

A SYNOD FOR THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: CULTURE, MINISTRY AND EUCHARIST IN THE AMAZON (PART II)

Pablo Mora, S.J.¹

Introduction

The Pan-Amazonian Synod appears as a breath of the Spirit, a *kairos*, which wants to renew and recreate the Church of the Amazon region. With its breath it wants to breathe life into and cover with tendons, flesh and skin what appear to be dry bones (cf. Ez 37, 5-10).

In Part I of this article we dwelt on inculturality and inculturation, as seen from the perspective of both the missionary and the community, and their role in the process of evangelization. Then we have also seen that a "Ministry of Visit" does not make for sustainable pastoral care in the Amazon.

Faced with this limitation, we must look now for new forms of ministry, with boldness and without fear, that will help us face the new challenges of this special region. The missionary Church in the Amazon awaits "courageous" proposals from this Pan-Amazonian Synod.²

In Part II we address the need for a "Ministry of Presence" rooted in the Eucharist in indigenous communities and distant river peoples. And as the reader will see, we focus on a humble and anonymous character, who reminds us of the "faithful servant" of the Gospel (Cf. Matthew 25:23): the Catechist. This "Amazonian" and "indigenous" face of the Church³ might guide us along new paths of evangelization.

Towards a "Ministry of Presence" centered on the Eucharist

The pastoral visit in the Amazon region, as we have seen, has its limits. *Instrumentum Laboris* insists on the need for a "ministry of presence"⁴. It is a new type of ministry that would welcome the presence of ordained native ministers who live within the same community so that they can preside at the Eucharist there.

¹ Fr. Pablo Mora SJ is currently collaborating in the preparation of the Pan-Amazonian Synod as official of the Synod of Bishops in Rome. (The content of this article does not reflect the official opinion of the General Secretariat of the Synod of the Bishops. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the article lies entirely with the author.)

² Cf. Preparatory Document of the Panamazonian for the Synod for the Amazon, n.14

³ Discourse of Pope Francis to the Amazonian people, Puerto Maldonado, January 19 2018

⁴ The Amazon: new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology. *Instrumentum Laboris*, Librería Editrice Vaticana, 2019, p. 110, n. 128

The frequent celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist in these communities is fundamental not only to "preach" the Church in the Amazon, but also to "build" the Church in the Amazon⁵, to make Christ close and present in the whole Amazon.

The Church is the People of God and the People of God is a priestly people, which needs to praise, offer and consecrate itself as God's holy people. And the Eucharist makes this possible in a special and unique way. When gathered at the Paschal banquet, the Church as one body gathers with its head which is Christ. In the Eucharist, Christ nourishes his Church, his spouse and renews it by the action of the Holy Spirit in faith, in hope, in love.

But this ecclesial experience has long been alien to indigenous communities and remote villages. We must already be convinced that the "Ministry of Visit" is not the most suitable solution for pastoral work with the most distant indigenous communities. It is not possible to accompany the community and even less to strengthen it, with the priest who comes from outside once a year to celebrate the Eucharist.

The Eucharist and Christian animation of faith, from the beginning, have always been united in the tradition of the Catholic Church. After the resurrection of Jesus, the first Christians already gathered in houses to "break bread."⁶ Preaching was always accompanied by the witness of a "Eucharistic" Christian community from its origins. Although "faith comes by hearing," (Cf. Romans 10:17) the Eucharist was celebrated by those who had received the gift of faith. From the Catholic tradition, the normal process of growth and maturation of faith in a Christian community does not occur if preaching is not accompanied at the same time by the opportunity to celebrate that faith in the Eucharist.

When Jesus said to his disciples: "The Kingdom of God is in your midst" (cf. Lk 17:21), he was referring not to a specific place but to his person who was in their midst; the Kingdom of God was there, present in the midst of his disciples in the person of Jesus, as it is now in the celebration of the Eucharist. It is a *tangible* presence by which Jesus offers us abundant life every day until the end of the world (cf. John 10: 10b; Matthew 28:20).

And so we must ask ourselves whether in this special context of the Amazon region, the time has not come for the most distant river and indigenous communities to be able to frequently celebrate their faith in the Eucharist, and thus presided over by one of their own.

As a Church, we can no longer be satisfied with "taking Jesus" sacramentally only for a few days a year, by means of a "pastoral visit" to the indigenous and remote river communities. In the "ministry of presence," Jesus not only "visits" the community but stays with them. He sets up his tent, his "tapiri", among them, wherever these communities are found. Here they can frequently find him in the Eucharist, accompanying them in their solitude, in their remoteness, in their sufferings and in their struggles.

"Amazonize" the celebration of the Eucharist on the outside ...and on the inside

⁵ The Amazon: new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology. *Instrumentum Laboris*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019, p. 106, n. 126c: "The Church draws her life from the Eucharist' and the Eucharist builds the Church."

⁶ Cf. Acts 2:42; Acts 20, 11; 1 Corinthians 10, 16-17; 1 Corinthians 11, 33-34

The apostolic zeal of the missionary, the desire that the Amazonian populations feel the closeness of the God who loves them, is also translated into the desire to "amazonize" or give a more local flavor to places such as the chapels, the interior and what is used for celebrations. Thus, they seek that all these places where liturgies are celebrated can identify more with the local culture, whether using forest materials, decorating chapels with paintings or native images, or looking for other possibilities. In all this there is an attempt to change the celebrations from the outside.

Perhaps we are now in a moment for new changes, to "amazonize" from the inside, e.g. being able to attend a celebration of the Eucharist presided over by local native people, in which those who attend the celebrations really see one of their own celebrating the Eucharist. Thus, all these positive attempt to "amazonize" the celebrations become not only an external adaptation but also transform what is essential. Thus, the chapels of the communities not only have native adornments but a native person with an "Amazonian face and indigenous face" that represents Christ "breaking bread" for this community.

Eucharist and cultural aspects in the Amazon

To speak of the Eucharist is to speak of the most precious thing that the Church has because it speaks to us of God's Love in Christ, making Himself present and alive in it in a very special way. The celebration of the Eucharist invites us to rediscover how "the Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter" (LS 236).⁷

God's love is an incarnate love and this incarnation in humanity passes through the concrete culture in which it unfolds.⁸ The Eucharist is not really alien to the Amazonian culture, and if it has been accepted from the beginning as carried by the first and successive missionaries, it is because the people have seen in it something essential that favors their own identity. Now, with the lack of priests, with the crisis of vocations and consequently with the impossibility of frequent Eucharist in the most distant communities, we ask ourselves if the time has come to shorten or eliminate "geographical distances" by accepting "cultural distances". And so, I want to dwell on two cultural aspects that relate to the possibility of native ordained ministers.

The collective being is more important than the individual

From the perspective of an Aboriginal community, any major initiative or decision affecting the community must necessarily and mandatorily pass through scrutiny at meetings or assemblies of members of that community. This is very natural to them, where in reality the collective being or identity predominates over the individual being or identity. This may even affect, as has already been demonstrated in several Amazonian communities, the rejection of this or that religious group if collective consent does not support it. In many communities the rotation between community leaders or authorities also shows that the community is always the highest authority.

The authority or leadership of the community naturally rests with the one who can best serve the community in its particular circumstances. It will always be the one who has a family, who has been tested by previous community responsibilities, and who has some experience of dealing with

⁷ Preparatory Document for the Synod for the Amazon, n.10

⁸ "Inculturation is a component of the Incarnation." John Paul II, 27 April 1979. In: "Cultura y Religiosidad Popular", Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ., January 19, 2008

people who are from outside the community. To have a position of authority in the community is not a great favor; on the contrary, since the main duty of the chosen one is the good of the community, this involves spending a great deal of time seeking to resolve the demands and needs of the community. Although these positions are not remunerated, they bring a future prestige that constitutes the true personal wealth in the community.

The vision of celibacy in communities

From the perspective of an indigenous community (and not just them), it is difficult to understand that the priest is celibate and in fact this really matters little. (Actually they are more concerned with an ambitious priest who is attached to money.) They are very pragmatic about what they want from the priest: that he baptize, that he celebrate Mass, that they feel a pastor who visits them and encourages them in their faith and in their struggles.⁹ But digging a little deeper into what they think of this subject, they simply don't believe that an adult man can be celibate and not have a family and children. In many indigenous communities, a man without the company of a woman is considered an incomplete man and has not reached "maturity". This worldview suggests a mentality of the dual, opposite and complementary, and that in the case of men and women, the complementarity of these at different levels of family life, social interaction and work, are a necessary reality, simple and without many explanations. Thus we understand why the rites of initiation into adult life, which soon lead to indigenous marriage, occur very early in adolescence.¹⁰ Rather, celibacy speaks to them of something strange to social life and runs the risk of seeing the priest as a person with certain powers, such as the healer or the sorcerer, linked to his religious function. In these cultures where witchcraft is considered a very real and powerful force, this could be a confusing misunderstanding. In conclusion, for them celibacy is very difficult to assimilate.

Catechists: possible future ordained ministers of the community

The missionaries, with the pastoral zeal and creativity that characterizes them, have tried to overcome the great challenge between their short sporadic visits (ministry of visit) and their long absences (lack of "ministry of presence") by means of a formation of lay men and women of the community, as part of an indigenous pastoral ministry in the parishes of the apostolic vicariates of the Amazon. These lay men and women are called "catechists", "animators of the faith", "servants", etc.

Catechists are one of the major pastoral consolations of the parish priests or religious missionaries of the communities. And rightly so, because they are the bond between the parish and the communities; they are the ones who make it possible that the candle of faith, already dying, does not go out in their communities. They are making an effort to fill the great vacuum of pastoral work in the Amazon region.

Among other tasks they do, they summon the community for Sunday celebrations, prepare the candidates to receive the sacraments of initiation, visit the sick to pray with them, accompany the families in the funerals of their deceased, and so on. They are the best candidates to take up the baton in

⁹ It goes without saying that the witness of the missionary must be in accord with the message he or she proclaims.

¹⁰ This is the case, for example, of the "rite of the hair pulling" of teenage girls in the Ticuna indigenous communities.

this race towards the survival of Christian communities among many indigenous peoples, this time as ordained ministers of the Eucharist.

These catechists, lay men and women, native, the middle aged or older, have always been, in the absence of the priest, the spiritual point of reference for their communities of faith, in the midst of various challenges, including the lack of accompaniment on the part of the pastors for different reasons. They are faithful to their vocation even when their formation is interrupted by distances, illnesses, or their own commitments with their families or with work and the demands by their communities, etc.

A challenge that deserves special attention is the sometimes not easy relationship with other evangelical or sectarian groups, where their preachers of the Word, lay like themselves, are also their pastors. Yet, unlike them, the catechist, would seem to exercise a ministry in the eyes of the community that is "incomplete," somewhat devalued, because it is limited to the liturgy of the word. The great attendance of the people to the chapel only happens when the priest, "el padrecito", comes and on the contrary, one notices the absence of a great part of the Christian community when the priest is no longer there. From another point of view, this further illustrates and reaffirms the unique importance of the Eucharist in Catholic identity.¹¹

In spite of everything, many catechists continue to persevere, because they have a desire and a proven vocation of service. Their moral influence in many cases goes beyond the Christian community, and that is why they are good leaders and candidates for government positions within their own locales, taking the role, for example, as intermediaries between the community and the regional government. Adult married catechists are highly regarded and respected in their community, for their vocation of service, for the love of the word of God, for being good spiritual leaders, for the preparation they have and the constant desire to nurture their faith. Are these not the most suitable persons among whom to find good candidates to exercise the ministerial priesthood in their communities?

It is important to emphasize that we do not start from scratch in this desire to think of possible native priests. In remote indigenous or river communities, the new ministry of the Eucharist would find a land already fertilized by the presence of these catechists or animators of the faith, thanks to the work of the missionaries of many years in the Amazon. For this reason, we must be optimistic about the advantages that these native priests would bring to the mission of the Church in the Amazon region. They are "indigenous people preaching to indigenous people from a deep knowledge of their culture and their language, capable of communicating the message of the Gospel with the strength and effectiveness of those who share their cultural background."¹²

Furthermore, if inculturating the Gospel across Panamazonia also means incorporating into their evangelizing zeal an integral vision of ecology, no one better than they can lead their communities in that desire of the church today. They are the inhabitants of the Amazon, the indigenous face of the Church, who have always been the best guardians of nature. They have a worldview, a cosmic vision that we are trying to recover, that of a life and a world integrated and connected in their different

¹¹ In the Eucharist, "the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship". In *Sacrosanctum concilium on the sacred liturgy* n.56

¹² The Amazon: new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology. *Instrumentum Laboris*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019, p. 110, n. 129, a)1.

dimensions. It is a worldview that they summarize as the "good living"¹³ and that goes hand in hand with a perspective of integral ecology which we all are called to live.

Conclusion: The “Ministry of Presence” reconfigures the “Ministry of Visit”

The “Ministry of Visit” generally carried out by religious men and women since the beginning of evangelization will continue to have a great importance for pastoral work in the Pan-Amazonian region.¹⁴ As the Pope once said: “The Church’s presence in the Amazon Basin is not that of someone with bags packed and ready to leave after having exploited everything possible. The Church has been present in the Amazon Basin from the beginning, in her missionaries, religious congregations, priests, laity and bishops and she is still present and critical to the area’s future.”¹⁵

The celebration of the Eucharist in the Amazon is still presided over in a large part by diocesan or religious priests who are from other continents, from non-Amazonian countries or from different regions outside of the Amazon. All of them carry out the “Ministry of Visit” which implies the responsibility of visiting indigenous or river communities within the vast territory of their parishes.

But, as we have already seen, the “Ministry of Visit” has its limitations and should only complement that ministry which is seen as essential for these distant peoples. This ministry is called “Ministry of Presence,” which demands the presence of native ministers of the communities who can preside at the celebration of the Eucharist. This would mark the beginning of a new stage of evangelization in the Amazon region where a springtime would begin in the pastoral care of indigenous and river peoples. The "ministry of visit" would leave its role of "ambulance" that cares for the dying patient or the Christian community that is currently in a critical situation in these villages. It would remain an itinerant ministry, but assuming the role of coordination, of reinforcement in the formation of the new ordained ministers, of support in common projects and essentially become a pastoral bridge between the communities, the parishes and the bishops of the pastoral vicariates or dioceses.

Without a doubt, this would give an injection of energy into the pastoral zeal and enthusiasm of the missionaries and religious congregations, since the limited training they currently do with the local natives has been submerged in many doubts by the difficult circumstances surrounding pastoral work in these distant places.

With the establishment of a “Ministry of Presence” the missionaries will know, in their trips to the distant communities of the Amazon region that a Church will be waiting for them more in accord with what the Church should be everywhere: a community that gathers in the Eucharist around its Lord, who wants to preside over it in this region with an Amazonian and indigenous face.

¹³ The Amazon: new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology. *Instrumentum Laboris*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019, p.18, n.13; p.22, n.18; p.26, n.24, etc.

¹⁴ Eight countries: Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname and one overseas region, French Guyana.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, Address to the Bishops of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, July 28, 2013

About the author:

Pablo Mora SJ, Doctor of Ministry, was born in the Peruvian Amazon. He worked pastorally for twelve years with indigenous Andean communities in the Archdiocese of Cusco. During that time, he developed and directed an adult formation and communication media program in the Quechua language for indigenous catechists. After that he was a missionary in China for six years and then worked for the Jesuit Service to the Pan-Amazonia (SJ-PAM) and the Pan-Amazonian Church Network (REPAM). He is currently collaborating in the preparation of the Pan-Amazonian Synod as official of the Synod of Bishops in Rome and is author of the recent article: "The Pan-Amazonian Synod: Towards an Amazonian Episcopal Conference?".