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Seminar on “Indigenous peoples, custodians of nature: Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Laudato si’* and the Sustainable Development Goals”

The Holy See Permanent Observer at the FAO, IFAD and WFP, Msgr. Fernando Chica Arellano, spoke yesterday during the study seminar on “Indigenous peoples, custodians of nature: Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Laudato si’* and the Sustainable Development Goals”, which took place at the Rome headquarters of the FAO.

In his address, Msgr. Chica Arellano emphasized that caring for the common home means being able to suffer with the earth, to spend oneself for it, to know how to listen to the “cry” that the Holy Father describes so lucidly in his Encyclical *Laudato si’*, and in this regard he repeated the Pope’s words in the Fourth Global Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples’ Forum at the IFAD, held in Rome this February: “Indigenous peoples are a cry of hope. They remind us that human beings have a shared responsibility in the care of the ‘common home’. ... The earth suffers and indigenous peoples know of the dialogue with the earth, they know what it means to listen to the earth, to see the earth, to touch the earth. They know the art of living well in harmony with the earth”.

“However”, he continued, “it must be recognized that the extraordinary cultural and spiritual patrimony of many indigenous peoples risks being swept away by a sort of economic and ideological colonization cloaked by prospects of development. The distinct and diverse qualities of multicultural communities are threatened by homogenization and standardization of culture and trade which are the logical consequence of the process of globalization... It is customary to relate the term *tradition* with something old and immutable that can only be imitated and reproduced, but it is not so. Cultural heritage is a permanent process of production that can create values only when it is continually updated and contextualized in the reality of the time”.

The prelate also highlighted the value of conservation, “which enables the maintenance of biological diversity in the agricultural system, thus becoming an added value for the community”, and mentioned the dramatic consequences for biodiversity of the choice of farmers to cultivate more successful varieties of plants, which would also guarantee higher income and could lead them to abandon the use of the classic varieties they previously cultivated, causing a sure loss of biodiversity. Indeed, “the United Nations reports and the study of investments in the sector of research and development show the dramatic nature of the pursuit of economic interests by some large transnational companies in those areas of the planet where autochthonous communities live: this is an often reckless attitude, that besides degrading the environment, also compels indigenous peoples, especially the young, to migrate, thus uprooting them from their lands and therefore from their origins. ... Indeed,

many indigenous people, uprooted from their origins, often find themselves in situations of poverty and vulnerability, and thus rejected by society, becoming, that is, those people whom we cannot and must not leave behind, if we wanted to reach the goals of the *Agenda 2030*".

In the structuring of the economic activities that involve indigenous populations, "it is essential to ensure the prevalence of the right to prior and informed consent, pursuant to Article 32 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples... in some cases, the protection of traditional know-how has as its aim the prevention of 'bio-piracy' and of ensuring the division of advantages". For example, "in the World Trade Organization, various developing countries have proposed, as part of the Agreement on trade aspects of intellectual property rights (TRIPs) ... the inclusion of a provision to establish the impossibility of guaranteeing the protection of patents incompatible with the provision contained in article 15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) ... which requires preventative evaluation for access to resources and a division of profits with the providers of raw materials".

The Catholic Church, for her part, emphasized the Permanent Observer, "pays special attention to these peoples, often forgotten and without the prospect of a serene future, and to identify new paths of evangelization, the Holy Father has convoked a Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, to take place in October this year", which will be "a splendid opportunity to provide a greater ecclesial presence, which will respond to all that which is specific to this region, starting from Gospel values. It will be, in addition, a fruitful opportunity to identify new pathways to enable the growth of the face of the Amazon in the Church, and also to respond to the situations of injustice in the region".

"In this regard", he affirmed, "we cannot forget the words of Cardinal Claudio Hummes, who ... made reference to the need to journey towards a Church with an indigenous countenance, that is, 'a Church that expresses fully the faith in her culture, in her own identity'".
