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Dear Friends and Family,

As most of us spent Advent preparing for Christmas within the comfort of our homes and neighborhoods, Rochester Franciscan **Sister Maria Carolina Pardo Jaramillo**, from Colombia, spent those days on a Franciscan mission trip to a region of the Amazon.

This mission trip was part of a Franciscan outreach program, based upon the *Laudato Sí* movement, which was inspired by Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical. The movement's goals are to achieve solutions to the ecological crisis and to establish "concrete actions to protect our common home." (Read more at: https://laudatosiactionplatform.org/)

She shares her journey in the article below.

Kathy Gatliff
Editor, Director of Communications

Mission Trip to the Amazon

"We should not be afraid; God will always answer our search. We need to have a clean heart to be able to listen. We need to pray for prosperity and well-being for ALL beings, for all the beings in the jungle, for all the beings on the earth. In that way through our generosity, through our light, the "bad spirit" will have no room, no space, no power."

— Welcoming words of Taita Iber as I arrived in Puerto Leguízamo in the Amazonian region on December 10, 2023 for the Christmas mission.* (*elder of the Muyui indigenous Community).

At the IV Congress of the Latin American Religious Conference (CLAR), November, 24-26, 2023, I met the Executive Secretary of REPAM (Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network) and Fray Santiago Gonzalez, O.F.M, member of the World Council of the *Laudato Sí* movement. In sharing about our work as Rochester Franciscans in socio-eco justice and peacemaking, our interest in the Amazon, and our commitment to the spirit of *Laudato Si*, they invited me to participate in the Christmas mission, December 10-20!

On December 10, just a few days after the Congress, Msgr. Joaquin Pinzon, Bishop of the Vicarate of Puerto Leguízamo and Consolata missionary, welcomed me warmly, as he did two years before when I had visited the area for the first time with a religious Sister friend of mine.

The next day I needed to catch up with the rest of the group of six Franciscan Friars who had arrived before me. I rode on the back of a pickup truck at 5:00 in the morning, hit by the cold wind of dawn, until I arrived at my first destination where, by myself, I picked up a boat to travel for 3+ hours on the Caquetá River. I was dropped off at some point along the river where the Friars were supposed to be waiting for me but weren´t! I sat on a plank, surrounded by trees, the river, a canoe, and a house at a distance, trusting that they would appear soon.

Sitting there, I started to slow down, to breathe in the simplicity and lushness of the jungle, the beauty of the birds flying over and the flow of the river. A different rhythm, a different way of being, opening up, trusting, waiting…

The Friars showed up soon after and told me I had been assigned to the Jericó-Consaya indigenous reservation with three of them. The indigenous community is organized in four clans: parrot, bat, crested oropendola and mestizo-iron. The community has preserved their dress, language, sacred dances, and seeds. Most of them speak Spanish, too.

The community has a public elementary and high school on site, run by them in their own language!

In the village, there was no running water, but they have had electricity for a year through the use of solar panels. Our host family was very welcoming. The man of the house is the healer and preserver of the culture for the community. The women cook in wood stoves, knit hammocks and bags and weave baskets. They make outstanding pottery and bead necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. Some of them have lived in Bogotá (a city of 10 million people!) but have returned to their indigenous community.

Pottery preparation.

These women are talented at knitting hammocks and bags.

Every morning I would go with the young and elder women to the river to wash dishes, wash our clothes and bathe. The time at the river was always a time to share, to laugh, and to learn a few Koreguaje words. We ate the fish (piranha) that they caught daily and “western food” as they call the rice, lentils and beans that we brought with us, from Puerto Leguizamo, so as not to be a burden on the community. Their diet is based on fish or game, and yucca products, like mandioca, casabe, farinha, and what they occasionally bring in from nearby towns. It was delicious!!!

Sister Carolina with a piranha!

Yucca products include casabe, which look like giant tortillas.

Cooking on a wood stove.

The Amazon is famous for its biodiversity, which I witnessed first-hand. I had heard that the bees found in the Americas before the Spanish colonization were ***stingless***, however I had never seen one. Well, as part of a preservation and income project, the Koreguajes are working with bees and we found **11 species** of stingless bees in their backyard! We witnessed the women singing and dancing to bless the native seeds before planting and had opportunities to share with them our view of the Amazon and its importance, as well as to hear their stories and the challenges they face.

The Franciscan Friars and I visited the families, prayed with them, learned about their problems, their organization, the projects they have as a community, and the conservation efforts they are involved in. In the afternoons we would gather with the children to play, and prepare the Christmas celebrations with them.

Sister Carolina, 2nd from left, with women of the community.

A young boy admires the holiday decorations.

The Franciscan Friars and Sister Carolina with the community members.

The *Laudato Sí* movement has an alliance with other organizations, such as CARITAS, Social Outreach/Ministry and REPAM, to safeguard the traditions and culture of the indigenous in the Amazon, to train leaders to protect the rain forest, and to acknowledge the importance of the Amazon for the world. Our Christmas mission was part of this alliance and outreach.

The region has seen violence since the rubber-boom fevers of 1850-1912 and 1939-1945, with documented genocide of the indigenous in the Putumayo and Caquetá rivers. It is currently threatened by violence, arms trafficking, deforestation, and unlawful armed groups. After recent communication with the community, and as I write this article, I am informed that there is an armed force strike which is not allowing the inhabitants to leave their territory.

In 2018, the Supreme Court in Colombia, in order to protect future generations and the Amazon jungle from climate change, recognized the Amazon region as Subject of Rights. In 2022, the Colombian government granted the Koreguaje indigenous more land for their reservation as a way "to protect the land from deforestation and global warming, contributing to the rights of future generations".[1]

The Christmas mission allowed us to learn about their ancestral wisdom as well as the strategic importance of the Amazon and its threats. We hope we can help protect their ancestral knowledge and community through our work.

Interesting facts about the Amazonian rainforest

- Is the single largest remaining tropical rainforest in the world
- Houses at least 10% of the world's known biodiversity
- Produces 20% of the oxygen for the earth
- Extends through 9 Countries
- Amazon River is the Largest by Volume and 2nd by length after the Nile

[1] Agencia nacional de tierras
https://www.ant.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ACUERDO-241-Ampliacion-resguardo-indigena-Jerico-Consaya.pdf