are part of ongoing efforts by the Latin American Observatory of Synodality to shine the light on issues affecting those on the margins.

Cacho's response was prompted by an audience question from Colombian theologian Consuelo Vélez, who said it seemed as if the Afro-Catholic experience was absent from the gathering, including from synod documents.

Cacho said that as a synod facilitator, her task is to keep the groups on track, and her role is different than that of a delegate, but she was "disconcerted" by the topic's absence in discussions.

Hernández answered that he included discussion on Afro-Catholics as well as Indigenous groups and the common home into his synod group. He said he believed Pope Francis has a strong concern for Afro-descendants and may be devising a "strategy" for more discussion on the topic during the 2025 Jubilee Year.

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Throughout the four-year synod process, CELAM has made an effort to talk about the experience of Afro-descendants, Cacho and Hernández said, given that the church in Latin America has for decades concretely addressed racism and its ills during landmark conferences in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007 and Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. The resulting documents of those meetings addressed the face of the poor, marginalized, and those living in inhumane conditions where a person's ethnic identity has been used for social subordination.

But the message has to move from the pages of documents to action by bishops' conferences, flow to dioceses and then to the parish level, she said.

The World Bank in a 2023 publication said that "one in four Latin Americans identify themselves as people of African descent," a number that adds up to more than 133 million and they "are 2.5 times more likely to live in conditions of chronic poverty," face inequalities in school, at work and in pay.

That inequality extends to the church, Cacho said.

She told Global Sisters Report in an Oct. 9 interview that she has seen priests, seminarians and others from her ethnic group leave their positions in the church.

"Why? Because of the same situation of racism that exists within religious life" and other places in the church, she said, where people are sometimes assigned social value according to the color of his or her skin or forced into a colonial system that does not value the gifts their backgrounds bring.

Growing up in a Garifuna community of Afro-descendants in Honduras who blended into unions with Indigenous groups in the Americas, Cacho said she only realized "that I was Black when I entered a [Catholic] religious community," because someone pointed it out. In the Garifuna community, all were brothers and sisters without a distinction of color, she said.

Inside the church, however, "racism still persists, as a system, so that if you're Black, you 'don't have the capacity.' It's on a rare occasion that you're a leader or part of a group such as [parish] council," she said. "You're defined. You're stereotyped. We have to accept a person who is different since that person has the same value as [others] because we all have the same dignity as children of God."

She, too, has faced challenges related to the way others view her because of her skin color. But there's something that has kept her strong in the church, she told GSR.



Sr. María Suyapa Cacho Álvarez poses for a photo at the Istituto Maria Santissima Bambina, just outside of St. Peter’s Basilica Oct. 9 where she serves a facilitator at the synod on synodality. (GSR photo/ Rhina Guidos)

"There is something that connects me to the Almighty, to God, and to my holy ancestors. As if every time I feel weak, there is something inside me that reminds me that I am a child of God and that no one, outside of God, can tell me that I do not belong to this group," she said. "This has sustained me all my life and has strengthened me, all the suffering, all these things that I have experienced that are out of place. It has strengthened me, as if to say, stay one step ahead. My motto is: Do not take one step backward, even to gain momentum."

But that's not everyone's experience, she admits.

"Who's to provide healing? Us, those of us inside the church itself," she said.

Hernández, of CELAM, said he's participated in a ministry that works with young Afro-descendants as it relates to the common home, the Earth, and it has helped to broach other topics.

Cacho, too, said she finds hope in the effort, in which she, too, has participated. But there's always something missing, she said, because church leaders hear the cry of those who suffer, but something beyond listening has to happen.

"Bishops, priests, missionaries of Latin America know the reality of these people, but they give the impression that there is a lack of true awareness that an increasingly synodal church, which manifests from our identity and vocation, can walk together with African descendants, in the style of a merciful Jesus," she said.

"How can we be a synodal, missionary and merciful church in the face of the drama of rejection, poverty, racism, ethnocentrism, exploitation, oppression, imposition, exclusion, indifference to cultural diversity, contempt and discrimination against others because of their race, sex, religion, intellectual capacity, spiritual practice, etc.? What do you do in the face of all these viruses, worse than COVID-19, that suffocate and threaten the human condition and that of the Afro-descendant people and other people?"

Hernández, of CELAM, said he had a "suspicion" that the pope will express his views on the topic with a gesture, just as he's done on the issue of migrants, to prompt a path of conversion for a more inclusive church.

"Pope Francis is not a man of words but of gestures, of symbols, strong symbols," he said.

The situations affecting Afro-Catholics have to be addressed, Cacho said.

"Otherwise, one synod comes, another one takes place, and we will still be fighting because each one wants to defend his or her space," she said.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.