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## Strong Church, Weak Catholicism: Transformations in Brazilian Catholicism

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# Journal of GLOBAL CATHOLICISM

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## TRANSFORMATIONS in BRAZILIAN CATHOLICISM

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Photo by José Rogério Lopes



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## Strong Church, Weak Catholicism: Transformations in Brazilian Catholicism



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A simple glance at the Brazilian religious landscape reveals significant changes over recent years, both in the rural world and the urban peripheries—where little chapels by the roadside have given way to small churches of diverse Pentecostal denominations—and in the centers of the metropolises where Catholic cathedrals compete in ostentatiousness with new and modern neo-Pentecostal churches. While this visual impression is reinforced on a daily basis by the presence of Evangelicals in public controversies, affording them a prominent place in politics and the media, it also highlights the loss of the hegemony maintained by Catholicism over Brazilian society and culture for five hundred years. This has become increasingly visible in the statistical data on religions produced by the decennial population censuses, which show a constant decline in the number of the Brazilian population identifying as Catholic. The table below presents this percentage reduction in Catholics compared to the two groups that have grown most in Brazil: Evangelicals and those with no religion.

	1980	1991	2000	2010
Catholics	89%	84%	74%	64%
Evangelicals	4%	9%	15%	22%
No Religion	1%	4.8%	7%	8%

Source: IBGE (Census 1980/1991/2000/2010)<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, this change in landscape, as well as the steady decline in numbers of Catholics, contrasts with the Catholic Church's ecclesiastical growth. As we aim to show in this text, this points to an inverse relationship between the demographic shrinkage of the Catholic population and the institutional strengthening of the Catholic Church. This strengthening is evident in both the marked increase in parishes and priests over recent decades, and the vitality of the mass religious manifestations held in public space, where Catholics and Evangelicals vie for power.

As well as enabling the emergence of Evangelical churches and those with “no religion” in the public sphere, Catholicism's loss of numerical hegemony also engendered a different religious system to take root in the country, one based on pluralism and competition. This, in turn, required the Catholic Church to

<sup>1</sup> Data made available from the IBGE at <http://www.ibge.gov.br/>, accessed April 15, 2020.

reformulate and strengthen itself to be able to join this new arena in which the rules of the game were no longer those defined by Catholicism as the official religion of the Brazilian nation. This new game demands the use of modern resources by religious actors, such as a presence in mass communications media, political articulation in defense of their interests and their causes in government structures, and the promotion of charismatic leaders capable of mobilizing large crowds. In other words, the change observed in the Catholic Church is not simply the result of a rational strategy, conceived as part of a conscious ecclesiastical project designed by the church hierarchy. Rather it emerges as a movement that accompanies the loss of horizontal diffusion and ideological domination that Catholicism once exerted in Brazilian culture. For several centuries until the 1960s, being Catholic and being Brazilian were identities that blurred into each other, although other religious practices like those of indigenous and Afro-Brazilian traditions subsisted and became syncretized within Catholicism.

Our objective in this text is to show the quickening decline in the number of Catholics in Brazilian society over recent decades, exploring the statistical evidence for this claim. Along with other social scientists who have worked with the data from the ten-year censuses, we aim to situate the numerical shrinkage in Catholics among the Brazilian population within a wider context of cultural and social changes.<sup>2</sup> In dialogue with these analyses, we develop a long-term anthropological interpretation, focusing on the relationship between Catholicism and the country's culture and modernization. In other words, moving beyond statistical analysis and the mapping of religious affiliation in Brazil, we seek to comprehend the impact that the reduction in the number of Catholics—which began in 1872, in a very subtle form, and has accelerated from 1980 on—is having on Catholicism as one of

2 Pierre Sanchis, "O Repto Pentecostal à 'Cultura Católica-Brasileira,'" *Revista de Antropologia* (1994): 145-181. Faustino Teixeira, "Fases do Catolicismo Brasileiro Contemporâneo," *Revista USP* 67 (2005): 14-23, <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-9036.v0i67p14-23>. Carlos Alberto Steil and Rodrigo Ferreira Toniol, "O Catolicismo e a Igreja Católica no Brasil à Luz dos Dados Sobre Religião no Censo de 2010," *Debates do NER* 14, no. 24 (July 2013): 223-243. Ricardo Mariano, "Mudanças no Campo Religioso Brasileiro no Censo 2010," *Debates do NER* 2 no. 24 (2013): 119-137, <https://doi.org/10.22456/1982-8136.43696>. José Eustáquio Alves, et al., "Distribuição Espacial da Transição Religiosa no Brasil," *Tempo Social* 29, no. 2 (2017): 215-242, <https://doi.org/10.11606/0103-2070.ts.2017.112180>.





Vitor Meireles, "The First Mass in Brazil," 1860, oil on canvas.

the core dimensions shaping Brazilian culture.<sup>3</sup> At the same time it's important to remark that our main focus is to provide data as a basis to seriously take on the debates about Brazilian Catholicism. After all, as we suggested, the constant decline in the number of people identifying as Catholics in Brazil points to a longer-term cultural process operating beyond the Catholic Church itself.

## CATHOLICISM IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD AND DURING THE EMPIRE

Catholicism in Brazil merges with the country's origin and historical formation. The founding act, which marks the beginning of Portuguese conquest and occupation of the territory, was the celebration of the first Mass, immortalized in the painting by Vitor Meireles (1860), reproduced in thousands of copies as an icon of European Discovery.<sup>4</sup> From this beginning, Catholicism composed the Brazilian landscape through the demarcation of both social time and public space. In relation to time, the calendar, which to a large extent still regulates social life and collective events today, is fundamentally defined by religious festivals, which overlap with civic dates. As for space, the landscape of Brazilian cities, especially those founded during the colonial period, is marked by baroque-style Catholic churches, whose

3 Taking into account data released by IBGE and processed by CPS/FGV, comparison of the years 1872, 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1991, 2000, 2003 and 2009 shows declines in the participation of Catholics in the Brazilian population for each interval. [http://www.cps.fgv.br/cps/bd/rel3/REN\\_texto\\_FGV\\_CPS\\_Neri.pdf](http://www.cps.fgv.br/cps/bd/rel3/REN_texto_FGV_CPS_Neri.pdf), accessed April 15, 2020.

4 The official history records the arrival of the Portuguese in Brazil on April 21, 1500.



impressive design and wealth have made them tourist sites. Meanwhile, the rural landscape is punctuated by the little roadside chapels, which testify to the presence of Catholicism in everyday life, and the sanctuaries, which during special moments of the year attract thousands of pilgrims to their festivals.

Catholicism not only transformed the landscape of the New World, it also impregnated the culture of the nascent Brazilian nation, shaping its institutions, family life, labor relations, forms of leisure, festivals and civic rituals, arts and the organization of public space.<sup>5</sup> The sacraments of baptisms and weddings, along with funeral rites, were public acts that bestowed citizenship to subjects, demarcating the key moments of their existence. As Caio Prado Jr. observed, the individual during this era “participates in the religious acts and ceremonies with the same naturalness and conviction as any other banal and everyday occurrence of their earthly existence [...]. There were disbelievers and skeptics, but the incredulity of the latter was limited to the small, closed and insulated circles of masons and freethinkers who carefully conceal their disbelief.”<sup>6</sup> In organizational terms, Catholicism was instituted in Brazil as an official religion of the State, governed by the *Regime do Padroado*.<sup>7</sup> Through this legal instrument, the Catholic Church delegated to the colonial Portuguese State and the emperors of Brazil after independence (1822) “the

5 One of the most important institutions of Catholicism with substantial impacts on social life is the *compadrio*, co-godparenting, which operated through the double baptism of children. Home baptism, which consolidated solidarity within the working classes, and church baptism, which instituted moral bonds of loyalty and protection between the workers and owners of the big plantations. For a deeper exploration of this topic, see Duglas Teixeira Monteiro, *Os Errantes do Novo Século: Um Estudo Sobre o Surto Milenarista do Contestado* (São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades, 1974) and Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira, *Religião e Dominação de Classe: Gênese, Estrutura e Função do Catolicismo Romanizado no Brasil* (Vozes, 1985).

6 Caio Prado, Jr., *Formação Econômica do Brasil Contemporâneo* (São Paulo, 1977).

7 This right of *Padroado* (patronage) was based on a series of papal documents, three of which have particular importance. The first is the bull *Romanus Pontifex* (1455), issued by Pope Nicholas V, which granted the King of Portugal the right to dispatch missionaries and found churches, monasteries and other pious places in the new overseas territories. The following year, Pope Callixtus III promulgated the bull *Inter Coetera* (1456) which confirmed the provisions of his predecessor and granted spiritual jurisdiction to Infante Dom Henrique, King of Portugal. This jurisdiction was subsequently passed to members of the royal family through the bull *Praeclara Charissimi* (1551). Together these defined the legal framework of the *Padroado*, by which the kings of Portugal became responsible for the expansion, implantation and administration of the Catholic religion in the overseas territories.



decision on the creation of dioceses and parishes, the establishment of religious orders and the founding of convents, nomination for ecclesiastical posts, and approval of ecclesiastical documents, including papal documents.”<sup>8</sup> As a counterpart, it was the State’s responsibility to maintain the clergy and the religious orders. This power of the State, however, while curbing Rome’s ecclesiastical and clerical control over the organization of religion, also enabled the emergence of lay and devotional Catholicism, disseminated by non-clerical religious actors.<sup>9</sup>

Implemented by lay members of the church, organized in brotherhoods, sisterhoods and associations that could dispense with the clergy in their everyday activities, Catholicism thus became established at the margins of the Catholic Church. In the rural context, where the large majority of the population lived, religious life occurred within the houses of families, who gathered around domestic altars or in the little chapels by the roadsides, where a *rezador* presided over the worship of the patron saints with the local population. On special occasions, once or twice a year, pilgrimages would be made to sanctuaries in the region, run by monks and devout lay worshipers (*beatos*), recognized for their holiness and life of reclusion and penitence.

In the cities, the organization of religious life was under the responsibility of the brotherhoods and sisterhoods, formed by lay members, who ran the churches by now proliferating in the urban centers. The logic of organization was not the territorial division into parishes, or the optional communities of belief formed by congregations, but instituted through the division of social structure, which shaped the colonial society and monarchical regime implanted in the country after independence. Through its priests, the Catholic Church was responsible for dispensing the sacraments on the occasion of the annual festivals for the local patron saints

8 Oliveira, *Religião e Dominação de Classe*.

9 Covering a territory of 8.5 million km<sup>2</sup> until 1854, the Roman Catholic Church had just twelve dioceses across the entire country. From 1890 with the Republic (1889) and the separation between Church and State, the process of creating dioceses quickened with seventy-eight new dioceses created in forty years. See Eduardo Hoornaert, *A Igreja no Brasil-Colônia: 1550-1800*, Vol. 45 (Editora Brasiliense, 1984). Today the Roman Catholic Church has 2,014 dioceses and 10,720 parishes. Steil and Toniol, “O Catolicismo,” 223-243.



and the sanctuaries, especially baptisms and weddings, confirming the religious code and Catholic morality. This produced a relation of complementarity between Catholicism—which ensured its reproduction through the apparatus of worship, maintained by non-clerical institutions with deep roots in the local culture—and the Catholic Church, which conferred a sense of unity (*ecclesia*) and common belonging via the sacraments.

## ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN BRAZIL

The context described above started to change from the second half of the nineteenth century with the emergence of the reformist movement. This eventually led to a structural division between the Catholicism practiced by the mass of worshippers and Roman Catholicism. The latter was introduced into the country with the arrival of the modern religious orders and congregations from Europe, which created the conditions for the restructuring of Catholicism.<sup>10</sup> Initiated during the pontificate of Pius IX (1846-1878), this movement became global in reach and arrived in the New World. Its principal objective was to submit local forms of Catholicism to the institutional control of the Roman Curia. In Brazil, this provoked a significant conflict between the Church and the monarchical government, culminating in the imprisonment of two bishops who refused to submit to the rulings of the Emperor, whose powers had been conferred by the Padroado regime. This anticipated a rupture between the Catholic Church and the State that would become official with the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889.<sup>11</sup>

10 The notion of the Romanization of Brazilian Catholicism was first suggested by Roger Bastide and later developed by Ralph Della Cava in the book *Miracle at Joazeiro* and Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira. Ralph Della Cava, *Miracle at Joazeiro* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970). Oliveira, *Religião e Dominação de Classe*.

11 The religious conflict in question took place in the 1870s, a few years before the separation between the Catholic Church and the Brazilian state. The main actors on the Catholic Church's side were the reformist bishops Dom Vital Gonçalves de Oliveira and Dom Macedo Costa. The origins of the crisis lay in the interdictions imposed by the prelates on the presence of masons in religious institutions, like the brotherhoods and sisterhoods, and the Emperor's ban on the divulgation and implementation of papal resolutions in Brazil. The conflict resulted in the imprisonment of the bishops and their condemnation to forced labor.

As a strategy of social legitimation, the reformist movement invested in the moral and theological formation of the clergy and the creation of male and female religious orders and congregations. The latter were growing rapidly in Europe at this time, providing an intense flow of missionaries to the Americas. Along with these missionaries arrived new forms of devotion, which overlapped with traditional forms, while dioceses and parishes were also created throughout the national territory, submitting Catholicism to the control of the clergy.<sup>12</sup> Seminaries were instituted in the form of boarding schools, run by European priests, to train a new clergy capable of replacing the brotherhoods and sisterhoods in the administration of churches in the towns and cities, and the monks and beatos in the running of the pilgrimage sanctuaries. Future bishops began to be trained in Rome, in the pontifical universities known for their orthodoxy. As well as the internal reform of the institutional apparatus, the Romanizing project aimed to gain public legitimacy through the creation of colleges and universities for training a literate middle class, as well as hospitals, old people's homes and orphanages.

This positive agenda, however, coexisted with a series of negative actions, such as combating the forms of worship and rituals of traditional popular Catholicism. The creation of the dioceses and parishes, for example, resulted in intense conflicts with the brotherhoods and sisterhoods in the urban centers.<sup>13</sup> In the outback regions, or *sertões*, the conflict unfolded primarily in the sanctuaries—the majority of them run by beatos and lay monks—and in the local chapels, maintained by *rezadores* (prayer leaders).<sup>14</sup> These conflicts, though, did not immediately cause any rupture

12 The main devotion brought by these missionaries was worship of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The devotions of Our Lady, especially those associated with the modern apparitions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the founding saints or members of new religious orders and congregations, also became widespread, very often overlapping with traditional devotions.

13 As Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira writes, "The brotherhoods and sisterhoods were associations of laypeople recognized by ecclesiastical and civil law. Their statutes had royal and ecclesiastical approval, recognizing them as legal entities independent of ecclesiastical authority for their internal government and their everyday affairs," Oliveira, *Religião e Dominação de Classe*, 130.

14 Popular Catholic worship in the field occurred primarily in three spaces: the domestic oratories where the family mother or father would preside over the prayers, litanies and songs; the chapels, operating at a local level, run by the *rezadeiras* or *rezadores*, and built not to shelter altars or Masses but to house the image of the worshiped saint; and the sanctuaries, presided over by monks and beatos, which operated at a regional or even national level.

between the Catholic Church and the Catholic masses. In part this was due to the institution's interest in maintaining the connection with the country's Catholic majority, since through this connection the Catholic Church could present itself to society as the voice of the Brazilian people, almost entirely Catholic, and thus claim privileges in a social context of low institutionality and inchoate political organization.<sup>15</sup> This ambivalence largely explains the position of the Romanizing clergy in relation to the Catholicism of the people, which oscillates between its recognition as a cultural value and combating the traditional devotions and rituals, seen as superstitions to be eradicated through catechesis and evangelization.<sup>16</sup>

For many decades, therefore, the Catholic Church believed that the reproduction of Catholicism was something that would take place "naturally" as a consequence of Catholic culture and tradition, rooted in the people's soul. If there was any problem with Catholicism, it was related to the "religious ignorance of the people" and the lack of clerics capable of enabling the mass of Catholics to receive the dogmas of the Church through catechesis, internalizing its values and moral code in the conscience of the faithful. Hence, the reduction in the number of people identifying as Catholics, registered in each new census, was explained by the fact that evangelization and catechesis were insufficiently organized or strong enough for the people to be reached by the "true religion" over which the institution claimed legitimacy.

Our argument runs counter to the Enlightenment interpretation of the reformist clergy, which explained the decline in the number of Catholics by the lack of an effective response from the institution to the challenges of evangelization, associated with the inadequate number of priests to meet the religious demands of the

15 The ambiguity of the clergy in relation to the followers of popular Catholicism appears, for example, in the ethnography of Rubem César Fernandes on the Sanctuary of Our Lady Aparecida, in the state of São Paulo, the Southeast of Brazil. He writes that "addressing the state authorities, the priests of the sanctuary represented the true nation, materialized in the Mass of the faithful; when it came to the pilgrims, however, they represented foreign missionaries," Rubem César Fernandes, *Romarias da Paixão* (Rocco, 1994), 109.

16 According to the historian Oscar Beozzo, the ideology of the reformist bishops was founded on the notion of purifying popular Catholicism of its abuses and superstitions. Jose Oscar Beozzo, "Irmandades, Santuários, Capelinhas de Beira de Estrada," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 37, no. 148 (1977): 753.





population. Contrary to this interpretation, we believe that there was a structural problem at the level of the reproduction of Catholic culture, which no longer had the resources and instruments available to it before the modernization of Brazilian society. A situation attributable to the change in the religious demands of individuals, who underwent a process of increasing rationalization, and also to the secularization of many of the local religious organizations, which began to operate as folkloric, touristic or even ethnic and social movements.

## THE DATA AND ITS INTERPRETATION

In the following pages, we compare data from the 2010 Census—produced by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)—with data from research undertaken by the Centre for Religious Statistics and Social Investigation (CERIS). Comparing these two sources of data, we show that the decline in the number of Catholics coincides with the growth of the Catholic Church. The latter is evinced by the continual increase in the number of dioceses, parishes and priests. The table below on the evolution in the number of dioceses<sup>17</sup> demonstrates this institutional growth, while also revealing the sudden shift that occurred during the period when Romanization was being implemented.

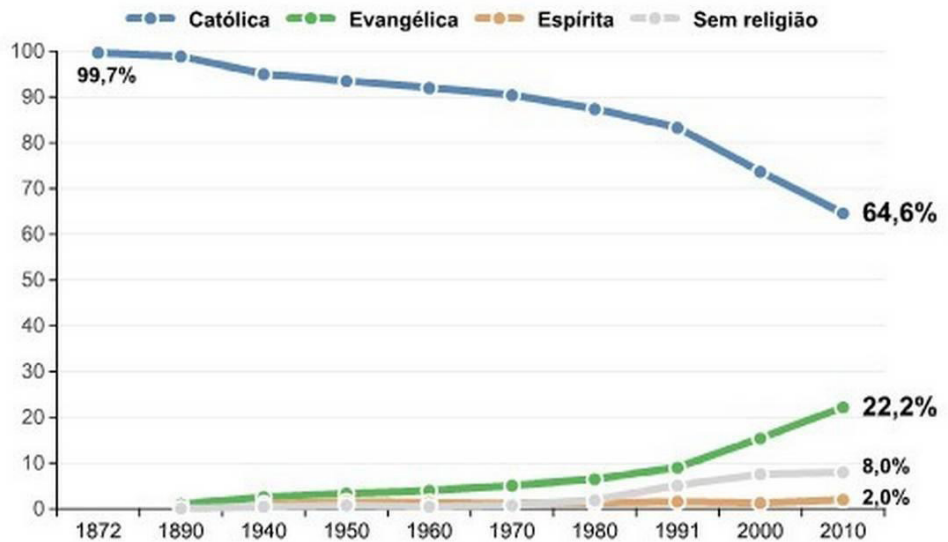
	1551	1676 - 1677	1719 - 1745	1850 - 1745	1890 - 1930	1930 - 2010
Creation of dioceses	1	3	5	3	68	271
Total	1	4	9	11	77	278

Source: Table produced by the authors

In the opposite direction, the sequence of data produced by the IBGE censuses shows a continual and progressive decline in the number of Catholics in Brazil.

17 This figure takes into account all ecclesiastical divisions, including 217 dioceses, 45 archdioceses, 3 eparchies, 8 prelacies, 1 exarchy, 1 ordinariate for the followers of the Eastern Rite without their own ordinary, 1 military ordinariate, 1 personal apostolic administration and 1 archeparchy. Source: <http://www.osaopaulo.org.br/noticias/a-igreja-no-brasil-conclui-2019-com-481-bispos-e-nove-dioceses-vacantes>, accessed April 15, 2020.

## SHARE OF CATHOLICS IN BRAZIL'S POPULATION COMPARED TO OTHER RELIGIONS



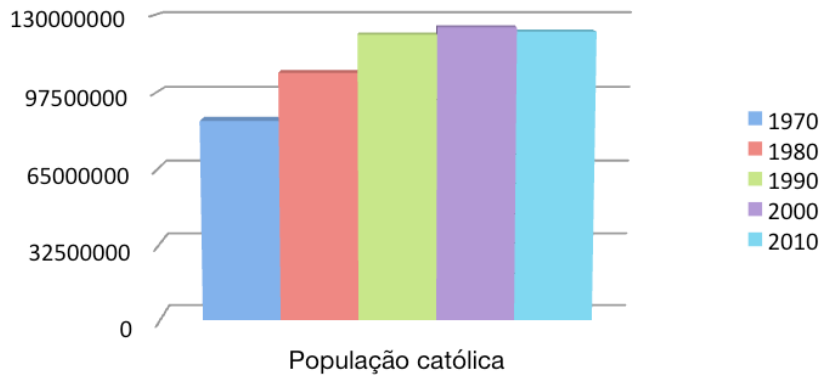
Source: Graph produced using data and microdata made available by the IBGE.

If we take as reference points the censuses from 1991, 2000 and 2010, we can note a continual reduction in the Catholic population in the country of almost 10% per decade. However, although the drop in the number of Catholics has been systematic since 1872, it was only in the 2010 Census that the absolute number of Catholics fell, declining from 125.5 million people in 2000 to 123.3 million in 2010, a loss of 2.2 million worshippers.

Our argument that the crisis revealed in the census figures represents a crisis of Catholicism, not of the Catholic Church, becomes clearer when we compare the data above with the indicators relating to the growth in the number of parishes and priests in the country. Taking as a starting point the mid-1990s, we can observe that the number of parishes rose from 7,786 to 10,720, this is an increase of almost 40% in 16 years. The increase in the number of priests is even more striking. From the 1980s to 2010, the number of priests rose from 12,688 to 22,119, an increase of more than 60%.



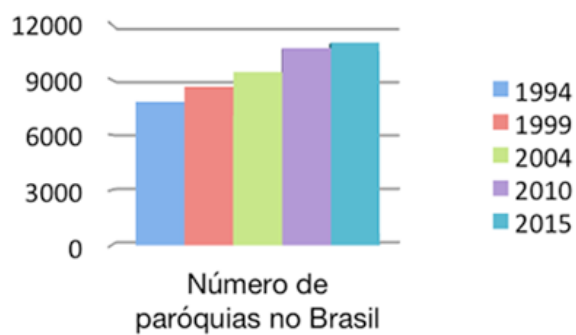
## CATHOLIC POPULATION IN ABSOLUTE NUMBERS



Year	Catholic population	Brazilian population
1970	85,678,714	93,139,037
1980	105,912,408	119,002,706
1991	121,865,144	146,825,475
2000	124,972,189	169,799,170
2010	123,213,320	184,184,264

Source: Graph and table produced using data and microdata made available by IBGE

## PARISHES IN BRAZIL

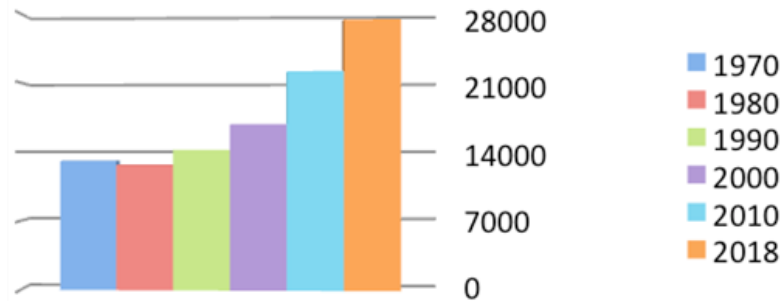


Year	Parishes
1994	7,786
1999	8,602
2004	9,410
2010	10,720
2015	11,011

Source: Graph and table produced using data and microdata made available by CERIS



### PRIESTS IN BRAZIL



Year	Priests
1970	13,092
1980	12,688
1990	14,198
2000	16,772
2010	22,119
2018	27,300

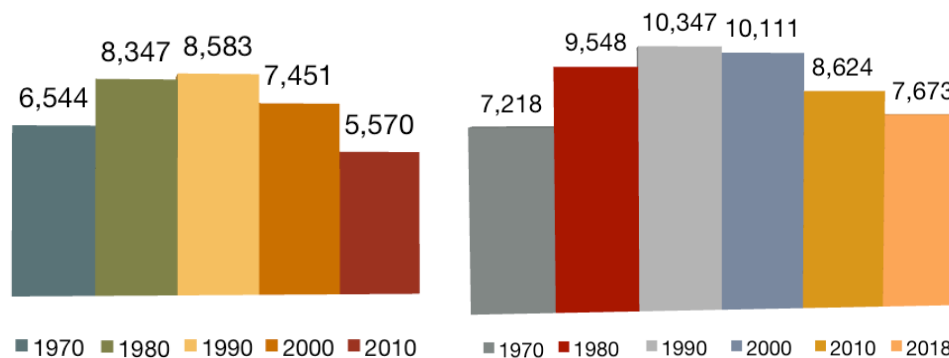
Source: Graph and table produced using data and microdata made available by CERIS

For many years, the Catholic Church invested in vocational recruitment, in training priests and in the structuring and multiplication of parishes in the expectation that this institutional strategy would be capable not only of strengthening and enhancing Catholicism’s presence in society, but also of staunching the migration of Catholics to other religions or to the contingent of those with no religion. Comparing the data from the IBGE censuses with the CERIS data, though, shows that any cause-effect relationship between the growth of the clergy and the Catholic population in Brazil is actually nonexistent. While the number of priests becomes the highest in the entire history of Catholicism in the country, the absolute number of Catholics dropped for the first time since the series of data on religion began to be included in the censuses. In sum, this confirms an argument very often



repeated in the sociological literature on traditional popular Catholicism since the 1970s, namely that the reproduction of Catholicism depended fundamentally on lay members rather than the clergy.<sup>18</sup> As a competitive and diversified religious field of options became established in the popular sphere, the reproduction of these agents, as well as the maintenance of Catholicism as a founding element of cultural identity, experienced a crisis.

### CATHOLICS PER PRIEST



The graph on the right shows the ratio of inhabitants per priest in Brazil from the 1970s, covering the population as a whole, both Catholics and non-Catholic. We can observe that since 1980 the number of priests per inhabitant has been rising. The first graph, though, considers only the proportion of priests and Catholics. This makes the difference even clearer, given that the number of Catholics has been declining while the Brazilian population has increased in absolute terms. Thus, while there had been 8,347 Catholics per priest in 1980, the ratio had fallen to 5,570 per priest by 2010. This situation is also confirmed when we observe the data relating in the first graph to the inhabitant–priest ratio in 2018. Even with the significant increase in the Brazilian population over the last five decades, the number of priests

18 Pedro Ribeiro de Oliveira, "Catolicismo Popular e Romanização do Catolicismo Brasileiro," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 36, no. 141 (1976): 131-141. Oliveira, *Religião e Dominação de Classe*. Beozzo, "Irmandades." Riolando Azzi, "A Visão do Paraíso na Sociedade Colonial Luso-Brasileira." *Perspectiva Teológica* 23, no. 59 (1991). Rubem César Fernandes, *Os Cavaleiros do Bom Jesus: Uma Introdução às Religiões Populares*, Vol. 7 (Brasiliense, 1982).

in 2018 ensured that this ratio remained very close to the level seen in the 1970s. In other words, even though today there are around 35% fewer Catholics in Brazil, the proportion of priests per Brazilian is the same as in the 1970s.<sup>19</sup> Without doubt, therefore, it is not the lack of pastors that explains the scattering of the Catholic flock. Our intention is not to claim the existence of a cause-effect relationship, but only to underline that the increase in priests coincides with the shrinkage of the Catholic population and Catholicism. This points to a trajectory in which Catholicism tends to become the size of the Catholic Church in the country.<sup>20</sup>

Next, we present a sequence of three graphs on the decline in the number of nuns and its relationship to the number of priests. In our evaluation, this adds another indicative feature of the institutional and clerical growth of the Catholic Church: its machismo. The Catholic Church in Brazil, in its upper echelons and at its intermediary and grassroots levels, is assuming an increasingly masculine profile. This contrasts with the female hegemony throughout the period of Romanization when the number of nuns was always numerically higher than the number of priests. As shown by the sociological analyses of religious congregations in Brazil, nuns played a decisive role in the modernization of Catholicism, through works in the field of education and healthcare—colleges and hospitals—and through the catechesis of children and, more recently, the implementation and maintenance of ecclesial base communities.<sup>21</sup> Based on our field research over the last few decades, we can assert fairly confidently that the secularization of the education and healthcare systems—

19 The data used to estimate the Brazilian population in 2018 was obtained from the IBGE's projections.

20 In this text we are discussing the institutional strengthening of the Catholic Church. We are not comparing the proportionality between the increases in the general and religious populations, therefore. Even so, it is worth stressing that such a comparison only corroborates our argument, given that while the country's population grew by 101% between 1970 and 2010, the number of priests rose by 108% over the same period.

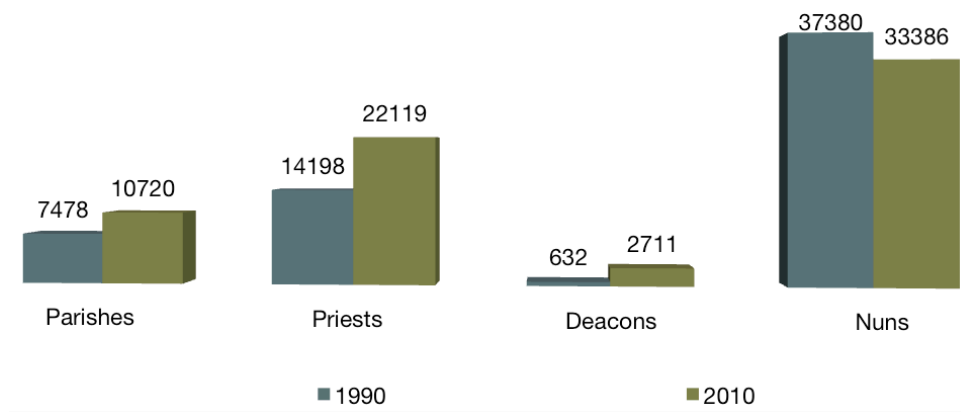
21 Cecília Mariz and Maria das Dores Campos Machado, "Mulheres e Práticas Religiosas—um Estudo Comparativo das CEBS e Comunidades Carismáticas e Pentecostais," *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 34 (1997). Paula Leonardi, "Congregações Católicas e Educação: O Caso da Sagrada Família de Bordeaux," *Revista Brasileira de História da Educação* 11, no. 2 (2011): 103-129. Ivan A. Manoel, "O Início da Educação Católica Feminina no Brasil (1859-1919): Os Colégios das 'Freiras Francesas,'" *Páginas de Educação* 5, no. 1 (2012): 115-134. Maurício de Aquino, "A Diáspora das Congregações Femininas Portuguesas para o Brasil no Início do Século XX: Política, Religião, Gênero," *Cadernos Pagu* 42 (2014): 393-415, <https://doi.org/10.1590/0104-8333201400420393>.



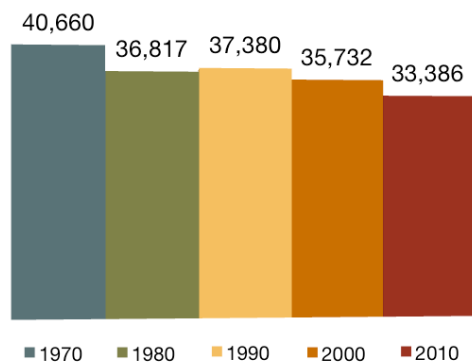


which began to be taken over by the State from the 1970s, along with the loss of Catholicism’s hegemony in the popular sphere—contributed significantly to the decline in the number of female religious vocations in the country.

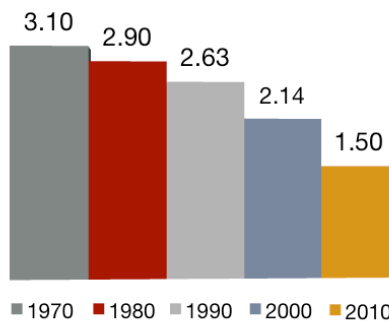
### ECCLESIASTICAL STRUCTURE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BRAZIL



### NUNS IN BRAZIL



### NUN-PRIEST RATIO



Source: Graphs produced using data and microdata made available by CERIS.

As we can observe in the graph of the ecclesiastical structure in Brazil, therefore, over an interval of twenty years (1990 to 2010), we can observe a growth in the number of parishes and clergy (priests and deacons) while the number of nuns declined. In other words, while the number of male agents has increased, the number of female agents decreased. Meanwhile the graph containing the figures relating to

nuns shows that the decline has only occurred since the 1970s. Finally, the graph displaying the nun-priests ratio in Brazil shows the sharp fall in this proportion in the interval of four decades, dropping from 3.1 nuns per priest in 1970 to 1.5 nuns per priest in 2010. What we can observe based on this set of graphs, therefore, is a clear tendency towards the masculinization of the Catholic Church's ecclesiastical structure.

Although the purpose of this text has not been to discuss gender questions as part of the crisis of Catholicism, as can be seen, these nonetheless become apparent when we interpret the statistical data. We could state, therefore, that Catholicism cannot respond to its crisis without taking into account the gender issues that emerge so explicitly in the context of the apparent institutional strengthening of the Church. Our hypothesis is that this characteristic of the Catholic Church's institutional configuration may affect the shaping of Catholicism as a cultural movement, suggesting that the decline in nuns may have been accompanied by a migration of women away from Catholicism. If this is confirmed, as the institution becomes more clerical, so Catholicism will become more masculine.

### THE CRISIS OF CATHOLICISM AS A PROCESS OF *DETRADITIONALIZATION*

For many years, the Catholic Church interpreted the crisis in Catholicism, evident in the decline in the number of Catholics in the Brazilian population, as an institutional problem. The idea that it actually represents a structural crisis, situated in the domain of culture, that extends far beyond the institution thus appears little reflected in the pastoral concerns and proposals of the Catholic Church's leaders. Having explored this question from a social scientific perspective, therefore, in this conclusion we offer some brief remarks on the responses that the Catholic Church has given to the problem.

One first response, which began with the movement of Romanization and has lasted until the present, is determined by an Enlightenment view of religion, in other words, sharing a modern concept of religion defined by the idea of conscious and explicit belonging to an exclusive community of belief, the Catholic hierarchy

has invested its efforts for decades in the expansion and improvement of the means of evangelization and catechesis, seeking to reach out to those who still recognize themselves as Catholics, but who do not frequent the weekly Masses and are not active in the parish community. As we saw in the development of our argument, this strategy has been successful in strengthening the Catholic Church institutionally, but has proven completely ineffective in halting the drop in the number of people who, when replying to the question about religion in the census, no longer identify as Catholics.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, another possible response for the Catholic Church loomed on the horizon: the creation of the Ecclesial Base Communities (EBCs). The Catholic hierarchy, stirred into action by the repercussions of the Second Vatican Council and the Episcopal Conferences of Medellín and Puebla, saw in the EBCs a possibility for structural insertion in the popular sphere, establishing the conditions for free and conscious adherence to the institution among those migrating in ever increasing numbers to Pentecostal Evangelical churches.<sup>22</sup> Mobilized by the Evangelical values of justice and the “option for the poor,” as well as by the modern values of human rights, part of the hierarchy, advised by liberation theologians, positioned itself alongside the vast majority formed by the country’s impoverished population, as well as the social movements that fought against the oppression, torture and censorship imposed by the military regime that had seized power in 1964 through a coup d’état. The EBCs thus became a space where poor people articulated their religious experience with social and political activism. This response, centered on raising awareness and political mobilization, allowed the Catholic Church to claim a place in the array of left-wing forces, dissociating itself from a past marked by collusion with the ruling classes. However, with the return of the democratic regime at the end of the 1980s and the rise of popular governments, the EBCs lost their heightened political role and their social visibility. Many of their leaders began to work directly in the State’s structures and in class organizations and lay movements among civil society. On the other hand, the working

22 Carlos Alberto Steil, “A Igreja dos Pobres: Da Secularização à Mística,” *Religião e Sociedade* 19, no. 2 (1999): 61-76.



classes, as well as a substantial contingent of the emergent middle class, instituted as reflective and free individuals, discovered an affinity between the Evangelical religions and the core set of cultural principles and values that had spread with the modernization of society, eroding a Catholic tradition that had been hegemonic in Brazil until the mid-twentieth century. This laid the foundations for the emergence and multiplication of Evangelical groups and Pentecostal churches on the peripheries of the country's large urban centers and in more remote areas. At the end of this long process of modernization, it can be stated that the option for the poor has been more recurrent and extensive for Evangelical religions than for the Catholic Church, whether through membership of the latter's parish churches or among the EBCs.

The Catholic Church's third response to the migration of Catholics has involved a degree of imitation with the institution incorporating the Evangelical Pentecostal model through the Charismatic Catholic Movement. Although this movement had its origins abroad and is indeed global in scale, it has operated in Brazil as a counterpoint to liberation Catholicism and as an alternative path for those migrating away from Catholicism. In the mid-1990s, the Charismatic Catholics in Brazil were 3.8% of the population (four million people), according to sample-based research coordinated by the sociologists Reginaldo Prandi and Flávio Pierucci.<sup>23</sup> However, this figure seems fairly modest given the visibility that the movement has maintained in the media and the crowds it has managed to draw in public spaces. Acting as a movement transversal to the Church's institutional space, the Charismatic Catholics are organized in groups autonomous from the ecclesial structure, formed and run by clerics and laypersons. These groups are owners of media outlets like radio stations, television channels, publishing houses, national newspapers and promoters of events. Generally critical of the left-wing political stances of the EBCs, the Charismatic Catholics have aligned with the Evangelicals and assumed conservative positions in the State's power structures and in public

23 The research was conducted in 1994 by the *Folha de São Paulo*, a national newspaper. Based on sampling, it included some questions on religious belonging, frequency of religious activities, and participation in religious movements. Pierucci, Antônio Flávio. "Bye Bye, Brasil: O Declínio das Religiões Tradicionais no Censo 2000." *Estudos Avançados* 18, no. 52 (2004): 17-28. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0103-40142004000300003>.



controversies, especially in relation to gender issues and the campaign against the legalization of abortion in the country. Although it functions as an option for many Catholics who perhaps would otherwise cease to identify as Catholics, the Catholic Charismatic Movement has not managed to staunch the flow of Catholics who increasingly swell the ranks of Brazil's Evangelical churches. Its most significant contribution seems to have been to strengthen the institution and make it more plural by incorporating and legitimizing a charismatic form of being Catholic into the Romanized and liberation model. In sum, the Catholic Church's responses to the crisis in Catholicism have not succeeded in renewing the tie of complementarity between the institution and the Catholic populace. Instead, its responses have strengthened the Church institutionally, making Catholicism increasingly a religion of the few. In other words, in the modern context in which the religious field is diversifying, the model of mass religion, once configured as a tradition, embedded in the culture and passed from generation to generation as a legacy left by the parents, is no longer plausible. This leads us to think that the crisis in Catholicism is less a question of the migration of its worshipers and more a problem of cultural transmission. Beyond Catholicism, a process of detraditionalization is under way, which requires people to make a reflexive choice in the face of the sheer diversity of options with which they are presented in a context of religious pluralism. And, in this setting, the Catholic Church ceases to be "the religion of everyone," becoming merely "the religion of the few." Of those who choose to engage in a community of faith, assuming an exclusive Catholic identity, faced with other religious groups competing with one another to save souls.

## CONCLUSION

The interpretation of the data proposed thus far in our discussion has associated the crisis in Catholicism with a broader process of cultural change that has hindered its transmission through the path of tradition. This is a crisis taking place in other countries with a Catholic tradition too. In the Brazilian context, though, it is imbued with certain particularities to which we have called attention. A comparison with Catholic Europe allows us to situate Brazil within the broader crisis in world Catholicism, at the same time as highlighting the specific nature of the crisis

faced by Brazilian Catholicism. Taking as a comparison the crisis experienced by Catholicism in France, we can recognize the same movement under way in both national contexts, a process that Alphonse Dupront called *detraditionalization*.<sup>24</sup> Philippe Portier, meanwhile, in a more recent article, conceives of a *desubstantialization* of Catholic civilization as a key to interpreting the transformations of the religious sphere in France. In the view of this author, it involves “a double crisis that simultaneously affects Catholicism’s capacity for internal attraction and its external influence.”<sup>25</sup> In the reading of Otávio Velho, these concepts acquire another meaning when applied to Brazilian Catholicism, where detraditionalization or desubstantialization indicate “less a break in tradition and more a reflexivity and consequent loss of any automatic alignment with tradition.”<sup>26</sup>

A glance at the figures from the census on religion in Brazil and France reveals points of convergence and divergence in the process of Catholic migration and the reconfiguration of the religious field in each country.<sup>27</sup> Among the shared elements, we can identify the accelerating decline in the number of people calling themselves Catholic. This allows us to speak of a crisis in the transmission of Catholicism at a cultural level in both national contexts, especially within families and associations that were important epicenters for the diffusion of Catholic values within France and in its missionized colonial territories. But while in France the crisis in Catholicism has coincided with the crisis in the Catholic Church, expressed in the reduction in priestly and religious vocations, in Brazil the crisis in Catholicism,

24 Alphonse Dupront, *Puissances et Latences de la Religion Catholique* (Gallimard, 1993).

25 Philippe Portier, “Les mutations,” 196.

26 Otávio Velho, “Globalização: Antropologia e Religião,” *Mana* 3, no. 1 (1997): 154, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-93131997000100005>.

27 In the 1950s and 1960s, the statistical data on religion in France is not very different from what we find in Brazil. In 1952, 90% of the French population identified as Catholic, while in 1981 the percentage had already fallen to 70%, and in 2008 to 42%. The differences appear first in relation to age: in France the older generations are clearly more Catholic than the younger generations, which is not observed in Brazil. Second in relation to where they live: French Catholics are more strongly present in the rural world, while in Brazil they are distributed more evenly between rural and urban regions. And third in relation to sex: in France there is a predominance of women among Catholics, unlike Brazil where men form the majority of the Catholic population. Philippe Portier, “Les Mutations du Religieux dans la France Contemporaine,” *Social Compass* 59, no. 2 (2012): 196, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768612440961>.



as we have shown above, has produced neither a reduction in vocations nor an institutional retraction of the Catholic Church in society.

Another difference worth mentioning is the destination of those who cease to declare themselves Catholic in the two countries. In France, those leaving Catholicism have swollen the ranks of those declaring themselves with no religion, now representing 50% of the population, while in Brazil they have migrated to Pentecostal religions (22%) with the numbers of those with no religion, though growing, representing just 8%.<sup>28</sup> In both national contexts, though, the category of those with no religion tends to designate people unaffiliated to any specific religion (unchurched) rather than those who are entirely secularized. Today many of these people are followers of a lay spirituality, which is disseminating concomitantly with the institutional deregulation of religions and the autonomy of subjects in relation to specific religious traditions.

The decline in the Catholic population in both contexts, albeit each with its own specificities, allows us to reiterate our interpretation that the crisis in Catholicism is an intrinsic part of a broader cultural process, one beyond the control of the Catholic Church over the loss of its congregations. But while the roots of the crisis are cultural, we need to recognize that “the relation between culture and religion,” as Sanchis reminds us, “it is not a simple or direct relation.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, while we can affirm that the reduction in Catholic numbers coincides with the institutional crisis of the Catholic Church in France, in Brazil such a direct coincidence is not observed. On the contrary, as we have aimed to show in this text, the Catholic Church in Brazil, as an institution, has expanded and become consolidated over recent decades, although it is simultaneously experiencing a crisis in its social and political recognition and legitimacy. It seems like we are facing, one more time, the bias and the epistemological inconsistency of Anglo-European interpretations to understand phenomenons on the global South.

28 In 1950, France had the same percentage as Brazil has today of people declaring themselves without any religion. Portier, “Les Mutations,” 201.

29 Sanchis, “O Repto Pentecostal,” 53.



As we have looked to demonstrate over the course of our discussion, the crisis in Catholicism is part of a much more extensive dilution of the conditions of reproduction and plausibility of the religious and cultural regime in which traditional Catholicism operated until the second half of the twentieth century. The new regime, which became established with the process of modernization, reconfigured the forms of religious belonging, as well as the ritual, aesthetic and moral practices, conferring individuals the right to opt personally for one path among the many that present themselves in a plural religious context. Catholic holism, which encompassed the diversity of religious manifestations, thus gave way to the emergence of a plural religious field in which differences became legitimate and desirable. Questions about whether and how to recognize such differences became focal points in disputes between religious actors and between them and other social fields, especially the political field.

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The Good Friday service at the Chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows (das Dores da Santa Virgem Maria) in Ouro Preto, Brazil, attracts a more local, low-key crowd than the one in the center of town. Photo by Thomas M. Landy.