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Inculturation and environmental struggles: Catholic Church, public sphere and anthropocentric preservationism in Brazil

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The article investigates the growing convergence between the Catholic Church and environmentalism in Brazil, aiming to demonstrate – through an anthropological reading of the Fraternity Campaigns that address sustainability and environmental crisis issues – how the national episcopate has been striving to reinvent the theology of inculturation as a system that incorporates, among other elements, the “natural world” as well. The hypothesis is suggested that the Church has been producing a symbolic narrative that articulates the fundamental elements of its theological conception of Creation with the set of social representations we know as ecology. This ecoteological narrative promotes a new perspective for interpreting biblical texts, seeking to recreate the relationships between Christianity and “nature” by projecting the origins of a certain Catholic environmental activism into a distant past. Despite being marked by anthropocentric categories, this new apostolic narrative seeks to assert, in favor of the Catholic Church and its pastoral work, a prominent position in the public sphere among the other relevant agents and institutions involved in present-day environmental struggles.

Catholic Church; Public Sphere; Ecoteology; Environmentalism; Nature; Inculturation.

O artigo investiga a crescente aproximação entre Igreja Católica e ambientalismo no Brasil, e procura demonstrar – por meio de uma leitura antropológica das Campanhas da Fraternidade que tematizam questões relativas à sustentabilidade e crise ambiental – como o episcopado nacional tem se esforçado em reinventar a teologia da inculturação como um sistema que incorpora, entre outros elementos, também o “mundo natural”. Sugere-se a hipótese de que a Igreja tem produzido uma narrativa simbólica que articula os elementos fundamentais de sua concepção teológica sobre a Criação ao conjunto de representações sociais que conhecemos por ecologia. Essa narrativa ecoteológica promove uma nova perspectiva de leitura dos textos bíblicos que procura recriar as relações entre cristianismo e “natureza”, projetando em um passado distante as origens de um certo ativismo ambientalista católico. Mesmo que marcada por categorias antropocêntricas, essa nova narrativa apostólica procura afirmar, a favor da Igreja Católica e suas pastorais, um lugar de destaque na esfera pública entre os demais agentes e instituições relevantes nas lutas ambientais do presente.

Igreja Católica; Esfera Pública; Ecoteologia; Ambientalismo; Natureza; Inculturação.

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Introduction¹

Ecology and the environment have become ubiquitous themes in contemporary society, pervading diverse segments of social life and also the practice and discourses of numerous institutions, public and private companies, organizations and social movements. It is not fortuitous that, as Manuel Castells (1999, 142) reminds us, the environmental movement (considering its great variety of organizational forms, action strategies and political projects) is the one that, from the 1990s onwards, has been the most expressive in terms of visibility, expansion and “historical productivity”.

In Castells’ analysis of this “greening” of movements and institutions – in his history of the process of ecological awareness that has taken over the contemporary world – one absence strikes us: the Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church until the papacy of Benedict XVI.² For some of the researchers attentive to the activities of these churches over the past three decades, however, Christians’ engagement with environmentalism and ecology³ is notably on the rise.⁴

Without intending to affirm an opportunistic “conversion” of the Church to environmental activism, whose motivations and concerns increasingly occupy the hearts and minds of many social groups in the country, we aim to outline – in terms of an anthropology of agents and the meanings that guide them – a minimum understanding of its endeavor to adapt to a symbolic horizon of representations, narratives and projects that have become central to a wide range of groups, institutions or even countries. We are also not interested in judging or comparing such ecclesiastical representations against a “secular” environmentalism, which would come to serve as a parameter or reference for any and all action aimed at the protection of nature.⁵ We will see later that the opposition between the “secular” and the “religious”, common to the studies focused on the action of the Catholic Church and its agents, hinders the possibilities of a more precise theoretical understanding of the problem.

If it is accurate to consider that ecology today functions as a language, articulating representations that are sufficiently powerful to generate new forms of interpretation about our place in the world – increasingly defined in terms of an ecosystem – it becomes possible to posit the creation of a new locus for nature within pastoral practices, biblical exegesis, and theology. Throughout this article, we will argue that the Church, in its movement towards embracing the environmental agenda, simultaneously contributes to the construction of the field of ecology in the country, acting freely and actively within the public sphere.

Throughout this article, we will examine certain issues concerning the association between environmentalism, ecology, and the Catholic Church in recent decades, with an emphasis on the historical experience of the Brazilian Church up until the end of Pope Benedict XVI’s pontificate. We will advocate three propositions, mutually articulated by our theoretical framework – which we will present later on – to analyze the link between ecology and Catholicism from the perspective of the public sphere. Firstly, we propose that the place of the Catholic Church in ecology does not correspond to the positions commonly identified in the literature, which classify the set of practices and representations of agents into the

1 In addition to the Campaigns of Fraternity, the extended original version of this article delved into the theme of ecology in the theological interpretation of passages from the Old Testament. Thanks to the reviewers of the journal, to whom I am grateful, the article has become more focused and readable, concentrating on the same set of questions.

2 The pontificate of Francis, which began in March 2013, brings the Roman Curia significantly closer to the major issues that currently mobilize environmental movements. The publication of the encyclical *Laudato si’* in 2015 addresses the problem of global warming and other environmental issues and stands as the first solemn expression of the current papacy on the subject. This new papal moment will undoubtedly have a considerable impact on how local episcopates address issues related to nature and its destruction. However, in this article, we will confine ourselves to the period immediately prior and exclusively within the context of the Brazilian Church. An analysis of this Vatican environmental “turn” requires another article, due to considerations of space and scope.

3 Although we have used the terms environmentalism and ecology interchangeably in much of the text, the distinction between the two, as suggested by Castells, will prove productive at a certain point in our argument. By environmentalism or the environmental movement, Castells refers to collective practices aimed at correcting the destructive forms of the relationship between humans and nature. Ecology, on the other hand, would encompass the broader realm of beliefs, theories, and projects that define our participation in an ecosystem.

4 Among the early analyses of the relationship between Christian churches and environmentalism, those focusing on the North American context stand out. Works such as Shaiko (1987), Campolo (1992), Sider

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categories of preservationism, conservationism, or, more recently, socio-environmentalism (Padua 1997). We propose to think that its position is distinct, linking themes present in these categories with theological assumptions of its “tradition” and with its historical trajectory of strong performance in the Brazilian public space. We will call this new position Christian anthropocentric preservationism. Secondly, we seek to demonstrate that the construction of this symbolic and political position is a recent phenomenon, despite recurring affirmations in ecclesiastical documents and pastoral addresses that tend to project Catholic “greening” into a distant past. Thirdly, we put forth the proposition that the success of this convergence between the Catholic Church and environmental struggles hinges on the creation of legitimization and authoritative mechanisms that enable the former to establish new spaces for political mediation in the present. This involves engaging in disputes and confrontations capable of revitalizing the notion of the Church’s incarnation in everyday experience and expanding the concept of Gospel inculturation towards an ecological semantics.

For this investigation, we have delved into the pronouncements of the Brazilian episcopate concerning the environment, particularly the speeches and documents related to five Fraternity Campaigns⁶, whose themes highlighted environmental or ecological issues, with a special focus on the campaign conducted in 2011. A significant portion of these pronouncements undertakes a reexamination of the Scriptures in light of the environmental problems faced by the planet. Although we are not conducting exegetical or hermeneutical analysis of the biblical texts, we have been compelled to incorporate the discussion of some of these passages into our analysis. The article is structured into three interconnected parts: the first presents the theoretical framework within which we are considering the issue of the relationship between the Church, pastoral action, and ecology, encompassing the contemporary discussion about religion in the public sphere. The second part discusses the Fraternity Campaigns as a laboratory for the Catholic Church’s engagement with the discursive repertoire of environmentalism in Brazil. The third part specifically analyzes the 2011 campaign, which highlights the maturation and consolidation of an anthropocentric pastoral ecology, rooted in research and dialogue with the central themes of the environmental movement.

The “ecothological tradition” in the light of public sphere theory

The theology of inculturation⁷, which plays a significant role in the theological orientation of the pastoral action of the Catholic Church in Brazil today, allows, in our understanding, the incorporation of “ecological” themes into the discursive repertoire of the institution, the absence of which was noticeable until recently. Paraphrasing the suggestive insight of Carvalho and Steil (2008), the dual movement of “sacralization” of nature and “naturalization” of the sacred, which the authors observe in various religious practices, may not be unfamiliar to the ongoing changes in the Catholic Church in Brazil. The recent ecclesial immersion in the realm of disputes surrounding nature, ecosystems, and the biosphere constitutes

(1993), Coffman & Alexander (1992), Fowler (1992), Greeley (1993), Goldman (1993), Hand & Van Liere (1984), Murphy (1989), Curry-Roper (1990), Steinfels (1992), Guth *et al.* (1995), Minter & Manning (2005), Effa (2008), Clifford (2010), and Wallace (2010) have delved into this subject.

5 Anthropology has long shown us that nature is a symbolic category of critical importance in the formation of knowledge systems. Understanding how it is constructed in various social worlds is an essential step toward comprehending how we conceive and organize our relationship with otherness.

6 The “Campanha da Fraternidade” is an event organized by the Catholic Church in Brazil since 1962, always held during the Lenten season. Its aim is to arouse the interest of both believers and the national society in topics that, according to the interpretation of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB), address significant issues for Christians and the country. This campaign involves activities across all parishes and ecclesial communities nationwide, extending to social institutions, Catholic schools, and universities throughout the forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter. In addition to liturgical celebrations, seminars, study sessions, and direct social actions, the campaign also raises funds to support organizations or initiatives related to the chosen theme. In other countries, the Catholic Church undertakes similar initiatives, such as “Alay Kapwa” (Philippines), “Campaña de Quaresma” (Colombia), “le Carême de Partage” (France), “Trócaire’s Lenten Campaign” (Ireland), and “Quaresima di Fraternità” (Italy), among many others.

7 The theme of the inculturation of the Gospel will be present in the following analysis, and although it does not constitute the focus of this current article, we need to share

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this process of “invention” (Kuper 2005) of an environmentalist and ecological Church. An invention that re-imagines the Church’s “tradition” in terms of a millennia-long history of concern for the natural world. If inculturation demands that the Church embodies itself in the world around it, dismantling the separation between parishes and streets, ignoring the narrative of urgency and panic regarding the fate of the planet—supported by numerous scientific diagnoses – is not an option.

However, while the theology of inculturation provides a “native” significance for the Church’s engagement in contemporary controversies central to the country today, including the issue of climate change, it does not fully address the questions that anthropology can pose about the reasons behind this engagement or even the strategies of political mediation it employs. The manner in which an important part of anthropology and sociology of religions has theoretically approached the participation of the Catholic Church in sensitive debates taking place in the public sphere, however, often results in the frequent practice of observing this entry of the Church into the “secular world” with a certain sense of estrangement, as if it were out of place, outside of its sphere. Primarily relying on an instantaneous and reflexive application of Weberian theory of secularization to the Brazilian religious landscape, these analyses outline a framework that we aim to avoid here. Our interest lies not in apprehending the Catholic Church as an entity crossing the borders of ontologically separate social spheres, departing from a realm that inherently belongs to it, and entering foreign territory whose language and rules would be foreign to its own practice.

The theoretical framework that we find most effective for analyzing this issue, which allows us to comprehend the intricate ways the Church engages with politics and civil society, and which somehow resonates with the theological representations it constructs through inculturation, is to consider the relationship between environmentalism and the Church in terms of the concept of the public sphere. This concept initially emerged in the reflections of Habermas (2003 [1961]) and has been applied to the context of religious actors by scholars such as José Casanova (1994) and Paula Montero (2006, 2009). These authors do not seek to question the separation between the secular and the religious sphere, nor the separation between State and Church that emerges from this process. Instead, they aim to highlight some of the problems that the complexity of multiple local realities, beyond the context of European Protestant asceticism, should bring to the analysis of the relationship between the Church and society. Casanova (1994) particularly emphasizes the loss of the analytical power of the secularization thesis due to the normative way in which it has been used to explain the modernization of the West in its diverse historical situations. By considering it as a universal teleological process, we disregard the historical experiences of countries where the separation of spheres did not result in an inevitable contraction of the religious or its confinement to the realm of individual subjectivities.

Montero, in her analyses of the formation of Brazilian religious pluralism from the republican period onwards (2006, 2009), demonstrates how Catholicism served as a reference and model for the formulation of rights and for framing popular

some definitions so that the reader can follow our argument. The Theology of Inculturation is a set of theological formulations and assumptions that propose a reorientation in the way the Church and its evangelizing practice should manifest in local socio-historical contexts. The apostolic work of this inculturated Church is no longer conceived as referring to a center radiating faith, principles, or holiness to be propagated in all directions. Instead of “romanizing” local experiences based on conceptions and experiences of the universal Church, inculturation suggests that the Church should become native and reinvent itself based on the cultures where it operates, seeking the presence of Christ in their practices, values, and ways of being. The recovery of an essentially Christian core in the world of the “other,” hidden and disguised by social practices and symbols unique to these alterities, should guide the Church to interact in a new way with the surrounding social world, shedding its features that characterize it as an institution of power and colonial action. There are significant differences, which would be impossible to explore here, between the Theology of Inculturation, which emerged during the 1980s, and Liberation Theology (Rufino, 2006). Among the earliest references on the subject are the works of Jesuit theologians: Azevedo (1982), Crollius (1984, 1986), Maurer (1982), Nkérámihigo (1984, 1986). In Brazil, theologian Paulo Suess (1989, 1995) was one of the main proponents of this theology. In Brazilian social sciences, some researchers have written about the concept, including Rufino (2006, 2013), Mariz & Machado (2009), Baptista (2012), Simões (2019), and others.

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practices as religious practices, operating within the public sphere. According to the author, who finds Habermas' tripartite model (which suggests understanding the genesis of modernity through the distinction between the State, civil society, and the private sphere) more suitable for discussing the theme, religion was not displaced to the private realm or confined to individual consciences. The Catholic Church managed to ensure symbolic and political identification between the worshipping community and the political community, creating a long-lasting equivalence between Catholicism and Brazilian society. In her view, the Brazilian public sphere "is historically forged with the invisible mark of the Christian *civis* in the background" (Montero 2009, 14). The Church actively participated in the construction of the public realm in Brazil, vigorously engaging in areas such as healthcare, education, and social assistance. We can also perceive the strength of the Catholic Church in the public sphere through its role in fostering numerous social movements that brought visibility to civil society from the 1970s onwards. These movements were influenced by a political and discursive grammar characterized by categories forged through Catholic pastoral action, such as the oppressed, the poor, the journey, fraternity, and participation (Rufino 2006, 2013).

The growing involvement of the Catholic Church with the agenda of climate change and environmental issues in Brazil, whose trajectory we propose to trace through the Campaigns of Fraternity, can be better understood within the framework of this post-secular reflection that situates Brazilian Catholicism as a significant force within the national public sphere. In the same movement in which it appropriates the contemporary scientific and political debate on nature, this pastoral ecologism contributes to the construction of the national public discourse on diagnoses, priorities, and actions to be taken. Even if it cannot achieve the same level of prominence it has attained in other domains, the Catholic Church makes an effort to remain relevant. And when it comes to discussions about the environment and climate—crucial issues for both the State and civil society in the country—being present in this arena entails considerations that go beyond the boundaries of the discourse on nature. This includes topics commonly mobilized by the Church, such as the condition of indigenous peoples and traditional populations, social rights in rural areas, hunger, and the precarious health situation of residents in the outskirts of major cities.

The observation made in one of the peer reviews of this article compels us to clarify how we understand the analysis of pronouncements from the Brazilian episcopate and the official documents of the Campaigns of Fraternity, which we will undertake in the following sections. While we are dealing with texts and speeches, the distinction between discourse and practice as separate objects of analysis and observation is, as we are aware, uncertain and somewhat questionable, especially within anthropology and its contemporary forms of ethnographic research that can delve into things like cinema, dreams, and literary texts. For certain institutions or social actors, such as the ones we are analyzing here, speeches and discourses hold significant practical effects that go beyond mere representation and directly influence the production of realities. The Campaigns of Frater-

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nity, whose materials inspire celebrations and pastoral activities in all Catholic parishes and temples across the country, must be situated within this context.

Campaigns of Fraternity and marginal ecology

On Ash Wednesday of 2011, the launch date of the Campaign of Fraternity titled “Fraternity and Life on the Planet,” Dom Dimas Lara Resende, then Secretary-General of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), described it as an important pastoral action aimed at alerting the Catholic Church to environmental issues and, above all, engaging in a dialogue with the array of topics gathered under the category of ecology. In his words, the goal was to align the Church “with a culture that is expanding worldwide, one of respect for the environment and the place where God has not only positioned us to live and coexist but also to turn it into the paradise we dream of.” In addition to seeking harmony with these new times of pervasive ecological concern, the campaign also appeared to align with the national political environment marked by controversies stemming from changes in the Forest Code, conflicts surrounding the construction of the Belo Monte Hydropower Plant and the transposition of the São Francisco River, and the heated public debate about the management of oil reserves in the pre-salt area.

Before delving into the narrative generated around this campaign, which is emphatically stated in its base text, it is important to address a recurring element in the speeches of the bishop, Father Luiz Carlos Dias (Secretary-General of the campaign), and in the campaign’s foundational document itself. This element pertains to the alleged long-standing concern of the Catholic Church in Brazil regarding environmental destruction and predatory exploitation of nature. According to them, other Campaigns of Fraternity had already addressed the issue, starting with the 1979 campaign titled “For a More Humane World.” They assert that the Church had also returned to the topic in the campaigns of 2002 (concerning indigenous peoples), 2004 (on water and water resources), and 2007 (on the Amazon), which would reflect a longstanding preoccupation of the institution with ecology.

We shall now direct our attention to these previous campaigns. The array of issues addressed in these events encompasses a semantic field that significantly extends beyond the set of topics directly related to ecological concerns. The nature that emerges there is far from taking a prominent role; it serves more as a setting or backdrop. The primary focus in these campaigns is occupied by humanity and concerns that have long been a priority for the Church in its pastoral history in Brazil. The themes of social exclusion in Latin America and the “preferential option for the poor,” which have been significant for the Church since the Medellín Episcopal Conference, resonate clearly in these events, shifting the environment and ecology to the periphery of the debate. The nature’s relegated role contrasts with the recent effort of the Church to bring it to the forefront, as happened in the 2011 campaign and, especially, in the 2017 campaign entitled “Fraternity: Brazilian biomes and the defense of life.”⁸

In the Campaign of Fraternity “For a More Humane World,” celebrated in 1979,

8 This latest campaign, which bears the motto “cultivate and care for Creation,” is outside the scope of our analysis here because, to us, it signifies the advent of a new stage of Catholic inculturation in environmentalism, marked by the publication of the encyclical *Laudato si’* (2015) and the Vatican’s renewed stance on the issue we are discussing. We understand that this new phase involves events and questions that warrant a separate analysis.

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environmental problems are directly linked to the functioning of capitalism. This connection is approached through the distinct sociological lens characteristic of Liberation Theology, which combines a certain utilization of Marxism with the Church's social doctrine post-Rerum Novarum by Pope Leo XIII.⁹ The social exclusion produced by capitalism and industrial society is believed to shatter human dignity and also contribute to the irrational exploitation of the environment. The foundational text of the campaign begins with a history of the relationship between humans and nature, marked by the shift from humans being dominated by nature to becoming dominators. However, it quickly moves on to the assertion that this dominion, in the context of industrialization and the rapid proliferation of productive technologies, has made us prisoners of the constant practice of deforestation, leading to floods, droughts, and landslides that threaten human life. The document lists other elements resulting from capitalist production, such as extensive carbon dioxide emissions, nuclear waste, the scarcity of clean water, animal extinction, and urbanization. The tone of this environmental crisis diagnosis, paralleled with the presentation of the social crisis stemming from exclusion, suggests the Church's nascent position in the debate surrounding ecosystem degradation. This incipency is also evident in its vocabulary and the way it appropriates scientific theories. However, the document more confidently discusses the human and social side of the problem. For instance, when addressing pollution, an ingenious dichotomy between the "pollution of wealth" and the "pollution of poverty" emerges. The former associates the wealth produced by industrial capitalism with deforestation, petroleum and fossil fuel use, real estate speculation, the exploitation of nature, and the exploitation of the poor. The latter, as a corollary of the former, is represented by hunger, homelessness, lack of sanitation, slums, and violence. To a large extent, environmental issues serve as pretexts to revisit the central themes of the "Liberation Church" and its "preferential option for the poor."

If the "excluded" constituted itself, within this theological perspective, one of the most relevant symbolic categories capable of consolidating diverse social groups into a singular persona, made one by the fate resulting from colonial and capitalist exploitation, the entry of the Church into the arena of environmental struggles occurred through the reduction of nature, in its discourses and interpretations, to the status of victim within this very history of martyrdom and despoliation. Nature thus becomes yet another facet of the "oppressed."

In recommending concrete actions to confront the environmental crisis, the argumentation of the campaign's base document shifts from the macrosociological realm, which characterizes the diagnosis of problems, to the moral transformation of individuals. Saint Francis of Assisi, declared the patron saint of ecology in the same year by John Paul II, stands as the archetype of this new Christian persona. Overcoming selfishness, resisting greed and consumerism, and conquering the urge to possess everything would constitute fundamental steps toward crisis resolution. Planting flowers, refraining from animal hunting, taking care of waste and water, atmosphere and trees – "Preserve what belongs to all," the campaign's motto – is an imperative phrase directed at the Christian individual, demanding their

9 The papal encyclical, with the format and rules that we know today, is a solemn document of papal communication. First published by Benedict XIV in 1740, it replaced the old epistolary communication method that had been used since the early centuries of the Church's history, where popes addressed the faithful worldwide. Starting with Pius IX (1846-1878), encyclicals addressed to bishops or even to Catholics in general became a regular mechanism of papal expression. Some encyclicals may address everyone, including non-Christians; this is the case with John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, addressed "to all people of good will" (Rufino 2002, 59). The encyclical *Rerum Novarum* was the first to address the theme of social justice and the issues that the Church perceived as arising from the process of industrialization. Published in 1891, it presented a progressive text with strong social criticism, indicating the Catholic Church's concern with asserting itself in the public sphere and entering a space dominated by socialist critiques of the economic exclusion produced by capitalism (ibid., 40).

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commitment to safeguarding the opus Dei. To promote this moral transformation, the campaign asserts the indispensable need to introduce ecological notions in schools and catechesis, in grassroots church communities, rituals, and sermons, as well as in the media.

More than a decade passes between this first Fraternity Campaign and the second one addressing environmental themes. Titled “Fraternity and Indigenous Peoples,” with the motto “For a land without evil”, the 2002 campaign brought to communities, pastoral groups, and liturgical celebrations the debate on the social conditions of indigenous peoples in Brazil, promoting a reexamination of their “history of martyrdom” and denouncing the violence and aggressions of the present. In the words of Dom Raymundo Damasceno, then Secretary-General of the CNBB, bringing the “indigenous question” to reflection would be “a debt of the Church to our indigenous brethren and Brazilian society.” A debt paid, incidentally, with a delay, as the episcopate missed the opportunity to align the campaign’s theme with the commemoration of the 500 Years of the Discovery of Brazil, which had taken place two years earlier. This dissonance is at the very least unusual when considering that during this event, as well as during the quincentenary of the Europeans’ arrival in America in 1992¹⁰, the Catholic ecclesial environment was deeply marked by much dispute between the episcopate and various social pastoral groups that debated the Church’s role in this history and its historical responsibility for the social reality experienced by the peoples of the continent.

However, the most surprising aspect of the 2002 campaign is its inclusion in the roster of Fraternity Campaigns dedicated to the environment and ecology. Indigenous peoples are assimilated into nature as components of a continuous series of beings and creatures of flora and fauna. The campaign’s foundational text and the pastoral speeches around it do not touch on any properly environmental issues, despite the references to the intrusion of miners and loggers into Indigenous Lands. Instead, they predominantly delve into the cruelty of capitalist expansion on the daily lives of indigenous people and its detrimental effect on their conditions of physical and cultural reproduction. If the 1979 campaign spoke about deforestation of forests, the 2002 one addressed indigenous genocide, as if between one phenomenon and another, we were ultimately addressing the same set of matters, all exemplary of the beauty of Creation, in solidarity with each other not only by virtue of participating in an expansive nature – as culture would also fit within it – but also as incessant victims of the devastating actions of colonialism and capital. The campaign whose motto was “For a land without evil” was, for the Church, a pastoral action in defense of the environment, as the indigenous peoples, in their primitive authenticity, might conceivably represent an extension of the natural ecosystem.

Indigenous peoples return to the forefront in the 2007 campaign, titled “Fraternity and the Amazon,” with the motto “Life and mission in this land.” However, unlike what happened in 2002, they share some space with riverside and “caboclo” populations in the attention given by the campaign’s foundational text, which defines it as “an invitation to know, appreciate, and respect all the life that the Ama-

10 Regarding the complex articulation and conflict among the groups (within the Catholic Church, social movements, and Iberian states) that either supported or opposed the celebration in 1992, please refer to Montero (1996).

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zon preserves: its peoples, its biodiversity, its beauty” (Foundational Text, no. 3). Issues more directly associated with the environment also gain some prominence, as seen in references to deforestation of the forest or the destruction of the region’s natural resources. Yet, these are always framed within the context of the local populations’ preeminence, those most affected by the predation stemming from the actions of economic expansion fronts. The campaign frequently employs the notion of an ecosystem, which asymmetrically assigns weight to the elements of the “life that the Amazon preserves.” Indignation at the aggressions against fauna and flora is, for the most part, justified by their impact on human life, serving as a benchmark for the ethical and moral evaluation of the Amazonian situation.

At the time, Dom Odilo Pedro Scherer, Secretary-General of the CNBB, effectively captures this asymmetry when referring to the campaign’s objective, which would be to

“promote effective fraternity with the Amazonian populations; it is to defend and promote life, which manifests itself with such exuberance in the Amazon. The same concern for fraternity and solidarity is also the foundation of environmental defense, the common home and heritage from which all have the right to enjoy and live, including future generations. The Amazon, a generous cradle of so much life, also needs to be a fraternal ground among peoples and cultures.” (Scherer 2007)

The environment should interest us because it is our “common home” and heritage for enjoyment. In presenting the challenges to evangelizing action, the campaign highlights the need for religious and pastoral assistance not only to “indigenous and traditional peoples,” but also to the thousands of migrants from across the country who would become victims of cultural and religious uprooting, chaotic growth of Amazonian cities, lack of public services, unemployment, family breakdown, and violence. The campaign calls not only for social assistance structures but especially for ecclesial life structures, as Dom Odilo reminds us, “it is within the shelter of its chapels and community centers that the poor Amazonian people find space for the recognition and affirmation of their dignity.”

One intriguing aspect of this campaign is its attention to the theme of national sovereignty and its alleged threat in the Amazonian context. In its foundational text, we see the Church calling on society to form a pan-Amazonian alliance, whose fundamental mission would be to foster the defense of “indigenous and traditional” peoples against international greed, interested in the potential profit from national genetic heritage and traditional knowledge. Water, land, wood, minerals, genes, and wisdom are being seized through the collaboration between national and transnational companies for whom national sovereignty poses a hindrance. In addition to combating the exclusionary economic development projects originating from the Brazilian state itself, it would be imperative to confront the greed of globalized capitalism. This stance contrasts with various situations where the Catholic Church sought to question this reasoning, especially in con-

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texts where it had been accused of promoting the internationalization of the region, primarily through missionary activity.

Let's go back to 2004 when "Fraternity and Water" was the theme of the Fraternity Campaign. Water resources and their devastation due to misguided development actions and projects were extensively discussed by the Catholic Church this year. The forces behind this devastation are practically the same as those present in the diagnoses formulated in the previous campaigns, with the exception of a greater emphasis on individual practices of waste and irresponsible water usage.

The "sacred" principle of its universal purpose, an indispensable condition for the existence of life, permeates the entire document and some statements from the episcopate. The numerous uses of water, multiplied by industrialization and the operational needs of various economic activities, have inspired unprecedented (and increasingly destructive) forms of extraction. However, the Church states that these uses should never overshadow the "primacy of life," especially human life, as the ultimate purpose of its allocation. Under the motto "Water, source of life," this campaign aims to develop an "ecological mystique" that goes beyond the technical analyses' characteristic of utilitarian discussions in scientific debates on the topic. It seeks to strengthen existing initiatives in water care and protection of water sources, but above all, it advocates for Christian solidarity with the "waterless" and popular participation in formulating a water policy that affirms its belonging to the public domain and expresses the non-negotiable precept of its universal purpose for the sake of life (Libanio 2004). At certain points in its foundational text, the campaign clearly expresses the idea that it's not dealing with an ecological struggle, but a greater mission "that takes on dimensions of faith" by reconnecting us with our commitment to Creation.

It would not be within the purview of the Church, the document asserts, to assume a role of direct intervention in the legal bodies responsible for the management of the country's water resources, nor to act as a device for the social representation of citizens in these matters. Nevertheless, it would have a critical role in fostering public discourse on the subject, imbuing it with a sense of urgency, and introducing to the faithful a range of concerns that would otherwise remain ignored. Furthermore, only a reinterpretation of the threat to water resources from a pastoral perspective would be capable of offering a holistic interpretation of the problem, by linking the causes of the degradation of water sources, or the misuse and wastage of water, to the broader array of interrelated themes, such as the lack of sanitation and housing for the poorer population. Public policies aimed at protecting water sources that, for instance, result in the displacement of socially vulnerable families, would need to be reassessed and circumvented by measures that prioritize, above all, respect for life. Another positive aspect engendered by this holism would be the "logic of encounter" in confronting problems, thus transcending the individualistic solutions implicit in a significant portion of technical and scientific prognoses.

Solidarity, fraternity, and dialogue are categories prevalent in this and other campaigns discussed here, and their intelligibility can only be grasped when plac-

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ing humans at the center of the narrative. Let us now return to the campaign that served as the starting point for our discussion, “Fraternity and Life on the Planet,” from 2011. In a brief analysis, we will seek to understand some significant shifts in ecclesiastical pronouncements concerning the environment and what they reveal about the representations of nature emerging within the Catholic Church today. We will perceive an increasing alignment of the institution not only with the scientific diagnosis of climate change but also with the agenda of a significant portion of the environmental movement, which, in our view, signifies a certain rearticulation of the Church in the public sphere.

“The creation groans in labor pains” (Romans 8:22)

The above verse, taken from the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, serves as the motto for the 2011 Fraternity Campaign, “Fraternity and Life on the Planet.” Three decades after the first campaign addressing the environmental crisis, we find the Brazilian episcopate, through its national permanent conference, grappling with both old and new questions. The distance that separates the Church’s initial formal pronouncement in the country about the environment from this more recent campaign undoubtedly involves a broad range of social transformations that would be impractical to analyze within the constraints of space and expertise that we possess. However, for the purposes of our argument, it is possible to discern a fascinating recontextualization of ecology and nature within the scope of the Church’s pastoral mission through the progression of narratives produced by the campaigns, in their foundational texts, as well as in the episcopate’s theological reinterpretation of Scriptures or papal documents.

By the time we reach the 2011 campaign, we notice a more “scientifically informed” ecclesial discourse on the environment compared to earlier moments. The initial lack of vocabulary or somewhat simplistic proposals for resolving the environmental crisis (which emphasized the individual attitudes of the faithful and a change in moral consciousness) observed in the campaign’s earlier phases give way to a more structured stance. This stance is increasingly based on academic literature and significantly closer to the network of institutions and movements associated with nature conservation.¹¹ The initial institutional pronouncements on the environment were characterized by the identification of specific problems, the relevance of which was recognized only when they involved the infliction of human suffering, especially upon the “oppressed.” When the issue was not singular, such as water or deforestation, the pastoral denouncement took the form of a listing of items, within which diverse events and phenomena were monothematically related to the ultimate and fatal cause of their existence: the capitalist economic “development model”.

The ecosystemic perspective for framing environmental issues, which is more clearly evident in contemporary times, was not absent in the past, but it held a discreet position, hinted at in a sentence here or there. More than an ecological system of interdependent relationships, what framed the “environmental” critique

11 This “discursive and analytical evolution” has been accompanied by the promotion of pastoral groups in dioceses and parishes throughout the country, focused on discussing, studying, and developing actions for the environment. Pastoral Committees for Ecology and the Environment have become increasingly common within the Brazilian Catholic ecclesial landscape. One concrete intervention by the Catholic Church, with significant repercussions and alignment with the actions of important environmental organizations, was the opposition of a portion of the episcopate (supported by CIMI and other social pastoral groups) to the transposition of waters from the São Francisco River. This opposition was marked by the hunger strike of Dom Luiz Flávio Cappio, the diocesan bishop of Barra, Bahia, which began in November 2007. This extreme action by an episcopal authority aimed to highlight the high environmental and social impact of an infrastructure project that, despite being presented as an effort to combat drought and famine in the sertão, ultimately served the economic interests of shrimp farming, steel production, and export-oriented intensive agriculture of grains and tropical fruits (Rufino 2013).

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offered by the Church was the social system, described by her in terms of a capitalist system that generates exclusion and inequality. In this regard, it's easy to discern the changes undergone by current episcopal formulations, which appear to align with the considerations of the third sector, some nation-states, and especially international cooperation entities specialized in this issue, such as the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme). An example of this is the well-known action of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which has guided the Church's discourse today. However, this refinement in the pastoral analysis of ecology did not imply abandoning the interpretative perspective originating from the "church of the poor." Quite the opposite, another "systemic" layer was added to it: if there is an inherent logic to ecological processes, all of them interrelated in a long chain of causal relationships, it could be said that the ecological system as a whole operates under the dependency of the economic and social system that transforms and consumes it. Therefore, we transition from a perspective in which ecology lacked a system to another where it now abounds.

An important aspect of the ecclesiastical updating process in the face of environmental controversies is the incorporation of keywords from activist lexicons into episcopal discourses. Noteworthy is the attention the campaign's foundational text dedicates to distinguishing between "sustainable development" and "sustainability," central categories in contemporary environmental struggles. The expression "sustainable development" is pointed out by the episcopate as a contradiction in its own terms, for it would constitute an antithetical and incongruent binomial. If "development" conveys the idea of continuous economic growth, a constitutive goal of capitalism, the notion of sustainable economic development would, at best, represent a palliative attempt to address the problems posed by industrial production and unrestrained consumption without confronting them at their core or essence. In contrast, the notion of sustainability is seen as more promising, pointing to an alternative "civilizational paradigm." The economy, the environment, and social well-being, central aspects of this discussion, would be harmonized within this notion, as it articulates a triple concern: ensuring the availability of renewable and non-renewable resources, respecting the limits of the biosphere's capacity to absorb polluting waste and greenhouse gas emissions, and eradicating poverty (CNBB 2011, §89).

The elaboration of this exegesis on the terms becomes even more surprising when we recall that in the 2007 campaign, "Fraternity and the Amazon," the bishops extensively employed the term "integral development." This notion, as defined by Pope Paul VI in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967), as the "development of the whole man and of all men," has become an omnipresent category for the Latin American Catholic Church. It resonates through the episcopal conferences of Medellín, Puebla, and Aparecida, as well as in the programmatic formulations of social pastoral and missionary endeavors dedicated to the cause of the oppressed. This notion was gestated within the ecclesial concern for its pastoral action in the secular world, aiming to qualify the emancipation and advancement not of nature but of the human experience. It was this category that the Church mobilized in

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its critique of “sustainable development.” Until the 2007 campaign, the central argument of the bishops against the latter term was less concerned with its terminological contradiction than with its alleged colonialist genesis – an original sin that would link it to the interests of big capital and empires that desire the Amazon untouched, as the “lung of the planet.” For the Church, this would mean hindering any promotion of social development or equity in the region. The fact that “integral development” does not appear even once in the official document of the 2011 campaign reveals, in our hypothesis, its adjustment in light of the Church’s recent effort to soften the anthropocentric perspective of its pronouncements. This perspective might have hindered its progress in constituting a field of symbolic and political mediation with other actors in the environmental arena, particularly by impeding the circulation of codes and more readily shared categories.

To soften or attenuate its anthropocentric gaze means, however, to preserve it, finding a place that allows the articulation of core values of Christian theology with the moral and political stance of various other forces active in the environmental discourse. And the notion of “sustainability,” a new conceptual instrument to counter “sustainable development,” manages to do so in the sense that, as argued above, it points towards a new ordering of relationships among economy, politics, and nature – or, as the bishops say, a new “civilizational paradigm.” Furthermore, “sustainability” encompasses actions to combat poverty, as this category, through its construction, becomes a point of convergence between economy, environment, and above all, human well-being.

The criticism of the endless productivity of contemporary economies, present in the analysis of many segments of the environmental movement, is ingeniously linked to the defense of Sabbath rest and contemplation. Much of the social injustices and environmental imbalances perceived today are seen as stemming from a world without celebration, one that no longer remembers the profound significance of pause and free contemplation of things and life. “And thus, a system of production anchored in efficiency, continuous growth, and exclusion thrived...” (CNBB 2011, §129). It is precisely for this reason that the struggle for nature should also point to the “discarded” of the production system – those doubly situated as excluded from the system and as symbols of idleness that challenge the value of work. The Church, therefore, would already have made a criticism of this alienated production long before we speak of ecological crisis, as the weekly day of rest in which Creation and Christ’s resurrection are celebrated would also be the day of pause, rest, and anti-production.

But why understand this praise of the pause from work as an inventive way for the episcopate to relate themes of its theology to the persistent critique that environmentalists make of the productivity logic of our economic system? For us, it is in the establishment of symbolic relations of this kind that the Catholic Church manages to establish an autonomous and unmistakable place for its presence in the public sphere and on the fronts of a struggle where no one wants to evade – and if Castells’ observations about the visibility and aggregating capacity of the environmental theme are accurate, the political and symbolic costs of ignoring it might be

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too high for any major institution in the West. What we are trying to demonstrate is that the Catholic Church engages fervently with this theme, acknowledges its relative “lag” in grasping the increasing importance that ecology gradually gains during the 1960s, but aims to secure a place that is not that of a mere observer amid numerous other institutions, governments, and organized movements.

Conclusion

Establishing roots within local cultures – sharing their desires and concerns – has been one of the most important theological and pastoral orientations of the Catholic Church over the past three decades. After all, articulating the universality of its political-pastoral project with the particularity of the cultural contexts in which it is present has become such a decisive and pressing task that, after the Second Vatican Council, perhaps the Church’s greatest intellectual and reflective investment can be translated into the category of inculturation.

Throughout this article, we have sought to demonstrate how this effort of updating and adjustment to the time and forces of the present has led the Church to draw closer to a set of representations that, somewhat loosely, we designate as ecology. The increasing pervasiveness of the themes and debates associated with it, in the regions and countries where the Catholic Church has established itself, has significantly affected the agenda of its apostolic action at various levels, mobilizing the Holy See, national episcopates, and numerous local pastoral communities and groups. In our argument, the incorporation of a certain ecological narrative into the Catholic theological and pastoral repertoire provides the Church with a strategically valuable political and symbolic practice in its engagement in the national public sphere, bringing it closer to agents and groups perceived as increasingly relevant in the struggles over the future directions of the planet. And if much of the “contemporary culture” speaks through ecology, nothing could be more predictable than the Theology of Inculturation simultaneously operating as a mediating element between the world and the Church, universality and locality.

By aligning itself with this “culture that is expanding more and more worldwide”, in the aforementioned words of Dom Dimas Lara Barbosa, the Church, however, reinvents itself. We have attempted to understand the terms of this reinvention in the specific context of the Brazilian Church, which, while engaging with the “ecological” propositions of some papal and conciliar documents, undoubtedly brings distinct aspects stemming from the particular way in which the Catholic Church constructs its history in the country. To better understand the connections between ecology and inculturation, however, requires anthropology, history, and other fields of knowledge to establish the relationship between so many other elements and processes – a task that is still in its prelude.

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