



**MARKS ON THE TRAJECTORY AND IN THE PRESENT OF CATHOLIC
LIBERATION CHRISTIANITY**

**MARCAS NA TRAJETÓRIA E NO PRESENTE DO CATÓLICO CRISTIANISMO DA
LIBERTAÇÃO**

**HUELLAS EN LA TRAYECTORIA Y EN EL PRESENTE DEL CRISTIANISMO
CATÓLICO DE LIBERACIÓN**



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ABSTRACT: Liberation Christianity was constituted as a religious phenomenon with relevant political consequences in Latin America, between the 1960s and 80s, in the context of military regimes and democratic reopening processes, and this article focuses on the Brazilian case. Also encompassing Protestant initiatives, it is fundamentally Catholic, having gone through a reflux due to the positions of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, as well as the Pentecostal evangelical advance and the growth of neoliberal ideology. In face of Francis' pontificate, new facts occurred in order to rescue aspects of this left-wing politicized Catholicism, with emphasis on a certain economic proposition that generated a significant mobilization in Brazil. The article, based on bibliographic consultation and field research, addresses this trajectory of Liberation Christianity.

KEYWORDS: Liberation christianity. Catholicism. Pope Francis. Economy of Francis and Clare.

RESUMO: *O cristianismo da libertação constituiu-se como um fenômeno religioso com desdobramentos políticos relevantes na América Latina, entre as décadas de 1960 e 80, no contexto de regimes militares e processos de reabertura democrática, sendo que este artigo enfoca o caso brasileiro. Abarcando também iniciativas protestantes, ele é fundamentalmente católico, tendo passado por um refluxo devido a posicionamentos dos papas João Paulo II e Bento XVI, assim como o avanço evangélico pentecostal e o crescimento do ideário neoliberal. Em face do pontificado de Francisco fatos novos ocorreram de modo a resgatar aspectos desse catolicismo politizado de esquerda, com destaque para determinada proposição econômica que gerou uma significativa mobilização no Brasil. O artigo, elaborado com base em consulta bibliográfica e pesquisa de campo, aborda essa trajetória do cristianismo da libertação.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Cristianismo da libertação. Catolicismo. Papa Francisco. Economia de Francisco e Clara.*

RESUMEN: *El cristianismo de liberación se constituyó como un fenómeno religioso con desarrollos políticos relevantes en América Latina, entre las décadas de 1960 y 1980, en el contexto de regímenes militares y procesos de reapertura democrática, y este artículo se centra en el caso brasileño. Englobando también iniciativas protestantes, es fundamentalmente católica, habiendo pasado por un reflujo debido a las posiciones de los papas Juan Pablo II y Benedicto XVI, así como al avance evangélico pentecostal y al crecimiento de la ideología neoliberal. Frente al pontificado de Francisco, ocurrieron nuevos hechos para rescatar aspectos de ese catolicismo politizado de izquierda, con énfasis en cierta propuesta económica que generó una importante movilización en Brasil. El artículo, basado en consulta bibliográfica e investigación de campo, aborda esta trayectoria del cristianismo de liberación.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Cristianismo de liberación. Catolicismo. Papa Francisco. Economía de Francisco y Clara.*

Introduction

In terms of the confluence between religion and politics in Brazil, before the Pentecostal emergence in the mid-1980s (PIERUCCI, 1989; FRESTON, 1993), another religious phenomenon had an impact and unfolded within Catholicism, namely the Catholic segment influenced by Liberation Theology and made up of the Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBs) and social pastorals (MAINWARING, 1989; DOIMO, 1995). This was the result of a process that preceded, but was given a significant boost by the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent appreciation of the laity in the 1960s, as well as the engagement of politicized young Catholics in France and Latin America, the emergence of biblical reflection groups and the strengthening of the Basic Education movements (MEB - Portuguese initials) and Catholic Action in its variations: student and worker (SOUZA, 1984; MACEDO, 1986; TEIXEIRA, 1988; SCHERER-WARREN, 1990; LÖWY; GARCÍA-RUIZ, 1997; WANDERLEY, 2007). This phenomenon was characterized not only by the actions of Catholics, but also by adherents of historic Protestantism, largely identified with the so-called ecumenical movement (ALTMAN, 1994). Because of these characteristics, which go beyond Catholic boundaries, this whole ensemble has been called liberation Christianity by sociologist Michael Löwy (2000; 2016).

Liberation Christianity expanded between the 1960s and 1980s, playing a prominent role in the country in the context of the reopening of democracy. This reopening began at the end of the 1970s and began to close with the election of the Constituent Assembly in 1986, which, coincidentally, was also the year that marked the effective entry of Pentecostal evangelicals into national electoral disputes (PIERUCCI, 1989; FRESTON, 1993). As a result of this phenomenon, specifically in the Catholic milieu, left-wing political expressions demanding citizens' rights gained strength in subsequent decades.

It can therefore be seen that liberation Christianity had a significant influence on a portion of Brazilian society, with important developments through the formation of social movements, civil society organizations and one of the largest left-wing political parties in the world: the Workers' Party (PT). Liberation Christianity went through an intense reflux between the last decade of the 20th century and the first two decades of the following century. The causes and main characteristics of this process will be discussed later in this article. For now, it's worth pointing out that something new and important in world Catholicism occurred with the beginning of Francis' pontificate in 2013, generating events that are also reverberating in Brazil and raising indications that perhaps a new cycle has begun.

Although liberation Christianity is obviously not over, the fact is that it has suffered a significant weakening, with the period of Pope Francis not signifying a strong revival, per se, but rather, and in some way, a new phase in its history.

The article discusses the key events in the trajectory of liberation Christianity, its birth, development, great weakening and the current moment in Brazil in the face of Francis' work.

Origin and development of liberation Christianity

It is often said that the Second Vatican Council - the main Catholic event of the 20th century, which took place between 1962 and 1965 - marked the beginning of a process of opening and encouraging the church to involve lay people in its own organizations (PRANDI; SANTOS, 2015). This planted the seeds of both liberation Christianity and the politically conservative Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement (PRANDI, 1997).

Bible circles, which emerged in the countryside and in the city, would form the CEBs in that decade, constituting a "new way of being church", characterized by a greater appreciation of lay pastoral agents, especially women, and by constant opposition to social inequality. It sought to combine Marxist aspects with a contextualized and critical reading of the Bible. The reference of the educator Paulo Freire was indeed important, especially his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and the application of his pedagogical methodology, similar to what happened in the context of the Basic Education Movement - MEB (BRANDÃO, 1980; WANDERLEY, 1984). We should also consider the relevant youth developments of Catholic Action that took place in the country, mainly influenced by French Catholic youth: the Catholic Workers' Youth (JOC) and the Catholic University Youth (JUC) (SOUZA, 2006).

Against the backdrop of the military regime and through biblical studies, the CEBs drew an analogy between Ancient Egypt, the oppressor of the captive Hebrew people, and the authoritarian Brazilian government and its relationship with the poor (MESTERS, 1986). Mobilization in the countryside, in line with rural unions, and in the city, demanding urban facilities and against the carestia - as inflation was called - gave rise to popular movements. The development of social pastoral work was underway.

In view of the religious interpretation of liberation Christianity in relation to the dictatorship in force at the time, left-wing activists from the student movement and political parties came to find a certain refuge in the church for their militant practice, also contributing to a certain intellectualization of this milieu (BEOZZO, 1984). This was also happening in other

Latin American countries, which were also marked by their respective military regimes (GOTAY, 1985). In Brazil, the cardinals Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, from São Paulo, and Dom Hélder Câmara, from Recife and Olinda, stood out in confronting the generals and seeking to protect militants - also nuns and priests - from torture and extermination, also drawing some international attention to the fact (MAINWARING, 1989; SERBIN, 2001).

The hardening of the regime in Brazil, starting with Institutional Act n. 5 in 1968, coincided with the holding of the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellín, Colombia, in the same year, when the continental church made an important shift, taking on the pastoral proposal of spreading the CEBs and the perspective of Liberation Theology, through the motto of the "Option for the Poor". There was some institutional encouragement for clerics to question authoritarian governments and, in some cases, to confront them to the extreme, even taking part in guerrilla warfare, being tortured and murdered, even though they were not involved in the armed struggle (LÖWY, 2000; TAMAIO, 2018).

There is another historical coincidence involving Brazil and Latin American Catholicism. The milestone in the reopening of democracy in the country was the Amnesty Law in 1979, which allowed the return of political exiles who had been abroad, among them the former JUC and Popular Action (AP) militant Herbert de Souza, the sociologist Betinho, sung in the iconic song of that period "*O bêbado e o equilibrista*" (1979), by Aldir Blac (NAKANO; ROIMAN, 2001). In the same year, the second meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) took place - after its creation in 1955 in Rio de Janeiro, under the leadership of Dom Manuel Lerraín, the Chilean bishop of Talca, and Dom Hélder Câmara. The event - which took place in the Mexican city of Puebla during the pontificate of John Paul II, who acted as a kind of intermediary between the interests of the Roman Curia and the Latin American episcopate - was not as critical of the continental status quo as the 1968 event had been, although it did confirm the adherence of the region's bishops to liberation Christianity (PASSOS, 2019).

A year earlier, in Brazil, the massive strikes of the ABC Paulista Metalworkers' Union had erupted under the leadership of Luiz Inácio da Silva, Lula, initiating the so-called new unionism, with the support of the then bishop of São Bernardo do Campo, Dom Claudio Hummes, and the 'strike fund', organized in parishes for union members with suspended salaries. This socio-political phenomenon, which was joined by more pastoral workers, gained momentum and led to the creation of the PT in 1980 and the Workers' Union Center (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores* - CUT) in 1983 (RODRIGUES, 1988; MARTINS, 1994; SECCO, 2011).

In the peasantry, the creation of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT - Portuguese initials) in 1975 - with the decisive participation of the bishop of the Diocese of Goiás, Dom Tomás Balduino, and Dom Pedro Casaldáliga, from the Mato Grosso prelature of São Félix do Araguaia - would contribute to the strengthening of rural trade unionism. In 1984, the largest social movement in the country, the Landless Rural Workers (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* - MST), emerged in the interior of Paraná (PAIVA, 1985; MENEZES NETO, 2007; PY; PEDLWSKY, 2018). It can therefore be seen that liberation Christianity had important effects in both urban and rural areas, with significant political consequences.

The reflux experienced

Although most of Latin America's military dictatorships were already in decline, the continental bishops' conference in 1979 was attended by John Paul II, in his second year of pontificate, something that significantly contributed to making it more moderate than the previous one, held a decade earlier in Colombia. Four years after the event in Puebla, the conservative Polish pope visited Nicaragua and reprimanded Father Ernesto Cardenal (on his knees), who was then Minister of Culture in the government he had helped to form after the Sandinista Revolution, which also took place in 1979 and had the significant participation of militants of liberation Catholicism (CABESTRERO, 1983). This act, permeated with symbolism, marked what would become the papacy of Karol Wojtyła.

In the 1980s, John Paul II became very close to US President Ronald Reagan in his crusade against governments aligned with the Soviet Union, something that culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent disintegration of the European socialist bloc (ESCURRA, 1984; DELLA CAVA, 1985). That same year, the pope dealt a significant blow to the progressive wing of the Church in Brazil by reducing the Archdiocese of São Paulo, removing from it large areas of the eastern and southern zones of São Paulo, where Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns had done significant work with CEBs and social pastoral work (CARVALHO, 2013).

Another emblematic event in this regard, three years later, was the punishment imposed by the then cardinal and prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the German Josef Ratzinger, on the Franciscan friar Leonardo Boff, considered together with the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez to be the two main liberation theologians (BOFF, 1981; GUTIERREZ, 1983). In 1984, Boff was banned from giving lectures and publishing, making him the most

strident case among several theologians punished by John Paul II's right-hand man (LACERDA, 2009; LIBANIO, 1983).

The Polish pontiff carried out his project of "conservative restoration" of the world church (DELLA CAVA, 1985), gradually appointing very traditionalist bishops to replace those who had taken part in the Second Vatican Council, as well as imposing much more conservative outlines on the seminary training of new priests. The reopening of democracy in Brazil meant that the church ceased to be a place where left-wing militants were welcomed, as they were now predominantly engaged in trade unions, parties, social movements and non-governmental organizations. On the other hand, the collapse of the European socialist bloc, concomitant with the worldwide strengthening of neoliberalism, contributed to the weakening of left-wing thinking, including within the framework of liberation Christianity. And on the national religious scene, Pentecostalism was already on the rise, accompanied by the conservative Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) movement and a certain reflux of the CEBs (PRANDI; SOUZA, 1996).

Pentecostal evangelicals entered the political-party scene, it is worth remembering, after the election of the Constituent Assembly in 1986, led by the Assembly of God (AD - Portuguese initials) and driven by the slogan: "Brother votes for brother" (SYLVESTRE, 1986; FRESTON, 1993). Other churches would have such a political commitment, especially the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD - Portuguese initials), which, along with other neo-Pentecostal denominations, in addition to the AD and others, would have a strong television presence in later years, all of which contributed to the strengthening of evangelicalism and the great growth of its flock in the country. For its part, the Catholic Church tried to cope with this reality by endorsing and encouraging the CCR, which had come to Brazil from the United States in the early 1970s and achieved full expansion two decades later (PRANDI, 1997). Sociologically, the charismatic movement was a Catholic search for a double response, on the one hand opposing the Pentecostal advance and, on the other, opposing the CEBs (PRANDI; SOUZA, 1996; ORO, 1996).

Within charismatic Catholicism, another form of ecclesial organization called the Community of Covenant and Life has emerged. *Canção Nova*, in the interior of São Paulo and led by one of the pioneers of the CCR in the country, Father Jonas Abib, is the largest of these, and has its own television and radio network. Other Catholic television stations with strong charismatic traits have also emerged in the state of São Paulo: *Rede Vida de Televisão* and *Século 21*, the latter led by another initiator of the CCR in Brazil, the American Jesuit priest

Eduardo Dougherty (CARRANZA; MARIZ; CAMURÇA, 2009; CARRANZA, 2011). And still in this milieu, characterized by the confluence of Catholic charismaticism and TV, the so-called singing priests emerged, with Marcelo Rossi attracting the most attention as the church's quest to confront the Pentecostal advance, being somewhat opposed to liberation Christianity (SOUZA, 2005), given its depoliticization and emphasis on the emotional experience of individuals, rather than social issues, especially inequality.

When Joseph Ratzinger - who became Benedict XVI and succeeded John Paul II - came to Brazil in 2007, he found the country's liberation Christianity already quite weakened. Even so, he did not agree to meet the then popular Father Rossi. In this way, the German pope emphasized his very conservative position, also in relation to the media innovations that stem from charismatic Catholicism.

Despite the clearly contrary pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, liberation Catholicism persisted and managed to maintain a certain influence over the CNBB, especially in relation to the national bishops' organization's positions criticizing the liberal economic policies of governments, which were much more in the interests of businessmen than workers. At the grassroots level in dioceses and parishes, however, this influence has greatly diminished, largely due to the replacement of bishops and priests, after deaths and retirements, by more conservative ones.

Francis and a certain rescue

As we know, in 2012 Benedict XVI faced a major crisis in church governance, characterized by sexual scandals (with a focus on pedophilia) and, above all, financial scandals involving the Institute for Works of Religion (IOR - Portuguese initials), known as the Vatican Bank (DALAI; DANTAS, 2012), which led, on 28 February 2013, to the resignation of a pope again after six centuries. In the conclave that ended on 13 March of that year, the cardinal from Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, became pontiff, the first Latin American and Jesuit to be elected pope. By taking on the name Francis, in homage to the saint of Assisi, and having expressive gestures and acts to match², the Argentinian was beginning a new phase, after two consecutive pontificates, in the history of the Roman institution, which had been rather clerical and conservative.

² This is mainly due to the simplified ritual through which he chose to be introduced to the post, as well as the fact that he lives in modest accommodation in the Vatican, eats meals in the refectory with other people and uses a popular car to get around.

After the unprecedented simplicity that characterized the enthronement ritual, Pope Francis' first expressive gesture was a celebration on 8 July 2013 on the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa denouncing the plight of African refugees seeking Europe, some of whom were shipwrecked (PIQUÉ, 2014). The following year, the pontiff received socialist political leaders in audience, including from the Party of the European Left, when it was decided to start a process of dialog between Marxists and Catholics, something that took the form of several meetings, culminating in a summer course held in 2018 in Greece (LÖWY, 2020).

Still on the level of international political positioning of a progressive nature, Francis brokered negotiations between Cuba and the United States in September 2015, when the latter was still governed by Barack Obama and was visited by the pontiff after passing through the Caribbean island³. In the US elections the following year, while the ultra-right-wing candidate who would win them, Donald Trump, had as his main campaign banner the intention of erecting an anti-immigration wall between his country and Mexico, the Argentine pope advocated forming "bridges" between different nations and individuals⁴. In July 2015, Francis was received in Bolivia by then president Evo Morales at the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements, where he gave an eloquent speech highlighting the contradictions of capitalism in its neoliberal phase⁵. His visits to Bolivia and Cuba, as well as the publication, in May, of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* - in which he criticized capitalism, although he did not name it, preferring to call it the "current system", reverberating statements from the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, from 2013 - led the pontiff to be called a "Marxist" by American right-wing extremists (NEVES, 2016; COELHO, 2018). It should be said that Bergoglio has been guided, since his time as cardinal in Buenos Aires (1997; 2013), by the similar, but non-Marxist, Theology of the People, promoted by the theologian, also Jesuit and Argentinian, Juan Carlos Scannone (2019).

In strictly pastoral terms, the former cardinal of Buenos Aires has taken important steps in line with liberation Christianity. In 2013, he received the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez at the Vatican, a pioneer in the dissemination of this libertarian theological strand. Five years later, he canonized Dom Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran archbishop executed in 1980 by his country's military while celebrating Mass (BINGEMER, 2012). Another important

³ Available: https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/internacional/2015/09/24/interna_internacional,691546/papa-francisco-faz-discurso-historico-no-congresso-dos-estados-unidos.shtml. Access: 10 Mar. 2022

⁴ Available: https://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/internacional/2015/09/24/interna_internacional,691546/papa-francisco-faz-discurso-historico-no-congresso-dos-estados-unidos.shtml. Access: 05 Oct. 2020.

⁵ Available: <https://www.cnb.org.br/confira-a-integra-do-discurso-do-papa-francisco-no-encontro-mundial-dos-movimentos-populares/>. Access: 30 Sept. 2020.

canonization was that of Pope John XXIII, which Bergoglio diplomatically carried out in 2014 together with that of John Paul II. Four years later, Francis led the Synod on the Amazon at the Vatican, focusing on the issues of this continental biome and the shortage of priests in the region, valuing the role of the laity, and he promoted and valued the wide range of entities that make up the Pan-Amazon Ecclesial Network - REPAM (HUMMES, 2019; SILVEIRA; PY; REIS, 2019).

On 1 May 2019, the symbolic Labor Day, the Argentine pope started something new by convening a world meeting in Assisi, Italy, in March, bringing together young people, activists and renowned intellectuals⁶ to rethink the planet's economic development, in an attempt to tackle inequality and global warming. The event, which pays homage to the medieval saint and is called the Economy of Francis (EoF), will take place remotely in November 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Between the 22 and 24 September 2022, the event finally took place in person in the Italian city, with the participation of 2,000 young people from different countries, including 200 Brazilians, some of whom work in Catholic social ministries. In his speech on the closing day, sealing the "Pact of Assisi", Pope Francis, in addition to drawing attention to the climate issue and the need for not superficial but structural changes, made critical mention of capitalism twice:

Well, the first market economy was born in 13th century Europe, in daily contact with the Franciscan friars, who were friends of those first merchants. Undoubtedly, this economy created wealth, but it did not despise poverty. Creating wealth without despising poverty (...) Finally, there is a spiritual unsustainability to our capitalism. The human being, created in the image and likeness of God, before being a seeker of goods, is a seeker of meaning (...) Our capitalism, on the other hand, wants to help the poor but does not esteem them, does not understand the paradoxical beatitude: "Blessed are the poor" (cf. *Lc* 6, 20, our translation)⁷.

In Brazil, this pontifical call, initially made in 2019, generated a significant mobilization of young people, not only Catholics, but also pastoral workers, university professors, activists from social movements and entities focused on self-managed cooperatives and agroecology. Promoting meetings in Catholic dioceses and universities, albeit with ecumenical characteristics, this mobilization took on the name of the Brazilian Articulation for the Economy of Francis and Clare (ABEFC - Portuguese initials), paying homage to the saintly

⁶ In particular, the Indian Amartya Sen, professor of economics at Harvard University, and the Bengali economist and winner of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, Muhammad Yunus.

⁷ Available: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/pt/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220924-visita-assisi.html>. Access: 14 Oct. 2022.

collaborator of Francis of Assisi and demanding gender parity, combined with a broader idea of "balance":

In walking together, women and men are seeking new paradigms: from competition to collaboration; from selfishness to generosity; from exploitation to sustainability; from accumulation to distribution; from imbalance in relations between people and countries to balance, with fair trade and solidarity; from unbridled consumption to responsible consumption; from greed to altruism (...) spirituality must be contemplated in the Economy of Francis and Clare, starting from the example set by the young man from Assisi, who stripped himself of material goods to enrich himself spiritually⁸ (our translation).

The ABEFC has adopted ten principles that should guide its actions in order to: a) an economy at the service of life; b) an economy that considers spirituality as a dimension that fosters affection and solidarity; c) a circular and integrated economy that eliminates habits of consuming non-renewable energy and values sustainable forms of energy; d) an economy based on healthy food and family farming that protects the Rights of Nature; e) an economy that avoids the commodification of common goods such as education and health; g) a less unequal global economy that rediscusses international debts with more social and ecological taxation; h) an economy against the minimal state, for a state that is a structure that promotes a balance between equality and freedom; i) an economy that values collectives, communities, politically minority and socially underprivileged groups; j) a universal labor economy that avoids the precariousness of workers.⁹

In addition to the pursuit of gender parity, another hallmark of the ABEFC is anti-capitalist activism. This was particularly the result of a note of repudiation by the Brazilian Articulation, in relation to the Council for Inclusive Capitalism, launched on 8 December 2020 by 27 major investors and businessmen from multinational corporations, in partnership with the Vatican, through the intermediation of Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Tuskon, head of the **Dicastery for Integral Human Development Service, the same department of the church government in charge of organizing the EoF**¹⁰. Although the pontiff gave his consent to the African bishop's corporate articulation and the economist and scientific director of the EoF, Luigino

⁸ Available: <http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/78-noticias/594766-carta-de-clara-e-francisco-direto-do-brasil-para-o-encontro-mundial-em-assis>. Access: 18 July 2020.

⁹ Available: <http://economiadefranciscoeclara.com.br/10-principios-da-economia-de-francisco-e-clara/>. Access: 25 Abr. 2021.

¹⁰ Available: <https://www.ihu.unisinos.br/sobre-o-ihu/78-noticias/605742-sobre-o-lancamento-do-conselho-para-o-capitalismo-inclusivo-com-o-vaticano-nota-da-articulacao-brasileira-pela-economia-de-francisco-e-clara>. Access: 22 Dec. 2020.

Bruni, has written in favour of what he calls "community capitalism" (BRUNI, 2020), the Brazilian mobilization is marked by a left-wing political stance against capitalism, calling for a society organized on the basis of other parameters (BETTO, 2019; OLIVEIRA, 2020; SOUZA, 2020). The ABEFC's position is therefore consistent with the stance of the Argentinian pontiff, in terms of solidarity with the poorest and questioning the economic system that marginalizes them, which are hallmarks of liberation Christianity.

Within this Brazilian network, formed at the call of Francis, there is a commitment not only from pastoral workers, but also from militants from social movements¹¹, students and university professors, as well as politicians, especially the former senator and current São Paulo state deputy for the PT, Eduardo Suplicy, with his banner of basic income (SUPLICY, 2020). Having prepared specific material for the 2022 Fraternity Campaign on the theme of education, the ABEFC has the backing of the CNBB, whose leaders have already met with its coordination and the participation of pastoral agents, including a representative of the important Brazilian Caritas organization. Among the clergy, the auxiliary bishop of Belo Horizonte, president of the CNBB's Episcopal Pastoral Commission for Communication and former rector of the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais, Dom Joaquim Mol, auxiliary bishop of Belo Horizonte, stands out in terms of this support, as does Dom Vicente de Paulo Ferreira, also auxiliary bishop of the same archdiocese. From PUC Minas, we are trying to link up with other Catholic universities by carrying out activities on the subject, with a view to introducing changes to the syllabuses of economics courses and including subjects on the Economy of Francis in the curriculum of other courses.

If we add the mobilization for the Economy of Francisco and Clara to the continuity of activities and events characterized by the presence of so-called progressive pastoral agents, such as the Brazilian Social Week (in its 6th edition), the Cry of the Excluded (28th edition) and the Interecclesial Meeting of CEBs (15th edition), we can see a certain resilience in Catholic liberation Christianity.

¹¹ Some of the organizations representing these movements stand out: National Articulation of Agroecology (*Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia* - ANA), Brazilian Solidarity Economy Forum (*Fórum Brasileiro de Economia Solidária* - FBES), Brazilian Network of Community Banks, Brazilian Semi-arid Articulation (*Articulação Semiárido Brasileiro* - ASA), National Union of Recyclable Waste Collectors (*União Nacional das Catadoras e Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis* - Unicatadores), Center for Cooperatives and Solidarity Enterprises (*Central de Cooperativas e Empreendimentos Solidários* - Unisol Brasil), National Union of Family Farming Cooperatives (*União Nacional das Cooperativas da Agricultura Familiar* - Unicafe) and the Confederation of Agrarian Reform Cooperatives of Brazil (*Confederação das Cooperativas de Reforma Agrária do Brasil* - Concrab-MST).

Final considerations

Latin American Catholicism underwent significant changes from the 1960s onwards with the formation and development of liberation Christianity, something that was significantly present in national struggles against military regimes and even in a revolutionary process, with the emergence of a new government in the case of Nicaragua. Specifically in Brazil, liberation Catholicism, as we have seen, was very important in the emergence of the new trade unionism, the PT and the MST, as well as other smaller social movements and NGOs, some of which were national in scope, such as the Federation of Organizations for Social and Educational Assistance - FASE (SOUZA, 2013). It was, as is well known, an important space for welcoming left-wing party and trade union activists persecuted by the military dictatorship and for training prominent social activists¹². Mostly between the 1990s and 2000s, it also spawned a set of economic initiatives based on the principle of self-management - community groups for collective production - with the leading role of *Cáritas Brasileira* and called the solidarity economy (SOUZA, 2013).

From the second half of the 1980s onwards, we can see that there was a significant change in the national scenario, also in terms of religion, because after the reopening of democracy, the church lost some of its relevance in political terms, experiencing a certain emptying of pastoral agents who became activists in movements, unions, parties and NGOs. On the other hand, Pentecostal evangelicals actively entered party politics, and the proselytizing of this religious segment only increased with the development of neo-Pentecostalism and the activities of its denominations, both in the political arena and in the electronic media (MARIANO, 1999; BAPTISTA, 2009). Under the very conservative pontificate of John Paul II, there was a great fight against liberation Christianity and support, in several dioceses, for its main opponent in the Brazilian ecclesial milieu: the CCR movement.

Pope Benedict XVI reinforced the church's worldwide institutional position in opposition to liberation Christianity, but without giving much encouragement to the Catholic charismatic movement, and even less to the so-called singing priests. This pontiff made a point of showing his unconcern about Catholic competition with evangelical denominations, opting in practice for a church that was focused on itself. Faced with a serious ecclesial crisis, Ratzinger surprisingly resigned in 2013, which led to a significant change in the following

¹² Among the activists, I would draw attention to the former ministers of the Lula and Dilma Rousseff governments: Patrus Ananias (Social Development) and Gilberto Carvalho (General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic). It's worth noting that the latter, even without a government post, continues to work closely with President Lula, including in dialogue with religious leaders, not just Catholics.

conclave, when Bergoglio became Pope Francis. Since then, Catholicism dictated by the Vatican has experienced pontifical acts considered progressive, in terms of sexual and family morality, with respectful and even evaluative expressions towards homosexuals and divorced people; international politics, especially through solidarity with Cuba and Bolivia; and liberation Catholicism, through dialogue with its theologians and the emblematic canonization of Oscar Romero.

In Brazil, some of Francis' political influence can be seen in the fact that he emphatically opposed Jair Bolsonaro on environmental issues at the 75th General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) and at the Amazon Synod in 2019, but especially when he received Lula, then recently released from prison, at the Vatican, ostentatiously blessing him, according to the images of the meeting, something that helped re-establish the PT leader's image, contributing in some way to his successful presidential campaign in 2022 against the right-wing extremist. From a pastoral point of view, there is still doubt about the degree of influence of the Argentine pope on the parish bases, although the CNBB and collectives of priests and bishops have spoken out in strong public letters against Bolsonaro's government (SOUZA; BATISTA, 2021).

The most visible demonstration of Francis' influence in Brazil can be seen in the mobilization around his proposal to rethink planetary economic development using environmental parameters. The ABEFC has held face-to-face and remote events with large audiences and the participation of nuns, clerics (including CNBB leaders), leaders of other religious strands¹³, intellectuals, representatives of social movements and exponents of Liberation Theology, especially Leonardo Boff, and it has seen reasonable growth in the three years since it was formed. With its proclaimed anti-capitalist militancy and demands for relevant public policies, this network is the most recent significant outgrowth of liberation Christianity.

Although there has been a notable reflux since the 1990s (PRANDI; SOUZA, 1996), it can be seen that liberation Christianity has left a deep mark on religious congregations, social ministries and the CNBB itself, which usually has strong positions on the country's socio-economic and political scenario. The extent of its reach and power of influence in Brazilian society has diminished in the face of the great Pentecostal evangelical advance, as well as the growth of conservative Catholic features, especially the CCR and, above all, the great advance of the so-called neoliberal political culture, which values individual and consumer aspects much

¹³ The highlight was Lutheran pastor Romi Bencke, general secretary of the National Council of Christian Churches - CONIC.

more than community and associative ones. In this context, the emergence of Pope Francis, with his relevant progressive initiatives, has brought new airs, with emphasis on the mobilization formed with a view to seeking socio-economic changes, with reference to the saints of Assisi.

It can therefore be seen that the Economy of Francis and Clare is an increasingly important part of liberation Christianity, a phenomenon which, although it has weakened in the last three decades, continues to have a certain relevance on the national religious and political scene.

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