



**Statement by H.E. Archbishop Gabriele Caccia,
Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations,
at the 20th Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
21 April 2021**

Madam Chair,

On the twentieth anniversary of this Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, I would like to express the Holy See's appreciation for its important work and offer a few thoughts on the advancement of indigenous issues.

As we all know, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) insists that "*indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State.*"¹ These rights must be protected and promoted.

Pope Francis has encouraged not only Catholics throughout the world but all peoples to respond to the cries and hopes of indigenous peoples. In October 2019, the Pope convened a Synod, an advisory meeting of bishops and experts, focused specifically on the Amazon, listening carefully to the voices of those who live there. In February last year, he wrote an exhortation – aptly entitled "*Querida Amazonia*" – not only bringing to the attention of the international community the human, ecological, environmental and cultural concerns of the people of the region, but also to the importance of coming together with resolve to address these concerns – that reflect the concerns of indigenous peoples across the planet.

Solidarity with indigenous peoples always involves concern for their endangered lands. When indigenous lands are appropriated, exploited, and devastated, the problems that result not only affect the environment, but also the human person. This is a particular concern in the Amazon region, which "*has been presented as an enormous empty space to be filled, a source of raw resources to be developed, a wild expanse to be domesticated.*" "*None of this recognizes the rights of the original peoples; it simply ignores them as if they did not exist, or*

¹ UNGA Resolution A/RES/61/295.

acts as if the lands on which they live do not belong to them... Their lives, their concerns, their ways of struggling to survive [are] of no interest. They [are] considered more an obstacle needing to be eliminated than as human beings with the same dignity as others and possessed of their own acquired rights.”²

Such attacks against the dignity of indigenous people are seen in the “*grave violations of human rights and new forms of slavery affecting women in particular, the scourge of drug trafficking used as a way of subjecting the indigenous peoples, or human trafficking that exploits those expelled from their cultural context.*”³ In the Amazon, and in similar situations in other parts of the world, indigenous peoples are being forced to migrate to the outskirts of cities where “*they find no real freedom from their troubles, but rather the worst forms of enslavement, subjection and poverty..., xenophobia, sexual exploitation and human trafficking.*”⁴

Responding to these concerns is vital in today’s interconnected world and has become even more pressing during the COVID-19 pandemic. When addressing the interests of indigenous peoples, it is vital to recognize that “*globalization cannot mean a uniformity that ignores diversity and imposes a new kind of colonialism. Rather, [we must] create alternatives based on solidarity... [W]hen diversities are articulated and mutually enriching, communion between peoples flourishes and comes to life.*”⁵

As Pope Francis has further stressed, particularly in the context of development, that we must never forget that indigenous peoples have a “*different notion of progress, often more humanistic than the modern culture of developed peoples. Theirs is not a culture meant to benefit the powerful... No authentic, profound and enduring change is possible unless it starts from the different cultures, particularly those of the poor.*”⁶

Thank you, Madam Chair.

² Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 2 February 2020, 12.

³ Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 2 February 2020, 14.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 2 February 2020, 10.

⁵ Pope Francis, Message of the Holy Father Francis to the Organisers and Participants at the Fifth Global Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples’ Forum, 2 February 2021.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 220.