

III Latin American and Caribbean Congress on the Social Doctrine of the Church

21 April 2023 - Bogotá

RENEWING AND REALIZING THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

Card. Michael Czerny S.J.

In the fourth century, Saint Gregory of Nyssa stated that it is necessary to “go from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that have no end.” With this new beginning in my heart, I intend to offer a summary of what Pope Francis, ten years into his pontificate, is teaching and encouraging us to put into practice in our synodal journey.

I will first explain the importance of the Aparecida Document for the whole Catholic Church. I will then focus on how synodality is acquiring a physiognomy that moves from the particular to the universal. I will also explore the challenges and new reasons for this journey to become a reality: overcoming the stumbling block of clericalism, moving toward inculturation, valuing our differences, and building unity. All this in a missionary key, opening our eyes to care for our common home and reinterpreting our social reality. May the Holy Spirit enlighten us so that every step we take will lead us to “put new wine into new wineskins” (Mt. 9:17).

1. From the particular to the universal: The importance of Aparecida for the entire Catholic Church

The five General Conferences of the Latin American Episcopate – Rio de Janeiro (1955), Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992), and Aparecida (2007) – have manifested the desire of the Latin American and Caribbean Church to grow and to confirm itself in faith in Christ Jesus, to be a light that shines amidst the many shadows of a closed world.

As I mentioned at the outset, Saint Gregory of Nyssa stated that in the Christian life one goes “from beginning to beginning, through beginnings that never end.” The Church always needs to begin new paths because she always needs to examine her adherence to Christ and humbly renew her dedication to being the “servant” of the Lord. In this logic of conversion, each of the five Conferences marked a new springtime, a fresh start that paved the way for new beginnings.

In particular, the Fifth General Conference of Aparecida was motivated by the desire to ratify the implementation of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. At the same time, it was enlightened by the rightful desire to give a new impetus to evangelisation and to take on the commitment to embark upon “a great mission throughout the continent” (*ApD*, 362). The Church in Latin America thus wished to reaffirm the joy of being the People of God on a mission, as “a community of missionary disciples” (*ApD*, 364).

As is well known, the Final Document of Aparecida constitutes a fundamental source and point of reference for Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. In highlighting the powerful seeds planted at Aparecida, we can see how the reflection that germinated in the fertile ground of a regional Church can grow to become a paradigm of understanding, and a hermeneutical key to rethinking, the presence of the universal Church in the world. Pope Francis synthesises and brings into full light the fruit of the ecclesial gathering held at Aparecida when he envisions the future of the Church and states, "I dream of a missionary option capable of transforming everything" (*EG* 27).

Latin America was the first region in the world to give rise – in 1955 – to an episcopal body of a collegial nature. From the work of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean has come a great richness for the entire Church. We are all grateful and indebted to CELAM for having given us a living and authentic expression of contextual reception of the "inductive method" proposed by *Gaudium et Spes*:¹ listen, discern, interpret, and act.²

2. Synodality and the People of God: Overcoming the stumbling block of clericalism

In the Pastoral Constitution of Vatican II, the Council Fathers wished to indicate as a permanent duty of the Church the attitude of discerning "in depth the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*GS* 4). It is from entering into dialogue and learning from history that we perceive the need of Church today to set out anew as the People of God, together with the whole human family, on a path of conversion that unfolds in four distinct directions: pastoral, synodal, social, and ecological. The Council also outlined a theological and ecclesial style that gives "form" to the ongoing, integral conversion of the Church, which is *semper renovanda*,³ constantly orienting her to be more deeply conformed to Christ, in the style of communion.

From 2007 to the present, much has been accomplished. Yet the challenges outlined in the Aparecida Document still remain valid. The problems posed by globalisation, migration, the resurgence of racism, the exacerbation of social violence, precarious housing, growing poverty, and the stewardship of creation still constitute the litmus test on which the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean is called to measure herself in the light of the Gospel message.

In this sense, the pandemic has brought these critical issues into even sharper focus, like a magnifying glass, revealing other related factors, such as emergencies in health care and education, as well as the need for political leadership that knows how to make common decisions for the good of all.

Within the Church, making mission the direct and intrinsic expression of our baptismal identity means restoring to the entire People of God the full dignity of being active subjects of evangelization (*EG* 114). From the Aparecida Document to the Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*, by means of the

¹ "The People of God believes that it is led by the Lord's Spirit, Who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age. For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for man's total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human. This council, first of all, wishes to assess in this light those values which are most highly prized today and to relate them to their divine source." (*GS* 11)

² "With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage." (*GS* 44)

³ The Council teaches that "Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of people here on earth." (*UR* 6; cf. *LG* 8)

Synod on Synodality, a further challenge is set before us: to reform ecclesial structures in such a way as to incorporate the witness and action of lay men and women into the life and mission of the Church, at all levels, so much so that we do not consider it an anomalous or extraordinary fact that they exercise functions and responsibilities of governance in local Churches and in the Roman Curia. Synodality should not be confused with any one particular structure, such as a synod or assembly, nor should it be reduced to an instrument at the service of episcopal collegiality. Rather, it is what qualifies the *modus essendi et vivendi* of the Church, in the expression of diverse synergies and charisms that converge in communion and unity.

However, in order to constitute for a circular model of Church, it is not enough to address “the abandonment of outdated structures that no longer favour the transmission of the faith” (*ApD* 365), in order to acquire forms of broader participation and decision-making strategies more inclined to listening and dialogue. Rather, to “reverse the pyramid,” we must first of all begin with the conversion of hearts and a change of pace in the way we consider ourselves as living members of the Body of Christ. In order for this to happen, it is urgent to overcome the stumbling block of clericalism, meaning to leave behind that self-referential mentality that has always prevented the transformative power of the Gospel from expressing itself in a concrete actualisation of lifestyles that is inspired by the Gospel and animated by mutual and fraternal love.

At this point, I will take a moment to dwell briefly on clericalism, because I think it may be useful to identify some of its distinctive features in order to discern the direction to take and the work ahead for the good of the Church. Clericalism is primarily a *praxis* that generates a relational *style*. This means that one learns by imitation, following role models that become examples and subsequently generate a paradigm in which develops one’s way of thinking.

If clerical exemplarism exerts such a potent force on new generations of priests and their point of view, it is because it conveys a sense of encouraging “efficiency-ism” and the semblance of control and security. The priority is not given to illuminating the challenges in society with the light of the Word of God, but to imposing a discipline that regulates the practical aspects of the experience of faith. We must acknowledge, with sorrow and contrition before God and the victims, that the verticalized, discriminatory relationships that have come about in certain clericalized Church environments have generated and continue to give rise to numerous cases of abuse of authority, power, conscience, and sexually motivated disorder.

The resistance to the reception of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, of the magisterium of Pope Francis, and even of the Aparecida Document in the Latin American context – which is in fact an expression of the reception of Vatican II – is due in large part to the difficulty of converting the hearts of bishops, clergy, and religious to the idea of a Church with “open doors,” a home for all, in which the affirmation of the diversity of ministries and charisms does not imply the subordination of a *learning* laity to a *teaching* hierarchy. Even the reluctance of many clergy toward synodal conversion often stems from the fear – which is understandable and sometimes not entirely unjustified – that opening up participation in ecclesial governance to the laity may cause a weakening of the structure of the Church, allowing various ideas to enter in and bringing about dynamics that are foreign to Catholic faith and moral values. Indeed, it is often said that the clericalism and careerism “of the laity” is more harmful and deleterious than that of priests.

Even if this were true, the solution would not lie in perpetuating a top-down and authoritarian model of governance, but in promoting and forming the laity to a genuine and authentic spirit of ecclesial belonging and participation. I am referring to lay people who are not only competent in areas in which they can do better than priests, but who first and foremost are men and women of faith, disciples on a journey, in love

with Christ and the Church. Clericalism cannot be countered if at the same time a responsible and reliable laity is not allowed to emerge. In this sense, the future of the Gospel proclamation is at stake: the crisis of authority in the Church, in fact, is reflected in the immediate and consequential mistrust of younger generations for an institution that appears debilitated and inflexible, strongly clerical and anchored in an obsolete formalism.

3. Rediscovering the theological foundation of synodality: The Church “*plebs adunata de Trinitate*”

Synodality, far from depowering or diminishing the Church’s hierarchical ministry, “offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding it,”⁴ enabling the hierarchy to express more authentically its true purpose in the service of the Bride of Christ. Synodality should never be understood in the terms of an “ecclesial strategy” aimed at mitigating the excessive clericalism of recent centuries, but is a return to the Church’s original identity. Indeed, synodality arises from the initiative of God the Father who, as is clear in the Johannine narrative, through the gift of the life of the Son made man (Jn. 10:17) pours out the Holy Spirit and “gathers in unity” (Jn. 11:52).

The verb *synágein* – to gather together, to con-join – contains that precious prefix *syn* that we find in the term synod: the foundational act of God who con-joins the assembly, the faithful remnant, is matched by the *syn-odéuein* of the disciples who walk together with one another. The International Theological Commission’s document on synodality underscores this fact when it states that synodality designates the distinctive style that characterizes the life and mission of the Church, expressing the nature of the gathering of God’s people into an assembly by virtue of Christ’s convocation, walking together under the Spirit’s guidance to proclaim the Gospel to all nations.⁵

To say that the principle of synodality is to be traced back to the action of the Holy Spirit makes it possible to emphasize that the Church is *plebs adunata de Trinitate*, meaning that she participates in the life of communion of the Trinity and becomes the instrument by which all of humanity is called to take part therein. In this sense, we can see in the gift of Trinitarian communion “the source, form and purpose of synodality.”⁶ However, it is also necessary to point out that synodality arises from the free response, consequential and logical, of human beings, of the *forma ecclesiae*, to the grace of the election of the triune God who summons his People.⁷ Synodality, therefore, expresses in the life of the Church the very identity of the God that she proclaims to the world, thus bearing witness to the correspondence between what she is and what she accomplishes based on the Revelation of God in Christ. Concretely, this means showing herself globally to be a believing community, following the style of the one who came “not to be served, but to serve” (Mt 10:45), towards whom she strives in her process of becoming across history.⁸

⁴ Pope Francis, *Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015: AAS 107 (2015), 1139.

⁵ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, 70

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cf. A. Martin, “Appunti per un’ecceologia biblica a carattere sinodale. L’utilizzo della Sacra Scrittura ne La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa”, in *La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa. Commento a più voci al Documento della Commissione teologica internazionale*, P. Coda & R. Repole, Eds., EDB, Bologna 2019, 21.

⁸ Cf. R. Repole, “Verso una teologia della sinodalità. Alcune considerazioni di fondo in relazione al secondo capitolo del documento”, in *La sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa*, op. cit., 56.

Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasised that the People of God, through the action of the Holy Spirit in the baptized (*LG* 12) are infallible *in credendo*. This means that they are intuitively disposed to sense what truly comes from God. However, it would be an ideological operation of empty rhetoric to interpret the *sensus fidei* in such a way as to perpetuate the belief that the lay faithful need firm guidance to express their naive faith. While it is certainly true that some expressions of popular faith need guidance, it is equally true that there is a conscious, capable laity whose voice remains largely unheard.

Obstructing and thwarting the synodal process, perhaps taming it into a light version by reiterating that the laity are called to be “collaborators” and not “co-responsible,” would be like decanting new wine into old wineskins (cf. Mk. 2:22).

From this perspective, slowing down the reform of the Church, waiting for the fervour to die down or for the winds blowing from Rome to change, would be like putting your hand to the plough only to turn back (cf. Lk. 9:62). Rather, in order to “promote the co-responsibility and effective participation of all the faithful in the life of ecclesial communities” (*ApD* 368), it is necessary to foster and encourage the establishment of relationships that are characterised by fraternal love.

Of fundamental importance is the role played by the Bishops’ Conferences in better integrating the exercise of the *sensus fidei* of the entire People of God and in helping local Churches to overcome particularisms, accompanying those areas that most struggle to take on a synodal style toward a renewed understanding of the Church’s mission as a responsibility shared by all.

4. Synodality and inculturation: Valuing differences, building unity

In Francis’ vision, synodality is an instrument of participation aimed at involving everyone. Synodality stands against all hierarchical reductionism and prevents a bland uniformity that does not let particular identities emerge. In other words, synodality constitutes the set of those “processes that can build a people that can accept differences” (*FT* 217). No one has stated more forcefully than the current pope that Christianity lives and thrives in differences. This emphasis stems from a theological choice, namely the emphasis on the mystery of the Incarnation as the propelling centre of Christian action. The mystery of Christ speaks to us of taking on that which is different: the radical difference between God and the Creature. This difference is never annulled, but always in tension, as the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) teaches about the two natures of Jesus which exist “without confusion, without division.” As Francis writes, “we would not do justice to the logic of the Incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous” (*QAm* 69).

Evangelisation, then, following the very same movement of the Word made flesh, does not cancel out human differences, nor does it entail for itself an *implantatio ecclesiae* that gives rise to a univocal cultural form. On the contrary, the Gospel enriches cultures from within because it always enters into dialogue with humanity in its diverse socio-cultural expressions, illuminating them with the light of Revelation.

Recognising the seeds of the Word that are already present in different cultures means confessing with faith that evangelisation unfolds by bearing the Truth of Christ in a spirit of respect and esteem for the identity of others. When one understands that the proclamation of the Gospel is animated by the intrinsic dynamism of inculturation and interculturality, one also matures in the awareness that in “giving” there is always “receiving,” and that “speaking” always involves “listening.” An ecclesial community that is truly missionary, that approaches the history and experience of others with respect, will experience that a mutual

enrichment emerges from the contact between the Gospel and cultures. The inculturation of faith is a two-way process: if the Church in delivering the Word of God offers the possibility for all cultures to discover a meaning and purpose to human existence, at the same time, she will discover how encountering other cultures brings to the surface visions of humanity that reveal and deepen new facets of the Mystery of Christ. As the Synod on the Amazon pointed out, inculturation should be thought of from the perspective of a two-way correspondence: there is a wisdom emanating from the cultures of Indigenous peoples that, as it is enriched by the Mystery of Christ, offers a unique and irreplicable depth to understanding the theology of creation.

In so many parts of the world, local Churches still face the effects and consequences of evangelisation that was understood and implemented in terms of cultural colonisation. We need to work harder so that the process of decolonisation is not only about overcoming and healing the wounds of the past, but also about promoting and sustaining the recovery and clarification of an identity that has often continued to exist under the radar, clandestinely, with unique customs and traditions. Decolonising in this case will also mean discerning the chaff from the wheat, purifying and redeeming, so as to allow for an authentic faith to emerge amidst the peculiarities of the culture itself, without undermining the Word of God and the Tradition of the Church, on the one hand, nor eliminating what is specific to each people's identity. Pope Francis warns us that colonisation has not ended, but that in many places "it has been changed, disguised and concealed, while losing none of its contempt for the life of the poor and the fragility of the environment" (*QAm* 16). We must be vigilant against new forms of ideological colonisation, for it would be a grave mistake and an impoverishment for all to let the globalisation of markets impose a uniformity of thinking and lifestyles. Synodality is allied to the inculturation of faith because it enhances differences and brings identities together in harmony. Like a polyhedron, a synodal Church is a pluriform unity.

5. Synodality and pastoral commitment: Placing everything in a missionary key

As the Final Document of Aparecida stated, "The pastoral conversion of our communities demands that we move beyond a mere pastoral ministry of conservation toward a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry" (*ApD* 370). Moving beyond a model of the Church solely focused on sacramental action requires an effort to promote pastoral action that takes on the challenges posed by history, especially those that find an echo in the cry of the poor. This means integrating the teachings of the Church's Social Doctrine into the spiritual and human formation activities of faith communities, not only of pastoral agents, but rather of all those who are called to "give a reason for the hope that is in them" (1 Pet. 3:15) in the ordinary contexts of their lives, especially in their family, work, and society.

When Pope Francis boldly states, "I desire a Church that is poor and for the poor" (*EG* 198), he is not saying that we should opt for some kind of ideological or classist perspective. Rather, he is calling us to our responsibility as Church, to conform ourselves to Christ who "rich though he was, made himself poor" (2 Cor. 8:9). If the suspicion of an ideological Marxist infiltration has burdened the practice of the Church in Latin America in the past, this should not deter us from finding a privileged place in pastoral action for a preferential concern for the poor and confessing that this "is implicit in our Christian faith" (*EG* 198).

Therefore, if it is intrinsic to faith in Jesus Christ, the option for the poor is anything but optional! It must permeate and lead to rethinking the way of planning and managing all the activities of the ordinary pastoral care of communities (*EG* 186-216). It should not be forgotten that when Francis categorically states "I desire a Church that is poor and for the poor," he immediately provides a precise rationale: "the poor have

much to teach us.” As with inculturation, the choice to become a poor Church with the poor has more to do with what we receive than with what we have to offer: the poor evangelize us (EG 198).

Francis makes no secret of his fondness for a passage in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), in which Paul VI spoke of the “sweet and comforting joy of evangelising” (EN 80). For Francis, this is an insight that can condense the meaning of the missionary Church today: to evangelise is the Church’s reason for existing, from which she obtains the joy of experiencing the living and working presence of Christ in the midst of her own. This demands that the parish come out of itself, to abandon self-referentiality, theological narcissism, in order to open itself to the world, to history, not with a judgmental attitude, but with the mercy-filled gaze of the Father who “so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son” (Jn. 3:16).

When the Church is self-referential it develops the pathology of spiritual worldliness, an evil that Henri de Lubac had no qualms about stigmatising as the worst illness with which the Bride of Christ can be afflicted. If the Church stops understanding herself as the *mysterium lunae* in relation to Christ *sol justitiae*, she begins to live in order to give glory to herself. The option for the poor is the cure for a self-referential Church, for in encountering those who are too often outcast and forgotten, the weakest and the suffering, she comes into contact with the wounds of Christ from which flows the source of healing and redemption: “by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24).

The word most repeated in the Aparecida Document is *life*. It recurs more than 600 times. This should give us pause: if evangelisation is offering a worthy and full life to human beings, then pastoral activities must bring a message of hope to those who suffer from the many failings, pains, and obstacles that they face. Our pastoral care must resemble the *Good Samaritan*, by daring to come close, bending over those who are wounded and fallen in the midst of our world today, anointing them with oil of gladness, carrying them on our shoulders, and providing whatever is necessary so that they can get back on their feet and regain their dignity as beloved children.

It is not enough to declare the urgency of the missionary conversion of the universal Church, local Churches, Bishops’ Conferences, parishes, and ecclesial movements. It is a matter of carefully considering those “ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelisation” (EG 26) – obsolete structures in which a Church that is unaccustomed to fraternal communion and disengaged with respect to her mission is entrenched. Here too, synodality can be a decisive resource in discerning how to incarnate the Church’s mission: it is not a matter of inventing something new, but of reforming existing structures so that they are truly at the service of the missionary force of every sector of ordinary pastoral work.

6. Synodality and the ecological crisis: the joint protection of the “common home”

At Aparecida, the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean felt it their duty to educate the population to be more sensitive and attentive to environmental issues, first of all starting from the objective fact that nature on the continent manifests itself as a “gratuitous inheritance” (ApD 471). Latin America presents “one of the greatest biodiversities on the planet” (ApD 83), the Final Document argues, and this prosperity offered to all constitutes a common good to be guarded and preserved, with gratitude and a sense of responsibility.

In fulfilling this duty, we need to be shrewd and vigilant with regard to the new forms of threat that come from a reckless and inequitable use of environmental resources today. In particular, I would like to mention

the regrettable global phenomenon that goes by the name of “extractivism” and which in the Latin American continent is assuming alarming proportions. The term refers to the custom of taking resources from a region of origin, often pushing them to extreme depletion, and displacing them for the benefit of other places and peoples, vastly distant in both geography and their standards of living, causing harm to the environment and to local populations. Extractivism is a new form of colonisation, combined with an unbridled tendency of the current economic system to convert nature’s goods into profit. Among the areas most affected by extractivism is the Amazon, whose aggressive and systematic deforestation is the main cause of reduced biodiversity and compromised delicate ecosystems. Another vicious expression of extractivism is the impoverishment of the land, whose mineral resources and fossil deposits are rapidly being turned into money, incidentally fuelling corruption and political instability.

At the same time, the cry of the earth is added to the cry of the most vulnerable, the Indigenous peoples, and the poor who are in fact the most “threatened by predatory development” (*Dap* 474). The climate crisis and the systematic and coercive exploitation of nature are responsible for the increase in the number of refugees and displaced persons.⁹ Rising temperatures, prolonged periods of drought followed by floods, violent cloudbursts, and devastating hurricanes have as their direct consequence the worsening lack of food and water, housing, and basic necessities. Like a chain reaction, the growing number of migrants, internally displaced persons, and refugees causes the resurgence of various expressions of violence, episodes of social tension, and racism. The Church is called to act together, in a synodal way, listening as much *to the cry of the earth as to the cry of the poor* (*LS* 48), spreading a culture of respect for our “common home,” and, above all, being a spokesperson for the need to reformulate the very concept of progress and economic growth, calling on the world of politics make choices that guarantee greater protection of the common good that is the environment itself.

7. Synodality and social reality

If evangelisation must urge us towards a now inescapable “pastoral conversion,” it must spur the also search for a more equitable and just, more fraternal and sororal society. The galloping secularisation that even in Latin America and the Caribbean is rearing its nihilistic and atheistic head – often disguised as a cynical promise of economic growth – demands of Catholics the boldness to bring the wise tradition of the Church’s social teaching into the realm of everyday temporal realities. To this day, the words uttered by the Council in the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* remain a beacon that shows us the way and leads us in the right direction:

The laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation. Led by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church and motivated by Christian charity, they must act directly and in a definite way in the temporal sphere. As citizens they must cooperate with other citizens with their own particular skill and on their own responsibility. Everywhere and in all things they must seek the justice of God’s kingdom. (*AA* 7).

The reference to *citizenship* seems particularly important, because it is in this context that Gospel values must enter into dialogue with the various aspects and actors in the social, political, cultural, and religious fabric of our world. But if citizenship, as the specific context in which the lay faithful are called to act in

⁹ Cf. CELAM, *Síntesis de la Fase Continental del sínodo de la sinodalidad en América Latina y el Caribe* (1 October 2021), 27.

the sphere of temporal realities, is a responsibility that pertains to the laity in the name of the whole Church, this means that they must be able to express themselves creatively, exercising in upright conscience a freedom that should not be coerced or compromised at the outset.

When we speak of the *Church's Social Doctrine*, then, we should think of it in this pedagogical perspective, in a line of succession with the Christian *paideia/politeia*: its teaching is directed at restoring and strengthening the relationship between God and the human person, and between the human person and community. As Saint Paul states, all Scripture is useful for “teaching, persuading, correcting,” but its educational function has as its primary purpose that of “training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Teaching and disseminating the Church's Social Doctrine is an essential part of the Christian message: it is not a secondary action, which is added as an after-thought, as an area of practical applications that follows a body of dogmatic truths. Rather, it lies at the very heart of the Gospel proclamation. Communicating Catholic social teachings falls within the ministry of the Church, as a service to the Word and to man, because “only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light” (GS 22).

This is well understood in a dense passage of *Evangelii Gaudium*, which states that the understanding of the social dimension is no longer to be understood as an addition to the Gospel, as a moment subsequent to it according to the adage “*operari sequitur esse*,” but rather as its inner, truly intrinsic reality.¹⁰

The kerygma has a clear social content: at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others. The content of the first proclamation has an immediate moral implication centred on charity. (EG 177).

In this sense, lack of attention to the poor and reluctance in expressing tangible solidarity with one's neighbour are to be placed in relation to the difficulty of building an authentic relationship of listening to the Word of God and of dialogue with God (EG 187). The dedication we have towards our brothers and sisters is the measure of the authenticity of our relationship with God. It is this principle that guides us, as believers, in our concrete commitments in life and provides us with the criterion by which to examine our choices in the spheres of society, economics, politics, the environment, technology, health, and safety.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude by referring once again to the specific event of the Synod on Amazon, whose work concluded on October 26, 2019 with the presentation of the Final Document to the Holy Father. Pope Francis honoured this work by deepening and illuminating further aspects of it in his apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia*. However, none of these documents were intended as a terminus on the ongoing work before us, nor did they make any claim to have the last word on the topics discussed. As long as the Amazon region and its inhabitants continue to live in peril, and as long as the social, cultural, ecological, and pastoral dreams envisioned by Pope Francis remain unfulfilled, we must continue our commitment to reflecting upon and searching for a common direction in the actions we must undertake.

This is also true for the work of CELAM, because gathering together as the People of God, as the “open-eyed” and clear-sighted Church, on a journey through history, even before worrying about “doing” something or choosing “what” to do, has value in itself for the very fact that in the exchange and cross-

¹⁰ Cf. M. Czerny & C. Barone, *Siblings All, Sign of the Times: The Social Teaching of Pope Francis*. Orbis, 2022, 27.

contamination of ideas, mindsets can begin to change. Ecclesial *metanoia* is, as Francis puts it, “being encouraged to enter into a process.”

“Ecclesial processes,” the Holy Father points out, “have a necessity: they need to be protected, cared for like a child, supported at the beginning, taken care of gently. They need the warmth of the community; they need the warmth of Mother Church. This is how an ecclesial process grows.”¹¹

As your brother in faith, feeling a bit Latin American myself because of the journey of religious life that brought me here as a Jesuit to work with you in complex and difficult years, I encourage you to continue with hope in this work of renewing the Church. May the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean continue to be the fertile ground for ideas and experiences by which the universal Church can grow in order to draw ever closer to the Christ who has come, who is coming, who will come, “that they may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Greeting for the Opening of the Works of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region* (7 October 2019).