

# After Amazon synod, Pope Francis criticizes cultural discrimination

by [Claire Giangravé](#) in the [December 4, 2019](#) issue



Members of Amazon indigenous populations pray at the end of a Via Crucis (Way of the Cross) procession from St. Angelo Castle to the Vatican on Oct. 19, 2019. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

In a book-length interview published November 5, Pope Francis discusses his vision for a missionary church and criticizes groups that discriminate against other cultures and view them as unworthy of receiving the gospel.

“There are circles and sectors that present themselves as *ilustrados* (enlightened)—they sequester the proclamation of the gospel through a distorted reasoning that divides the world between ‘civilized’ and ‘barbaric,’” Francis said in

the interview.

“They consider a large part of the human family as a lower-class entity, unable to achieve decent levels in spiritual and intellectual life. On this basis, contempt can develop for people considered to be second rate,” he said, adding that “all this also emerged during the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon.”

The book, titled *Without Him We Can Do Nothing*, was written by the Italian author and journalist Gianni Valente and based on interviews done during the Amazon synod. The book was released to coincide with the close of Extraordinary Missionary Month, created by the pope for October 2019.

The Vatican summit of bishops in the Amazon region shone a spotlight on the tensions in the Catholic Church over bringing the gospel to isolated cultures and how to adapt the message to resonate with those cultures.

[The synod had no decision-making power, but in a final document a majority of the 180 regional bishops recommended that in certain circumstances some married men serving as deacons should be ordained as priests, to help with the priest shortage. It also recommended further study of the proposal that women be considered for ordination as deacons. The bishops also recommended creation of an Amazonian liturgy that would reflect the cultures of the Amazon basin.]

The two-week gathering began with a flood of negative media coverage, including accusations of infanticide in some Amazon cultures and a prolific use of the term *savages* to describe indigenous peoples.

In a tree-planting ceremony in the Vatican gardens at the opening of the synod, the pope was given wooden statues depicting an Amazonian fertility deity. A video of the event was widely circulated, and the carvings, later described as representing “Our Lady of the Amazon” or “Pachamama,” became the center of controversy.

On October 21, a young man entered a church not far from the Vatican and stole the statues from a chapel, and proceeded to dump them into Rome’s Tiber River. Images of the act were recorded and published on social media.

The young man later released a video on YouTube confessing to the theft. “I am the guy who threw the Pachamama idols into the Tiber,” he said, speaking in English from his home in Austria and calling himself “Alexander” in the video. “I was very

upset,” he added.

In the video Alexander goes on to say that what upset him were people bowing before the images at the Vatican, which he saw as a clear breach of the commandment against worshipping other gods. He described his act as “a great success,” having had a lasting impact on the Catholic Church and the synod.

“There are some laymen, and we stand up because we don’t want things like that happening in the Catholic Church,” he said.

The interview with the pope, according to Valente, “is an answer to all the closed- and narrow-minded points of view that we witnessed” during the synod.

In the book, Francis refers to the debates surrounding the early colonization of the Americas, when Catholics were divided on whether indigenous peoples were “worthy” of receiving baptism based on their race, customs, and beliefs.

“In the period we are living, it becomes even more urgent to bear in mind that the revealed message is not identified with a particular culture,” the pope said. “And when meeting new cultures, or cultures that have not accepted the Christian proclamation, we must try not to impose a determined cultural form together with the evangelical proposition.”

Unlike proselytism—which “is always violent by nature,” does not acknowledge grace, and “cuts out Christ,” Francis said—evangelization is moved by the Holy Spirit. Without it, mission becomes nothing more than “a religious, or perhaps an ideological conquest, perhaps carried out even with good intentions,” he said.

Allowing oneself to be moved by the Holy Spirit, he continued, is what creates the “attraction” for others to want to follow in the same path—and is a fundamental aspect of what it means to be a missionary.

Missionaries, Francis said, have the role of “facilitating, making easy, without placing obstacles to Jesus’ desire to embrace everyone, to heal everyone, to save everyone.” It is not their role, he said, to be selective nor to impose “pastoral tariffs,” nor should they be “playing the part of the guard at the door controlling who has the right to enter.” —Religion News Service