

Masculorum concubitores

Views on homosexuality among
Catholics in Recife, Brazil

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Introduction

This paper analyzes the positions towards homosexuality of Catholics (both laypersons and clergy) in Recife, Brazil. The data analyzed here are part of a multicenter study on religious responses to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Brazil, which considers the Catholic, Evangelical, and Afro-Brazilian traditions.¹

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The relevance of the issue of homosexuality to a study on religion and AIDS lies first in the fact that sexual practices are one of the main routes of HIV transmission. Since such practices are sociocultural constructs, marked by representations and values ascribed to them (Vance 1989 and 1995; Foucault 1993; Parker 1991 and 2000; Gagnon 2006), understanding the meanings of sexual behaviors according to different religious traditions is of the utmost importance for developing effective responses to the epidemic (Rios, Paiva, Oliveira et al 2008).

It cannot be overlooked that ever since the first AIDS cases, homosexuality has been associated with HIV. Through a synergy of stigmatizations, meanings ascribed socially to the two categories – homosexuality/“homosexuality” and HIV-positive/“*aidético*” (person with AIDS) – have intermingled and fueled each other. Thus, with AIDS initially perceived as the “gay plague,” people with homosexual practices came to be viewed not only as “perverted,” but also as carriers of a disease capable of destroying themselves and others. On the religious level, history shows how quickly HIV was interpreted by Christian denominations as God’s punishment for sins of the flesh (Parker & Aggleton 2001).

The epidemic’s subsequent development demonstrated the fallacy of such initial scientific and religious interpretations of who would be directly affected; the virus failed to spare heterosexuals, “housewives,” and children. Even so, its association with homosexuality, or with sins of the flesh in the broader sense, appears to have persisted in the religious imagination and elsewhere (cf. Terto Jr 1996).

Meanwhile, the persistent concentration of HIV infection among men who have sex with men is currently interpreted as related to stigmatization processes, whereby infection results from homophobia (cf. Gondim & Kerr-Pontes 2000; Terto Jr 2002; Rios 2003 and 2004). Thus, the current scientific consensus is that an effective response to HIV and AIDS in this population group must involve reducing oppression against homosexualities (Rios 2002).

Beyond AIDS, studies have shown that homophobia is a major problem in itself. From the synergy that develops with other oppressive social vectors, it decreases many men and women’s access to citizens’ rights and well-being, thus making them vulnerable to a number of social problems (cf. Green 2002; Carrara & Viana 2003; Facchini 2004; Ramos & Carrara 2006; Rios & Nascimento 2007, Costa 1992; Peres 2004; Castro, Abramovay, & Silva 2004, among others).

Much has already been done to fight stigma and discrimination, but despite the gains made by social movements in ascribing new meanings to homosexualities, homophobia – a structuring stigma of social relations – remains. In Recife, capital of the State of Pernambuco in Northeast Brazil, a quantitative survey was distributed at the 5th Diversity Parade in the State of Pernambuco in 2006, an event celebrating the affirmation of homosexualities. According to the survey, a high proportion (70.8%) of people with homosexual practices that were interviewed reported that they had already suffered at least one of the nine forms of discrimination related to sexuality that were listed in the questionnaire. A full 21.6% of the interviewees reported experiences involving exclusion or marginalization in a religious setting (Carrara, Ramos, Lacerda et al 2007).

In complex societies like Brazil, various sociocultural institutions provide frameworks that organize and give meaning to sexual subjects and interactions. Much has been written about the way medical discourse and the gender system have contributed to structuring homophobia (Costa 1995; Parker 2002, Green 2002; Fry 1982; Grossi 2003, among others), but little attention has focused on the way religious beliefs contribute to this process (Rios 2004; Natividade 2006 and 2007; Silva, Santos, Licciardi et al 2008).

In this context, data from a recent national survey on Brazilian men and women's opinions of homosexuality show that 99% of the population have some type of prejudice against lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transvestites, or transsexuals (Venturi 2008). Returning to the main focus of this article, Venturi (2008) calls attention to the legitimizing weight of religious (especially Christian) discourses in reinforcing prejudices against homosexualities. The fact that 92% of the public agreed (84% *totally*) with the statement "God made man and woman with different sexes in order to fulfill their roles and bear children" and that 66% agreed (58% *totally*) that "Homosexuality is a sin against God's law" reveals the extent of religious complicity with intolerance towards people with homosexual practices.

What the study failed to reveal, given the methodology used, is exactly what in "God's law" provides the grounds for such opinions – in other words, which cultural/religious beliefs allow such prejudices to develop and prosper. The current study addresses this gap. Thus, considering the broader context outlined above, we focus on the discussion of the meanings our religious interviewees ascribe to same-sex practices.

To begin the discussion of our data, we chose to focus on Catholicism, still the religious tradition with the most followers in Brazil (Camurça 2006; Mariz 2006). In due time, we intend to discuss the other two religious traditions studied in the research (Evangelical and Afro-Brazilian). By focusing on Catholicism, our aim is to develop an in-depth analysis of the grounds for prejudice against homosexuality among Catholics in Recife; we also intend to analyze how these prejudices play out in a variety of contexts within this religious tradition. Understanding the meanings ascribed to homosexuality by Catholics, as members of one of the religious traditions that contributed most to establishing sexual practices and meaning among men and women in Brazil (Parker 1991), can provide useful information for developing strategies to deal with homophobia, as well as for responding to the AIDS epidemic among men who have sex with men.

Concerning the Research Approaches

Our discussion is based on an ethnographic study conducted from 2005 to 2007, which involved interviews with priests and lay leaders and participant observation of the daily lives of Catholics in a working-class parish in Greater Metropolitan Recife, referred to here as Nova Guanabara.² We should highlight that interviewing Catholic priests on AIDS was not an easy task. Looking back, over the course of 2005 and 2006, while interviews with Evangelical pastors, *pais-de-santo* and *mães-de-santo* (priestesses from Afro-Brazilian religions) were proceeding smoothly, our greatest challenge was making headway with the fieldwork among Catholics. When potential interviewees, priests and friars, learned about the subject matter, they frequently cancelled their interviews (others refused to be interviewed from the start.)³

2 We should emphasize that the project that produced these data was approved by the Brazilian National Commission on Research Ethics under the National Health Council/Ministry of Health (CONEP/CNS/MS). According to the provisions of CONEP Ruling 196/96 on safeguarding the anonymity and confidentiality of research subjects, we have used fictitious names to designate our informants and the neighborhood and parish where a major portion of the data collection took place.

3 Once we managed to make progress with interviewing Catholic clergy, we realized that our difficulty lay partially in the fact that the Archdiocese was led at the time by an ultra-conservative Archbishop who had already persecuted numerous priests for having contradicted his interpretation of the Holy Church's guidelines (Cruz 2009). Meanwhile, we realized that the AIDS epidemic raised a paradox for the priests, friars, and nun we interviewed. Although they all claimed to agree with the Vatican's view towards sexuality's place in the world order, which leads the Church to advocate prevention based on

While we were having difficulty finding priests willing to be interviewed, and informed by our understanding of the importance of laypeople in contemporary Catholicism (Mariz 2006), we focused on observing the daily lives of such laypeople in a neighborhood with a strong Catholic presence. Thus, in addition to recording notes in a field diary about events we witnessed and informal conversations we had with Catholics living in the neighborhood, we interviewed eleven laypeople involved in religious services in the parish church. We finally managed to conduct interviews with seven priests and a nun, all of whom perform their religious services in other neighborhoods. The interviews touched upon different themes related to dealing with the AIDS epidemic including young people's sexual initiation, opinions on HIV prevention, and homosexuality.

In the analytical process, we sought to conduct a "dense description" (Geertz 1978), allowing for the emergence of emic categories, their interpretation by the "natives," and their use as culture in practice (Sahlins 2004), without, however, failing to offer our own interpretations of our research subject based on a theoretical framework that emphasizes the sociocultural construction of sexual events (Foucault 1993; Vance 1995 and 1989; Rubin 1993 and 1998).

Having presented the methodological and interpretative framework in which the data were collected and the analyses conducted, we now begin our discussion by briefly presenting the way homosexualities are grasped in Nova Guanabara. Following this initial overview, which will serve as the backdrop for a second analytical moment, perceiving some links to Christian sexual beliefs, we will move on by pursuing our Catholic interviewees' understanding of homosexualities (first that of the laypeople living in the neighborhood and active in their parish, and next members of the clergy working in other settings in Greater Metropolitan Recife).

Nova Guanabara and sexualities outside the norm

As demonstrated in a previous study (Rios, Aquino, Muñoz-Laboy et al 2008), Nova Guanabara's religious diversity is characteristic of working-class

fidelity in married couples and abstinence by single individuals, they acknowledge the temptations of the flesh permeating the sexual experiences of the congregations they lead. To affirm the Church's prevention model can mean expanding the contexts that increase the vulnerability of Catholics, which would objectively mean placing them at the service of death (cf. Rios, Aquino, Muñoz-Laboy et al 2008).

neighborhoods in Greater Metropolitan Recife. Afro-Brazilian religious temples (*terreiros*), Spiritist centers, Evangelical churches of all denominations, and places known for people that perform *trabalhos* (spells or incantations) comprise the neighborhood's broader religious landscape.

The Sacred Heart Catholic Church is located in this neighborhood. The priests help to settle the neighborhood initially, and the parish was established soon after the it was founded. Though immersed within a religiously diverse context, this parish manages to leave its mark on both the faithful and daily local life more broadly. We thus consider it a predominantly Catholic neighborhood⁴.

As in other working-class neighborhoods in Greater Recife, many people with homosexual practices attempt (if and how they can) to remain invisible to avoid the stigmas against homosexualities. However, both “effeminate” men and “masculine” women say that they cannot avoid being the way they are (Rios 2003 and 2004), which leads to them being perceived immediately as sexual deviants. At the same time, while many attempt to deny or disguise their homosexual orientation, others accept what they consider their “condition” (because, they say, they did not choose their desire or their way of being) and face the world, almost always paying a heavy price for what society at large considers a “deviation” (cf. Rios 2003 and 2008; Almeida, Rios & Parker 2002; Almeida 2004).

The neighborhood's pressure against these and other sexual “deviants” is strong. The control of sexuality is mediated by gossip within neighborhood networks. Such gossip circles are typical of communities in which adjoining houses formed by “little extensions” (*puxadinhos*) in backyards and extra slab floors added one on top of another to house extended families are spread along streets and alleys (cf. Aquino 2008). Territory and sociability converge in what Both (1976) referred to as a close-knit community network, which facilitates the control and stigmatization (Elias and Scotson 2000 and Goffman 1988) of what are viewed as “deviant” behaviors, including sexualities diverging from the heterosexual norm.

Of course, as demonstrated by Aquino (2008), this does not rule out the possibility of female conjugal infidelity and contra-hegemonic conjugal

4 For more on the importance of the Catholic Church in founding this particular neighborhood and daily Catholic life in the community, see Rios, Aquino, Muñoz-Laboy et al (2008).

arrangements (for example, two men and one woman cohabiting). Those with such arrangements, however, pay the price of disobeying what is expected of a “family” man or woman. In Nova Guanabara, as in other corners of Brazil, animals with *galhas* (horns) are symbols for deviant men: bull (for *cornocuckold*) and deer (or *veado* for queer) are epithets for what are viewed as failed masculinities.

The stigma of *cornocuckold* is related to female infidelity and the male’s inability to maintain control and contain the sexuality of his wife, partner, fiancée, or girlfriend. The second, *veado*, is the insignia of male homosexuality, or more precisely, of “lying with another man” and, in the sexual interaction, assuming the position of receiving the other’s penis in one’s mouth or anus. In the community’s view, the “passive” position is expressed “outside the bedroom walls” by displaying feminine attributes that constitute public identity performances (Parker 1991 and 2002; Rios 2004).

Along this line, Fernando, who is a younger member of the church’s Fellowship Group and who assists with Catechism, is the constant object of gossip by parishioners because of what they describe as his effeminate “way,” marked by a “high voice” and “delicate gestures.” One member of a Catholic group we accompanied revealed that people suspect the boy of being a “homosexual” but lack the proof necessary to “denounce this affront to Church principles.”

In the case of a woman, the stigma stems not from the fact that she *leva chifres* (literally “gets horns,” meaning that her male partner cheats on her), since from the community’s standpoint, this is part of “women’s condition.” The stigma lies in her own infidelity as a “loose” woman who “puts horns” on her male partner (Aquino 2008). Another stigmatizing vector that directly relates to the latter and mainly affects single and divorced women is the classification of women as “home women” and “street women”, or *boa para casar* (good for marrying) versus *boa para transar* (good for sex) (Da Matta 1989; Quadros 2004). A third stigmatizing vector relates to sexual orientation. Being *sabueira* (butch) or *sapatão* (literally “big shoe”, used similar to the English word dyke), though not based on animalistic figures like *veado* (deer), *bicha* (worm), or *frango* (chick), are still insults that suggest the degeneracy of any woman labeled as such. In these cases, assumptions about sexuality are also based on gestures and ways of dressing that are perceived as masculine.

Importantly, the genderization of female and male homosexuality does not prevent stigmatization. If, in other times, conceptual structures tended to exempt the “active” male from stigma (as long as he was masculine), it now appears that in the case of same sex couples, the “more feminine” woman or the “more masculine” man do not escape being stigmatized due to their sexual preferences. Modern medical discourse has placed all same-sex relations into the category of homosexuality (Guimarães 1984 and 2004; Fry 1982; Green 2002; Rios 2004 and 2008) – in a sense accentuating the suspicion that the erotic device (Parker 1991) brought to the field of concrete sexual interactions. After all, as the Brazilian popular saying goes, “Between four walls, anything goes.”

Sexual interaction with an individual of the same sex and gender presentation are not the only factors that place someone under suspicion. Regardless of their own sexual orientation or gender, people who maintain friendships with homosexuals or couples also “enjoy” such stigmatizing processes. The stigma also extends to the families, especially those that refuse to throw the sexual “deviant” out of the home.

Laypeople: homosexuality in Catholic families

Dona Albertina, a fervent Catholic active in the religious programs of the Sacred Heart parish, reports her sadness about having a lesbian daughter.⁵ For her, this fact is an affront to God’s laws and thus to the nature of things as they should be: woman exists for man. As if the suffering over her daughter’s “sexual choice” were not enough, she also has to put up with the neighborhood gossip. No one knows how the neighbors discovered the family secret, but once they did, the stigma of homosexuality affected her as well. She asks herself, “What did I do for my daughter to take this path?” Her daughter no longer even lives in the neighborhood, but Dona Albertina perceives her neighbors’ disapproving looks when the young woman comes to visit the family.

The gossip characteristic of life in Nova Guanabara can crop up at any moment. During an interview, we learned about another case of

5 Importantly, Dona Albertina’s disclosure of her daughter’s homosexuality did not take place during the formal interview when we first contacted her. We sense that in order for her to speak in the first person about her daughter’s homosexuality, she needed to develop a relationship of closeness and trust with the (female) researcher who lived in the community for three months.

“homosexuality,” this time a boy who was the son of another parishioner. While we were interviewing Mariquinha, the woman in charge of a monthly “pilgrimage” of the Virgin Mary to people’s homes⁶, her daughter (a member of the Fellowship Group), interrupted the conversation and “snitched” on the son of Dona Ana with the unsolicited information that he “likes men” and is living with a *boiola* (queer). Mariquinha immediately frowned in disapproval at her daughter’s “big mouth;” the young woman had said too much.

It is important to emphasize the relative silence surrounding “cases” of homosexuality involving family members of church leaders. This contrasted with the cases of infidelity and other contra-hegemonic situations, which were readily revealed through gossip. We noted that with infidelity, several of our informants offered comments on the same event both in informal conversations and formal interviews. Meanwhile, with cases of homosexuality, few people commented, even on situations that were known to the community.

Thus, even though Dona Albertina told us that she suffers prejudice within the church, her daughter’s homosexuality was never mentioned by any other interviewee. Dona Ana’s son was only the object of gossip once, one of the few cases of gossip that we saw censored by church members. Apparently, keeping the homosexuality of an active churchgoer’s family member invisible is a strategy used to avoid damaging the image of someone who is a servant of God, even though (as suggested by Dona Albertina) that person feels the weight of the family member’s homosexuality on his or her shoulders.

The divine nature of the sexes and reproduction

Although our interviewees did not normally gossip about the homosexuality of other parishioners’ family members, they did have a lot to say about the subject in general. Their statements on homosexuality are guided by the perspective that homosexual practices are “an affront to the Church.” Father Olavo, who leads his congregation in another working-class neighborhood in

6 What the followers refer to as a “pilgrimage” involves the circulation of an image of the Virgin Mary to approximately 240 households per month. The local missionaries are responsible for maintaining the list of families the Virgin visits for a period of twenty-four hours during which the family is responsible for saying the rosary to the saint.

the city of Recife, is categorical: Catholics' views towards homosexuality are marked by prejudice.

Many [homosexuals] come to the parish for worship services, but few if any belong to specific groups in our church. The barrier is often "here comes that unwanted person, here comes that person who never wanted it to happen, to have someone in the family." (...) [Q. Are these people looked down on in the parish?] Some parishioners look down on them, others respect them, and others keep a distance from them. But what matters is for homosexuals to be aware of their place in society.

This perspective often leads homosexuals to avoid churches and religious services. This priest's perception, and those of other priests, is corroborated by lay leaders' comments. Putting aside the priests' view for the moment, we will now focus on the basis for lay leaders' prejudice.

We observed a variety of positions, all prejudiced. An example of a more extreme position is that of Antônio and Francisco, who coordinate the Men's Rosary Group⁷. Like Dona Albertina, they assert that man was made for woman and vice versa, referencing the reproductive task of the two sexes in interaction, which they believe to be a fact of nature (of God). They state:

I'm also completely against [homosexuality], and so is the Church. Man was made for woman and woman for man, not woman for woman or man for man. The Church [says that], and on that point I follow my religion, I'm completely against it. (Antônio)

The world is now focused on paganism. (...) They're trying to change it. Like the issue of disobedience to God: marriage of man to man, and woman to woman. The [Catholic] Church doesn't allow this at all, nor do other religions. Religions are unanimous (...) that it goes against nature, that it's improper to God's nature. The Church condemns it on this point. (Francisco)

⁷ The Rosary of Men has approximately 800 groups in the Northeast with a total of nearly 100,000 men who recite the rosary weekly. In the Nova Guanabara parish, the rosaries are recited every Monday of the month, with approximately 60 to 65 men participating each week.

The challenge by the homosexual movements

Although reproduction is cited repeatedly in expressions of disapproval of “homosexuality,” some interviewees’ subtle shifts in rhetoric demonstrate dialogue with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans (LGBT) rights movement. This is expressed, for example, in the interview with Dona Chica, coordinator of the “Couples’ Encounter with Christ”⁸ group:

God forgive me, my Lord Jesus! I think God put woman and man on earth to procreate. He didn’t leave man with man to be a mother, woman with woman to be a mother. **It may sound inhumane**, but I think there’s a time and place for everything. (our emphasis)

Appearing to accept the LGBT Movement’s challenge against discrimination as inhumane, and faced with the possibility of same-sex parenthood (via adoption, for example), she had to shift her focus from biological reproduction to raising children⁹. Thus, according to Dona Chica, it is not only having sexual relations with persons of the same sex, which is a “mortal sin,” that delegitimizes homosexuality and same-sex parenthood but also the societal stigma itself, which will infect the child.

I still don’t accept it. I might even accept it, but I think it’s wrong. I think. People might even say, “What’s wrong with it? Isn’t it better than being left in the street? I don’t know...” What can you claim? What are two women going to claim? One claims to be the mother, and the other what, the father? How? While the child is still small, fine. After he starts growing up, he can distinguish and talk about what’s happening. The world isn’t prepared for it, not at all. He’s a target for teasing... **The person is going to feel it in the skin, the son or daughter. To say “that’s just the way so-and-so is” sounds easy. But nobody’s there in their heart. Some people are going to have to suffer the words, and what about the teasing? Just say, “Oh, I don’t care!”? But it**

8 The ‘Couples’ Meeting with Christ’ is one of the mechanisms through which the Church transmits its key tenants of a successful marriage (see Machado 1996). The group is considered a service of the Catholic Church and has been offered since 1970. In the Nova Guanabara community, weekly activities include prayer and discussions on topics related to married life and raising Catholic children. Group leaders emphasized that monogamy and fidelity were among the most important values reinforced through the meetings.

9 For an introduction to the debate on LGBT civil rights in Brazil, especially on issues of same-sex parenthood and same-sex marriage, cf. Uziel (2007); Uziel, Mello & Grossi (2006); Mello (2006); Grossi (2003).

hurts, young lady. It hurts! Words aren't sticks and stones, but they hurt!

With some things it's better to take a beating than to put up with the words. But people are trying to trample over God's word one way or another, right? (Dona Chica) (our emphasis)

It is thus the stigma itself, which is considered inevitable, that causes people to consider a "homosexual family" unfeasible. Bernardo, from the Men's Rosary Group, also expounded upon civil (and perhaps religious) rights issues, describing how the LGBT movement's agenda has impacted and stirred up the "Christian religious world" and its representatives in the lay state:

[Q. And how does the Church view homosexuality?] Fine, there's the homophobia bill now, I don't know if you're aware of it. Are you? [No...] Girl, didn't you know? The homophobia bill that's in the Senate. The Church managed to veto part of it. (...) Because it's a bill that the President wants to pass.

After stating that his discontentment with the bill is based on God's commandment to Christians to aid sinners but to denounce sin, Bernardo recalls that the bill would even prevent ministers and priests from taking a stance against "homosexuality."

(...) To begin with, this homophobia bill is unconstitutional. But it's a bill that gives all homosexuals the right to express their affection by acts wherever they are. If anybody feels bothered and says anything, they can be indicted and spend two or three years in jail. If a priest or minister in the church speaks out against homosexuality, the practice that is, he can be indicted and get two years in jail. If the priest in the church or in the seminary discovers that a seminary student committed a homosexual act, the student can't be expelled. If he's expelled because he committed a homosexual act, he can sue and [the priest] can get two to three years in jail.

Bernardo assures us that the Christian community is mobilizing to block the passage of the bill:

They're really pushing this bill. Darn! Petitions and everything. We have a website for the Senators from the State of Pernambuco. The entire Church, all the churches, are mobilizing like mad to veto it. Because it's unconstitutional. You have the right, and I don't have the right to consider the practice bad, understand? Imagine: we're imagining now, whether you agree or not. Fine, inside the

church like that, homosexuals, men or women, lesbians, kissing each other, at a time like that, in a sacred place like that, where a heterosexual couple is supposed to have some respect, just imagine a homosexual...

At this point in the interview, and like the other interviewees, he states in his own (layperson's) words the Christian opinion on (homo)sexuality: "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Ivo ." In other words, God created two complementary sexes, and this difference should be the basis for sexual interactions. To do differently is to commit a sin, an act against the (divine) nature of things.

Yet the Church is made of human beings and thus, of sinners. Bernardo goes on to point out the presence of people with homosexual desires, both priests and worshippers, within the religion:

We have many cases in the Church. There's knowledge of priests, after all... (...) But if that's what the priest wants, it's his problem, not the Church's (...). We just had a case with an altar *boy* - I'm going to tell it. I talk too much, right? (...) who decided to come out, and he went to the priest, and came to us and we discussed it with him: "So, is that what you want? Will that make you happy? Are you sure? Do you want help? Do you want to talk to a psychologist? Do you want to talk with the priest?," in the sense of "Is this it? Are you going to be happy like this? You're going to suffer a lot!"

Like Dona Chica, in addition to using religion to condemn homosexuality, Bernardo raises the issue of prejudice on the part of society at large as a fact to be considered in assuming this sexual position.

Homosexuals are, well, there's huge prejudice against homosexuality. [The boy:] "Oh, right, the Church, people look at me like that, because this actually happens, and I can't deny that it's complicated". [...] In short, summing up that case in our congregation, I thought it was very dignified of him. He came out because he wanted to. His name is Paloma now. He's not even a homosexual now, he's a (...) transvestite. (...) but for the Church he couldn't assume his homosexuality. Oh, no he couldn't! But he has to live on the outside. Living on the outside is a problem for the person that lives it. What can he do? He left [the Church] because he couldn't live a life like that and a separate life as a Christian. Since Christianity does not approve of homosexual practice, that's how it is! But the person has a tendency, takes pleasure in it,

he works on it, he asks God for strength, he channels it into something else. But that's how the Church...

As Bernardo shifts his discussion from the 'ideal' situation to the reality of this boy's situation, he demonstrates increasing tolerance. This tolerance, however, rests upon the assumption that the Church and the outside world will remain separate; only within the latter can the boy's sexual orientation be tolerated. In other words, to come out and fulfill one's desire, one must disconnect from the Church.

What is important to highlight is that no matter how much both Dona Chica and Bernardo affirm God's condemnation of homosexuality, they appear to be conflicted. According to Sahlins (1990), progressive discourses on homosexuality and interactions with LGBT people have served as empirical risks to the meanings ascribed by religion. When Dona Chica says, "*I still don't accept it,*" and Bernardo says, "*I thought it was very dignified of him,*" they reveal spaces that are opening up for reconsideration.

To make further progress in understanding the grounds for the religious discourse that classifies homosexuality negatively, we must turn to experts on the doctrine. The priests we interviewed base their explanation on the Bible and Paul's teachings concerning homosexuality.

Clergy: desire versus practice

The lay leaders assert that homosexuality is a choice, but rather than discussing motivations for this "choice," they only consider the Biblical and social rules forbidding it. The priests, on their other hand, discuss desire:

Everywhere on earth there are persons who have all different kinds of options. Logically, according to Church morals, theoretically we're all called upon to chastity. Married people live their sexuality with their husbands or wives, so the unmarried don't have anyone to live their sexuality with (...). So logically a homosexual, if he marries a woman, he is obligated to be with his wife. Now if he doesn't marry a woman, he is obligated to live his chastity (laughs). A lesbian, too, logically. (Father Malaquias)

On the one hand, Father Malaquias acknowledges homosexual desire, while on the other, he denounces the Catholic ideal of chastity. Nevertheless, he notes that for those unable to achieve this ideal, there is

the alternative of heterosexual marriage. Yet modern times challenge the Church – and priests as its representatives – to engage in dialogue and knowledge exchange. Thus, Father Malaquias proceeds to put forth scientific propositions on homosexuality:

Mainly in the last two decades, the Church has realized that reality is not that simple. And it's not only the person's own choice. I believe that in the coming decades we will make progress in our knowledge of this reality.

Next, the priest links three discourses: the field of human rights, which affirms the humanity and dignity of all human beings; scientific discourse, which separates sexuality from “character/personality;” and a third, which draws a distinction between homosexuality and homosexualism.

Yet for several decades the Church (...) has basically acknowledged the innate value of the human person. Every person has value in and of himself or herself, regardless of what he or she is or thinks. It's necessary to distinguish between *homossexualismo* (homosexualism) and *homossexualidade* (homosexuality).

On this latter point, he subverts the contemporary discourse of social movements and constructionist theories of sexuality, in addition to the scientific consensus that proposes to replace the “ismo” (ism) referring to disease with the “dade” (ity) to signal a legitimate form of sexual expression¹⁰.

Homosexualism is the practice of homosexuality. Homosexuality is not a sin. It is a condition of the person that is inclined, to various degrees, to be sexually attracted to a person of the same sex (...). This is not a sin. Attractions and feelings are natural to man. It is the practice of homosexualism that the Church sees, and which is, according to this doctrine, condemnable. (Father Malaquias)

The modern concepts Father Malaquias uses reaffirm Paul's teachings on controlling sins of the flesh. Finally, the priest mentions the presence of homosexuals in the Church (as worshippers and clergy) but explains that they are expected to forego their “homosexualism” and remain chaste:

Of course we won't turn a blind eye. There are homosexuals everywhere, including in the Church, and these people should be respected. Obviously, he

¹⁰ In Brazil, after depathologization of homosexual practices, the scientific consensus has been that the term *homossexualismo* (homosexualism), which refers to disease, should not be used. In its place, the indication is the use of the term *homossexualidade* (homosexuality) - a benign expression in human sexuality.

shouldn't, they shouldn't openly defend something that goes against Church doctrine, which is chastity. (Father Malaquias)

The flesh

Biblical notions of sexuality, articulated by Paul, provide the basis for these assertions, as well as others made by the priests we interviewed. Ariès (1987: 52) highlights that, according to Paul's epistles, there is "*a sexual morality of sins against the body, due to the use or abuse of sexual inclinations, namely lust.*" Sexual pleasure is something that should serve the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" but that is also capable of existing independently of this commandment. The emic category used to speak of this is the flesh. Flesh is not only weak, but is also especially dangerous for the divine purpose, according to Paul (26:41). In Paul's word, "*For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would*" (Galatians 5:17). The flesh is thus considered an impulse; it is autonomous, exists in the body, and is capable of making the latter act on its own terms.

In terms of the implications of carnal practices on reproduction, it is the same Paul who offers the resources to situate sexual life within marriage (see 1 Corinthians 7:1-40).¹¹ To disobey Paul's guidance is to commit sin. According to Ariès (1987), in Paul, the sins of the flesh appear in prostitution, in adultery, in sexual practices aimed exclusively at pleasure, and in *masculorum concubitores* – men who have sex with men- or, in a broader sense, homosexuality.

Temptations of the flesh are in everyone. In some people, the temptations of the flesh act by impelling them towards *masculorum concubitores*. But since "the flesh is against the Spirit... to prevent you from doing what you would," in everyone, these impulses are not where the problem lies. Rather, the problem lies in the failure to know and obey religious rules. Knowing and obeying these, *in spite of inclination/desire*, is a precondition for salvation.

11 "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion."(1 Corinthians 7:7-9)

Tolerance

Thus, noting the difference between desires (the flesh) and practices (sin), aware of temptation's place in the human condition, and understanding that for the Church to save souls it must accept them as they are, Father Malaquias reiterates:

...according to the Bible, and also Pope John Paul II, (the Church) should treat these persons with charity and mercy. But treating with charity and mercy does not mean condoning their condition, right? Condoning this type of thing, right? Otherwise you're contradicting the Bible... In the Bible there's a lot of "cursed be the man that lies down with another man," right? It's an explicit condemnation. The Evangelicals even take this thing literally. Good, one should treat this type of person with charity, with mercy.

Thus, the priests we interviewed all agreed that in daily practice the principle of tolerance should prevail. And the priests often have to deal with the widespread homophobia in the congregation to make this principle stick. Take the example reported by Father Expedito. He describes clashing with a group of church women in his attempt to include a group of *maricas* (fairies) in caring for the Virgin's altar, a task reserved exclusively for virgin women in that parish:

I've always treated these people with a lot of respect. I recall, before becoming a parish chaplain. These people really suffer, right? (...) So there was this very conservative parish, where no one was allowed walk up to the Virgin's altar. There were these fanatical church ladies that wouldn't let anybody else near (laughter). (...) And there was a group of [homosexuals] that attended mass at the church. They were very talented and were good friends of the mayor's wife. And at the parties and bazaars, they took the lead and made beautiful decorations. Everything that the group of church ladies did, except the church ladies made horrible decorations. I called (the boys) (laughter) to do the decorating. And this was a jolt, because the ladies were shocked to see "fairies" taking charge. Desecrating the altar! So be it, they did the decorating and did a beautiful job. And they took over from then on, see? They started doing the decorations for weddings. It was like opening up, fostering tolerance for these types of people. They felt the prestige, they felt appreciated for their work, see? I think that's the approach.

As we were able to observe, though the priests we interviewed do not accept homosexual practices, they accept the presence of homosexuals in their congregations. At the same time, however, they acknowledge Catholics' difficulty with dealing with those who openly express their homosexual orientation. As Father Expedito rhetorically asked of his push for tolerance in his parish, *"It's not just any priest who's going to go out on a limb with work like this, is it?"*

Catholic sexual beliefs and homosexualities: sex, reproduction, gender, and desire

The analysis of our informants' responses to the way the Church deals with homosexuality demonstrates the persistence of prejudice among Catholics. Of the eight Catholics with lives dedicated to religious service, only the nun failed to express any prejudice towards the issue. All of the laypeople expressed prejudice, though with different nuances, as we have shown.

When we compare the priests and laypeople's attitudes towards homosexuality, we note greater tolerance among the clergy. We interpret this phenomenon as being related to the different doctrinal elements they drawn upon to grasp human sexuality. While the clergy base their assertions on the dichotomies between desire/practice and chastity/reproduction, the laypeople focus on the difference between the sexes as the condition for good, natural, and sanctified sexual interaction.

From Paul's perspective, the priests acknowledge the existence of homosexual desire, which appears as a condition (not a choice), but assert (for those who are marked by it) the need for celibacy – because man was made for woman. Even though chastity is the ideal, experiencing sexuality is possible – but only heterosexuality, and even then, only within the context of marriage. Marriage, in a sense, sanctifies the flesh by placing it at the service of reproduction and human beings at the service of the commandment to "be fruitful and multiply." Let us recall that according to the Catholic ideal, sexuality should always be at the service of reproduction, never independent of it (pleasure is secondary), and that this is one of the reasons for the Catholic ban on condom use in HIV/AIDS prevention (cf. Rios, Paiva, Maksud et al 2008; Rios, Aquino, Muñoz-Laboy et al 2008).

However, the seven priests we interviewed, while acknowledging a sort of universal presence of homosexuality, point to homosexuality as a condition

of desire that may not coincide with conscious intentions and point to tolerance as a practice to be fostered by the Church in relation to individuals inclined toward others of the same sex. Despite their promotion of tolerance, they do not condone “homosexuality” as, in their view, homosexual practice is a sin that should be combated.

The laypeople seem to base their understanding of homosexuality only on the second part of Paul’s teachings. They base their arguments on the differences between the sexes and reproduction without considering the force of the flesh – the eternal temptation to stray from God.

Among the lay Catholics in Nova Guanabara, this link between sex, sexuality, and reproduction forms the basis for the view that homosexuality is a sin and disqualifies it from being considered an acceptable orientation. In daily life, the “word” becomes “flesh” via “performative reiteration” (Butler 2003). Bodily attributes (clothing, gestures, postures, etc.) of masculinity and femininity lend support to an understanding of the categories of male and female as distinct. Because they are enacted by the body, these performances are understood as strong empirical proof of the fundamental partition of humankind; they support the understanding that “manhood” and “womanhood” are asymmetrical and sexually complementary conditions, as many passages in Paul assert (Cf. for example 1 Corinthians 11).

As elsewhere in Brazil, in Nova Guanabara, to speak of a gay or lesbian couple is to speak of one person who is more masculine and another who is more feminine in affective-sexual interactions. It is the perceived femininity of Fernando, the boy from the Fellowship Group mentioned above, that sparks suspicion of homosexuality. Reading between the lines of the interviews with Bernardo and Father Expedito, we can see that it is gender deviation – as in the cases of the altar boy who became a “transvestite” and the homosexuals who are stigmatized in religious communities and effectively excluded from church groups – that reveals homosexuality. According to Mariquinha’s daughter, it is understood that Ana’s son is the masculine one (although “he likes men”), since the young woman stigmatizes his partner as *boiola* (queer) (meaning effeminate). Thus, in homosexual interactions there are two people that break the heterosexual norm while simultaneously reaffirming it through gender-based body language (Rubin, 1993).

In our first level of analysis, we can ask whether this difference in focus between clergy and laypeople results from differences in socioeconomic class

and schooling between the two groups. The laypeople, more deeply affected by the working-class sex-gender system, would tend to focus on the difference between the sexes, while the clergy, exposed to a more “enlightened” discourse – from their university and theological training – would display less sexism and focus more on the condition of human desire.¹² This latter discourse contains similarities to contemporary sexual sciences and psychoanalysis.

Here, we cannot fail to note that if Foucault (1993) and Sahlins (2004) are correct, it is not the case that Christianity bases its argument on theories of desire to best support its assertions about the flesh; rather, Christianity has laid the groundwork for sexual science’s conception of desire.¹³

Importantly, perhaps it was not by chance that we identified analogous conceptual structures in Nova Guanabara, where the gender and religious systems meet and reinforce each other to give meaning to sexuality (Parker 1991). Viewed from another angle, we contend that it is the religious system itself, forged in the complementary nature of sex and gender (Rubin 1993), that provides backing and legitimacy for organizing interaction between sexual beings.

This becomes particularly evident when we compare the field data and analyses from Catholics with those from the Afro-Brazilian religions *candomblé* and *xangô*. The latter point to a gender system based on a plurality of positions for manhood and womanhood that are not always complementary and which, combined with an understanding of sexuality as separate from reproduction, allows for the establishment of a religious group that values homosexualities and various expressions of gender (notably, in a working class context) (Fry 1982; Birman 1995; Teixeira 1987; Segato, 1995; Rios 2004).

In other words, what we wish to highlight is the important contribution of religious teachings on the sexes to the formation of understandings of relations between men and women and systems of sex-gender, sexuality, and

12 In addition to exploring the greater tolerance that, in our opinion, the position that distinguishes between desire and practice allows for, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether the recurrent cases of homosexuality within the Church itself, which preceded our questioning, led to more reflection by the clergy. If clergymen and laypeople have desires, but do not practice “homosexuality,” and instead remain celibate, they are not living in sin and can remain in the Church.

13 We should recall, for example, that if Freud (1997) identifies drive, or desire that does not have a predefined object or objective (what we would call the first part of Paul’s formulation), in the nature of human sexuality, he is quick to propose that altruistic sexuality, placed at the service of humanity, is heterosexuality (what we are calling the second part of the formulation). For a more in-depth discussion of the many psychoanalytical positions on homosexuality, see Costa (1995).

eroticism (cf. Parker 1991). Currently, despite religious deregulation via the pluralization of religious and non-religious discourses, religious, and especially Christian, morality continues to constitute and legitimize sexual conducts.

Finally, and also related to the pluralization of discourses on sexuality, it is important to underline that for laypeople, civil rights was an issue that emerged spontaneously in the interviews. Unlike the sciences, which focus on the origins or causes of sexuality, LGBT rights movements call for change and succeed in challenging the cultural underpinnings of some of our assumptions, which are legitimized through religious teachings and reaffirmed through our gendered bodies.

Not all of the interviewees discussed human rights, but the statements of those who did were marked by doubts and contradictions. Although they claimed to agree with the Church, a more nuanced reading revealed that these people were often conflicted about the human rights implications for those suffering from stigma. Dona Chica went so far as to ask whether she was being inhumane; Bernardo saw dignity in the attitude of the former altar boy, now transvestite. Various clergy members, like Father Olavo, stated that beyond issues involving sins of the flesh, the most important thing is for the homosexual to fulfill his or her social role. Father Expedito went so far as to lobby to have the “fairies” decorate the altar, a task traditionally reserved for virgins, according to the church women.

We consider all of this to be strong evidence that something is out of place in relation to the Church’s official position on homosexuality. These events, although still sparse, suggest that a path for overcoming religious intolerance towards homosexuality is already opening up. More promising than attempts to directly confront religious discourses and contend that they make no sense, is the strategy of continuing to identify –within the lay state and the Human Rights Charter – the discourse of the LGBT rights struggle to affirm the expansion of rights to people with same-sex sexual practices, and to uphold the principles of freedom, equality, and respect for differences as conditions for promoting and guaranteeing human dignity.

All of our interviewees from the different religious faiths we investigated state that religions help promote human dignity. It is this religious principle that we should promote, describing it in a way that allows for the inclusion of sexual diversity. Thus, to facilitate the legitimatization of homosexualities, let us allow “cognitive bargains” (Berger & Luckman 1995; Mariz 2006)

to flourish between religion and modern discourses. Perhaps growing waves of religious deregulation will impact the Church, causing it to re-consider whether its current interpretation of homosexualities still make sense.

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