

The Capuchin friars in the Amazon

From 'Green Hell' to Hope-filled Promise

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Through their century-long, tireless work of evangelization and fostering human development, the Umbrian Capuchins have come to play a central role in the lives of those living along the banks of the Amazon's Solimões river and are strong advocates for the preservation of the Ticuna Indians' cultural heritage and traditions who were nearly annihilated by colonial practices of previous centuries. Focus is placed on the formation of young men and women as protagonists of the mission entrusted by Jesus to his disciples, that of "Proclaiming God's Kingdom!" by fostering fraternity, solidarity, justice and care for creation.

With immense courage, four young Capuchin friars -- Agatangelo da Spoleto, Martino da Ceglie Messapica, Domenico da Gualdo Tadino, and Ermenegildo da Foligno – departed more than a century ago for a mission land, one decidedly much more treacherous at that time than now. In fact, one went so far as to call this mission land, the 'green hell'. It was the Amazon.

Missionaries to the very end, all four friars ultimately gave their lives for what seemed an impossible undertaking at the time but one that is now a dynamic and resilient reality able to respond to today's needs. Thus, if one were to ask what might be the single, most significant accomplishment of the friars and confreres from 1909 to the present, the response would likely be identical to that first uttered decades before by Father Domenico da Gualdo Tadino when he responded: "We remained!"

This seemingly sums up the Umbrian Capuchin friar's entire missionary charism in the Amazon. It is a pastoral ministry that gives witness merely through its *presence*, despite the enormous difficulties and impossible environmental conditions that often test body and spirit. It was this which was called for during the recent Synod on the Amazon .1

Brother Carlo Maria Chistolini, a young friar "guardian" of the Amazon, often jokingly repeats, "When Pope Francis urges us to go to the 'farthest corners of the earth,' I look back and there is nowhere else to go . . . Farther than this is impossible!" One of their distinguishing missionary traits is perfect joy always and everywhere, even when food or clean water are lacking, or in the face of arduous, days-long travel by canoe to reach and offer a sign of loving presence to a small community of 60 or 70 people. The region of Alto Solimões, in particular, which covers an area half the size of Italy, is a labyrinth of forests

containing many remote communities, both small and large. For these communities, the priest's arrival is a true blessing, a celebration for all and this is true throughout the entire, immense Amazon territory.

In addition to visiting communities over these past 110 years, the friars have also helped give life to countless numbers of social initiatives by becoming teachers, nurses, carpenters, and farmers as well. This area of the Solimões river includes the major city of Manaus, the beating heart of the missionary reality, and many scattered communities along its banks. The indigenous *Ewara* reserve is also a part of this extensive region.

The Challenges

The greatest challenge was undoubtedly establishing contact and living together with the Indian peoples. The first friars began to build social structures that included a small church at the center, with villages, schools and clinics nearby. In just over a century of dwelling along the Solimões riverbanks, the Umbrian Capuchins have left their imprint through tireless works of evangelization and support of human advancement. They have sustained efforts to recover and preserve native habits, customs and traditions that were nearly wiped out by the colonial practices of previous centuries.

Religious commitment and human/cultural development have gone hand in hand. Their mission in this territory continues today through a young and vibrant Christianity. Sharing, trust, hope and mutual assistance continue to be the founding cornerstones of the relationship between the children of Saint Francis and the Ticuna. There are no students or teachers, but only two gradually mingled cultures that enrich one another. The Amazon remains mission land and the Capuchins are often the only voice capable of echoing the indigenous people's cry and for whom they struggle in defense of their human rights and cultural identity.

Padre Fedele da Alviano, for example, was the first to settle in the largest Ticuna village, Belém do Solimões, becoming the "missionary of the Indians", a friend, and a confidant. He learned their difficult language which until then had only been passed down through oral tradition and he managed to have it printed in a grammar-dictionary in 1945. To this day, it remains the only such work published by the Rio historical-geographical Institute. Currently, Padre Fedele lives in Belém do Solimões together with a small fraternity of friars. Padre Paolo Maria Braghini is the parish priest and leader for the different communities in the vast surrounding territory. Their work is an example of pastoral closeness and the charism of fraternity so characteristic of the Capuchin friars missionary work in this land.

Cultural Values

The fact that evangelization is inseparable from a loving preservation of culture is evident in two initiatives created and sponsored by the parish: The Indigenous Olympics and the Indigenous Music Festival. The first is a true Olympics, although the sports are not those typically played, but rather they are ones traditional to the Indian people. It is attended by tribal young people throughout the vast region. The second initiative focuses on the dance and musical traditions of the various ethnicities. Brazilian national television itself is also

involved and transmits both events.

To evangelize among the Indians means first and foremost an encounter, an emptiness of self in order to be ready to listen and welcome the other. It is the same emptiness that Jesus made within himself in order to welcome each of us. It is the Indians themselves, shares Father Paolo Maria Braghini, who ask us to speak of Jesus. Often times, it is a first, true proclamation of the Gospel.

In Belém do Solimões, the Christian community is young and full of enthusiasm: children ask to become catechists and want to take an active part in their communities. By bringing each one to feel that the Church is their own and belongs to everyone – in particular to the lay faithful – the missionary work in this region is already lived and modeled on synodal guidelines. In addition to parish engagement, work and societal life are also promoted through a carpentry workshop and bakery which is entirely under the management of village inhabitants (including the women's Mapana Association, which has the goal of fostering and strengthening the role of women).

Currently, Belém do Solimões friars are forming the first indigenous seminarian. A careful decision was made not to uproot this young man from his homeland but rather provide needed training in order for him to be a pastor for, and with, his own people.

Journeys of Encounter

In addition to ongoing missionary work in Alto Solimões, journeys to other regions are indispensable. Father Gino Alberati is emblematic of this, having lived much of his life on a boat while continuously traveling the river to ensure that no one is deprived of his loving and comforting presence. This is the meaning of mission and all have come to experience it! The Amazonian government, on February 10, 2017 in Manaus, bestowed honorary Amazonian citizenship on Father Gino for his 47 years of service to the people of the region.

During the last century, many figures that have made a huge contribution to having lived for and been with these populations. They have done this by even building entire towns, defending the rights of the weak, becoming an official presence in the social reality through the appointment of Capuchin bishops and having a vision of great collaboration through a fraternal spirit.

As these frontier evangelizers themselves explain, remaining there while enduring enormous sacrifices and without losing enthusiasm constitutes the essence of their mission and the motive of their faithfulness to God throughout this journey.

The primary mission for the friars of the mission in the Amazon today is this: to form young men and women to be protagonists in the proclamation of God's Kingdom (cf. Luke 9:2) on this earth, building it in the here and now through the values of fraternity, solidarity, justice and care for creation.

- 1 *Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology, October 6 – 27, 2019.*
- 2 *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Mission Day, May 19, 2018.*