

## THE CHURCH'S MISSIONARY MANDATE: BRINGING THE LIGHT AND TRUTH OF CHRIST

My first introduction to the Amazonian region began with my grade school fascination with geography. What is the world's longest river, the **Nile or the Amazon**? Of course, this debate has raged for years, and it all comes down to definitions. The challenge is in seeking the source of the river, with its 1,100 tributaries! With the help of GPS in the 1990's, researchers traced the source to the Apacheta Creek, determining the length to be **4,345 miles** (farther than the distance between New York City and Rome!), though the "official" record belongs to the Nile. Other than imagining encountering a flesh-eating piranha, I remained **largely ignorant** of the region, that is until I saw the magnificent 1986 film *The Mission*. Starring Jeremy Irons, Robert DeNiro and a young Liam Neeson, it told the story of 18th century missionaries in Paraguay, trying to convert the **Guarani** natives to the Catholic faith. One rejected missionary was tied to a cross and sent over Iguazu Falls.

In an amazing scene, Father Gabriel (Irons) reaches an isolated community, employing his oboe to soothe their anger, lest he also face the same fate. The musical score by **Ennio Morricone** is hauntingly beautiful. In the seminary at the time, the **zeal of the missionaries** captivated me— they risked everything— life and limb— in order to bring the saving truth of the Gospel to people in the remotest regions of the forest. But over time, the approach to missions changed, in part acknowledging some serious problems. Typically, missionaries accompanied explorers, and too often the principals had very different ambitions and goals. There were dark shadows cast amidst the missionary zeal, and yet, in large part the missionaries were successful. The missions were safe because they were under Spanish law. But in the film, the Treaty of Madrid (1750 A.D.) transfers mission territory to the Portuguese, who sadly allowed slavery. The film accurately portrays the complexities of the missionary endeavor.

The Synod for the Amazonian Region is also quite complex in its outlook and goals. And yet, shadows have obscured the Synod which wraps up today. Competing theologies of mission are evident and many, unfamiliar with the complexities, are left to wonder if this Synod packs an agenda extending far beyond the Amazonian Region? There is **reason for concern**. Numerous rituals led by indigenous observers at the Synod have raised eyebrows. When pressed, the Vatican Communications Office has been **unable** (or unwilling?) to answer simple questions as to the **identity of the statues and rituals** that have taken place. Rather, they seem irritated, reflecting the question back to the reporter— "What does the statue mean to you?" Inculturation is a gradual process, as missionaries walk with the people, slowly bringing them to accept the Catholic faith in its richness.

Still, historical examples abound of missionaries **freeing people from idols**, sometimes quite strikingly (pun intended), such as St. Boniface cutting down the sacred oak tree of the god Thor. For many, the new approach appears to downplay the necessity of conversion and Baptism and ecclesial statistics are revealing. According to the "Atlas Panamazónico" from the Pan-Amazonian Church Network (an organizing network deeply involved in the Synod), fully **46%** of the 34 million inhabitants of the region, have **abandoned** the Catholic faith. This is one reason why the Synod participants have stressed the need for missionaries to dwell within the communities— a Church "of presence" rather than merely "of visit". Some remote communities only see a priest a few times per year. In Brazil's decennial census, 90% professed the Catholic faith in 1970; by 2010, that number had slipped to 65%. What will 2020 bring?

The issue of **ordaining** local older **married men** (*viri probati*) in remote regions has drawn support from at least four of the twelve Synod working groups, though not unqualified support. One Cardinal noted that some indigenous communities do not desire married priests because of the issue of confessing one sins to someone too well known to them. In fact, this is one aspect that far too few consider with respect to married clergy in general. Peruvian Cardinal Pedro Baretto Jimeno, S.J. noted that even if this were to move forward, it is envisioned only for this region and not universally, referencing **Pope Francis himself** on his recent interview aboard the papal plane: "I would prefer to die than to abolish the law of celibacy." Perhaps ordaining local married men as deacons is a logical starting point?

Serious questions are being raised about the **theology of mission** that is operative today. Is the ultimate goal to bring people to **full faith in Jesus Christ** and his Church, **including Baptism** and the Church's spiritual

traditions? Or is it one of not only tolerance, but acceptance of indigenous spiritualities, trying to meld them with the Gospel of Christ? If the latter, it is not at all clear how that is carried out. When does inculturation devolve into **syncretism**? These are valid questions. As the three-week Synod comes to a close, we look to the final document for answers. I **close** with the **opening** words of “Lumen Gentium,” Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: “Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church.”

- Don’t miss it! Next **Saturday November 2** is the Feast of **All Soul’s Day**. At the **5:15 p.m. Mass** we will welcome the chorus and orchestra of **Magnum Chorum** with the presentation of the *Requiem* by Maurice Duruflé within the context of the Mass. Portions of the Mass will be celebrated in Latin at the high altar as we offer our fervent prayers for our deceased loved ones. A free-will offering after Communion will help defray the costs of the musicians.
- Both **World Series** teams (Houston Astros and Washington Nationals) are flush with solid starting pitching. Sure, home runs are great– but in October you need some “lights out” starters to win the pennant. I finalized my prediction **before** the first pitch in an e-mail– the Nationals will win. Go Nats!
- I am preparing an update on our **parish financials** and will share it with you in a November Pastor’s Page column. I also wish to plant a seed about a special project. Would you **consider a gift** to provide **cameras** throughout the Church and parking lots? It is prudent to install such a system. We received a \$35,000 gift– let’s try to complete the project.
- I wrote last month about my summer wedding couples. I will say the same for the fall– wonderful, faith-filled couples seeking marriage in the Church. God.Is.Good! Pray for all our engaged couples.
- Please see the schedule for All Saints/All Soul’s Day in the sidebar. Envelopes are in the pews to remember our deceased loved ones by name. Please place them in today’s collection.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector