
Dom Leonardo Steiner, a Cardinal for Amazonia: "My ministry is rooted in missionary zeal"

A Cardinal from Amazon rainforest. Dom **Leonardo Steiner**, Archbishop of Manaus, besides being one of two Brazilian clerics who will join the College of Cardinals with the Consistory of next August 27, is the first cardinal from the great Pan-Amazon region. Indeed, Cardinal **Claudio Hummes**, who passed away last July 4, being Archbishop Emeritus identified himself with the cause of the Church in Amazonia, making a decisive contribution to the path leading to the 2019 Synod. The most important ecclesial bodies in Amazonia, the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon ([CEAMA](#)) and the Ecclesial Network ([REPAM](#)), are presently headed by Peruvian Cardinal **Pedro Barreto**, Archbishop of Huancayo. But Dom Steiner will be the first cardinal to serve as bishop of a diocese located in the Amazon rainforest, Manaus. In certain respects its vast metropolitan area has an ambivalent relationship with the great forest, similar to the one Robinson Crusoe's island has with the ocean. In fact Manaus has the features of an urban context, yet evoking the reality of the forest that surrounds it, starting with its isolation, (a difficult city to access by land). Manaus is where the confluence of two great rivers, the dark water of Rio Negro and the muddy water of Rio Solimoes, meet, merging into the Amazon River. Dom Leonardo Steiner is himself an 'adopted son' of the Amazon rainforest. In fact, he was born in Forquilha, southern Brazil (State of Santa Catarina, diocese of Criciúma) on November 6, 1950. He took his first vows in the Order of Friars Minor on August 2, 1976 and was ordained a priest on January 21, 1978. On February 2, 2005 he was appointed Bishop Prelate of São Félix (succeeding Dom Pedro Casaldáliga). On September 21, 2011 he was appointed auxiliary bishop of Brasília. He served as Secretary General of the Brazilian Bishops' Conference from May 2011 to May 2019. On November 27, 2019, Pope Francis appointed him Metropolitan Archbishop of Manaus. He also serves as vice-president of the Ecclesial Conference of the Amazon (CEAMA). SIR interviewed him ahead of the Consistory. **Does the decision to appoint a cardinal from the Brazilian Amazon represent a sign of the Pope's special concern? What could be the response to that concern?** It certainly signals the special consideration that Pope Francis gives to our Amazon region, but it also stands as a sign for the particular Churches in the region. The Pope is aware of what is happening in the Amazon region with respect to its natural environment, its indigenous populations, and the Churches' efforts to be increasingly attuned to the evangelisation he proposes. The meeting with the Holy Father last month during the ad limina visit illustrated our response and clarified the ways in which we must continue to respond, namely: To take the dreams of the exhortation *Querida Amazonia* seriously and dream together with the communities, because dreams that are dreamt together ultimately come true. **Are Pope Francis' four dreams for the Amazon region gaining ground?** The exhortation *Querida Amazonia* offers us a hermeneutics of reality. It is a hermeneutics of the Word of God intended to be incorporated into our reality; that is, to be inculturated! The guidelines for evangelisation in the dioceses and prelatures of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil North I region (corresponding to the States of Amazonas and Roraima, *Ed's note*) draw inspiration from the dreams of Pope Francis. It can be said that before rampant devastation, a 'policy void' with regard to environmental protection and indigenous peoples, those dreams should come true as a matter of urgency. Just as the missionaries of the past had dreams, we too continue to dream. **Manaus is in the heart of the Amazon rainforest but it is also a big city, like many others in Brazil. What are the pastoral challenges of this urban context?** It is a city with a population of 2.3 million! The city is developing chaotically, harming the environment, with no basic sanitation, drying up water streams, leaving families at the mercy of criminal rings. More than 35,000 indigenous people live on the outskirts of the city. We are reflecting on ways to accompany these different ethnic groups, allowing them to cultivate their roots, so that they do not lose their culture, the language of their ancestors. Poverty and hunger are growing in suburban areas. It is necessary to be present in the communities constantly, provide training so that well-

trained leaders can assume responsibility for the communities. A greater presence of Caritas, of the activity of the Life and Hope Community (MCVE) movement, due to its closeness and solidarity with the people, will be very helpful. The area features a remarkable number of immigrants, with a large percentage of Venezuelans. The Church accompanies them and strives to integrate them into the life of the city. **Manaus was painfully affected by the Covid pandemic. What remains of this tragic experience inside the Church and in society at large?** Precautionary measures are being taken in the Church, because the pandemic is not yet over. We have grown in solidarity, in closeness. We have discovered that we are a domestic Church. Acts of solidarity continue, while poverty and hunger increase. No significant changes are taking place in society. We should have emerged from the pandemic as better people: more fraternal, more supportive, closer, with greater moral values in politics. But it did not happen. The government failed to help people understand the seriousness of the situation and, therefore, to inspire solidarity even with regard to the vaccine rollout. **To whom do you dedicate your elevation to the Cardinalate, and how do you think it will change your service to the Church?** Many missionaries have given their lives for the Gospel in the Amazon region. The place of burial of some of them remains unknown. Missionaries who left everything and gave everything in order for Jesus to be known and loved. They supported the poor, those who were marginalised, they lived with them. As a Cardinal in Amazonia, my ministry is rooted in this missionary zeal, in missionary spirit for the Amazon region. Men and women who have given their lives out of love for the Gospel in an extraordinary way. After my appointment, many times my thoughts went to these missionaries, whom I met in the stories told by the people and in reading what was left behind. I remember Dom Hélder Câmara, Dom Luciano Mendes, Dom Ivo Lorscheiter, Dom Geraldo Lyrio, among others. They have illuminated the paths of the Church in Brazil. Serving the People of God, the poor, shall continue unceasingly. A service that rekindles hope and makes peace attainable. (*) *journalist at "La vita del popolo"*

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