
First Gran Chaco and Acuífero Guaraní Ecclesial Network Assembly, the third Amazonian 'daughter' of Laudato Si'

The Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM) was the first-born (whose fruits were made manifest in the subsequent Synod and its ensuing steps). The second-born, the Mesoamerican and Mexican Ecological Ecclesial Network (REEMAM) was set up in Central America. [REGCHAG](#) - the Gran Chaco and Acuífero Guaraní Ecclesial Network - is the newest, the third-born. These are three fruits of *Laudato si'* that were borne in the Latin American continent, ecclesial networks whose main objective, expressed in openness and dialogue with the native peoples, is the care of creation and the promotion of integral ecology. While this was and remains a matter of urgency in Amazonia, this vast area of the so-called 'Cono Sur', one of the southernmost areas of South America, is no exception. The Gran Chaco is the second-largest forest in South America, behind the Amazon rainforest. It stretches across Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia and Argentina. The so-called Acuífero Guaraní is the third-largest groundwater reservoir in the world, originating in the basin of the Parana, Paraguay and Uruguay rivers. The aquifer is shared by Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina. These are regions with vital ecosystems, inhabited by various native peoples, notably the Guaraní people, today endangered to an increasing extent by groundwater pollution, mono-cultures, deforestation, wildfires and illegal practices. **An idea that developed at the Amazon Synod.** The REGCHAG constituent assembly was held in Asunción, the capital of Paraguay, November 28- 29. The Latin American Episcopal Council ([CELAM](#)) and the Episcopates of the five countries involved gave a strong impetus to its creation. **Monsignor Ángel José Macín**, bishop of Reconquista, at the helm of the Pastoral Care of Indigenous Peoples and the Pastoral Care of Migrants at the Episcopal Conference of Argentina, coordinates the Ecclesial Network. "The idea first emerged during the Amazon Synod, which I took part in", he told SIR. "We shared this idea with the then archbishop of Asunción, Msgr. Edmundo Valenzuela, and with Mauricio López, REPAM executive secretary at the time. We became friends. We continued discussing this project, and the first preparatory meeting was held at the height of the pandemic. In short, it was a dream that gradually took concrete shape and has now become reality. Cardinal Czerny, prefect of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, expressed his explicit support at the launch of the ecclesial network." The primary goal is to "give concrete form to the contents of *Laudato si'* in these regions, promoting integral ecology and care for our common home. In the preparatory process we also met with a number of scientists, with whom we engaged in extensive debates. The areas that the REGCHAG comprises, the Gran Chaco and the Acuífero Guaraní, are two separate but contiguous areas, united primarily by the common concern of water protection, which runs underground in the former, and at surface level in the latter. They are two lungs that breathe the same spirituality. Water resources are constantly in peril, monoculture farming is spreading." Obviously, points out Msgr. Macín, "the Network is no substitute for ecclesial structures. Quite the opposite in fact, it was created in close agreement with ecclesial bodies, starting with CELAM, and with the core structures of the Church. At the same time, it aims to engage in cultural and social dialogue, and to raise awareness and build advocacy within the general public. We shall be concerned and dedicated to the care of our common home, together with the peoples who inhabit those regions, especially the native peoples." The joy of the Latin American Church was also expressed in a short video by **Mauricio López**, director of the Network and Pastoral Action Centre at CELAM. In his words, REGCHAG is "the sign of a new pastoral dynamism", at local level, a sign of "pastoral, social-environmental, cultural and ecclesiological conversion." **Enlightened by Pope Francis' Magisterium.** The REGCHAG Executive Secretary **Miguel Cruz Solares** further highlighted the importance of the new ecclesial body: "This ecclesial network, in brief, comes forth from the reality we live in, enlightened by the words of Pope Francis. We intend to contribute to his plan for the Church; our source of inspiration are [Laudato si'](#), [Evangelii Gaudium](#), the post-synodal exhortation [Querida Amazonia](#), and the preparatory and final

document of the Amazon Synod. REGCHAG has been established as an open ecclesial network. It comprises cardinals, bishops, priests, religious and many lay faithful. We want to build a strong presence at the local level, and walk together." Cruz likewise emphasised the crucial issue of freshwater, "which is running out because of pollution, due to its irrational and excessive use, especially in intensive agriculture, giant hydro and mining projects, and wildfires. Entire villages are running out of drinking water. Awareness of this situation must be raised, and together we must sustain the livelihoods of the indigenous communities." **The voices of indigenous peoples.** Indeed, indigenous peoples are eagerly awaiting and looking forward to this ecclesial initiative, as **Jorgelina Duarte**, from Argentina, leader of the Mbya Guaraní people, points out to SIR. "There are 10,000 of us, spread out across 130 communities. My grandfather was a historic leader of our people." Jorgelina inherited his leadership, within the territorial organisation of the Guaraní people. She lives in the north of Argentina, along the Uruguay River. She makes frequent visits to the various communities, attends the meetings organised by the Indigenous Pastoral Ministry within the Argentine Church, and has been invited to take part in REGCHAG's constituent meeting. She sees constant destruction of forest land, the expansion of soybeans cultivation, which destroys ecosystems and traditional crops. "For example, the eucalypt trees, which yield traditional natural products in the Rio Uruguay basin, are endangered". Jorgelina lives near the Iguazú Falls, on the border of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, one of the most stunning natural sites on earth. "Tourists flock in from all over the world, but this does not benefit the indigenous peoples, nor the small farmers, who are growing poorer and poorer as they can no longer sustain the businesses they had been running for generations. Furthermore, freshwater is becoming increasingly polluted, and the natural balance that we cherished for generations is disappearing. There is much talk of sustainability, while in fact our indigenous territories are being destroyed." Before this alarming scenario, "the Church, through the pastoral care of indigenous people, is there to support us, notably by providing legal assistance". As of today, this proximity will be permanent and structural. (*) *Journalist at "La vita del popolo"*

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