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Apostolic Trip of the Holy Father Francis to Chile and Peru (15-22 January 2018) – Meeting with the Peoples of Amazonia in the Coliseo Madre de Dios, Puerto Maldonado

Meeting with the Peoples of Amazonia in the Coliseo Madre de Dios, Puerto Maldonado

This morning, after leaving the apostolic nunciature, the Holy Father Francis transferred by car to the Airport – Grupo 8 Lima from where, at 8.30 local time (14.30 in Rome), he departed on board a LATAM A319 destined for Puerto Maldonado.

Upon arrival at the “Fr. José Aldámiz” International Airport, Pope Francis was received by the vicar apostolic of Puerto Maldonado, H.E. Msgr. David Martínez de Aguirre Guinea, O.P., the Governor, and the Mayor. Several hundred faithful were present, with a choir and 150 children. A native Matsigenka family presented a floral tribute to the Holy Father, who then travelled by car the *Coliseo Madre de Dios* where, at 10.30 local time (16.30 in Rome), he met with around 4,000 representatives of the various peoples of Amazonia.

In the *Coliseo*, after the hymns and welcome dances by Arambut elders, the vicar apostolic of Puerto Maldonado, H.E. Msgr. David Martínez de Aguirre Guinea, O.P., gave a welcome address to Pope Francis. Then, after the testimony of various representatives of the peoples of Amazonia and the presentation of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'* in local languages while a Machirenga song was performed, the Holy Father gave an address.

At the end of the meeting, after the exchange of gifts, the Pope toured among the faithful by popemobile in the field of the “Instituto Jorge Basadre” facing the *Coliseo* where the meeting with the population then took place.

The following is the Pope’s address to the representatives of the peoples of Amazonia:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Here with you, I feel welling up within me the song of Saint Francis: "Praise be to you, my Lord!" Yes, praise be to you for the opportunity you have given us in this encounter. Thank you, Bishop David Martínez de Aguirre Guinea, Hector, Yésica and María Luisa, for your words of welcome and for your witness talks. In you, I would like to thank and greet all the inhabitants of Amazonia.

I see that you come from the different native peoples of Amazonia: Harakbut, Esse-ejas, Matsiguenkas, Yines, Shipibos, Asháninkas. Yaneshas, Kakintes, Nahuas, Yaminahuas, Juni Kuin, Madijá, Manchineris, Kukamas, Kandozi, Quichuas, Huitotos, Shawis, Achuar, Boras, Awajún, Wampís, and others. I also see that among us are peoples from the Andes who came to the forest and became Amazonians. I have greatly looked forward to this meeting. I wanted to begin my visit to Peru here. Thank you for being here and for helping us to see closer up, in your faces, the reflection of this land. It is a diverse face, one of infinite variety and enormous biological, cultural and spiritual richness. Those of us who do not live in these lands need your wisdom and knowledge to enable us to enter into, without destroying, the treasures that this region holds. And to hear an echo of the words that the Lord spoke to Moses: "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Ex 3:5).

Allow me to say once again: "Praise to you, Lord, for your marvellous handiwork in your Amazonian peoples and for all the biodiversity that these lands embrace!

This song of praise is cut short when we learn about, and see, the deep wounds that Amazonia and its peoples bear. I wanted to come to visit you and listen to you, so that we can stand together, in the heart of the Church, and share your challenges and reaffirm with you a heartfelt option for the defence of life, the defence of the earth and the defence of cultures.

The native Amazonian peoples have probably never been so threatened on their own lands as they are at present. Amazonia is being disputed on various fronts. On the one hand, there is neo-extractivism and the pressure being exerted by great business interests that want to lay hands on its petroleum, gas, wood, gold and forms of agro-industrial monocultivation. On the other hand, its lands are being threatened by the distortion of certain policies aimed at the "conservation" of nature without taking into account the men and women, specifically you, my Amazonian brothers and sisters, who inhabit it. We know of movements that, under the guise of preserving the forest, hoard great expanses of woodland and negotiate with them, leading to situations of oppression for the native peoples; as a result, they lose access to the land and its natural resources. These problems strangle her peoples and provoke the migration of the young due to the lack of local alternatives. We have to break with the historical paradigm that views Amazonia as an inexhaustible source of supplies for other countries without concern for its inhabitants.

I consider it essential to begin creating institutional expressions of respect, recognition and dialogue with the native peoples, acknowledging and recovering their native cultures, languages, traditions, rights and spirituality. An intercultural dialogue in which you yourselves will be "the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting your land are proposed".[1] Recognition and dialogue will be the best way to transform relationships whose history is marked by exclusion and discrimination.

At the same time, it is right to acknowledge the existence of promising initiatives coming from your own communities and organizations, which advocate that the native peoples and communities themselves be the guardians of the woodlands. The resources that conservation practices generate would then revert to benefit your families, improve your living conditions and promote health and education in your communities. This form of "doing good" is in harmony with the practices of "good living" found in the wisdom of our peoples. Allow me to state that if, for some, you are viewed as an obstacle or a hindrance, the fact is your lives cry out against a style of life that is oblivious to its own real cost. You are a living memory of the mission that God has entrusted to us all: the protection of our common home.

The defence of the earth has no other purpose than the defence of life. We know of the suffering caused for

some of you by emissions of hydrocarbons, which gravely threaten the lives of your families and contaminate your natural environment.

Along the same lines, there exists another devastating assault on life linked to this environmental contamination favoured by illegal mining. I am speaking of human trafficking: slave labour and sexual abuse. Violence against adolescents and against women cries out to heaven. "I have always been distressed at the lot of those who are victims of various kinds of human trafficking. How I wish that all of us would hear God's cry, 'Where is your brother?' (*Gen 4:9*). Where is your brother or sister who is enslaved? Let us not pretend and look the other way. There is greater complicity than we think. This issue involves everyone!"[2]

How can we fail to remember Saint Turibius, who stated with dismay in the Third Council of Lima "that not only in times past were great wrongs and acts of coercion done to these poor people, but in our own time many seek to do the same..." (Session III, c. 3). Sadly, five centuries later, these words remain timely. The prophetic words of those men of faith – as Hector and Yèsica reminded us – are the cry of this people, which is often silenced or not allowed to speak. That prophecy must remain alive in our Church, which will never stop pleading for the outcast and those who suffer.

This concern gives rise to our basic option for the life of the most defenceless. I am thinking of the peoples referred to as "Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation" (PIAV). We know that they are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. Their primitive lifestyle made them isolated even from their own ethnic groups; they went into seclusion in the most inaccessible reaches of the forest in order to live in freedom. Continue to defend these most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters. Their presence reminds us that we cannot use goods meant for all as consumerist greed dictates. Limits have to be set that can help preserve us from all plans for a massive destruction of the habitat that makes us who we are.

The recognition of these people – who can never be considered a minority, but rather authentic dialogue partners – as of all the native peoples, reminds us that we are not the absolute owners of creation. We need urgently to appreciate the essential contribution that they bring to society as a whole, and not reduce their cultures to an idealized image of a natural state, much less a kind of museum of a bygone way of life. Their cosmic vision and their wisdom, have much to teach those of us who are not part of their culture. All our efforts to improve the lives of the Amazonian peoples will prove too little. We hear disturbing reports about the spread of certain diseases. The silence is alarming and deadly. By remaining silent, we fail to work for prevention, especially among adolescents and young people, and to ensure treatment, thus condemning the sick to a cruel ostracism. We call upon states to implement policies of intercultural health that take into account the experience and the worldview of the native people, training professionals from each ethnic group who can deal with the disease in the context of their own worldview. As I pointed out in *Laudato Si'*, once again we need to speak out against the pressure applied to certain countries by international organizations that promote sterilization policies. These are particularly directed at the native peoples. We know too that the practice of sterilizing women, at times without their knowledge, continues to be promoted.

The culture of our peoples is a sign of life. Amazonia is not only a reserve of biodiversity but also a cultural reserve that must be preserved in the face of the new forms of colonialism. The family is – as one of you said – and always has been, the social institution that has most contributed to keeping our cultures alive. In moments of past crisis, in the face of various forms of imperialism, the families of the original peoples have been the best defence of life. Special care is demanded of us, lest we allow ourselves to be ensnared by ideological forms of colonialism, disguised as progress, that slowly but surely dissipate cultural identities and establish a uniform, single... and weak way of thinking. Please listen to the elderly. They possess a wisdom that puts them in contact with the transcendent and makes them see what is essential in life. Let us not forget that "the disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, or even more serious, than the disappearance of a species of plant or animal".[3] The one way for cultures not to disappear is for them to keep alive and in constant movement. How important is what Yèsica and Hector told us: "We want our children to study, but we don't want the school to erase our traditions, our languages; we don't want to forget our ancestral wisdom!"

Education helps us to build bridges and to create a culture of encounter. Schooling and education for the native

peoples must be a priority and commitment of the state: an integrated and inculturated commitment that recognizes, respects and integrates their ancestral wisdom as a treasure belonging to the whole nation, as María Luzmila made clear to us.

I ask my brother bishops to continue, as they are doing even in the remotest places in the forest, to encourage intercultural and bilingual education in the schools, in institutions of teacher training, and in the universities.[4] I express my appreciation of the initiatives that the Amazonian Church in Peru helps carry out in favour of the native peoples. These include schools, student residences, centres of research and development like the José Pío Aza Cultural Centre, CAAAP and CETA, and new and important intercultural projects like NOPOKI, aimed expressly at training young people from the different ethnic groups of our Amazonia.

I likewise support all those young men and women of the native peoples who are trying to create from their own standpoint a new anthropology, and working to reinterpret the history of their peoples from their own perspective. I also encourage those who through art, literature, craftsmanship and music show the world your worldview and your cultural richness. Much has been written and spoken about you. It is good that you are now the ones to define yourselves and show us your identity. We need to listen to you.

Dear brothers and sisters of Amazonia, how many missionaries, men and women, have devoted themselves to your peoples and defended your cultures! They did so inspired by the Gospel. Christ himself took flesh in a culture, the Jewish culture, and from it, he gave us himself as a source of newness for all peoples, in such a way that each, in its own deepest identity, feels itself affirmed in him. Do not yield to those attempts to uproot the Catholic faith from your peoples.[5] Each culture and each worldview that receives the Gospel enriches the Church by showing a new aspect of Christ's face. The Church is not alien to your problems and your lives, she does not want to be aloof from your way of life and organization. We need the native peoples to shape the culture of the local churches in Amazonia. And in this regard, it gave me great joy to hear that one of *Laudato Si's* passages was read by a permanent deacon of your own culture. Help your bishops, and help your men and women missionaries, to be one with you, and in this way, by an inclusive dialogue, to shape a Church with an Amazonian face, a Church with a native face. In this spirit, I have convoked a Synod for Amazonia in 2019 whose first meeting, as the pre-Synodal Council, will be held here this afternoon.

I trust in your peoples' capacity for resilience and your ability to respond to these difficult times in which you live. You have shown this at different critical moments in your history, with your contributions and with your differentiated vision of human relations, with the natural environment and your way of living the faith.

I pray for you, and for this land blessed by God, and I ask you, please, not to forget to pray for me.

Many thanks!

Tinkunakama (Quechua: Until we meet again)
