

The Amazon in Brasil



History of the Catholic Church in Brazil.

The beginning of the presence of the Church in the Amazon, as well as throughout Brazil, is related to the complexity of its discovery and occupation by the Portuguese crown. This presence had two aspects: the missionary side entrusted to some religious orders, and the branch of implantation of the Church, with its own structures, through the bishoprics. At the same time, the presence of the Church had a political and cultural significance.

The evangelization of the Amazon began with the arrival of the first missionaries in 1617: they were the Franciscans of the Province of Santo Antonio. In 1626 the Carmelites arrived, in 1639 the Mercedarios who were Spanish, the Jesuits arrived in 1652, the Franciscans of the Province of Pieta in 1693 and the Franciscans of the Province of La Concepción in 1706. From the mouth of the river Amazon to the Alto -Solimões and Alto -Rio Negro - distance equivalent to 3000 km to the west (almost no missionaries are found in north-south direction) - hundreds of missionaries planted the Cross of Christ.

Missions or villages, schools, haciendas and sugar mills that gave economic support were the "places" of evangelization and catechesis of the Amazonian indigenous world.

The performance of the religious was significant for the formation of the first population centers of the Amazon, establishing an urban model that was consolidated throughout the interior of the Amazon.

With the creation of the Bishopric of Bethlehem in 1719, the diocesan clergy came to have their place in the task of establishing the Church in the region through the few parishes created in places of greater population concentration: Bethlehem, Cametá, Vigia, Tefé, Alvelos, Santarém...

In the middle of the eighteenth century, the intervention of the economic and cultural policy in the state of Maranhão and Grão Pará to solve problems of the border with Spain and the friction between the religious, their missions and the Portuguese merchants, resulted in the expulsion of the Jesuits

(1st time in 1661, then in 1684 and finally in 1759/60), the Franciscans (of the Piedad and of the Conception), and later, of the Mercedarians of the region. The missions were transformed into towns and parishes and the diocesan clergy went to take care of the parishes, although with many difficulties, because there were few priests. Between 1760 and 1870, the situation of the Church in the Amazon could be considered critical, due to the absence of ecclesiastics.

The pombaline intervention in the Amazon until today is considered disastrous not only for the damages caused to the catechesis, but also for the marginalization of the natives of the region. Pombal and the economic policy implemented in the region materialized a pedagogical reform based on the illuminist culture of the time, which emphasized the value of reason and conscience, the ethics of order and dedication, which brought education from the hands of the priests and put it in the hands of the laity, thereby desacralizing literacy. This was considered as a kind of forced penetration of cultural elements that, if they were significant in Europe, did not reach their objectives, or was only valid for the city's elites, leaving the people of the interior outside of those benefits. Certainly, this devastated the native culture, which became internalized in the forest, further increasing the prejudices between the population of the city and the interior, the social and cultural discomforts that continue to this day.

In that period, the influence of laity and secularism, brotherhoods and confraternities that sustained devotional and family Catholicism around the marine, holy images, chapels, processions, festivities, etc., which characterized an autonomous and secular Catholicism in relation to the official Church, with serious consequences for the growth of the faith. The devotion to Our Lady of Nazareth and the Candle of Nazareth, which emerged within that context, are the most complete synthesis of the Amazonian religiosity.

Another stage that marked the Church in the region was the influence of "Romanization". From 1840 the Holy See, at the request of the government, began sending missionaries to Brazil, for the indigenous missions of the North, Northeast and Center-West.

This new phase is characterized by the appointment of Brazilian bishops, in which the Catholic Church becomes organized from the orientations of Rome. These bishops undertook a reform and reorganization of the Church, facing real battles to free it from the "chains" of the colonialist tradition that gave rise to many conflicts, with Freemasonry, with the Catholic population and with the Protestants who were establishing themselves in the North of Brazil.

In 1892 the diocese of Manaus was created, Bethlehem was elevated to the Archdiocese (1906) and several new Prelatures nullius [1] or Apostolic Prefectures were given to the religious [2] who, little by little, were arriving to the region from different parts of Europe to act above all in the areas of greatest need of the presence of the Church. The Capuchins arrived (1843), the Franciscans (1870), the Spiritains (1885), the Dominicans (1897), the Augustinian Recollects, the Barnabites, the Marists, the Benedictines, the Salesians, the Jesuits, the Servites, the Precious Blood, etc.

A significant fact in this stage of history is the presence in the region of the female religious Congregations that acted alongside the male Congregations in hospitals, leprosariums, schools, orphanages, schools, indigenous missions: Dorotheas, Daughters of Saint Ana, Capuchinas, Dominicans, Sisters of Santa Catarina, daughters of Mary Help of Christians.

The most outstanding example of this new phase is the AMAZON FOUNDATIONS, religious congregations created in the region to meet the needs and appeals coming from all over.

Religious men and women form a new ecclesiological scenario in the region, playing a decisive and active role, in which the mystique of service and abandonment led many of them to leave the best of their lives in the region, and even life itself.

We can characterize this period as a true “spiritual reconquest of the Amazon”.

A Church with an Amazonian face

Faced with the challenges of reality, the Church in the Amazon has shown signs of vitality and its deepest communion with those who, in this context, are the masses excluded from the economic plans oriented towards the region.

After the CELAM Meeting in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, the Church in Latin America officially assumed the adaptation of the conciliar renewal to the reality of the continent. This new ecclesiological approach also had an impact on the Amazon.

In 1972 the Church of Brazil initiated the Churches Sisters Project, seeking solidarity between dioceses and regionals, which also favored the opening of some prelatures to other ecclesial presences of priests and laity, different from the institute to which they had been entrusted. Also in that year the CIMI (Indigenous Missionary Council) was founded; and the Assembly of the two Amazonian Regionals was held in SANTARÉM, with the concern of thinking and concretizing “a Church with an Amazonian face” that would assume all the socio-diversity of the region, with its new human features. Institutes were also created for the training of agents and future priests of the region. In 1975, the CPT (Pastoral Commission of the Earth) was born, a new vision of the Church in relation to the problems of the earth, offering advisory services, communication, legal, etc.

All this gave new impulse to the evangelizing action in progress and favored the growth of a more local, ministerial and lay Church, demonstrating a great maturity of their walk.

The Social Pastorals assumed a significant role due to the impoverishment-exclusion of the people of the region: the phenomenon of urbanization with its trace of misery and violence, the conflicts that do not stop happening (in the city and in the countryside), work slave, prostitution, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, led the Pastorals to assume the Social Weeks, the Cry of the Excluded and the defense of the poor and unjustified.

In 1990 there was a meeting of bishops and pastoral coordinators of the dioceses and prelatures in Icoaraci, district of Belém. With the theme “In defense of life in the Amazon”, for the first time, the environment was assumed to be important for the defense of life. The Church joined a group of organizations around the world that care about the Amazon.

Twenty-five years after Santarém the two Amazonian regionals held a new meeting in Manaus, evaluating the way and the reality of the region. From that meeting a document emerged: The Church becomes flesh and lives in the Amazon, confirming an evangelizing-pastoral guide, an Amazonian mysticism before a painting that has not changed much in those years; in certain aspects, there was more exclusion and violence.

In 2003, the Episcopal Commission for the Amazon was created; in 2007 an interregional meeting was held in Manaus that generated a document entitled: Disciples Missionaries in the Amazon. We are Church at the service of the Kingdom and we learn this mission in the exercise of the mission.

In July 2012, another meeting of the pastors of the Church of the Amazon was held in Santarém to commemorate and celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Assembly of Santarém (and of the famous document). The fruit of that meeting was a letter to the People of God in the Amazon with a message from the Bishops and the conclusions of the meeting entitled: Church in the Amazon: Memory and Commitment to the main decisions of the Assembly.

In 2013, between October 28 and 31, 2013, the Episcopal Council for the Amazon promoted another meeting, this time with the participation of all the regions that are part of the Legal Amazon, including the Northeast Five Region of the State of Maranhão . The Encounter was held in Manaus and counted on the participation of about 60 bishops.

In September 2014 the PAN AMERICAN ECCLESIAL NETWORK (REPAM) was created to lay the foundations of a network throughout the region based on dialogue, articulation and consensus building on the ecclesial mission in the Amazon. The meeting was held in Brasília and had the participation of the churches that make up the Pan-Amazo.

“The Repam seeks to be an Ecclesial Network that articulates the forces of the Church in a progressive way in the defense of the Common House and the peoples.”

Between November 14 and 18, 2016, in Belém, (Icoaraci) bishops, priests, deacons, religious, advisors and pastoral leaders of the Episcopal Conference of the Bishops of Brazil, of the Regionals: North 1 (North of the Amazona and Rpraima), North 2 (Pará and Amapá), North 3 (Tocantins), Northeast 5 (Maranhão), West 2 (Mato Grosso) and Northwest (Acre, south of Amazonas and Rondônia) met for the II Meeting of the Catholic Church in Legal Amazon and the Meeting of the Sister Churches.

Between August 21 and 23, 2018, the III Meeting of the Catholic Church of the Legal Amazon was held in Manaus, with the participation of 58 bishops of all the Regionals. The main theme was the Extraordinary Synod on the Amazon, convened by Pope Francis and whose theme is: Amazon: new paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology.

“We follow the paths set by the synodal process in the firm hope that the Spirit that leads the Church will encourage and sustain us in our walk in this Amazon, because we feel the need to establish a unity around the most diverse challenges that the Amazon presents, immense effort, sometimes disconnection from evangelization, pastoral movements and practices to make effective that network of solidarity and communion”.

Excerpt from the Letter published at the end of the Meeting

Text by Monsignor Raimundo Posidonio Carrera de la Mata, Master in Ecclesiastical History. Adapted for this website only for information purposes. the present text does not have official character.

[1] Prelature is an ecclesial circumscription independent of the dioceses, but without depending on the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. The first prelature created was Santarém in 1903. Unlike the creation of Apostolic Prefectures that depend on the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, without this that provides them with any favor, especially economic. In 1907 the Apostolic Prefecture of Roraima was created and in 1910 those of Tefé, Río Negro and Alto Solimões. In 1925

these Apostolic Prefectures became Prelatures. Beginning in 1980, the Prelatures were elevated to the status of Diocese.

[2] With the restoration of the Church in Europe, the old orders were renewed, new masculine congregations and active women's congregations emerged which, like the religious, also left on mission. There is a revitalization of the missionary ardor, motivated by the “recolonization” of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Amazon received these new missionaries, no longer Portuguese, but rather Italians, Belgians, French, Germans, Dutch, Spaniards, Austrians, Americans, etc., as well as religious of various nationalities.