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## Lake Tefé disappears due to drought. Dom da Silva: “The cry of the water is the cry of the poor”

“Despite all attempts to deny, conceal, gloss over or relativise the issue, the signs of climate change are here and are becoming increasingly evident,” writes Pope Francis in his recent exhortation *Laudate Deum*. And sadly so, in one of the planet's most fragile and vital areas for the future of humanity, the Amazon rainforest, those signs are visible and concrete. We are in the town of Tefé, which takes its name from the river that, before flowing into the Amazon, forms Lake Tefé, slightly larger than Lake Garda in Italy, located about 700 kilometres west of Manaus, the capital of the Brazilian state of Amazonas. These places are one with their water flows. Just three months ago, canoes and small fishing boats were plying the blue waters of Lake Tefé on their way to isolated indigenous tribes, while the Amazon pink dolphins leapt and swam about, and the lake and river basin continued to fulfil their traditional function as the sole, or almost sole, source of food for the local population and other living creatures. **The lake almost dried up in a few months.** The landscape has changed dramatically. The lake has dried up as a result of the drought that has affected the entire Brazilian Amazon. The pile dwellings that once stood on its banks are now 'houses on stilts', isolated in the mud; the waters where canoes used to sail are now dirt tracks crossed by motorbikes; the carcasses of dolphins and thousands of other fish are rotting on its banks. With the waterways as their only means of communication, thousands of people, entire indigenous tribes, have become completely isolated. “It is said that the cry of the earth is the cry of the poor, and the cry of the water is the cry of the poor”, we are told by the Bishop of the Prelature of Tefé, **Dom Altevir da Silva**, who in recent days travelled all the way to Brasilia, to the offices of the National Episcopal Conference of Brazil, to make a heartfelt appeal to the Church of his country, and indeed to the whole world: “Although we are in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, where the climate is traditionally humid, it has not rained for three months. The drought we are experiencing is the worst ever. The death of fish, the main source of food and livelihood for the local population, is staggering. Water is not available for daily use.” **Food and environmental crises.** The 10 municipalities of the Prelature of Tefé (Itamarati, Carauari, Juruá, Japurá, Maraã, Fonte Boa, Jutai, Uarini, Alvarães and Tefé) are among the most affected by the drought, out of the 62 municipalities of the State of Amazonas. Like a shepherd who knows his flock, the bishop lists the tribes and communities that have been affected, one by one. In the municipality of Maraã, for example, 42 communities are without drinking water. Only four of them have an artesian well. In the municipality of Tefé alone, 152 communities, representing 3,000 families, are completely isolated. The lack of water for consumption and daily activities, due to the drying up of rivers and lakes and the pollution resulting from the large number of dead fish, is posing a serious risk to the people living on the banks of the rivers, according to data released by the Prelature of Tefé. Some members of the community will have to travel thousands of kilometres in search of food and reservoirs where fishing is still possible. At least 15,000 people, mostly from indigenous tribes living in near isolation, are at risk as a result of the food emergency. In addition, more than 60 percent of goods shipped through the Amazon are not reaching their destination because of the drought. The situation is likely to affect heavier products in particular, such as rice, frozen food and fertiliser, which are expected to become more expensive in the region. “What is happening” - he told SIR – “confirms what the Pope has written in his most recent exhortation, *Laudate Deum*, and in previous documents. Everything is connected, the environmental disaster is becoming a social and humanitarian tragedy. It is necessary to act quickly - populations have been left completely isolated, without water or means of subsistence. Some of this is man-made, and the drought itself is just one of many assaults on our Amazon region, including forest fires, economic development plans and the growing presence of illegal gold miners, known as *garimpeiros*, whose illegal activities have contaminated rivers with mercury. **Wildfires and illegal mining are compounded by drought.** As if that were not enough, the stench of the fires, which every year (only

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the level of journalistic 'attention' changes) devastate huge swathes of forest, permeates the atmosphere and can be smelled as far as Tefé and many other places, including Manaus. "We may be nearing the breaking point of our Common Home, as the Pope writes. Laudate Deum speaks to the whole of humanity, but here we feel its closeness and concreteness more than ever. We are the victims of these phenomena and of plans backed only by the force of violence. We are the victims of a murderous system that absolutizes profit. The exhortation calls for a rapid response that is at once profound and comprehensive, prophetic, cultural and spiritual." Hence the appeal of the bishop, in the wake of the initiative of solidarity promoted by the Prelature: "Our riverbank brothers and sisters face serious hardship. They urgently need our help. Hence, through the Caritas Centre of the Prelature of Tefé, we have promoted a relief campaign to bring fresh water and food to the most isolated communities at this time. Together with other institutions, we will do all we can to help our brothers and sisters who are suffering these hardships caused by the drought. May our hearts of solidarity and brotherhood be united with the suffering of our people, sharing what little they have and helping those who are affected." It is a plea that reaches out to Europe through SIR. "The world must help us," concluded Dom Altevira da Silva. \*journalist at "La vita del popolo"

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