

Pope opens unprecedented synod in attempt to stop Amazon destruction

A hundred years ago the Harakmbut people were nearly wiped out. The inhabitants of a vast jungle region where Peru meets Brazil and Bolivia, the tribespeople were enslaved by rubber barons and murdered en masse, only surviving thanks to the help of Dominican missionaries. Now a new threat of extinction looms, and once again they are appealing to the Catholic church. As wildfires and deforestation drive the Amazon rainforest towards a tipping point beyond which it cannot recover, bishops from the nine South American nations that share the Amazon are meeting at the Vatican this week to try to muster the spiritual and earthly forces to pull the world's largest rainforest back from the brink. The opening of the synod yesterday was attended by indigenous people from several tribes, some with their faces painted and wearing feathered headdresses, as well as more than 180 South



American cardinals, bishops and priests. Pope Francis told them: re set by interests that destroy, like the fire that recently devastated Amazonia, is not the fire of the Gospel. The fire of God is warmth that attracts and gathers into unity. It is fed by sharing, not by profits." He prayed that God's "daring prudence" would inspire the bishops to take bold action to protect the region. "If everything continues as it was, if we spend our days content that 'this is the way things have always been done,' then the gift vanishes, smothered by the ashes of fear and concern for defending the status quo," he said. Yesica Patiachi, a Harakmbut leader from Peru, has journeyed to Rome for the unprecedented synod. Although not a practising Catholic, the 32-yearold teacher sees the church as a key ally to save the rainforest. "Eden is here in the Amazon and we are destroying it," she said. "We cannot pray to God when we are destroying his creation." One of the synod's organisers, Father Peter Hughes, said the threeweek gathering would set out a new view of ecology based on Christian faith in God as the creator of a "common home". Hughes said the Catholic church should place itself alongside the region's indigenous people, defending their territorial rights and way of life. "The life of the [Amazon] people is intrinsically, inherently part of the territory. If the territory is injured, the people are injured," he said. Stretching from the Andes in the west to Brazil's Atlantic coast, the Amazon basin ecosystem faces a host of threats. Fires, many ignited deliberately, have surged across the region. In Brazil, whose territory includes the largest portion of the Amazon, blazes increased by 84% in August compared with the same period last year, and deforestation spiked in July to a level not seen in more than a decade. Rains in September aided efforts to control the fires, but the aggressively antienvironment rhetoric of the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, continues to embolden landgrabbers, loggers and miners to invade indigenous or protected land. The situation is equally dire in neighbouring Bolivia, where up to 4m hectares in the Chiquitano dry forest, Amazon and Gran Chaco ecosystems have burned in two months. Environmentalists blame the leftwing president, Evo Morales, for legalising slash-and-burn fires to open up pastureland for cattle farming and beef exports

to China. "The Amazon is witness to death and resurrection right now," said Hughes in the Peruvian capital, Lima, where he has lived and worked for nearly 50 years. "It is a place of beauty, a place of immense marvel, providence, abundance of life on every level. But it's also a place of death, destruction, violence, ransacking, plunder and tremendous chaos." The Catholic church has a troubled history in Latin America. It was the ideological force for an imperialism that brought death, disease and slavery. But Catholic priests have also often sided with indigenous people against invaders. Latin America lived and died a Catholic, but the church is rapidly losing followers as evangelical Protestant groups expand across the region. In 2014, 69% of Latin Americans belonged to the church. One of the proposals the synod will consider this week is a change to the Catholic church's centuries-old requirement that priests must be celibate, to allow the ordination of married men in remote areas of the Amazon. But organisers insist that the church is not simply fighting for its share in the market of souls. Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, the president of the synod, said last week that the Amazon' s ecological problems were inseparable from its social ones. The world must hear "both the cry of the earth and that of the poor", he said. Xavier Arbex, 77, a Swiss priest who has spent close to 40 years in Madre de Dios, in Peru's Amazon, said that the pope's proposal was "socially and politically revolutionary". But half a lifetime defending human rights in the Amazon makes him pessimistic the synod can impede the "savage capitalism" driving destruction. "The synod will shine a light but it won't be enough to drive away the darkness," he said. Sixty miles west of Puerto Maldonado, a small city in southern Peru, is La Pampa, a frontier boomtown that sprang up around a recent gold rush. Storefront evangelical churches sit amid wooden shacks and bars. Since a government crackdown earlier this year, illegal miners have pushed deeper into the jungle, and the local economy is grinding to a halt. Sitting outside his roadside motorcycle repair shop, Samuel Tecse Barrios put it simply: "There's no work." Tecse Barrios belongs to the Israelite Mission of the New Universal Pact, a Peruvian doomsday sect that is just one of the Catholic church' s competitors in the Amazon. Male members of the evangelical group grow long hair and beards, while women cover their heads and wear colourful, flowing robes. Tecse Barrios, 57, does not accept that rising temperatures are driven partly by Amazon deforestation. "It is God' s punishment. He told us we would destroy ourselves," he said. "We' ve sinned worse than in Sodom and Gomorrah. What comes next will be seven years of drought, famine, torrential rains and floods, as it says in the Old Testament." Back in Puerto Maldonado, Zully Rojas, 53, tends a grotto to the Virgin Mary in the airy home shared by the Missionary Dominican Sisters of the Rosary. It is dotted with Amazon plants and baskets of Brazil nuts on a typical patterned blanket. "Some thing we will never agree on," says Rojas of dialogue with other churches. "But caring for the forest is synonymous with life, on this we have to come to an agreement." 'If everything continues as it was, God's gift vanishes'