

# Letters from the Synod: There are new steps

Br Mark O'Connor FMS, 11 October 2019



Letters from the Synod is written by Br Mark O'Connor FMS.

Currently in Rome for the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, Br Mark will be providing regular updates and news from the Synod.

## Letter Number Three.

**There are new steps: Prophetic voices amaze and energise in first week of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon region**

Dear Friends,

I am sure some of you might remember that fine Australian film *Strictly Ballroom*.

In it, there was an epic struggle going on. On the one hand, there were those convinced that there is only one model of ballroom dancing and hence their insistent and non-compromising mantra: “No new steps”.

A young couple in the film, however, challenged this prevailing ideology and showed, in their actual dancing, that “new steps” are indeed possible.

Well, there is a similar ‘dance’, this time a ‘dance’ of the Holy Spirit, going on in Rome at the moment.

There is, however, one big difference.

Today, in Rome, at the Synod of the Amazon, the young couple is represented by the successor of Peter, who has gathered an impressive, representative and diverse group of lay leaders, religious, theologians and Bishop pastors.

These are people largely actually working in the field hospital of the Amazon.

They are seeking, as the pilgrim people of God, to discern the Spirit and imagine new steps for the good of the people of God.

They don't necessarily have all the answers but there is a refreshing sense that the Spirit is breaking through.

Certainly, new graces are being offered by these local churches. Graces that can also teach us much in the church in Australia.

These synodal delegates are ironically, the real orthodox conservatives – because they want to conserve and apply the living Gospel to today's realities!

They understand that: “Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living; whereas Tradition is the living faith of the dead.”

For them, the authentic tradition is dynamic and a river. For as Cardinal John Henry Newman (to be canonised in just a few days) famously pointed out: “To live is to change, and to change often is to become more perfect.”

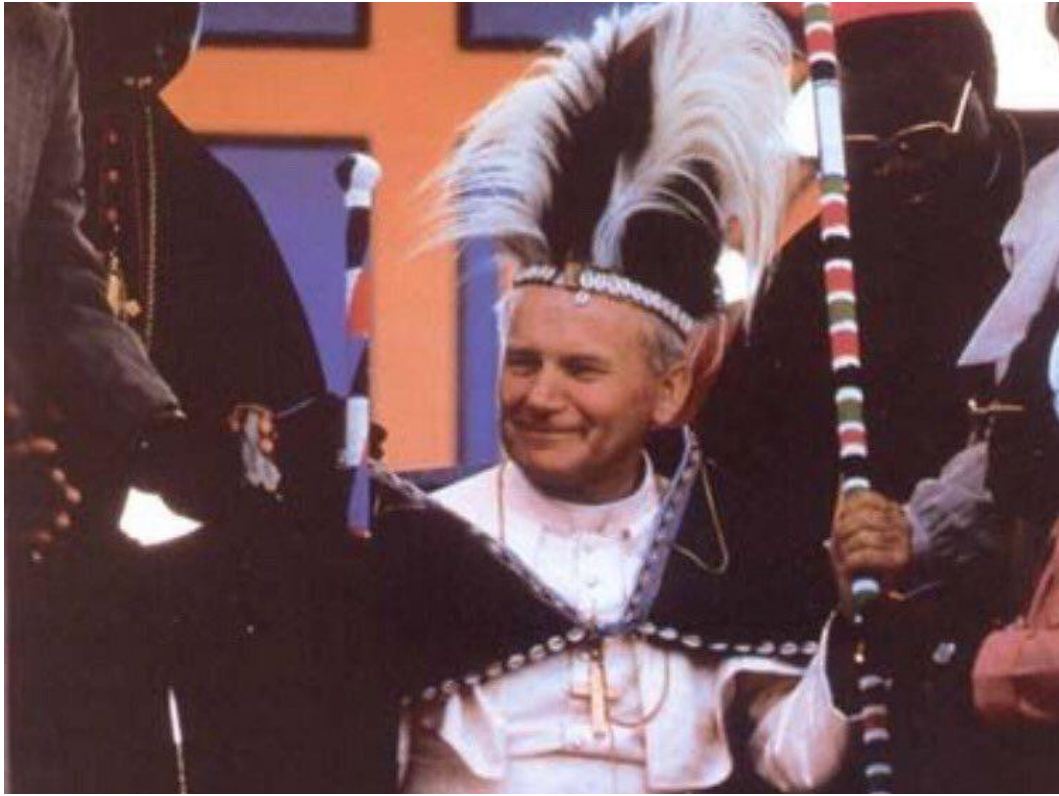
For greater insight into all of this, [you must read Austen Ivereigh's brilliant analysis](#) of the inner dynamics of the Amazon Synod as it progresses. Austen shows us that we are witnessing, before our very eyes, the Amazon flowing into Tiber.

On the other hand, there are some here in Rome who are determined to repeat the old mantra: “No new steps!” And not all of these are old people!

They are almost exclusively represented by a tiny group of well-funded, largely USA reactionary Catholic media people (with the help of a few neo-fascist Italian intellectual journalists).

They are determined to do anything and everything they can to burn the house of the Church down, in order to maintain their campaign against Pope Francis.

With little or no sensitivity to the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon, they rush in to condemn before even trying to understand. Remarkably, these critics are trashing the legacy of Pope St John Paul II and his profound understanding of inculturation. (See [here for a fine article](#) on the complex distinctions necessary between inculturation and the much feared syncretism these critics constantly evoke as an attack ploy.)



*Pope John Paul II wearing a feathered African headdress during his 1980 African tour. Image: Pinterest.*

These professional Pope Francis haters are using tactics that are mean-spirited, bullying and thoroughly anti-Gospel. They are wannabee Grand Inquisitors plotting agitprop in the dark. But more about all of that later.

Meanwhile, thank God, the real Good News is that the Holy Spirit keeps on breaking through!

Rome is at its glorious Autumn sunny best. The people in the Synod Hall, where the real action is going on, are trying to discern where the Spirit is leading them and us.

The Amazon Synod is very much the living prophetic voice of God in these days of grace.

And as the great biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us: “the prophetic vision not only embraces the pain of the people but creates an energy and amazement based on the new thing that God is doing.”

And what is this “new thing” God is doing?

You can glimpse God’s presence, simply by listening to some of the delegates, as they give their amazing testimonies.

A palpable sense of the Divine beauty and energy is shining through their human faces.

So, I share just a few of the faces and voices of these prophets that have struck me, with the help of reports from Vatican News.



*Pope Francis celebrates Mass for the opening of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon region in St Peter's Basilica. Image: Shutterstock.*

Pope Francis leads the Synod with daring prudence! He prophesises: “A fire does not burn by itself; it has to be fed or else it dies; it turns into ashes. If everything continues as it was...then the gift vanishes, smothered by the ashes of fear and concern for defending the status quo.”

A key leader in the Synod is Cardinal Cláudio Hummes OFM of Brazil. In his overview, which uses a variation of the Cardijn method of See, Judge, Act methodology Cardinal Hummes addressed the three great themes of the Synod as: the Environment, Indigenous peoples and evangelisation.

The former Archbishop of Sao Paulo, argues that “ecological conversion” is necessary to ensure that Christians understand the “gravity of sin against the environment as a sin against God, against one’s neighbour and against future generations.”

For: “This Synod is held within the context of a serious and urgent climatic and ecological crisis, which involves our entire planet. The earth cannot take this anymore.”



*Cardinal Cláudio Hummes OFM. Image: The Vatican.*



Cardinal Hummes speaks of the Amazon as a vast region where: “there has always been a great lack of material resources and not enough missionaries for the full development of a community with, in particular, an almost total absence of the Eucharist and other sacraments essential for daily Christian life.”

Bravely, Cardinal Hummes was not afraid to point out that: “Faced with a great number of women who nowadays lead communities there is a request that this service be acknowledged and there be an attempt to consolidate it with a suitable ministry for them.”

He explains that: “Participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, at least on Sundays, is essential for the full and progressive development of Christian communities.” Indigenous communities “requested ... the ordination of married men resident in their communities.”

New wineskins are needed!



*Moema Marqués de Miranda. Image: manosunidas.org.*

An outstanding feature of the Synod are the prophetic voices of women.

Moema Marqués de Miranda, a lay Franciscan from Brazil spoke powerfully of Greta Thunberg and Pope Francis who are both outsiders. She noted: “It is not by chance that a young woman and a Pope from a far-off land are bringing a message of hope on the environment. Time is running out.”

For me a special highlight of the Synod so far was the amazing prophetic witness of Sister Alba Teresa. Listen to her voice:

“We are present everywhere and we do what a woman can do by virtue of her Baptism: we accompany the Indigenous people, and when priests cannot be present, we perform baptisms. If someone wants to get married, we are present and we witness to the love of the couple. We have often had to listen to confessions, but we have not given absolution. In the depth of our hearts, though, we have said that with the humility with which this man or woman approached us because of illness, or because they were close to death – we believe God the Father intervenes there”.



*Sister Alba Teresa Cediel Castillo, MML. Image: Supplied.*

These are simple and direct words spoken by Sister Alba Teresa Cediel Castillo, of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Immaculate and of St Catherine of Siena, who lives in Colombia among the Indigenous communities and they were extraordinary.

She described the situation and the difficulties experienced in villages in the Amazon, and the fact that sometimes there are couples who swear allegiance to each other in a marriage pact in the presence of the women religious when there is no priest. Then there are people at the end of their lives, or in difficult situations, who cannot make their confessions to a priest, because there isn't one.

These people too turn to the women religious and confide in them the sins they have committed. They cannot perform the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but they can listen, and they can pray.

If this woman is not acting *in persona Christi* – no one is!



*Bishop Erwin Kräutler. Image: Holger Motzkau 2010, Wikimedia Commons.*

Another prophetic voice has been Emeritus bishop of Xingú, Bishop Erwin Kräutler. This Austrian missionary who has spent over 50 years in the Amazon, described the destruction of flora and fauna in Amazon as a result of hydroelectric plants, and once peaceful towns made violent by drug trafficking.

Here is a prophet of extraordinary authenticity. This man risked his life for the Indigenous people of the Amazon (surviving an assassination attempt), and was a close associate of Sister Dorothy Stang, who gave her life.

And from his direct experience of decades in the Amazon, he was also not afraid to also call for “new wineskins.”

On the *viri probati* proposal (ordaining married elders) he argued powerfully that there’s no option if we want an Indigenous clergy. Indigenous people do not understand celibacy. He jokingly recalled that whenever he visited remote Indigenous peoples always wanted to know where his wife was! And as the Bishop clearly pointed out: “We are not against celibacy. The question is how to enable access to sacraments. At the moment we’ve placed celibacy above sacraments. That’s not the Gospel.”



Christopher Lamb. Image: [christopherlambmedia.com](http://christopherlambmedia.com).

Lastly, I draw your attention to the courage and prophetic voice of a young English Catholic journalist from the U.K. Tablet, Christopher Lamb.

Speaking in a personal capacity, at a press conference a few days ago, Christopher offered an apology as a Catholic journalist, to the Indigenous people of Amazonia for the racist and demeaning comments from “parts of the Catholic media”.

For these journalists and the vested interests who pay them, one thing is utterly clear. As Austen Ivereigh has commented: “It is an article of colonial faith for some that nothing that comes out of the Church in Amazonia can ever be truly Catholic.”

And after all, Christopher Lamb was simply echoing Pope Francis’ observation of a day or so earlier. Francis had described how upset he became when he heard a snide comment about the feathered headdress worn by an Indigenous man at Mass on Sunday.

“I was pained to hear, right here, a sarcastic comment about a pious man with feathers on his head who brought an offering,” the Pope said.

“Tell me” the Pope continued, “what’s the difference between having feathers on your head and the three-peaked hat worn by certain officials in our dicasteries?” (referring to the three-pointed red birettas worn by some clerics).

A few minutes later, after Christopher’s intervention, I witnessed Christopher being verbally abused by one of these very same Catholic journalists filled with rage, more against Pope Francis’ vision of the Church than anything Christopher had actually said.

Catholic journalists can indeed also be prophets!

## **Conclusion**

Observing the scandalous campaign of some US Catholic media people in Rome in recent days, I was reminded of Dostoevsky’s short story entitled *The Grand Inquisitor*.

[One summary reads](#), “In the tale, Christ comes back to earth in Seville at the time of the Inquisition. He performs a number of miracles. The people recognise him and adore him but he is arrested by Inquisition leaders and sentenced to be burnt to death the next day. The Grand Inquisitor visits him in his cell to tell him that the Church no longer needs him.”

He keeps shouting at the silent Christ. Why have you come back again to trouble us? You have no right to add what you said before! So, don’t come to us anymore, we are in control now!

For a great re-enactment of this scene by John Gielgud, [click here](#).

This marvellous parable captures the perennial problem of those in power in all institutions with an authoritarian rigid mindset – including plenty inside the Church. Pope Francis calls this “clericalism”. It is a type of *aristocratic* thinking that is summed up as: We know best.

As these journalists mocked the practices of the Indigenous peoples and kept on insisting they were simply unveiling a naive romanticism about these suffering peoples – the descendants of centuries of colonisation and exploitation – I shuddered.

Callous attacks on these vulnerable people, simply because they too are human beings limited by sinfulness and in need of redemption, revealed hearts of stone.

I could see clearly an image of the suffering Amazonian Indigenous peoples as new icons of the suffering and silent Christ – once again being taunted, now by the new wannabee Grand Inquisitors. Meanwhile, these people have nothing to say about their own ‘Caesar’ Donald Trump (who they fervently worship) as he washes his hands of the blood of the Kurds.

Their moral blindness is staggering to behold.

And they simply misunderstand God’s preferential love for the poor. God does not preferentially love the Amazonian Indigenous peoples because they are ‘perfect’. No, God loves these Indigenous peoples because they are especially vulnerable and wounded and therefore close to his merciful heart.



Such people effectively reject Vatican II and *Dei verbum*, by de facto insisting that Revelation is closed. They refuse legitimate doctrinal or even pastoral development. Apparently, the Spirit Jesus prophesises about in John 16 cannot really teach us anything new!

But something very different is happening at the Synod of the Amazon.

A learning church is listening to the Spirit! What an incredible opportunity for all of us to experience afresh that the Spirit is still breathing.

For in our days, with Pope Francis' leadership, the vision of Vatican II is now being implemented in fresh ways.

Let's not miss this Kairos moment. May we listen to the prophets in our midst.

Pope Francis and the Synod of the Amazon are teaching us once again to remember: There are new steps!

Maybe we Australians can even learn some "new steps" in our own Plenary Council process?

There are new steps!

Until next week's letter....

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**The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region will be held in the Vatican from 6 to 27 October. For more information, [click here](#).**

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