

**ZILDA ARNS, A MILITANT INTELLECTUAL AND HER RELATIONSHIP WITH  
PASTORAL DA CRIANÇA AND POPULAR EDUCATION**

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POPULAR Y LA PASTORAL DA CRIANÇA**



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**ABSTRACT:** The paper aims to present the doctor Zilda Arns as an intellectual woman and her relationship with the Pastoral da Criança and Popular Education. Therefore, the life trajectory of Zilda Arns will be presented, articulated to the historical context of the Pastoral da Criança and Popular Education. The guiding question of the research is: What is the relationship of the intellectual Zilda Arns with the Pastoral da Criança and Popular Education? The theoretical contribution is centered on Paulo Freire (1967; 1970; 1982; 1989; 2005; 2007), Zilda Arns (1996; 2003; 2000; 2010), Brandão (1984; 2005), Orlando (2021), Sapiro (2012), Batalha (2003), and Codini (2014). The method used for the development of the research was phenomenological hermeneutics, with a qualitative approach. The results showed that Zilda Arns was a militant intellectual, who brought her worldview closer to the thinking of Paulo Freire, practical theorist of Popular Education, and thus implemented the Pastoral da Criança, through dialogue and conscientization.

**KEYWORDS:** Zilda Arns. Pastoral da Criança. Popular Education. Paulo Freire.

**RESUMO:** O artigo objetiva apresentar a médica Zilda Arns como mulher intelectual e sua relação com a Pastoral da Criança e a Educação Popular. Para tal compilação, será apresentada a trajetória de vida de Zilda Arns articulada ao contexto histórico da Pastoral da Criança e da Educação Popular. A pergunta norteadora da pesquisa é: Qual a relação da intelectual Zilda Arns com a Pastoral da Criança e a Educação Popular? O aporte teórico está centrado em Paulo Freire (1967; 1970; 1982; 1989; 2005; 2007), Zilda Arns (1996; 2003; 2000; 2010), Brandão (1984; 2005), Orlando (2021), Sapiro (2012) e Batalha (2003). O método utilizado para o desenvolvimento do estudo foi a hermenêutica fenomenológica, com abordagem qualitativa. Os resultados apontaram que Zilda Arns foi uma intelectual militante, que aproximou sua visão de mundo ao pensamento de Paulo Freire, teórico prático da Educação Popular, e assim implementou a Pastoral da Criança, por meio do diálogo e conscientização.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Zilda Arns. Pastoral da Criança. Educação Popular. Paulo Freire.

**RESUMEN:** El artículo tiene como objetivo presentar a la doctora Zilda Arns como mujer intelectual y su relación con la Pastoral da Criança y la Educación Popular. Para ello, se presentará la trayectoria de vida de Zilda Arns, articulado al contexto histórico de la Pastoral da Criança y de la Educación Popular. La pregunta guía de la investigación es: ¿Cuál es la relación de la intelectual Zilda Arns con la Pastoral da Criança y la Educación Popular? La contribución teórica se centra en Paulo Freire (1967; 1970; 1982; 1989; 2005; 2007), Zilda Arns (1996; 2003; 2000; 2010), Brandão (1984; 2005), Orlando (2021), Sapiro (2012), Batalha (2003) y Codini (2014). El método utilizado para el desarrollo de la investigación fue la hermenêutica fenomenológica, con un enfoque cualitativo. Los resultados mostraron que Zilda Arns fue una intelectual militante, que acercó su cosmovisión al pensamiento de Paulo Freire, teórico práctico de la Educación Popular, y así implementó la Pastoral da Criança a través del diálogo y la concienciantización.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Zilda Arns. Pastoral da Criança. Educación Popular. Paulo Freire.

## Introduction

Zilda Arns Neumann (1934-2010) was a woman who marked the history of her generation through her work, determination, intellectuality and love for others. Progressive Christian, doctor, founded and coordinated Pastoral da Criança, which saved thousands of lives from child malnutrition in Brazil and other countries in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Caribbean.

Zilda Arns rolled up her sleeves and, inspired by Paulo Freire's pedagogy, first found the human resources capable of mobilizing thousands of people in favor of the drastic reduction in infant mortality: mothers and fathers of children from zero to six years of age, assisted by Pastoral, transformed into multiplying agents (Betto, 2010, p. 1, our translation).

For public health doctor and pediatrician Zilda Arns, education is transformative, a response to the cries of those in need, an expression of solidarity with everyone, especially the marginalized and forgotten. This was evident in all her letters written to the Pastoral da Criança newspapers and in all the Pastoral's actions (Arns, 2010, p. 105-106). “[...] I, in the practice of medicine, did much more for education to prevent illnesses than cures and rehabilitations” (Neumann, 2003, p. 40, our translation).

Pastoral da Criança is a Social Action Organization of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), which is part of the Catholic Church. For society, a third sector body<sup>4</sup> that has as one of its fundamental objectives the democratization of knowledge through basic health, nutrition, education, citizenship and spirituality actions in an ecumenical way. The importance of education within this process is highlighted. This is treated in a special way at the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965). For this, education must guide towards solidarity and with the aim of better preparing people to act in economic, political and social life in a more humane way.

However, one cannot deal with Pastoral da Criança without addressing Popular Education, which had educator Paulo Freire as one of the most important global disseminators of this segment. For the educator, the Churches in Latin America have an educational role. “Churches, in fact, do not exist, as abstract entities, they are made up of 'situated' women and

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<sup>4</sup> Third Sector is the name adopted to designate institutions that are neither part of the State nor the market. As they do not belong to the public sector or the private sector, they would be in a third sector, which corresponds to the field of organized civil society (Paraná, 2023).

men, conditioned by a concrete, economic, political, social and cultural reality” (Freire, 2007, p. 123, our translation).

Popular Education precedes Pastoral da Criança and was developed in a context of cultural and political effervescence. It was born from Freire's proposal for an education that liberates, fights in defense of life, and does not collude with oppressors and social injustices. Inserted in a historical context, it fights to transform it, with a view to promoting justice, becoming a space of fraternity, peace and dignity for all. It provides an education in and for freedom, through which each human being is capable of recognizing themselves as a subject of knowledge and history without discrimination, whether man, woman, rich or poor. Everyone must make a commitment to the oppressed, not only with assistance and palliative programs, but also to ensure that they exercise their citizenship to the fullest.

Thus, this article aims to present the doctor Zilda Arns as an organic intellectual woman, in the Gramscian sense (Gramsci, 1975), and her relationship with the Pastoral da Criança and Popular Education. To this end, Zilda Arns' life trajectory will be presented in conjunction with the historical context of Pastoral da Criança and Popular Education, as well as her relationship with the Church, her philosophical assumptions, her pedagogical tendencies and the socio-political and economic contexts of Brazil.

The research method used to reveal the intellectual Zilda Arns was phenomenological hermeneutics with a qualitative approach, which carries in its baggage a Freirean view of the world, the subject and the citizen of/with the world. It is important to emphasize that this is not a standard or the only approach available, but it is a way of reaching the essence without losing sight of the phenomenon and all the elements associated with it.

### **Zilda Arns: Life trajectory**

Zilda Arns Neumann was born in the municipality of Forquilha, state of Santa Catarina, on August 25, 1934. She was the daughter of Gabriel Arns and Helene Steiner, farmers descended from immigrants from Germany, who had 16 children. Of these, Zilda was the thirteenth. In her childhood and youth, she

[...] barely knew that there was a government, that the school, the public library, the church and the houses of the priest and nuns were built by the community and that there was very intense community activity. We had a very

strong family experience. Every night we got together to pray and sing in three, four voices (Interview..., 1998, our translation).

With the conviction that her purpose was to dedicate herself to health, she chose to study Medicine, despite going against the wishes of her father, Gabriel Arns, who had little formal education, but still supported her despite not considering a career in medicine suitable for women. Zilda completed her fundamental studies (1st to 4th year) in Forquilha - SC, high school and secondary school in Curitiba, at the Sagrado Coração school. In 1953, at the age of 19, she was approved in the exams and began studying medicine at the Federal University of Paraná (UFPR), where a professor failed her in the first year, even though she was one of the first in her class, because he thought it was absurd for a woman to study medicine – there were six women and 143 men in the room – but to his surprise, Zilda became a pediatrician just like him. She knew how to conquer her space in an environment mostly dominated by men. Women of her generation “aware of their social place, had to create their own rules to insert themselves in power games” (Orlando, 2021, p. 51, our translation).

Zilda, since she was a student, was involved with social causes. In her first year of college, she began taking care of children under one year old as a volunteer, a job that left her impressed by the large number of children hospitalized with easily preventable illnesses, such as diarrhea and dehydration.

From a young age, Zilda Arns adopted the Catholic principle of serving others as her life motto. Although she considered pursuing a religious career, like three of her sisters and two brothers, including the former archbishop of São Paulo, D. Paulo Evaristo Arns, Zilda chose a path in which she could dedicate herself to needy communities, both in Brazil and abroad, as a public health doctor, without family responsibilities.

In 1959 she graduated in medicine from UFPR and met the carpenter and professor Aloísio Bruno Neumann, whom she married on December 26 of that same year and had six children – Nelson (Doctor), Heloísa (Psychologist), Silvia (Business Administrator), who died in 2003 in a car accident, Marcelo, who died shortly after birth, Rubens (Veterinarian) and Rogério (Business Administrator). Counting on her husband's unconditional support to study and work, at a time when marriage was synonymous with living exclusively for the family, she furthered her studies in Pediatrics through the Brazilian Society of Pediatrics, aiming to save poor children from infant mortality, malnutrition and violence in their family and community context; in Public Health and Sanitation from the University of São Paulo (USP); in Social Pediatrics from the University of Antioquia, in Medellín, Colombia; in Administration of

Maternal and Child Health Programs from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO). Ultimately, it can be said, according to Gisèle's Sapiro concept (2012), that Zilda Arns was an intellectual woman with significant individual symbolic capital for Brazilian society.

With the support of her husband, Zilda Arns was in charge of several children's health care programs, in hospitals and at the Paraná State Health Department (SESA). She began practicing as a pediatrician at the César Pernetta Children's Hospital, in Curitiba, and later became the Director of Maternal and Child Health at SESA. In 1980, Brazil was beginning to open up to democracy, her successful experience at the Department of Health led to her being invited by the Government of the State of Paraná to coordinate the Sabin vaccination campaign, to combat the first polio epidemic, which began in the Municipality of União da Vitória, creating her own method, later adopted by the Ministry of Health. In the same year, she was also invited to return as director of the Maternal and Child Department of SESA, when she then instituted planning programs with extraordinary success family, gynecological cancer prevention, school health and breastfeeding.

However, Zilda Arns was often distressed by the fact that her dedication to work prevented her, on several occasions, from being close to her family. Pregnant with her fifth child, she left the other four in the care of her father, Aloysio, to take a three-month course in Colombia, in 1973. Some time later, she continued with her studies in public health, which led her to spend only the final at home during the week, while staying, from Monday to Friday, in the city of São Paulo. However, a fatality occurred and her companion and supporter died on February 18, 1978, of a massive heart attack, at the age of 46, after rescuing one of their daughters from drowning, on Betaras beach, on the coast of Paraná. However, even as a widow with five children, the youngest four years old and the oldest fourteen, Zilda remains detached in her work of saving lives.

In 1983, after approximately 25 years of experience in medicine, Zilda Arns responded to the CNBB's request and founded Pastoral da Criança in partnership with Dom Geraldo Majella Agnello, Cardinal Archbishop Primate of Salvador, Bahia, who at the time was Archbishop of Londrina. It was on this occasion that the development of a community methodology took place with the aim of expanding knowledge and solidarity among families in vulnerable situations, taking as a reference the prodigy of the multiplication of fish and the five loaves of bread that fed five thousand people, as narrated in the Gospel of Saint John (John

6, 1-15). Educating mothers through trained community leaders has shown to be the best way to combat most easily preventable diseases and the marginalization of children.

The public health doctor and pediatrician mobilized millions of volunteers throughout Brazil and when asked what made the work of Pastoral da Criança successful, she said:

The biggest secret is to work with love on what you believe in, knowing where you want to get to and how to work. Our community leaders [...] are simple people with immense hearts, true doctors of citizenship who learn the basic lessons of health, nutrition and education and are committed to multiplying knowledge, accompanying and guiding neighboring families. They are the ones who carry out social transformation, and, certainly, they are the cornerstones for improving the country's social conditions (Neumann, 2003, p. 130, our translation).

Zilda believed in the social transformation that occurs through human beings, and stated that the most relevant fact in this understanding is understanding that “the solution to problems is not reduced to economic issues, but is strongly related to the recovery of the social fabric” (Neumann, 2003, p. 131, our translation).

In 2004, Zilda Arns was entrusted by the CNBB with a new mission, which consisted of establishing and leading the Pastoral for the Elderly. Currently, more than one hundred thousand elderly people are monitored monthly by twelve thousand volunteers from 579 cities in 141 dioceses in 25 states in Brazil. Zilda Arns dedicated her time to fulfill multiple commitments, including her role as national coordinator of the Pastoral for the Elderly and international coordinator for the Pastoral da Criança. In addition, she also served as the CNBB's main representative on the National Health Council and as a member of the National Council for Economic and Social Development (CDES). In 2006, Zilda Arns was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for the significant work carried out at Pastoral da Criança. It is noteworthy that the doctor, in addition to her excellent work in the health sector, knew how to navigate politics, demanding the rights of the most disadvantaged. “Presidents, ministers, senators and deputies knew that the sister of Cardinal Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns did not knock on the doors of power in Brasília with a saucer in her hand, asking for favors. She demanded rights” (Rodrigues, 2018, p. 9, our translation).

Based on Antonio Gramsci (1975), it is understood that Zilda Arns can be considered an organic intellectual. Furthermore, based on the modes of intervention proposed by sociologist Gisèle Sapiro (2012), it is identified that the practices developed by Zilda encompass actions

of an institution intellectual<sup>5</sup> and also a specialist<sup>6</sup> in the position of Coordinator of the Pastoral da Criança and the Pastoral of the Elderly representing the CNBB, and consequently, the Catholic Church in the various social segments, as well as a critical intellectual<sup>7</sup> who wrote for newspapers and magazines, anchored in specialized knowledge and her prophetic role in society, with the purpose of raising people's awareness about the problem of infant mortality, confronting health professionals and conservative clergy.

Zilda also shook off dogmas, established procedures and the cult of complexity of powerful sectors of Brazilian pediatrics: she adopted, on the Pastoral's work fronts, simple, cheap and, above all, quick solutions such as homemade serum, in the treatment of diarrhea prevention and other diseases that filled Brazilian cemeteries with white crosses and small coffins. [...]faced opposition from conservative cardinals to the scientific and realistic view that faced the issue of contraceptive methods. On the other hand, she did not hesitate to collect criticism from feminists and intellectuals from the scientific community for her vigorous fight against abortion (Rodrigues, 2018, p. 12, our translation).

On January 12, 2010, she was on a humanitarian mission in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to introduce the work of Pastoral da Criança in the country. However, when the lecture ended in the parish building of the Sacré Church Coeur, where she spoke about the importance of caring for children as a sacred asset, promoting respect for their rights and protecting them, the building collapsed in an earthquake and Zilda Arns died. Her body was taken to the Municipality of Curitiba/PR, transported in an open car, where she was applauded by a crowd saying goodbye to the missionary doctor who had founded the Pastoral da Criança, drastically reduced infant mortality, educated men, women and children of the popular classes and marked their generation.

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<sup>5</sup>Intellectuals from an institution (especially a religious one) or from a party have the main task of illustrating and defending the doctrine and/or ideological line of the instance to which they chose to join (...). They need to constantly adjust to the specific obligations that are imposed on them and that subordinate intellectual values to militant discipline (Sapiro, 2012, p. 39).

<sup>6</sup>It is the one that informs the decisions of public authorities and provides "scientific" foundations for public policies (Sapiro, 2012, p. 43).

<sup>7</sup>Producer of collective representations and an interpretation of the world, generally carrying an ethical-political message, the critical intellectual bases the legitimacy of his positions on his symbolic capital, that is, on his charismatic authority with a public, capital often linked rather to his name than to his titles and, therefore, associated with his person (Sapiro, 2012, p. 27).



## Pastoral da Criança: brief historical context

The story of Pastoral da Criança begins in Switzerland, with worrying information about the infant mortality rate in Brazil, commonplace in national daily life, but impactful in the “first world”. In 1982, the United Nations (UN) promoted a meeting on peace in Geneva and during one of the breaks, the executive director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), James Grant, spoke with Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, representative of the Brazilian Catholic Church at the meeting, about the need to take steps to save Brazilian children, and the Church could help reduce child mortality (Arns, 2010). Therefore, he suggested that a pilot project be started with the support of UNICEF in Brazil. Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns thought of his sister, Dr. Zilda Arns Neumann.

Social rights in Brazil, in the 1980s, practically did not exist. The areas most affected were education, health and security. Brazil's political scenario was moving towards democracy, as the military government, established in 1964, was no longer supported by corruption, countless social problems and various acts against the lack of freedom, not only in the large urban centers that were forming quickly, but also in the field. External debt increases dependence on richer countries. The oil crisis and the decrease in financial capacity meant that investments in education and health on the part of the State practically did not exist. Regions of poverty emerged in the countryside and large urban centers swelled due to the rural exodus caused by industrialization. The country suffered significant rates of malnutrition and infant mortality (according to UNICEF, over 80 deaths in the first year of life for every thousand live births), largely due to preventable diseases.

In medicine, some medical concepts began to change in the country in that decade. Curative medicine, widely used, gave way to preventive medicine. It was known that most diseases in developing countries could be easily prevented. Studies showed that it was not the diarrhea that killed, but the dehydration caused by it. Zilda Arns, a scholar, was aware of changes in medicine and knew the problems of poor countries. As a pediatrician, she treated hundreds of children who arrived at her office, sick due to lack of information on the part of their mothers, mainly. Therefore, upon hearing her brother's proposal, she thought that the way to reduce infant mortality was to teach mothers how to properly care for their children (Pastoral da Criança, 2010).

Then, in 1983, Zilda Arns started a pilot project supported by UNICEF and CNBB, which gave rise to Pastoral da Criança. To achieve this, the doctor relied on her professional and life experience, especially from her childhood – having lived in the interior of the

municipality of Forquilha, in Santa Catarina, until she was 11 years old. In this place, there were no doctors, electricity or health center; Her parents, children of German parents, received many books from Europe and some of these were on home medicine. They read a lot and always listened to the radio. So when people in the community got sick, they went to their parents' house to seek help and cure with homemade medicine.

With this information in hand, public health doctor and pediatrician Zilda Arns argued that it was necessary to bring knowledge to the population, so that prevention could be worked on and various diseases could be avoided, a fact that could save many children from death. To achieve this, knowledge should be conveyed in language that is accessible to people. In this way, she created a community methodology to spread knowledge and solidarity among families in situations of poverty. Educating mothers by qualified community leaders has proven to be the most effective way to combat most preventable illnesses and social exclusion of children. Thus, volunteer community leaders raised awareness about basic care and prevention of childhood illnesses, through information, to those responsible for children up to six years of age, and pregnant women.

Thus, Pastoral da Criança emerged as an initiative to combat the high rates of infant mortality in Brazil. This experience of partnership between the government and non-governmental organizations began with a pilot project in the municipality of Florestópolis, State of Paraná, where breastfeeding and rehydration projects for newborns were implemented, actions that drastically reduced infant mortality, which was very high in the city. In the municipality, 73% of the population worked cutting sugar cane for the alcohol and sugar plant and planting cotton and coffee and had a high mortality rate. Therefore, it was the place chosen to start the project.

Zilda Arns believed that, for the development of work, popular education was the way to form community leadership and thus make people aware of the prevention of diseases that were killing their children. Aware of the importance of popular education to achieve this objective, it developed special material, with approximations of the method developed by Paulo Freire, in easy language, for everyone to understand. One year after the start of work in Florestópolis, the mortality rate reduced from 127 deaths per thousand live births to 28 deaths (Batalha, 2003, p. 41). The relevance of volunteering in the development of work at Pastoral da Criança and the commitment of everyone to the well-being of children is highlighted. According to the pediatric doctor,

Being a volunteer is a means of carrying out a mission, reviving humanitarian values and acting in communion with people. The responsibility for the well-being of children, families, the community and the development of our country belongs to everyone. We need to act in an articulated and intersectoral way to overcome problems and difficulties so that all Brazilians can have a full life (Neumann, 2010, our translation).

In this way, it expands the work throughout the national territory. To multiply knowledge and solidarity in the project, three instruments were created: home visits to families; Weight Day, also called Celebration of Life Day; and Monthly meeting for Assessment and Reflection, all included in the Pastoral Leader's Guide<sup>8</sup>. Still according to Zilda Arns, the work affected the economic, political, social and religious classes.

[...] on an economic level, the work of Pastoral da Criança allows governments to do much more with the same resources; on a political level, it encourages social participation in controlling the use of public resources; on a social level, it helps people to promote themselves, to become subjects of their own history and on a religious level, it enables the union of faith with life (Neumann, 2000, p. 93-94, our translation).

Also noteworthy in the formation of the Pastoral da Criança was the work of the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of São Paulo, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, for his intense defense of human rights. Thanks to his work with the São Paulo Justice and Peace Commission, many exiles were able to return to Brazil, thus characterizing the commitment to defending the lives of those who fought for the return of democracy in the country. Educator Paulo Freire was one of the exiles who, upon returning to Brazil, had the support of Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns.

After two decades of operation, Pastoral da Criança supported a total of 1,816,261 children under six years of age and 1,407,743 needy families in 4,060 Brazilian municipalities. During this period, Pastoral volunteers brought solidarity and knowledge about health, nutrition, education, citizenship and spirituality to the most disadvantaged communities, creating conditions for them to become protagonists of their own lives. Two aspects are particularly emphasized in the Pastoral da Criança approach: the democratization of knowledge and the integral formation of families, seeking to develop human potential in all aspects.

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<sup>8</sup>Leader's Guide is a 255-page book, used by Pastoral da Criança volunteers, with large print and photographs, which was prepared with the participation of all its diocesan coordinators and support from technical partner entities, such as the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, the National Council of State and Municipal Health Secretaries, the Brazilian Society of Pediatrics, the Brazilian Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics Societies and the Pan-American Health Organization. In this book, the volunteer learns about the stages of development of child to use them as parameters in their community. These steps are the same, regardless of culture (Batalha, 2003, p. 110-115).

[...] at the beginning of Pastoral da Criança, we were aware that the work of preventing diseases and marginalization within families depended greatly on the democratization of knowledge, human training for the practice and exercise of citizenship, social co-responsibility and society, even the constituted power (Neumann, 1996, p. 113, our translation).

In this statement, we can observe the desire to share knowledge and the importance attributed to family education as a fundamental factor in achieving the proposed objectives. There was a concern about how Pastoral da Criança leaders, many of whom were illiterate, could be motivated to feel empowered to change the reality in their communities, where life was denied due to undignified conditions. It is then evident that education is valued as a transforming element of reality, as reported by Zilda Arns: “I was sure that child mortality, malnutrition and family violence would be reduced with the education of mothers and families” (Neumann, 2003, p. 66, our translation).

The work of Pastoral da Criança, in addition to support from UNICEF, now has the Ministry of Health as its main financier, with around 70% of the funds <sup>9</sup>, and has spread to more than twenty countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and was fundamental in reducing infant mortality. Currently, “Brazil's Children's Ministry is considered one of the most important community organizations in the world” (Neumann, 2003, p. 120, our translation). And popular education, supported by the Catholic Church, extensively worked on by Paulo Freire, and supported by the Ministry of Education, mainly in the literacy work of Youth and Adults of the Pastoral, was an important pillar for the development of actions that reduced child mortality in the Brazil and in developing countries where Pastoral was present.

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9 Pastoral da Criança also had support from Rede Globo de Televisão, through the Criança Esperança program, which is the largest non-governmental partner. And the Church is responsible for logistical support and the mobilization of volunteer networks (Neumann, 2003, p. 119).

## Popular Education

In the Brazilian situation, many scholars were interested in the topic of Popular Education and its definition. According to Fernando de Azevedo, the embryo of Popular Education in Brazil came about with the pedagogical work of the first Jesuit missionaries, who taught mestizos, whites and indigenous people.

Attracting Indian children to their homes or meeting them in their villages; By associating in the same school community, children of natives and natives – whites, Indians and mestizos – and seeking to win over and re-educate their parents in their children's education, the Jesuits were not only serving the work of catechesis, but were laying the foundations of Popular Education (Azevedo *apud* Brandão, 1984, p. 28, our translation).

But it was from the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, with Federal Law No. 4,024, of December 20, 1961, which established the Guidelines and Bases of National Education, inspired by the principles of freedom and the ideals of human solidarity, that educational practices in popular circles had a broad boost due to the sociopolitical and economic context of the time. During this period, new national pedagogies were established through educational reforms, the objective of which was to establish an improved workforce, greater integration of the population into the economy and guarantee capitalist hegemony, without necessarily expressing a concern with the transformation of social structures.

In this context, human promotion activities were distinguished by investment in educational reforms, which were linked to the first Adult Education agencies (linked to the UN and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a fact that was later reflected in the support for the work in favor of the fight to reduce infant mortality, carried out by Pastoral da Criança and coordinated by Dr. Zilda Arns.

Educator Paulo Freire<sup>10</sup>, at this time, became one of the main references in the 20th century for understanding Popular Education. His understanding was that “popular education is understood as the effort to mobilize, organize and train the popular classes” (Freire; Nogueira, 2005, p. 19). His contributions stood out, first, in Brazil, then in Chile, when he was in exile, after the coup that installed the military dictatorship of 1964, and then, the Freirean educational

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<sup>10</sup>The philosophical sources that Paulo Freire was based on were the thought of Tristão de Atayde, the personalism of Emanuel Mounier, the thought of Jacques Maritain, the existentialism of Kierkegaard, the neo-Marxism of Eric Fromm, education as a policy of Gramsci, among others. These are some of the sources that Freire used to nourish the anthropological and sociopolitical basis of his reasoning. It is worth highlighting the fact that Paulo Freire was Catholic, with an ecumenical vision of religion. His Christianity is based on a liberating theology, which can be observed in the book “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (1970), in which he outlines a dialectical approach to reality, whose determinants are found in economic, political and social factors.

method, theory and practice spread throughout Latin America. Currently, his proposal influences education on all continents.

The proposal of Popular Education, in Freire, was not to exercise passive teaching, a banking education, but to stimulate learning based on the student's investigation within their reality. In other words, the educator never exposes the finished content, but encourages the student to build their knowledge, to seek their autonomy, to develop their criticality, their reflection within their context, their own reality. It is an approach to pedagogical work aimed at raising awareness among the people and becoming an instrument of transformation, as stated by Freire (1967).

The first attempt at education with the popular classes, which was called Basic Education, Liberating Education, and later Popular Education, originated within civil society movements. In other words, the strategic environment that founds Popular Education is that of popular culture movements and centers, base education movements (MEB)<sup>11</sup>, base ecclesiastical communities (CEBs)<sup>12</sup>, Popular Culture Movement (MCP), in Recife, and popular action.

To understand this liberating education proposal more proficiently, it is important to bring to light the experience that marked Popular Education in Brazil, the episode of the “Angicos Revolution”<sup>13</sup>, led by Paulo Freire, which took place in the countryside of the state Rio Grande do Norte, where a pioneering and daring experience took place in the early 1960s, before the military dictatorship. The new teaching promoted in the Culture Circles showed that in 40 hours a group of poor people, oppressed and forgotten by society in the interior of the Northeast, were able to become literate through “generative themes”, that is, through texts that were part of the context of life of the respective group, using words instead of letters (Lyra, 1996). For Paulo Freire: “The reading of the world always precedes that of the word and the reading of this implies the continuity of the reading of the former” (Freire, 1989, p. 22, our translation).

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<sup>11</sup>On March 21, 1961, the MEB was officially created, by Decree No. 50,370/61, by President Jânio Quadros, for the North, Northeast and Central-West areas of the country, lasting 5 years. Movement created by CNBB to promote basic education through an agreement between the Church and the Presidency of the Republic, signed by the Secretary General, Dom Helder Câmara. Specifically, it was an agreement with the Ministry of Education and Culture (Wanderley, 1984; Fávero, 2006).

<sup>12</sup>Between the 1960s and 1980s, CEBs played an important role, as they were spaces for popular organization. During the military coup in 1964, they were brutally attacked. In this sense, the CEBs adopted an important role in the struggles of the Brazilian people and in the process of redemocratization of Brazilian society (Betto, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> Angicos has become an emblematic word for all those interested in Popular Education. The small town located in the backlands of Rio Grande do Norte was the stage where, for the first time, Paulo Freire, at the beginning of 1963, put into practice his famous method of adult literacy (Germano, 1997, p. 389).

With regard to pedagogical trends, Popular Education had its foundations in the liberating pedagogical current, which goes beyond the boundaries of pedagogy, also placing itself in the field of economics, politics and social sciences. Emancipatory education is based on the principle of popular thought, of the people. The curriculum is built based on concrete, current and existential reality. The situation presented - often unfavorable - must be critically analyzed and considered as a challenge with issues to be overcome through reflection and action (praxis). The generating themes are reflections based on people's thinking, which do not occur in a vacuum, but rather in people, in the relationships between them and in them, and in their relationships with the world. The exploration of relevant themes is carried out through dialogue and is the object of collective reflection, in an increasingly in-depth investigation process, seeking a comprehensive understanding - economic, political, social. From this perspective, Freire says:

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and liberating pedagogy, will have two distinct moments. The first, in which the oppressed reveal the world of oppression and commit themselves in practice to its transformation; the second in which, once the oppressive reality has been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes the pedagogy of men in a process of permanent liberation (Freire, 1970, p. 27, our translation).

When the military dictatorship was implemented in April 1964, Brazil had more than 20 thousand Culture Circles, which lasted approximately two decades. In this same context, Catholic University Youth was weakened and the Basic Education Movement was disfigured in a continuous process. But the thesis of education as a tool for revolutionary practice and transformation, of establishing the priority of justice, equality and solidarity, persisted among all who participated and fought for this work – especially Christians.

In some communities in our *sertões*, in our cities scattered between work and fear, what, soon after, we came to call “another way of being Church” began to emerge [...] it was valid for Catholics and also for evangelicals, now united in the same human project of building the future. [...] a place of conscious agent and conductor of a new story, it animated, like a “new breath of the Spirit”, all those who began to create among us at the same time: the biblical circles, the gospel churches, base ecclesial communities and liberation theology [...]. Many of them had learned to babble these words for the first time and to think around the fire, their meaning, along with what then, here and there, was already called: Popular Education (Brandão *apud* Preiswerk, 1997, p. 11-12, our translation).

During this period when Popular Education emerged in Brazil amid the cultural and political effervescence that the country was experiencing, Zilda Arns, as an organic and militant intellectual, developed her projects with public and private health agencies, aiming to help those most in need to become protagonists of their stories and, consequently, save the lives of their children.

Zilda, very committed to Christian values, professed the Catholic faith and was very close to her brother, former Archbishop of São Paulo Dom Evaristo Arns – a religious man who fought and defended the people against injustices and social ills – and her other brothers, who also decided to follow religious life. Thus, her work was linked to the commitment to help, mainly, those who are disadvantaged. Even with the 1964 Military Coup, she continued working in public health agencies, due to her ability as an organic intellectual that transcended medicine and permeated social and political issues. According to Rodrigues, the doctor was a

fearless and enlightened woman who knew how to reconcile, like few others, science and faith, competence and courage, to face the obscurantism of some sectors of the Church, the incompetence of politicians and the stuck bureaucratic machine of governments, as well as the interests of the powerful in the commercialization of medicine (Rodrigues, 2018, back cover, our translation).

### **Popular Education and the Church**

The Catholic Church in Latin America, especially after the Second Vatican Council, which took place in four sessions between 1962 and 1965, stood out for its dedication in the field of Popular Education, committing itself to projects for the liberation of the oppressed through action educational and prophetic. These factors allowed the church to act immersed in concrete and contextualized reality, with a socio-historical and political approach.

According to Enrique Dussel (1999), many pastoral and socio-political movements, mainly youth, such as Catholic peasant, worker, student, university youth, Protestant Christian student movement, among others, stimulated and strengthened projects for the liberation of the oppressed, which are understood in light of the concepts and definitions of “Liberating Education” discussed in this article, which had Popular Education as one of its main tools.

Paulo Freire discusses this issue by suggesting that the Churches of Latin America can be divided into two main aspects: modernizing and traditional. Modernizing churches are those that have opted for a liberating educational approach. On the other hand, traditional churches are those that are still stuck in a methodology that alienates social classes. These churches have



not yet understood that humanization is linked to liberation and that liberation implies the integral transformation of the human being. According to Matthias Preiswerk, “the Church was bold in handing over to a group of lay people, most of whom had recently left Catholic Action, the responsibility of promoting adult literacy through awareness-raising education” (Preiswerk, 1997, p. 10, our translation).

These groups made up of lay people built an extensive “grassroots popular action” demanding participation in the life of the Church and in the sociopolitical history of the country, that is, transforming themselves into active subjects and protagonists in the face of the concrete reality, which led them to know, they feel the entire situation of misery in the socioeconomic and political context in which people were subjugated.

As a result, this group of people revolted with ethical-religious aversion, which motivated them to confront social injustice. In this way, the Basic Education Movement, among others, had the participation and engagement of lay people, especially followers of the Christian faith, as a way of claiming a fundamental right, that of freedom and humanization of others. For Rubem Alves (1999), grassroots movements express the sighs, pains and aspirations of the oppressed who desire liberation and social transformation.

However, at the height of grassroots movements, mainly MEBs, in favor of raising awareness and liberating the individual, supporters of the political context of military dictatorship sought to end these activities, due to the characteristics considered "subversive" that they possessed. However, education activists who promoted "awareness" persisted in their work. This action was directly linked to the renewal process of the Second Vatican Council, with the clear objective of adapting the Church to contemporary challenges, including industrialization and urbanization.

Popular Education, in turn, had a wide repercussion in the Church, and after significant support from Christian and progressive educators, much of this support was based on identifying the ideological bases shared between Liberation Theology and <sup>14</sup>Education Popular, as the two “find themselves on the same ground and sometimes with the same actors” (Preiswerk, 1997, p. 24, our translation). Based on this conception, according to Gabriel Priolli,

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<sup>14</sup>Liberation Theology is a socio-ecclesial movement that emerged within the progressive Catholic Church, in the wake of civil and youth movements in Brazil in the 1960s, which, driven by ideals of freedom, began to criticize everything linked to authoritarian practices and centralizers of the time. At the same time, this Theology also influences social movements by highlighting the popular classes as subjects of their own destiny. The Christian faith, in its analytical and anthropological reinterpretation, is its basic inspiration, lived and understood as a transformative action of social reality. It is a popular theology, from the CEBs, and is capable of rethinking the social function of the Church. One of the best-known exponents of Liberation Theology in Brazil is the Franciscan Leonardo Boff (Otto, 2021, p. 298-299).

educator Paulo Freire<sup>15</sup> presented himself as a revolutionary Christian and declared that he was a “comrade of Christ who approached the favela residents, since his days as a beginning educator” (Priolli *apud* Brandão, 2005, p. 41, our translation). The educator understood that the identity of "being Christian" was related to "being revolutionary":

Being Christian does not necessarily mean being reactionary, just as being revolutionary does not imply being 'demonic'. Being revolutionary means being against oppression, against exploitation, in favor of the liberation of the oppressed classes, in concrete terms and not in idealistic terms (Freire, 1982, p. 113, our translation).

From the perspective of the praxis of Liberating Education, attention is drawn to the characteristics that can be generated in the identity of each Christian committed to Popular Education.

Christians committed to Popular Education will reflect on their identity and report it to other actors in the educational experience [...]. Christians committed to Popular Education will make their identity clear through their own educational practice within the popular movement and the ecclesiastical institutions with which they are linked [...]. Christians committed to Popular Education will join or, if applicable, form ecclesiastical communities, in which all actors who wish can reflect on their commitment, compare it with the Word of God and celebrate their faith (Preiswerk, 1997, p. 374-376, our translation).

From this perspective of a progressive Christian, formed in that socio-political and economic context and committed to raising awareness, Zilda Arns immersed herself deeply in the areas of public health, pediatrics and sanitation, with the purpose of protecting children in vulnerable situations from infant mortality, malnutrition and violence in their family and community contexts. Aware that education was proving to be the most effective means of tackling the majority of preventable diseases and the social exclusion of children, she directed her efforts to hospitals and public health departments in the 1960s and 1970s and, in parallel, to her family, always present in your life. At the beginning of the 1980s, with the reopening to democracy that was taking place in the country, she established the concepts and praxis of Popular Education in her new project to save lives, which would be developed together with the CNBB.

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<sup>15</sup>Paulo Freire can be considered one of the founders of Liberation Theology. The educator brings the oppressed as a being capable of creating culture, in addition to being a historical subject. This being is capable of transforming society, when human beings become aware and organize themselves. “Liberation Theology, when making the option for the poor against their poverty, takes on the vision of Paulo Freire” (Boff, 2008, p.18-19).

## Children's Ministry x Popular Education

Amid the effervescent reopening of democracy in the country, the Pastoral da Criança project emerged with the support of CNBB and UNICEF, coordinated by Zilda Arns. In this, the methodological direction of the activities has dialogue and awareness among participants as the main pillars and teaching includes moments of practice and theory.

In Freire's method, keywords begin to emerge during the process of surveying students' vocabulary. In the Pastoral da Criança, the process begins with words from the universe of the Pastoral itself. In Freire, the objective of adult literacy is to promote awareness of social problems for knowledge of social reality, an aspect also present in the Pastoral da Criança agenda. According to Zilda Arns, "students learn to read and write through key words in Pastoral, such as: homemade serum, health, nutrition, family, community, fraternity, faith, God and others" (Otto; Rodrigues, 2020, p. 9, our translation).

Several workshops are held to improve the content covered in the training of community leaders and the training process for pregnant women and those responsible for children up to six years of age is broad, seeking to involve the different dimensions of human life: spiritual, emotional, biological, cognitive, sociocultural and politics. Zilda Arns highlights "that the World Health Organization itself, based on research, says that people who have faith are healthier, less violent and happier" (Interview..., 2003, our translation). Thus, in Pastoral Care they not only weigh children, but seek to develop them as a whole, within a family and community context.

From this perspective, Pastoral da Criança carries out studies based on the Popular Education methodology and promotes actions to decode scientific knowledge in the areas of health, nutrition, education and citizenship, necessary for the education of pregnant women, breastfeeding women and their children. These studies relate decoded scientific knowledge with popular knowledge, collectively constructing new knowledge, called "popular-scientific", which has meaning for the leaders and the families they support. The studies contribute to the transformation of socioeconomic and political reality through the process of raising awareness about basic social rights.

In this way, it was understood that it was necessary to organize the community into smaller groups. Members are educated to feel responsible for one another and are invited to share what they are and have: their time and their life. Zilda Arns' explanation portrays education for solidarity, autonomy and awareness, values that Pastoral da Criança seeks to

develop in its activities. With the guideline of "see-judge-act-evaluate-celebrate"<sup>16</sup>, members engage in practices and actions of an educational nature, in a simple but intentional way. "See" allows a coordinator, together with the group, to define the generating theme to be analyzed. "Judge" involves analyzing and studying the generative theme or a specific story to discover the causes and provisional solutions. In "Act", it is proposed to define how to carry out the practice and the strategies to be adopted. In "Evaluate", the group has the opportunity to seek to improve performance and improve its action. And finally, in "Celebrate", achievements, victories, failures, joys and the hope that it is possible to change an inadequate situation are highlighted.

It is noteworthy that, considering its characteristics of insertion in reality and analysis of generating themes, the guideline has a high potential for political-educational praxis from the perspective of the transformation proposed by educator Paulo Freire, characterizing itself as a method of Education Popular.

Popular Education has a deep and coherent relationship between theory and practice, emphasizing the importance of the democratic spirit and revealing reality in a radical way. This is evident in the way popular communities organize themselves to fight against social injustices. Furthermore, Popular Education values all individuals, regardless of their position in the community, considering the knowledge that each person carries internally.

In the formation process, Popular Education is characterized by its political clarity, which goes beyond the differences between those involved. This includes overcoming the idea that we are superior and saviors of poor communities, recognizing the experience and knowledge of the people who live in them. People's active participation in all training moments is valued, promoting an exchange of knowledge in which we teach and learn at the same time. Popular Education also seeks to overcome prejudices based on race, class and gender, aiming to democratize human relationships and awaken solidarity among people.

Popular Education also seeks to promote dialogue in communities, so that, based on a critical analysis of the reality experienced, people become aware of and overcome the authoritarian tradition imposed by oppressive classes. It is important that they are active subjects in the transformation process, and not just spectators subject to manipulation. In this

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<sup>16</sup>Guideline created by Joseph Cardjin, priest of Belgian origin, founder of the Youth Workers (JOC). However, the original trilogy was made up of three actions, "see, judge and act". Two actions were added to the Pastoral da Criança project, evaluating and celebrating. Cardjin worked for the social commitment of the Catholic Church at the beginning of the 20th century. In his conception, for man to carry out a profound spiritual reform, it is necessary to reform the environment in which he lives and works, since that is the result of this (Brighenti, 2015).

way, it knows how to recognize the participation of the popular classes and it is necessary for people to truly awaken as agents of transformation and not as objects of domestication. And so the doctor Zilda Arns developed the concepts and educational praxis of Popular Education in the Pastoral da Criança, so that learning reached everyone involved, transforming them into protagonists of their lives, regardless of their level of education and knowledge.

Thus, the purpose of Pastoral da Criança is to promote the social inclusion of people who are less privileged in terms of human dignity, health, and nutrition under the auspices of Popular Education as a catalyst for the autonomy of those welcomed, allowing the objectives to be achieved in a self-sustainable way, through the training of community leaders who raised awareness among those responsible for caring for children, based on the reality in which they were inserted, which consequently generated a significant reduction in child mortality.

### **Final remarks**

Zilda Arns had a life of hard work and recognition for implementing Public Health programs celebrated around the world. This work was carried out with great dedication and often faced adversity, such as resistance from politicians, public health system bureaucrats, representatives of the pharmaceutical industry and even fellow doctors and the Catholic Church itself. However, recognition did not only come from governments, but also from anonymous people, such as a street sweeper who, in a moment of meeting Zilda Arns before her trip to Haiti, asked to take a photo with "the woman who takes care of the children in Brazil". Zilda Arns was a militant intellectual, with important symbolic capital for Brazilian society, and demonstrated autonomy in relation to political demands.

The praxis of Popular Education was fundamental in the implementation and development of the work of Pastoral da Criança. However, a striking characteristic of the founder Zilda Arns, who also contributed significantly to the progress of the work, was her kindness. For her, "loving God above all things and our neighbors as ourselves means working for social inclusion, the fruit of Justice, it means not having prejudices, applying our best talents in favor of a full life, primarily for those who need it most" (Pastoral da Criança, 2010). In this way, she was instigated by her brother Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns and initially awakened in herself the understanding of the importance of acting to save children's lives and, later, awakened in people the collective dream that, by joining efforts, it is possible to build a more

just and supportive society. Combating child mortality was not just an intention, but a mission for her.

Pastoral da Criança, with the union of different segments of society, joins efforts in the search to solve problems in communities. With this style of work, whose driving force is to multiply knowledge and awaken hope in people that the united community can transform their reality, Zilda Arns - militant intellectual, doctor of the oppressed, protector of children and founder and coordinator of Pastoral da Criança -, brought her worldview closer to the thought of Paulo Freire, icon of Popular Education. Both loved people and fought for social justice to be implemented before charity.

From the beginning, the Pastoral da Criança methodology aimed to address aspects of education, citizenship, health, nutrition and ecumenical spirituality. Therefore, it avoided the creation of complex structures, prioritizing the empowerment of people in the communities involved. And this happened with the praxis of Popular Education established in the development of work that transformed Pastoral members into protagonists of their stories, transformers of their realities and multipliers of knowledge, just like Paulo Freire's proposal for Popular Education, demonstrating the relationship of ideological proximity. Ultimately, it can be said that Zilda Arns, as a Christian, intellectual woman, knew how to navigate the spheres of health, education, politics and spirituality with mastery.

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