



The synod on the Amazon region in Latin America, which has now finished in Rome, has revealed how powerful the radical theology of Pope Francis can be. It integrates care for the poor with care for the planet; it upends the Church as a hierarchical pyramid so the first come last and the last, first; it finds the hand of God in everything that is good regardless of its label; and it smokes out the enemies of progress and development as being far outside the Catholic mainstream that they claim to defend. Henceforth the Church can speak of the “Amazon method” as a model for future reform, and as a template to discern how far each local Church has deviated from the “ways of the Lord”, as well as what it needs to do to straighten them.

The indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin, spread over nine nations with numerous tribes, languages and cultures, have in common an intimacy with nature expressed in the phrase “Mother Earth” – the notion that the entire natural environment, God’s glorious Creation, is a living thing, a home for humanity. That same humanity has nearly wrecked this common home, however, and it must urgently be rescued if it is to survive. Because of its extraordinary rainforest and the vastness of its waters, on which the planetary climate depends, the Amazon Basin could be humanity’s best ally – but only if humanity honours the relationship in return.

The Amazon method that this synod has tested and found effective means putting listening and learning

at the heart of evangelisation. The Church has often lost sight of the spiritual riches present in non-Christian cultures, and those who have attacked the Amazon synod for dignifying pagan gods and idols need to be reminded that the Holy Spirit “blows wherever it wills” – as Pope John Paul II put it: “Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart.” Pope Francis’ consistent message is that this is especially true of the poor, who have an instinct for God’s ways that people can easily lose under the influence of rampant consumerism and individualism.

So “the poor in spirit” must be heard, and they call for “ecological conversion” of the heart and mind – a phrase first coined by John Paul II – so that the priorities of civilisation are fundamentally redirected. This is the “climate crisis”, the “environmental catastrophe” that has moved to the top of the public agenda in the West. Nothing illustrates it better than the fate of the Amazon itself. A spirit-filled response on behalf of Western Christians might be for the Church – the whole People of God, not just priests and bishops – to join the call for radical political action on the environment.

The summons to synodality is becoming irresistible. The Amazon synod is a striking fulfilment of the Second Vatican Council’s vision for a new way of being the Church. The poor of the Amazon Basin could be said to be teaching the rest of the Church a new kind of wholeness, which is a new kind of holiness.