



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"