October’s Synod in Rome is coming under fire from critics of the Pope, including prominent cardinals. A senior figure in its planning presents the framework of spiritual discernment in which the synodal process should be understood / BY MAURICIO LOPEZ OROPEZA

Make room for the God of surprises

It seems natural to me – and even desirable – that we should hear a variety of voices (including dissenting ones) in the Amazon Synod process. This reflects the abundant richness of the Church. In any synod journey, if we are talking about remaining faithful to its essential purpose of spiritual discernment, all well-intentioned voices are welcomed.

One of the defining features of the Amazon Synod is that it acts from the periphery towards the centre. Here, perhaps, lies the explanation for the disquiet over the synod in certain sectors within the Church – and beyond. As so often happens in the Gospel of Jesus, it is a voice from the margins that is patiently calling to the centre in a shared quest for purity of heart. And this can challenge settled positions and comfortable assumptions.

In this synod process, which will reach a climax in three weeks of discussion in Rome this October, it is the Amazon region – indeed, the South American Church as a whole, with its richly distinctive approaches to materialism, individualism, technocracy and the “throwaway culture” – that will be speaking to the Church, calling it to conversion.

This is not a process in which the periphery seeks to usurp the role and place of the centre. That would be totally undesirable. The periphery brings it no more and no less than what it is and what it has. But at this present moment it is perhaps the peripheries, the neglected corners and some of the forgotten peoples of the world, that might best shed a light on the way forward, not only for the Church but also for society as a whole.

What will authentic spiritual discernment look like? The Pope and the bishops are joined together in the same way as, in the Gospel, Peter and the other apostles constituted one apostolic college. This is, as the Second Vatican Council reminds us, “the very ancient practice whereby bishops duly established in all parts of the world were in communion with one another and with the Bishop of Rome in a bond of unity, charity and peace” (“Lumen Gentium, 22”).

We should not be worried by differences of opinion about the forthcoming synod; that is natural and, indeed, positive. But every contribution should be marked by the three elements beautifully expressed by the council fathers – unity, charity and peace.

Spiritual discernment is the pathway for finding and following the will of God. I am constantly learning from my own experience of accompaniment in the tradition of Ignatius of Loyola. It is a question of discerning what is good spiritually, what leads to a greater abundance, a greater sense of life, greater interior peace and communion. What is of God and what constitutes a “spiritual consolation” (“Spiritual Exercises, 316”) is characterised by a bolstering of hope, faith and charity, and by interior joy and happiness.

This contrasts with what is not of God and which expresses “spiritual desolation”: darkness of the soul, turbulence and anxiety, a lack of trust and a loss of direction and purpose. In commenting on the synod, it can be easy to fall into the trap of being distracted by strident positions that do not enrich and further the process of discernment.

There is a danger, too, in trying to “bind” the Holy Spirit, so that before discernment at the gathering in October even begins, critics seek deliberately to stifle discussion by imposing limitations, barriers and restrictions. The preparatory document for the synod (“Lineamenta”) and the working document (“Instrumentum Laboris”) are part of a process, not final documents, set in stone. They are means, not ends. They are, in a way, like the grain of wheat that has to die before it can bear fruit. They have emerged from a long process of discernment among the faithful of the Amazon that has seen very wide participation.

“Instrumentum Laboris” is the result of an
intense process. It has been much prayed over, with collegiality as its foundation stone. It has come out of an extensive consultation (perhaps unprecedented in the recent history of the Church). It is the result of reflection, debate and approval by a pre-synod council put in place by Pope Francis. Participating in it were representative bishops from the Amazon region; bishops and representatives of specialised agencies who have accompanied the mission of the Church in this region; and bishops who brought to bear relevant experience from other realities outside the Amazon area.

There was also Pope Francis himself, who presided over it, and the support of the permanent secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. It is crucial both to value this expression of collegiality and to recognise its richness. In the questioning that will inevitably arise, the sense of collegiality that is inherent in the whole manner of being ecclesial – of “being Church” – should be honoured.

The invitation to the whole Church now is to show respect and humility and to open our ears and hearts in order to see what God could be saying through the people of the Amazon, for the good of all the Church. About 87,000 people participated in the “listening” exercise that was part of the formal consultation process for the synod, facilitated by the Pan-Amazon Church Network (Repam). Of these, 22,000 participated in assemblies, forums and caucuses, and at least another 65,000 in the preparatory processes in the nine countries of the Panamazonia: parts of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru, Venezuela and Surinam. Ninety per cent of the bishops of the region or their vicars attended. And in some cases, the episcopal conferences themselves carried out their own consultation processes.

The reflection within Instrumentum Laboris calls for a serious and profound reading on our part. We have to discern with courage, energy, and interior freedom that to which God calls us in this present situation – one that we recognise as a true kairos moment. We should let go of a suspicious frame of mind that could prevent the Spirit expressing itself to us as a breath of fresh air.

It is vital to remember that, like every synod, the special Amazon Synod acts as an accompaniment to the Pope in his service to the Church. A crucial factor if it is to bear good fruit is that those involved in the process have a genuine disposition to seek communion. Again, these familiar words from the Second Vatican Council are worth bearing in mind: “The college or body of bishops has no authority unless it is understood together with the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter, as its head. The Pope’s power of primacy over all, both pastors and faithful, remains whole and intact. In virtue of his office, that is as Vicar of Christ and pastor of the whole Church, the Roman Pontiff has full, supreme and universal power over the Church. And he is always free to exercise this power” (Lumen Gentium, 22).

What seems to underlie many of the concerns about Instrumentum Laboris expressed by its critics is the apparent tension between some elements of Church teaching and discipline and the sense of faith of the people of God, the sensus fidei. The Vatican Council teaches “that the holy people of God shares also in Christ’s prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to God, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give praise to God’s name”.

“The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples’ supernatural discernment in matters of faith when ‘from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful’ they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.” This point is continued on page 6.

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reasserted by Pope Francis in his apostolic constitution on the structure of the synod, Episcopalis Communio.

The council also affirms that the Holy Spirit, not only sanctifies and directs the People of God in sacraments and ministries, but also "distributes special graces among any of the faithful regardless of social position, passing on to each one according to what he or she needs or wants". In a carefully nurtured discernment, one side never seeks to triumph over the other. There are no opposing sides, because it is a process of seeking what leads towards the realisation of God's plan for Creation. This is the great danger with extremist positions or with those who seek simply to dismiss or discredit the other side. Neither allow for dialogue or for space "for the God of Surprises" to act.

We must walk without fear of the new, respecting our sources and roots, so that the presence of God in the world, in its peoples and in the Amazon, grows stronger, and the mission of the Church is strengthened.

Mauricio López Oropeza is Executive Secretary of the Pan-Amazon Church Network (Repam). The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region takes place on 6-27 October on the theme "Amazonia: new paths for the Church and for an integral ecology".

CHILE'S JESUITS IN CRISIS

Collective shock that haunts the Society of Jesus in South America

Once feted for its service to the poor, the Ignatian order is reeling from learning one of its legends was an abuser

C H I L E H A S NOT been short of earthquakes. The one currently shaking the Chilean Catholic Church, once one of the most respected institutions in South America, is high on the Richter scale. Eighteen months after Pope Francis' visit to the country was overshadowed by an abuse scandal, the late Jesuit priest Renato Poblete, who was one of Chile's most venerated legends of modern times, has been exposed as a serial abuser of women, writes Jimmy Burns.

When Poblete died aged 85 in 2010 he was widely admired for his work over decades among the poor; he was also remembered for his role as the mediator who helped to secure the release of the son of a Chilean press magnate from left-wing guerrillas in 1991.

For many years, Poblete had been the inspirational head and hugely successful fundraiser for Hogar de Cristo ("Home of Christ"), turning it into the country's leading charity with an annual income of nearly £50 million, with more than 30,000 volunteers working with the homeless, vulnerable poor children, and people suffering from mental health issues and alcohol and drug addiction. Hogar de Cristo had been founded in 1944 by another Jesuit priest, Alberto Hurtado, who was beatified during the papacy of John Paul II and canonised by Pope Benedict XVI in 2005.

Poblete was a hero to both progressive and more traditionalist Catholics, a rare centre of consensus in a Church that has been left deeply divided by the experience of socialism under Salvador Allende, succeeded by the abuse of human rights that followed the Pinochet coup.

According to the findings of an enquiry commissioned by Chile's Jesuits province, published at the end of July, Poblete sexually abused at least 22 women, including four minors, over four decades. The enquiry was launched after the Jesuits received a detailed complaint from Marcela Aranda Escobar, a professor of theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile.

Professor Escobar said Poblete abused her physically and sexually for eight years after she had begun working at the Hogar de Cristo as a 20-year-old. She said that Poblete had forced her to abort three pregnancies. Cristián del Campo, the Jesuit provincial superior of Chile, said that "the abuses of power, of conscience, sexual and other crimes" committed by Poblete "were sustained by a sort of double life, protected by his public image of a good person."

Fr del Campo said that the testimonies given by Aranda and other survivors reveal a pattern of violence, of abuse of power as well as emotional and psychological manipulation of the victims and their families, which facilitated his actions and the silence of both other victims and people. The Poblete case broadens the issue of abuse in Chile to encompass women, raising urgent questions about their place in the Church. "There has to be a change in what it means to be Church: from the inclusion of women to a more open debate about celibacy," says Marcial Sanchez, a historian at the Pontifical University of Chile.

A sense of collective shock now haunts the Society of Jesus beyond the Chilean province, once held up as an example in South America of service to others. While accepting that his order in Chile may have erred on the side of "arrogance" by not acting with greater humility, Fr del Campo is struggling to convey a sense that he put the concerns of victims and survivors first.

The damage to the order's reputation in Chile contrasts with the huge uplift it received with the election, six months before the youthful del Campo's appointment, of Jorge Bergoglio as the first Jesuit, and the first South American Pope. Bergoglio drew great inspiration from Hurtado's life and example. Among Hurtado's writings that had the greatest impact on the young Bergoglio was one proclaiming Christ's presence among the poor and marginalised and highlighting the dignity of women.

Many lay volunteers, nuns and priests are continuing to play an important role supporting refugees and immigrants, and the indigenous Mapuche, campaigning for land rights. As the Pope and the Jesuit headquarters in Rome struggled to absorb the shock of the report on Poblete, a group of Catholic men and women staged a day of "witness" in Santiago to focus attention on the reordering of our society to save our planet, in the spirit of Laudato Si'. They have not lost their faith in a radical agenda for change, and the Ignatian vision of God in all things.

Jimmy Burns is a prize-winning author and journalist. His books include Francis: Pope of Good Promise: From Argentina's Bergoglio to the World's Francis.

Go to: www.vatican2voice.org

The website promotes the teachings of Vatican II, with authoritative contributions and easy access to the documents. It further the ongoing renewal of the Roman Catholic Church.

Two Council Fathers feature prominently: Abbot, later Bishop Christopher Butler OSB; and Franz, Cardinal König, Archbishop emeritus of Vienna. Both had great regard for The Tablet. In 1968 Butler called it "that great journal". In 2005 König dedicated his final book to The Tablet.