



INTERFAITH  
RAINFOREST  
INITIATIVE

# A CATHOLIC TOOLKIT ON FOREST PROTECTION

RESOURCES FOR RELIGIOUS  
LEADERS AND FAITH COMMUNITIES

## ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is part of a series developed by the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative meant to inform and inspire faith communities to action to help safeguard tropical forests and their inhabitants. The Initiative believes the time has come for a worldwide movement for the care of tropical forests, one that is grounded in the inherent value of forests, and inspired by the values, ethics, and moral guidance of indigenous peoples and faith communities.

This Catholic Toolkit presents a series of reflections, meditations, prayers, talking points, and lesson plans aimed at Catholic practitioners, and assembled with the help of Rev. Dr. Neddy Astudillo and Laura Vargas. It is not meant to be exhaustive or final, but represents a living document that can evolve over time with the help and for the benefit of faith communities.

## INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is an international, multi-faith alliance that is working to bring moral urgency and faith-based leadership to efforts to end tropical deforestation. It is a platform for religious leaders and faith communities to work hand-in-hand with indigenous peoples, governments, NGOs and businesses on actions that protect rainforest and the rights of those that serve as their guardians.

## QUESTIONS?

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is eager to work with you to protect tropical forests and the rights of indigenous peoples. Contact us at [info@interfaithrainforest.org](mailto:info@interfaithrainforest.org).

## PARTNERS

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative welcomes engagement by all organizations, institutions and individuals of good faith and conscience that are committed to the protection, restoration and sustainable management of rainforests.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Opening Reflection</b>	<b>5</b>
Looking for New Pathways: A Church With an Amazonian Face	
<b>Talking Points</b>	<b>7</b>
On Rainforests and Biodiversity	
On Climate Change	
On Indigenous Peoples and Intercultural Approaches	
<b>Prayers and Meditations</b>	<b>11</b>
Praying with the Forests	
Litany for the Tropical Forests	
<b>Lesson Plan</b>	<b>13</b>
Writing Our Own Eco-Autobiography	

# OPENING REFLECTION

## LOOKING FOR NEW PATHWAYS: A CHURCH WITH AN AMAZONIAN FACE

By Laura Vargas

The following article was written during the preparations for the Synod of Bishops for the Panamazonian Region, a beautiful and prophetic moment in which the Roman Catholic Church is challenged to be a church that listens attentively to the voice of the Spirit and recognizes the Amazon as a historical subject “which has not been sufficiently considered in the national or global context, or in the life of the Church. Now is a privileged communicator” (IL 2). The inspiration of this moment leads the church to consider a new *kairós* capable of building a church with an Amazonian and indigenous face, a church that promotes the enculturation of the gospel in each culture, and thus a church that reflects the one and diverse faces of the Lord.

### 1. 500 years later

It is now commonplace to say that the cross and the sword arrived together on the American Continent. This process of conquest and colonization, which began more than 500 years ago, was marked by widespread suffering of indigenous peoples. Among these subjugated and humiliated peoples are the cultures of Panamazonia, who have lived, for more than 200 years of republican life, under successive waves of domination by powers that sought to appropriate their natural resources. The 3 million indigenous peoples of the Amazon have resisted, and today they continue to fight for dignity and respect. The preparatory document of the Synod reminds us that the Amazon region comprises 9 countries that share the Amazonian plain with around 390 villages, as well as 110-130 “free villages” or villages in “voluntary isolation.”

### 2. The Amazon has entered through the big door in the Church

Holding the Synod for the Amazon means that we are on the agenda of the universal Church. While, according to the logic of world domination, the Amazon is a great pantry of natural resources that must be used to generate more money and power, for the Church the region and its people are a vocation. Our presence seeks to be a cry for “the defense of life, of the earth and of cultures”, as Pope Francis advocated. Monsignor David Martínez, OP, bishop of Puerto Maldonado, when welcoming Pope Francis, told him: “The treasure of the Amazon, which is not minerals, wood, or oil, is its people ... with its dances and colors that reflect the traditions of their living cultures. Many years ago the Church sent us as missionaries to help put an end to the barbarism unleashed by rubber in these lands. We wanted these communities to recover their own voice. We feel strongly that the call of the church is to accompany them. They are their own best interlocutors; we, the missionaries, have been taught to look at the world from their perspective, and it really looks more beautiful...” (Monsignor David Martínez, 01/19/18)

### 3. A Pope from the end of the world

We live a time of grace with the pontificate of Francis, the “Pope from the end of the world,” who has placed the Church in the key of “mercy” and asks us to be a “Church that goes forth,” that is “poor for the poor,” that loves and defends our common home, mercilessly pillaged and abandoned when it is transformed into an “immense deposit of filth” (LS 21). Francis asks us to listen to the “deaf cry that reaches heaven, the cry of the poor and the earth.” During his visit to

Puerto Maldonado he spoke of the need for a Synod for Panamazonia: “Every culture and every worldview that receives the Gospel enriches the Church with the vision of a new facet of the face of Christ. The Church is not alien to your problems and your lives, does not want to be alien to your way of life and organization. We need the indigenous peoples to culturally mold the local Amazonian Churches ... to help your bishops, your missionaries, to become one with you, and in this way in dialogue among each other, you may be able to shape a Church with an Amazonian face and a Church with an indigenous face. With this spirit I convened the Synod for the Amazon in the year 2019.” (1/19/18)

**4. The Amazon, mirror of humanity**

As the preparatory document of the Synod reminds us, the Amazon is a vitally important region for the life of the planet. The Amazon holds 20 percent of Earth’s fresh water and is the largest carbon sink in the world. It is rich in biodiversity, as well as being multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious. Everything that happens to the Amazon will affect the life of the planet. This blessed land is living a deep crisis because of a prolonged human intervention driven by a “throw-away culture” (LS, 16) and an extraction mentality. This mindset adheres to the fallacy that resources are inexhaustible, which leads powerful economic interests to exploit with great pressure the oil, gas, precious woods, and gold of the region. This land cries because of the deep wounds inflicted on it and on its original peoples. But this blessed land is also a land of hope, which we discover in the many settlements inhabited since time immemorial; from them we learn about “good living” and “good work.” “The Amazonian peoples are a cry to the conscience of a lifestyle that fails to recognize the costs it imposes. You are the living memory of the mission that God has entrusted to us all: to take care of the Common Home.” (Puerto Maldonado 01/19/18).

**5. Its protagonists: the peoples of the water, of the rivers, of the forests**

The Amazonian indigenous peoples, in their incredible variety and diversity of faces, cultures, languages and worldviews, have developed wisdom and ancestral knowledge of animals, plants and ways of life. These tell us about a treasure of cultures that should not only be respected, recognized and valued in themselves, but are the heritage of humanity. From them we learn the paradigm of care of, respect for, and respectful listening to the life that bustles around us. This stands in radical contrast to the current model of a “throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish.” (LS 22). Aparecida warned us that “society tends to belittle them, ignoring their difference. Their social situation is marked by exclusion and poverty.”

**6. Conclusion**

The new paths that are opened with this Synod should lead us to a growing enculturation of the Church in all its ministries, in the liturgy, and in its theological reflection. Likewise, it is critical to recover a new contemplative outlook, to empathize with the region’s original peoples, and to adopt a prophetic stance of denunciation, proclamation, and commitment, because much must be changed so that our peoples may have life in Him. The protagonist will not be us, but the peoples whom we, by our vocation, are called to serve. In this way we will be a Church with an Amazonian face, and an indigenous face.

# TALKING POINTS

## SELECTIONS FROM POPE FRANCIS' ENCYCLICAL 'ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME'

Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *On Care for Our Common Home* (also referred to by its title *Laudato Si'*), is addressed to people of the entire world and carries a strong sense of urgency about the global environmental crisis we face. He analyzes the root causes of the crisis and proposes a set of values and actions to redirect humanity onto a new and hopeful path for the future and for the well-being of the planet, our common home.

In this section, we focus on encyclical passages that relate to issues of concern to the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative. The number before each quote represents the corresponding paragraph in the encyclical.

The complete encyclical can be found online in: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

### On Rainforests and Biodiversity

32. The loss of forests and woodlands entails the loss of species which may constitute extremely important resources in the future, not only for food but also for curing disease and other uses. Different species contain genes which could be key resources in years ahead for meeting human needs and regulating environmental problems.
33. It is not enough...to think of different species merely as potential "resources" to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves. Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.
38. Let us mention, for example, those richly biodiverse lungs of our planet which are the Amazon and the Congo basins, or the great aquifers and glaciers. We know how important these are for the entire earth and for the future of humanity. The ecosystems of tropical forests possess an enormously complex biodiversity which is almost impossible to appreciate fully, yet when these forests are burned down or levelled for purposes of cultivation, within the space of a few years countless species are lost and the areas frequently become arid wastelands. A delicate balance has to be maintained when speaking about these places, for we cannot overlook the huge global economic interests which, under the guise of protecting them, can undermine the sovereignty of individual nations. In fact, there are "proposals to internationalize the Amazon, which only serve the economic interests of transnational corporations".[24] We cannot fail to praise the commitment of international agencies and civil society organizations which draw public attention to these issues and offer critical cooperation, employing legitimate means of pressure, to ensure that each government carries out its proper and inalienable responsibility to preserve its country's environment and natural resources, without capitulating to spurious local or international interests.

42. Greater investment needs to be made in research aimed at understanding more fully the functioning of ecosystems and adequately analyzing the different variables associated with any significant modification of the environment. Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another. Each area is responsible for the care of this family. This will require undertaking a careful inventory of the species which it hosts, with a view to developing programs and strategies of protection with particular care for safeguarding species heading towards extinction.
95. The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others. That is why the New Zealand bishops asked what the commandment “Thou shall not kill” means when “twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive”.[78]

### **On Climate Change**

23. The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all. At the global level, it is a complex system linked to many of the essential conditions for human life. A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system. In recent decades this warming has been accompanied by a constant rise in the sea level and, it would appear, by an increase of extreme weather events, even if a scientifically determinable cause cannot be assigned to each particular phenomenon. Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it. It is true that there are other factors (such as volcanic activity, variations in the earth’s orbit and axis, the solar cycle), yet a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity. As these gases build up in the atmosphere, they hamper the escape of heat produced by sunlight at the earth’s surface. The problem is aggravated by a model of development based on the intensive use of fossil fuels, which is at the heart of the worldwide energy system. Another determining factor has been an increase in changed uses of the soil, principally deforestation for agricultural purposes.
24. Warming has effects on the carbon cycle. It creates a vicious circle which aggravates the situation even more, affecting the availability of essential resources like drinking water, energy and agricultural production in warmer regions, and leading to the extinction of part of the planet’s biodiversity. The melting in the polar ice caps and in high altitude plains can lead to the dangerous release of methane gas, while the decomposition of frozen organic material can further increase the emission of carbon dioxide. Things are made worse by the loss of tropical forests which would otherwise help to mitigate climate change. Carbon dioxide pollution increases the acidification of the oceans and compromises the marine food chain. If present trends continue, this century may well witness extraordinary climate change and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us. A rise in the sea level, for example, can create extremely serious situations, if we consider that a quarter of the world’s population lives on the coast or nearby, and that the majority of our megacities are situated in coastal areas.

25. Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited. For example, changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children. There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters, points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.
26. ...There is an urgent need to develop policies so that, in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy. Worldwide there is minimal access to clean and renewable energy. There is still a need to develop adequate storage technologies. Some countries have made considerable progress, although it is far from constituting a significant proportion. Investments have also been made in means of production and transportation which consume less energy and require fewer raw materials, as well as in methods of construction and renovating buildings which improve their energy efficiency. But these good practices are still far from widespread.
169. ...Reducing greenhouse gases requires honesty, courage and responsibility, above all on the part of those countries which are more powerful and pollute the most...
165. We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels—especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas—needs to be progressively replaced without delay. Until greater progress is made in developing widely accessible sources of renewable energy, it is legitimate to choose the less harmful alternative or to find short-term solutions...



## On Indigenous Peoples and Intercultural Approaches

14. I urgently appeal for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all...We require a new and universal solidarity. As the bishops of Southern Africa have stated: "Everyone's talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God's creation". [22] All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.
63. Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality. If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it...
145. Many intensive forms of environmental exploitation and degradation not only exhaust the resources which provide local communities with their livelihood, but also undo the social structures which, for a long time, shaped cultural identity and their sense of the meaning of life and community. The disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, or even more serious, than the disappearance of a species of plant or animal. The imposition of a dominant lifestyle linked to a single form of production can be just as harmful as the altering of ecosystems.
146. In this sense, it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest here, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. Nevertheless, in various parts of the world, pressure is being put on them to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects which are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture.

# PRAYERS AND MEDITATIONS

## PRAYING WITH THE FORESTS

By Deacon Alirio Cáceres Aguirre

From the hidden roots of the trees,  
In humble dialogue with the humus and the  
mysteries of the subsoil,  
We praise you God, Precious Community  
of Infinite Love,  
For the gift of life, your hope and your comfort.

With each nest and each fruit,  
With each fallen leaf turned into food  
We praise you, Creator Spirit  
By the grace of your love and your main  
commandment

By flying rivers and groundwater  
For the connection of the biome and the biodiverse  
communion  
We praise you, O Lord, for your immense kindness  
in which each creature evolves, immersed.

Everything is connected.  
Everything is interlinked.  
We apologize for breaking the whole  
For giving rise to sin  
We apologize for denying your love  
For wanting to violate, for the evil ego.

We apologize for the economy that kills  
Because of the greed that causes so  
much destruction  
We apologize and we beg your guidance  
To restore, renew, reconcile your  
beautiful creation.

With each ethnic group and its ancestral  
knowledge,  
With each settler and each riverbank  
With each academic and each pastor  
We beg your light to not believe  
ourselves owners.

May each temple and each parish  
May each tribe and organization  
Recognize that we are like a fertile tree  
That only bears fruit being forest in communion.

May we be instruments of harmony and peace  
May the climatic chaos advance no more  
May we be witnesses of sustainability  
And consistency, the best way to show up.

With dances and prayers, with sacred silence  
With the trill of the birds and the voice of the river  
We ask you Father with a Mother's heart  
Let us be one, in the image of your power

With colors and flavors, to you, Love of Lovers  
We stand united to implore your blessing,  
To learn to take care of ourselves in our  
common home  
Like a family that sings together  
your joyful song.

May no more trees be cut!  
May no more lives be lost!  
May we always find creative solutions.  
And at the end of time, joined by the Wind  
May we understand that your Word is the Way,  
the Truth and the Life. Amen.

## LITANY FOR THE TROPICAL FORESTS

By Phelipe Reis (Adapted)

O great God, Creator  
You, who mastered heaven and earth  
and perfected our common home.  
You, who made the tropical forests' porch and yard,  
where you planted trees beyond the horizon  
and underneath hid riches that arouse the  
greed of man.

You, who distributed the waters in  
lakes and streams,  
and excavated with enjoyment the  
depths of mighty rivers  
whose muddy waters refresh and satisfy  
the thirst of young and old,  
Hear our cry for help.

O great God, Creator  
Stand up for us!  
You, whose sky-eyes enjoy this immense  
green carpet,  
You will not bear to contemplate the verdure  
tainted by the ashes of the burning.  
Disguised as progress, destruction lurks behind us,  
waiting for the hour to reap the supply and the life.

Do not let your creation be invaded and plundered,  
Do not let the wicked ruin your forests  
without mercy,  
Cutting down precious trees of all kinds,  
Making your ground and your children  
cry and despair.

O great God, Creator,  
You who love justice and simple people  
Do not let us fear the enemy who with pen  
scribbles wants,  
to decree the death of the forest.

You, who vomit corruption and those who  
practice it.  
Do not let us fear,  
the white-collar enemies  
who plot Machiavellian plans in the dead of night,  
to cheapen and surfeit the wealth of your creation.

O great God, Creator  
We, Indigenous peoples,  
your children, the forests and the rivers,  
Together invoke your protection and cry out:  
Do not delay in overthrowing the wicked.

It makes us brave and courageous to defend  
our gardens.  
And patiently teach us the good stewardship  
of your creation,  
To care for, fight and resist.

O great God, Creator  
who in the work of thy Son reconciles thy Creation  
For you we prophesy before your strong arm  
and the fiber of the sons and daughters  
of the tropical forests:

Without delay,  
The corruption, evil and ambition,  
as well as those who serve it,  
Will not prevail!

# LESSON PLAN

## WRITING OUR OWN ECO-AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The purpose of the following eco-autobiography exercise is to begin peeling away the layers of our personal stories, to find the root causes of our dissociations, and gain clarity regarding how we might support a change of heart within ourselves and our communities; a change of outlook, practices and beliefs, in favor of tropical forests and the lives of indigenous peoples.

“For human beings... to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation ... to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life—these are sins”. For “to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God”. (Pope Francis, Encyclical *Laudato Si’*, 8.)

We are people of faith. Our faith tradition makes a special appeal to choose life (Deut 30:15), to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mk 12:30-31), to care for the poor and the most vulnerable people (Lk 4:18), including the natural world (Gen 2:15). In his encyclical, Pope Francis adds: “The sense of internal connection with other creatures cannot be genuine if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and caring for other people ... Everything is connected. Therefore, it is essential to take care of the environment, together with the sincere love of people and with permanent efforts to solve social issues.”

What stands in the way of our hearts being compassionate, caring, and tender? What values, worldviews, and teachings stand in the way of establishing proper relationship with God, our neighbor and nature?

Becoming aware of our shortcomings could support our journey to an ecological conversion capable of transforming all of our relationships.

By working on their eco-autobiographies, participants will:

- Reflect individually and collectively on their experiences with forests, nature, indigenous peoples and climate change. The participants, as they look at their history, will reflect on how the community of faith, nature, society, etc. has shaped their way of seeing the world, especially forests and indigenous peoples.
- Reflect on personal and spiritual experiences with the natural world, which serve to develop awareness, a relationship with tropical forests and a connection to the struggles of indigenous peoples.
- Be present to their personal history and their villages; become aware of how close or distant they live from forests; and become conscious of their knowledge or ignorance of their faith with regard to the care of forests and the rights of indigenous peoples.
- Establish a mutual understanding, with which an interreligious movement for the protection of tropical forests and the rights of indigenous peoples can be sustained.

## **Format**

Depending on the size of your group, we propose two ways of using this exercise. Each has its pros and cons. The goal of both is to invite all participants to continue working on their eco-autobiographies, even after the day of the first session, and encourage them to continue sharing them.

### **Large group format**

Days before your session, invite five people (representing diverse voices) to work on their eco-autobiographies. This group will share their stories before the larger group. Each presenter can use art, poetry, illustrations, music, etc., to help bring out his/her story. They can also read it. The day of the session each presenter will have five minutes to share her or his eco-autobiography. After the five presentations (25-30 minutes in), invite the larger group to think about their own stories. Give them 5 minutes to think and write (provide paper and pencils) and divide them into smaller groups of 3, to share their stories.

### **Small group format**

When you use this exercise in a small group, it is ideal to share the instructions on writing an eco-autobiography in advance, and ask people to come to your session ready to share whatever they have crafted. If it is not possible to provide instructions in advance, give participants 15 minutes to write their own eco-autobiographies. Since they will not have the advantage of hearing others tell their stories, the facilitator is encouraged to model the exercise for them. Write a short version of your own eco-autobiography and share it, as part of the introduction to the session, and/or as part of the instructions of the exercise.

### **Supporting materials for facilitators:**

- IRI has produced three Issue Primers (available on the IRI website) that can provide key facts and background:
  - a. Tropical Forests: A Resource Under Threat
  - b. Tropical Forests and Climate Change
  - c. Indigenous Peoples: Guardians of the Forests
- IRI Country Primers (for the 5 major rainforest countries) can also be used to familiarize yourself with key facts about the state of tropical forests in your country.
- If you are working with a small group, remember to write your own eco-autobiography prior to the day of the session.
- Bible.
- Sheets of paper and pencils for all participants who may not have their own.
- Large board/paper to write, chalk and/or markers.
- Sign-up sheet (to gather contact information). This is very important, if you decide to organize another gathering and/or plan a joint action in the future.

## Opening Words (10 minutes)

*Note to facilitator: To gather your group, you may first choose to invite people to sing a familiar song of praise to God as Creator, and continue with the following words:*

In his encyclical on Care for Our Common Home (2015), Pope Francis says, “I urgently appeal... for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.” (14)

Following Pope Francis’ suggestion, today we want to reflect individually and collectively on our experiences with forests, nature, indigenous peoples and climate change. As we look at our history, we will reflect on how our community of faith, nature, and society has shaped the way we see the world, especially forests and indigenous peoples.

We hope this dialogue can transform our ethics and relationship with each other, with indigenous peoples and with nature, and move us toward an ecological conversion and reconciliation with tropical rainforests.

First, let us listen to some of the facts and concerns which support the need for a dialogue about rainforests, climate change, and indigenous peoples; as they were shared during the launching of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in Colombia, 2018.

*Note to facilitator: Invite a diversity of voices, to read one of these facts.*

- Tropical deforestation is one of the main causes of climate change... It is responsible for an increase in greenhouse gases that is greater than that of all cars, planes, trains and ships in the world.
- When we talk about deforestation in the Amazon region, we are talking about a forest that has evolved continuously for 60 to 70 million years. It contains more than half of the animal species of the planet; distributes rain throughout North and South America and regulates the world’s temperature. Without the Amazon, most of South America would be a desert. Reforestation is important. Protecting and defending ancient forests is a must.
- To put an end to deforestation, we need a global social movement that includes faith communities and religious leaders willing to raise their moral voices to support governments and businesses to change their policies in favor of tropical forests and the rights of indigenous peoples.
- Indigenous communities, being the inhabitants of the tropical forest environment for centuries, have invaluable knowledge about forest conservation. They have a vision of the world in which they are deeply intermingled in the natural cycles of the earth, water and wildlife. They recognize that their lives depend on the health of the rainforest; therefore they are the main and best custodians of tropical forests. Any environmental understanding of the tropical forests cannot be separated from the communities that live there.

- The best conservation tool to protect rainforests is safeguarding indigenous peoples as environmental authorities in their own territories, and promoting sustainable forest practices among non-indigenous people living in places with a high risk of deforestation (often the border regions between savanna and forest).
- Most people in Western cultures consider themselves separated from the natural order. According to this worldview, the role of nature is to provide resources for the construction and operation of towns and cities. Therefore, the destruction of forests and other ecosystems is something that occurs outside of their immediate living space, and is a “logical” consequence of civilization. From this perspective, the protection of natural resources is not seen as something necessary for survival, but as something abstract and distant from the immediate reality; in the worst case, the protection of natural resources is seen as a foolish ideal that prevents the development of human societies.

*Note to facilitator: You may continue with the following statement:*

In his encyclical, Pope Francis also said that in order to solve the environmental crisis “we require a new and universal solidarity” ...“Everyone’s talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God’s creation”. All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.” (14) “...Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality...” (63)

We hope this exercise will provide a good foundation for this to happen.

*Note to facilitator: At this point, if working with a large group, invite forward those people who have prepared their eco-autobiographies in advance and ask them to share with the group. If you are working with a smaller group, invite everyone to take 15 minutes to work on their own eco-autobiography, quietly, and prepare themselves to share it in smaller groups of 3-5 people max. Model the autobiography process by reading your own short version, prepared in advance. Give people paper and pencils if they don’t have them.*

### **Developing your own Eco-Autobiography (20 minutes)**

Instructions to participants: Think about your personal story and prepare yourself to share it in around 5 minutes. If you wish, you can use art, poetry, photographs and music to tell your story. You may also read it aloud if preferred.

- Articulate with a personal voice the experiences you had during the first years of life with respect to nature, and the effects they had on your character, your values or anti-values, your feelings and your spirituality.
- Narrate how the environments of your childhood, youth and adolescence, including the cultural, school, family or religious environment, shaped the way you relate with others; how you act, value, judge, think, feel or ignore nature, and the communities that live closer to nature.
- For the purposes of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, think about your relationship with tropical forests and indigenous peoples, even if you live far away from both.

In the ecological autobiography you can articulate your experiences of place; symbolic, formative memories; and expressions of joy, pain, prejudice, sadness, fear, loss, etc.

This exercise offers the opportunity to explore the places and characters that have shaped you, the ones that have determined your judgments, your goals, your values, your relationships and your commitments. Our environmental past affects how we treat our environment today. In this past, we can also find seeds for a better tomorrow.

*Note to facilitator:*

- a. If you are working with a small group, this is the moment you can model sharing a brief version of your own eco-autobiography. After 15 minutes in which participants have worked on their own eco-autobiographies, divide your group into groups of 3-5 for sharing of stories. Each person has 5 minutes to share. When finished, bring everyone back together.
- b. If you are working with a large group, after the panelists have shared their eco-autobiography, invite the audience to think about their personal stories, and give each person 3 minutes to share it with his or her neighbor.

### **Plenary (15 minutes)**

*Note to facilitator: After either of the above has been done, bring everyone back together and ask the following questions to your group. Allow time to respond before asking the next question:*

- What did you discover by writing your eco-autobiography and listening to others'?
- What values exist within our faith and culture that may support the protection of tropical forests and encourage our solidarity with indigenous peoples? What values need to be nurtured? (Write the responses on a board where everyone can see them.)
- What values still exist within our faith tradition and culture that prevent us from protecting tropical forests and from standing in solidarity with indigenous peoples?
- What needs to change? (Write the responses on a board where everyone can see them.)

After participants have shared, repeat what is written on the board, and invite the group to stay connected with the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative:

- Let them know the IRI Issue Primers, Country Primers, and Resource Guide provide a diversity of resources for further study.
- Ask participants if they would like to meet again to learn about the issue of tropical forests, climate change and indigenous people. The IRI website contains Toolkits targeted to other faith communities that also have lesson plans that may be adapted for your group and used to deepen their understanding of the situation, and of how other faiths are reflecting about it.
- Ask if anyone would like to volunteer to organize the next session.
- Encourage attendees to continue working on their eco-autobiographies at home and to share it with others.



- Share the results of the session with the local IRI coordinator. He/she will be able to support and help keep your community engaged with IRI.

**Closing: A prayer for our Earth (From Pope Francis' encyclical, Laudato Si')**

Note to facilitator: Choose two people of diverse voices to read aloud each part. You may also consider asking each person to read one line and inviting the rest of the group to repeat in echo.

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe  
and in the smallest of your creatures.  
    You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.  
Pour out upon us the power of your love,  
that we may protect life and beauty.  
    Fill us with peace, that we may live  
    as brothers and sisters, harming no one.  
O God of the poor,  
help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth,  
so precious in your eyes.  
    Bring healing to our lives,  
    that we may protect the world and not prey on it,  
    that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.  
Touch the hearts  
of those who look only for gain  
at the expense of the poor and the earth.  
    Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,  
    to be filled with awe and contemplation,  
    to recognize that we are profoundly united  
    with every creature  
    as we journey towards your infinite light.  
We thank you for being with us each day.  
    Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle  
    for justice, love and peace. Amen.



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