

"Communists in the Church": the role of progressive Catholics
in encouraging popular participation in the Sisal Region of
Bahia in the last years of the 20th century

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Abstract: This paper aims at presenting a brief discussion about the role of lay religious people, considered *progressive Catholics*, in encouraging popular participation in the socio-political decisions in the city of Conceição do Coité – located in the Sisal region of Bahia – in the final years of the twentieth century. These Catholics' political actions contributed to downsize a political framework linked to the dictatorial regime and to strengthen the Popular Church in Conceição do Coité's community. The theoretical-methodological perspective guiding this analysis works on the same assumptions adopted by the political historiography's *new* approach and it is articulated with sources of several natures.

Keywords: Progressive Catholics, Brazilian Popular Church, political action, Conceição do Coité.

Introduction

“The Church is a place to bring the people close to God and to ask Him to solve our problems and here in this region. Not to make a den of Communists there in this Church.”¹ This exhortation was delivered on September 25, 1992, during the election period, in Radio Sisal – the main communication vehicle in Conceição do Coité² – by a lawyer who was in charge of the program: “Dr. Ari, the lawyer of the people.”

In 1992, the Brazilian electoral race took place in the context of a Presidential impeachment, which led aspects of the national circumstances to have the upper hand regarding local issues. This reality also operated in the politics of Coité, as one of the candidates for the administrative position in that time, Misael Ferreira de Oliveira, pointed out, “the *Collor problem* has helped us a lot. I mean, Collor was involved in corruption, and I uncovered corruption in Coité”³. However, “Dr. Ari’s” speech indicated how important it was for priests and lay Catholics to be in political discussions during Coité’s electoral battle, especially when a few lay religious people decided to enter party politics and to run for elective offices against entrepreneurs of the Sisal industry in 1986.

The reason for these Catholics to be in Coité’s political arena is due to a Catholic experience more concerned with the dynamics of socio-political relationships in the city during the final years of the twentieth century, which is specific to the *Brazilian Popular Church*⁴.

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¹ Case No. 045/92 found in the Archive of Nossa Senhora da Conceição of Coité parish Church.

² Conceição do Coité is located 235 km from Salvador, and it has an area of 1,086,224 km², with an estimated population of 67,875 inhabitants. Its past territory comprised the routes that interconnected Salvador to the São Francisco hinterland and the State of Piauí. From the 1940s, sisal cultivation became its main economic activity and it currently has the core industries focused on sisal manufactured products in the region.

³ Misael Ferreira de Oliveira’s interview on June 26, 2009, given to Samara Suelen Lima da Silva during her monographic research. Misael had two terms of office as councilman, with the higher number of votes in the municipality, and he worked as the leader of the government in the City Council between 1962/66 and 1967/71. In 1972 he was a candidate for mayor for the first time and he tried it again in 1982, losing both elections; In 1992, he won the elections as deputy mayor on the ticket with Diovando Carneiro. He took the office of Chief of Executive from October 8 to December 31, 1996, due to the suicide of Diovando. In 1987 he was appointed State Deputy for the 1987 to 1991 office.

⁴ Taking Mainwaring (2004) into consideration, who understands the *Brazilian Popular Church* as areas of Catholicism in which faith is deeply concerned with the poor and social justice.

This Catholicism practiced by lay religious people [considered *progressive Catholics*⁵] in *Nossa Senhora da Conceição of Coité* parish church was an important factor in the socialization processes for strengthening popular participation in socio-political decisions and for combating political behavior that did not correspond to the democratic system in the local political arena, such as leaving some people out of political discussions, being violent to opponents, and the control and clientele relations.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that “Dr. Ari’s” speech, in trying to besmirch the lay religious people image when calling them “communists”, aims at disqualifying *progressive Catholics* and their pastoral actions in the Church in front of the Coité’s population and at possibly justifying the need for repressive measures towards the actions of these lay individuals in the political arena. It is known that the attempt to awaken and to play the power of the anti-communist tradition against opponents has demonstrated to remarkably influence the political game at several periods in the Brazilian reality (MOTTA, 2000).

That said, this work is going to address the lay Catholic people actions that have mobilized socialization processes to strengthen popular participation in socio-political decisions rather than a political culture in which the vote was taken as an object of bargaining and the use of violence was a legitimate action in the electoral game. It should be noted that the debate proposed in this work is linked to my doctoral thesis research developed during the History PostGraduate Program of the Federal University of Bahia, which aims at studying disputes between laity Catholic people and the Sisal entrepreneurs for political power that took place the city of Conceição do Coité during 1986 and 2012.

For they are closer to the popular movements they have more responsibility on the creation of Basic Ecclesial Communities, and they are supporters of the so-called liberation theology.

⁵ Taking Scott Mainwaring (2004) studies into consideration, which understand *progressive Catholics* as part of a field of the Catholic Church, comprised by lay movements and members of the hierarchy. Their faith is deeply concerned with the poor and social justice, and they believe their mission requires political engagement.

⁶ In this *new* approach, the study of politics is understood not only in its traditional sense – linked to the State and the great leaders –, but as Francisco Falcon (1997) points out, it is at the level of representations, social imaginaries, memory, mindsets, as well as the several spheres of the exercise of power. For René Rémond (2003), political history, based on the analysis of power games, is essential for understanding society as a whole; politics is a social practice category, it is the point where most activities converge to, and it takes stock of the other components of the social sphere. It demands to be subscribed in a global perspective, making methods and theories developed also by political scientists its own, a renewal through new approaches, objects and problems.

The theoretical-methodological perspective guiding this analysis works on the same assumptions adopted by the political historiography's⁶ *new* approach that "acquires a new dimension when taking into account the religious aspect" (COUTROT, 2003). This approach understands that behind the religious aspect "one recognizes social dimension: in religious expression one can encounter politics and, what is more, religious motivations can somehow influence a society's political experience" (NUNES, 2016, p.11).

In this sense, for Coutrot (2003) the relationship between Christianity and politics "lies in the fact that religious beliefs are manifested in Churches that are social bodies endowed with an organizational structure that has more than one common trait with the political society" (p. 334). Therefore, they disseminate teachings beyond the science of the sacred – "nothing that concerns man and society is foreign to them" (p.334) – and they are part of the same political fabric in which religion communicates politics and politics also structures religion.

According to this idea, which considers the studies about politics no longer with traditional history features, but with other objects, new approaches and open to problems that have not been observed before, this research's time perspective is based on the theoretical-methodological guidelines of the history of the present time, taking into consideration that our object is encompassed within present times and it is interconnected to several document resource (newspapers, pastoral letters, legal actions and spoken interviews). Consequently, it is also interconnected to oral history, because the history of the present time is a quintessentially time perspective of this history (FERREIRA, AMADO, 2006). Thus, the movement of renewing political history played an important role in the development of the history of the present time and oral history in historiographic production.

It is known that the notions of the history of the present time and oral history are still controversial, nevertheless there is common understanding in the academic field about classifying oral history – which depends on memory – as a research methodology; and it is understood that the history of the present time is not "simply an additional period detached from contemporary history, but a new notion of historiographical operation" (DOSSE, 2012, P. 7).

Thus, it is understood that the history of the present time is not a synonym for oral history, neither they are synonyms for memory, but both maintain a fruitful connection with it. Especially regarding collective memory, which is not simply the overlapping of individual memories, but it is "a discursive and force field in which these individual memories are shaped" (ALBUQUERQUE JÚNIOR, 2007, p. 204). The sense of this memory is clearer with representations of the past observed in "a given period and place – provided they are recurrent and repetitive, relate to a significant group and are acceptance in or out that group" (ROUSSO, 2006, p. 95).

The history of the present time as "the history of a past which is not yet dead, which is still borne in the speech and experience of living individuals" (ROUSSO, 1996, 63) is a history - as well as the oral history - "under surveillance" of witnesses who can dispute the historical records in which they do not recognize themselves, or the danger of taking testimonial speech as an unquestionable truth – in this case, a strict articulation between history and memory is even more necessary. (DOSSE, 2012). Memory is constituted by several temporalities that coexist and are interrelated; it is an always current phenomenon (NORA, 2003).

In this sense, the oral and written records – which are the foundation for this investigation of issues of the *progressive Catholics* mobilizations – that can be found in the Archive of the *Nossa Senhora da Conceição do Coité* parish church were analyzed with no hierarchy and not like one could replace the other, but as complementary; "there are things can never be understood from written records alone, and there are also things that cannot even be set forth by oral investigation" (GARRIDO, 1993, p. 39-40).

Having said that, I put forward the path I intend to take on the aspects of the *progressive Catholics*' work in the city of Conceição do Coité: I start by presenting the context fundamentals that influenced lay religious people and the local hierarchy to engage in Coité's socio-political field, as well as the political arena aspects. Next, I aim at displaying the main actions taken by *progressive Catholics* for greater popular participation in socio-political decisions and their efforts to change political behavior, which they did not consider to be matching the democratic system. Finally, I briefly discuss the aspects related to the conflicts that arose from the *progressive Catholics* mobilizations in Conceição do Coité.

A new religious thought

Tribuna Coiteense newspaper is a local press newsletter, founded in 1980, which at the time had great impact on the city and several columnists wrote about the events taking place in the municipality and in the nearby areas, especially regarding politics and local and national events – some of them related to the local Catholic Church. On April 28, 1989, the following thinking was published on it:

The Latin American bishops gathered in Mexico stated that such poverty is not incidental, but rather the result of certain 'situations and structures'. According to evangelical values, the separation between rich and poor is not God's will. He desires brothers and sisters to live fair and egalitarian relationships. That is why we need to change society.⁷

The event referenced by the *Tribuna Coiteense* newspaper was the III General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate held in Puebla de Los Angeles, Mexico, in 1979, promoted by the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM). During an economic recession scenario, CELAM demonstrated, through its documents, to be a Church committed to social action against dictatorships and oppression and indicated prioritization and solidarity towards the poor. This record was signed by Arivaldo Ferreira Mota during his time as a lay religious man in Coité's parish church – he was pastoral volunteer, member of the *Cursillo* Movement⁸ and freelancer.

⁷ *Tribuna Coiteense* newspaper, Year IX, n. 46, April 28, 1989, p. 2.

⁸ The *Cursillo* Movement (MCC) was founded in the 1940s in Spain under the influence of the Spanish Catholic Action Youth (JACE). Although its national structure is linked to traditional Christian doctrines and behaviors, it was one of the main lay religious zones that shared the conciliar proposals and the spirituality of liberation ideal in the diocesan and parochial spheres.

⁹ Sisal is also known as Agave, a rural plant native to Mexico that grows in semi-arid regions. Brazil is the world's largest sisal producer: its fiber exportation revenue has been higher US\$ 100 million. The country's sisal exploration is concentrated in the Northeast region, roughly in Bahia and Paraíba – the largest producers – usually by small producers, what makes it an alternative income source (Source: Development Institute for the Sisal Region).

¹⁰ The literature on the region's industrialization process is still scarce, but it is possible to relate this process with the analysis of attempts to modernize Bahia in the 1950s through the "implementation of an agricultural development policy for the production of raw materials and basic inputs and that would back not only to the already-installed industries in the area, but also the industrial sector of the dynamic center of the country" (SANTOS, Reginaldo S. OLIVEIRA, José C. S. *Notas preliminares sobre o padrão de intervenção do Estado da Bahia (1955-80)*. Rio de Janeiro, 1988. p.62, available at: bibliotecadigital.fgv.br. Acesso em: 10/12/2016. In the 1970s, the sisal production reached great expansion throughout the municipality, turning some regions into areas focused specifically on sisal monoculture. This period was marked by the increase of the fiber prices in the external market due to the oil crisis.

It is interesting to highlight that during the period of the conference of the Latin American bishops in Mexico, as well as in the period of the publication of Arivaldo Mota's thinking, I have not yet found any parochial record about this event – especially when it comes to the local hierarchy. Arivaldo Mota's thinking is quite significant once it reveals that, during this period, the local religious institution – represented by its clergy – was far from the ideals and presumptions that guided the pastoral action of the Latin American Church and, above all, the Church in Brazil, represented by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB).

The mismatch between the local Church and the national Church can be explained by the sociopolitical and religious scenario of Conceição do Coité. This municipality's socio-political structure was linked to the process of the industrial development of sisal⁹ between the 1950s and the mid-1970s¹⁰, and to the establishment of the Military Dictatorship in Brazil that strengthened a powerful local economic elite, linked to the local political power of the sisal fiber¹¹ export process. Thus, from these decades on, the main dominant political groups of Conceição do Coité were men who grew rich with the industrialization of the sisal fiber and competed against great traders and independent professionals for local political power, winning several lawsuits.

In this context, two sisal entrepreneurs, Hamilton Rios de Araújo and Misael Ferreira de Oliveira, who "reaped the rewards" of sisal farming and became the largest owners, traders and industrialists of sisal, so they invested in their political careers. The implementation of the two-party system, instituted by the Institutional Act No. 2 – which cut political party freedom – made the consolidation of political groups linked to sisal entrepreneurs in the political arena of the region feasible, since this elite, in order to remain in power and continue calling the shots in the local political game, joined the National Renewal Alliance (Arena) – the main basis for sustaining the regime – and settled in the underlying labels of the government party: Arena 1 and Arena 2.

¹¹ The sisal leaves are used to produce a highly resistant fiber that, in turn, is used to produce handicrafts, brooms, sacks, bags, hats, strings, ropes, mats and carpets, as well as in the production of cellulose for manufacturing high-strength Kraft paper and other types of thin paper (for cigarettes, filter tips, dielectric paper, hygienic absorbents, diapers etc.). In addition to these uses, there it is possible to use the fiber: in automotive, furniture, household appliance and geotextile (slope protection, agriculture and road surface) industries; mixing it with polypropylene as a substitute for fiberglass (plastic objects composition); and in the construction industry (PROSSIGA, 2004; CAMPBELL, 2004 apud ALVES, Maria O.; SANTIAGO, EDUARDO G. *Tecnologia e relações sociais de produção no setor sisaleiro nordestino*. 2007. p.4. Available at: www.bdpa.cnptia.embrapa.br. Accessed on: 12/02/2016).

On the other hand, this local elite, as in other regions of the country, represented the assurance of legitimacy to the central power, since they were loyal to the greater power in exchange for the protection of their interests. "The consecutive and extended election victories of the Arena candidates during the dictatorship" (LEMENHE, 1995, p.29) were evidences of it.

The sisal entrepreneurs formed the basis of the authoritarian government; thus, they were able to limit the party-political field of action and to unite other political leaders under their command. Therefore, disputes over political offices were restricted to *sisal men* and their co-religionists: Coité's politics was divided between two rival groups from the same governing coalition. The similarities in the political-ideological profiles of the sisal entrepreneurs highlighted that "the disputes took place within the same ideological field, and the candidates could only be differentiated in the personal sphere" (ALMEIDA, 2010, p.10). Thus, as Lemenhe (1995) points out, due to the absence of ideological polarization between the parties and the lack of different interests, the personalistic position in power got worse.

The worsening of personalism in Coité's politics violently limited the discussions and reflections on politics and its true meaning. As well, it strengthened the political behavior in which the vote was taken as an object of bargaining and the use of violence was a legitimate action in the electoral game. The gears of this political system acquired nuances so peculiar in this region that the local groups, as of 1972, were identified by means of the symbology of their colors, an "actual electoral folklore": *Blues* (Arena 1) and *Reds* (Arena 2).

This governing method did not change with the democratization process. The two groups organized themselves into pro-government labels: ARENA 1 migrated to the Liberal Party (PL), the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) and the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB); and ARENA 2, to the Liberal Front Party (PFL) and the Brazilian Progressive Party (PPB). The latter exercised the local power supremacy for 40 years – on one hand, the *Reds* were under the leadership of Hamilton Rios de Araújo; on the other, the *Blues* were under the leadership of Misael Ferreira de Oliveira.

From the religious perspective, the Church, throughout its history in the municipality, was involved in the power relations schemes around powerful political leaders, at times, driven by its ecclesiastical power symbolic strength; in others, by its efforts to meet their structural demands and to influence the political-institutional field of Conceição do Coité. The sociopolitical structure of Conceição do Coité was based on traditional power relations and it induced the Church to be subservient to the local power.

For a long time, the material and financial dependence made the Church exchange favors with the municipal government and, at the same time, legitimized the authority of several politicians who, surrounded by religious celebrations, reinforced their power and privileges in society. It can be observed in the following record from the Parish Council on March 23, 1996:

Until June 1989, the *Nossa Senhora da Conceição do Coité* parish church went through turbulent times, ranging from dreaming, the need to "be seen", the big accomplishments with no concrete objectives, to the commitment with political parties that imposed structural, functional and financial dependence – to the point the City Hall was covering almost all the costs that we believed to be the responsibility of the parish administration. Costs with the staff of the Parish Office, housekeeping, power and water bills, and other expenses became part of the liabilities of the Municipal public power. We were never informed about balance sheets that demonstrated the income and expenses of our parish church. We had a car in the parish church that we don't even know what end it took... The parish church was subservient to a political party¹².

Another aspect that made religious experience difficult, especially on the part of the local clergy – close to the conciliar *aggiornamento* program¹³ scope – was the fact that the ecclesial communities, inspired and established by Father José Antonio dos Reis¹⁴ throughout the municipality during the 1970s and 1980s, do not reflect on social matters nor claim their rights.

¹² Letter from the Parish Council on March 23, 1996.

¹³ *Aggiornamento* is an Italian expression used during the Second Vatican Council and Pope John XXIII popularized as an expression of the Catholic Church desire to come out of the Vatican Council updated. II. In other words, *aggiornamento* is the adaptation and re-presentation of Catholic principles to the current days and modern world. Therefore, it is a key goal of the Second Vatican Council. (Source: <http://pt.wikipedia.org/>).

¹⁴ The parish priest who preceded Father Luiz and was part of the Society of Divine Vocations (Vocationist Fathers), the religious congregation that ran the parish church between 1959 and 1989.

¹⁵ The Second Vatican was a Council held in the Catholic Church with the bishops from all around the world and some representatives of other Christian religions from 1962 to 1965 in several sessions in the Vatican City, summoned by Pope John XIII and sealed by Pope Paul VI. The Catholic Church experienced a new paradigm under the influence of the Second Vatican Council, which provoked great changes within the Church, both in the conceptual and theological field, but above all, it introduced within the institution an openness to existing social matters in the society it operates throughout the evangelization process.

¹⁶ The term *Liberation Theology* was created by Gustavo Gutierrez in 1972 to indicate the expression/legitimacy of the praxis of a vast social movement that emerged in the 1960s, made up of priests, bishops, religious people, lay religious movements, grassroots pastoral interventions and CEB'S. Michael Lowy (1975) also defines as a set of writings by Catholic and Protestant theologians from a reflection on the praxis of this movement.

They were areas mainly dedicated to welcoming sacramental rituals. These communities were not in agreement with the philosophy of the CEBs – entities that criticized the conservative power, ecclesiastical or political, and expressed their faith with awareness of the social situation.

On the other hand, Arivaldo Mota's record highlights that part of Coité's parish church lay religious people was not distant from the *new thinking* of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council¹⁵ and it was influenced by the guidelines of Liberation Theology¹⁶, responsible for the engagement of Church sectors in popular participation and in the fight for redemocratization in Latin America. At the same time, this record represents the efforts of the lay religious people who reflected in their meetings on the *winds* of the Second Vatican Council, the documents of the Latin American Episcopal Conferences in Medellín and Puebla¹⁷ and, above all, who believed in the spirituality of Liberation Theology, in establishing the *Brazilian Popular Church* in Coité's Catholic experience and, from these religious influences, in making changes in society's sociopolitical and economic conjuncture.

In this sense, it was probably through the diocesan context to which the local Church was inserted, under the jurisdiction of the then Diocese of *Feira de Santana*, that these lay religious people from Coité – who were part of the pastoral movements of diocesan dimension – got in touch with the new Church guidelines; through a solidarity network they became autonomous to discuss about the conciliar documents, no matter their parish priests' activities; since part of the diocesan clergy, especially the foreign priests, excited by the *winds* of the Second Vatican and Liberation Theology, spread among the Catholic churchgoers the importance of advocating and claiming their rights.

In addition to the involvement of priests in this process, Resende (2008) points out that some lay people¹⁸, many of them teachers, inspired by the practice of countless Catholics who were fighting against the Military Dictatorship in Brazil, spread the new guidelines adopted by the Church in the ecclesial spaces of the diocese, most importantly their political stance.

¹⁷These two conferences were held by the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM). The Second Conference of Medellín in 1968 represented the consolidation of the guidelines of the Second Vatican in the light of the Latin America situation. The Third Conference of Puebla of Los Angeles in 1979 was much discussed, expected and feared, not only on the Continent but throughout the world.

¹⁸ Resende analyzes that many of these lay people had a record of involvement with social movements and deep involvement in the religious community experience. These lay people were supporters for the fight against the social exclusion capitalist system and were taking part in the Catholic social movements that emerged in the country during this period. They collaborated with some priests in the creation of the Community Organization Movement (MOC) and in the creation of the Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs).

¹⁹ The Catholic Action, a lay Catholic movement originating in Italy at the end of the 19th century, was established in Brazil in 1920 by D. Sebastião Leme, inspired by Pius XI. This hierarchy-oriented conservative movement aimed at Christianizing several sectors of Brazilian society, especially the elite. Between 1946 and 1950, the movement became more autonomous and more involved with university and leftist movements. (MAINWARING, 2004)

Delgado and Passos (2009) argue that the change processes in Catholicism, in the sense of greater closeness to the popular strata and groups engaged in social changes, is a dialectical and non-linear movement. The signs of the dialogue relationship with society stem from the involvement and militancy of some members of Catholicism in several areas of society. "By these means, the relationships mediation does not take place only at the institutional level, as in previous periods, but at the social situation itself" (DELGADO, PASSOS, 2009, p.97).

In Brazil, this process took place in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with a change in the Catholic Action¹⁹ guideline under the influence of Jacques Maritain's thought²⁰, European theologians such as Lubac, Chenu, Congar²¹, and the Economy and Humanism movement of Father Lebre²²; In addition, as Luiz Gonzaga Lima (1979) points out, by the action of an episcopate group called progressive. This process was also linked to labor issues in the Getúlio Vargas' government, contextualized by the polarization of the Brazilian civil society in the middle of 1960, and the international capitalism crisis that had affected the countries of Latin America.

In analyzing this political-religious development of the Catholic Church in Latin America, Bruneau and Hewitt (1992) argue that the Church's approach to social issues was consolidated by the theological tendencies in the Universal and local Churches that resulted in the Second Vatican Council and the meeting of CELAM, in Medellín. It is emphasized that the main conduit for this change in Brazil were the CNBB activities. CNBB, led by a progressive clergy, promoted social programs with political involvement in the Brazilian scenario.

Another important factor of this action in Latin America, analyzed by Lowy (1991), was the engagement of Christians to the Marxist ideals that was made possible by the emergence of Liberation Theology. According to the author, without practicing Christianity for liberation one cannot understand social and historical phenomena as important as the rise of the revolution in Central America or the emergence of a new labor movement in Brazil.

²⁰ Jacques Maritain was born in Paris on 18 November 1882 and died in April 1973 in Toulouse. He was a Catholic French philosopher and his works influenced the ideology of the Christian Democracy.

²¹ These theologians led some theological movements that emerged between World War I and II. The movements proposed reforms in the Church before the Second Vatican. Lubac, Chenu and Congar were theologians in the Second Vatican, although they were censored during Pius XII magisterium. Cf. CODINA, Victor. Fifty years ago there was a council...originated from the Second Vatican. In: _ *Cadernos de Teologia Pública*. year VII, number 81, 2013. Humanitas Unisinos Institute - Vale do Rio dos Sinos University, 2013.

²² It was a movement established in 1940 in France by Father Louis-Joseph Lebre^t, an economist and Dominican, because of the fascist regime, who proposed not only an antifascist, but openly anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist political thinking. Fr. Lebre^t established close relations with the Vatican during the Council and was invited by Pope Paul VI to write the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, enacted in 1967. Cf. BOSI, Alfredo. Economy and Humanism. In: _ *Estudos Avançados*, vol.26 no.75 São Paulo May / Aug. 2012. Available at: <http://www.scielo.br/>. Accessed on: 12/01/2016.

On one hand, Mainwaring (2004) points out that the development of the libertarian current was made possible due to the pioneering reflections on the specificity of the Catholic faith in the Third World made by the young people of the Catholic Left. These young people "did not reduce faith to political action, nor did they place Marx before Christ, but, in fact, they believed that faith requires commitment to create a fairer world" (p.94).

On the other hand, Amaral (2006) argues that this political change process in the Church was made possible by the messianic concept, the bureaucratization of the Church and the relationship between the intellectual laity and priests. According to Bento (1999), from a political and economic point of view, these groups' freedom was, above all, the freedom from capitalism. This convergence point with Marxist concepts resulted in backlashing from conservative ecclesiastical sectors that understood the movement as heresy that is exposed due to deviation from faith.

In contrast, the aforementioned authors indicate that, in spite of this conservative counter-offensive against the progressive actions of the Church, this libertarian current reached wide performance spaces in the institution during the 1960s and 1980s and, thus, according to Jeffrey Klaiber (1997), it was made possible for the Church to take an important leadership role against the dictatorial regimes that took place in Latin American countries. In many countries, its work favored and legitimized the establishment of political oppositions and alternatives for returning to the democracy. In Brazil, this strengthening took place before the Second Vatican, with some progressive sectors shifting in the hierarchy to important dioceses in the national context, but above all, with the creation of the CNBB in 1952 and the Brazilian Conference of Religious (CRB) taking place in 1955 – they were catalysts for this new Church policy.

In the ecclesial situation of the Sisal Region, especially in Conceição do Coité, these hierarchical changes are noticed in a post-dictatorship period, starting in 1989 with the arrival of priests and nuns kindled by the notions adopted by the Church in the Second Vatican and the Liberation Theology, as well as rooted in the pastoral practice of confronting the authoritarian regimes and experience with the reality of poverty²³.

²³ Fathers Luiz Oliveira and Antônio Cedraz, and the nun Marina Santos share in their life trajectories experience in fighting the Military Dictatorship and taking part in religious movements that were mobilization areas in the process of re-democratization of the country. CF. MIRANDA, Cristian Barreto de. *Rebulição no Coreto: conflito entre padres e políticos em Conceição do Coité (1989-2000)* 162 f. 2012. Dissertation (Master's degree) - Faculty of Philosophy and Human Sciences, Federal University of Bahia, Salvador - BA, 2012.

²⁴ Woman Congregation founded by Father João Martinho Moye in the year 1762 in GAP, region located in the south-east of France. The Sisters arrived in Brazil on June 28, 1904.

The performance of the priests Luiz Rodrigues de Oliveira and Antonio Elias Souza Cedraz, and the Sisters of the Providence of Gap²⁴, especially Sister Marina Roseli Santos, was fundamental for the dissemination and implementation of the guidelines of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and for the consolidation of the Brazilian Popular Church in Coité's society. Moreover, along with the work of the laity, it contributed to the changes in the socio-political relations marked by the political disputes of the "sisal men", separated in the *Reds* and the *Blues*.

Thus, this condition experienced by the Catholic Church influenced and enabled some lay people and the local hierarchy in Conceição do Coité to mobilize Catholics for greater popular participation in socio-political decisions and to put efforts to modify political behavior, which they believed that was not keeping up with the democratic system. Thus, they engaged in the process of minimizing the political structure of command – that adapted itself to the socioeconomic and political-institutional changes that the country and the state went through with the re-democratization process.

Progressive Catholics in Coité's political arena

According to progressive Catholics, the stay of an authoritarian political culture – in which *Blues* and *Reds* were established after the resumption of the democratic regime and the civil society was strongly mobilized to guarantee social rights and to take part in politics – was regarded as a major setback. Therefore, they understood that it was necessary to consolidate in Coité's community, especially in electoral periods, values and behaviors linked to a democratic political culture and the common ideals of the 1988 "Citizen Constitution". Their own involvement in party politics would be a way to strengthen such culture in Conceição do Coité, as one of its leaders, Arivaldo Ferreira Mota, highlighted:

[...] from the moment when doctors and teachers – such as Doctor Pinheiro, Doctor Yedo and Acrisia – were transferred from our city to rather far ones, we realized the situation was worse than we thought. Then we realized that we still needed to take part in a political project different from those of persecution, so that we could try to change Coite's politics.²⁵

²⁵ Interview with Arivaldo Ferreira Mota, on June 22, 2009, given to Bianca Carneiro de Almeida for her monographic research. Arivaldo, then as a lay religious man working to the local Church, accounting and statistics technician and founder of the Workers' Party in Conceição do Coité. He served as municipal councilor between 2000-2004 and, in 2004, he was a deputy mayor candidate in coalition with PMDB, but the ticket he was part of did not win.

In view of this, the laity understood that taking political action meant to act on a political culture (ALMEIDA, 2011) seeking changes in the way in which politics was experienced in Conceição do Coité, especially in the election period, when voting was a trade currency and violence against the opponents of the hegemonic political project was legitimized. That said, this work does not analyze the notion of the existing political culture in Coité's society from its affinity or distance from democracy, nor from its economic development, but from the studies of Serge Bernstein, who points out that the "the political act, as the complex phenomenon it is, is often explained by reference to a set of representations common to a very broad group within a society" (p. 157). In this sense, the understanding of political culture, through these common values and beliefs, "is to make a common reading of the past; of aspirations and projections of a future to be lived together; and of a world view fellowship" (DUTRA, 2002, p. 24).

Angela Gomes (2005) points out that despite the complexity and heterogeneity of this "system of representations", such notion of political culture "allows the understanding of meanings of a given group (its size may vary), given its social experience and at a certain period in time" (p.31). Thus, the multiple character of political cultures "which territories are plotted by limits that correspond to common norms and values" is evident (DUTRA, 2002, p.25), even though at one point one element prevails.

The integration and conveyance of political cultures go through multiple channels, they emerge and change due to, among other things, the processes of socialization; and the channels of socialization of the traditional politics are, for instance, family, school, high school, university and the various groups to which citizens belong. (Bernstein, 1998, p. 356). Therefore, from the socialization processes point of view, one can analyze the political activity of these progressive Catholics – loaded with religious values and symbols – in the political-partisan game, as permeated by intense clashes and schemes, also as way of strengthening and growing the political culture. The lay religious movements as such are extremely rich civic spaces because they are embodied in concrete actions developed in community (COUTROT, 2003). To perceive the experience of Catholics in the Church and in the political party in the sense of such socialization "results in both an affirmation and legitimation of a preexisting political culture, which allows its questioning and even the forging of a new proposal, as far as it allows dialogue about it". (MARINHO, 2014, p. 10).

The laity's understanding was also shared by the new religious people of the local hierarchy who arrived in 1989, especially Father Luiz Rodrigues, who published an article in in the *Tribuna Coiteense* newspaper, in October 1990. He analyzed the 1989 elections as a setback because the elected candidates were "children" of the Military Regime, a period in which the "vital sectors of social life" were "scrapped" by these men: a real social and human backwardness²⁶. Such aspect did not promote democratic development in the country, thus, favoring the persistence of the authoritarian political behavior.

This understanding of Coite's *progressive Catholics* was possibly influenced by the role played by the national sectors of the Catholic Church in Brazil's process of redemocratization and it was essential for the establishing a participatory democracy. In this process, the Church's operation can be observed, for example, in the actions of Bishop Mario Moreli from the state of Duque de Caxias, who together with a group of lay people "traveled throughout Brazil, giving lectures and organizing meetings, mobilizing the setting up of a Constituent Assembly" (WHITAKER, 2010, p.77). In addition, the mobilization to establish the Constitutional Monitoring Commission organized by CNBB that disclosed information on the progress of the constituent process in a weekly newsletter throughout the country. Mainwaring (2004) highlights the Church's performance during the redemocratization period:

During the opening, the Catholic Church made contributions to democratization, from defending human rights, criticizing the abuses of authoritarianism, to supporting popular movements. (...) one of its contributions - the Catholic Left approach - influenced some important political agents, including significant part of the Left, the Workers Party, the new syndicalism and many peasant leagues, unions and neighborhood associations.

Another indication of its performance, as presented by Dermi Azevedo (2004), was the mobilization of the Church in favor of Popular Amendments to the Constitution, with emphasis on ethics in politics and the implementation of social policies as *sine qua non* for democratic stability.

²⁶ OLIVEIRA, Luiz R. *Retrocesso histórico*. *Tribuna Coiteense* newspaper, October 1989.

²⁷ According to Lowy, this concept defines the great range of movements linked to significant sectors of the Church and ideals of the Liberation Theology, which in 1960 approached left-wing movements in Latin America and Brazil. Cf. LOWY, Michael. *Marxism and Liberation Theology*. São Paulo, Cortez: Associated Authors, 1991. (*Polêmicas do nosso tempo* collection, v.39)

A total of 122 amendments were signed by over 12 million citizens, due to the commitment of various organizations and social movements in collecting signatures, including the Church, in order to make the Brazilian population aware of its participation in the socio-political decisions of the country.

Thus, sharing the *spirituality of liberation*²⁷, responsible for engaging Church sectors in popular participation, and understanding the need to change the Coité's political arena, as pointed out in Arivaldo Mota's report that some lay people from Coité – teachers of state schools at the municipality, self-employed workers, public servants and young students – sought to have political-partisan participation, as one of its leaders, Joilson Araújo Cunha, then pastoral volunteer and public official reports: "We were all part of the Cursillo Movement of Christianity and listening to the ethical requirements of the Gospel, we began to look for a party that would represent the Christian ideology and be concerned with the pursuit of justice"²⁸.

Therefore, close to the Brazilian Popular Church perspective, they founded the local Workers Party²⁹ (PT) in 1986. The local PT was a result from the laity's actions. Under this label, *progressive Catholics* entered the dispute for the Coité's political power – an arena represented by Sisal businessman hegemony – and they were considered Communists by part of the population.

Based on the laity's statements, Bianca Almeida³⁰ highlights that their main objective was to make the population aware of the formation of a new political culture in Conceição do Coité, in order to neutralize the clientelism and welfarism relations. However, this goal established by the laity was not encouraged by the local religious institution, nor did they obtain many supporters; on the contrary, they were ridiculed for being a minority that "would fit into a Beetle".

One could suppose that the lack of incentive of the local hierarchy in the period, represented by the priest José Antônio dos Reis, meant that the religious institution was a unique social greatness, opposed to the society that secularized and sought to emancipate itself from the catholic tradition. The laity performance in the political arena could represent a path far from the evangelical precepts.

²⁸ Jonilson Araújo interview, on June 22, 2009, given to Bianca Carneiro de Almeida for her monographic research. Joilson was a pastoral volunteer and member of the MCC, founder of the PT in Conceição do Coité and in 1996 he was candidate for councilman, but he lost the elections with 1,466 votes.

²⁹ These Catholics convergence to the PT can be interpreted in the analyses of Machado's study on the participation of Catholic sectors in the formation of the PT in São Paulo metropolitan zone. Cf: MACHADO, Adriano Henriques. *Os católicos oPTaram? Os "setores católicos" e o Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) na grande São Paulo* (1978-1982). 204 f. 2010. Dissertation (Masters). Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, São Paulo. 2010.

³⁰ ALMEIDA, B. C. 2010, op. cit.

However, with the arrival of Father Luiz Rodrigues de Oliveira, some leaders linked to the religious institution were encouraged to engage in party politics, as reported by Francisco de Assis, a public official:

Father Luiz encouraged leaders of the Workers Party and he gave opportunity and visibility to some of the leaders of the party and I can include myself: there was a debate program for *TV Cultura* and he invited me and Joilson (...) two notorious members of the PTs, even though it was still small and little influential party in the municipality. Father Luiz aided the PT to gain visibility, and the PT leaders felt at ease to organize, articulate, present themselves and their proposals to society. He contributed a lot to the rise of some leaders of the PT of Conceição do Coité among whom I include myself. (...) he set an example of involvement in the social life of the municipality and he encouraged the leadership of the Workers Party – this made him to be righteously considered as someone who contributed to the opposition causes and with the Workers Party in particular (...) his friendship with Waldir Pires made him somehow part of the PT, he was never a member although he was one when he arrived – or he was already a “Waldirist”; and Waldir's arrival facilitated this approximation of him with the PT of Conceição do Coite.³¹

In this sense, Father Luiz's behavior strengthened the engagement of lay people in social movements and influenced Catholics, especially lay religious people who believed in the *spirituality of liberation*, upon the importance of the Christian community in the transformation of the unfair structures existing in Coité's society, through reflection and praxis inspired by the Gospel. The encouragement given by the local hierarchy for the laity's popular participation in the socio-political arena of the municipality can be observed, in addition to partisan political engagement, in the different paths adopted in the pastoral work of these religious individuals.

The main path pursued was to create spaces for the laity's prominence so that they could perceive themselves as partakers of the Church's salvific mission³² and to be actively responsible for the evangelizing mission amidst temporal affairs. This could be done through the various ministries, worthy and necessary for the creation of the Kingdom of God, thus helping the Church's apostolate.

³¹ Interview given by Francisco de Assis Alves dos Santos on December 19, 2009. He currently holds the chief executive office in the city of Conceição do Coité for the second time; he held his first office between 2013 and 2016. He was elected councilman in 2004.

³² See Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, p. 167-72.

According to the testimony of Eliana Souza³³, the Sisters of Gap, especially Sister Marina Roseli, played an important role in the formation of the lay people of the community of Cristo Rei, located in the Açudinho municipality, and in encouraging women to participate in collective actions, whether it meant helping with the household income, making handicrafts or claiming their own rights to the Rural Workers' Union of Conceição do Coite and the Association of Residents of Açudinho.

The Sisters of Gap made use of biblical texts in which stories of important women of the people of God who fought for justice and for the Kingdom were told as an example to encourage and legitimize the actions of women living in the Açudinho community; the encouragement from the Sisters can be observed in the following account of Eliana Souza:

During my seventeen years of activity in this movement, I can say that we have never lost contact with the Catholic Church (...). The moment the Sisters of Providence ceased to give that support and to assist us as a group, as people, as practicing Catholics, right? Father Elias showed up and he was of great help to our work, he helped the group in some organizations of March 8, which also helped a lot (...) in the making of the women's movement constitution, anyway, the Church was there at several moments of the history of achievements of women's rights, right? Our gatherings always took place... in areas lent by the Catholic Church, right? ... We have always been supported by the Catholic Church, right? This joint participation was not only participating for the sake of doing it (...) the Church, then, shows its involvement as a religious entity and makes people get involved today; I'm not only speaking for myself, but I'm talking about a few testimonies from colleagues, women and men (...) everyone who is connected is in the movement today due to a relationship with the Catholic Church.³⁴

In addition to the involvement of the Sisters in the formation process, the presence of Fr. Antonio Elias Souza Cedraz was fundamental to encourage Catholics to engage in the political decisions of the municipality. The religious discourse uttered by these societal players – aiming at engaging the laity in the political arena – arose from the teachings on the *social issue* reflected in the Social Doctrine of the Church³⁵ and in the Latin American Episcopal Conferences, especially in Puebla.

³³ Interview given by Eliana Souza, on July 24, 2010, in the city of Conceição do Coité. Eliana Souza, then a lay religious member of the CEBs in the countryside, currently takes part in the coordination of the Collective of Women of the Union of Rural Workers of Conceição do Coité.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

According to it, the origin of social issues had its root in the sin of men, a "sinful situation" that impaired life and prevented the realization of the human being.

Thus, the laity representation in the transformation of conjunctures that generated inhuman conditions of life according to the Gospel would be paramount. The layman should be the main player responsible for translating his faith into actions that informed the Kingdom about the unfair structures and, above all, for the Christian ordering of temporal affairs (PASSOS; SOARES, 2007).

Father Antonio Elias was in the countryside communities organizing several CEBs and being the main motivator and lecturer of lay leaderships. During the electoral period, discussions and speeches about the Christians' political participation and the importance properly voting prevailed. He shared this social engagement with the young people who, gathered in the Youth Ministry (PJ), promoted discussions about faith linked to social issues, an aspect analyzed in the account of Maria Eliana Santos, a lay woman who participated in the CEBs and PJ:

One of the things Father Elias put forward was not just praying, but also the organization. Father Elias has brought fairly high motivation in this respect (...) that actions do not walk alone, it is not only about the person who acts, but the whole, brought together, it adds up, grows and highlights things; if actions are not brought together, they certainly weaken and end up losing a project that was created.³⁶

In this sense, the experience of the *Brazilian Popular Church* Catholicism influenced the engagement of some lay religious people and members of the local hierarchy in Coité's political arena and enabled them to understand that their religious practices were permeated by the commitment to "order temporal affairs to use them to establish the Kingdom of God".³⁷ In this sense, they contributed to altering the sense that religion should be distant from concrete realities, and that political discussions could only take place between representatives and in areas legally established for such purpose –not by a priest, nor in the ecclesial community.

³⁵ The Social Doctrine of the Church was developed in the nineteenth century on the encounter of the Gospel with modern industrial society. It proposes principles of reflection, presents criteria of judgment, guides one to action contrary to the logic of the market in the regulation of social ties that are against justice and the common good.

³⁶ Interview given by Maria Eliana Santos, on July 24, 2010, in the city of Conceição do Coité. Maria Eliana, is currently taking part in the coordination of the Collective of Women of the Union of Rural Workers of Conceição do Coité.

³⁷ CELAM Documents: results of the Conferences of Rio de Janeiro, Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo. São Paulo: Paulus, 2005, p. 482.

Coité's Catholics in dispute or under the guise of final considerations

In January 1997, *Jornal Coiteense* – Coité's newspaper, a significant local press report, launched in the 1990s due to the termination of the *Jornal Tribuna Coiteense*, based on the statements of the then Metropolitan Archbishop of São Salvador da Bahia and Primate of Brazil, discussed the aspects of the limited action of the Catholic Church in politics, the main reason for it was "the Church being distant from the parties (...)" D. Lucas was very clear in establishing that pastors, bishops, priests and deacons should not do politics party"³⁸. The editorial's title was "The Catholic Church and the Elections" and its final considerations were the following questions:

And how did priests, deacons, and ministers behave? For example, here in Conceição do Coité? Were they consistent with the Church norms, set forth by D. Lucas? No. The conduct was ostensibly contrary, reaching the height of placing their favorite candidates for councilors during the mass of 9/29/96 on the altar, in a curiously advertising stand (...) There lacked understanding and obedience to the norms set forth by D. Lucas.³⁹

The questions raised in the *Jornal Coiteense* are quite interesting, since they show that, in the process of retake of democracy, conservative sectors of the Catholic Church in Brazil tended to minimize the mobilization for popular participation in socio-political decisions and for the clergy's and laymen's public involvement in politics, because "democratization allowed civil society to be reborn and, as a result, the Church no longer felt compelled to speak for the civil society as it has done before" (MAINWARING, 2005, p.251).

The questions published in *Jornal Coiteense* also contribute to the realization that even though the local Church is close to the postulates of the Brazilian Popular Church and it fosters the engagement of the Catholic in Coité's political arena, such as in the actions of the clergy and in the appointment of candidates linked to the Church for the electoral race – part of the Catholics did not approve the performance of *progressive Catholics* in Coité's society, possibly because they understood that political environments are unprivileged areas for the sacred.

³⁸ *Jornal Coiteense*, January 1997, page 2.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

It is clear that the subjects linked to the political groups of the local political arena were hostile towards the laity and priests of the *spirituality of liberation* activities in the socio-political dimension of the municipality. It happened during the municipal election of 1996: examples were the depredation of the parochial house and an attempt of invasion; riots during celebrations of Mass in the mother church, causing the leaving a few churchgoers wounded; confrontations during Radio Sisal's program, labeling them as "communists" and "ministers of Satan."⁴⁰

In this sense, despite the fact that the purpose of this work was not to discuss the conflicts between *progressive Catholics* and Sisal businessmen, it is important to observe that these conflicts were not only a political arena dispute, but they included the religious field, for the sisal businessmen were Catholic and they placed strategies to "desecrate" religious practices, beliefs and value system of the religious lay people based on the Liberation Theology during this power dispute.

On one hand, in analyzing the relationship between Catholicism and politics, I recognize that the Church is an institution. From this notion, presented by Mainwaring (2004), understanding that the Church's tendency to protect its organizational interests is a key element of its involvement with politics. Thus, I understand that the conflicts between the different conceptions of the institutional goals of the Catholic Church reveal that there are different models of *being a Church* in this institution, experienced and defended by the individuals that are part of it. Depending on the model of the Church, "the adoption of a particular purpose can be perceived as absolutely essential or erroneous" (MAINWARING, 2004, p.19), so the Church's actions reflect the political conflicts and value references inside the institution, and its intervention in politics depends fundamentally on the way in which the Church understands its religious mission⁴¹.

On the other hand, Mainwaring (2004) argues that conflicts between different ecclesiastical sectors are not directly antagonistic and are not wholly conscious in pursuing hegemonies, but rather occur through the attempts of each group to establish their perception of the Church's mission as being the most appropriate. Political conflicts affect the conception of faith, since social practices and institutional identities change because social conflicts lead to a new way of understanding oneself existence. If a religious movement "believes that its mission requires political movements, political conflicts affect their idea of faith. So, the analysis of institutional change requires a broader approach to the political process "(MAINWARING, 2004, p.25).

⁴⁰ Book of Tombo of the Nossa Senhora da Conceição do Coité parish church.

⁴¹ Coutrot (2003) approaches this understanding by analyzing that the existence of Christian subcultures or models of belief within a Church, which convey different conceptions of society and predispose the churchgoers to make certain social and political choices.

In this sense, the presence of these *progressive Catholics* in the political arena is significant in order to perceive the performance of the *Brazilian Popular Church* in Bahia during the time when the conservative sectors of the Catholic Church took the central institutions of power, such as the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB). These sectors expanded the Pentecostal spirituality⁴² and minimized the activities of the *spirituality of liberation* in many dioceses and parishes. In addition, it is significant to get to know the mobilization undertaken by the lay religious people in the effort to minimize the dictatorial political structure and to strengthen the experience of the Brazilian Popular Church in Coité's society.

⁴² Analyzing the record of psycho-sociological investigations by J.-M. Donégani, Aline Coutrot demonstrates that this spirituality is one of the most loose currents of Christian identity, since it associates a symbolism that translates specific values and actions towards the world to the Spirit.

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