

Article

Getting to the Roots: Critical and Transformative Engagement Between Indigenous Communities and the Synodal Church

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Abstract

This paper argues for the Catholic Church to receive and nurture the synod on synodality toward transformative decolonization through stronger and humbler engagement with Indigenous communities (primarily from North and South America) and their worldviews that parallel, augment, or challenge ecclesial doctrines and praxes laid out in the synod. The paper will first analyze the trend toward decolonization in the synodal process and then propose two clear opportunities for decolonial synodality informed by Catholic–Indigenous dialogue: the church as the people of God and as a community firmly rooted in and attentive to local contexts and, thus, place and space. Following these areas of relative harmony, the paper will highlight two regions likely to produce tension. The first is the significantly different worldviews of Indigenous cultures from the West that still dominate the church’s vision, language, and practice. The second is the possible refusal of Indigenous individuals or communities to engage in an “ecclesiology of recognition” that seeks to “include” Indigenous people and perspectives while exploiting them without challenging or changing the imperial and colonial heritages of Christianity. The paper will end by reaffirming the worth and necessity of decolonial synodality imagined, explored, and realized in creative and tense relationships with Indigenous communities.

Keywords: synodality; Roman Catholic Church; Indigenous; decolonization; ecclesiology; worldviews

1. Introduction

On 1 October 2024, the 368 members of the second session of the Synod on Synodality ended their two-day preparatory retreat with a penitential service in St. Peter’s Basilica. Seven cardinals selected by Pope Francis read apologies and requests for forgiveness that the pontiff said he himself wrote, “because it was necessary to call our main sins by name” (Wooden 2024). The final document of the synod explicitly references this service and states that it brought the participants “to a renewed understanding, namely, that synodality requires repentance and conversion” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 6). Among the sins identified by Francis and stated by his chosen cardinals were sins “against Creation” and “against indigenous peoples,” maintaining the keen interests in the environment and in Indigenous communities, often tied together as in this document, that the pope expressed in the first year of his pontificate (Francis 2013, para. 118, 210). In the service, Francis stated that in a church that is “always relational,” “just as everything is connected in good, it is also connected in evil;” therefore, “only by healing sick relationships can we become a synodal church” (Wooden 2024). Relationships figured crucially into the synod on synodality and appear in the final document’s own assessment of the penitential service. The sacramental setting was meant to open the hearts



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of those in attendance to “the pure grace of which we are not masters but only witnesses,” inspiring in them the desire to “be a merciful Church” in which all people can experience the “unconditional love” that the attendees did ([XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024](#), para. 6).

Indigenous communities and the environment have not been limited in the synod on synodality to this section of the final document, nor are they examined in simple imitation of Francis’ and now Leo XIV’s own engagement with the topics. Rather, the synodal process and theological engagement with synodality have occurred alongside, and in dialogue with, an increasing turn in Catholic theology and practice toward decolonization, environmentalism, and justice for the earth and the poor who live on and in tune with it, who are often Indigenous communities. By prioritizing a relational model of the church as the people of God, emphasizing a “Church of Churches” rooted in and attentive to their local contexts, and envisioning a church “in the world” and “for the world,” including the non-human world, the synodal members have opened doorways to deeper dialogue with, apology to, learning from, and transformative collaboration alongside Indigenous nations across the globe ([XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024](#), para. 17, 38).

These moves toward deeper and more just relationships must occur with acknowledgment of the Catholic Church’s involvement in the historical, ongoing, and multifarious harms of colonialism and with concrete practices of repairing, decrying, and preventing harms toward Indigenous communities while empowering them and their members. Again, “synodality requires repentance and conversion” ([XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024](#), para. 6). In an address to the Indigenous Peoples’ Network and the Indigenous Theologians Network in October 2025, Leo stressed the need for Catholics to recognize the “lights and shadows” and “highlights and wounds” of the “long history of evangelization experienced by our Indigenous peoples” and then to “surrender ourselves to God’s power” to “reconcile ourselves with our own history” ([Holy See 2025](#)). A month later, Leo gave 62 artifacts from the Vatican Museums’ ethnological collections to Pierre Goudreault, Bishop of Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière and President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB), as a “concrete sign of dialogue, respect and fraternity” ([Holy See and Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops 2025](#)). Leo explicitly linked this action to Francis’ journey to Canada in 2022 and the Vatican’s rejection of the Doctrine of Discovery in 2023.

As the second pontiff from the Americas, Leo, like Francis, has immediate awareness of the colonial legacy of the Catholic Church in the Western Hemisphere, especially stemming from his time in Peru and his tenure as Bishop of Chiclayo between 2015 and 2023. However, his October 2025 exhortation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Catholics to enter the “very source of divine love, the open side of the Crucified One” downplays how narrow and fraught this passage can be due to the crucifixion of Indigenous peoples in the “long history” of missionary and colonial activity ([Holy See 2025](#)). The people of God, Indigenous and otherwise, must recognize that walking with Indigenous communities, Christian and otherwise, will not only be informative and creative but also challenging and tense. Apologies from Catholic leaders may be rejected or at least held suspect by Indigenous communities unless concrete action follows them. The responses from First Nations members like John Jones (Nanoose) and leaders like Chief Robert Joseph (Gwawaenuk) to Pope Francis’ July 2022 apology in Canada for the “evil” committed by Catholic individuals and “local Catholic institutions” to Indigenous children through that nation’s residential school system reveal as much ([CBC News 2022](#)). When no direct apologies are made and control remains firmly with the institutional Church rather than Indigenous communities, as Leo’s return of artifacts to Canadian bishops rather than their original communities implies, one can

expect greater skepticism or even outright opposition (Holy See and Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops 2025).

Beyond the wounds of colonialism, the demands, worldviews, and practices of some Indigenous cultures clash with the beliefs and practices of the church now and as envisioned in the synodal process. Some Indigenous individuals and groups may reject any engagement with the church, synodal or not, due to its past and present connections to evil. These factors necessitate a humble approach but do not render encounters with Indigenous nations impossible or fruitless. Perhaps recognizing the limits to his recommendations to Indigenous peoples and theologians, Leo recalled his predecessor Francis and urged them to adopt *parrhesia*, an ecstatic “evangelical boldness” that “tells the whole truth because it is consistent,” including when the whole contains painful or shameful parts (Holy See 2025). Examining alliances between rural settlers and Indigenous communities in the United States, Zoltán Grossman has argued that mutual understanding and effective collaboration between these groups often result from tense conflict and the strengthening of Indigenous communities’ cultures rather than their assimilation (Grossman 2017, pp. 272, 281). Deepening relationships with Indigenous communities in the spirit fostered by the Synod on Synodality can enrich the church’s synodal journey, providing a source of revitalization for the people of God and the many peoples belonging to and walking alongside them.

This paper argues for the Catholic Church to receive and nurture the synod on synodality and its thrust toward decolonization through stronger, humbler engagement with Indigenous communities, scholars, and their manners of seeing and moving through the world that align with or challenge the ecclesial doctrine and praxis laid out in the synod.

2. Methodology and Terms

This paper grounds its claims in practical and decolonial theologies and Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS). Therefore, it brings ecclesial documents of the Roman Catholic Church into critical dialogue with the lived realities and scholarly insights of Indigenous communities and individuals, most often from what is now known as North America. The paper most frequently uses the term “Indigenous” to refer to the aboriginal inhabitants of North America and other colonized regions, with “Native” or “First Nations” occasionally used in its place. Specific national or tribal names accompany scholars, perspectives, or practices from those communities. To analyze the synodal process, the paper utilizes documents about and issued by the Synod on Synodality and texts from Francis’ tenure as pope, particularly the post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia* from 2020. Given Leo’s recent election as pope, consideration of his approach is necessarily briefer. The paper also draws from Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars of decolonization and religion. With the majority of sources on Indigenous communities coming from and speaking to Native North Americans, the essay’s horizons on Indigenous experiences and critical theory are limited mainly to this region of the world, even as it calls for the Catholic Church to engage with Indigenous communities globally.

This essay begins with a consideration of potentials for decolonial transformation for the Catholic Church through synodality. First, it provides its definition of decolonization and an overview of Catholic participation in and entanglement with colonization. Next, the paper argues for the transformative potential of decolonial liturgy or ritual and the corresponding ecclesiology it can produce and reinforce. This section ends by describing opportunities for Catholic–Indigenous dialogue concerning models of governance, environmental care, and approaches to place and space. Then, the essay lays out two major challenges to the Catholic Church’s transformation through encounter and dialogue with Indigenous communities: different worldviews and ongoing skepticism of the Church by Indigenous communities due to ongoing colonizing behavior. The paper concludes by reaffirming the worth and

necessity of decolonial synodality imagined, explored, and realized in tense *and* creative relationship with Indigenous communities.

3. Decolonial Transformation Through Synodality

3.1. Decolonization and the Catholic Church

3.1.1. Decolonization Defined

Decolonization involves “unraveling global participations in coloniality, which requires identifying roles and practices that coloniality’s victims and perpetrators need to name and take in order for decolonizing to move from mere theory to praxis” (Kuo 2023, p. 33). Importantly, decolonization requires the participation and transformation of colonizers and the colonized, which in themselves form an overly simplified dichotomy for the complex ways people in colonial societies and institutions participate in, uphold, resist, and are acted upon by oppressive colonial structures. For those institutions and individuals who have contributed to and benefited from colonization more throughout history, Henry S. Kuo has argued that decolonization requires settlers’ acknowledgement of colonization, their participation in it, and their need to dismantle it, often by concretely giving up intellectual, cultural, political, and economic power (Kuo 2023, p. 33). However, decolonization from a Christian perspective does not require the punishment or removal of colonizers as irredeemable but rather their conversion so that they may live in a more loving and just relationship with God and their colonized neighbors who may rightly love them as enemies before their conversion (Ezk 18:23) (Gutierrez [1987] 2003, pp. 39–40). Rather than marginalize or suppress Euro-Western worldviews and thus set up a reverse cultural hierarchy, decolonization in the church and the world at large must, to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s term, “provincialize” them, putting them alongside diverse Asian, African, Latin American, and Indigenous worldviews (Chakrabarty 2000; Kuo 2023, p. 33). Rather than the historical monotony of Western voices, a “harmony amidst differences” as envisioned by the Synod on Synodality’s final document or even perhaps a polyphony in which no one cultural voice holds the guiding melody would result from decolonization (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 1).

3.1.2. Colonialism and the Roman Catholic Church

Pope Francis voiced concerns about colonialism, often linked with globalization, the environment, and Indigenous populations, throughout his pontificate and thus laid the ground for a synodal approach to decolonization. His awareness and critique of colonialism appeared most frequently and strongly when he discussed the environment. In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’*, the pope expressed opposition to the “globalization of indifference,” a phrase he repeated five years later in *Querida Amazonia* and clarified as a “new version of colonialism,” quoting John Paul II (Francis 2015, para. 52; 2020, para. 14). *Querida Amazonia* also reveals an increased awareness of and respect for Indigenous spiritualities from Francis and his administration. Vincent Miller explains that *Laudato Si’* only praises Indigenous peoples for their care for the environment and future generations through it; *Querida Amazonia* adds a positive evaluation of the religious beliefs and practices that shape and are shaped by environmental orthopraxy (Miller 2022, p. 23). Moreover, *Querida Amazonia* rightly and more explicitly connects poverty, abuse of Indigenous peoples, and degradation of the environment with colonialism as an ongoing process rather than a historic event beyond which the Church has moved. Rather, colonization “in many places...has been changed, disguised and concealed, while losing none of its contempt for the life of the poor and the fragility of the environment” (Francis 2020, para. 16). *Querida Amazonia* directs its critique of colonialism more forcefully toward nation-states and corporations

than the Catholic Church itself. However, as the synodal process was underway, the Vatican took important steps toward decolonization by confessing and apologizing for the church's extensive institutional involvement in colonialism and its destruction of Indigenous cultures, traditions, and lives.

In March 2022, representatives of the Métis, Inuit, and First Nations of Canada met separately with Pope Francis for several hours over the course of the week. That week ended with Francis issuing the first papal apology for the “deplorable” abuses inflicted on Indigenous children in the nearly 75% of Canadian residential schools run by various religious orders in the Catholic Church (Winfield 2022). These abuses included not only physical violence but also denigration and erasure of “identity, ...culture and even...spiritual values” as part of a project of “ideological colonization” and assimilation (Winfield 2022). The representatives invited Francis to make his apology on Indigenous lands in Canada, and he did so in late July that same year.

At Maskwacis on Cree lands in central Alberta, Francis expressed that he was heeding the call of these lands to “remember” and apologize for the Church's participation in the “colonizing mentality,” “cultural destruction,” and other abuses inflicted on Indigenous peoples rather than remain indifferent as so many representatives of the Church did toward them (Francis 2022). In contrast with *Querida Amazonia*, he acknowledged that even if “Christian charity was not absent,” “the overall effects of the policies linked to the residential schools were catastrophic” and “our Christian faith tells us...that this was a disastrous error, incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” as well as that his apology was “only a first step” in a long process that could never fully repair the harm done (Francis 2022). Indigenous people present at and observing the apology expressed a mix of appreciation, skepticism toward actual change, and observations of how long the apology was overdue (Winfield and Gillies 2022). Still, Pope Francis' trip and forthright apology on Indigenous lands represented a significant shift at the highest level of the Catholic Church regarding its involvement in colonization and its dismantling.

The year following Pope Francis' apology, another move welcomed and deemed long overdue by Indigenous peoples came from the Dicasteries for Culture and Education and for Promoting Integral Human Development when they issued a joint statement on the “Doctrine of Discovery.” Colonizing nation-states built a legal and political framework off a series of papal bulls in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries justifying their seizure of and settlement on Indigenous lands from these texts that largely stands today in the United States, as evidenced by the explicit reference to the Doctrine of Discovery in the Supreme Court's decision against the Oneida Nation of New York's land claims in *City of Sherrill v. Oneida Indian Nation of N.Y.* in 2005 (Arnold 2023, pp. 184–85). The statement acknowledged both the “inadequate reflection” of “the equal dignity and rights of Indigenous people” in the bulls and the lack of “opposition from ecclesiastical authorities” to the colonial enterprises built on and the “terrible effects of the assimilation policies” stemming from them (Holy See 2023). The Francis pontificate endeavored to counteract these terrible effects in part through liturgical reform.

3.2. Decolonial Transformation Through Liturgy and Ecclesiology

Although less newsworthy than a public apology, proposed or actual changes in the liturgies of the Catholic Church significantly impact its self-understanding and practice as a church. The bishops of Vatican II who described the liturgy, particularly the Eucharist, as the font and summit of the Church in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* also called for liturgies incorporating “appropriate” elements of (non-Western) cultures, since “the Church has no wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not implicate the faith or the good of the whole community” (Second Vatican Council 1963, para. 10, 37, 40). To date, however,

only the Zairean or Congolese Rite of the Mass has gained Vatican approval, and this only as a rite of the Roman Missal rather than a distinct “family” of ritual. Commenting on the rite in 2020, Francis stressed the need for liturgy to “touch the hearts of local Church members” and reiterated his recommendation in *Querida Amazonia* for an “Amazonian Rite” that would “take up into the liturgy many elements proper to the experience of Indigenous peoples in their contact with nature, and respect native forms of expression in song, dance, rituals, gestures and symbols” (Francis 2020, para. 82; Samasumo 2020). Despite his rejection of married men as priests in the Amazon region, Francis did express the need for inculturation in liturgical ministers as well as forms, since “if we are to inculturate spirituality, holiness and the Gospel itself, how can we not consider an inculturation of the ways we structure and carry out ecclesial ministries?” (Francis 2020, para. 85). These developments under Pope Francis have provided fertile ground and stimuli for the recent synodal engagement with decolonization and Indigenous communities.

Centering ecclesial imagery and practice around the people of God provides a clear opportunity for learning from and walking with diverse Indigenous peoples. “People” as a collective noun is crucial, as both the church in the synod and many Indigenous communities for millennia have started with a group rather than an individual when considering humans’ needs and purpose. Rather than a closed system at the center of its own universe and beyond institutional or relational obligations, the self in most Indigenous North American cultures takes shape in the community that itself continually relates as a sovereign entity to other “nations” of human and non- or other-than-human persons. Philip Arnold, working with the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Arnold 2023, p. 175); Mark Freeland (Bahweting Bear Clan), working with U.S. Anishinaabe groups (Freeland 2021, pp. 117–21); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Nishnaabeg), working with Canadian Anishinaabe groups (Simpson 2017, pp. 58–59); and George Tinker (Osage), analyzing general Native spirituality (Tinker 2008, pp. 6–7), have all made such observations. Importantly, these communities usually do not take the form of large bureaucratic states. Rather, villages or reservations connect to each other through an overarching worldview or culture they live in distinct ways at the local level (Deloria [1973] 2003, p. 102; Freeland 2021, pp. 53, 55).

Indigenous groups historically and currently often see their purpose as maintaining balance through reciprocity in ritual and economic activity attuned to the web of relationships constituting the cosmos as revealed in their local and living lands (Arnold 2023, pp. 118–19; Freeland 2021, p. 44). While not recognizing land and non-human entities as living to the extent Indigenous communities do, the synod participants also identified relationship as the heart of reality and crucial to individual fulfillment. “Relationships and bonds are the means by which God the Father has revealed Himself in Jesus and the Spirit,” firstly through the family and then through the community of the church that is “God’s home and family,” according to the final document (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 28, 70, 142). Characteristic of the synod’s shift toward decentralization, the document asserts that the church has always been a “communion of a Church of Churches” comprising “a plurality of peoples and languages, of vocations, charisms and ministries at the service of the common good, as well as of local Churches” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 38). The positive evaluation of diverse yet harmonized churches with distinct rites, theologies, and spiritualities rooted in their local contexts provides a means for the global church to interact more knowledgeably and respectfully with the array of Indigenous cultures, themselves internally diverse, on local levels. The synodal approach to ecclesial governance also has solid ground on which to dialogue with and learn from Indigenous communities.

The synodal church envisioned in the final document builds on Francis’ vision of a church where “*todos, todos, todos*” are welcome and pushes it to be a place in which

all members are informed and empowered to fulfill their distinct roles in the ministry, liturgy, and governance of the community (Francis 2023). The final document affirms a “differentiated co-responsibility” for all the baptized, with particular emphasis on laity participating more and holding more leadership roles in decision-making processes and bodies and in courts of canon law (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 77, 89–90). Co-responsibility arises from the priestly, prophetic, and leadership (kingly) roles gifted through baptism, establishing a “common priesthood” that precedes and has “ontological priority” over the ordained priesthood (Luciani 2022, pp. 37, 61). Baptism also establishes the *sensus fidei*, the ability of the people of God as a people to “grasp intuitively what conforms to the truth of Revelation in the communion of the Church” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 28). Indigenous North American communities also have a history of recognizing different levels of skills and political, military, and ritual leadership roles—which were not strictly separated. However, the knowledge and practice of a largely identical array of tasks by men and women in multiple North American Indigenous cultures through much of their history may make interfacing with the specialization of roles and their resulting power relationships along the lines of differentiated co-responsibility, particularly the sacramental powers accessible to men but not women through Holy Orders, difficult (Kugel 2023, p. 132).

Together, the attributes of a synodal church ground the power and responsibility of the laity to actively participate in making decisions binding and generative for the local and universal churches with consecrated persons, priests, and bishops, who must respect the co-responsibility of the laity in “a climate of trust that is supported by transparency and accountability (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 80). Decision-taking (deliberation)—the final word on a specific step the church is taking on the synodal journey—occurs at the level of the episcopacy and the papacy, but it must bind itself to the decision-making (consultation)—the identification of the step to be taken through communal dialogue and discernment of all the faithful—to be truly synodal (Luciani 2022, pp. 38–39, 74). The constitutive nature of decision-making for synodality informs the final document’s forceful argument for mandatory “participatory bodies” like parish pastoral councils and the review of canon law away from describing decision-making votes as “merely consultative” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 92, 104). The extent to which the universal church and its local churches will receive and implement the co-responsible governance envisioned by the synod on synodality remains uncertain, but the vision itself provides a stronger bridge to Indigenous peoples than previous models.

3.3. Indigenous Communities and Roman Catholic Synodality: Potentials for Dialogue

3.3.1. Models of Governance

Indigenous nations in North America have rarely operated as monarchies or even representative democracies and more often as direct democracies functioning through consensus. Leaders, who often have both political and spiritual functions, exercise authority at the request and with accountability to the community, generally treated as “relatives” more than “followers” or “subjects,” a perspective in line with the function of the extended kinship network as the base social unit in most Indigenous North American cultures (Free-land 2021, p. 41; Kugel 2023, pp. 2–3; Wilkins 2023, p. 192). Group participation in the discernment and support of, as well as accountability for, leaders in Indigenous communities can inform the church’s implementation of the synodal call for the same (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 95, 99). A synodal church of differentiated co-responsibility also has much to learn from Indigenous communities’ conception of and behaviors toward women, children, and elders. Mentioned only briefly in the final document as vulnerable (among the first lives to be “discarded”), the elderly in a synodal

church should be treated as “a wealth of community resources” based on their life experience (Freeland 2021, p. 77; XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 54). The final document urges not only that the adult community protect children from abuse but also listen to and value them as “bearers of missionary potential” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 61). Leann Simpson points to historical and current Indigenous practices of trusting and valuing what children say, letting them learn by following their passions, and creating an environment in which they can “trust themselves, their family, and their community” (Simpson 2017, pp. 147, 150).

The role of women will generate the most conflict in Catholic approaches to Indigenous cultures. While the final document states “there is no reason or impediment that should prevent women from carrying out leadership roles in the Church,” it states only that the “question of women’s access to diaconal ministry remains open,” and opacity marked the study group dedicated to that topic from its start (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 60; Dulle 2024). With larger obstacles to women in the priesthood, the church will face strong critique and opposition from Indigenous nations that are matrilineal, choose ceremonial timing and political leaders through women, attach importance to women or 2-Spirit/gender-queer people in rituals, or support strident critiques of heteropatriarchy as a tool of settler colonialism (Kidwell et al. 2001, pp. 82–83; Kugel 2023, pp. 20–21; Simpson 2017, p. 52).

At the same time, opportunities for creativity and collaboration between the Church and Indigenous women exist outside of ordained ministry. In *Querida Amazonia*, Francis called for exploration of “forms of service and charisms that are proper to women” (Francis 2020, para. 102). While discussion of Holy Orders for women continues, Catholic Indigenous communities can explore recognition for the roles of women in choosing the timing for ceremonies, as among the Haudenosaunee today and historically, or confirming religious decisions made by the community, as among the Ojibwe historically (Arnold 2023, p. 39; Lewandowski 2019, p. 11). The formal opening of the installed ministries of acolyte and lector to women through canon law and the creation of an installed ministry of catechist during Francis’ pontificate offer encouraging signs in this direction (Francis 2021a, para. 8; 2021b). Finally, the synod on synodality’s final document asserts that “inequality between men and women is not part of God’s design” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 52). Encounter with Indigenous women and their experiences will deepen the Catholic Church’s understanding of what constitutes “inequality” for the benefit of all women and people.

3.3.2. Approaches to the Environment

Care for creation, “our common home,” is a hallmark of Francis’ papacy and a major focus of the synodal process. The synodal document, echoing *Laudato Si’*, calls for an integral ecology that heals human relationship with the earth that/who is mother and sister and connects care for the earth with care for the poor (Francis 2015, para. 1; XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 54). As mentioned, the synodal document’s one mention of Indigenous people occurs immediately after “Creation” in the list of bodies harmed by the church read at the pre-synod penitential service (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 6). The practice of synodality in the Synod on the Amazon and its reflection in *Querida Amazonia* also link the cry of the earth to that of the poor and more regularly calls for integral ecology (Synod on the Amazon 2019; Francis 2020, para. 8, 12, 52, 71, 82, 110). The Synod on the Amazon and Francis also maintain a close connection in their texts between environmental care and Indigenous populations. Indigenous groups care for their lands best due to the “mysticism that sees the interconnection and interdependence of the whole of creation,” and they and

their lands have also been subject to abuse, exploitation, and colonization by corporations, governments, and even the church (Synod on the Amazon 2019, para. 31, 49, 60–62, 66, 131, 145; Francis 2020, para. 9, 15, 18, 21, 42, 73). It is important to note that the self-criticism in these documents is more muted than in Francis' (2022) Canadian apology.

The synod's working document goes significantly farther than *Querida Amazonia* in advocating for a church with a local, Amazonian, Indigenous face that rejects "cultural homogenization" and "alliance with the dominant culture and with political and economic power" in favor of ecclesial conversion to Indigenous wisdom through the empowerment and support of Native ministers, theology, spirituality, liturgy, and traditional rituals and ceremonies for the integral health of people and their environment (Synod on the Amazon 2019, para. 87, 98, 102, 119, 123–26, 129). This document and, albeit to lesser extents, *Querida Amazonia* and the synod on synodality's final document provide substantial ground for walking with Indigenous communities by taking their experiences and worldviews seriously.

3.3.3. Locality and Place

Although not explicitly engaged with Indigenous frameworks, Part IV of the synod on synodality's final document, "An Abundant Church: The Conversion of Bonds," posits an ecclesial identity amenable to Native understandings of place and space. While not "of" the world, the people of God are "in" and "for" the world, recognizing the "seeds of the word" in the religions and cultures of the "peoples of the earth" and also that they themselves "cannot be understood apart from [their] roots in a specific territory, in that space and time where a shared experience of encounter with the saving God occurs" (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 17, 110). As a basis for the "rich diversity of expressions of faith" in the universal church, this section promotes a local church attuned and attentive to its cultural and environmental surroundings. As Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) noted in his seminal text on Native spirituality, *God Is Red*, Indigenous cultures worldwide foreground place, specifically place- and land-based relationships, as the foundation of their thought and action (Deloria [1973] 2003, p. 70).

Later scholars reiterated and explored the depth of Deloria's arguments from both Christian and traditional spiritual perspectives (Kidwell et al. 2001, p. 30; Simpson 2017, p. 213). Broadly, they argue that human communities are part of nature rather than separate from it. Communities must pay attention to the environment to determine the best ways to support the relationships between all those living on and with the land so that all may flourish. The prioritization of place-based ethics fosters diverse instantiations and interpretations of rituals and comfort with this diversity (Deloria [1969] 1989, pp. 102–3). Thus, as Cherokee theologian Randy Woodley has stressed, relationships and the practices maintained, renewed, or repaired through them—orthopraxy—matter more to most Indigenous communities, including Christian ones, than adherence to a standard creed—orthodoxy (Woodley 2022, pp. 62–63). While credal confession will not lose its centrality in the Catholic Church, a church transformed through synodality and decolonization needs to follow the recommendations from Francis and the synod to have inculturated liturgies and ministries for a church with a "local face." The emphasis on practice based on place figures into Native theologians' assertion against any one, universalizing "Native theology" detached from distinct environments and for Native theologies as always practical theologies (Kidwell et al. 2001, p. ix; Woodley 2022, p. 121).

Importantly, both Indigenous communities and the synod process assert that place is not simply empty space. Instead, place denotes "one's belonging to a network of relationships and to a culture whose territorial roots are more dynamic and flexible than ever before" (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 111). Francis came out strongly against conceptions of the Amazon as an "enormous empty space to be filled" and

a “wild space to be domesticated” (Francis 2020, para. 12). This opposition aligns with the work of Aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson who has highlighted the cartographic and political designation of Indigenous lands as *terra nullius*, land belonging to no European nation-state and thus open to settlement and resource extraction (Moreton-Robinson 2015, p. 4). Instead of empty space controlled and filled by the hierarchy, the Church of Churches draws vitality from its constituent parts interacting with and supporting one another and the non-Catholic people within their locales as they make their pilgrimage toward and with God in a time of rapid and mass mobility and an expansive digital culture (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 111–115).

Similarly, Indigenous nations were and are not stagnant in their commitment to particular lands but rather engaged in what Simpson has termed an Indigenous internationalism. Human and non-human nations share particular lands and thus require international relationality from the start, fostering the realization that the whole planet is connected and the desire to learn about it and one’s own position in and responsibilities to it (Simpson 2017, pp. 56–57). Indigenous communities are not “bound” to their traditional lands, either, but rather have moved historically within and beyond them in seasonal migrations for ceremonies, food, and trade (Weatherdon and Schermerhorn 2024, pp. 3–4). A valuable opportunity exists here for dialogue with the synodal church styled as “firmly rooted yet pilgrims” (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 110). Indigenous communities can dialogue with and teach the people of God to be both particular and universal without being universalizing, a historic and current barrier to a decolonial and synodal church.

4. Discussion: Challenges to Transformation

4.1. Worldviews

Within and alongside the opportunities for synodal, decolonial conversion of the church with Indigenous peoples, there remain significant challenges. Prominent among these is the difference between the worldviews common to Indigenous peoples and common to the Greco-Roman and later Western European cultures that inform the ecclesiology, theology, liturgy, and daily operations of the Catholic Church. The gap is such that Woodley has written that “you can be a Christian and follow Jesus, but it’s very hard,” because Christianity since the time of Constantine often has not been compatible with Indigenous values even though Jesus, in Woodley’s view, was and is (Woodley 2022, pp. 44–45).

The synods on the Amazon and on synodality may express the importance of place, but they do not recognize the non-human inhabitants of places—plants, animals, and especially spirits and “inanimate” entities like rocks and rivers—as subjects for respectful and reciprocal recognition and relationship. The Church, particularly in North America and Europe, will need to acknowledge and revoke its immediate identification of spirits as demonic or fictitious as part of its decentralization and decolonization (Lledo Gomez 2023, pp. 64–65). This turn would be in part a *ressourcement* of ancient and medieval Christian worldviews populated by far more spiritual beings, some associated with the environment or cosmos (Caciola 2016, pp. 44, 306). Such a move would also align with the Synod on the Amazon’s working document in its recommendation of adopting Indigenous ceremonies and spirituality.

Time and its relationship to space will also cause tension in the people of God’s synodal journey with Indigenous communities. Deloria explained that space and place take such priority in Indigenous thought that they generate cyclical or ritual time as opposed to the linear time or “division of continuous time” with fixed start and end points that structures the church (Deloria [1973] 2003, p. 65; Freeland 2021, p. 81). Linear time in the church comes from and has reinforced Western emphases on “progress,” but it also reflects belief in

God's continuous action in created history, most definitively in the Incarnation and the end of time at Jesus' second coming, that lies at the core of ecclesial identity (Gjermundsen 2024, p. 836; Shults 2007, pp. 55–56). The people of God observe ritual time through the sabbath, Eucharist, and liturgical year, even if the influence of feast days and liturgical seasons on Christians' lives is much attenuated from the Middle Ages (Duffy [1992] 2005, p. 47). These elements of ritual time require critical reflection with Indigenous communities to connect them with place- and nature-based cycles important to ritual and everyday Native life (Freeland 2021, p. 79; Simpson 2017, p. 150).

Dialogue and clarification must also attend to Francis' oft-repeated line "Time is greater than space." The phrase appears in *Lumen Fidei* (para. 57), *Evangelii Gaudium* (para. 222–223), *Laudato Si'* (para. 178), and *Amoris Laetitia* (para. 3, 261). Francis connected time positively with "processes" and space negatively with "power," specifically efforts to "possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion" (Francis 2013, para. 223). While the pope still prioritized actions that "bear fruit in significant historical events," his emphasis on process over possessive power offers a route for decolonial dialogue with Indigenous communities, for whom treaties and decolonization itself are more about the process than results, content, and structures (Francis 2013, para. 223; Wilkins 2023, p. 300; Woodley 2022, pp. 104, 131). The people of God's journey and process of decolonization and synodality must involve ongoing recognition of and conversion from their historic and current involvements in assimilative, destructive, and genocidal colonial systems, as well as acceptance of Indigenous people's refusal to engage in dialogue with an institution that has done such harm.

4.2. Colonial and Imperial Heritages and Rejection of "Recognition"

"The fact that Christians have participated in acts of resistance to colonialism and engaged in liberating praxis does not atone Christianity from the major role it has played and continues to play in the fostering and expansion of global colonial designs" (Barreto and Latinovic 2023, p. 4). The institutional Catholic Church has come closest to this statement in Francis' apology at Maskwacis and the revocation of the Doctrine of Discovery, but it has yet to embody the statement in a humble and thorough decolonization process.

Frustration at the slow pace of change in the church and its overdue, still-partial acknowledgement of its colonial entanglements and deep anger and trauma from those entanglements have led significant numbers of Indigenous people and scholars to give up on or reject engagement with the Catholic Church. Simpson sees little to no place for "church" in resurgent Indigenous communities (Simpson 2017, p. 85); Freeland casts doubt on the possibility of Indigenous people engaged in Christianity being able to do so, even with a desire to participate in their Indigenous cultures, without doing violence to them (Freeland 2021, p. 193); and Randy Woodley sees institutional Christianity as more often a hindrance rather than a help to following Jesus (Woodley 2022, p. 54). While Clara Sue Kidwell (Choctaw), Homer Noley (Choctaw), and Tinker have more hope and stake in institutional Christianity, they strongly criticize the Catholic Church's model of inculturation as an ongoing colonial move of "universality and exclusivity" meant to "dominate and subdue Indians" by identifying elements of Native traditions as "different cultural forms of Christianity" to be affirmed and assumed by the church while others are "eradicated" (Kidwell et al. 2001, p. 9). At the same time, the Tekakwitha Conference seeks to "reinforce Catholic identity" as they "affirm pride in our cultures and spiritual traditions" and "promote healing through forgiveness and reconciliation," showing a trust in and desire for engagement with the institutional Church among the Indigenous North American Catholics who participate in and lead it (Tekakwitha Conference n.d.).

With these painful experiences clearly articulated, the church has an obligation to be decolonized and changed in part by giving leadership of truth and reconciliation processes to Indigenous nations. Simpson and Glenn Sean Coulthard (Yellowknife Dene), among other Indigenous scholars, have delineated and rejected the “politics of recognition.” Through this approach, settler entities initiate and direct truth and reconciliation processes in order to manage their feelings of guilt, dismiss or villainize ongoing Indigenous anger as irrational or overly demanding, and maintain their control over Indigenous bodies, emotions, and lands (Coulthard 2014, pp. 1–6; Simpson 2017, pp. 238–39). Religious or spiritual leaders and scholars of the same bent as Coulthard and Simpson may similarly reject an “ecclesiology of recognition” in which apology is the only step taken or all steps taken remain under the control of the institutional Church. Tinker certainly has done so, forcefully criticizing those communities that follow liberation theology’s “option for the poor”—supported by John Paul II, Francis, and Leo—and through it reinforce concepts of class structure that do not exist in Indigenous worldviews (Tinker 2008, pp. 148, 168).

Recent history demonstrates how the Vatican continues to recognize Western structures and perspectives as more legitimate than Indigenous ones. During Francis’ trip to Canada, the public liturgies in Edmonton and Ste. Anne de Beaupré were celebrated in Latin and put the bishops closest to the altar. Rev. Daryold Corbiere Winkler, an Ojibway priest in the Diocese of Ottawa, remarked that having bishops conduct parts of the liturgy in Native languages and surrounding Francis first with survivors, then bishops, would have demonstrated a more synodal and survivor-centered approach to the trip (Kieser and Barter 2023, p. 77). The statement denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery and voicing support for the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples expresses a trust in international law, human rights, and the nation-state founded in liberalism that many Indigenous peoples do not share or are struggling to expand (Glenn 2011, pp. 173–74; Holy See 2023). Leo’s description of Indigenous people as “ours” in his October 2025 address likely meant to include them as equal members of the diverse Body of Christ (Holy See 2025). However, “ours” could convey to Indigenous peoples a sense of entitlement or control felt and exerted by the institutional Church over them, especially when it motivated multiple seizures of Indigenous lands, objects, and children and rejections of Indigenous dress, ceremonies, and family structures in favor of Euro-American ones over centuries (Chi 2025, pp. 2, 6–8; Lewandowski 2019, p. 23). The return of First Nations artifacts to the Canadian bishops rather than their original communities plays into this interpretation of “ours” by trusting the institutional Church more than Indigenous people to care for Indigenous cultural objects properly (Holy See and Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops 2025).

Together, these gestures align more with Francis’ relative quiet on colonial abuses of the Church in *Querida Amazonia* and other documents. Leo should not push reconciliation onto those who experienced harm. The honesty, humility, and contrition exhibited in Francis’ apology at Maskwacis and *more* of these virtues are necessary for true decolonial transformation in the Catholic Church. The Church can show goodwill toward those communities and scholars who reject synodal engagement and concrete dedication to synodal decolonization by strengthening its tenuous commitment to respect the status of voluntarily isolated Indigenous peoples in the Amazon and elsewhere. The people of God should protect these people’s lands and lifestyles from colonial encroachment by governments, businesses, and the church itself in consultation with non-isolated Indigenous peoples and its ongoing support of voluntary internationalism (Synod on the Amazon 2019, para. 57; Francis 2020, para. 37).

5. Conclusions

In a ceremony held onsite on 31 October 2025, Sister Sue Ernster, president of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, signed the official transfer of the order's land on Trout Lake in Arbor Vitae, Wisconsin, to the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, a tribe within the Anishinaabe culture. The transfer of the two acres for \$30,000, the price the order paid for the land in 1966 and just over 1% of its current market value, is the first known return of land from a Catholic institution to an Indigenous nation in the United States made explicitly for the sake of reparation for colonization and residential boarding schools (FSPA 2025). The FSPA highlighted their operation of St. Mary's Catholic Indian Boarding School on the reservation of the Anishinaabe Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa between 1883 and 1969 as requiring reparative address (FSPA 2025).

The Franciscan Sisters began discernment on the spirituality center in 2023 with the Lac du Flambeau Band and Land Justice Futures, a nonprofit that works with religious landowners to transfer land for ecological and racial justice. Tribal President John D. Johnson, Sr., stated that not only did the transfer of land occur, but also "the restoration of balance, dignity, and our sacred connection to the places our ancestors once walked," which served "as an example of what true healing and partnership can look like" (FSPA 2025).

The opportunities for and challenges to the Catholic Church's dialogue and collaboration with Indigenous peoples as it walks the path of synodal and decolonial conversion are both significant. As a people with trust in the inherent goodness and dignity of creation and humanity and in the salvific love of God, the people of God have grounds for hope in this journey that remembers the painful past rightly and also prompts action for a more just present and future. The land transfer from the FSPA to the Lac du Flambeau Band demonstrates that European and Christian interactions with Indigenous and non-Christian peoples did not have to happen as they did, nor do they need to continue in the same vein of domination, assimilation, and destruction (Arnold 2023, p. 198; Deloria [1969] 1989, p. 49; Francis 2022). As Francis stated in *Querida Amazonia*,

[E]ven as we feel this healthy sense of indignation, we are reminded that it is possible to overcome the various colonizing mentalities and to build networks of solidarity and development. 'The challenge, in short, is to ensure a globalization in solidarity, a globalization without marginalization' (Francis 2020, para. 17).

Decolonization as a journey and process is empowered or stymied by leaders like Francis and now Leo, but sustained and vitalized by the diverse people on the grassroots who receive, implement, re-vision, and revise the process through their concrete, localized experiences rather than abstractions (XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024, para. 142). The church's path away from colonialism and toward synodality will best be trodden through tense, honest, and creative dreaming, praying, and acting with Indigenous communities.

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