Opinion
Voices of Sisters
Social Justice
EarthBeat



Bishop Adalberto Jiménez, apostolic vicariate of Aguarico, Ecuador, carries a cross on a pilgrimage from Quito to Coca, Ecuador, in honor of Bishop Alejandro Labaka Ugarte and Sr. Inés Arango Velásquez. (Courtesy of Sr. Nuala Doherty)



by Sr. Nuala Doherty

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"We are instruments of justice and peace like Alejandro and Inés." This was the theme of the 2026 July pilgrimage from Quito to Coca in honor of Bishop Alejandro Labaka Ugarte and Sr. Inés Arango Velásquez, two Capuchin missionaries who were killed by the Indigenous group Tagaeri, mistaking them as a threat, deep in the Amazon of Ecuador on July 21, 1987. They both knew that it was a risky endeavor to enter deep into the Amazon but they believed that if they didn't go, the Indigenous would be killed and their land exploited by the oil companies.

I took part in the last four days of this 12-day walk and was very much impressed by the number of youth who participated. This was the 20th walk, founded by Capuchin Brs. Txarli Azcona and Darwin Orozco. Txarli was a good friend of Alejandro. Both came from Spain.

The walk began at the Sanctuary to the Virgin of Guápalo in Quito and finished about 376 kilometers to the Coca Cathedral in the Amazon region. People could do as much or as little of the walk as they wanted.

Our pilgrimage was for several reasons: in honor of these two great martyrs (who have been proclaimed venerable by Pope Leo XIV), to marvel in the beauty of creation, to listen to God through nature, his word and others, and for our own personal conversion and intentions.

We also walked in peaceful protest against the ecological injustices that are all too evident in this part of Ecuador (deteriorated roads, legal and illegal mining, deforestation, and contamination of the rivers, air and other species due to oil spills and the constant burning of the "mecheros"). One contributing factor of the "mecheros" is the occurrence of catastrophic illnesses including cancer. Patients have to travel to Quito because of inadequate healthcare in the Amazon Region.

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The walk was a very animating and joyful event with strong bonds built up among us. Ninety percent of the participants this year were young people. It was truly inspiring listening to the testimonies that they gave in the Eucharistic celebrations each evening. The bishop of the apostolic vicariate of Aguarico, Adalberto Jiménez, participated in part of the walk each day which was in itself a great testimony. At the end of the walk we met up with two other pilgrim groups, outside the cathedral. We were about 300 in total that entered the cathedral and processed to the tombs of Alejandro and Inés in front of the altar.

The "mecheros" continue burning in spite of a promise from the government to eliminate them. Contamination is rife. Pachamama is crying out in agony. Nevertheless, I have hope in our young brave prophets of the Amazon, that their voices will finally be heard.

The walk has ended but their mission continues. I am confident that with the intercession of Alejandro and Inés, justice and peace will eventually flourish in this small corner of the world.