

BLACK BRAZILIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

‘Yes, I am black, as God created me’: reflections on the Black Catholic Movement in Brazil

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Abstract

This article examines how the Catholic Church in Brazil has incorporated elements of black activism, promoted actions to combat racism, and adopted symbols of African heritage in its liturgies. Three aspects are highlighted: the formation of the Black Catholic Movement, the role of inculturated liturgies, and the dialogues established between Catholics and African-based religions, particularly Candomblé and Umbanda. In addition to a review of the literature and an analysis of documents produced by Catholic agents, a multi-sited ethnography of the actions of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral was carried out. The article argues that, by integrating into its liturgical elements from African-based religions – regarded as ‘Black cultural elements’ – the Afro Pastoral reinforces the view that, within the context of the terreiros, the symbols of African heritage were preserved in Brazil.

Keywords: Black Identity; Religions of African Origin; Afro-Brazilian Pastoral; Inculturation.

‘Eu sou negro sim, como Deus criou’: reflexões sobre o Movimento Negro Católico no Brasil

Resumo

Nesse artigo, discute-se o modo pelo qual a Igreja Católica no Brasil tem incorporado em seu interior elementos da militância negra, promovido ações de combate ao racismo e adotado símbolos das heranças africanas em suas liturgias. Três pontos foram destacados: a formação do Movimento Negro Católico, o lugar das liturgias *inculturadas* e os diálogos entre católicos e religiões de matrizes africanas (especificamente do Candomblé e da Umbanda). Em conjunto com a revisão da bibliografia e a análise de documentos produzidos pelos agentes católicos, realizou-se uma etnografia multisituada das ações da Pastoral Afro-brasileira. Argumenta-se que ao assumir em suas liturgias elementos das religiões de matrizes africanas, considerando-os como “elementos culturais negros” a Pastoral Afro corrobora a perspectiva de que no contexto dos terreiros os símbolos das heranças africanas foram preservados no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: identidade negra; religiões de matrizes africanas; pastoral afro-brasileira; inculturação.

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, I revisit certain arguments presented by myself elsewhere (Oliveira 2016) with the aim of reflecting on three aspects of the Black Catholic Movement and understanding how the so-called symbols of African heritage in Brazil are mobilised by its agents in political actions directed at the black population, both within and beyond the religious field. In other words, I seek to highlight elements that help us comprehend how these three spheres – black theology, a rereading of the history of black people in Brazil from a Catholic perspective, and the adoption of an inculturated liturgy – converge in practices that support specific agendas within the broader Black Movement and, at the same time, enable the construction of an institutional dialogue between the Catholic Church and representatives of religions of African origin.

The Black Catholic Movement – understood here as the set of groups that, since the 1970s, have been articulating activities aimed at promoting an institutional visibility of black people within the Church (Oliveira 2016) – organises its actions around three axes: the formulation of a ‘black theology’ (or a theology ‘on blackness’), the development of a narrative concerning the history of black people in Brazil (and within the Church) and the establishment of a ‘black liturgy.’ These three lines of action mobilise Catholic actors (and others associated with them) in coordinated initiatives, such that each dimension necessarily influences the others.

Within the scope of this research, the Black Catholic Movement also includes, to some extent, what is referred to as ‘Black Catholicism,’¹ insofar as it establishes, at least institutionally, a dialogue with black lay brotherhoods and confraternities, as well as with *congadas*, *moçambiques* and other groups that incorporate devotions and practices of African origin into official Catholic cosmology and liturgy. Along these lines, Rubens Alves da Silva (2010: 181), in his study of *congado* in Minas Gerais, has shown that ‘black identity is affirmed

1 There is an extensive literature on black popular Catholicism in Brazil; I highlight Silva’s (2010) reflection, which synthesises the main features of this form of worship. It is also important to note that some of these groups do not claim Catholic religious affiliation for themselves, or do so only critically (see Martins, 2021).

through concrete experience, through (co)living and socialisation in this religious-cultural milieu; that is, through effective participation in this ritual, with this identity being a process of construction rooted in the symbolic reinterpretation and articulation of diverse beliefs and religious values (Catholicism/Afro-Brazilian religions), as well as in differences (black/white).

Considering the breadth and diversity of this movement, I take as my empirical focus the actions of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral, in coordination with the Mariama Institute (IMA) and the Group of Black and Indigenous Religious Men and Women (GRENI), with the aim of observing how the notion of ethno-racial identity and certain agendas of the black movement are mobilised.

Here I follow Stuart Hall's (1996) provocative question: 'what is this "black" in black popular culture'? In formulating this question, the author situates it within a more expansive debate on the pertinence of the notion of cultural identities in postmodernity, a moment in which the idea of an essence in the configuration of individuals and social collectives is ruptured, as the historically constructed meanings attached to categories denoting belonging start to be questioned. In this context, Hall argues in favour of retaining the identificatory category insofar as it operates 'under erasure': that is, with provisional and contextual meanings, 'in the interval between reversal and emergence; an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all.' (1996: 104).

Taking the notion of identity as a category under erasure allows us to reflect on the strategies used by particular groups seeking public recognition and access to social rights. Within the scope of this text, therefore, I pose the following question: what is this 'Catholicism' produced through the actions of various black groups since the 1970s?

As Oliveira (2019) has shown, leaders of religions of African origin have increasingly invested in presenting 'religion as culture,' understood as a powerful instrument for validating public policies intended to valorise the black community in general and religious terreiros in particular, as well as for confronting racism and religious intolerance (Silva Neto et al. 2019). In the context of Black Catholic activism, as discussed below, we find a distinct movement, one that seeks ever more forcefully to affirm a 'Church for black people' (Oliveira 2024).

I argue, therefore, that the institutionalisation of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral is the outcome of attempts by black Catholic activists to develop a 'black theology' through the establishment of an 'inculturated liturgy,' mobilising elements of a certain 'Black Catholicism' – such as the worship of black saints (Saint Benedict, Saint Iphigenia and Our Lady of Aparecida) and the historical and religious valorising of black lay brotherhoods and confraternities – with the aim of compelling the ecclesiastical hierarchy to engage in a debate on ethno-racial relations within the Church.

The data for this research was collected at three complementary levels: (i) documentary, drawing on texts produced by the groups themselves (minutes of meetings, hymn books, liturgical scripts, training-course texts and so on); (ii) ethnographic, based on observations made at a range of events, such as the editions of the Pilgrimage of Black Catholic Communities to Aparecida (2012–2023), the National Congresses of Black Catholic Organisations, the meetings of the Catholic, Candomblé and Umbanda Dialogue Nucleus in São Paulo

(2009–2015), a meeting of the Reflection Group on Interreligious Dialogue (GREDIRE) in Belo Horizonte (2013), as well as regional meetings of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral in the metropolitan region of São Paulo and diverse ‘Afro-Brazilian inculturated Masses’ held in the Northeast, Southeast and South of Brazil and the Federal District (Brasília); (iii) interviews with leaders and testimonies from participants in the pilgrimages and black congresses.

It should be emphasised that the choice of which events to observe was not random but followed the dynamics of the religious field in which actors connect with each other via multiple pathways, composing an intricate web of relations that must be analysed at different levels. The text that follows is organised in three parts: in the first, I revisit the work of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral (PAB); next, I examine some aspects of inculturated liturgies; and finally, I offer a reflection on the relations between the Catholic Church and religions of African origin (Candomblé and Umbanda), highlighting their joint efforts in combating racism and religious intolerance.

PASTORING ‘THE BLACK PEOPLE’: AFRO-CATHOLIC GROUPS

The Second Vatican Council, held in Rome between 1962 and 1965, had a profound impact on the political actions undertaken within the Church and in civil society, establishing a new baseline for Roman Catholicism’s positioning in response to the social transformations generated by modernity (Kloppenburger 2000). From this landmark onwards, themes such as changes to the liturgy, relations with the sciences and with other religions (particularly non-Christian), as well as the recognition of the ethno-racial and cultural diversity of congregations, emerged as significant challenges for Catholic actors (Oliveira 2016).

With the aim of constructing a shared agenda for action, meetings were convened across the Americas that brought together the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean at the General Conferences of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council (CELAM). Although the Vatican set the guidelines and themes to be debated, it was up to the local episcopate to ‘translate’ these theological and pastoral directives of the universal Church into Latin American contexts. In this sense, the conferences held after the Council – in Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) and Aparecida (2007) – each reaffirmed in their own way aspects of Liberation Theology and its relevance for the development of ecclesial action in the Latin American region (Santos 2012).

As Lucilene Reginaldo (1995) demonstrated, some Catholic bishops had little familiarity with the cultural and ethno-racial diversity of the Brazilian population. A working group was therefore convened by the CNBB to provide support to the bishops due to participate in the Third Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), held in Puebla de Los Ángeles (Mexico) from 27 January to 13 February 1979, whose central theme was ‘The present and future of evangelisation in Latin America.’ On this point, Dom José Maria Pires – known as

Dom Zumbi, Archbishop Emeritus of Paraíba – recalls that the Brazilian delegation needed to broaden its understanding of the diverse cultures making up the nation (Oliveira 2016).

Drawing on their experience in the working group, its members identified the need to continue the theological reflection on the black population, revisiting the history of black people in Brazil and their relationship with the Church. The group's format was therefore expanded with the founding of the Union and Black Consciousness Group (GRUCON) in 1980, still operating independently of the ecclesiastical hierarchy (Valente 1994).

Frei Davi de Oliveira, in an interview with Vanessa Alberti and Amílcar Araujo, notes that in the group's early years of activity in Rio de Janeiro, one of the strategies adopted was the production of slide shows that were projected in public spaces, such as Central do Brasil station in Rio city, as well as in other locations in the metropolitan Baixada Fluminense region. According to the friar, the objective was to provide the black population with a

historical consciousness, because we understood that historical consciousness is the first step towards an awakening of consciousness in general. We produced these slide shows ourselves, a large team, with the support of Ibase.² One of them was called *The untold history*, the other, *Life reborn through struggle*. (...) We believe we made over 200 copies for the whole of Brazil. It was truly remarkable because we managed to hold many of these slide shows in the communities linked to the Catholic Church with large black populations (Alberti and Pereira 2005: 14).

For the members of GRUCON, it was not enough simply to revisit the history of the black population in Brazil: this history had to be narrated in light of other theoretical and political perspectives. This positioning forced the Church to confront the challenge of retelling its own history, publicly justifying its position in relation to slavery and the exclusion of black people, as well as adopting concrete measures to value black culture within Catholicism and to promote reparative actions. This movement assumed a more pragmatic orientation from 1988 onwards, during the Fraternity Campaign,³ which took the black population as its central theme that year.

In parallel to the work of GRUCON, another group emerged within the Catholic context, this time with a stronger emphasis on faith: the Black Pastoral Agents (*Agentes de Pastoral Negros*: APNs). 'Having faith' was the minimum requirement for joining the group, as Father Jurandyr Azevedo stated in interview (Oliveira 2016). This approach, however, had two effects: on one hand, insofar as one wing of the APNs sought to advance the agenda of the

2 The Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analyses (*Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas*: Ibase), founded in 1981 by Herbert de Souza (Betinho), Carlos Afonso and Marcos Arruda, works in defence of citizenship and human rights. See: <https://ibase.br/quem-somos-2/>

3 As Oliveira (2024) notes, 'the Fraternity Campaign is an initiative of the Catholic Church implemented through the CNBB and Caritas Brazil, the aim of which is to broaden evangelisation. It began as an initiative of Caritas Brazil to raise funds for charitable work and, once incorporated by the CNBB, transformed into a mechanism for defending the social interests of the underprivileged and a means of drawing attention to broader social problems, as well as securing resources for projects linked to the theme chosen each year.' Valente (1994), analysing the Black Pastoral Agents, followed the development of the 1988 campaign, while, in later research, Oliveira (2016) examined the impact of this mobilisation on the configuration of Afro liturgies.

black movement within the Catholic Church in Brazil, it increasingly distanced itself from some of the guidelines of the secular black movement (Valente, 1994); on the other hand, more intense dialogue with other groups from the black movement sharpened the racial debate within the Church.

Over time, it became clear that ‘faith’ and ‘black activism’ encompassed many meanings, some of them contradictory, depending on the vision of particular Catholic clerics, which led to the emergence of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral in 1988 (Santos 2012). Indeed, there was considerable concern among religious figures to reflect on the place of black people within the Church and, on that basis, to introduce a religious expressiveness into Catholicism that took into account aspects of ‘black culture.’

Once officially established, the Afro Pastoral began coordinating the work of the other bodies within the Black Catholic movement, without these being necessarily subordinated to it: the Mariama Institute (IMA) and the Group of Black and Indigenous Religious Men and Women (GRENI). In this context, the APNs gradually became more secularised, culminating in their formal separation from the Catholic Church at the end of the 2000s.

According to its founders, the IMA emerged in 1999 as an exclusive space in which black priests, deacons and bishops could discuss issues relating to the fact of being black Catholic clergy. They understood that since both the APNs and the Afro Pastoral dealt with broader themes, they lacked the conditions to undertake a more in-depth reflection, even though ordained ministers were included within their scope (Oliveira 2016).

One of the IMA’s principal activities is to offer ongoing training to its members, both in the field of theology and on topics related to black people in Brazil. This is achieved through annual meetings, which combine moments of study, inculturated celebrations with local communities and visits to sites explicitly or implicitly connected to black artistic and cultural productions. For example, the organisation’s 22nd Assembly was held in São João del Rei (Minas Gerais state) and addressed the themes ‘Afro-Brazilian art in sacred art from Minas Gerais’ and ‘The Year of the Priest and black clergy in the Church in Brazil,’ as well as the vocation and the situation of young people. While the latter two topics were addressed through lectures and group reflections alone, the discussion of sacred art included an invited historian whose presentation was complemented by a guided visit through São João del Rei and the neighbouring town of Tiradentes. The aim was to demonstrate the agency of Africans in the production of Minas Gerais’s baroque sacred art.

The theme of the black person ‘assuming’ their ethno-racial belonging or developing ‘consciousness’ of their identity is a perennial issue among black activists. The underlying premise is that skin colour and the everyday experiences of racism are not in themselves sufficient: it is necessary to lead the person to understand that the discrimination they face and the difficulties they encounter in accessing goods and services have their roots in racism.

Impelled by the same principles that drove the clergy of the IMA, black religious men and women successfully obtained the formal establishment of the Group of Black and Indig-

enous Religious Men and Women (GRENI) during the general assembly of the Conference of Conference of Religious of Brazil (CRB).

One of the major differences between GRENI and the other bodies composing the Black Catholic movement is its inclusion of indigenous people. This is no coincidence. In Brazil, missionary work among indigenous populations dates back to the colonial period when Franciscans, Carmelites, Salesians and other orders crossed the country with the aim of catechising them (Montero 2006). It was also in the indigenous context that debates around the *inculturation* of the liturgy first began (Rufino 2006) and, thanks to the work of Dom Pedro Casaldáliga, the *Missa da Terra sem Males* ('Mass of the Land-without-Evil') was celebrated in 1978, the first systematic experiment in inculturation. It was on the basis of this celebration that the *Missa dos Quilombos* (1981) was conceived – that is, the first 'Afro Mass' (Oliveira 2016).

Although they were the pioneers, the role of religious men and women within the Black Catholic movement is less visible than that of the Afro Pastoral agents, perhaps for two reasons. First, some of the religious practitioners who are also priests belong to the IMA and are responsible for parishes and thus coordinate the local work of the Afro Pastoral. Secondly, the work of missionaries is often confined to rural communities or to the peripheries of large cities, where combating racism is just one among diverse concerns (alongside social inclusion, security, health and education).

Supporting theological and pastoral debate on black people in the Church, the Atabaque Group also emerged, formed by theologians and scholars from other areas of the humanities, with the aim of reflecting on questions of blackness in relation to theology. The group was 'ecumenical,'⁴ based in São Paulo, and throughout its period of activity was led by Father Antônio Aparecido da Silva, 'Father Toninho,' parish priest of the Church of Our Lady of the Achiropita and provincial of the Little Work of Divine Providence (Don Orione) (Bina 2002).

As Oliveira (2024) argues, Father Toninho played a fundamental role in the discussion of racial issues and black activism within the Church, influencing the formation of many activists, especially during his tenure as rector of ITESP – the Theological Institute of São Paulo. His work as an activist and theologian was not detached from his ecclesiastical activity. As the priest responsible for the parish of Our Lady of the Achiropita (located in the Bixiga neighbourhood of São Paulo), therefore, he developed a series of initiatives aimed at welcoming the poor population, including especially work with vulnerable children and the founding of the Achiropita Afro Pastoral.

Meanwhile, the Atabaque Group, founded by Father Toninho and other members of the Afro Pastoral, became a space for theological debate and liturgical experimentation in São

4 As a category used by Catholic religious actors, 'ecumenism' refers to dialogue between some Christian churches. As we shall see below, relations with religions of African origin are defined rather as 'interreligious dialogue'. In this text, I treat both categories – ecumenism and interreligious dialogue – as native terms.

Paulo. The group discussed issues on which there is still no consensus within the Catholic Church in Brazil: ‘dual belonging’ (the possibility of someone professing Catholicism while also being a follower of a religion of African origin), the existence of a ‘black theological thinking’ and the establishment of a ‘black way of praying’ through the theological and pastoral justification of the so-called Afro-Brazilian inculturated liturgies (Jorge and Deus 2024).

In parallel, in other regions of Brazil, work also emerged on theology, liturgy and Afro-Brazilian history and culture, consolidating the development of ‘black theology.’ Its central themes included the spirituality of black people, Afro-Brazilian inculturated liturgy and the reconciliation of faith and activism — some of which turned into academic studies, such as the dissertation by Sister Franziska C. Rehbein, *Candomblé e Salvação – a salvação na religião nagô à luz da teologia cristã* (1985); José Geraldo Rocha’s master’s dissertation (*Negro: um clamor de justiça*, 1993) and doctoral thesis (*Teologia e Negritude: um estudo sobre os Agentes de Pastoral Negros*, 1997), both defended in Rio de Janeiro; Gabriel Bina’s research (2002) on the atabaque drum in the Church; and the collection organised by Ildo Bohn Gass, Selenir Correa Gonçalves Kronbauer and Sônia Querino dos Santos on the black presence in the Bible, especially the volume *Negra sim, negro sim, como Deus me criou: leitura da Bíblia na perspectiva da negritude* (2006). These works were accompanied by a substantial number of booklets, lectures and training sessions that highlight the relationships between racial belonging, the Catholic faith and its connections with African cosmoperceptions.

We can observe an intellectual endeavour to read the Catholic faith through certain black racial or ‘cultural’ presuppositions, or from the viewpoint of religions of African origin. This is largely attributable to two factors: first, the fact that the Black Catholic movement already emerged in close dialogue with Candomblé religious leaders (especially those who venerate the Orishas); and second, the fact that the diacritical signs allowing both the formulation of a ‘Black Catholic identity’ and the development of inculturated liturgies will be drawn from the repertoire of these religions.

In a way, the Atabaque Centre formed the nucleus of those directing Black Catholic theology. There were, however, other centres of debate spread across Brazil, such as the Archdiocesan Centre for Coordination of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral (CAAPA, in the capital of Bahia), the state-level APN nuclei, the Father Batista Institute for Black People (São Paulo), the Mariama Institute (IMA), which provides a forum for black deacons, priests and bishops, and GRENI. Added to these groups were national discussion forums like the Congress of Black Catholic Organisations (CONENC), which brought together leaders from these various groups, as well as the Brotherhoods of Our Lady of the Rosary of Black Men (in São Paulo and Salvador) (Oliveira 2016).

The Black Catholic Movement has pursued a wide range of agendas: ranging from confronting racism within and outside of the Church, through debates on black representativity in the episcopate and other positions of power, to the formulation of an Afro-centred theology that recognises the legitimacy of incorporating symbols of African heritages in Brazil into Catholic rites, thereby shaping Afro-Brazilian inculturation.

The debate on the number of black Catholic bishops has been recurrent in recent years. Although the Catholic Church, via the Centre for Religious Statistics and Social Research (CERIS), has undertaken censuses of the faithful and ecclesiastical bodies, this data is not made regularly available, the most recent edition having been published in 2012. In 2015, during CONENC, Dom Zannoni Dementino de Castro (Archbishop of Feira de Santana, Bahia, and the bishop responsible for the Afro Pastoral) listed by name the 11 black bishops then in active service out of a total of 434. This information was also reproduced by official Church channels, such as Vatican Radio.⁵ It should be emphasised that although this number has not been officially updated, not all black bishops participate actively in the Black Catholic Movement (Oliveira 2024).

Drawing on the fieldwork, the analysis of meeting minutes and the bibliographic review, we can observe that issues related to public policies benefiting the black population and actions aimed at combating racism once again became central themes from the fifth edition of CONENC, held in 2007, marking a return to certain positionings present in the movement's genesis.

Also perceptible over the years is the fact that the debates taking place within the Church are not isolated from the national context. For example, when the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture became mandatory in basic education,⁶ activists began to discuss how these principles might also be applied in catechesis (that is, in the religious instruction offered to Catholic children in each parish). Along these lines, the Black Women Educators' Study Group – a working group formed within the National Afro Pastoral – produced a booklet with guidelines for implementing these principles in local communities. The material was made available to Black Catholic activists in 2015 and the debate was taken up again at the CONENC held in Salvador (Bahia) in 2022.

Indeed, one of the constant preoccupations of Black Catholic activists since the movement's formation in the 1970s has been the construction of a narrative about the history of black people in Brazil, presenting a history that was untold (Reginaldo 1995), revisiting processes and events with the aim of 'restoring the dignity of black people' and demanding reparations both from the public authorities and from the Church itself.

Returning to what I noted above, if we take the Second Vatican Council as the landmark for the emergence of the Black Catholic Movement, we can observe that the members of the Task Group, after completing their work of advising the bishops who participated in the Latin American Episcopal Conferences, did not disband. Instead, they began to reflect more systematically on race relations within the Catholic Church.

As we have seen above, over the years the members of the Black Catholic Movement succeeded in institutionalising the racial debate within the Catholic Church, both in Brazil

5 'Igreja Católica no Brasil tem poucos bispos negros.' Available at https://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2007/04/11/igreja_cat%C3%B3lica_no_brasil_tem_poucos_bispos_negros/bra-127744 Accessed 25 August 2025.

6 Law 10.639/2003, which amends the Law of Guidelines and Bases for Basic Education (Law 9.694/1996). On this topic, see Oliveira (2018).

and in Latin America more widely, through the Afro Pastoral. This achievement involved internal negotiations, confrontations with more conservative groups and the softening of certain demands present within the broader black movement.

This process became clearer during the activities of the 10th CONENC, held in Salvador in 2022. Under the theme *Black Communities: decolonising minds and knowledge; recovering historical memory; strengthening intercultural spaces and relationships*, the event brought together around one hundred participants, the majority of them women, from all five macro-regions of Brazil. The predominance of participants aged between 50 and 60 indicated that many of these leaders had been active in the Afro Pastoral since its early years. Nevertheless, almost one third were attending the Congress for the first time.

The meeting sought ‘to deepen and reflect on liturgical-Christian spirituality, recognising black cultural identity as an enrichment of ecclesial life,’ as recognised in the final document of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) held in 2007 in Aparecida (São Paulo state) (CONENC 2022). In returning to the city of Salvador for another edition of the most important congress of the Black Catholic Movement, the organising committee announced an ambitious goal, described in the second specific objective of the preparatory document: ‘to deepen content; to train, in an integral manner, the agents of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral, with biblical, methodological and catechetical content, for quilombola communities and urban centres’ (CONENC 2022). This intention became evident in the structure of the meeting: three lectures delivered by invited university professors, as well as working groups organised according to each of the regional delegations present.

Since the CONENC held in Duque de Caxias (Rio de Janeiro) in 2015, three principal concerns have occupied Afro-Catholic leadership: (a) the theological-pastoral, political-social and academic formation of its agents; (b) the reorganisation of grassroots groups, with the consequent renewal of their membership; and (c) the expansion of ecclesial action beyond the performance of inculturated liturgies.

With the multiplication of Afro Masses in parishes across the country and the constant confrontations experienced by pastoral agents – as I discuss below – the need for continuous formation processes became imperative. Local, regional and national meetings have sought to bring together leaders in formulating theological and socio-anthropological responses that justify the actions undertaken. This movement also includes the revision and updating of the document regulating the activities of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral (Document 85 of the CNBB), which is currently being reformulated by a team of advisers comprising clergy (bishops and priests) and lay people (religious practitioners and academics). The revival of training courses for pastoral agents is also noteworthy.

In this respect, discussions have taken place on the refounding of the Atabaque Group – the theological school established by Father Toninho in São Paulo, whose central aim was

the production of an Afro-centred theology (Oliveira 2024). In parallel, there is an ongoing concern with the formation of new generations of pastoral agents.

During the acute phase of the Covid-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022, when holding in-person meetings became impossible, the national and regional coordinations of the Afro Pastoral made use of technological resources to offer training courses for pastoral agents. Two editions reached a national audience, each with more than one hundred people enrolled. Lasting six months, the courses addressed the main themes of Catholic theology from an Afro-centred perspective, as well as offering specific classes on race relations, the black movement and Black Catholicism in Brazil. In this context, the researcher was invited to teach two classes in both editions, addressing the relationship between African populations and the Catholic Church in the context of the diaspora.

As Oliveira (2016) has already noted, the presence of intellectuals in the training processes of Catholic religious agents, drawing on their respective disciplinary fields (anthropology, history, sociology, etc.), is not something new. Catholic theological production, as well as its intervention in society, has never been separate from the scientific knowledge produced in universities. On this point, Father José Enes de Jesus – president of the Father Batista Institute for Black People in São Paulo and national secretary of the PAB – recalls that, even as a theology student, he was able to discuss racial issues with academic figures like Florestan Fernandes in the early 1980s.

At CONENC in Salvador, an agenda for action was developed based on the work of the anthropologist coordinating the activities on the second day of the event. This agenda set specific targets for each regional body for the forthcoming three-year period, to be presented and discussed at the next edition of the Congress. The objectives defined in this ‘Pastoral Agenda 2022–2025’ revolved around the three axes cited earlier: the formation of pastoral members, the renewal of the contingent of agents – with greater participation of young people – and the expansion of the field of action.

While the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral is now consolidated within the institutional structure of the Catholic Church in Brazil and, more broadly, in Latin America, in some contexts its activity has been progressively reduced to the liturgical sphere. In this regard, by returning to the concluding document of the Aparecida Conference, which highlights the role of the black population as both subject and agent of ecclesial action, members of the Pastoral seek to amplify the scope of their work.

During the debates held at CONENC, the need to reconfigure pastoral practice within the Church – without disregarding the importance of inculturated liturgy or the progress achieved in recent years – was repeatedly stressed. ‘We need to be Afro Pastoral everywhere,’ the participants insisted.

This reorganisation necessarily entails new negotiations not only over the place of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral within the structure of the Catholic Church but also concerning the

ways in which the theme of ethno-racial difference, in an ample sense, and racism, more specifically, has been mobilised in the contemporary Christian religious field.

In the following section, I examine how the actions of the Afro Pastoral have been shaped within the Catholic Church.

‘IT WAS OLORUM WHO SENT US’: AFRO PASTORAL ACTION WITHIN THE CHURCH

The Catholic maxim ‘we pray as we live, because we live as we pray’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2725) resounds strongly in the actions of the Black Catholic Movement, which asserts ‘our black way of celebrating’ (Jorge and Deus 2024). In other words, in developing actions to combat racism and discrimination both within the Church and in society in general, the Afro Pastoral, the IMA and GRENI seek to reveal a way of being and professing the Catholic faith that necessarily passes through belonging. It is through this exercise of affirming a prominent space for Afro-Brazilian expressions within the Church itself that activist initiatives beyond the religious context are also energised.

In this section, drawing on reflections concerning ‘Afro-Brazilian liturgies’ and the pilgrimages of Black Catholic Communities to Aparecida, I argue that *inculturation*, as proposed by agents of the Afro Pastoral, functions as a device for the ‘blackening’ of the Catholic Church, articulating elements of Christian theology with principles of the racial debate present in African cosmoperceptions, activated by groups from Brazil’s black movement. As a result, the circulation of people and symbols between Catholicism, Umbanda and Candomblé makes it possible for the same diacritical signs of blackness to acquire different meanings along a continuum from one segment to another. Belonging simultaneously to Catholicism and to a religion of African origin, although not identical, may thus be experienced by some individuals as interpenetrated, existing in a kind of religious ‘dual belonging’ (Souza Jr. 2001).

The analysis will focus on the actions of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral, recognising that these are developments of the work carried out by black groups within the Catholic Church, especially the APNs (Rocha, 1997; Santos, 2012). Given that Caetana Damasceno (1990), Rosangela Borges (2001), Gabriel dos Santos (2012) and Oliveira (2016) have already undertaken analyses of inculturated liturgies, here I only highlight certain aspects of these rites.

In *Orixás – a manifestação cultural de Deus: uma análise das liturgias católicas inculturadas* (Oliveira 2016), I observed that the creation of inculturated liturgies through the incorporation of elements from religions of African origin establishes ‘a new place for black people within Catholicism: the place of mediation between two religious systems. Like a hinge, Afro celebrations can symbolically turn towards each of the poles without, however, limiting themselves to one or the other. Perhaps we are witnessing a new moment in Catholicism in which the maxim “unity in diversity” is also finding expression in ritual’ (Oliveira 2016: 167).

Indeed, agents of inculturation reproduce in the liturgy the same reconstructive movement observed in the formulation of a ‘black identity,’ starting out from a universal substratum (‘we are all children of God’) and adding diacritical signs of identification. It is worth noting that from its first edition – namely, the *Missa dos Quilombos*, held in 1986 in João Pessoa – these symbols were drawn from the Afro-religious field and re-signified in light of the experiences of members of the Black Catholic movement, as Father Jurandyr Azevedo recalls.

The rite of ‘Afro-Brazilian inculturated Masses’ follows the structure set out in the Church’s official documents. The elements of ‘inculturation’ are visible in the liturgical vestments (which evoke an ‘Afro aesthetic’), in the songs (accompanied by the atabaque drum) and in the dances (Oliveira 2016). The significant change lies precisely in the signs of blackness activated in the ritual, which undergo transformations provoked by three main factors: the sociocultural context in which the celebrations take place; the training in theological and African-studies; and the guidelines issued by the national coordination of the PAB. Thus, the variations observed in Afro Masses accompany the changes occurring within the Black Catholic movement, each influencing the other.

If the sociopolitical context of the 1970s prompted a more combative liturgy in the *Missa dos Quilombos*, for example, with its tone of denunciation, the celebrations of the 2000s adopted a festive ethos and an ‘Afro’ aesthetic, inspired by Candomblé, as representative of ‘black culture.’ From this perspective, an investment can be discerned in the notion of a tangible and identifiable material culture whose elements can be activated to express religious beliefs.

The ritual remains the same, Catholic, but some elements of Afro-Brazilian religions are inserted into its fissures through inculturation, transforming it into something ‘Afro.’ Since the state, with the support of religious figures and intellectuals, has conferred heritage status to these religions, they can now be inculturated by Catholics. In other words, Catholics recognise that the *terreiros* preserve symbols of African heritage in Brazil, which can be safeguarded as national cultural patrimony and, at the same time, mobilised to compose Afro liturgies.

In this dynamic, black saints perform an important role. As noted above, black theology (or ‘the theology of blackness’) initially sought to identify figures of African origin in the Bible. However, this project was abandoned for being considered of limited usefulness. Attention shifted instead to the mediation of saints. Mary, the mother of Jesus, occupies a privileged place, accompanied by saints with varying degrees of popular appeal like Saint Benedict, Saint Iphigenia, Saint Anthony of Categeró and Saint Elesban.

In the Catholic pantheon, Mary is invoked in a special way as the mother of the God-Son. Recognised under various titles, she is the patron saint of Brazil as Our Lady of Aparecida, whose statue was found in 1717 in the waters of the River Paraíba, close to the town of Guaratinguetá in the state of São Paulo. Dark in colour, her maternal figure was quickly associated with the marginalised and enslaved population and her presence is constant in the Black Catholic movement. Among the titles used in Afro liturgies are ‘Mariama,’ ‘Qui-

lombola Mother,’ ‘Black Lady’ and ‘Black Mother Aparecida.’⁷ A paradigmatic example is the feast of the ‘Black Mother,’ held annually in May at the Church of Our Lady Achiropita in São Paulo, which combines Mass, bean stew (*feijoada*), an Afro-themed market and samba performances, forming part of the city’s tourist calendar.

Saint Benedict has historically enjoyed wide devotion among Catholic faithful. Countless *congadas*, *moçambiques*, brotherhoods and confraternities that take him as their patron. In the context of Afro activism, this repertoire is taken up and, as noted above, unlike the case of Mary – who is invoked as the welcoming mother (‘Mariama’), warrior mother (‘Quilombola Mother’) and protector (‘Our Lady Aparecida’ / *sinhá querida*) – worship of Saint Benedict is mobilised as a ‘Black Catholic cultural heritage.’ In other words, the festivals dedicated to the saint combine the discourse on heritage with black religious expression.

In 2016, the São Paulo City Council, through the Municipal Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality (SMPIR/SP), launched the ‘Municipal Feast of Saint Benedict,’ held annually in April in Largo do Paissandu, next to the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary of Black Men. The event features artistic performances, a market for black entrepreneurs and a food court.

The first edition took place from 16 April to 15 May 2016, announced months earlier, in November the year before during celebrations of the National Day of Black Consciousness, at an Afro Mass presided over by the auxiliary bishop of São Paulo, who is responsible for the Afro Pastoral in the archdiocese. The event was attended by officials from the SMPIR/SP, the Municipal Secretariat for Human Rights and Citizenship, city councillors, priests and *pais* and *mães de santo*. In his speech, the SMPIR secretary emphasised that, just as São Paulo has ‘ethnic’ neighbourhoods with well-known annual festivals (such as the Japanese Festival in Liberdade and the Achiropita Festival in Bixiga), a festival was needed that could bring together the black community, choosing the most popular Black saint for this purpose.

Although the organisation of the festival had a predominantly Catholic orientation, the performances were diverse: capoeira, *afoxés*, *maracatus* and samba groups and a gospel choir. This is the only public initiative observed that addresses the black community from a Catholic standpoint without taking religions of African origin as its primary reference, although religious leaders and some shows signal their presence, limited to the opening speeches denouncing religious intolerance.

Another axis of action of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral is the Pilgrimage of Black Catholic Communities, or the ‘Pilgrimage of the Black People,’ held at the National Shrine of Aparecida. The two terms are used interchangeably with some subtle differences: ‘black communities’ emphasises the multiple groups making up the Black Catholic Movement, whereas ‘Black people’ also encompasses those who do not belong to these collectives but nonetheless participate in the activities.

7 In Portuguese, *Mãe Quilombola*, *Senhora Negra* and *Mãe Negra Aparecida*.

The pilgrimages take place annually, usually on the first Saturday of November, organised by the Pastoral's national coordination, with certain dioceses assuming responsibility for each edition. The event makes it possible to analyse (a) how pastoral agents negotiate with other Catholic entities and publicly present the image of the 'black Catholic'; and (b) which operational strategies are adopted to bring together participants from different regions of the country.

The pilgrimage begins with an inculturated Mass in the central nave of the National Shrine of Aparecida, presided over by the bishop responsible for the National Afro Pastoral and broadcast nationwide by TV Aparecida. This is followed by a number of cultural performances (*quizomba*) in one of the Shrine's atriums or halls.

The Afro Mass celebrated in Aparecida presents certain particular features in relation to those held in other churches: the duration of the celebration is shortened so that it can be completed in just 60 minutes (an Afro celebration normally lasts an average of 90 minutes and may extend to 120); the food items taken to the offertory are collected and distributed only among those taking part in the pilgrimage and not among all the participants of the Mass; and finally the master of ceremonies for the celebration does not belong to the Afro Pastoral but to the congregation that administers the Shrine.

In sum, the inculturated celebration is organised so as to comply with the directives established for all masses held at the Shrine. This fact reinforces the findings of earlier research (Oliveira 2016): Afro Masses have specific elements that identify them (vestments, songs, dances, an Afro-centred theological discourse, et cetera), which are materialised in ways that take into account the contexts in which they are performed. Despite the restrictions present in the Shrine's ceremonial norms, being able to hold this annual event in such a space constitutes an important landmark in the history of Black Catholic activism.

The second moment, known as the *quizomba*, is a kind of celebratory gathering that features musical and dance performances by the various groups that make up the Black Catholic movement across Brazil. These performances are defined in advance by the group responsible for organising the pilgrimage each year. The presentations are interspersed with exhortations by pastoral leaders, and it is also at this moment that the diocese responsible for organising the next edition of the event is chosen.

It is difficult to estimate the number of participants at each edition of the pilgrimage, since the national shrine comprises a complex with two basilica churches connected by a walkway, a set of halls, chapels, museums and shopping areas (in addition to the rooms for ex-votos and confessionals), and the faithful move continuously through these spaces. Even during the celebration of the Mass and the *quizomba*, the flow of people joining the pilgrims makes any reliable estimate of participants impossible. One strategy adopted by the organisers has been to record the dioceses represented by priests or groups of faithful (although this number is not disclosed).

Each year, the group responsible for organising the pilgrimage, together with the national coordination of the Afro Pastoral, prepares a booklet – a kind of guide – presenting the theme and motto chosen for that year and their respective theological-pastoral explanations. This guide contains a set of reflections on the ‘journey of the black people’ and suggestions for activities to be executed in advance by pastoral groups as a way of preparing for this major gathering.

In the words of the national coordination of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral:

Pilgrimage is a sign that people seek God. They pray with their minds and their lips, but also with their feet and with their whole bodies, setting out on the pathway. God is always ahead of us and calls us to walk: to leave ourselves and travel towards the foreign and sacred land of the ‘other,’ the one who is different. It is a path towards a better and deeper life. *Black people are a pilgrim people.* We are walkers. The Christian is dynamic, ever on the move. Whoever does not walk does not progress. Whoever wishes to build something in life must walk. The Twentieth Pilgrimage of Black Communities to the National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida will be held because she is our Black Mother and our *Mariama* – that is, Mary who loves. *Its aims are: to reclaim our culture by contemplating the face of the Black Mother, the Mother of Mercy, who has been present in our sad and painful history, in the joys of our achievements and in our responsibilities before the challenges posed by reality; to open the commemorations, events and activities in our Communities to celebrate 20 November, Black Consciousness Day; and to unite Black organisations in a great celebration (quizomba).* In this way, it opens the month during which we celebrate our Black leader Zumbi dos Palmares and our liberation. We, Afro-Brazilians, united with all Black organisations, with positive actions and with the journey of black communities in Brazil, rejoice in praising God with our song, our dance and our instruments. We celebrate our history of the cross, death, persecution and discrimination, but also our history of life and resurrection. *The victory of Jesus over death resounds in our drums as our victory.* (Invitation Letter to the Twentieth National Pilgrimage of Black Catholic Communities, 2016. My italics.)

The above excerpt illustrates the argument set out earlier: the Black Catholic Movement articulates traditional Catholic practices (like pilgrimages) with the political strategies of social movements (like manifestos). In other words, while highlighting both the importance of pilgrimages for popular piety and the idea that ‘the black people are a pilgrim people,’ the agents of the Afro Pastoral also stress the political character of the pilgrimage: it is configured as a march denouncing racism and celebrating Black Consciousness Day in a manner akin to a street protest.

This mode of action is not unprecedented within the Catholic Church, since, from the emergence of the Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs), strongly shaped by Liberation Theology, many Catholic groups have articulated faith and social activism (Rocha 1997).

As in the CONENCs, each edition of the pilgrimage has a specific theme and motto that guide the year’s reflections. The theme highlights the central motif of the edition and directs actions before and after the pilgrimage itself, such as training meetings and the preparation of documents, generally associated with the Fraternity Campaign or with events of significance for the Church or the black community. The fifteenth edition, for example, addressed the ‘Year of the Afrodescendant’ proposed by the UN, while the 2016 edition celebrated the

‘Year of Mercy’ proclaimed by Pope Francis. The motto, for its part, functions as a ‘call to action,’ succinctly conveying the proposals contained in the theme in practical terms.

It is notable that the mottos tend to reinforce a political stance confronting the violence suffered by the black population. Save for the editions of 2016, 2017 and 2021 – which celebrated the 300th anniversary of the discovery of the image of Our Lady of Aparecida and the 25th Pilgrimage – the remaining years emphasise two elements: (a) the black population as a central agent in overcoming inequalities; and (b) black people as subjects of violence who cry out for justice.

In sum, within the Catholic context, while the African heritages present in Candomblé terreiros are incorporated into inculturated liturgies as ‘signs of black culture,’ the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral also works to reconfigure the relations between Catholicism and religions of African origin in Brazil. The following section presents some aspects of this new paradigm.

AFRO-DIALOGUES: RELATIONS BETWEEN CATHOLICISM AND RELIGIONS OF AFRICAN ORIGIN

Relations between the Catholic Church and Afro-Brazilian religions have always been marked by ambiguity. Even during periods of explicit persecution and condemnation of Afro cults, some Catholics maintained close ties with terreiros. A more substantial shift in the Church’s positioning becomes observable from the 1970s onwards in a distinctive social and political context: Brazil’s process of redemocratisation after the dictatorship and the emergence of the Black Catholic movement.

As I argued above, between the 1970s and 1980s we can observe a process through which the black movement asserted itself within Catholicism. From the perspective of the ecclesial hierarchy, this discourse unfolded under the guise of pastoral concern – that is, oriented towards evangelisation — while the activists advocated a clearer and more effective form of social engagement.

If, up to the 1990s, it fell to the APNs to consolidate the foundations of Black Catholic activism, imbuing their work with a certain organisational shape (including articulating the Church’s official position), today the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral represents the institutionalisation of the Catholic vision on ethno-racial issues. Paradoxically, its creation in the late 1980s represented a middle ground between the demands of black Catholics and the ecclesial hierarchy.

Three decades after the creation of the PAB, a new posture can be observed both among Catholics and among followers of religions of African origin, who have begun to establish – at least officially – a relationship of equals through the Catholic-Candomblé-Umbanda Dialogue Group (DCCU). Similar to what can be found with other religions such as Judaism and Islam, this space of dialogue is marked by complex events whose historical linearity is difficult to trace. Nor is there a uniform national position on the matter, given the internal diversity that characterises both the Afro-Brazilian and the Catholic contexts.

Here I highlight two initiatives led by the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral that seek to reconfigure the way in which the Catholic Church relates to Candomblé and Umbanda: the first in Salvador, the second in São Paulo.

According to the records of the Archdiocesan Centre for the Coordination of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral (Salvador), the possibility of a Candomblé-Catholic Bilateral Commission was proposed by the president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Monsignor Michael Louis Fitzgerald, who, in early 2006, took part in three meetings, held in Salvador, with representatives of different religions, as well as an interreligious prayer at Ilê Axé Iyá Nassô Oká (known as Casa Branca, in the Vasco da Gama neighbourhood).

In response to the proposal presented by the Holy See via the aforementioned Pontifical Council, the CNBB asked one of its internal bodies – the Episcopal Pastoral Commission for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue – to put this dialogue into effect.

Salvador was chosen as the venue and in 2006 the first meeting was held between Catholic and Candomblé leaders. Two Comboni missionary priests participated (one of them the coordinator of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral of the Archdiocese of Salvador and of the Northeast Region), as well as the priests advising the National Afro-Brazilian Pastoral and the Episcopal Commission for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue (both from the CNBB). On the side of the religions of African origin were the president of the Cultural Association for the Preservation of Bantu Heritage (ACBANTU, representing Bantu Candomblé) and a representative of the Palmares Cultural Foundation of Bahia. Already at this first meeting, the difficulty of including a representative from each Candomblé ‘nation’ became apparent – a difficulty that would also recur in the meetings held in São Paulo.

The minutes show that while the Catholics presented their concerns and sought to ‘learn about the other for the good of each and of the world,’ the Candomblé representatives highlighted, among other issues, the religious intolerance promoted by Pentecostal evangelical churches. This concern remained a constant: ‘Allying with the Catholic Church is important if we are to confront the Pentecostals who persecute us,’ one participant said (Minutes of the meeting in Salvador, 2006).

Despite an initial agenda of commitments, the second meeting scheduled for 2008 failed to take place due to the absence of Candomblé representatives. In 2009, the third meeting was held in Brasília with representatives from São Paulo, Brasília and Maranhão. Its aim was to map existing initiatives, analyse ongoing processes and discuss future prospects, including the organisation of a symposium in 2010. The absence of Afro-religious leaders once again made it impossible to hold meetings in 2010.

In early 2011, the first meeting was held in São Paulo, for which I was invited to give a presentation on the configuration of religions of African origin in Brazil. At first, I was informed that it would be an interreligious meeting; only on the day of the gathering did I realise that it was in fact a meeting between representatives of the Catholic Church and Candomblé.

Present on the Catholic side were: the priests who presided over the Mariama Institute (IMA) and the Father Batista Institute for Black People; the person responsible for interreligious dialogue and ecumenism in the Archdiocese of São Paulo; the national coordinator of the Afro Pastoral; and the representative from the CNBB for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Representing the religions of African origin were: the executive coordinator of the National Institute of Afro-Brazilian Tradition and Culture (INTECAB-SP)⁸ and two members of the Interreligious Forum of the Secretariat of Justice and Citizenship of the State of São Paulo. This meeting revisited the same concerns as the previous encounters. From this point onwards, I began to follow the meetings as an invited observer.

Already at the first meeting, the mistrust of the *pais* and *mães-de-santo* present regarding the ‘real’ intentions of the Catholics became evident: ‘But what do you actually want with this commission? [...] We know the Pope is coming in 2013 and then what? What will happen then?’ asked one *mãe-de-santo*. She continued: ‘Because the enemies of the [Catholic] Church aren’t the *povo de santo*, they’re the evangelicals [Pentecostals].’⁹

After an intense debate on the issues raised, including the appropriate way to name the religions, and revisiting the historical positionings through which Catholicism condemned religions of African origin, a few basic points were defined to guide the following meetings: (a) recuperate the history of the arrival of Black people in Brazil; and (b) identify the theological continuities and ruptures between Catholicism and Candomblé with a view to fostering mutual respect.

Other difficulties concerned more practical questions: the composition of the group, the funding for the meetings and the definition of a meeting schedule. The CNBB’s adviser for interreligious dialogue proposed inviting representatives from across the country and asking each participant to cover their own travel costs. Faced with these difficulties, it was decided instead that the group would be composed of ten people from São Paulo: five Catholics and five Candomblé practitioners (one representative from each Candomblé nation: Jeje, Nagô, Angola, Mina and Keto). The meetings were scheduled to be held at the Casa de Reconciliação, belonging to the Archdiocese of São Paulo. Lunch would be subsidised by the Catholics and each participant would be responsible for their own transport costs.

This organisational design shows us how the Catholic representatives struggled to comprehend the modes of organisation characteristic of religions of African origin. Wrongly assuming the existence of a hierarchical structure similar to that of the Catholic Church,

8 ‘INTECAB is not a religious institution of a liturgical nature, although composed mostly of members of the Afro-Brazilian spiritual community. Its aim is the preservation, continuity and expansion of the values of tradition, proposing to achieve this aim through theological and liturgical study, as well as through cultural expansion via exchanges and the sharing of experiences. INTECAB is a deliberative institute.’ Available at <http://intecabsp.wordpress.com/intecab-sp/> Accessed 15 February 2012. Six Catholic religious association that brings together black bishops, priests and deacons.

9 Although a relevant topic, I shall not explore the disputes between Catholics and evangelicals here, nor cases of racism and religious intolerance. On these issues, see Silva (2007), Sanchis (2001) and Oliveira (2024).

they suggested the presence of *pais* and *mães-de-santo* who could act as ‘representatives’ of the other Candomblé houses.

The next meeting was scheduled for early October the same year, its agenda set to define the aims, justifications and common principles for the Catholic-Candomblé dialogue. However, these issues could not be discussed, as considerable unease arose: one of the Catholic representatives objected to the presence of a *pai-de-santo* from Umbanda, going so far as to assert that the meeting was ‘a dialogue between Candomblé and Catholics, not with Umbanda.’ This priest was replaced and did not attend subsequent meetings. In his place a seminarian (today a priest) joined the group. Those present decided to accept the participation of the Umbanda practitioner, although without altering the group’s name: the Catholic-Candomblé Bilateral Dialogue Group.

At the last meeting of 2011, an agenda was set for the following year: bimonthly meetings at which exclusively theological themes would be discussed. In making this decision, the Catholics, as well as reinforcing their position that the group should not yet be presented as an extension of the CNBB, also frustrated the expectations of some Candomblé practitioners that some form of official joint statement with the Church would be produced, or that the content of the discussions would be made public in some form. This became even more apparent at the April 2012 meeting, when it was decided that the minutes would record only the outcomes of the debates, not the various positions and interventions of the participants.

In 2013, the group finally became consolidated and held regular meetings, although there was still some inconsistency in the participation of Candomblé practitioners. With the active participation of a *mãe-de-santo* from Umbanda, the group officially adopted the title of the Catholic-Candomblé-Umbanda Trilateral Dialogue Group (*Núcleo de Diálogo Trilateral Católico-Candomblé-Umbanda*: DCCU).

While the group’s agenda and objectives had been defined at least minimally, the same could not be said of the composition of the commission. On the Catholic side, the issue was settled with the nomination of five priests, in addition to my presence as a researcher. Among the practitioners of religions of African origin, however, several problems arose. According to the account of one *mãe-de-santo* (who later stopped attending the meetings), other priests questioned why they had not also been invited to join the commission. Meanwhile, some priests declined the invitation because they disagreed with the political stance of INTECAB-SP (all the more so because it was the institution’s coordinator who had been tasked with making the arrangements). As a result, at each meeting a new *pai-de-santo* would appear and the same topics had to be at least partially revisited.

After years of persecution, it is understandable that Candomblé and Umbanda religious leaders would receive the Catholic proposal to form a bilateral dialogue commission with some apprehension – especially as they did not perceive the proposal as effective, given that they continued to be victims of acts of intolerance, particularly from charismatic Catholics.

Added to this mistrust was the inherent difficulty of identifying interlocutors among religions of African origin capable of presenting an ‘official position’ of the religion, given that these traditions are organised in such a way that each leadership operates autonomously from the others. Paradoxically, the *pais* and *mães-de-santo* who did take part in the meetings were satisfied with how the encounters were conducted, perceiving that a dialogue between the parties was genuinely taking place.

In this context, the goal of including one representative from each Candomblé tradition was abandoned. In April, twelve people were present (six Catholics, three from Candomblé and three from Umbanda) and these participants began to attend the meetings regularly. Father Jurandyr Azevedo, national adviser to the Afro Pastoral, led the meeting, giving a brief historical account of the group after the invited members had introduced themselves. It was agreed that, from that meeting onwards, each member of the group would be responsible for addressing a theological theme from the perspective of their own tradition. At the May meeting, therefore, Father José Bizon presented a synthesis of the decrees *Nostra Aetate* and *Dignitatis Humanae* (promulgated by the Second Vatican Council), which address the Church’s relationship with non-Christian religions and human dignity with respect to religious freedom, respectively. At the June and October 2013 meetings, the *babalorixás* Badeladey and Carlos de Oxóssi presented aspects of Keto Candomblé.

The mistrust experienced during the initial meetings gradually diminished as they unfolded. The banner of ‘mutual understanding’ appears to have taken precedence over other more social or political demands. It is notable that those attending the meetings did not conceal their expectations – especially on the part of the Candomblé practitioners – that this relationship with the Catholic Church might bring some benefits in the combat against religious intolerance, albeit recognising that the path ahead is a long one. Controversial themes such as syncretism and animal sacrifice are avoided.

Over the three years in which I accompanied the activities of the DCCU group, both through its minutes and through conversations with its members, three juxtaposed positions became apparent. First, a moment of denunciation when Candomblé leaders told the Catholic representatives about the harms that people associated with the Church had caused, and continue to cause, to religions of African origin. Second, as a corollary to this first position, an underlying fear emerged that the Commission might represent yet another attempt at co-optation, or a surreptitious form of attack by the Church. And, finally, a demand for a public statement from the Catholic hierarchy in support of the claims of Afro-Brazilian religions, combined with a sense of satisfaction that – historically and for the first time – they had been officially invited to engage in a joint endeavour.

At the same time, the way in which the Catholics have participated in the meetings demonstrates just how unfamiliar they are with the organisational dynamics of Afro-Brazilian

religions, as I noted above. Although there are priests who are more knowledgeable of certain aspects of Afro religious practice, these are not necessarily members of the DCCU group.

The configuration of the DCCU in São Paulo points to a reworking of the relationship between Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religions, in a manner that is symmetrically opposed to the relationship observed between terreiros and neo-Pentecostal churches. In the latter case, symbolic and political disputes prevail, at times involving physical confrontations (Silva 2007), while in the dialogue with Catholics a certain cordiality predominates – though without implying the complete absence of tension or conflict. Beneath the discourses of interreligious dialogue, peaceful coexistence and the defence of black cultural values, common interests emerge that draw the Church and terreiros closer together.

This relationship between Catholicism and Candomblé thus presents a paradox: on one hand, sectors of the Church still outrightly reject Candomblé practices and symbols; on the other, the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral legitimates these elements as expressions of black culture and develops a new ritual form known as ‘Afro inculturated liturgies’ (Oliveira 2016). In a broader sense, this bilateral dialogue reflects the contemporary Brazilian social context that, since the 1970s, has debated identificatory, cultural and religious plurality in the public sphere, while still having to confront diverse conflicts.

FINAL REMARKS: INCULTURATING RELIGION

In this article, I have discussed the ways in which the Catholic Church in Brazil has incorporated elements of black activism into its internal practices, promoted initiatives to combat racism and adopted symbols of African heritage in its liturgies. Three aspects were highlighted: the formation of the Black Catholic movement, the place of inculturated liturgies and the dialogues between Catholics and practitioners of religions of African origin.

In the 1970s, certain demands of the black movement began to be debated within the Church, generating a series of clashes between leaders regarded as ‘progressive’ and those seen as ‘conservative.’ It is true that Catholics were already strongly mobilised in favour of indigenous peoples and those living in situations of social vulnerability – orphans, homeless people, the poor and so on. However, the ethno-racial dimension had not yet been incorporated into the agenda. This occurred through a twofold movement: on one hand, the reforms introduced by the Second Vatican Council and the intensification of social campaigns for an end to the military dictatorship in force in Brazil since 1964; and, on the other, the preparations for the General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate, whose central theme would be ‘culture.’

These events stimulated clergy, religious personnel and black Catholics to reflect on the place of black people within Catholicism beyond the spaces they had traditionally occupied, such as *congadas*, *moçambiques*, brotherhoods and confraternities. The first difficulty lay in reconciling the ethno-racial differences of the faithful within the axiom of ‘Christian

universality.’ For this reason, the movement’s first step was to seek theological foundations capable of legitimising its aims, thereby enabling the subsequent definition of the concrete actions to be implemented.

Catholic activism, through the institution of Black Pastoral Agents, initially worked alongside the wider black movement, while also developing discussions directed towards the Church. This intermediate position between the ‘religious’ and the ‘political’ yielded some advances but also generated conflicts, culminating in institutional separation and the creation of the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral.

During the period when the Black Catholic Movement was becoming consolidated, theological study groups were indispensable, among which the Atabaque Group, coordinated by Father Toninho, stood out. The inculturated liturgies were gradually conceived within these groups. The first experiences of incorporating elements of Afro-Brazilian religions into the Catholic rite began in the context of these closed meetings, following the celebration of the *Missa dos Quilombos* in 1981.

By positioning itself in the public debate on policies aimed at the black population, the Catholic Church was forced to reassess both the place occupied by black people within its own structures and its official relationship with Afro-Brazilian religions. In some respects, the adoption of key elements of the black movement’s agenda – the fight against racism, reparatory policies and respect for religious diversity – was relatively easy; in other aspects, internal adjustments were required, beginning with the 1988 Fraternity Campaign. By situating black people and their lived reality at the centre of the discussion, the Church acknowledged its historical complicity in the exclusion and exploitation suffered by the black population since the arrival of the first Africans as enslaved people. This reflection resulted in a proliferation of public apologies and the strengthening of the Afro Pastoral, the IMA and the GRENI.

Inculturated liturgies constitute, together with the 1988 Fraternity Campaign, one of the movement’s principal achievements, although they are also a source of controversy both within and beyond Catholicism.

As discussed above, in surveying the national repertoire of symbols of African heritage in Brazil, the agents of Catholic inculturation incorporated a set of elements drawn from Afro-Brazilian religions into the Roman rite. The justification presented by the Church is that such elements are not exclusive to any one religion but express the ‘black way of praying.’ Since the terreiros are regarded as the ‘locus of African cultures in Brazil,’ it is common to resort to these spaces to access these symbols.

The Church appears to take seriously the process of the ‘culturalisation’ of Afro-Brazilian religions. Since the state – with the support of Afro-Brazilian religious leaders, intellectuals and artists – has recognised the terreiros as ‘traditional African communities,’ the incorporation of these symbols into Catholic liturgy represents a continuation, rather than a rupture, of this process. Transformed into ‘culture,’ Afro-Brazilian religions can be inculturated by

Catholicism. This process is not understood as syncretism, since both Afro-Brazilian and Catholic religious practitioners adopt a cultural reading of the religion. Outside the ritual domain, however, the relationship with the terreiros unfolds on a different plane, as evidenced in the meetings of the DCCU.

The inculturated liturgies contain elements that make evident how the Church has conceptualised black identity: bound to the material culture of Candomblé and reified by the state as African. These celebrations constitute one of the major achievements of the Black Catholic movement in the period following the 1988 Fraternity Campaign.

At the National Congress of Black Catholic Organisations (CONENC), held in February 2012 in Londrina (PR), the central theme was the ‘Afro Mass.’ More than debating which symbols were permitted or which ecclesiastical authorisations were required, the central concern was to establish the cultural and theological foundations for these celebrations. Advised by priests responsible for the liturgical dimension within the CNBB, participants sought to justify the presence of particular symbols, citing examples such as the Congolese rite approved in the Democratic Republic of Congo. At the same time, another adviser highlighted the need to reorganise the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral, mapping its activities and returning to the studies initiated by Fr Toninho.

Like the inculturated liturgies, the National Pilgrimages to Aparecida give visibility to the actions of the Black Catholic Movement. As festive celebrations, the pilgrimages are also political acts, producing new narratives about the black presence within the Church. These events mobilise not only the historical groups of Black Catholicism, like the *congadas*, *moçambiques* and confraternities, but also elements of black culture incorporated into the inculturated celebrations, in dialogue with Afro-Brazilian religions.

As noted above, in the 2012 edition we can observe the reproduction of a hegemonic syntax within the Black Catholic Movement: the presentation of an ethos akin to that of the *povo-de-santo* (Amaral 2002), characterised by informal gestures and speech, the shared meal after Mass and greetings including the expression *axé*. Together, these elements reinforce a particular conception of what it means to ‘be black,’ inspired by practices found in Candomblé terreiros.

In the most recent editions of the pilgrimage, no specific collectives such as *congadas* or brotherhoods were identified. The references now centre on (arch)dioceses and regional bodies, pointing to a semantic shift in the term ‘Black Catholic communities,’ which now encompasses a wider range of subjects. From this perspective, following Leda Maria Martins’ (2021) analysis, it becomes relevant to assess the extent to which the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral has succeeded in institutionally articulating the diverse black groups connected to the Church.

Generally speaking, *congadas* do not participate regularly in the inculturated masses promoted by the Afro Pastoral, except in specific activities such as the feast of São Benedito at the Achiropita Church in São Paulo. Likewise, the Pastoral does not organise the annual

gathering of *congadeiros* in Aparecida. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise the diversity of Catholic forms of action, linked to the plurality of existing groups, as already highlighted by Paula Montero (2006) and Pierre Sanchis (2001).

The Church's current position of recognising Afro-Brazilian religions as legitimate religious interlocutors, just as it already does with other denominations, is unprecedented. This has been a slow process, unfolding over more than a decade, and extends far beyond the ordinary meetings and joint events. What has impacted the Brazilian religious field is the shift in the stance of the actors involved. The apparent paradox of treating Afro-Brazilian religions sometimes as 'culture' and other times as 'religion' dissolves when we consider that identities are fashioned through the relations established in each context, even when this involves mobilising conflicting diacritical signs.

When Afro-Brazilian religions present themselves in public debates as 'traditional communities,' the Church recognises this identity claim and inculturates it. Within the religious field, *pais* and *mães-de-santo* are recognised as priests, establishing interreligious relations with Catholics, Buddhists, Jews and Muslims. Identificatory plasticity thus becomes essential for stabilising and surpassing boundaries.

Although not directly analysed in this article, it should be emphasised that the ethnography conducted with groups of the Catholic Black Movement did not suggest that their actions are connected to any strategy to stem the loss of followers experienced more recently by the Catholic Church. A preliminary examination of the last three demographic censuses (2000, 2010 and 2022) shows that the variation in the percentage of Catholics who self-identify as *pretos* or *pardos* (black or brown) broadly mirrors the fluctuations observed in the racial composition of Brazilian society. Between 2010 and 2022, for example, the proportion of *pardo* (brown) Catholics rose from 43% to 44%, while that of *pretos* (black) increased from 6.8% to 9.3% – a growth that corresponds closely to the shifts of approximately 1% and 3% recorded for the Brazilian population as a whole. In this sense, it would be productive to deepen the analysis of the census time series in order both to understand how racial and religious belonging interpenetrate and to assess the reach of pastoral and proselytising initiatives with a racial emphasis within the Church – but without reducing the investigation to the notion of a religious market, which would curb a more nuanced exploration of the complexity of Catholic modes of belonging.

TRANSLATED BY DAVID RODGERS.

RECEIVED: MAY 30, 2024.

APPROVED: AUGUST 25, 2024.

This article was translated with support from 'The Vibrant Project: Publishing Indigenous and Black Brazilian Anthropologists in foreign languages,' funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research as part of its Global Initiative Grant programme.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT:

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the University of São Paulo (USP), but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for the present study and are therefore not publicly accessible. However, the interview data may be obtained from the author upon reasonable request and with the permission of the research interlocutors.

FUNDING

This study was financed, in part, by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001 (2009-2010) and São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), Brasil. Process Number 2012/12372-7 (2012-2016).

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