



## Evolution of the Catholic Church in Brazil in the light of recent surveys

A evolução da Igreja Católica no Brasil à luz de pesquisas recentes

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### Abstract

This article proposes a theological-pastoral reading of the results of Census 2010 on religion in Brazil, published in July 2012, also resorting to the study by the Getulio Vargas Foundation *The new map of religions*, published in 2011, and to the survey commissioned by the Archdiocese of Belo Horizonte on *Values and religion in the metropolitan region*, carried out in 2012. The reading proposed by the article takes into account, above all, what data from these surveys say about the Catholic Church. After a brief comment about elements presented by these surveys, the text proposes some interpretive keys. It begins with a socio-religious kind of reading, showing that the sharp drop in belonging to Catholicism is the result of leaving an “environmental” and inherited kind of religion towards a “conviction” religion, having a “confessional” nature. In a second moment, it presents some roots of this way of understanding faith in the New Testament and in the reading on the nature and mission of the Church by the Second Vatican Council. It is concluded through some pastoral considerations, pointing out not so much solutions to the drop in Catholic belonging, but rather attitudes that a “confessional” Church should take nowadays.

**Keywords:** Census 2010. Census of religions. Catholic Church in Brazil. Theological reading.

### Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma leitura teológico-pastoral dos resultados do Censo 2010 sobre religião no Brasil, publicados em julho de 2012, recorrendo, também, ao estudo da Fundação Getulio Vargas *O novo mapa das religiões*, publicado em 2011, e à pesquisa encomendada pela Arquidiocese de Belo Horizonte sobre *Valores e religião na região metropolitana*, realizada em 2012. A leitura proposta pelo artigo leva em conta, sobretudo, o que os dados dessas pesquisas dizem sobre a Igreja Católica. Após um breve comentário de elementos apresentados por tais pesquisas, o texto propõe algumas chaves de interpretação. Começa com uma leitura de tipo sociorreligioso, mostrando que a queda acentuada da pertença ao catolicismo é o resultado da saída de uma religião de tipo “ambiental” e herdado para uma religião de “convicção”, de caráter “confessante”. Em um segundo momento, apresenta algumas raízes dessa maneira de compreender a fé no Novo Testamento e na leitura sobre a natureza e a missão da Igreja feita pelo Concílio Vaticano II. Conclui-se com algumas considerações pastorais, apontando não tanto as soluções para a queda da pertença ao catolicismo, mas as atitudes que uma Igreja “confessante” deve assumir na atualidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Censo 2010. Censo das religiões. Igreja Católica no Brasil. Leitura teológica.

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## Introduction

This article aims to weave initial comments on *Census 2010*, by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2012), also taking into account other recent surveys. We cannot undertake, here, an exhaustive analysis, but only formulate hypotheses and interpretations, which should undergo deeper verification and discussion. We will focus on what regards the Catholic Church, however, for actually realizing the relevance of data in relation to it, there will be also a need to consider some comparative data from other denominations and religiosities.

### 1 Statistical data

Since not everyone has access to the primary sources, *Census 2010* (IBGE, 2012) and the *New map of religions*, by the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV) (NERI, 2011), covering 2009, initially, we reproduce some data especially concerning the Catholic Church and compared, when relevant, to other groups.

The results of Census 2010 show growth in the diversity of religious groups in Brazil, revealing greater plurality in the more urbanized and populated areas of the country. A first implication of this diversification is that the Roman Catholic Church fails to be close to a religious monopoly in Brazil. The survey by FGV (NERI, 2011, p. 7) shows the continued decline in the percentage of Roman Catholics: 93.07% in 1960; 91.77% in 1970; 88.96% in 1980; 83.34% in 1991; 73.89% in 2000; and 68.43% in 2009. The last two figures are confirmed, within the margins of uncertainty, by IBGE (2012, charts 36 and 37): 73.6% in 2000 and 64.6% in 2010.

According to data from IBGE (2012, Table 12), the Catholic population decreased in all “Major Regions” in Brazil, remaining higher in the Northeast (from 79.9% to 72.2%) and South regions (from 77.4% to 70.1%). The greater relative decrease in the number of Catholics took place in the North region, from 71.3% to 60.6%. In the Southeast the decrease was from 69.2% to 59.5% and in the Central-

West and it was from 69.1% to 59.6%.

IBGE also shows, besides the stationary state of Umbanda/Candomblé (3.0%), the growing number of Evangelicals (from 15.4% in 2000 to 22.2% in 2010), Spiritualists (from 1.3% in 2000 to 2.0% in 2010), the other religiosities (from 1.8% to 2.7%), and those “with no religion” (from 7.4% to 8.0%). It is assumed that Catholics are migrating to these forms of religiosity.

As for Evangelicals, we observe an increased number of Pentecostals in all major regions of the country (10.3% to 13.3%), while people declaring themselves as missionary Evangelicals (historical Evangelicals) had a slight decrease (from 4.1% to 4.0%), a phenomenon evidenced in the South and Southeast regions, where, historically, missionary Evangelicals were more numerous (from 4.3 + 5.7% to 3.9% + 5.0%). This finding is important, because these groups have characteristics close to the Catholic Church. The number of Pentecostal Evangelicals significantly grows in regions where there are more Indians (from 14.4% to 20.1% in the North and 13.4% to 16.6% in the Central-West), as well as in the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, in addition to metropolitan areas in the Northeast region (IBGE, 2012, p. 93).

Among Spiritualists, the most significant increase was observed in the Southeast (from 2.0% to 3.1%) and South regions (from 1.9% to 2.3%), the regions having the better organized Catholicism and historical Protestantism! Spiritualists have their strongest density in Triângulo Mineiro, in Campo Grande, Mato Grosso do Sul, and Cuiabá, Mato Grosso, with a remarkable presence in the meridional part of Rio Grande do Sul, where there is also a high concentration of Umbanda.

Those with no religion are mainly located in Baixada Fluminense and within the “Legal Amazon” (North and Central-West regions), that is why the interpretation is not immediately aimed at the secular urban post-Christianity! We will return to this later. Incidentally, these are the same regions where we observe remarkable advances of Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals (IBGE 2012, p. 93).

The Catholic population has greater representativeness in rural areas, 77.9%

vs. 62.2% in urban areas. Surprisingly, among those who declare themselves as Roman Catholics, 65.5% are men vs. 63.8% of women. Also among those with no religion men are the majority (9.7% vs. 6.4%), while in the other religious groups women constitute the majority (IBGE 2012, Table 13).

The average age among Catholics is 30 years, with higher proportions over 40 years, i.e. age of the generations formed within periods of greater Catholic hegemony. Spiritualists also had higher proportions at older ages; their average is 37 years. Pentecostal Evangelicals are, on average, younger (27 years) and their highest proportions are among children and adolescents. As for those with no religion, this option is more frequent among adolescents and young adults, aged between 15 and 29 years (IBGE 2012, p. 100). Besides the increased number of people with no religion, at this age, the percentage not only of Catholics, but also of other religions, shows a remarkable decrease. In 2010, these numbers are clearer than in 2000 and, in addition, the phenomenon of those with no religion seems to start earlier. In 2000, among adolescents from 15 to 17 years, 8.5% declared themselves as with no religion; in 2010, at the same age, they were 9.4%.

We notice some links between ethnicity and religion. Regarding Catholicism, the participation of yellow people (1.0%) is lower than the national proportion (1.1%); it is worth knowing that almost half of them are Buddhists. Indians are also below the national proportion, which is 0.4%: among the Catholics they are 0.3%, but among missionary Evangelicals, 0.7%, and among Pentecostals, 0.5%. Those classified as “black” skinned (7.5% of the national total) constitute 6.8% of Catholics vs. 21% of those who declare themselves as belonging to Umbanda or Candomblé (the proportion of white skinned people in Umbanda/Candomblé, 47.1%, is almost the same as the proportion of white skinned people in the nation, 47.5%). The whitest religion is Spiritualism (68.1% of white skinned people vs. 48.8% in Catholicism, and 44.4% in the various Evangelical churches) (IBGE, 2012, Table 15).

As for the socioeconomic and cultural status, the number of illiterate people

is higher among Catholics (10.6%) and those with no religion (9.4%), while in Spiritualism and Umbanda/Candomblé these are the lowest rates (1.4% and 3.8%, respectively)! It is also known that both Spiritualism as Candomblé (more than Umbanda) spread, above all, among people having Higher Education. If among Catholics 9.4% have complete Higher Education, in Umbanda/Candomblé 12.9% have this education level and in Spiritualism, 31.5%.

The fact that historical or missionary Protestantism adds a greater percentage of literate people (95.5% vs. 89.4% in Catholicism) is not surprising, since everyone knows its commitment to make believers familiar with Bible reading; the percentage of people having complete Higher Education (12.1%) is higher than among Catholics (9.4%). Individuals from Pentecostal churches are slightly more literate than Catholics (something that may be related to Bible reading), but the levels of Higher Education are more humble (4.1% having complete Higher Education). It is also worth noticing that the item “with no religion” is not a privilege of intellectuals; if there is a significant number of literate people (90.6%), those having complete Higher Education (8.2%) are somewhat rarer than among Catholics (IBGE, 2012, p. 103-104).

As for the household *per capita* income, 55% of Catholics, 63% of Pentecostal Evangelicals, and 59% of those with no religion are in the group up to 1 minimum wage. On the other hand, the richest group consists of Spiritualists, among which 19.7% earn above 5 minimum wages (IBGE, 2012, p. 104).

**Summing up:** Catholicism has known, especially since 1970, an increasingly sharp drop, with a tendency to aging, but it is still the popular religion, rather present in the countryside than in large cities, quite cozy for the various income, color, and education level categories.

## 2 Sample: Belo Horizonte

We present here some rather qualitative data, collected by means of a survey conducted in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte (CAMARGOS, 2012). Belo

Horizonte is a somewhat representative city for Catholicism in Brazil in the post-conciliar era, it is neither too advanced or too conservative. The Catholic Church in Belo Horizonte has shown to be relatively dynamic, standing out due to its successive plans of pastoral action and combining novelty with the solid Catholic tradition of Minas Gerais.

In a first reading, we have the impression that, in Minas Gerais, the decreased number of Catholics is not so much due to philosophical reasons, but rather to practical issues. A very important factor in religious preference is the subjective experience of meeting God (or “meeting Jesus”) and the sensation of peace.

Looking at the general boxes, we notice in the survey of the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte the same decreased number of Catholics found by IBGE for the country as a whole. Out of the 2,826 respondents, 84% had Catholicism as their family religion; today, only 60% are Catholics! For Neo-Pentecostals, these figures increase from 4% to 13%, for Pentecostals, from 5% to 9%, for historical Protestants, from 3% to 6%, for those with no religion, from 1% to 6%, and for the Afro-Brazilian religions, from 0% to 1% (CAMARGOS, 2012, p. 10 and 13). This does not mean that there is a revolt against the Catholic Church. Among those who remain Catholics, 8 out of 10 feel satisfied in the theological field, however, as for sexual morality, significant variations are noticed: 9.5/10 advocate for monogamous marital fidelity, but only 1.4/10 condemn the use of condom in sexual intercourse (CAMARGOS, 2012, p. 46). Almost half accept abortion in cases of rape (CAMARGOS, 2012, p. 52). As for divergences between the official doctrine and the opinion of Catholics, the issue of clerical celibacy stands out (CAMARGOS, 2012, p. 58).

When analyzing the individual answers, we notice at the negative side: “dogmas” (that is: teachings), moralism, guilt, fear, certain moral rules (prohibition of contraceptives and abortion in cases of rape); issues of divorce and second marriage; monotony, repetitiveness, formalism of the liturgy, regarded as

somewhat uninteresting and quite complicated (worship and praise are better than the mass!); lack of unity between people in parish communities, which are very large and anonymous; bureaucracy, lack of embracement and direct contact on the part of the priest; lack of seriousness on the part of believers, who go there due to tradition or obligation; appropriation of churches and chapels by “inner circles”; lack of participation in organization and decisions; exaggerated devotion to saints and even certain idolatry of Mary; cases of refusal to baptize the child of a single mother; lack of evangelization; absence in favelas nearby luxury churches, “castles”. There is not that sympathy for the current pope. People criticize the powerful and “subsidized” aspect (unlike Evangelicals), and celibacy as a consequence. Abuses by priests are mentioned. Some individuals think that priests meddle too much in politics. A very controversial subject is wedding celebrations, but usually only at the level of social event. A few people criticize the materialistic and outward mindset of those who go to church.

Of course, many matters of criticism are also found in other churches, but the answers mention that Evangelicals are generally tighter to fight drugs and alcohol and better in terms of service, close follow-up, music... and acoustics! Evangelicals make their belief more apparent, they are more prevalent in hospitals and prisons, but there is much fanaticism, much control... People are not blind to the issue of turnover, change for change’s sake, only to find some novelty that then turns into sameness, etc. Some people notice the pitfalls of commercialized and mediatized religion, exhibitionist religiosity; they realize that “God’s gift” on the car may be a form of self-assertion (“I got it!”), etc.

At the negative side, people appreciate brotherhood services, daycare centers and schools, social and educational action, short courses, good experiences in smaller communities, examples from priests or generous, even heroic, religious men and women; religious men and women who take care of people living on the streets; praying groups or family Bible reading. Much importance is attributed to embracement, accessibility to the priest, his presence among the people. The

ministry of baptism is usually appreciated, as well as the work of lay ministers. Adolescents love creative liturgies, priests who behave as they do, provided that they have some content, and a pastoral that creates communities, mentioning cities where this happens more than in Belo Horizonte. There is appreciation for good preachers and priests on TV, because they raise a certain sense of presence in everyday life and some of them communicate deep messages; however, there is also much criticism.

In general, practicing Catholics think that the Catholic Church, today, is better than before, more accessible, but less instructed on practices and duties... It is recognized that the Catholic Church has “renewed” itself, either in the sense of post-conciliar openness and renewal or in the sense of Charismatic Renewal, *Canção Nova*, etc. People appreciate the biblical renewal, preaching through the Bible, the Fraternity Campaign. More persistence and creativity are required when working with adolescents. It is hoped that the priest has something deeper than a college degree. There are a certain number of lay people who endorse the motto “we are the Church”.

In fact, adherence to the Catholic Church comes not, usually, from a deep conscious choice. It is rather emotional, traditional, and many people do not understand their ecclesial belonging at a personal level. Much inaccuracy is observed in the answers, people cannot distinguish worship and mass, the family man who became a priest and the priest who has had a child in a different way, priest and seminarian, venerate and worship some image, renewed Catholic Church and the “Brazilian Catholic Church”... People mistake the biblical characters, the Bible is confused with science. People think St. Jude is second to none... Syncretism between Catholicism and Spiritualism is frequent. It is not surprising that among practicing respondents many criticize the lack of knowledge of Catholics themselves.

It is possible that the Catholic Church and its “doctrine” are, in fact, somewhat complex and opaque. It is striking that people talk about Jesus Christ



only on an exception basis, no distinction is made between being religious and being Christian, being Catholic is just a way of being religious or fulfilling a duty. Individuals seem to be more Catholic than Christian. Much more attention is drawn to the cult than to grassroots communities. Another striking thing is that everything moves around the priest. This is an element that should be thought through: having personal contact and customized embracement is something impossible in an urban church, if everything is expected from the priest himself. A life of faith such as that of John (13,35) (“...if ye have love one to another”) or James (1,27) (“to visit the fatherless and widows...”) is hardly seen. As theologians, we have the impression that people experience another religion instead of that we explain in college...

### **3 First reactions**

As for the survey by IBGE, responses were seen in two opposite directions. One almost involves fatalism: it is admitted, and complained, that the Church, in fact, goes bad, and then there are the most diverse explanations... Other people, however, react with unwavering certainty in the opposite direction: the percentage of Catholics decreased, but – they say – in absolute numbers, not that much, and the number of priests and parishes considerably increased. It is worth noticing, however, that the increased number of parishes and priests has almost accompanied the numerical increase (absolute) in the population as a whole...

Long pondered reflections point towards either the increasing secularization or a “purification” of Catholicism, in the following sense: Catholicism is leaving the regime of “inherited” or “environmental” religiosity towards Christianity due to choice or belief. This was observed in France during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Perhaps, we are at the onset of a similar process. Using another terminology, we could say: we are moving from a “Christendom” Catholicism towards a Catholicism of personal choice and conscious communities. It would be analogous to the

Catholicism of minorities that has been described for half a century, by many theologians, from Joseph Ratzinger to Juan Luis Segundo.

The phenomenon was noticed by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB). The *General Evangelization Guidelines of the Church in Brazil 2008-2010* (CNBB, 2008) and, more persistently, those for 2011-2015 (CNBB, 2011), although do not mention the numerical decrease, repeatedly speak of the problem of conveying faith and pastoral conversion. Has the numerical decrease been implicitly interpreted as a problem of conveying faith? This certainly contains a large part of the truth, but it also invites us to raise an even more key question: where does this problem of conveying faith come from?

For better interpreting the numerical decrease, we must to add to the evidence of Catholic decline the decrease found out in the historical or “missionary” Protestantism (Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians). Is it mere coincidence or do they have something in common with Catholicism? We immediately think that both Catholics and historical Protestants have “dogmas” and older structures, marked by the Middle Ages or Modernity, less postmodern “lightness”. However, the issue should not mainly involve lightness vs. strictness, because it is unlikely that people say that Catholics or Episcopalians are stricter than the Church of the Foursquare Gospel!

As for the Pentecostal or Neo-Pentecostal Evangelicals, variations between churches are noticed, such as, for instance, pulverization of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD). Altogether, however, they keep growing. Therefore, we may not say “IURD also decreased!”, because it has multiplied. We may only say that its believers do not show that loyalty, something which confirms the well-known observation that this kind of churches has a “high turnover” (MARIANO, 1999). The Catholic Church will not regain “lost ground” by imitating them, if this was a priority – something we will discuss below.

Regarding Evangelicals, we also observe that, for the first time, the category

“non-practicing Evangelicals” has been statistically shown (NERI, 2011), an element to be taken into account at the time of overall diagnosis.

Although they are low absolute figures, the growth of “other religiosities” shows a remarkable percentage increase. If Umbanda and Candomblé virtually stick at 0.3%, the Spiritualist religion grows, from 2000 to 2010, from 1.3% to 2.0%, showing a high acceptance among people with Higher Education, and “other religiosities”, including the eastern ones, grow from 1.8% to 2.7%, also with remarkable presence among more educated people.

The first impression is that people no longer feel “obliged” to be Catholic or even Christian to be religious. And we may say more: they also feel no longer obliged to belong to some organized religion. There lies the riddle of those “with no religion”, who grow from 7.4% to 8.0%, both in some metropolitan areas and in peripheral or countryside regions. Are they atheists, agnostics, or “religious” people who prefer not joining any organized religion? Anyway, the phenomenon compels us to put into question the motto saying that Brazilians are “naturally religious”.

The statistics also reveal a surprise with regard to the assumption that women keep their religiosity more than men: the percentage of women in Catholicism is lower than that of men and among those who declare themselves as with no religion the percentage of women is higher than that of men. For Catholicism, this means that it will not be possible to rely on women as the main conveyors of faith, in family and society. It is difficult to redraw the movement of women and identify their motivations. It is suspected that the growing autonomy of women and the evolution of concepts around family and sex play an important role in this phenomenon. The importance of subjective factors found out in Belo Horizonte may be an indication.

The census by age confirms what many people have observed: the absence of adolescents in churches. They do participate in meetings and worship services that may even take the form of show, but according to the statistics, the number of believers among them has not increased.

#### 4 Socio-religious interpretations

That is an inescapable conclusion that Catholicism and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the historical Protestant churches experience a decrease in Brazil, not only in the last 10 years, but for about 40 years now.

The phenomenon seems to be related to sociological changes, especially urbanization, because the Catholic Church (and the Lutheran, in some regions) was heavily rural, and the tendency to have religiously homogeneous communities is stronger in rural life, which has a patriarchal structure and strong social control, than in modern urban life.

Economic factors also come into consideration. Financial and/or health problems can get people to Neo-Pentecostal cults, above all those that emphasize miracles, promises, etc. descarregos. It is true that in certain sectors of the Catholic Church such cults have been celebrated, with remarkable afflux of participants, but not in the same proportion and, above all, not with the proselytizing zeal demonstrated by some Neo-Pentecostal churches.

Let us also consider that the Brazilian Christianity, especially from the Catholic viewpoint, is used to syncretism, embracing many elements of a magical kind. The increased sobriety of the Catholicism post-Second Vatican made these elements, to some extent, more distant, now they are resumed, above all, by Neo-Pentecostal denominations (and, from another perspective, by certain sectors of the Catholic Church).

Certainly, the irruption of the modern subject also contributed to the current pulverization and pluralization of the Brazilian religious field, a phenomenon that takes place mainly in large cities. Now, in postmodern societies, this phenomenon is not denied; it is rather exaggerated, since, more than “great accounts”, everyone seeks to construct her/his own story, something which is, indeed, the expression of a hermeneutics in which everyone has her/his truth and constructs it.

A last observation: is the context found out, above all the decline of

Catholicism, valid for the future? The curve has a rapid decline between 1970 and 2010, with no sign of rise, unless the brief status quo, according to FGV (NERI, 2011, p. 7) between 2000 and 2003<sup>1</sup>. If we correlate the drop of Catholicism (and historical Protestantism) to urbanization and the emancipation of technical-scientific reason, as it is usually done with regard to the phenomenon of secularization in the Northern Hemisphere, we should not expect a rise, soon. However, the Brazilian Catholicism does not have the same characteristics observed in Belgium, Netherlands, or Germany. A certain resemblance to Portugal and Italy could be alleged. Society can change, but the profile of Catholicism, too. Therefore, it would be unwise, from the sociocultural viewpoint, jumping to conclusions about the future.

## 5 Theological reading

Faced with the context found out, what does the theologian say? Of course, it depends on which theologian. We may interpret the context as a result of devil's work and organize a crusade of prayer for God to reverse the context. The moralist, believing that everything is a result of sin, will preach a moral rearmament. And it would not be useless at all. However, within a current ecclesiology, based on the thinking of the Second Vatican, we may ask if the Catholic Church and also the Christianity more conscious in other churches, is not getting closer to greater authenticity than before, becoming a truly "confessional" Church instead of a primarily socio-environmental one.

A reading of the New Testament points out this kind of understanding of what faith is and the Church in the light of the Christ event. The religion of signs and miracles, of observations foretold by the synagogue and the temple, of ethnical belonging or that inherited from tradition, gives way to following Jesus, which implies "bearing one's own cross", "losing life", i.e. answering to a call, making a choice (Matthew 16,21; Mark 8,34-38), in which the subject/individual in search of

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<sup>1</sup> This brief status quo coincided with a decreased number of those "with no religion" (NERI, 2011, p. 8). We have no means to analyze better this "gap" in the statistics provided by FGV, but on the horizon of forty years it does not seem to be decisive.

meaning is called. This is no longer a religion attached to a specific place, it rather assumes the worship of “Father in spirit and truth” (John 4,21-23). The community of Jesus’ disciples is taken to make this radical change in what, until then, was understood as religion. Among its members, the one who wants “to be the greatest must make himself small” (Matthew 18,1-4; Luke 9,48), the one who “wants to be first must be last and servant of all” (Matthew 20,26-27; Mark 9,35; Luke 22,24-27). This community is called to practice mutual forgiveness (Matthew 18,15-18.21-22), share goods, so that there are no beggars (Acts 4,32.34-35), live in communion and fraternal union (Acts 4,32). The testimony makes it well seen by everyone (Acts 4,33), turning into “salt from the ground and light of the world”, as the Master wished (Matthew 5,11-16). As Christ’s Church, this understands itself as his Body, in which each member is important and puts her/his gifts to the service of all (1 Corinthians 12,12-30; Colossians 1,22-23). Consisting of Jews and Gentiles, it reconciles what is a source of conflict in human history: the difference between master and slave, man and woman, Jew and Gentile (Galatians 3,28).

In the early centuries, this way of understanding oneself remained very alive in the Church, which constituted a minority and made the difference within the Roman Empire. This is shown by the *Epistle to Diognetus*, written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, by recognizing that Christians were not different from the other citizens in the empire “neither due to land, language, or customs” (FIGUEIREDO, 1976). They lived in the world as “pilgrims” and “foreigners”, believing that they were to it what the soul is to the body. Their testimony was disturbing, thus, they were persecuted. They did not hesitate, however, to give their lives for what they believed. By becoming the empire’s religion, the Christian testimony slackened, but it never disappeared. This is made apparent by the numerous renewal movements that emerged within the Church over the centuries, which are inspired in the pathway opened up by Jesus himself and in what this pathway engendered in early Christianity.

The Second Vatican is among these movements<sup>2</sup>. It helped the Catholic Church to rethink its nature and mission in a world undergoing deep change. After long centuries of amalgamation with society, which started with the “conversion” of the Roman Empire and gave rise to the regime of Christianity, the Church became aware of the radical changes posed to believing in the modern era. Without renouncing to the self-consciousness of being “in Christ like the sacrament or sign and tool of the intimate union to God and unity of humankind as a whole” (LG 1), it reviews its teaching about itself. For doing this, it resorts to a re-reading of its nature, inseparable from Christ’s mission, who “inaugurated on earth the Kingdom of heaven, revealed His mystery to us and achieved redemption through His obedience” (LG 3). Servant to the Kingdom (LG 5), the Church is perennially sanctified by the Holy Spirit (LG 4), becoming the mystical Christ’s Body in the world, announcing his Word and conveying his life among the believers who, through the sacraments, are united to his paschal mystery (LG 7).

This “mysterical” and sacramental understanding of the Church gains visibility and historicity in the other parts of the conciliar text. This is shown by the adoption of the category “God’s people” as first instance to think of the concrete existence of the Church, which has in the priesthood common to all, provided by baptism, the source of the vocation common to all believers (LG 9-17). Then, hierarchy appears as servant to this people (LG 18-29), everyone of them called to holiness (LG 39-42), either through lay testimony (LG 30-38) or through the testimony of consecrated life (LG 43-47). This re-reading of the Church’s nature and mission gained in Latin America, by means of the conferences held in Medellin and Puebla, a new reinterpretation: that concerning the choice for the poor people. This contributed to the formation of a Samaritan Church, servant to those undergoing all kinds of exclusion and injustice. Certainly, participation and testimony in this kind of Church are very demanding. They assume a continuous displacement, interior and exterior. It is not easy to put oneself on the borders of

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding the Council texts cited below, see Concilio Vaticano (1968). We use the consecrated abbreviation of the document *Lumen gentium*: LG.

the service to a debased and oppressed humanity. And it is also not easy to live on the margin and without great hopes for change. However, Jesus did not choose the easy way of richness, honor, or power. He preferred the pathway of poverty, humiliation, and powerlessness. In it, he found the pathway that humanizes and leads to God. Would not the contemplation of this pathway constitute the pathway to be privileged in order to rediscover the pathway of Christian testimony at this time when religion predominates instead of faith?

## 6 Pastoral reflection

We have just outlined a concept of the Church as witness of Christ as “light of the nations” (*Lumen Gentium*). A Church rather involving quality than quantity; rather involving service and choice for the poor people than the socio-political power; a Church that is rather leaven to the dough and network to communities than territorial organization (almost feudal). In the light of this concept, how could we interpret the sociological data mentioned above and which pastoral prospects are presented?

If we really think of a “confessional” Church and not merely sociological, we cannot feel surprised, and even less be exacerbated, due to the fact that not all, but only 2/3 of the population declare themselves as Catholics. If in Hitler’s Germany 2/3 of the people had belonged to the “confessional Church” of the theologian-martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, there would have been neither World War or the Shoah (Holocaust).

By preparing such reasoning, however, we need to wonder if the most committed Catholics were not exactly those who left the Church. In this regard, it is worth distinguishing Brazil from other countries, above all the European ones, where the withdrawal of Catholics gained a connotations of revolt against the Church and its structures, a trend even more noticeable after the scandals of pedophilia (which now show to be no privilege of the Catholic, or another Church, but a secret closely guarded from all sectors of society...).



When analyzing the qualitative survey concerning Belo Horizonte, which has certain representativeness for the majoritarian Catholicism in Brazil, we do not notice such rancidity on the part of those who leave the Catholic Church. The main reasons for moving to another Church are very subjective: higher satisfaction, better attention found often in something that does not occupy the first place in the post-conciliar Catholic theology.

On the other hand, the relative serenity in face of the phenomenon of decrease does not avoid recalling the conviction that the Church is a means of salvation *for everyone*. Certainly, the “*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” (outside the Church there is no salvation) is now no longer understood in an exclusive sense, but in a historically situated sense (against the Donatists) and according to an inclusive hermeneutics (all salvation, even outside the visible structures of the Church, is the same that involves Christ and his Church).

The Church as a testimonial community cannot give up its universal evangelizing vocation. However, the way of witnessing should be different from the past. Without underestimating the heroic work of early missionaries in Latin America, we must recognize that it is not baptizing indiscriminately that we form a conscious and confessional Church. The Church we think of will be rather a spotlight for everyone who seeks God with a sincere heart, inside or outside the visible structures of the Church. The bottom line is not the visible belonging to the Church, but the meeting with salvation that Jesus revealed in human history – even when we do not know Jesus’ name. A silent testimony, but eloquent, as that of Charles de Foucauld among the Tuaregs and that of the recently martyred French monks in Algeria, as seen in the movie *Of gods and men*. A testimony concerning love and justice.

Thus, the issue of visibility emerges, and people insist a lot on it today. Well, this depends on which visibility.

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.  
Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a

candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Mt 5,14-16).

The purpose of visibility is not being *en vedette*, but giving rise to gratitude and praise to the “Father of lights” (James 1,17).

This issue requires mature judgment. The success of mediatized churches has also inspired clergymen and lay Catholics to highlight the Church in the media. However, the medium itself may have a built-in message (“the medium is the message”, claimed MCLUHAN; FIORE; AGEL, 1969). One thing is a radio program that communicates news of the local community, or instructs the cook in the morning, or keeps the taxi driver awake all night long. Another thing is a TV show that involves the viewer in a mere emotionalism and turns the priest into a media star, making the Christian content just *décor*. The issue is delicate; warning is enough here. It is not by imitating what takes the weak believers to leave our communities that we will constitute conscious communities.

This does not mean that we cannot, and should not, use, with discretion, the language and style that young people are used to. Jesus spoke as his people did, and not always in a theologically correct way (e.g. when he says that the unfaithful servant will be cut by half, or that we give to those who have, as our credit banks do). But it must be clear what is being communicated, the actual message conveyed by these forms of language and style!

The most important thing, however, is recalling that the true visibility of Jesus’ disciples lies on fraternal love: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13,35). “See how they love one another” (Tertullian). This love, however, as evidenced *ad intra*, indoors, is a light that shines *ad extra*, to outsiders. They are not closed “conventicles”, but Christians in daylight, citizens of humanity. Fraternal community love is a public testimony and it cannot exclude, of course, those who are not from the community. Again, the movie *Of gods and men* is a good illustration of this principle. And the

missionaries who “experience the light that Christ is” among the Indians witness the same thing without making the Indians “suitable” to the Catholic structure.

The overall model of the Church behind this view is the Church consisting of communities, not the world organization divided into fiefs.

The parish may be a point of reference, even in terms of social and ecclesial service, but it does not replace the priority of communities that may emerge through human relations at various levels and environments: from neighborhood chapels to affinity communities that cross parish boundaries. All of them should be supported by the local Church, whose head is the bishop.

Another corollary of this view is the public nature of theology, i.e. the Christian discourse. Theology must not speak only to itself, but to the world. Providing reasons for hope (1 Peter 3,15), not only for those who have it, but for anyone who is asked to have it.

The purpose of the Church is not the Church, but the loving and saving God’s self-revelation to the world through Jesus of Nazareth. As God’s manifestation Word of God is greater than the Bible, thus the manifestation of salvation is also greater than the Church. Therefore, the Catholic Church – exactly because it is named Catholic – must allocate its testimony in word and action not only to those inside, but also to outsiders, even while they are within another religious or humanistic framework. The Church is sacrament, a visible and effective sign of salvation, but it is not the exhaustive means of salvation. In the current context, this has consequences that some people might not like to admit.

For a few centuries, the saving manifestation of God through Jesus Christ started being indicated, preferably, with the term that Jesus used in his preaching, the Kingdom of God. But we may not forget the historical origin of this preference, which is apparent in the ironic sentence of modernist theologian Alfred Loisy (1902): “Jesus announced the Kingdom, and what came was the church”. Even in the Bible, the Kingdom of God is not a very old concept. It appears in the Scripture at the time of apocalypticism (Daniel 7). It is likely that Jesus has used this term

because it is the language of his time, corresponding to the imagination of his people in times of oppression under the Hellenistic and Roman empires. But this is still a *metaphor* for something that cannot be situated. “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17,21)<sup>3</sup>. It is a metaphor that, in due time, in the socio-political-cultural circumstance of that time, expressed the “unavailability” of God’s action entrusted to his envoy, “Son of man”, as opposed to the domination exercised by the kingdoms of this world. But the “salvation (that comes) from God” through Jesus, for “all flesh” (Luke 3,6), far surpasses the figure of a kingdom, and the attempts to identify it with a historical kingdom inevitably lead to millenarianism. Something that does not exclude that what the metaphor points out incarnate in the historical praxis; first, in the “flesh” itself (human being), which is Jesus.

Based on these considerations, we risk saying that the testimony of communities gathered under Jesus’ name should neither be “aimed at the Kingdom” or overestimate historical instances, whether socio-political or religious, but rather open minds and hearts to God’s infinity, which overcomes civilizations and religions, but it lies, concretely and immediately, on the human praxis of justice, love, and peace, conceived according to the infallible paradigm that is the praxis of Jesus of Nazareth, “human face of God and divine face of man”<sup>4</sup>.

From this perspective, the mottos of “pastoral conversion” and “new evangelization”, which lately mark the pastoral reflections, both from CNBB and the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) and, recently, the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization, should not be seen as war cries for regaining lost ground, but as an expression of the announcement of good news about God, with a new ardor, at new times, which are precisely these that, in Brazil, are marked by the transition from socio-environmental Catholicism to a Catholicism, or rather a Catholic Christianity of personal conviction and community testimony.

<sup>3</sup> A literal translation, leaving open whether “within” means each person or “among you” – something which, in turn, may indicate the internal reality of the group or the world where the group meets.

<sup>4</sup> Expression dear to Pope John Paul II.

## Conclusion

On several recent statistics, especially those provided by IBGE (2012), it is confirmed that Catholicism is no longer the religion of almost all Brazilians. In a continuous and rapid decline for the last forty years, it currently gathers less than 2/3 of the Brazilian population. At the same time, we find out a remarkable growth of evangelicals, above all the Pentecostal ones, as well as those with no religion, Spiritualism, and “other religiosities”. This does not exclude the fact that the number of Catholic parishes has grown, as well as, at least numerically, the diocesan clergy.

The causes for the decreased percentage of Catholics may be sought in the phenomenon of secularization found out in the “Western” world, and people even speak of an “acculturation” of religion. The analysis of a Brazilian sample – the Archdiocese of Belo Horizonte – points out other direction: migration to other religiosities, usually due to subjective reasons, such as better embracement and attention, greater human and even geographical closeness, as well as doctrinal and disciplinary issues specific to the Catholic Church. However, these phenomena may be united. Secularization becomes less astringent the ties of traditional religion (Catholicism and historical Protestantism) and it opens the pathway to more subjective religiosities, in Pentecostalism (Evangelical, but also Catholic), or to leave religious practice – the case of those who declare themselves as with no religion.

We confronted, this way, the theology of the Second Vatican, the understanding of what faith is, and the Church in the light of the Christ event, the personal Christian choice to bear the cross behind Jesus. Thus, faith is no longer structured as an environmental religion, such as the sociological Christianity that was born more than fifteen centuries ago and now is dismantling itself. We came back to the pilgrim Church, foreign in the world, which always emerges again at times of renewal, such as the Second Vatican Council. This mysterical and sacramental understanding – an effective sign of salvation through Christ – has led

the church to conceive itself as “poor and servant”. A Church that, statistically, may constitute a minority, being characterized not by its powerful structures, but rather by the confession that Jesus is Christ and savior of the world. It is not an organization gathering the largest possible number of members, but a testimonial community that does not give up its universal evangelizing vocation. It does not follow the pathways of sensationalist shine and religious consumerism, undergoing a high turnover and final disappointment, but it experiences the visibility of fraternal love as a sign of the love by means of which God saves the world.

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