



## The Traditional Catholic Revival in Brazil

*Editor's Note: This month the Mindszenty Report invited a Brazilian journalism student to write about the Catholic religious revival occurring in his country, which offers inspiring lessons for the U.S. and other countries. It has been called the "Silent Revolution." Domenico Schmidt studies journalism at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and works at the Centro Dom Bosco publishing house reviewing and translating books. He was baptized when he was 19 years old.*

By Domenico Schmidt

The Catholic Church is, and has always been, a yardstick of morals. Where the church is vigorous and virtuous, the church's followers will have a model for their lives. The opposite is also true. This was apparent in the 1960s when the church appeared to capitulate to the social mores of a popular culture gone astray.

Today in Brazil, the largest country in South America, many Roman Catholics are in open rebellion against the country's church hierarchy, which they believe is letting them down by not promoting conversion, the belief in a living God, public morality and the traditional family.

For Brazilians who believe in a living church, the results of the failure of the hierarchy are all too evident in the daily news. In Brazil we had more than 60,000 homicides in 2017, more than any other country.<sup>1</sup> An estimated 40,000 abortions occur each year, even though abortion is for the most part illegal in Brazil. (A woman or doctor will not be punished for performing an abortion in order to save the life of the mother or for a pregnancy produced by rape or incest.)<sup>2</sup> One out of three marriages in Brazil ends in divorce.<sup>3</sup> These statistics are just a slice of the social problems facing Brazil today following a decades-long failure of the church, its

hierarchy and clergy to address social morality. The dismissal of God from public and private life manifests itself in crime rates and the breakdown of the traditional family.

### Responding to Moral Breakdown

In this moral chaos, Brazil is witnessing a renewal of a traditional faith that once united the entire country—the Roman Catholic faith. This renewal, a religious revival, coincides with the election of President Jair Bolsonaro and his allies in the Parliament. After decades of leftist administrations, a strong conservative movement has assumed power in Brazil with popular support of the electorate.

The political battle in Brazil is not over. Leftists remain a strong force in Brazilian politics. The mainstream media echoes leftist sentiment. Many intellectuals and academics continue to dream that socialism can work. Nevertheless, social media has created new forums for conservatives; and a few academics and intellectuals are rejecting failed leftist policies.

More important, there is a widespread turn toward Catholic doctrinal orthodoxy, the sanctity of life and religious vocations. Many Brazilians congregate in churches that celebrate the Mass in accordance with the Tridentine rite, also called the traditional Latin Mass. These people are in the forefront of a silent counterrevolution taking place all over the country, especially among the young.

They are mostly men and women in their twenties or thirties, whose older family members are mostly in-name-only Catholics or former Catholics who have joined the ranks of Protestant sects, paganism or religious indifference. These older generations also grew up in a Brazil

with the progressive Workers' Party ruling the country for 13 years, carrying on the dismantlement of Brazilian values practiced by all the administrations at least since the end of the Brazilian Military Regime period (1964-1986). The older generations tended to avoid Catholic community activities, and even when they attended Mass they were in parishes that did not instruct them on the meaning and joys of Christian and Catholic life.

Of course, the breakdown of traditional Christian culture is not unique to Brazil. Traditional religious culture has been under assault by the forces of secularism throughout Western Europe, North America and South America. What is unique to Brazil is an awakening of the Catholic faithful. This awakening is not found in any other South American country.

### Explaining the Revival

**T**he number of parishes that celebrate the traditional Latin Mass in Brazil has risen from 13 in 1990 to at least 133 parishes today.<sup>4</sup> Parishes offering post-Conciliar traditional Masses are strikingly different from older parishes. Post-Conciliar Masses are dominated by Millennials and there is a balance between male and female parishioners, unlike more liberal parishes largely attended by older women. These older women are religious and have a shared community, but their parishes lack the fervor of the young, male and female, who have returned to the church.

It is hard to identify the root of this phenomenon, maybe because there are many. Some can be traced to the origins of the resistance to the modernization of the Catholic Church that occurred in the 1960s. A key figure in the religious revival has been Dom Antônio de Castro Mayer, bishop of the Diocese of Campos, who defended traditional faith alongside Msgr. Marcel Lefebvre at the conferences of the Second Vatican Council. Dom Castro Mayer's zeal left a deposit of the traditional faithful in the church hierarchy in his diocese, which led to the establishment of the Sacerdotal Society of John Marie Vianney and the Society of Saint Pius X priests.

The presence of these two fraternities kept alive traditional faith, but they were not found in many Brazilian cities. They were strongest in Rio and Sao Paulo. Yet these fraternities cannot fully explain the recent fervor being expressed by the young who are discovering the treasures of the Catholic faith. If one person could be named

as critical to this revival among the young, it would be Fr. Paulo Ricardo.

Ordained by Pope John Paul II in 1992, Fr. Paulo Ricardo studied theology and later received a master's degree in canon law at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. After that he became the rector of the Cristo Rei Seminary, later lecturing at the Universidade Católica Dom Bosco. He is the current parish vicar of Christ the King Parish in Várzea Grande in the state of Mato Grosso and lectures on theology at the Instituto Bento XVI of the Lorena Diocese in the state of Sao Paulo.<sup>5</sup>

Through his use of social media, especially YouTube, Fr. Paulo Ricardo emerged as a light in the shadows for many young people who had remained ignorant of traditional Catholic doctrine. His eloquence and knowledge were rapidly recognized by the young and old alike. His videos on Catholic doctrine are watched by thousands every day, including many priests. A modern-day Fulton Sheen, he has reached beyond parishes. His website now has 754,000 subscribers and lists more than 2,300 videos including daily homilies and entire catecheses on doctrine, liturgy, morals, history and spiritual direction.

The fruits of such astonishing work are easily observed. It is hard to find a Brazilian neophyte who was not converted or at least strongly influenced by Fr. Ricardo. Indeed, I was converted by Fr. Ricardo. What is so innovative about Fr. Ricardo is that he speaks to the masses in a manner that is affable and welcoming, while presenting the hard truths of traditional doctrine.

### The Role of Lay Catholic Centers

**A**nother important factor that helps explain this movement in Brazil is the spontaneous creation of various Catholic cultural centers founded by laymen who combined their forces to pray, study and evangelize. The first of these centers was the Centro Dom Bosco, founded in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 by a small group of ordinary people who complained of bad experiences with some of the clergy and who wanted to join together to study the doctrine and then spread it to others.

Led chiefly by the brothers Alvaro and Bruno Mendes, Pedro Luiz de Affonseca and Lucas Henrique, the activities began in a small rented room where people sat on the floor to listen to lectures on classical and medieval philosophy, history of the Church, sacraments and

traditional Catholic doctrine—exactly what they had missed in their own parishes and catechism classes. Centro Dom Bosco then started a publishing house specializing in disseminating the best Catholic books written mostly by saints, such as *Preparation for Death* and *Moral Theology* by St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori and *On the Nature of God* by St. Augustine.

The Centro Dom Bosco describes its efforts as “archeological” work of reviving the hidden or forgotten masterpieces of Christian civilization. The center hosts free weekly lectures with laymen, clergymen and intellectuals that attract dozens of young people engaged in the task of helping the church with her sole mission—saving souls. Another product of the center’s efforts is the construction of the Monastery of the Holy Cross, a traditional Benedictine foundation scheduled to celebrate its first Mass in January.

This new sort of apostolate, where laymen from different parishes unite their efforts to build a community of orthodox Catholic friends to pray and study—without any initiative of the local diocese and counting on the advice of just a few of the best living priests of our time—is rapidly spreading throughout Brazil. Two years after the founding of Dom Bosco, 46 other centers were founded on the same principles and goals. They were united into a league of Catholic centers called the Liga Cristo Rei.

These centers have become places where non-Catholics and in-name-only Catholics become familiar with the truths of faith expounded in the clearest form. I have witnessed many of my own friends flourish as strong, virtuous Catholics. Few of them are over 30 years old.

### Faith and Knowledge

One question remains: What do these young men and women see as so appealing about the Catholic worldview with its centuries-old teachings, with a rite celebrated in a dead language and with all those commandments that seem so rigid for the youth of the 21st century?

Part of the answer lies in one word: knowledge. Almost all the new traditional Brazilian Catholics became that way not by the natural influence of their families, even less through school or friendships. In reality, much in this repaganized world leads us to religious indifference, to idolatry and lately to hell. But these people have had access to

the study of the doctrine, the history and the situation of the current hierarchy of the church in a way that impelled them to embrace traditional Catholicism.

Whether this knowledge was achieved by the work of good priests like Fr. Paulo Ricardo or by apostolates such as Centro Dom Bosco does not matter. Truth is attractive by itself; it does not require ornamentation. And knowledge, when accompanied by order and virtue, leads to the improvement of the relation between a man and God. The concrete effect is that many people who otherwise would be taking part in the current general apostasy of the nations have received by God’s grace the antimodernist shields that compel them not only to be “conservative” or “right-wing” but to adopt Catholicism with all its implications for their lives.

### Brazil’s Catholic History

Another factor that helps the flourishing of traditional Catholicism in Brazil is its own history. The first Mass celebrated in Brazil took place on April 16, 1500, only four days after the discovery of the land by the Portuguese. The territory was baptized as *Terra da Santa Cruz*, Land of the Holy Cross. Thousands of Jesuit priests from Portugal and Spain risked their lives crossing the Atlantic to evangelize the indigenous cannibals.

Despite the ferocity of some of the natives and the martyrdom of many of the priests, the history of the colonization of Brazil is closely related to the communities constructed in collaboration between the Jesuits and converted indigenous tribes. The then ruling power, the kingdom of Portugal, was also a Catholic state, with its authority submitted to the authority of God in the person of the Pope.

After the Brazilian Empire gained its independence in 1822 it kept its Catholic identity despite the increasing influence of freemasonry in the Parliament and other state positions, even in the clergy. The influence of freemasonry was actively opposed by the bishop and martyr Dom Vital from the Diocese of Olinda. The abolition of slavery was achieved in 1888 by the regent Princess Isabel, known for her sanctity. She offered her own crown to the Holy Mother of God and begged her to reign over Brazil and watch over the liberated slaves. In 1889 she was forced to abdicate in a republican revolution organized in part by freemasons. Roman Catholicism, however, remained central to Brazilian culture.

## Current Trends

**B**razil has the largest absolute Catholic population in the world, with around 125 million faithful.<sup>6</sup> Yet even with the success of recent evangelism, large numbers of Brazilians have left the church. This year will be the first year in history in which less than half of the Brazilian population (49.9 percent) declare themselves Catholic.<sup>7</sup> Compare that with the 95 percent in 1940 who considered themselves Catholic. Into this vacuum have stepped evangelical Protestants, who have increased from 2.7 percent of the population in the 1940s to an estimated 31.8 percent by 2020. Protestants are projected to surpass Catholics by 1.2 percent in 2023.<sup>8</sup>

While the Catholic Church keeps losing adherents in Brazil despite efforts and innovations adopted to attract youth, the only part of the church where things do not seem to be numerically declining is the traditional faith, including celebration of the Latin Mass. Therein lies a lesson: The church cannot offer people the same things that the world offers. She must present something more, something much higher. She must offer exactly what the world is unable to give.

Our Lord said, “My own peace I give you, a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you” (John 16:27). To accomplish her mission, the church must be like her founder: She must give us what the world cannot give, which is the life of sanctity and the love of God, the sacraments and the liturgy.

The revival of traditional faith in Brazil is good news. The Catholic Church offers truth, beauty and virtue to those

who seek to live in communion with her. That is what young Brazilian Catholics are looking for and encountering in the Holy Mother Church.

1 Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, the Brazilian institute for applied economics research.

2 “Pesquisa internacional projeta 48 mil abortos clandestinos no Brasil — Estudos Nacionais,” Estudos Nacionais (in Portuguese), 2018-08-14, retrieved 2018-08-19; “1 em cada 5 mulheres até 40 anos já fez aborto no Brasil. Católicas e evangélicas são maioria,” HuffPost Brasil (in Portuguese), 2016-12-08, retrieved 2018-08-19.

3 Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, the Brazilian national institute for geography and statistics.

4 *Veja* magazine, 13 November 2019.

5 padrepauloricardo.org.

6 Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

**Attention St. Louis-area subscribers:** Please join us for the second talk in the Cardinal Mindszenty Speaker Series at Saint Mary of Victories Church in downtown St. Louis, Missouri, on Sunday, March 15, on “**Missouri: The Show Me Life State.**” Pam Fichter and James Cole will address new developments in Missouri abortion law and national trends following the church’s regular monthly luncheon which starts at 12:15. The 1:00 talk is free, but RSVP for lunch (\$10 payable at the lunch) to 314-727-6279 or [info@mindszenty.org](mailto:info@mindszenty.org).

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