



Alejandro Labaka, OFM Cap.

Amazon Day: July 21, 2012

The 25th anniversary of martyrdom of Bishop Alejandro Labaka, OFM, Capuchin and Sister Inés Arango of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters – the courageous defenders of the Amazon rainforest, its peoples and cultures.

The Amazonian rainforest – the lungs of our mother, sister Earth – is being destroyed. In the name of short-term economic gain, thousands of square miles of lush forest are being ruined. Countless species of plants and animals that proclaim the glory of God are being doomed to extinction. The indigenous communities that have lived there in close, harmonious relationship with God’s creation for thousands of years are being systematically pushed off their lands, trampled upon, and decimated; their great wisdom, vision and virtues widely ignored.

There is so much at stake, but there also is so much hope. At this critical crossroad, there is a new global vision and solidarity emerging that extend a circle of compassion to the most marginalized indigenous communities, plants and animals, and entire eco-systems. The divine Spirit of creativity continues to renew the face of the earth, opening new horizons and pointing out new paths to a more holistic, just, peaceful and sustainable future.

July 21 coincides with the 25th anniversary of the martyrdom of Alejandro Labaka and Inés Arango. Both died in the Ecuadorian Amazon in 1987 when they set out to facilitate a risky mediation between an indigenous warrior tribe living in a pristine Ecuadorian rainforest in a self-imposed isolation, and the petroleum companies encroaching on the ancestral lands in pursuit of oil, and wreaking havoc on the peoples and lands that stood in the path of their insatiable greed. (*Note: The process for the beatification of Bishop Alejandro and Sister Ines as martyrs began in 2010*).

The Background Story of Alejandro Labaka, OFM, Cap. and Sister Inés Arango

Alejandro Labaka was a Capuchin friar who at age 27 left his native Basque region of Spain and embarked on a mission to China. In 1953, after being kicked out of that country by the communist government, Alejandro arrived in Ecuador.

He was a 33-year-old with a strong desire to minister among the indigenous communities in the eastern part of the country where he could evangelize and serve as a cultural bridge. At the time the town of Coca, where he and other Capuchin friars were assigned, had merely 300 inhabitants. Located deep in the rainforest, the town was referred to by some as a “green hell;” Alejandro, however, called it a “paradise.”

Soon, he came to be known as a compassionate pastor of the indigenous people, humble and eager to share their everyday life. He had great admiration and respect for the indigenous cultures and was committed to their well-being. A practical man, Alejandro built a hospital, school and brick factory, and carried out many other concrete projects aimed at improving the health and education of his people. At a time when the indigenous people and their cultures were considered worthless and widely despised, friar Labaka embraced the indigenous people with the kind of spiritual piety and devotion that characterized St. Francis of Assisi in his embrace of the leper.

This deep, spiritual recognition of God's presence manifesting itself in those who were on the margins of society led to the creation of the Center of Cultural Investigation of the Ecuadorian Amazon, which was started by Alejandro and his fellow Capuchin missionaries. In addition to helping preserve the rich oral traditions of the local indigenous tribes, the Center helped the local Huaorani tribes obtain official titles to their ancestral lands. It also built up the capacity of indigenous leaders to organize and develop strategies to deal with the incursion of petroleum companies and the inevitable consequences.

In 1976, in what is now Yasuní National Park, Alejandro encountered for the first time several members of the Huaorani tribe who, much like their ancestors thousands of years ago, lived as hunters and gatherers with almost no contact with the outside world. In Ecuador they are known as Tagaeri, "the last, free people."

Fascinated by them, he used to go by himself and spend extended periods of time living among them, learning their language and culture. He came to love and admire them so much that he wanted to be one of them; this expressed his desire to find Christ in the other and be born again. That wish came to partial fruition on a December night when he was staying in a hut of one of the indigenous families he had grown close to. Kneeling down in front of an old Huaorani couple who placed their hands on his head, Alejandro was adopted by them. From that moment on until his death, the Basque Franciscan Capuchin friar considered himself to be one of the free Huaorani people.



The area today where Alejandro Labaka, OFM Cap. & Sr. Ines ministered.

Alejandro also was a passionate guardian of the rainforest, which he used to call his "green paradise." His diary is a testimony to how much he delighted in the diversity of the rainforest and how he agonized over the wanton and irrational destruction of the Amazon. In the 60s and 70s, the northeast part of Ecuador was hit by tsunami-like waves of violent incursions into its pristine territories propelled by aggressive oil exploration. The forceful displacement of the indigenous tribes and their progressive cultural disintegration, deforestation, and the pollution of rivers and lands were accompanied by the influx of desperately poor people from other parts of the country, and a state of lawlessness and chaos.

Appointed a bishop of Coca, Monsignor Labaka used his leadership and public position to promote peace, doing what he could to make the situation in his diocese more humane and just, and tirelessly holding up the vision of the common good. He remained an unfailing advocate of the rights of the native peoples and their cultures. Neither the indifference nor derision of others could dampen his passion for the Amazon and its peoples.

Not only Bishop Labaka but also Sister Inés Arango was noted for a compassion toward the most isolated, native tribes of the Amazon. Born in Colombia, she entered the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters of the Holy Family when she was a 17-year-old. Her small and fragile physical stature belied her huge and fearless soul. From her early years, Inés desired to live and die among the indigenous peoples. It was her passion to learn their language, come to see the world through their eyes, and live out the Gospel among them. She was not naïve, however, and was very conscious of the precarious nature of the mission she was undertaking: "If I die there, I'll go away happy. I don't look for any recognition," she wrote

in her diary. Inés Arango and Alejandro Labaka shared their ministries among the native tribes, prayed together, and supported one another until the end.

In 1987, the petroleum companies were preparing for another violent incursion deep into the territories inhabited by the Tagaeri warriors who chose to live in self-imposed isolation and to defend themselves. Seeing their families decimated by the outsiders and their green paradise poisoned and destroyed by petroleum and logging companies, they were provoked to fight back. In a daring attempt to prevent the Tagaeri tribe from being wiped out and the spilling of blood on both sides, Alejandro Labaka and Inés Arango attempted a last-resort mediation. Among Alejandro's last words were: "If we don't go, they will kill them." On July 21, 1987, Inés and Alejandro were dropped off by a helicopter at a clearing in a jungle. The next day, their bodies were found with dozens of spears imbedded in them.



Tagaeri spear

Paradoxically, the natives of the area, living in the anguish of always feeling attacked, killed the two missionaries who had offered their support and protection. But the deaths of these Franciscan martyrs were not in vain. Alejandro's and Inés' unwavering efforts to respect and protect the isolated, indigenous communities in the Amazon and their lands – commitments that eventually were sealed with their blood – helped to call attention to the plight of the Huaorani people. Some legal measures were taken to protect their human rights and lands; in some cases, holding off the encroachment of the oil companies on the ancestral lands of the native people.

The struggle to defend the Amazon and its indigenous inhabitants continues, and not only in Ecuador but also in Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Bolivia and other parts of South America. The Franciscan friars, sisters and lay people in those countries are part of that struggle.

Celebrating Amazon Day in Franciscan ministries across the United States is very significant. Many of the oil companies that have wreaked havoc on the Amazon and its people are based in the U.S. One such company, Chevron – America's third largest company – owns Texaco. It was Texaco's decades of reckless oil exploration that provided gas for millions of cars driven in our country and allegedly poisoned vast areas of the pristine Amazon Ecuadorian rainforest – a damage for which Chevron now faces a \$23 billion lawsuit (<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=4988079n/>).

As insatiable consumer demand requires the production of disproportionate amounts of fossil fuels and other raw materials, as well as the existing proclivity for a meat-intensive diet, the people of the United States - whether we realize it or not - are already intimately involved in the destruction of the Amazon. The good news is that we can choose to be a part of solution. How? One way is by raising awareness about what is happening with the Amazon and its indigenous peoples.

Another way is to reflect on these critical issues through the eyes of our Christian faith and consider their profound spiritual and moral ramifications. Modifying our personal consumption habits and advocating for more just and sustainable public policies can be powerful ways of practicing the Franciscan vision and values. Finally, we invite you to pray for the success of the Amazon Project launched by the Franciscan Order and begin to spread inspirational stories of the prophetic witness of our fellow Franciscans such as Alejandro Labaka and Inés Arango of the Amazon region.

Homily Suggestions for July 22, 2012, the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

In the first reading, the prophet Jeremiah directs words of damnation toward those leaders of God's people who mislead and scatter the flock. While it's easy to focus our indignation on the political and religious leaders of Israel that lived some 26 centuries ago, a homilist may choose to shed light on ways in which the first reading might challenge our contemporary leaders, including us.

Too often, through our words and actions, we may inadvertently lead others into the misleading and faulty notions that we can and should "have it all:" more income, creature comforts, energy consumption – and, of course, bigger houses and cars. Feeling entitled to pursue the American Dream of high consumption, we often fail to recognize that in the United States, an average person requires 22 acres of the Earth's resources to sustain his/her lifestyle, while only 4.5 acres would be one's fair portion. A failure to call ourselves and others to embrace a voluntary simplicity translates into a failure to promote the common good. In the absence of ecological conversion and spiritual renewal in our society and its institutions, we see more and more of a "scattering the flock of the Lord's pastures," as millions of environmental refugees around the world are being displaced due to record breaking heat waves, droughts, floodings and sea level rising.

Yet our God whose name is "*the Lord, our justice*" (Jer. 6), as the prophet Jeremiah says, will gather the remnant of the Lord's flock and "*will appoint shepherds for them who will shepherd them so that they need no longer fear and tremble; and none shall be missing...*"

This passage of Scripture tells us that despite the painful setbacks suffered by God's people there is no reason to lose confidence in God's Providence. When the Israelites suffered in the Babylonian exile, God was there and his heart was moved with compassion for them. When Jesus looked at the vast crowds that desperately followed him into a desert, God's heart was moved with compassion.

When the Huaorani people and their culture were being systematically destroyed, and their rivers and lands poisoned by toxic petroleum sludge, God's heart was moved with compassion. Alejandro, Inés, and countless other missionaries living in the remote corners of the world among the various indigenous tribes, are the voice and arms of God who hears and responds to the cry of the poor.

Questions that could be posed to a congregation:

1. In what ways does the witness of the two modern Franciscan martyrs challenge us to show a compassionate heart and reach out with justice to the indigenous people of the Amazon or to others around us whose human dignity is being downgraded or denied?
2. What have you found particularly touching about the life-mission and death of Alejandro and Inés? What Franciscan virtues do they embody?
3. How can you and I exercise the leadership role we may have within our families, and faith communities to demonstrate that we indeed have a global/universal/catholic vision and can act locally for the common good of all God's creation, including the Amazon?

Sample Prayers of the Faithful:

1. For the efforts of the Franciscan Order around the world to safeguard the Amazon rainforest and protect its people. We pray to the Lord.
2. That Franciscan-hearted people around the world may celebrate this Amazon Day by learning about the importance of the Amazon rainforest and the urgent need to protect its cultural and bio diversity. We pray.

Did you know? (Some point to choose from for a parish bulletin)

- Due mostly to uncontrolled ranching, logging, and commercial farming, the Amazon basin today is losing 7,500 square miles of rain forest each year, the equivalent of six soccer fields every minute.
- During each burning season in the Amazon, fires deliberately set by frontier settlers, ranchers and developers hurl up almost half a billion metric tons of carbon a year, placing Brazil among the top five contributors to greenhouse gases.
- Soy cultivation has recently replaced cattle and logging as the largest single factor in deforestation in the Amazon, as thousands of acres are being cleared for use by large multinational agri-business firms.
- Deforestation accounts for 20% of the world's greenhouse gas emission contributing significantly to the rapid melting of the glaciers and overall global warming.
- Nearly 80% of the global soy bean harvest is milled into animal feed.
- Beef production accounts for nearly 10% of all emission of CO².
- The world's vast cattle herds emit more of greenhouse gasses than all the cars, planes and other forms of transportation put together.
- The average American can do more to reduce global warming emissions (and save the rainforest) by adjusting meat consumption than by switching to driving the most fuel efficient car currently on the market.
- Vast expenses of cropland are used to grow modest amount of fuel.
- Biofuels are jacking up world food prices and endangering the hungry.
- The U.S. leads the world in corn and soybean production, but even if 100% of both crops were turned into fuel, it wouldn't be enough to offset just 20% of on-road fuel consumption.
- Biofuels pit the 800 million people with cars against the 800 million people with hunger problems.

Also:

- Yasuní National Park, located in the Ecuadorian Amazon, the home of the Huaorani and other tribes living in voluntary isolation, is the most biologically diverse region in the world.
- In just one hectare of Yasuní a total of 644 species of trees and shrubs have been found. To put this figure into perspective, there are almost as many tree and shrub species in one hectare of Yasuní as the total number of native tree and shrub species in all of Canada and the United States combined, estimated at 680 species.