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Dona Zenilda with the Xucuru people; Ednamar de Oliveira Viana, a leader of the Satere-Mawe people; and Francisco Chagas Chafre de Souza, a leader of the Apurina, all three from Brazil, speak at a meeting of indigenous people from North America and South America at the Jesuit General Curia in Rome Oct. 17. The meeting was a side event to the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Tom Roberts

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In 1979, Pope John Paul II gave Italian historian Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Sant'Egidio community, a [quick version of his position](#) on international economics. "Look, I can surely say by now that I've got the antibodies to communism inside me. But when I think of consumer society, with all its tragedies, I wonder which of the two systems is better." That's quite a statement for a pope credited with having a major hand in bringing down communism.

That rather significant strain of John Paul's thinking, his strongly worded critique of the "rich North" and its effect on the Global South, is unpacked at much greater length in writing and speeches. His critique of capitalism was quite robust. It just never got much play by those in the United States — some of them highlighted [in our editorial](#) — who were most enthusiastic about other aspects of his teaching. They have found it convenient to minimalize or ignore the cautionary approach to capitalism, and the need for a regulated market economy focused on the common good and the rights of workers, that has been a consistent component of Catholic social thought in the modern church.

The critique of capitalism by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and the manner in which some high-profile Catholics in the United States misrepresented that critique, is succinctly laid out by Jesuit Fr. Fred Kammer [in an essay](#) for the Jesuit Social Research Institute at Loyola University New Orleans.

That background is important in considering NCR's editorial and accompanying reporting that we've done over the past five years and have gathered [here](#). We make the case that something quite unusual has developed in the church in this country, largely through the nonprofit mechanism that is unique to the United States.

Our hope is that you might use the package of reporting and the commentary as a starting point for small group discussions, perhaps as a way to raise questions in your parish and diocese, about who or what groups are influencing the Catholic conversation today. Is it those who espouse a church that accompanies the poor and who view the Eucharist, in the words of Pope Francis' encyclical "[Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home](#)," as "a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation"? Or is the conversation in your parish or diocese being dominated by those who have required the teaching to contort itself to accommodate an unrestrained market economy and an uncritical view of U.S. ambitions?

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We in the Catholic world have been forced to do so much looking at the past because of the clergy sex abuse scandal and at a present riven by differences, even our looking ahead is fraught with nervous questions about losses — people in the pews, priests, sisters, certainly young people.

It was a welcome surprise, then, wandering amid the rubble of the scandal fallout and trying to navigate the deep divisions, to happen upon a moment filled with the promise of the future. It occurred recently in a corner of the nation's capital. You would not have known about it from any parish bulletins or diocesan announcements. It happened, in fact, in a place many might consider the least likely to contain a spark of the Catholic future — All Souls Church Unitarian.

It was there that Benedictine Srs. Joan Chittister, 83, and Teresa Forcades, 53, having just met, sat for an unscripted discussion and, in the doing, provided a remarkable example of adult Catholicism wrestling (not always in agreement) with difficult issues.

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The evening was hosted by the Women's Ordination Conference and the discussion was moderated by its executive director, Kate McElwee, who also serves on the Leadership Circle of Women's Ordination Worldwide.

To this observer, the riveting back-and-forth had not as much to do with the particulars of women's ordination as it did with the status, in general, of women in the church. Jesse Remedios, a Bertelsen intern at NCR, [provides a lively account of](#)

[the discussion](#), the nature of which will certainly one day be commonplace and nonthreatening on Catholic ground. For now, it incubates where it is welcome.

Women, who do most of the heavy lifting to keep the church alive, are not going away. And the men should have learned by now that there is no edict, even one issued from the pinnacle of infallibility, that will succeed in prohibiting them from talking about their place in the church, including as ordained ministers.

In the meantime, check out the new series of columns by Chittister on virtues necessary for this era. The first virtue she tackles: [anger](#).

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I noted in this space previously that recent weeks in Rome, given the creation of new cardinals from unusual places and the opening of the synod for the Amazon, hold proof of the degree and pace of change underway in the church.

Change brings resistance, of course, and it was evident in the extreme with the recent theft from a church and destruction of symbols of indigenous spirituality from the Amazon region, statues of pregnant women. Our editorial on the matter can be found [here](#) and NCR columnist Jamie Manson weighed in on the issue [here](#).

Reporter and author Mary Jo McConahay, who did two insightful pieces on [newly named Cardinal Álvaro Ramazzini of Guatemala](#), puts human faces to all of the discussion of environment and theology, and gets the thoughts of those in the region about what's happening in Rome, with her reports [from the Colombian Amazon](#).

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The Colombian Amazon may be a distant margin in the church, but there are much closer margins at home. One of those who have been accompanying people in the near margins — the poor, the disenfranchised, those who resist the militarization of the culture and those treated unjustly — is Bishop Thomas Gumbleton. NCR readers are familiar with him through our reporting and his transcribed sermons that run weekly under the heading "[The Peace Pulpit](#)."

the **RADICAL GOSPEL** of  
**BISHOP**  
**THOMAS GUMBLETON**



**Peter Feuerherd**

NCR news editor Peter Feuerherd has gone beyond the news clippings and the sermons in a highly engaging biography, *The Radical Gospel of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton*, just published by Orbis and available online [there](#) and through [Amazon](#).

Gumbleton is one of the rare contemporary Catholics for whom the appellation "prophet" actually applies in all of its best meanings. He is a remarkable example of fidelity who has managed to maintain his integrity while serving the institution at the leadership level. He's paid more than a small price.

Feuerherd describes the inherent tension in Gumbleton's life as "a balancing act" that "may point us in the direction of a future church that may arise from the ashes of the present season of scandal and disaffection."

Read this biography and have your hope renewed.

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