

# THE COLOMBIAN CHURCH WITH AN AMAZONIAN FACE

**Luz Marina Quintero Cely**

- *REPAM Colombia and the Amazon Synod* •

## ABSTRACT

*The text is a brief account of the work of the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM) in the face of the challenges that the Amazon Synod, convened by Pope Francis for this year, brings to the Catholic Church in an Amazonian country such as Colombia.*

## KEYWORDS

Catholic Church | Amazon Synod | Territories | Dialogue | Colombia

The Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM) was created in Colombia in 2017 and strengthened in 2018 with the pre-synodal listening process, which reached 14 places in the Colombian Amazon territory.

The network's organizational body is composed of: 1) The Amazon Bishops Commission, which consists of 15 bishops; 2) the coordinating committee, composed of a representative of the priests, an indigenous representation, a lay representation and Colombian Caritas, among others; and 3) the advisory team, made up of specialists in Amazonian themes.

Thus, we have a broad representation that allows us to build from the national level to the territory level. This is precisely one of our challenges: how can REPAM not be restricted to Bogotá? How can we help to build and strengthen REPAM at the local level with the support of this entire team that is often dispersed?

In order to strengthen the organizational structure, we have started to work towards the three jurisdictions of the Colombian Orinoquia: Arauca, Yopal and Trinidad, because it is necessary to see the country and the world as an integral body. Thus, if the Colombian Orinoquia is impacted by the various extractive activities that take place there, the Amazon will suffer as well.

We have been working on this for years and we can say there is an Amazonian Colombian ecclesial network that is working with all the processes of pre-synodal listening. Since last year, several ecclesiastical jurisdictions were visited in Colombia, and about 14 meetings were held. They were local spaces of analysis of the reality of the Amazonian people and the role of the Catholic Church, and identifying new ways of walking together. In this follow-up we found that, beyond the problems already identified as common to the Amazon, we have local situations, such as drug trafficking, the migration of the Venezuelan population and the issue of antipersonnel mines and the armed conflict, which are currently the greatest challenges.

Throughout the Amazon region, especially in Caquetá, Putumayo and Guaviare, we find, for example, the problem of illicit crops, from which not only strong environmental, but also social, cultural and political impacts arise. Armed conflict, in turn, generates forced displacement, confinement of communities and murders of social leaders in the region; reality that, unfortunately, we share with Brazil right now. The problems of deforestation and contamination of water sources are common to all pan-Amazonian countries, and in Colombia is a recurring theme in various ecclesiastical jurisdictions.

At this moment we are accompanying, from REPAM Colombia, Caritas Colombia and the regional office of Social Pastoral, the communities of the large indigenous reserve of Vaupés, which will be affected by the extraction of rare ores in their territory. More than 4,831 acres were concessioned. This is the largest reserve in Colombia and where the largest number of ethnic groups converge, totaling roughly 27. It is a large-scale

extraction, with all the impacts it represents and which we have witnessed in many parts of the national territory. Therefore, we are devoting ourselves to a whole follow-up process to ensure a free and informed prior consultation. This is an example of a very specific action that we are concluding in terms of protecting and defending the territory amid pre-synodal listening processes.

At this time, we were preparing ourselves for the Pre-Synodal Assembly, which would take place at the week of August 13-14 in Bogotá. The objective of the Assembly is to analyze the *Instrumentum Laboris*, but we also want to hold a public forum on the first day to analyze the situation of the Amazon and to consider the work of the Catholic Church in the follow-up of this territorial process.

The idea of the Assembly is to strengthen a Church with an Amazonian face. That is, try to bring a bit of the Amazon, to recognize us as an Amazonian country. Colombia has about 43-45% of its territory in the Amazon region, so it is very important for us to bring this message. We are not a country with part of its territory located in the Amazon, we are an Amazonian country. We are moving toward this and the idea is to Amazonize the Episcopal Conference.

Something that we have always emphasized is that the Colombian Amazon is not only indigenous, it is also Afro-Colombian, it is rural and it is urban. Even living in an urban area, we can also protect and help to preserve the Amazon.

## 1 • Territorial work and the challenges facing local communities

What is being done from the territories? In the ecclesiastical jurisdictions, work is being carried out directly with the indigenous population, following up issues of organizational strengthening, and with indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in the region, claiming for territorial rights.

With Afro-Colombian communities, the work is a little smaller. Although we do not find so many Afro-Colombians in these areas, for us it has been important to claim that the Amazon is not only indigenous. Then begins the organizational process of land request and assemblies.

An important work is also being done on climate change issues. For this reason, thinking of alternatives to development is also an issue that the Pope has suggested to us in the encyclical *Laudato Si* and in the pre-synodal work.

We are working hand in hand with the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative. This is a global initiative of the UN that is generating several actions in some countries including Colombia. This is a very interesting ecumenical space to strengthen processes to avoid deforestation. We actually have work to do at different levels and scales and with various communities.

Our target audience is the people of the Church. Establishing a dialogue around everything that is happening with the Synod and with the Pope's call but also showing people related to the church what is being done in the Amazon region. The goal is also to convene the public institutions, try to make an impact so that based on public policies the strategic ecosystems are defended, the populations that live there, as well as the various life forms that do not need extractive and accumulation to be sustainable and economically productive societies.



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