

Pope Francis, Amazonia, and the Social Question

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By David Lantigua

COVID-19 has disclosed, for better and for worse, the glaring truth that “everything is interconnected”. These familiar words of *Laudato Si’*, the landmark social encyclical of Pope Francis from five years ago, reverberate today with a great sense of unease. The pandemic in the United States exposes the acute vulnerability of socially marginalized and economically excluded populations. From [isolated elderly](#) in nursing care facilities to [“essential” immigrant workers](#) lacking PPE in agro-industries, the discarded in their multifaceted poverty remain susceptible to the ravages of this infectious disease. No doubt extreme development, or what recent popes have termed “superdevelopment,” comes at a steep cost to human dignity and public health.

The spread of the coronavirus among already strained indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin offers a fateful look at global interconnectedness. According to reports from the Catholic Church’s Pan-Amazonian network (*Red Eclesial Panamazónica*, or REPAM), over 430,000 cases have been documented in the region. With nearly 14,000 deaths reported, Peru and especially Brazil are the most afflicted Amazonian countries. Brazil’s virus-related fatalities are well over 50,000, the only country to surpass the mark other than the U.S. Twice the national percentage, the mortality rate among widely undertreated indigenous victims in the Brazilian Amazon is devastating. The recent death of Kayapó leader and activist [Paulinho Paiakan](#) to the virus presents an omen to the region’s nearly one million indigenous

inhabitants. A perfect ecological firestorm, literally, is blazing in Amazonia that goes back several decades though it quickens under the current pandemic.

While Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has failed to reckon with the gravity of the virus from the beginning and shown abhorrent laxity toward illegal land grabbing in the Amazon, the disease has spread through loggers and miners, but also health and aid workers. The combination of smoke pollution from seasonal forest burning and the peak of a severe respiratory disease may deem an even greater state of emergency than the terrible fires of 2019. To make matters worse, deforestation is up drastically, over 50% this year from last, which means those downed trees will be set ablaze as the dry season sets in.

Christians have a distinct responsibility toward this growing crisis scourging God's spectacular habitat containing one-third of the earth's forest reserves and transmitting about twenty percent of freshwater. But with one of the longest rivers in the world nourishing the rich biodiversity and vibrant ethnicities, the Amazon has been a neoliberal fantasy for aggressive resource extraction since the 1980s, producing water pollution from metal mining and oil drilling in addition to the deforestation for logging and cattle farming. Astonishingly, the universal Church turned to the Amazon synod last October spotlighting the region's harsh reality.

Pope Francis's post-synodal love letter to the indigenous inhabitants of the region, *Querida Amazonia*, dreams of a social and ecological justice there responsive to both the cries of the poor and the earth. The Pope warns that in the last decades of the twentieth century "the Amazon region has been presented as an enormous empty space to be filled, a source of raw resources to be developed, a wild expanse to be domesticated."

Beginning with the social teachings of Leo XIII, the modern popes have consistently targeted various iterations of the “modernist” error: a misguided anthropocentrism utterly out of touch with the sacredness of creation and in denial of the moral norms indexed to a sociable human nature. That is the ideological germ of the planetary crisis observed in the Amazon according to Francis’s social writings.

The earth itself must now be the horizon of the social question. If labor reform constituted modern Catholic social teaching of the previous century, land reform will be the defining issue of social Catholicism for the twenty-first. The Church’s analysis of our current global crisis, signaled by Pope Francis, has shifted from the Industrial Revolution to the Anthropocene. St. Peter’s Chair has expanded its protection of poor laborers exploited by owners of capital to include the protection of the planet from undue expropriation by extractive industries.

The Ecological Turn of Papal Social Teaching

Amazonia is a microcosm for the Church’s urgent social question in the face of ecological catastrophe on a planetary scale. Although Pope Francis’s social writings and pastoral activities are mapping new terrain for resisting neocolonial forces and converting technocratic mindsets, his predecessors paved the ecological path in important ways. Francis is a reformer of tradition, not a neophiliac. While politicizing pundits see division between Francis and his old-school predecessors, popularized on screen by Netflix’s Oscar-nominated *The Two Popes*, fact is the ecological turn of recent pontiffs reveals striking continuity in the social magisterium.

Lauded by environmentalists as the “Green Pope,” Benedict XVI installed over two thousand solar panels atop the Vatican’s papal audience hall. Even before Benedict converted the Vatican into the world’s only carbon-neutral state, Pope John Paul II named St. Francis of Assisi the patron of ecology, invoking the twelfth-century friar to raise environmental awareness within the Church. Moreover, John Paul II’s opening words at the Annual World Day of Peace in 1990 were a paradigm shift for social teaching when he declared that world peace was threatened by a lack of due respect toward nature and the environment.

The ecological turn of John Paul II’s social teaching came out the following year in *Centesimus Annus*, an encyclical commemorating the one-hundred-year anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891). He introduced the ecological question in social doctrine by giving encyclical attention to the “senseless” and “irrational” destruction of the environment. Sometimes read as a magisterial endorsement of global capitalism after the fall of the Eastern bloc in 1989, *Centesimus Annus* nevertheless contained the seed for a revolutionary yet nonviolent democratic politics conveniently ignored by neoliberal Catholics. The Pope challenged Westerners to radically alter their consumerist lifestyles from one of “having” to “being,” in order to avert ecological disaster and secure a share of the earth’s limited resources for everyone, especially the poorest.

Pope Benedict XVI strengthened the ecological concerns of his Polish predecessor in *Caritas in Veritate* (2009). In the spirit of Pope Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* (1967), Benedict reaffirmed integral development as the catchword for peace to address the 2008 global recession from an international standpoint encouraging greater solidarity and distributive justice between wealthier and poorer countries. Nevertheless, under the guise

of development, the unregulated or unsustainable exploitation of earth's resources has implicated the global North in its cravings for the fertile South.

According to Benedict XVI, a human ecology recognizing nature's intrinsic grammar is required. There is also a need to infuse economy and politics with the logic of gratuity and justice rather than possession and self-interest. Again, this involves a serious review and transformation of lifestyles in throwaway cultures marked by superdevelopment, or rather, moral underdevelopment. Ecological well-being promoting biodiversity and sustainable regeneration must now be a criterion for measuring authentic development.

Most remarkable of all, the Green Pope called for a "covenant" between humanity and the environment. A covenant of stewardship between human creatures and the earth, emulating God's love for creation, can raise contemplative awareness of the earth as our common home. The Church has the duty to defend the earth and the common gifts of water and air as the patrimony of everyone. Pope Francis subsequently double-downed on his predecessor's proposal, turning it into a new Christian expression of democratic politics for the Anthropocene.

Pope Francis on Ecological Justice and Protecting the Amazon

Besides the ecological turn of previous popes, then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio confronted the ecological dimension of the social question during his leadership role in the Latin America Conference of Bishops (CELAM). He oversaw the document drafted from their Aparecida meeting in Brazil (2007), where he became intimately familiar with the Amazonian crisis and the Church's struggle alongside the region's indigenous communities,

as seen in the Brazilian church's Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*). At the Aparecida meeting, Bergoglio and the bishops identified the defense of the Amazon and its original inhabitants, specifically, within the scope of the Church's social and pastoral mission. The bishops at Aparecida renewed the option for the poor from the earlier meetings of Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979), yet did so by adding a green hue.

In a key passage quoted later by the pontiff in both *Laudato Si'* and *Querida Amazonia*, the Aparecida document proclaimed the indigenous peoples' right to organize and defend their territories from foreign and domestic efforts to "internationalize the Amazon, which only serve the economic interests of transnational corporations." A vivid example at Aparecida of what this ecclesial resistance and accompaniment looked like was North-American "martyr of the Amazon," Sr. Dorothy Stang (d. 2005). Her decades-long commitment to indigenous land reform in the Brazilian Amazon state of Pará brought her to a murderous confrontation with the profit motives of cattle ranchers and land grabbers.

Aparecida also evoked St. Francis of Assisi's Canticle of the Sun in speaking of humanity's "sister Mother Earth," which generated the iconic starting point of the Latin-American Pope's love letter on creation, *Laudato Si'*. To render justice in an ecological sense, *Laudato Si'* expanded the Church's solicitude to future generations and to the environment. Intergenerational solidarity and the climate as a common good are specific encyclical insights inspired by one of the Church's principal dialogue partners—indigenous peoples. Francis considers it of first importance that among indigenous communities, "land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors."

This ecological awareness coincides with Catholic social teaching on the universal destination of goods and the social function of property. Both *Laudato Si'* and *Evangelii*

Gaudium (2013) strongly assert that these social doctrines are “realities” prior to any claim of private property. Yet recognition of these realities demands nothing less than conversion in an ecological mode. The faithful have the vocation to become hearers and doers of the gospel of creation. Bottom line: it means a lifestyle change grounded in an authentic spirituality of resistance to expansive consumerist urgings, possessive subordination of others, and acquisitive practices violating the grammar of creation.

Building on his papal predecessors, Francis’s social teachings yield a refreshingly prophetic take on justice and property quite distinct from Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*. Pope Leo kept the Bolshevik insurgent and the capitalist overlord at bay by sacralizing every laborer’s inviolable right to private property in things and in the land. Yet Francis, like more recent popes, sees a destructive notion of private property at the ideological and practical core of the ecological social crisis. The unyielding assertion of individual ownership has translated into increased autonomy of markets and financial speculation thus sustaining a globalized technocratic paradigm where the private interests of transnational corporations can evade and supersede the political control of nation-states. Overall weakening of the nation-state has only invigorated global drug production and trade from the South, as well as human trafficking.

Seizing the planet by recklessly extracting its resources under the false assumption of unlimited growth and infinite supply of goods is a damnable lie, the Pope admonishes. Worse yet, morally speaking, is the act of taking away the earth from dependent others with full knowledge that its resources are limited. Indigenous inhabitants are typically perceived by foreign and domestic agribusinesses and mining companies as backward savages who fail to properly utilize and exploit land rich in minerals. This historically white Eurocentric

judgment of native peoples from a superior gaze represents America's other original sin along with the anti-blackness of transatlantic slavery.

Querida Amazonia, the first modern papal social writing to address indigenous peoples and the lasting effects of colonialism and Church complicity directly, identifies indigenous rights as the fulcrum of social and ecological justice. "Businesses, national or international, which harm the Amazon and fail to respect the right of the original peoples to the land and its boundaries, and to self-determination and prior consent," Francis says forcefully, "should be called what they are: *injustice and crime*." From Iberian conquistadors to North-American and British rubber barons, Amazonia remains a steady colonial frontier of unjust extraction of natural resources.

Evidently, Pope Francis has not [given up on human rights](#) as some commentators wrongly concluded after *Laudato Si'*. The accent of justice for the Pope falls on social movements of the global South rather than the polarized politics of north transatlantic societies. One key characteristic of this alternative "third-world" discourse of rights, according to *Evangelii Gaudium*, is reckoning with the cry of real peoples bearing the face of Christ and not abstract individuals. "Even human rights," the Pope cautions his flock in the global North, "can be used as a justification for an inordinate defense of individual rights or the rights of richer peoples."

Transnational Popular Movements and Ecological Conversion

The individual right to private property is notably dethroned in Francis's social teachings, suggesting why more than a few conservative spectators in North America have Cold War

suspicious about the Pope from South America. Alternatively, Francis proclaims three sacred rights of labor (*trabajo*), lodging (*techo*), and land (*tierra*). These three L's (or *las tres T*), a Latin American mantra repeated in his messages at the World Meeting of Popular Movements, provide a comprehensive view of justice beyond civil and political rights to include social, economic, cultural, and environmental rights.

Pope Francis is fully cognizant that when he appeals to these three sacred rights instead of private property some exclaim, “¡Comunista!” Sr. Dorothy was likewise accused, and so was St. Óscar Romero, both of whom gave their lives promoting land reform in the spirit of social Catholicism among rural and indigenous communities. Yet the Communist international is no longer the great demonic inversion of the mystical Body of Christ on earth. Rather, to use Pope Paul VI's expression often cited by Latin American bishops, it is “the international imperialism of money.” Francis rebukes this colossal demon of modernity as the “god of money” (*dios dinero*).

An often-overlooked aspect of Pope Francis's social mission has been his impressive commitment to mobilizing grassroots movements, local and transnational, comprised of believers and nonbelievers. *Laudato Si'* would identify the importance of the “worldwide ecological movement” to raise awareness and promote the common good of the environment. The [Global Catholic Climate Movement](#) is a compelling example of an organized transnational community of action standing in opposition to “unlimited growth” through renewable energy. Catholic universities in the U.S. like Dayton and Georgetown have, for their part, joined the global ecological movement by fully committing to the divestment of fossil fuels.

The Pope's action of convoking a World Meeting of Popular Movements at the Vatican in 2014 was simply unprecedented, as noted by Cardinal Peter Turkson of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. With roots in the Argentine theology of the people (or *teología del pueblo*) and the historic legacy of base communities, popular movements for Pope Francis are an alternative to both party politics and neo-populism in democratic societies. They represent the political agency of landless and exploited peoples capable of organizing themselves around the rights of labor, lodging, and land. They are authentic sites of resistance to the global technocratic paradigm of transnational corporations and a source of creative change for civil society. Popular movements also demonstrate that the future does not belong strictly to technocratic cowboys and political elites, but to ordinary people "from below".

When the Pope attended the Second Meeting of Popular Movements in Santa Cruz de la Sierra during his 2015 visit Bolivia, Ecuador, and Paraguay, indigenous communities were at the center of the Church's dialogue about a globalization of hope versus exclusion. The technocratic imperative to dominate parcels of the earth through gross accumulation of profit without respecting the consent of ecologically dependent peoples represents a form of colonialism as old as it is new in Latin America, not to mention North America. Speaking directly to the Latin American indigenous movement present at the meeting, the Pope beseeched them, "I ask you, in the name of God, to defend Mother Earth." The Pope exhorted them to be agents of change, along with their allies, in the effort to inspire a truly participatory democracy empowering persons on the underside of an indifferent globalized market afflicting the Amazon and the Andes.

The pastoral style of the new evangelization under Pope Francis does not adhere to a worn-out, and too often detrimental, model of Christians from on high coming to rescue the needy. Instead, the pastoral model of accompaniment is operative, recognizing with humility and regret the errors of the Church's colonial past. It promotes a global Church that not only *listens* to indigenous peoples of the Amazon and the Andes, but also *learns* from them. This is more than just inculturation of the gospel; it is an intercultural encounter, or *mestizaje*, between the gospel of Jesus Christ and the gospel of creation. [REPAM](#), a Catholic-based network of Amazonian countries that largely coordinated the recent synod, provides a notable model of the new pastoral approach of the Church as the people of God who accompany, listen, and learn from indigenous ways of life. On June 29, 2020, this network provided the foundation for newly-established Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon.

Another important example is the Latin American ecumenical movement, [Red Iglesias y Minería](#) (Churches and Mining Network), which engages in the ecological struggle against the land grabbing and pollution caused by extractive mining industries. Their activism, shaped by eco-theological convictions, has not only focused on metal mining in the Amazon, but also the mining of lithium, or the new "white gold". The extraction of this increasingly important metal powering our electric cars, smart phones, and laptops requires excessive amounts of water in some of the driest regions of the earth like the Andean salt flats. Latin America's Lithium Triangle—Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina—is the latest neocolonial frontier for superdevelopment that restricts limited water access to local peoples. It shows no sign of abating.

The defense of Mother Earth, or Pachamama, expresses resistance through the protection of indigenous rights of self-determination within respective territories. Yet

indigenous creative wisdom is especially important for Christians in search of a different lifestyle, as Pope Francis reminds us. The cultural embodiment of indigenous peoples “to live well” (*vivir bien* or *buen vivir*) with one another and the environment is a social and economic alternative to false forms of development determined by strict profit and wealth accumulation. To avoid misunderstandings, the path to authentic peace which includes indigenous agency and knowledge is better termed integral ecology rather than integral development.

Although integral development might have proposed a viable alternative to the iron curtain, it is ill-suited to imagine the vulnerable peoples of the earth free from the clutches of the lasting iron cage under the technocratic reign of global finance capitalism. Whether the Western liberal variety of North America’s transnational companies or the statist version of China’s new silk road, global capitalism is highly efficient in advancing the economic interests of individual corporations and collectivist governments alike. Francis widens the previous papal vocabulary of integral development and human ecology by emphasizing integral ecology as the new name for justice and peace.

Querida Amazonia appeals to the spiritual worldview of “living well” among indigenous peoples at several points to outline the Gospel of creation that can inform evangelization and inspire ecological conversion. *Buen vivir*, or *Sumak kawsay* from the Quechua language of Andean peoples, has gained international recognition as a political principle protecting the “Rights of Nature” and respect toward the earth in the constitutions of both Ecuador in 2008 and Bolivia in 2009. Though not without shortcomings, it has mobilized political support for ecological and indigenous protections from relentless growth under a neo-extractivist economy waged in the name of development. Decommodification of

water and indigenous participation in decision-making over a country's natural resources are but a couple of salient policies encouraging an ecological lifestyle-change at the societal level.

The Amazonian countries of Brazil and Peru have not accommodated this alternative ecological model under neoliberal and populist leaders of recent decades. For example, the neoliberal legal reforms of former Peruvian President Alan García in 2009 to sell off for private use forests held collectively by indigenous communities sparked a national protest with violent repercussions. Sr. Dorothy is therefore one among numerous Christians, such as Spanish Jesuit priest [Carlos Riudavets Montes](#) in 2018, whose martyrdoms have exposed the limits of ecological justice. Fr. Carlos's brutal death in the Peruvian Amazon happened at the school where he taught indigenous children.

Attacks of ecological injustice have intensified against church members and the spate of indigenous leaders and forest guardians of the Amazon and Latin America more broadly. And yet the courageous struggle against the national and transnational interests of extractive industries continues, for example, among better known female leaders such as indigenous Peruvian Máxima Acuña and the lay Franciscan advisor to the Amazon synod, Moema Miranda. There are also many unsung allies right now, like Padre Flórez in Putumayo, Peru, who are desperately searching for oxygen with Amazonians during the pandemic so they can still breathe in the middle of the planet's lungs.

The Pope calls for an ecological expression of holiness with Amazonian features to challenge and teach the universal Church, especially the Christian faithful in the global North. He writes prophetically in *Querida Amazonia* about indigenous peoples embodying *buen vivir*: "They know how to be content with little; they enjoy God's little gifts without

accumulating great possessions; they do not destroy things needlessly.” These communities have “the ability to find joy and fulfillment in an austere and simple life, and a responsible care of nature that preserves resources for future generations.” In this way, indigenous Amazonians reflect the simplicity of Christ’s life and witnessed among countless religious lives throughout the Church’s history. The gospel of creation that has taken root in their ecologically-attuned forms of life sets the stage for a new evangelization.

Too much is at stake to ignore this extraordinary and long overdue indigenous moment in the universal Church and the papal summons for a popular ecological conversion. In the Pope’s most recent Earth Day message commemorating its fiftieth anniversary, he delivered an unsettling message about the price of mercy before ecological disaster. We do well to ponder his words as a community of faith during these precarious times:

We have failed to care for the earth, our-garden home; we have failed to care for our brothers and sisters. We have sinned against the earth, against our neighbors, and ultimately against the Creator, the benevolent Father who provides for everyone, and desires us to live in communion and flourish together. And how does the earth react? There is a Spanish saying that is very clear about this. It goes: “God always forgives; we humans sometimes forgive, and sometimes not; the earth never forgives.” The earth does not forgive: if we have despoiled the earth, its response will be very ugly.