

The church's search for an environmental stand

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 5, 2007 All Things Catholic

Catholic environmentalism these days seems to be an instinct in search of a cause. One can find impressive traces of awareness, from John Paul II's 1990 call for "ecological conversion," to grass-roots initiatives such as the [Genesis Farm](#) [1] founded by the Dominican Sisters of Caldwell, N.J. Yet so far no single defining moment has come along to crank up Catholic activism in a way that changes the social and political equation.

If there's such a turning point taking shape, it may well be in the Amazon rainforest. If Catholicism can't make a stand in the Amazon, there may not be much hope for it anywhere else.

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Let's start with a bit of historical perspective.

Almost 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it's easy now to look back on the Catholic response to the Soviet empire as a half-century of constant struggle, beginning with Pius XII's strident condemnations of Bolshevism, and culminating in Pope John Paul II's role in liberating Poland.

In reality, things were not that simple. Heading into the conclave that elected John Paul II in 1978, it seemed an even bet that the Catholic church would actually make a separate peace with the Soviets. Beginning with Pope John XXIII, and coming to full flower under Pope Paul VI, the papal policy of *Ostpolitik*, or constructive engagement, seemed to be leading the church towards a position of equidistance between the two power blocks. Then, of course, John Paul was elected, the Solidarity movement was born, the Polish pope picked up its cause, and the tide of history changed. Catholics worldwide felt deep sympathy with the oppressed Poles struggling for their basic human rights, using the iconography of Catholicism to do so. From the moment Lech Walesa scaled that fence in the Gdansk shipyards in 1980, *Ostpolitik* as a living force in Roman Catholicism was essentially dead.

Catholicism likewise stands at a crossroads today on the environmental question. While there may be growing ecological concern, it's not clear whether the church will be a follower or a leader, and to what extent it can, or will, mobilize its resources to make a difference. One interesting thought exercise is to ask whether there's a potential new Poland out there -- a place where the stars could align again, giving rise to a 21st century version of the Solidarity movement, galvanizing worldwide Catholic energies for the cause of environmental protection.

If so, it's probably the Amazon.

Generating 20 percent of the earth's oxygen, and home to between 15-20 percent of its life forms, the Amazon covers 2.7 million square miles in nine countries: Brazil, Guyana, Surinam, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Paraguay, and Bolivia. It represents 30 percent of the world's tropical rainforest. Due mostly to uncontrolled ranching, logging, and commercial farming, the Amazon basin today is losing 7,500 square miles of rain forest each year, the equivalent of six soccer fields every minute. At this point, approximately 18 percent of the Amazon has been wiped away. A computer model designed by the Hadley Centre in England shows the Amazon beginning to turn into a savanna by 2050, completing the transformation somewhere around 2080. The woodlands of a savanna are often seen as a transitional stage between a forest and a desert.

Aside from the aesthetic objections to massive deforestation, the loss is of environmental concern for at least the following reasons:

- Forests are one of the primary means for cleansing the atmosphere of carbon dioxide. Fewer trees mean more carbon in the atmosphere.
- When these trees are cut down they're often burned, so deforestation becomes a serious source of greenhouse gases. In mid-2007, satellite imagery detected 76,000 separate fires burning within the Amazon basin.
- Loss of trees also reduces water in the soil and groundwater, as well as moisture in the atmosphere, thereby exacerbating droughts and fires.
- Forests are a main source of biodiversity, so their eradication means species loss. Experts believe that millions of species within the Amazon will be wiped out before they're even identified.
- Forests are an important source for new medical discoveries, such as taxol, a drug used in the treatment of cancer which is extracted from the bark of a Pacific yew tree. Eliminating forest means eliminating whatever medical potential lies within.

All this should, in theory, interest the Catholic church in a special way. The nine countries that share the Amazon all have overwhelming Catholic majorities. Though the Amazon really belongs to the world, there's a sense in which this is historically Catholic land, dotted with churches and shrines and Marian grottoes, home to one of the largest concentrations of Catholic missionaries anywhere on earth. (This is without denying the importance of indigenous traditions, or the growing Pentecostal presence.) Brazil, which forms the front line in the struggle to save the Amazon, is the single largest Catholic country on the planet, with 149 million baptized Catholics, and is destined to remain the largest Catholic country throughout the 21st century.

A comparison between Solidarity in Poland and Brazil today may seem far-fetched, for several reasons:

- Polish Catholicism was remarkably compact in its confrontation with Communism. Brazilian Catholicism is far more divided.
- The Vatican threw its weight behind the Poles in part because they were seen as loyal to Rome. With Brazil, there's a recent history of fairly bitter estrangement, focusing on battles over liberation theology.

- The struggle with the Communists had moral clarity, as well as a simple way of judging success: They had to go. Things are different in the Amazon. The cattle ranchers, loggers and *sorjeiros*, or soy growers, usually seem the villain of the piece, given the way they bribe, bully and bulldoze resistance. It's not as simple, however, as telling them all to take a hike. Were they to disappear, hundreds of thousands of Brazilians would be out of work, deeper in poverty and more abandoned than ever.
- Finally, the reality is that Lech Walesa, by himself, wouldn't have been enough to galvanize Catholicism; John Paul II was the other part of the equation, and undoubtedly the more important of the two. Who's the Catholic leader of sufficient global stature to do this for the Amazon?

Yet there are also reasons to think that these contrasts may not be quite as stark as they appear.

Despite undeniable fractures in the Brazilian church, the one thing that tends to bring Catholics together is the Amazon, widely considered a matter of national pride. At least on this issue, the Brazilians might be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder like the Poles. Also like Poland, the Brazilian church has produced martyrs in the struggle. Fr. Jerzy Popieluszko was murdered by the Polish Communist security forces in 1984; Sr. Dorothy Stang was killed by two gunmen working for a cattle rancher in 2005. She died reading the Beatitudes to her killers, defending the rights of local farmers and of the Amazon itself. (Though American, Stang had lived in Brazil for more than 30 years at the time of her assassination.)

Some of Brazil's baggage with Rome may have been unloaded by Benedict XVI's May 2007 trip to the country. A meeting of the Latin American bishops which occasioned the trip was originally scheduled to take place somewhere else, but Benedict chose Brazil, and he chose to canonize a Brazilian while he was there. Even many of the pope's left-wing critics took it as a gesture of reconciliation. Fr. José Oscar Beozzo, a longtime stalwart of the liberation theology movement, said the trip marked the "normalization" of Brazil's ecclesiastical situation. If he's right, this too would make a coordinated Catholic effort on behalf of the Amazon seem more thinkable.

The complexity of the challenges in the Amazon is undeniable. The goal has to be to convert the opposition, not just to conquer it, and that's always a far trickier proposition. This very challenge, however, may actually be another enticement for the global church to get involved. It means the Amazon offers an ideal case to flesh out the oft-stated goal of official Catholic ecology, which is to balance conservation against development, to defend the environment and to defend the poor at the same time.

On the question of leadership, the jury is admittedly out. Will it take the election of a Brazilian pope to catapult the Amazon to the top of the church's "to-do" list? It certainly wouldn't hurt. Short of that, the scenario sketched here seems to call for a senior Catholic leader to invest him or herself deeply in the cause, travelling repeatedly to the Amazon, standing toe-to-toe with the giants of politics and industry, crying to Heaven for justice, and adroitly marshalling the forces of the church on the side of the reformers. At the moment, it's difficult to know who that might be.

On the other hand, maybe a single charismatic personality isn't the only possibility. Perhaps the Amazon could become the incubator for the emergence of "horizontal Catholicism" on a global scale, meaning a lay-driven grass-roots mobilization, linking Catholic activists, movements, religious orders, NGOs and other players into a fluid but powerful policy network. Though it might seem counter-intuitive, the Terry Schiavo case in the United States could offer a term of comparison. "Save the Amazon" could become to the global church what "Save Terry" was in the States, meaning a battle in which the lead role on the Catholic side is played not by hierarchs

but by guerilla activism, organized largely on the Internet, and savvy in its use of both mainstream and alternative media. The movement on behalf of Schiavo generated enough force to draw the bishops along in its wake, and, in concert with allies of both religious and secular persuasions, almost triggered a Congressional intervention. The Amazon presents a similar life-or-death scenario, and although the contours of the coalition would certainly be different, the ways and means of effective Catholic intervention could be similar.

Here's a final parallel with Poland. Just as everyone felt a stake in the Solidarity movement because of the global dimensions of the Cold War, so too the nature of a globalized economy means everyone is involved in the fate of the Amazon, whether they presently realize it or not. To take just one example, soy cultivation has recently replaced cattle and logging as the largest single factor in deforestation in the Amazon, as thousands of acres are being cleared for use by large multinational agri-business firms. The biggest player is the U.S.-based Cargill Corporation, which has built its own port in the Brazilian city of Santarém, where workers load soy from the fields of the Amazon onto freighters bound for Europe. Cargill's major client in Europe is Kentucky Fried Chicken, which uses soy for batter and other products. As Alex Shoumatoff has noted in *Vanity Fair*, anyone who dines on a bucket of chicken in Liverpool or Brussels is, therefore, "eating the Amazon."

To be sure, there are multiple points at which an effort to bring global Catholic resources to bear could come unglued. For one thing, Western Catholic leaders could continue their preoccupation with the struggle against the "dictatorship of relativism" in Europe, consigning the Amazon to a permanent spot on the global Catholic backburner. Or, Brazilian Catholic thinkers might pursue their current fascination with "Indian theology," essentially a repackaged form of liberation theology, this time with indigenous persons as the oppressed class in a Marxist analysis rather than simply "the poor." If so, it would likely mean that much of the energy of Brazilian Catholicism would be consumed in internal doctrinal struggles, and fighting off unwanted attention from Rome.

In any event, given the pace of deforestation, the time window for a concerted Catholic effort is closing fast. Were it to somehow succeed, however, it could have a powerful effect on the church everywhere.

That, of course, is one final difference with the Solidarity movement. Once the Communists had been toppled in Eastern Europe, the board was pretty much clear. There were no Soviets to fight in Manila, or Buenos Aires, or New York. When it comes to ecology, however, the world is looking at an interlocking set of planetary challenges which is, in the literal sense of the term, deeply "catholic."

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