

Faithful Witness as Women in the Church

The Amazon Synod, *Querida Amazonia*, and Faithful Witness as Women in the Church by Sister Eileen White, GNSH

Last October, Pope Francis convoked an *Amazon Synod*, that is, a meeting of Church representatives to look at the gifts, needs, and concerns of the people of the Amazon regions of South America, which includes Brazil, Peru, Columbia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana.

We Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart have been looking at many iterations of the commitment to “offer faithful witness as women in the Church” – historically and in today’s world; offered by us, as well as by many other women, both lay and religious. The Amazon Synod, the preparatory conferences for it, the resulting synod report, and Pope Francis’ response to the Synod in *Querida Amazonia* -- all revealed the vital witness of so many women in the Church in these rich regions of South America.

Thirty-two religious and laywomen were representatives at the Synod, ten of whom were religious women. Noting that one non-ordained male religious was allowed to vote, breaking the tradition of excluding non-ordained participants from the privilege, many Sisters – both those named as observers of the Synod and others throughout the world -- lobbied for religious Sisters to be included in that privilege, thus offering one aspect of “*faithful witness as women in the Church.*” Although the vote was not granted, many voting participants joined the Sisters in the questioning about that exclusion. However, speaking for many religious and laywomen observers at the conference, Capuchin Sister Daniela Adriana Cannavina, secretary-general of the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Religious said, “*The voice of religious life, especially of women, has been heard*” in the plenary sessions and small-group discussions on which the synod’s recommendations will be based. “*This is a prophetic hour for religious life.*”

The major focus of much of the Synod was on the agonizing exploitation of the rainforests and the most vulnerable indigenous populations of Amazonia and of God’s call to the Church to incarnate Jesus by standing with those made poor. What has been the witness of women in Amazonia? It is indeed diverse. It includes building solidarity in their communities, being involved in formal and informal education, serving as catechists, leading liturgies of the Word and communion services, preparing people to receiving the sacraments, and listening, listening, listening to the voices of the people, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Jesuit Cardinal Barretto, Archbishop of Huancayo, Peru, and vice president and founding member of REPAM (the ecclesial network for the Amazonian region for response to the grave concerns of the pope and the church regarding the deep wounds of the region and its peoples) had this to say about the work of women, especially women religious or Sisters, in the Amazon region:

“ . . . there are communities more than seven hours from the city in which women religious (“sisters”) baptize, celebrate para-liturgies of communion, give homilies, distribute communion, and preside at religious weddings. In actual fact it is so throughout Latin America. . . The fact is

the presence [of the church] among the most distant peoples is through the women religious.” (Gerald O’Connell. *Cardinal Barreto: The Amazon Synod is the child of ‘Laudato Si.’* America Magazine. October 17, 2019)

Bishop Krautler, one of the 18 members of the pre-synod council, stated that two-thirds of the communities in the Amazon are coordinated and directed by women. Deacon Francisco Andrade, executive secretary of North Region 1 of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil said, “There are many women who . . . make sure faith continues to be alive in those communities.” So, one of the major proposals agreed on by the Synod participants was that women in Amazonia ought to be admitted to the permanent diaconate. Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, disappointed some, however, because it does not settle the question of the diaconate. What he instead emphasizes is that many of the women who lead the communities in the Amazon “*promote the encounter with God’s Word . . . and have spent decades embedded in the life of the communities.*” He encourages the Church to publicly recognize and commission them. He hints that acknowledging their leadership role does not require and could, in fact, be unnecessarily restricted and limited by becoming part of the clerical fold!

Faithful witness must necessarily be in imitation of Jesus. *Jesus, the Suffering Servant, the Healer. Jesus, the Teacher, the Merciful Son of God. Jesus, the Challenger of Those Who Disdain and Exploit the Vulnerable.*

Sister Jean Bellini, a Sister of St. Joseph of Rochester, NY, went to the Amazon when she was 33. Now at the age of 76, she continues to minister to the people of Amazonia. Her ministry is what is known now in the church as “*acompañamiento*” or accompaniment. She ministers to or alongside all suffering people, including those who do not fully share our faith. It is not about solving problems. It is about “*walking with,*” and as Pope Francis wrote, “*removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other.*” Bellini encourages the women and men she accompanies to grow more independent and more interdependent. She knows that challenging the complicated bureaucracy to gradually help transform our imperfect world into the one intended by God requires enormous patience.

Sister Jean’s work also requires willingness to let go of one’s cultural biases and embrace others’ way of life and thinking. The work also requires courage. Thousands of farmers and human rights defenders, including priests and nuns, have been killed in disputes over the protection of land. In a recent post by Pope Francis, he says,

“The Church, which in every age encounters . . . very harsh trials at times: we recall certain long and ferocious persecutions of the last century and even today in certain places. In situations like that, she may be tempted to think that God has abandoned her. But in reality it is precisely in those moments that the witness of faith, the witness of love, the witness of hope shines the most. It is the presence of the Risen Christ in His Church that gives the grace of witness unto martyrdom, from which buds new Christians and fruit of reconciliation and peace for the entire world.”

Sister Dorothy Stang, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, offered faithful witness as a woman in the Church of Brazil from 1966 until she was murdered in 2005. Like Sr. Jean Bellini and so many women religious devoting their lives to the people and the preservation of Amazonia,

Dorothy imitated Jesus. She learned the languages and the ways of the people she served, she taught, setting up more than twenty schools. She helped those made poor to use their voice. She challenged those who exploited the land and those made poor. And although she knew her life was in danger, she refused to be silent; she refused to flee. Rather, like Jesus, she prayed for and forgave her persecutors. As Pope Francis said, “...*the presence of the Risen Christ . . . gives the grace of witness unto martyrdom.*”

The Amazon Synod Report and Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, can inform and inspire us to embrace a much wider vision of Church than we might otherwise imagine. No doubt, that is the experience of many who listened to the Spirit revealed in the voices of those women and men who came to Rome to speak of Amazonia.

God’s call to us Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart continues to evolve, even as our present life in community and our mission is re-shaped by the circumstances of today. We ask God to keep us open to the paths we must follow to offer faithful witness as women in the Church.

- - Elizabeth Barber. *A Nun’s Journey in the Amazon*. The New Yorker. February 17, 2020
 - Austen Ivereigh. *New Wine, New Wineskins*. Commonweal April, 2020
 - Barbara Fraser. *Women’s role in Amazon church does not depend on diaconate, sisters say* Crux. Oct 19, 2019
 - Luke Hansen, SJ. *Amazon Synod Weekly Roundup: Calls for ecological protection and new ministries for women*. America Media. October 13, 2019
 - Joshua J. McElwee. *Sister at Amazon synod calls for women religious to be granted vote*. Global Sisters Report. October 11, 2019.