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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Andrade, Paulo Fernando Carneiro de
Publisher	Globethics.net / WCC Publications
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-05 08:09:48
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/173457

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POPULAR LEADERSHIP IN A CONTEXT OF OPPRESSION. A LATIN AMERICAN LIBERATION PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction *

Growing social and political tensions at the beginning of the 1960s divided the Catholic clergy. Although most bishops identified with the agrarian oligarchies, which were against social transformations, many were developmentalists or held even more deeply-rooted transformative beliefs. Faced with the threat of communism in Brazil – actually more an issue in the imagination of then-President João Goulart than a real threat – in the end, the Catholic clergy supported the 1964 military coup, which installed a dictatorship in Brazil. We should note that, in spite of support for the coup, some sectors of the clergy expressed concern with the military government. They had been working toward social reforms during the administration of the deposed government, and believed that the continuation of these reforms were indispensable for the future of Brazil. They also believed that democracy should be restored within a short period of time.[1]

1. The Catholic Church in Brazil and the Military Dictatorship

The period of the military coup coincided with that of the Vatican Council II and with increases in awareness on social justice and human rights. For this reason, wide sectors of the Catholic Church rapidly distanced themselves from the military government. In Rio de Janeiro in 1968, many priests and religious followers participated in the 'March of 100,000', a massive demonstration to end the military government. At the end of the same year, the government responded by hardening its authoritarian line. It declared *The Institutional Act No. 5*, which modified the Brazilian Constitution to expand its dictatorial powers. The military shut down the congress and set off an even greater wave of repression, widely and systematically employing practices, such as torture, that go against the most basic legal norms.

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Because arbitrary imprisonment and torture affected members of the clergy, many felt they should intervene against the government and position themselves in defence of the rule of law. These included laymen linked to the hierarchy, family members of some bishops, and wide sectors of the Church hierarchy itself, even those who held moderate and often conservative positions. The Episcopal Conference of Bishops of Brazil *(Conferência Episcopal dos Bispos do Brasil, CNBB)* came to assume a central role in the struggle for human rights and became a permanent focus of democratic resistance. Tensions between the military government and the Catholic hierarchy grew to the point of near rupture. Even some members of the highest hierarchy in the Church that had initially supported the military coup because it was anti-communist, became hostile to the military. They opposed the government's most authoritarian acts, as with D. Agnelo Rossi, at the time the Cardinal Archbishop of São Paulo.[2]

Many Catholic bishops, such as D. Waldir Calheiros from Volta Redonda and D. Helder Câmara from Recife, were faced with embarrassing situations. High-ranking members of the military gave speeches and made statements accusing the Church hierarchy and the CNBB of being at the service of international communism. Priests were imprisoned and often tortured; some were condemned in military tribunals and others, because they were foreign, were forced to leave Brazil. In April 1969, an extreme-right military commander assassinated Father Antônio Henrique Pereira Neto, assistant to D. Helder Câmara for youth in the Diocese of Recife.[3] In 1970, D. Aloísio Lorscheider, at that time Secretary General of the CNBB, was detained for nearly four hours at the entity's headquarters and impeded from meeting with the Justice Minister.[4]

The Vatican supported Brazilian bishops' actions against human rights violations. The Vatican Radio and *L'Osservatore Romano* (the official organ of the Holy See) denounced abuses committed by the military government and published an article by the CNBB. Pope Paul VI himself publicly supported Brazilian bishops and condemned torture.[5] In spite of the growing tension there was never a total rupture between the military and the Church. Some channels of communication were left open, such as the so-called Bipartisan Commission, created in November 1970 in Rio de Janeiro, where the CNBB was housed at the time. The Commission was extra-official and membership was divided between the Church and the military.

On one side, the Commission was composed of the CNBB leadership, the Núncio Apostólico, the Cardinals from São Paulo (D. Paulo Evaristo Arns) and Rio de Janeiro (D. Eugenio Salles), and the advisor of the CNBB, Prof. Candido Mendes; on the other side were General Antonio Muricy, Ten. Cel. Roberto Pacífico, Maj. Leone da Silveira Lee and Prof. Tarcisio Padilha. Although a recent study by the

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K. Serbin has given great prominence to the role of this commission,[6] it is important to understand the context in which it operated as well. It was important because of the pressure on the government, rather than because of a respect by the military for the Church or for members of the Catholic hierarchy. The CNBB and important members of the hierarchy made public denouncements – both nationally and internationally – that had the support of the Vatican. An example is the case of D. Paulo Cardenal Arns, whose solidarity with, and unconditional support to political prisoners, human rights and the rule of law were inestimable. The commission was interesting to the government, mainly to its more radical sectors, as an instrument to decrease tensions and improve Brazil's image in the rest of the world. In this sense, its limited effectiveness was strongly dependent on the action of Catholic leaders who played a key role in denouncing torture and defending civil rights and liberties internationally.

During the most repressive years of the military dictatorship, some documents promulgated by the hierarchy of Brazilian Catholicism were fundamentally important. These included dozens of collective and individual briefings, homilies read in Sunday masses in all the parishes of a Diocese, articles published and protests carried out by the national clergy. Particularly noteworthy was D. Cândido Padin's hallmark study, which critically analysed the Doctrine of National Security in light of the Social Doctrine of the Church and was presented to the CNBB Assembly in 1968. In addition, the following documents should be highlighted: 'I Heard the Clamoring of My People' *(Eu ouvi os Clamores do Meu Povo)* by bishops from the Northeast, in May 1973; 'Pastoral Communication to the People of God' *(Comunicação Pastoral ao Povo de Deus)* by the Representative Commission of the CNBB in 1976; and 'Christian Demands of the Public Order' *(Exigências Cristãs de uma Ordem Política)* in 1997. These documents – elaborated in different moments and different contexts – were rare examples of how the Church was able to break the censorship imposed by the military regime, which tried to silence any voice critical of its actions and ideology.

2. Grassroots Ecclesiastical Communities

The strong positioning of the Catholic hierarchy in support of human rights and the rule of law, then, was evident in documents and actions, and was as much personal as collective during the military rule. At the same time, an intense pastoral movement organised the so called Specific Pastorals *(Pastorais Específicas)*, such as the Workers Pastoral of the Land *(Pastoral dos Trabalhadores, da Terra)* with the Pastoral Land Commission *(Comissão Pastoral da Terra, CPT)*, the

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Indigenous Peoples Pastorals, with the Indigenous Missionary Council *(Conselho Indigenista Missionário, CIMI)*. It also created Grassroots Ecclesiastical Communities, beginning in the mid-1960s in some dioceses, and soon spreading over all of Brazil.[7] *Grassroots Ecclesiastical Communities* (GECs) are small groups of neighbouring families, mainly residents of rural zones and peripheral areas of cities, that meet regularly to discuss the teachings of the Bible and reflect on their lives in light of a biblical text. Their faith led them to become involved in transformational struggles, at local as well as national levels. GECs were in general directed by laypeople from within the groups, and coordinated by the diocese or parish. We should observe here that, at least at the beginning, the Church thought GECs might take over traditional parishes. With the passing of time, however, we see that the Grassroots Ecclesiastical Communities did not bring about the end of parishes but actually revitalised them. The two structures are not mutually exclusive and can be combined.[8]

In order to better understand the pastoral experience of the GECs and the popular leadership that emerged from them, we should consider that this is a consequence of the work of *aggiornamento* brought to term by the Vatican Council II (1962-1965). One of the most fundamental points of this Council was the emphasis on a logic that valued the local Church and plurality, as well as diversity of ministries and vocations. This view re-situated the role of the laypeople and their responsibilities, not only in the world but also inside the Church. A strong outcome of the Council was a growing commitment to the poor, assumed above all by a group of bishops who wanted to identify with the dispossessed. In the years that followed the Council, numerous religious followers left comfortable and traditional homes and schools to work with communities in the popular context. In the same way, many secular priests sought to live and work amongst the poor, trading the parish houses for modest homes in the peripheries and in rural areas.

3. Contextual Theology of Liberation

With these changes, pastoral practice began to be based on analyses of local problems, and was no longer imported from other latitudes and longitudes. This led to the creation of a more independent theology that reflected on local questions. This brotherhood with the poor, together with political repression by the military dictatorship beginning in Brazil in 1964, placed as a central question for theology the very significance of being Christian in a continent of poor people. This same question presupposes a certain interpretation of the causes

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of poverty in Latin America. The experience of increased contact with the poor, of sharing in their real-life situation, found a parallel in the biblical passage of the good Samaritan. In this passage, the Samaritan helps a man who is attacked and left on the road, wounded and prostrate (Luke 10:29-37).

This ideology made traditional explanations about the causes of poverty (backwardness, ignorance, indolence) seem unreasonable. On the other hand, interpretations of Latin American poverty, as articulated in key critical reflections by development theorists or by Marxists sociologists, were accepted as more plausible in light of this real life experience. The poor came to be understood as a marginalised and, above all, exploited group. The central question for theology and for pastoral practice became how to live a Christian life in a continent of men and women who have been exploited and plundered.

In rejecting traditional explanations to the causes of poverty, the relationship with the poor also changed. The poor – no longer seen as ignorant and indolent – came to be seen as objects of social action and subjects of political transformation. The new pastoral that emerged in Latin America, then, was based on the so-called *option for the poor*. This was not exclusive to the Catholic Church, as it was also incorporated by other historical churches. In concrete terms, the option for the poor means to try to see the world through their eyes and allow them to transform themselves into ecclesiastical or politico-social subjects.

In 1994 the Centre for Religious Statistics and Social Research *(Centro de Estatísticas Religiosas e Investigações Sociais, CERIS)* and the Institute for Religious Studies *(Instituto de Estudos da Religião, ISER)*, both in Brazil, conducted a study that estimated that there were around 100,000 communities in the country at that time.[9] Later, research carried out by Inter-ecclesiastical Meetings of GECs concluded that although they were less visible in the media, these communities continued to grow and maintain ecclesiastical and social vitality.[10] Another study by ISER over a ten-year period (1984-1995) aimed to evaluate pastorals in ten dioceses in different parts of the country. The research observed how, through Grassroots Ecclesiastical Communities, Catholics pertaining to popular groups, from the socio-economic point of view, took part in different social struggles and even entered into political participation, mainly in parties more linked to social transformations, such as the Workers Party *(Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT)*.[11]

We should also point out here that during the most repressive years of the military government, in which for a long period nearly all the channels of democratic participation were blocked, the GECs constituted a space of participatory learning. Within these groups,

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participants developed democratic practices, reached decisions following exhaustive debate, and exercised their right to engage in social criticisms.[12] In this sense one can say that the GECs had an important role in the democratic resistance to the military government and in the democratic restructuring that happened in the country after 1996. They provided an excellent popular framework for the social, labour and political party movements.[13]

Data gathered from the 2,395 delegates/participants in the 10th Inter-ecclesiastical Meeting of GECs in Ilhéus, Bahia in 2000 indicated that at least 84 % of the 1,439 delegates/participants who returned the questionnaire had been involved in some social struggle. Another 76 % of them had participated in some civil society organisation, and at least 58 % had suffered some type of persecution, such as threats or even prison or physical violence as part of their involvement in social struggles.[14] Leaders that emerged from the GECs were fundamental in many regions to retake the labour movement in the city and countryside, as well as to organise the popular movement, both during the military dictatorship and in the time of reconstruction of democracy.

4. Participatory Political Leadership

In terms of political-partisan participation, we observe the same small sample of growth in the number of those affiliated with political parties (56 % had party affiliations, versus 30 % of the delegates/participants who responded to a similar questionnaire in 1981). Of those who are affiliated, 75 % are with the PT and just 8 % are with the parties that made up the base that sustained the Fernando Henrique Cardoso government (PSDB, PMDB, PFL).[15] The electoral force of GECs has been interpreted in different ways. Some authors attribute the clear victory of PT candidates in traditionally conservative regions such as Acre and Amazonas to the activities of these groups.[16]

We should mention here that at the time of the reconstruction of Brazilian democracy, when reforms undermined the bipartisanism imposed by the military government, some even discussed the possibility of founding a Catholic party, following the example of the Italian Christian Democracy. The Catholic-Brazilian hierarchy was mainly against this perspective, encouraging the centres to act in accordance with the values of plurality and supra-partisan politics for the Catholics. GECs do not constitute a centralised movement and do not recommend political candidates. However, many different candidates have come out of them, and many GECs do support specific candidates – most frequently candidates of the PT.

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5. Characteristics of Popular Leaders

The main characteristics of the leaders working with GECs are the following:

a) *Popular social origin.* The leadership originates from less favoured social classes including workers, labourers, and home-makers who have become politically active through political parties, labour unions, or in organised social movements.

b) *Commitment to progressive social causes.* Within their parties, the leadership defend social change and lead movements to support social causes within political parties.

c) *Formation in action.* In general, these leaders are not well educated in the formal sense. Their education comes from action, through meetings, popular courses, seminars, and exchanging experiences.

d) *Spirituality.* These leaders have created a strong link between action and spirituality. They read the Bible and pray together in community gatherings, linking these with the practice of social justice. This feeds their faith and gives sense to their actions.

e) *Organic links with popular and community sectors.* These leaders maintain their link with the faith community and with popular sectors from which they originate. They seek to share experiences of action and take decisions on their collective actions with *companheiros* or companions from their community, and with popular sectors to which they are linked.

f) *Respect for autonomy of the socio-political reality.* Although these leaders are Christians and understand that their social or political commitments come about as a result of their faith, the underlying drive for their work is a desire to promote justice and fundamental ethical values – they do not impose their religions on others.

These are the characteristics that mark the emergence of a new political and ecclesiastical movement, capable of transforming society through actions that are at once ethical and effective.

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NOTES

* Translation from the Portuguese by Jessica Galeria (jessica@vivario.org.br).

1 Bernal, Sergio, *CNBB. Da Igreja da Cristandade à Igreja dos pobres*, São Paulo: Loyola, 1989, especially pp. 48-56.

2 Azzi, Riolando, 'Presença da Igreja Católica na Sociedade Brasileira', in: *Cadernos do ISER* 13 (1981), pp. 90-91.

3 *Ibidem*, p. 93.

4 *Ibid*., p. 98.

5 *Ibid*.

6 Serbin, Kenneth, *Diálogos na Sombra. Bispos e Militares, Tortura e Justiça Social na Ditadura*, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2001.

7 Caramuru de Barros, Raimundo, *Comunidade Eclesial de Base, uma opção Pastoral decisiva*, Petrópolis: Vozes, 1967.

8 Lesbaupin, Ivo (ed.), *Igreja. Comunidade e massa*, São Paulo: Paulinas, 1996.

9 Valle, Rogério/Pitta, Marcello, *Comunidades eclesiais católicas: resultados estatísticos no Brasil*, Petrópolis: Vozes/CERIS, 1994.

10 Oliveira, Pedro A. Ribeiro de, *Perfil social e político das lideranças das CEBs no Brasil*, in: REB 245 (2002), pp. 172-184.

11 Lesbaupin, Ivo *et al., As Comunidades de Base em Questão*, São Paulo: Paulinas, 1997.

12 Wanderley, Luiz Eduardo V., *Comunidades de Base e educação popular*, in: REB 164 (1981), pp. 686-707.

13 Of the communities studied by ISER, more than 60 % said they had participated in protest struggles, covering a wide range of issues from struggle for land, labour unions, neighborhood associations, etc. See Lesbaupin, Ivo, 'As Comunidades de Base e a Transformação Social', in: Lesbaupin, Ivo *et al., op. cit.*, 1997, pp. 47-74.

14 Oliveira, Pedro A. Ribeiro de, *op. cit*., pp. 179-182.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 183.

16 Iulianelli, J., 'Eleições e algumas lições, em, Eleições 98: encaixam-se as peças', in: *Tempo e Presença* 302 (1998), pp. 17-19.