

The Amazonian PACT

The **Pact of the Catacombs** is an agreement signed by 42 bishops in the Catacombs of Domitilla near Rome on 16th November 1965, three weeks before the close of the Second Vatican Council. These bishops pledged to live like the poorest of their parishioners and adopt a lifestyle free of attachment to ordinary possessions. Their pact included a commitment to “try to live according to the ordinary manner of our people in all that concerns housing, food, means of transport, and related matters.”

The signatories vowed to renounce personal possessions, fancy vestments and “names and titles that express prominence and power,” and they said they would make advocating for the poor and powerless the focus of their ministry. The catacombs were chosen because of their association with the Church when it was without worldly power and existed in its simplest form. It is claimed that more than five hundred bishops mostly from Latin America, including Oscar Romero, added their signatures in the next few months. That original document has been lost and was little spoken of until Pope Francis’ election.

Pope Francis told journalists within days of his election that he wished for a “poor church, for the poor” and from the start he shunned the finery of his office, and preferred to live in the Vatican guesthouse rather than the apostolic palace. He has stressed that all bishops should live simply and humbly, and continually exhorted pastors to “have the smell of the sheep,” staying close to those most in need and being welcoming and inclusive at every opportunity.

The social upheavals of 1968, the drama of the Cold War against communism and the rise of liberation theology which stressed the gospel priority for the poor, was considered too close to Marxism by those who opposed it. As a result, the thinking behind the pact of the Catacombs became unpopular. Brazilian Archbishop Helder-Camara famously remarked, “When I work for the poor they call me a saint; when I ask why are they poor, they call me a communist”.

On Sunday October 20th, 2019, a small number of bishops participating in the Pan-Amazonian Synod in Rome gathered at the same site in the Catacombs to sign a new pact. A considerable number of the 180 bishops attending the Synod declined to participate in the event. Their reasons for not participating are not known.

Soon after this event, Burmese-Australian, Joachim Rego CP, General of the Passionist Congregation, participated in a meeting of 150 male Generals of Religious Orders in Rome. During the meeting they spent time with Pope Francis. At the end of the meeting these Generals were invited to sign the Amazon Pact at the Catacombs of Domitilla.

Joachim wrote, *“As the leader of our Congregation, I chose to accept the invitation to sign the Pact on behalf of the Passionist Family because I feel it challenges us toward personal and communal renewal, and it proposes kingdom values and practical strategies by which we can respond and give authentic witness to the issues of our times”*.

Writing to the Passionist Family which includes the members of the Passionist Family Group Movement, Joachim said, *“I offer and encourage you to engage in prayerfully reflecting on the fifteen points contained in the Pact - both personally and with those in your ministries - with the aim of forming your Passionist heart and proposing prophetic actions by which we give witness personally and in our various communities. Of course, this is a response to listening and discerning the action of the Holy Spirit”*.

Joachim finished his letter by saying, *“May the values of this Pact strengthen us in our identity and mission as Passionist Apostles today and assist us in our call to Renew our Mission as we commemorate 300 years with gratitude for fidelity to the charism; seek the wisdom of the Cross to live prophetically in our times; and trust with full confidence in God’s love to walk towards God’s future with hope”*.

Joachim Rego, C.P.

It is interesting to note that Pope Francis has called for “a global educational pact to educate us in universal solidarity and a new humanism.” This is likely to be linked with ‘Laudato Si week’, celebrating the fifth anniversary of the encyclical. This is to take place on May 14th, 2020. We will hear more of this as the date for the event approaches..

Not all fifteen points of the Amazon Pact that Joachim signed on our behalf may be equally relevant to us in Australasia, but for our PFGM formation this year, we can focus on two main points (which include parts of several other points in the Pact) and leave open, how individual PFG’s might respond to these or the other points.

This is the pact.

We invoke the Holy Spirit and we commit ourselves, personally and communally, to the following:

1. To assume, in the face of extreme global warming and the depletion of natural resources, the commitment, in our territories and with our attitudes, to defend the Amazon jungle. From it come the gifts of water for much of the South American territory, the contribution to the carbon cycle, and the regulation of the global climate, an incalculable biodiversity and a rich socio-diversity for humanity and the entire earth.

2. To recognise that we are not the owners of Mother Earth, but rather the sons and daughters, formed from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2: 7-8), guests and pilgrims (1 Pet. 1: 17b and 1 Pet. 2:11), called to be its jealous caregivers and caretakers (Gen. 1: 26). For this we commit ourselves to an integral ecology in which all is interconnected, the human race and all creation, because all beings are sons and daughters of the earth and over them the Spirit of God moves. (Gen. 1:2).

3. To welcome and renew every day the covenant of God with everything created: "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, domestic and wild animals of the earth, as many as came out of the ark (Gen. 9:9-10 and Gen. 9:12-17).

4. To renew in our churches the preferential option for the poor, especially for native peoples, and, together with them to guarantee their right to be protagonists in society and in the Church. To help them preserve their lands, cultures, languages, stories, identities and spiritualities. To grow in the awareness that they must be respected, locally and globally and, consequently, to encourage, by all means within our reach, that they be welcomed on an equal footing in the world concert of peoples and cultures.

5. To abandon, consequently, in our parishes, dioceses, and groups all types of colonist mentality and posture, welcoming and valuing cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity in a respectful dialogue with all spiritual traditions.

6. To denounce all forms of violence and aggression toward the autonomy and rights of native peoples, their identity, their territories, and their ways of life.

7. To announce the liberating novelty of the Gospel of Jesus in welcoming the other and the one who is different, as happened with Peter in the house of Cornelius: "*You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean.*" (Acts 10:28).

8. To walk ecumenically with other Christian communities in the inculturation and liberating proclamation of the Gospel with other religions and people of good will, in solidarity with original peoples, with the poor and the small, in defence of their rights and the preservation of our Common Home.

9. To establish in our particular Churches a synodal lifestyle where representatives of original peoples, missionaries, lay people, because of their baptism and in communion with their pastors, have voice and vote in the diocesan assemblies, in pastoral and parish councils and, ultimately, everything that concerns the governance of the communities.

10. To engage in the urgent recognition of the ecclesial ministries that already exist in the communities, exercised by pastoral agents, indigenous catechists, ministers of the Word, valuing in particular their care in the presence of the most vulnerable and excluded.

11. To make effective in the communities entrusted to us, going from pastoral visits to pastoral presence, ensuring that the right to the Table of the Word and the Table of the Eucharist are effective in all communities.

12. To recognise the services and real diakonia of a great number of women who today direct communities in the Amazon and seek to consolidate them with an adequate ministry of women leaders of the community.

13. To seek new paths of pastoral action in the cities where we operate, with the prominence of the laity, with attention to the peripheries and migrants, workers and the unemployed, students, educators, researchers and the world of culture and communication.

14. To assume before the avalanche of consumerism a happily sober lifestyle, simple and in solidarity with those who have little or nothing; to reduce the production of garbage and the use of plastics, favouring the production and commercialisation of agro-ecological products, and using public transport whenever possible.

15. To place ourselves on the side of those who are persecuted for their prophetic service of denouncing and repaying injustices, of defending the earth and the rights of the poor, of welcoming and supporting migrants and refugees. Cultivate true friendships with the poor, visit the simplest people and the sick, exercise the ministry of listening, comfort and support that bring encouragement and renew hope.

Of these fifteen points, there are eight or nine that have something in common. They can be further reduced for our purposes to two points.

1. Interconnectedness, Diversity and Belonging

- Recognise and celebrate the interconnectedness of all humanity and creation
- Respect the diversity of cultures and religious traditions
- Welcome people who are different (as Peter welcomed Cornelius)
- Abandon in our parishes, dioceses, and groups all types of colonialist mentality and posture, welcoming and valuing cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity in a respectful dialogue with all spiritual traditions.

2. Consumerism and solidarity with the poor

- Challenge consumerism by reducing garbage and plastics, using public transport and adopting a simple and sober lifestyle by identifying with those who have nothing

This leaves us with some challenging thoughts:

- 1. If the spirituality of those in our PFG's had a deeper awareness of the interconnectedness of all life, 'we' might be able to respect the diversity of cultures and religious traditions in our community and parish more than we do, be more welcoming, respect diversity and actively seek to include others. This would be a good fit with our motto to be 'A Family for All'.**

- 2. If we can quietly challenge some aspects of consumerism in our own families with the active support of our PFG's such as reducing garbage and plastics, using public transport; adopting 'a simple and sober' lifestyle, identifying with those who have nothing, taking part in environmental clean-up days etc, this would be a good fit with our PFG aims to live as the early Christians and to give good example to children?**

Handouts for the two formation sessions that deal with these two areas will be available on the Australian and New Zealand PFGM website. .

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