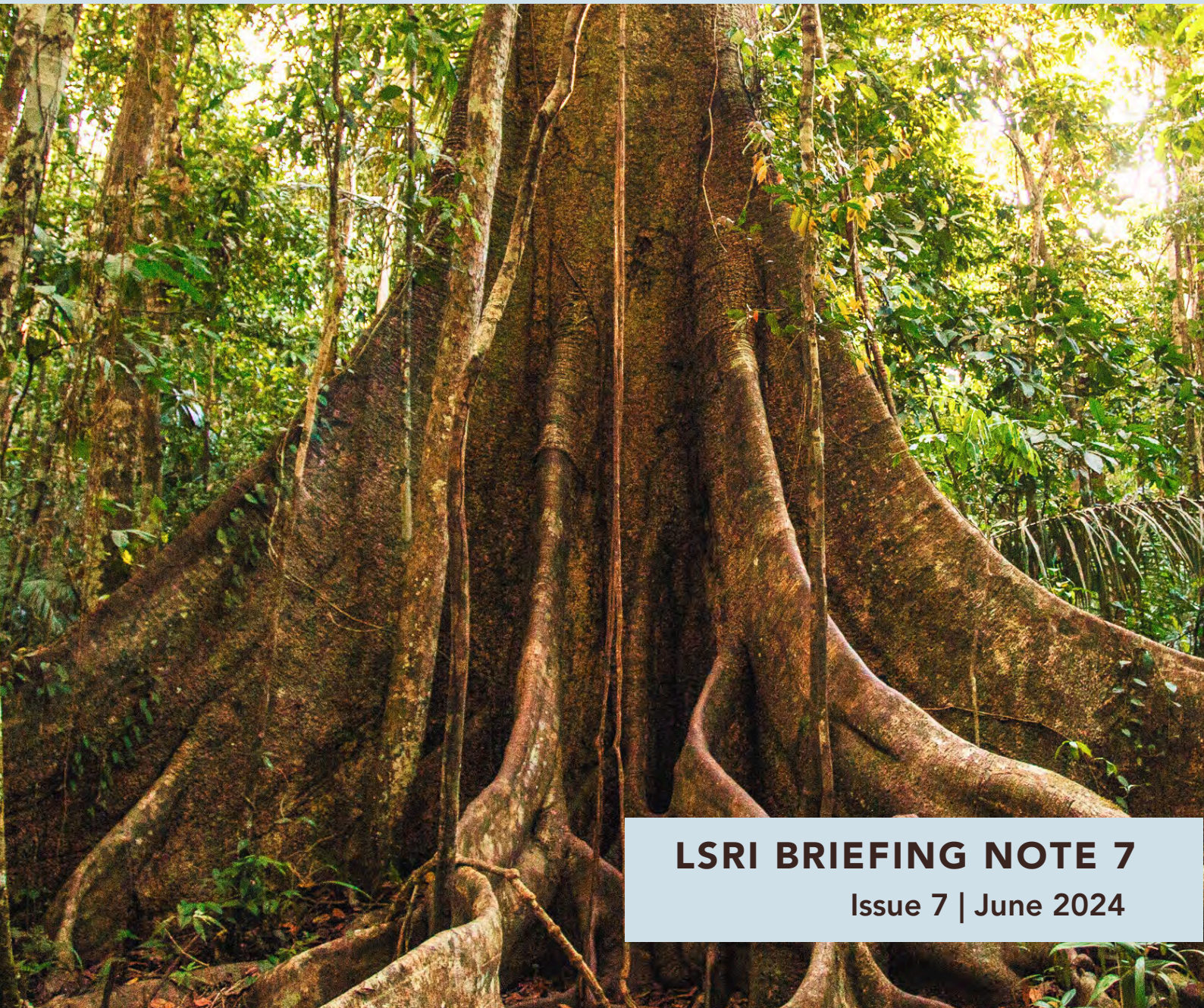




Hope and Integral Ecology

Some Insights from Theology and Communities in the
Brazilian Amazon

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This Briefing Note examines the virtue of hope in the context of contemporary socio-ecological challenges. It highlights some insights from two sources: theological understandings of hope, particularly in the works of Aquinas, Moltmann and Rahner; and the embodiment of hope in the actions of local communities in a specific case of social and ecological destruction in the Brazilian Amazon. It concludes by drawing some implications of the virtue of hope for academic research on integral ecology.

Introduction

The Belo Monte dam in the Brazilian state of Pará in the Amazon basin is the fourth largest in the world. Situated along the Xingu river, a tributary of the Amazon river, the dam was set to provide renewable energy to millions of Brazilians. When visiting the construction site in 2010, President Lula promised that the project would bring 'money that the state of Para has never seen, to take care of social issues', money 'to improve the life of the riverine people, to improve the life of the indigenous people, to improve the life of the farmers'.² When one of us (Luiz Felipe Lacerda) visited

the dam in June 2023, seven years after the dam started operating, the reality on the ground was much more complex than the promise. A local resident showed how the roots of an 800-year-old Samauma tree (Ceiba Pentandra), one of the tallest trees in the world and seen as sacred to indigenous communities, were drying out and being transformed into dust due to the changed water flows. A relocated riverine resident showed his new wooden house on stilts that he built with



KEY POINTS

- **Hope is an essential virtue** deeply rooted in the experience of people's lives and fundamental to the integral ecology paradigm.
- **Examples of hope** coming from communities suffering critical socio-ecological challenges, such as the ongoing destruction of the Amazon rainforest biome, illuminate their determination to act to protect all life against its destruction out of love for God and God's creation, despite setbacks and sacrifices.
- **The theological works of Aquinas, Moltmann and Rahner** highlight how hope is deeply rooted in faith, love and its implications.

“ The Belo Monte dam poignantly illustrates what Pope Francis has called in *Laudato Si'* the technocratic paradigm, the illusion of unlimited material progress (LS 78) disregarding its effects on human and non-human living beings (LS 109), the illusion that global warming and the transition to fossil-fuel free economies can be addressed by technical solutions (...) without considering their human and ecological costs. ”



compensation money. With the daily change of water levels, his new house had become infested with snakes and insects, which brought health risks. An estimated 30,000 people were relocated in the outskirts of the city of Altamira in new housing developments which, to date, continue to have inadequate access to electricity, water, sanitation, transport, health and other public services. This is not to mention the impact of the dam on the endemic aquatic diversity of the Xingu river, on the fish stock and livelihoods of riverine communities, on deforestation, and on global warming given the methane gases released by the dam due to vegetation decomposition on its surface water.³ Of the 47 socio-environmental conditions set by the government, only 13 had been met in October 2023, and 29 illegal actions have been identified in the construction and operation process of the dam.⁴

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(LS 78) disregarding its effects on human and non-human living beings (LS 109), the illusion that global warming and the transition to fossil-fuel free economies can be addressed by technical solutions, such as the building of mega-dams to provide renewable energy, without considering their human and ecological costs. The Belo Monte dam is presented by the government and businesses as a promise of sustainable economic and social development for the region, but the reality for local populations, and the animal and plant species of the area, is one of destruction. What can hope mean for these local communities whose lives and territories have been profoundly harmed by the dam project? What can hope mean for communities facing social and ecological deterioration, if not destruction, more generally?

In this Briefing Note, we explore the virtue of hope and its relation to integral ecology as it has stemmed from the research conducted at the *Laudato Si'* Research Institute. It is divided into two parts. The first examines



the theological foundations of hope, focusing especially on the works of Aquinas, Moltmann and Rahner. The second part discusses how the virtue of hope is lived and concretely embodied in the lives of communities affected by mega-infrastructure or extractive projects such as the Belo Monte dam. We conclude by drawing some implications of these insights from theology and the lived reality of people at the margins for fostering hope through academic research.

sacrifices, losses, difficulties and obstacles are central to marginalized communities' experiences of hope.

Aquinas offers some contemporary insights on the religious inspiration for hope. He makes a careful distinction between hope as a passion and hope as virtue, and specifies a potential *religious* influence on hope and its pathways. Hope as a passion is inclined towards something good that is both difficult and possible, whereas hope as a virtue is only possible



Theological Insights⁵

In his book *Hope Without Optimism*, literary critic Terry Eagleton has written one of the most interesting contemporary discussions of hope.⁶ He identifies some key points of significance for our discussion in this Briefing Note. First, he distinguishes hope from optimism, identifying optimism as more like belief than hope, an assumption that things will turn out well. The opposite of optimism is pessimism, an assumption that things will turn out badly. Both are 'simply a quirk of temperament.'⁷ Positive psychologies amount to moral evasion and a false hope which has very little to do with hope as such which faces squarely up to difficulties and obstacles. As the second part of this Note shows,

by grace.⁸ Aquinas orientates the virtue of hope towards experiencing joy in God.⁹ Does his separation encourage an otherworldly heavenly-focused approach to hope that lacks adequate recognition of the importance of social transformation of this world? It is here that theologians of hope such as Jürgen Moltmann and Karl Rahner become significant, as they both emphasize the place of explicitly religious forms of hope in human becoming and moral and social transformation.

Moltmann's notorious *Theology of Hope* has had wide influence on contemporary theology, including liberation theologies.¹⁰ We focus here on how Moltmann uses the terminology of hope in relation to faith. For

Moltmann, the only real problem in Christian theology is that of the future, so his work is in an eschatological key.¹¹ He develops the Thomistic distinction between what could be termed secular hope and faith-based 'hope against hope', but the latter in his case necessarily seeks to transform the present in the face of suffering, evil and death. Hope and Christian faith are companions to each other as two of the theological virtues. In the case of Moltmann, however, compared with Aquinas, hope is not just orientated towards the love of God in charity, but a strong protest against suffering in this world.¹² For Moltmann, theological hope, to be true to its name, must witness against sufferings inflicted by certain models of economic and social development on human and biotic communities, such as the one symbolized by the Belo Monte dam mega-infrastructure project. For Moltmann hope 'makes us ready to bear the "cross of the present"'¹³ This 'upside down' aspect of hope is stressed far more in Moltmann compared with Thomas, but he also takes into account the risks of presumption and despair, though for him the greatest risk is not allowing the present to be challenged, i.e. the practical radicality of hope.¹⁴ This point particularly resonates in the local communities affected by the Belo Monte dam. Despair and giving up the struggle is a greater risk than challenging the political and economic structures which are behind the dam's construction.

Karl Rahner is another theologian whose work on hope has been very influential for contemporary theology. Rahner argues that hope is a loving yearning that is apprehended by faith and within the goal of love. Hope in his formulation is not free standing, but rather takes its bearings from faith and love. And indeed, for faith communities resisting the Belo Dam, it is love for God's creation, love for the Samauma tree, love for the aquatic diversity of the Xingu river, love for the human beings whose health and livelihood are threatened, that gives their hope a bearing, as does Christ's resurrection. For Rahner, the theological virtue of hope must be thought of as a way of bringing unity to faith and love.¹⁵ Unlike Aquinas for whom hope was edging towards a form of possessing, for Rahner hope retains a sense of the mystery of a God whom we can never control.¹⁶ For Rahner, Christ is foundational to the promise of hope,

since the grace of God is manifested in the historical action whereby Christ is crucified and surrendered to God. The greater hope in God is that which enables the lesser hope of transforming the world, but at the same time, in the light of the lesser hope the greater hope in God is made more real.

The remainder of this Briefing Note explores how Christian communities in the Brazilian Amazon are realising these two modes of hope, faith and love, in their actions to transform the reality of destruction created by the dam. It is based on a larger research project conducted by the Laudato Si' Research Institute and the World Resource Institute on faith-based participation in natural resource governance funded by the Ford Foundation.¹⁷ All data is taken from interviews and focus group discussions conducted with faith communities in Altamira in June 2023 by Luiz Felipe Lacerda. Research ethics approval was granted by the Research on Human Subjects Department of the World Resources Institute and the Research Ethics Committee of the Oxford Department of International Development prior to fieldwork. All research participants have consented for their words to be used for research purposes and for their organisational membership to be known. All individual names have been anonymized.

Insights from local faith communities in the Brazilian Amazon

Resistance to the Belo Monte dam came as soon as plans to build the dam were announced in the 1980s. One of the first and largest mobilizations in response to the news was initiated by the Kayapó indigenous community. This mobilisation culminated in the first Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples of the Xingu in February 1989, which had been facilitated by the then bishop of Xingu, Austrian-born Erwin Kräutler and which took place in the Catholic Church headquarters. During the Meeting, a Kayapó woman stood up and brandished a machete against the President of the energy business consortium with these words: "You are a liar. We don't need electricity. Electricity won't give us food. We need the rivers to flow freely: our future depends on it. We need our forests to hunt and gather



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in. We don’t want your dam” (quoted in Taylor Klein 2022, 57). The scene received international media attention. The dam size was subsequently reduced by two thirds from the original plans, but its negative impacts in the region are still massive, as briefly summarized in the introduction.

Today, the resistance to the dam continues, as well as against other projects in the area – negotiations are currently undergoing between the Brazilian federal government and Canadian mining company Belo Sun Mining Corp to start one of the largest gold extraction operations in Latin America. Faith has been a constitutive element of the resistance, its discourses and actions, as has love for the Amazon forest and its

people, both of which have been the twin modalities of how the virtue of hope has been lived by faith communities in the area. In what follows, we wish to share how local faith communities themselves have expressed this relationship between faith, love and hope in their context of social and ecological destruction.

All participants in the focus group discussions were unanimous in affirming that faith is fundamental in their struggles against models of social and economic development based on the destruction of ecosystems. Faith is what encourages them to move forward even in the face of defeat. The word ‘hope’ was mentioned many times, and connected to struggles, faith, and

justice. In our one-to-one interviews, our research participants further expressed this relation between the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love, which Rahner highlighted for the transformation of the world: 'Our faith in God teaches us not to give up, to have hope above all else. These people and companies may have power, but God has much more. God is seeing everything and will judge each one in the final judgment' (Riverine person); 'It was hope that kept us there in the fight against Belo Monte, when the work came out people felt discouraged. Someone said: you

forests are everything, without them, there is no life."

In the rural communities of the region of Altamira, faith is one of the elements that weaves together social relations at the local level as local communities have historically been constituted and accompanied by the Catholic Church. Many bear the name of saints, and the celebration of their feast days are among the greatest local mobilizations in the region. It transpired from interviews and discussions with local communities that, for those who participate in social movements of



lost this battle. I don't really like that term, it's really bad to think that you've lost the battle' (participant in the Women's Movement of Altamira). In an event where local communities shared their experience with other communities in Latin America facing similar challenges, they shared that it was love of life, of all the life contained in rivers and forests and the other lives they support, that was the strongest motivation for their actions. In the words of a participant: "The connection with life is the source of hope to reconstruct what has been destroyed. Without that connection, that strength coming from connection with forests, rivers and ancestors, there would be no motivation for the struggle. [...] If we lose nature, we lose ourselves too. Our struggles are survival struggles. Rivers and

resistance in the region under the wider umbrella of the social movement Xingu Forever Alive (Xingú Vivo Para Sempre),¹⁸ this faith is intrinsically connected to hope, which comes from the belief in the figure of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. This hope that situations can be transformed stands out as central to faith communities involved in the resistance.

Faith is not only a mobilising element of the resistance against the dam to protect human lives and ecosystems, but also a safeguard, an untouchable and unbreakable support. Faith is what keeps hope for justice active, even in the face of imminent defeats. As a Catholic community leader expressed it: 'Our faith is very important, it gives us hope to go on, even when



we know that the battle is lost'. Many of our research participants pointed out that, even when losing a battle or facing intimidation and threats, it is their faith in Christ that gives them courage to continue. As a social movement leader puts it: 'We always work from looking at the word of God, the New Testament, and compare it with our reality. This is what we have learned in the Base Ecclesial Communities. It is a Christian faith centred on citizenship. It is seeking the example of Jesus in the struggle for justice. This generates hope.'

Martyrs, i.e. those who have been killed for defending Nature and the rights of peoples, represent a particular symbolism in the Amazon.¹⁹ The ultimate sacrifice of their lives is also a symbol of love and transformation of death into life. The symbolic reference to the crucified Jesus who gives himself up and is killed for his denunciation of the oppressive institutions at the time, and who has risen to life, is a strong idea in the popular

arrived here at the beginning and entered the most distant places to meet and support the people.²⁰

For these communities affected by the dam, promoting justice is about following the example of Jesus Christ, persecuted and crucified. They see a commitment to solidarity and justice as integral to the practice of faith. This paragraph from the 2007 declaration of Latin American bishops gathered in the Brazilian city of Aparecida succinctly summarizes this relationship between faith, hope and love:

'Faith in God who is Love is manifested in the mature faith of many of the baptised and in popular piety, which expresses love for the suffering Christ, the God of compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation [...] the God who is close to the poor and to those who suffer. It



imagination among Catholic faith communities in the Amazon. Sometimes, people connect with Jesus's pain on the cross; other times, they connect with the hope that life will triumph over destruction. As a Catholic priest puts it, 'The Amazon is a region of martyrdom, of many people who gave their lives for the people's struggle. The Amazon bears the symbol of Christ's blood on the Cross. With this perspective, many priests

is also expressed in the charity that everywhere inspires deeds, projects, and paths of solidarity with the most needy and defenceless. It is also at work in consciousness of the dignity of the person, wisdom about life, passion for justice, hope against all hope, and the joy of living even under many difficult conditions that move the hearts of our peoples.'²¹

The figure of Jesus is most prominent in people's faith in Altamira. His life, attitudes towards others and deeds are seen as examples of how people

but who have dedicated their lives to the peoples of the Xingu, are also systematically evoked in the collective memory as symbols of a persistent, just, hopeful and



should act. The practice of 'seeing, judging and acting' in the light of the Gospel, which has been a foundational methodological processes of Base Ecclesial Communities,²² remains a strong base for the strategies deployed by social movements in the Xingu region. Dorothy Stang, an American religious sister murdered in 2005, is one of the most notable martyrs who has lived the life of Christ. As a Catholic sister interviewed expresses: 'Dorothy was this example of Jesus on earth, of the church on the way out. Even when threatened, she did not back down against the tyrants and today her image takes the Pilgrimage of the Forest forward, mobilizing and filling many people, especially young people, with hope.'²³ Such commemoration encourages a sense of commitment and generates greater resistance and perseverance in the struggle for justice. As a Church representative comments, 'The Catholic Church is a follower of Jesus and has a preferential option for the poor, the Church of Jesus must be against injustice. We, those of the Catholic faith, have always worked to commemorate our past, our martyrs, the lives who died in the fight. Remembering in a formative way, not letting people forget the past, this is what feeds hope in the face of the fight.' The figures of some people who are not martyrs,

supportive faith. In Altamira, the greatest example of this is undoubtedly the figure of Bishop Erwin Kräutler, who is often described as the pastor of a church who took care of its people. 'Dom Erwin was a very strong symbol of this struggle and the church's involvement with the cause. [...]. The people are missing the old missionaries, they were living symbols of an incarnated faith, this gave hope to the people.' (participant in the Movimiento Xingu Vivo Para Sempre)

Concluding remarks

As the story of the resistance of faith communities to the Belo Monte dam illustrates, hope is not only a theological concept, it is also, and foremost, deeply rooted in the experience of people's lives. It is a disposition to act out of love for God and God's creation, protect it against destruction, despite setbacks, disappointment and failure. As Rahner has argued, hope takes its bearings from faith and love. It is rooted in the faith that Jesus Christ is risen and that death and destruction do not have the ultimate word, that life always triumphs. It is a virtue that is nourished through faith communities, who meet to reflect on the life of Christ, and on the lives of those who have closely



“ [Hope] is a disposition to act out of love for God and God’s creation, protect it against destruction, despite setbacks, disappointment and failure. (...) Hope is also rooted in love, in love for God’s and God’s creatures, the Ceibo tree and the person living on the Xingu riverbank alike. ”



followed his life (the saints and martyrs), and who seek to follow in their footsteps. Hope is also rooted in love, in love for God’s and God’s creatures, the Ceibo tree and the person living on the Xingu riverbank alike. As Pope Francis opens his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Amazon Synod: ‘The beloved Amazon region stands before the world in all its splendour, its drama and its mystery’.

Hope is an essential feature of an integral ecology paradigm. Conducting academic research according to the integral ecology paradigm, as the Laudato Si’ Research Institute strives to do, therefore needs to

be rooted in hope, with its two modalities of love and faith. Integral ecology research entails situating love as a starting point of our academic research, which is closely linked to rooting our research in contemplation and analysing social and ecological realities with wonder and paying attention (see LSRI Briefing Note 2). And most of all, integral ecology research entails documenting the faith of local communities that ecological and social destruction does not have the last word, that human efforts at protecting the balance of life in all its forms are not in vain, despite appearing as failures. It is a faith that is not only words but is proclaimed in their actions, and in the witness of their lives.





Endnotes

- 1 Séverine Deneulin is Director of International Development, Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, University of Oxford; Celia Deane Drummond is Director of the Laudato Si' Research Institute; Luiz Felipe Lacerda is Executive Secretary of the Observatório de Justiça Socioambiental Luciano Mendes de Almeida.
- 2 International Rivers. 'Speech by Pres. Lula at a Rally for the Belo Monte Dam'. Accessed 21 May 2024. <https://archive.internationalrivers.org/resources/speech-by-pres-lula-at-a-rally-for-the-belo-monte-dam-4293>.
- 3 Ed Atkins, 'Belo Monte: there is nothing green or sustainable about these mega-dams', *The Conversation*, August 9, 2018. <https://theconversation.com/belo-monte-there-is-nothing-green-or-sustainable-about-these-mega-dams-98025>. Daniel B. Fitzgerald et al. 'Diversity and Community Structure of Rapids-Dwelling Fishes of the Xingu River: Implications for Conservation amid Large-Scale Hydroelectric Development'. *Biological Conservation* 222 (1 June 2018): 104–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2018.04.002>.
It is estimated that 16 tons of fish were killed during the first weeks of the dam's operations. For other data on the consequences of the dam on the ecosystems and lives of people, see Viviane Zandonadi, 'Damned If He Does: Lula Decides the Fate of Belo Monte'. *SUMAÚMA* (blog), 6 March 2023. <https://sumauma.com/en/a-hora-e-agora-lula-tera-que-decidir-sobre-belo-monte/>; 'Amazon's Belo Monte Dam Cuts Xingu River Flow 85%; a Crime, Indigenous Say'. Accessed 21 May 2024. <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/03/amazons-belo-monte-dam-cuts-xingu-river-flow-85-a-crime-indigenous-say/>.
- 4 Zandonadi, <https://sumauma.com/en/a-hora-e-agora-lula-tera-que-decidir-sobre-belo-monte/>
- 5 This section is based on material from Celia Deane-Drummond, *Morality's Evolution and the Transcendent: Evolution of Wisdom Volume III* Oxford University Press, in preparation; "Hope in Time," *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* 3.1 (2022): 9–20.
- 6 Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*. London and New York: Yale University Press, 2015.
- 7 Eagleton, *Hope*, p. 2.
- 8 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, Qu. 17.1
- 9 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, Qu. 17.2
- 10 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, translated by James W. Leitch [1965]. London: SCM Press, 1967.
- 11 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 16
- 12 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 21
- 13 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 31
- 14 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, pp. 26–32.
- 15 Karl Rahner, 'On the Theology of Hope'. In *Theological Investigations. Volume 10, Writings of 1965-67, 2*, translated by David Bourke, 242-59. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973, p. 248.
- 16 Rahner, *TI*, 'On the Theology of Hope', p. 249
- 17 The research report will be published in June 2024.
- 18 One leader of the MXVS mentioned that the name of the movement comes from writing a letter, 'SOS Xingu', as if the river was speaking to the community.
- 19 For an account of the lives of "eco-martyrs" in the Amazon and Latin America, see Elizabeth Gandolfo-O'Donnell, *Ecomartyrdom in the Americas: Living and Dying for Our Common Home*. Ecology & Justice Series. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2023; see also <https://ecomartyrdom.net/about-the-book>

- 20 This is also echoed in the final document of the Amazon Synod: 'One of the most glorious pages of the Amazon has been written by the martyrs. The participation of the followers of Jesus in his passion, death and glorious resurrection has accompanied the life of the Church to this day, especially in the moments and places in which, for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus, Christians live in the midst of acute contradictions, such as those who struggle courageously in favour of integral ecology in the Amazon.' (paragraph 16). <http://secretariat.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.pdf>.
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- 22 Schickendantz, C. 'Reception of Vatican II in Latin America and the Caribbean'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, edited by C. Clifford and M. Faggioli, 676–94. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023.
- 23 For more information about the pilgrimage in Dorothy's memory, see Coletivo de Comunicação MAB PA, 'Defensores da Amazônia celebram a memória de Irmã Dorothy em romaria'. *MAB - Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens* (blog), 24 July 2023. <https://mab.org.br/2023/07/24/defensores-da-amazonia-celebram-a-memoria-de-irma-dorothy-em-romaria/>

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