

Letters from the Synod: Ear to the Ground

Br Mark O'Connor FMS, 6 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 One.

Dear Friends,

Dom Helder Camara, the Brazilian prophet and mystic of the Church in Latin America, would be rejoicing in heaven as the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region begins in Rome today.

In his poem, *Put Your Ear to the Ground*, Dom Helder urges us all to shun bitterness and to listen for signs of hope and the Lord's presence in our daily lives:

Put Your Ear to the Ground

*Put your ear to the ground
and listen,
hurried, worried footsteps,
Bitterness, rebellion.
Hope
hasn't yet begun.
Listen again.
Put out feelers.
The Lord is there.
He is far less likely
to abandon us
in hardship
than in times of ease.*

– Dom Helder Camara

In the chaos of contemporary life and the crises in the Church, we are all tempted to lose hope.

But today, in Rome, the Spirit of the Risen Jesus is hovering over the chaos.

The Spirit is breaking through and breathing new life into the Universal Church through this Synod of the Amazon.

And yes, it is of great relevance to the Universal Church including our local Church in Australia. But more of that later.

These days we are all weary and even cynical about our political 'leaders'. The crass greed and amorality of Donald Trump is joined with the lust for power of so many politicians who promote a selfish 'nationalism' in so many countries.

Even our own Australian politicians are noted far too often for their harsh disregard for refugees. Too many of them make monetary gain as the supreme 'god' we are all ordered to worship.

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In this 'desert' of our public life, we Catholics can be very proud of our leader, Pope Francis.

Francis is almost a solitary prophetic voice, amongst world leaders, crying out for compassion and mercy for all those who are victims of injustice.

As he cried out in St Peter's this Sunday morning October 6th: "May God preserve us from the greed of new forms of colonialism."

And as the newly created Cardinal Hollerich SJ of Luxembourg said yesterday of Francis, "The more he gets attacked "the more free he becomes." Pope Francis needs our strong support

After all, Pope Francis follows in the footsteps of other great Popes, like Pope Saint John Paul II, who has a passion for proclaiming the Good News.

And the strategy they propose is profound and the only way forward.

We can only evangelise our times through inculturation. Whether it's the Amazon or a local Church in Australia preparing for a Plenary Council, we must understand the times in which we live and discern where God's spirit is present.



Opening Mass of the Amazonian Synod. Image: Austen Ivereigh.

Let's listen again to Pope Saint John Paul II: "A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not faithfully lived out."

(Pope John Paul II, Speech at the Foundation of the Pontifical Council for Culture, 20 May 1982)

That is why Pope Francis on October 4th, the Feast of St Francis, launched the Synod of the Amazon with a beautiful prayer service in the Vatican Gardens that respectfully used the sacred symbols of the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon. Connecting faith and local culture is vital.

By the way, throughout this wonderful prayer service, I was reminded of how Pope Saint John Paul II in Alice Springs in 1986 also movingly cried out to comfort our own Indigenous peoples: "And during all this time, the Spirit of God has been with you. Your 'Dreaming', which influences your lives so strongly that, no matter what happens, you remain forever people of your culture, is your only way of touching the mystery of God's Spirit in you and in creation. You must keep your striving for God and hold on to it in your lives."

But still, you might ask: "What's that got to do with us Australians?"

Well, as our own Archbishop Mark Coleridge, President of the ACBC recently wisely commented, "The Amazon is a long way from Australia but many of the questions are not".

The deepest reason the Synod of the Amazon is of relevance to our local Church in Australia is explained by Mauricio Lopez, from Caritas Ecuador.

Mauricio explains, "The whole Synod is about the Amazon, and then enlightening the Universal Church. It's about contemplation of the incarnation. How does the Trinity look down on earth and see this diversity? And how do we hear the call to redeem, to take part, to bring life and possibilities?"

And so, the practical connections are many and potentially fruitful for us Australian Catholics as we, too, meditate!

In the next three weeks, I will offer weekly letters reflecting on these connections.

Let me signal just a few of these vital issues of relevance for us. And the questions are indeed common:

How do we respect our Indigenous Peoples?

In the vast Amazonian region, we're talking about nine countries, with different cultural backgrounds and state structures.

It covers 33 million people who live in the pan-Amazon region; three million who are in Indigenous communities. In those communities you have 400 different Indigenous nationalities, using 200 different languages, which come from 50 main linguistic origins.

We Australian Catholics also have a long way to go before we truly understand and honour the rich diversity of our own Indigenous sisters and brothers as a central issue for our church.

How do we respect and reimagine our relationship with the Environment?

You might think that the Synod for the Amazon has nothing to do with you, but one out of every five glasses of water that you drink comes from the Amazon!

The tragic consequences of us not heeding Pope Francis' call in *Laudato Si* means that the destruction of the vital Amazonian region for the planet will influence us Australians too!

And what of our own environmental issues in a drought-prone continent, increasingly vulnerable to human-made climate change disasters.

How can we possibly talk of evangelising, if we continue to ignore the grave concerns of so many Australians, especially our young people? I get the strong impression that the urgent cry of *Laudato Si* is not yet being heard clearly in our dioceses and parishes? Yet bold action is critical for us Australian Catholics

How do we return to a more Gospel-centred model of leadership?

Only yesterday in creating 13 new Cardinals, Pope Francis also by implication challenged our Australian bishops and all of us who are leaders by virtue of our baptism, with these powerful words: “So many disloyal actions on the part of ecclesiastics are born of the lack of the sense of having been shown compassion, and by the habit of averting one’s gaze – the habit of indifference.”

And Pope Francis asked the Cardinals (and all of us) whether we have a “lively awareness” of God’s compassion for them. “Either I feel it or I don’t. If I don’t feel it, how can I share it, bear witness to it?”

A good question for our upcoming Plenary Council!

And the Pope in the opening Synod Mass homily put it even more powerfully: “Jesus did not come to bring a gentle evening breeze, but to light a fire on the earth.”

And let’s not forget an especially crucial issue in the Amazonian region and for our Church in Australia. In both places, it is women who do the majority of the work and ministry! How can we creatively find new ways of including them (and lay people in general) in the governance of the church’s life?

We are far from doing justice to women and all laity on this issue. And this ‘sin of omission’ means we are losing out on so many fresh gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, let’s ‘put our ear to the ground’ and listen for signs of hope as the Spirit breaks through in the Universal Church’s Synod of the Amazon.

Recent times have been difficult for us Catholics in Australia. But let’s all take heart from Dom Helder’s words:

*The Lord is there.
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Br Mark O'Connor FMS is the Vicar for Communications in the Diocese of Parramatta and the Pope Francis Fellow, Newman College, University of Melbourne.

The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region will be held in the Vatican from 6 to 27 October.