NEEDS of the HEART

A Social and Cultural History of Brazil’s Clergy and Seminaries

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chapter one

Introduction

The Meaning of the Priesthood

The vocation of the Catholic priesthood embodies the most generous of human aspirations and the most profound human contradictions. Throughout history priests have sought to bring themselves and their flocks closer to God and to build a just society. For Catholics the priest is the way to salvation. For non-Catholics he symbolizes the Church’s prominence as a religious, political, and social institution. Priests, the sociologist Father Andrew Greeley once wrote, have the special capacity “to take a constructive view of the nature of man.”¹ Educated in a tradition stretching back to the start of Western civilization, they are a repository of the Judeo-Christian ethic. But in the name of God they have directed some of the most brutal campaigns against ideas, peoples, and individuals. Priests are expected to personify the divine while inhabiting imperfect bodies. Called upon to express the highest form of love, they must deny the basic drive for sexual pleasure, comfort, and freedom. These requirements bind priests together in a mysterious international brotherhood. Like a Greek tragedy, the story of the priesthood speaks about fundamental human issues.²

This account is a social and cultural history of the priesthood in Brazil, one of the world’s largest and most religiously evocative places, nominally the world’s largest Catholic country but in reality quite diverse in religious practice. I trace five centuries of continuity and change in the life of the clergy by
focusing on the seminaries, the training schools in which young men—and only men—isolated themselves from the world in order to prepare for the ordained ministry of the Roman Catholic Church. Ethnicity, gender, politics, and economics come into focus. Just as important as these is religion, a dominant influence in the vast sweep of the history of civilizations. Priests’ social roles and the ways in which they struggled with the demands of their special station are the major underlying themes.

I was inspired to write this book in 1986, when, visiting Brazil for the first time, I learned that Rome had sentenced the famous liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, a Franciscan friar, to a year of silence because of his controversial critique of power in the Church. The Brazilian Church was also mourning the death of Father Josimo Morais Tavares, murdered in May 1986 because he assisted poor people who struggled against powerful landowners in the Amazon. The discovery of liberation theology and clerical activism refreshed my Catholic roots. Hearing priests denounce social evils during the first electoral campaign of post-dictatorial Brazil, I told myself, “This is what the Church should be doing everywhere!” The Brazilian Church stood in sharp contrast with the conformist, middle-class-oriented Church in the United States, where after Mass people raced to their new cars in the parking lot rather than contemplate a renewed life with God. The experience in Brazil led me to focus on the Church for my doctoral dissertation in Latin American history at the University of California, San Diego.

I commenced my research in 1987 on a balmy winter afternoon in Rio de Janeiro. I began by meeting with one of Brazil’s most impressive clergymen, Father Marcello de Carvalho Azevedo, a Jesuit intellectual whose important book on the renowned Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (CEBs, or Grassroots Church Communities), faith, and culture had just appeared in English. The CEBs had emerged in the 1970s, as the Church struggled to end Brazil’s military dictatorship. Receiving me with his characteristic big smile, Father Marcello proceeded to outline verbally, in the space of about an hour and without notes, four possible dissertation topics. One of these topics—the training of priests in diocesan seminaries—had not been systematically studied by any social scientist or historian. “You can provide a great service to the Brazilian Church by doing a study on the seminaries,” Father Marcello said.

Father Marcello received me in his office in Botafogo, one of the most interesting microcosms of modern Brazilian life. Located not far from downtown Rio, the Botafogo district hosted one of the greatest clusters of intellectual life in Latin America. Father Marcello and other key thinkers involved in
the Progressive Church worked at the Instituto Brasileiro de Desenvolvimento (IBRADES, Brazilian Institute for Development), an influential Jesuit think tank that had trained a generation of Catholic grassroots activists. In 1970 agents of Brazil’s military regime had invaded IBRADES, provoking a near rupture in the historic relationship between the Church and the state. Just around the corner stood the Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicos, where researchers under the leadership of former Catholic militant Herbert de Sousa (Betinho) organized a national anti-poverty movement in the 1990s. After our formal meeting Father Marcello and I walked briskly up the Rua São Clemente. Once graced with the elegant residences of the nineteenth-century Brazilian imperial nobility, when Botafogo sat idyllically on the city’s outskirts, this street now bustled with traffic, shoppers, and pedestrians, many of whom resided in high-rise apartment buildings. Just a few steps up São Clemente one could find the cultural center known as the Casa de Rui Barbosa, the former home of the great Brazilian jurist, scholar, statesman, and abolitionist. Fernando Henrique Cardoso, an internationally renowned sociologist and Brazil’s president from 1995 to 2003, grew up in Botafo. Father Marcello pointed out the Colégio Santo Inácio, the Jesuit preparatory school that educated many of the members of Brazil’s male elite. A bit further one encountered the Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro (IUPERJ), founded by Candido Mendes, the brilliant great-grandson of the senator who defended the Church against encroachment by the state in the 1870s. IUPERJ stood in the heart of Botafogo, on the Rua da Matriz, a short street that connected São Clemente and the neighborhood’s other main thoroughfare. A stolid-looking stone church loomed at the far end of the Rua da Matriz, while on the São Clemente side the hills rose up to the Corcovado, the peak where the world-famous Christ the Redeemer statue spread its arms in a benevolent yet distant gesture to the people of Rio.

Life shifted dramatically on the hillside, where the favela Dona Marta sloped precariously upwards. Known by its inhabitants as Santa Marta, a name coined by a Jesuit father, the community gained national infamy in the 1980s as a lair for drug traffickers and their hit men. In 1996 it became a symbol of violence and First World-Third World tensions when pop singer Michael Jackson and movie producer Spike Lee produced a controversial music video there. Some Brazilian politicians opposed the filming, and Lee had to pay a bribe to the drug kingpin in order to assure security. That year Brazilian director Murilo Salles also made an acclaimed tragic action film based on children from the favela. It was titled Como nascem os anjos (How Angels Are Born). Joining cosmopolitan
sophistication and class struggle, Botafogo and Santa Marta reflected the contradictions of postmodern underdevelopment.\(^5\)

Father Marcello believed that foreign oppression caused this situation. He pointed to the noisy buses lurching up crowded São Clemente and belching out diesel pollution. The middle class avoided these buses, which were nothing more than transport trucks fitted with uncomfortable seats and rough, noisy turnstiles seemingly designed for animals. The residents of Santa Marta resigned themselves to a lifetime of commuting in these vehicles. “Look what the multinational corporations do here in Brazil,” Father Marcello said. “They leave their worst technology for the poor countries of the world.”

Our meeting resolved some central issues for me. Father Marcello not only helped me with an important career decision but also had charged me with an important mission. In Brazil the Church really mattered and, in the likes of individuals such as Father Marcello, truly seemed to care about the people. My work would be much more than an academic exercise. I would venture into faith, politics, and the fight for social change.

But a study of the seminaries would have to address more than the mainly political concerns expressed in most of the writings on the contemporary Latin American Catholic Church. In Father Marcello I had already observed that the life of the Brazilian clergy involved complex and sometimes contradictory demands. For instance, he belonged to the religious (or regular) clergy. These priests were grouped in orders, could serve anywhere in the world, and were subject to a bishop only if formally serving in a diocese, the Church’s main territorial division. Yet he recommended that I study the diocesan (or secular) priests, who generally spent their entire careers subject to the local bishop. At first I decided to concentrate on the training of only diocesan priests. But in Brazil Jesuits and other orders had shouldered much of the responsibility for training the diocesan fathers. Rivalries developed between the religious and secular priests, and also among the many orders that came to Brazil from Europe. Tensions particularly developed along lines of national identity. Thus my study expanded to include research on the religious, and it went beyond the seminaries to give an overview of the clergy and other themes such as popular religion and the structure of the institutional Church. Whereas at first I hoped to examine only the post–World War II era, it became rapidly apparent that I could not explain the seminaries without returning to the colonial era.

Priests’ struggles with celibacy became an inevitable part of my research. I discovered the personal side of things as I searched for the core of liberation theology among the activist priests of the Baixada Fluminense, a complex of
hot, teeming working-class suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Writing about and at times even assisting these men, I witnessed how they jumped into the political fray of Brazil’s new democratic political system and, as a result, fell victim to oppression by the Church bureaucracy, threatened the pecuniary comfort of their clerical enemies, and challenged the standard model of the priesthood.

On a Friday night in July 1989, I ran into one of these priests at a Brazilian pop music dance concert held to benefit Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the presidential candidate of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, or Workers’ Party) in the country’s first free presidential election in three decades. Father Nelson was wearing his usual jeans and holding the hand of a young woman. The three of us danced together and conversed a good while before I took my leave at midnight, but not before I offered them a room in my apartment. Getting back to the Baixada by bus was virtually impossible late on a Friday night. At 2:30 AM the doorbell rang, and I prepared a place for them on the living room floor. The next morning we ate breakfast together.

A year later Father Nelson and Ângela had their first child, a robust boy born only after the priest wrote a check to cover the cost of an emergency cesarean. To avoid bouncing the check Father Nelson got a loan from a friend who didn’t question the priest’s alleged need to help a needy “parishioner.”

Father Nelson was highly popular. He was also a radical whose violation of celibacy became a pretext for his removal. His politics led his superiors to transfer him to a far-off diocese, but to no avail. His activism and denunciation of the local elite’s abuse of power and privilege angered his new bishop. Father Nelson’s flock gladly accepted his unofficial marriage to Ângela. They protested when the Church moved to use it as a reason to expel him from the parish and his religious order. The eight-month ordeal spilled into the pages of the press, including photos of Father Nelson and his family. His opponents ransacked his quarters and stole his personal Bible.

Unemployed and with a second child to support, Father Nelson worked as a janitor at a private recreational club before landing a position as an assistant to a PT city councilwoman. In his next job he assisted street children. Father Nelson then separated from Ângela and moved to another state, where he “married” again to an old friend. Father Nelson still considers himself a priest. He did not apply to the Vatican for release from his vows, and he still engages in pastoral activities. He hopes for a liberalization of the rules on celibacy so that he can return to the full practice of his ministry.6

Father Marcello’s political stance and the tensions of Father Nelson’s priesthood summarized key elements of the history of the clergy and Brazilian
Catholicism. The experiences of the clergy highlighted the link between religion and society as well as the struggles over beliefs, cultural values, and material resources spurred by the political evolution of the Brazilian Church. The seminaries were the starting point in this odyssey. The clergy formed the core of the Church, and the seminary its inner core.

Our story has panoramic dimensions. It covers the vast territory of Brazil, the transcontinental exchange of people and ideas, and the singular history of a two-thousand-year-old institution. The Catholic Church is a global organization with hundreds of millions of believers and more than a million functionaries, including hundreds of thousands of priests and nuns. Its vast network of dioceses is subdivided into a myriad of parishes. The Church is an ecclesiastical institution, but also the “People of God.” The term refers to the clergy and the faithful. In Brazil the Church is the oldest institution. It played a central part in the development of Brazilian civilization. Only the military and the state have rivaled it in terms of organization and resources.

This is also a story of violence. The clergy were long the fulcrum on which much of Brazilian social life turned and, as a result, frequently stood at the center of conflict. Priests constantly needed to adapt to different pressures: from the elite, the people, and the Vatican. The colonial Church, for instance, sought to minister to the people but also exploited them. It legitimized the state and powerful economic interests, with the clergy generally enjoying great social comfort and privileges. In surveying the social roles, economic power, and ethnic background of the clergy of the colonial era (1500–1822), chapter 2 of this book pays particular attention to the social impact of the Church’s missionary activity, its support for Brazilian slavocracy, and the repression of native and African culture. In contrast, in chapter 5 we will see how in the name of the people some clergy succored armed revolutionary movements seeking to overthrow the military dictatorship (1964–1985). These and other issues have divided the Church.

A central argument of this book is that patterns of Brazilian Catholicism from the colonial and imperial eras survived into the twentieth century. The famed transformation of the modern Brazilian Church into a progressive institution was deeply rooted in the historical experience of the clergy, and its causes long predated those identified by most scholars. Brazilian clerical nationalism—a factor often ignored in the explanation of progressivism—had beginnings in the colonial period. As chapter 2 illustrates, the political involvement of the clergy had numerous precedents in the First Empire (1822–1840). Father Diogo Antônio Feijó’s campaign for an alternative model
of the priesthood, including optional celibacy, formed a major plank of the nationalists’ platform.

Another pattern is modernization. Scholars such as Richard Graham have focused on the economic progress and infrastructural improvements of the latter half of the nineteenth century as the key moment in Brazilian modernization. In a broader sense, however, it had already started in the sixteenth century. Brazil began at the dawn of modernity and was thus essentially a modern project. Brazil was colonized by the Portuguese, the leading seaborne nation of its time. Brazilian growers developed the world’s most productive sugar plantations.

In addition to material progress, modernization brought shifts in attitudes about a host of changes that are all part of what we today call modernity: the new status of the individual, his or her evolving relationship to large organizations, the emergence of human consciousness, new notions of political participation (democracy, citizenship, and authoritarianism), the belief in rationality and scientific progress instead of medievalism’s reliance on authority, the autonomy of the secular order, new women’s roles, the need for constant cultural and technological innovation, personal innovation, and intensification of the search for truth. These flowed from such varied but interrelated developments as the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, the scientific revolution, the French Revolution, and the violent encounter of Europeans and Native Americans after 1492. Modernity is “humanity’s adulthood” and “emancipation.” Modernity constructed its own utopia. But it also produced strong reactions such as Romanticism, which responded to modernity’s degradation into a reductionist fundamentalism that was overly pragmatic and incapable of comprehending the spiritual and life’s meaning. As the twentieth century so tragically illustrated, modernity brought new methods of oppression and destruction.

The Brazilian Church’s need to adapt to a constantly changing world caused it to undergo religious modernization. True, the Brazilian masses lacked most of the philosophical and political attributes mentioned above, and Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery. Even at the start of the twenty-first century, Brazil still lagged terribly in terms of distribution of wealth and land and respect for the individual citizen. But Brazil orbited a European world in which social changes were taking place. Brazil began to experience them through religion, which played a major part in social and ideological evolution. Scholars of European history have described the Reformation and Counter-Reformation (and Catholic Reformation) as important determinants
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in the development of modernity. In colonial Brazil priests such as the Jesuits molded proto-modern culture by cultivating European Catholic ideas and practices and establishing an extensive system of missions, schools, plantations, and other institutions.

But the Counter-Reformation played out much more erratically in Latin America than in Europe. The Jesuits and other religious fathers—but generally not the diocesan clergy—worked to establish the norms established at the Council of Trent, the watershed meeting of Church fathers held between 1545 and 1563. Trent aimed to end the widespread laxity of the clergy and to strengthen loyalty to the institutional Church. Tridentine Catholicism represented the dominant religious values as put forth by the Church and royal governments in their subjugation of the Americas. In the Catholic world it was the most modern cultural proposal of its time. The institutional Church thus fomented the first of several waves of evangelization-cum-modernization. However, this campaign created religious and cultural conflict throughout Latin America. Popular religion, including many practices rejected by the official Church, resisted religious modernization and thrived everywhere, especially in Brazil. From the Church’s standpoint the most serious shortcomings existed among the clergy. Combined with Brazil’s vast territory and the chaotic development of colonial civilization, the lack of reform created an ambiguous situation in which priests routinely strayed from the modernized ecclesiastical standards.

The Counter-Reformation did not effectively take place in Brazil until the implantation of the diocesan seminaries in the second half of the nineteenth century. Catholic identity and the model of the Church were tightly linked to the identity of the priest. Through the seminaries the bishops hoped to transform the earthy, sexually active, and politicized clergy into a corps of socially superior, morally irreproachable, mainly apolitical pastors. The Church believed that a reformed clergy would foster institutional unity and obedience to the hierarchy’s religious, political, and social dictates. The Church set out to change the model of the priesthood and to differentiate priests from the rest of the populace. To achieve this goal it isolated seminarians from the alleged dangers of the outer world. It also imposed control over their spiritual, physical, and emotional behavior.

Discipline was the key. It caused individuals to internalize ecclesial norms. For the Vatican, the bishops, and the heads of religious orders, discipline became the central issue of the Brazilian clergy. In Michel Foucault’s assessment, modern Western discipline is rooted in the history of the Church. Although I
do not embrace Foucault’s philosophy as a universal explanatory theory, it provides a way to understand seminary life in its basic disciplinary elements, such as architecture and internal space, schedule of activities, surveillance of students, and regulation of bodily attitudes. Discipline drove the mechanics of power, shaping individual behavior in the service of institutional goals: academic rigor, religious orthodoxy, compliance with celibacy, effective missionary action and moral leadership, obedience to the bishops and public authorities, and the preservation of the Church’s male-controlled, monarchical structure. These goals formed part of a single package, a kind of religious Taylorism in which piety, celibacy, and moral norms were reinvented to make the Church more efficient. In the Church “discipline” became synonymous with the Tridentine seminary and Catholic tradition. Discipline was the millennial link between the distant Christian past and the modernizing present. For Brazil’s bishops in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the solution of the future.

Clerical reform in Brazil amounted to a program of conservative modernization in which the Church sought institutional renewal, influence over its flock, and association with the state and networks of power. In the Second Empire (1840–1889) and First Republic (1880–1930) Brazil strengthened its ties to the international capitalist order, while its urban elite imported the fashions, customs, technology, and prejudices of Europe. Brazilians in the know wanted to look and act like Parisians. The coastal-oriented government in this period worked to consolidate its power vis-à-vis the backlands and the masses, whose lay-based Catholicism and resistance to oppression generated an alternative form of social organization and therefore a threat to the elite. In Rome the Church leadership felt increasingly besieged by the onslaught of modernization unleashed by the industrial revolution and the anti-clerical current of the French Revolution. Atheistic socialism and Communism represented another threat to the Church’s traditional nucleus of power in Europe. The Vatican fought back by reasserting its authority, condemning both capitalism and Communism, and formulating a new Catholic social doctrine as the solution to the ills of modernization. Paradoxically, the Church sought to become modern by presenting itself as an alternative to the modern. This strategy included an effort to strengthen the Church’s base overseas. Thus the Brazilian Catholic program of conservative modernization employed an international standard of seminary training determined by the Vatican and implemented through the importation of foreign priests. The Church also fortified European, clerically oriented religious devotions. Brazilian Catholicism thus underwent Romanization, or
Europeanization, a process that, like modernization, has lasted into the present. Like Brazil’s elite, the clergy aped European ways. Romanization represented the second great wave of evangelization in Brazil. The institutional Church flourished, and, despite official separation of Church and state as decreed in 1890, attained a status as Brazil’s quasi-official religion during the era of President Getúlio Vargas and post–World War II populism (1930–1964).

The Vincentian fathers epitomized the “grand discipline.” Known in Brazil as Lazaristas, they built, standardized, and ran the country’s most important seminaries in the so-called golden age—a feverish period of seminary construction starting in the 1840s and ending only on the eve of the momentous Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962–1965). Chapter 3 features their extensive pastoral, organizational, and educational work.

Discipline went awry, however. This is the theme of chapter 4. By making discipline an end in itself, the Church diverted the clergy’s energy from religious to institutional concerns. Tensions arose over celibacy, clerical nationalism, pedagogy, and other issues. The resultant institutional dysfunction hampered the clergy’s ability to adapt to a rapidly changing society. Missionary activity faltered, and priests became more distant from the people. Like Karl Marx’s description of capitalism’s tendency to destroy its own successes to make way for new innovations, modernization created new levels of human achievement and increased demands on the individual, institutions, and society. In the case of the Brazilian Church conservative modernization failed to innovate beyond the implementation of discipline. Discipline instead became yet another layer of Catholic tradition. One crack in discipline harmed the Church: its failure to remove sexually abusive priests. The hierarchy’s omission predated the infamous U.S. crisis by many decades and proved that problem priests were an international phenomenon.

The seminaries furnish an important case study of how cultural modernization proceeded in the Third World with the help of religion. In Brazil religion played a key role in the complex interplay of tradition and modernity, one of the central themes of twentieth-century Brazilian society. The seminaries stood at the nexus of religion, modernization, and state-building. The uneven development of religious modernization helps to explain other tensions in Brazil’s overall modernization.

A new Catholic modernization after World War II spurred a movement in Brazil and Latin America for a Church based on the power of the laity and the struggle for social justice. Criticizing the military dictatorship, the Brazilian Church became the world’s most radical branch of Catholicism. Liberation
theology, the defense of human rights and democracy, and a critique of capitalism characterized the progressive wing of the Church in the 1970s and 1980s. Brazil gained international recognition for its leadership in theological and pastoral innovation.

Progressivism emerged as the Church’s influence in the modern world diminished. Many pinpointed the difficulties in secularization. In Brazil the story was different. The Church’s centuries-long religious monopoly began to erode in the face of industrialization and urbanization, but also a growing social and religious pluralism that was the by-product of a democratic political system as well as new social developments, including the mass media, consumer culture, and various new strains of Protestantism. As new groups emerged and as educational opportunities expanded, priests’ leadership in politics, culture, and intellectual life decreased. Progressivism revealed innovation and vitality and, in the short run, breathed new life into the Church. But it also masked great insecurity. In the late 1960s the clergy plunged into a deep crisis of identity.

Acting as a modernizing vanguard, a large group of seminarians and priests pushed the Church leftward and rebelled against Tridentine discipline. In an effort to resolve their personal crises, they proposed a new model of the priest as social activist. Resistance to the military regime deeply affected this quest. Political opposition, the search for social justice, and the reform of ecclesiastical structures became intertwined. In the process the seminarians provided one of the first specific outlines for implementing the so-called preferential option for the poor, a new trademark of Latin American Catholicism. The redefinition of the vocation in the 1960s and 1970s reflected the Brazilian Church’s attempt to renovate its social and religious mission.

There was no clear path for the seminarians. The challenge to discipline exacerbated the crisis of the clergy and produced widespread conflict, fear, and uncertainty for the Church everywhere. Here was another paradox of modernization. It fostered discipline but then critiqued it. As discipline dissolved, freedom to innovate expanded. All aspects of the priesthood came into question. Seminarians demanded a complete overhaul of the seminaries—and maybe even their destruction. This threatened the existence of the clergy and thus the very survival of the institutional Church. The Vatican and other sectors of the hierarchy at first stimulated, then quickly tried to control, and finally worked to stop much of the experimentation. The well-documented neoconservative reaction of the 1980s actually began in the 1960s. The crises of the clergy and the seminaries are examined in chapters 5, 6, and 7.
Seminarians saw discipline as an obstacle to becoming modern. While Church instructors still viewed the individual through the prism of neo-Thomistic philosophy and utilized a discipline developed in the sixteenth century, a rapidly industrializing Brazilian society was focusing increasingly on new forms of individuality. Seminarians no longer wanted to become the unique, Christ-like figures shaped in the seminaries. They wanted to be human. As a result, they advocated a more holistic approach in seminary training that included greater self-knowledge, individual fulfillment, and psychological well-being. This outlook provoked a revolutionary shift away from the traditional corporatist ideology of Catholicism. It also reflected the historical struggle within Catholicism between universality and particularity (including religious nationalism). New theology, student radicalism, and anti-regime protest captured the attention of this generation, but so did the idea of professionalism. The crisis of the clergy could be resolved by making the priesthood a more rewarding vocation. By taking the momentous step to work and live among the poor, seminarians broke through the impasse affecting both the institution and the individual. This theme is studied in both chapters 5 and 7. A model combining social justice and the modern shored up the declining status of the clergy. The option for the poor was political and religious, but also personal and occupational.

And it was romantic. The new Catholic modernity proposed in Latin America in the 1960s included powerful elements from the past. No matter how innovative seminarians’ proposals might be, they were still working in a dense context of tradition. Seminarians endeavored to build a bridge between the demands of modern civilization and notions of community inherent in primitive Christianity.13

The personal side of the crisis involved the deepest needs of the clergy: sustenance, power, recognition, and sexual love, all of which governed the life of the Church as thoroughly and profoundly as they did any other human group. As Marc Bloch wrote, the historian has an obligation to explore such “secret needs of the heart.”14 The Church put men in seminaries to mold these impulses for institutional and spiritual goals. Successfully or not, Catholicism and especially its seminaries had always dealt in basic human psychology. In the 1960s seminarians and priests tried to break free of tradition in both an organizational and an emotional sense. Gripped by basic desires and fears, individual priests groped towards solutions to problems. It is a little studied fact, but not at all surprising, that the appeal of psychotherapy in the Catholic Church burgeoned at this time—precisely as the option for the poor emerged as the primary strategy of progressive Catholicism. Psychotherapy was a quin-
tessential modern approach. Chapter 6 discusses the rise of what I call “lib-
eration psychology.”

My own psychotherapy proved to be an invaluable tool in exploring the
primal motivations of priests. Traveling to Porto Alegre in August of 1989 to
conduct research on the seminarians’ movement and psychotherapy, I began
reading *I’m OK, You’re OK*, a best-selling book written in the 1960s to teach
people how to conduct their own transactional analysis. I was fascinated to
learn that the book offered not only a handy way to manage emotional and
social conflict but also reflections on the relationship between psychology and
religion. Days later I began to interview a number of priests who had under-
gone psychoanalysis. I pored over the memoirs of Father Géza Kövecses, a
masterful priest-psychoanalyst. While living with the Jesuits at the Colégio
Anchieta, I became absorbed in a novel, partially autobiographical, written by
a man who had left the order, married, and, in becoming a professional psy-
chologist, continued to minister to the afflicted. I became convinced of the
transformative potential of psychotherapy. I contacted the Jesuit author, who
put me in touch with a therapist who worked with a combination of techniques.
Therapy clarified my deep feelings about Catholicism and the priesthood,
to which I had aspired as a child. I arduously discovered that my research
was a mere repetition of my childhood wish. Therapy enabled me to recon-
struct more effectively the historical context of the psychoanalytic culture that
emerged in Brazil in the 1960s just as the priesthood entered into crisis. As his-
torian Peter Gay reports, psychoanalysis sharpens “sensitivity to the uncon-
scious shared fantasies that underlie cultural styles, and to the potent, largely
concealed currents of sexual and aggressive drives that give energy to action.”
I now understood the social and religious pressures experienced by seminari-
ans and priests. I also comprehended the tension between desire and vocation.

“I believe that . . . someone who is a writer is not simply doing his work in his
books,” Foucault stated shortly before his death, “but that his major work is, in
the end, himself in the process of writing his books. . . . The historical-critical at-
titude must also be an experimental one.” One of Foucault’s epistemological
tools was the “limit-experience.” In *The Passion of Michel Foucault* James Miller
describes how the philosopher had a “personal fascination with experience.”
Foucault pushed “his mind and body to the breaking point, hazarding ‘a sac-
rifice, an actual sacrifice of life,’ as he put it in 1969, ‘a voluntary obliteration
that does not have to be represented in books because it takes place in the very
existence of the writer.’” Foucault, a gay man and sadomasochist, made sex
his arena for extreme adventure. Employing the term “horizon experience,”
Garry Wills recalls how the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin served as stretcher-bearer in World War I in order “to conduct a laboratory test, as it were, in the crucible of his own body, on the concepts he had worked out in an abstract way.” Similarly, high-risk sports can bring a brush with death, as we know all too sadly from the case of Brazilians’ beloved Ayrton Senna, the champion race driver killed in 1994. What else besides the vicarious thrill of danger can explain North Americans’ fascination with football or hobbyists’ love for guns and the history of warfare? I had a limit-experience flying to a clandestine gold mining camp’s landing strip, a sliver of land carved into the Amazon rainforest. How many hubris-minded Western explorers, researchers, and missionaries have gone to the Third World with some sense of having a cultural limit-experience? But an academic or well-fed foreign tourist venturing into a favela is flirting with danger in a manner far different from the favelado who lives the far more daunting daily limit-experience of basic survival. Life-threatening illnesses are another form of limit-experience from which escape may be impossible, as Foucault, who died of AIDS, tragically learned. He was not unique—just privileged with greater intelligence and freedom in the exploration of human limits. His contribution was that he always strived to connect his experience “to a collective practice, to a manner of thinking.” Foucault briefly tried psychoanalysis and employed Freudian ideas in much of his work. Going beyond Freud, Foucault posited that the dream was “the birth of the world,” “the origin of existence itself.” It was a key to the riddle of being. Psychoanalysis as limit-experience plunges the individual into the murky abyss of the subconscious, revealing the potential horror found in instinct and fantasy. As Foucault suggested, any of us could be mad if society chose to define us as such.

The priesthood too is a limit-experience that sheds light on the human condition by revealing how discipline works in the extreme. In taking vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, priests do what most humans avoid. They attempt to sublimate their desires in favor of the collective good of the Church and society. Free of family life, priests marry the Church. Historically they have strived to imitate Christ, who volunteered for the ultimate, Atlas-like limit-experience—crucifixion—in order to save humanity from sin and eternal death. The priest takes on the job of ultimate mediator, a “courier between the living and the dead.” In today’s English vernacular, priests live on the emotional edge. They also seek the literal edges of society, aiding the sick and the downtrodden. In Brazil priests were tortured and murdered for their beliefs. Their imitation of Christ was revolutionary.
Many writers have pointed out that the Church changed Brazilian society. But society also changed the Church. I assess the meaning of the Catholic faith in Brazil by considering these reciprocal influences, which are clearly seen in the evolution of the seminaries’ educational policies and in experiments such as those with psychotherapy. Our view is from inside the seminary looking out—and from the outside looking in.

Priests felt especially strong about celibacy. The Catholic ministry is a lifelong commitment. Its most difficult requirement is the vow of chastity. Controversy over this directive preoccupied the Brazilian Church throughout its history. Brazil needed seminaries because its priests ignored celibacy. The Church attempted to prepare new generations of priests for celibate lives by isolating them from women (including female relatives) and other external stimuli considered dangerous. Some priests assumed celibacy as a personal commitment to the Church, but many saw it as an imposition of a system that exercised immense power over youths and children. After 1965 hundreds of priests quit the Church because they rejected obligatory celibacy.

Although some might categorize sexual matters as the history of private life, celibacy was at the center of a web connecting vocation, Church, and polity. It illustrated the tension between the priest’s vocation and his humanity, between rationality and instinct. As the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner asserts, celibacy is so complex and central to life that it assumes dimensions as vast and mysterious as humankind and life itself.

Sexual control exemplified sanctification: the elevation of the priest to a superior status by separating him from others and subjecting him to discipline. Celibacy reinforced isolation—literally, because the sexual act was forbidden, and symbolically, because the priest was a holy man, an Alter Christus, another Christ. Max Weber pointed out that in the West, where the Jesuits set the pattern, as well as in the East,

    the monastic procedural plan for attaining sanctification developed increasingly in the direction of rationalization. . . . Methodologies of sanctification developed a combined physical and psychic regime and an equally methodical regulation of the manner and scope of all thought and action, thus producing in the individual the most completely alert, voluntary, and anti-instinctual control over his own physical and psychological processes, and insuring the systematic regulation of life in subordination to the religious end.
As Weber further explained, the “relationship of religion to sexuality is extraordinarily intimate.” Anti-erotic religions, including Catholicism, “represent substitute satisfactions of sexually conditioned psychological needs.”25 This phenomenon became especially evident among priests and nuns.

Two hostile attitudes toward sexuality stood out. According to Weber, the first was the conception of mystical flight from the world, which interpreted sexual abstinence as the central and indispensable instrument of the mystical quest for salvation through contemplative withdrawal from the world. From this view, sexuality, the drive that most firmly binds man to the animal level, furnishes the most powerful temptations to withdrawal from the mystical quest. The other basic position was that of asceticism. Rational ascetic alertness, self-control, and methodical planning of life are seriously threatened by the peculiar irrationality of the sexual act, which is ultimately and uniquely unsusceptible to rational organization.26 Weber noted how the harsh restrictions on sexuality actually increased its social value. He affirmed that the preaching of Jesus, with its demand of absolute and indissoluble monogamy, went beyond all other religions in the limitations imposed upon permissible and legitimate sexuality. . . . At the level of the peasant, the sexual act is an everyday occurrence; primitive people do not regard this act as containing anything unusual, and they may indeed enact it before the eyes of onlooking travelers without the slightest feeling of shame. They do not regard this act as having any significance beyond the routine of living. The decisive development . . . is the sublimation of sexual expression into an eroticism that becomes the basis of idiosyncratic sensations and generates its own unique values of an extraordinary kind.27

Although Brazil’s seminaries rationalized the training of priests, they did not fully contain or divert sexuality. The Church battled not only human instinct, but also the Brazilian cultural milieu, which led European priests to observe that Brazilian men were incapable of living celibately. Noncompliance undermined authority and the institution’s social and political objectives. Priests lived the tensions of celibacy inwardly, but historically they also sparked social conflicts in the seminaries and in the community. It was more than just coincidence that celibacy became controversial during moments of difficult political transition. The history of the Brazilian clergy demonstrated repeatedly that celibacy was fundamentally a political question.
Women and concepts of femininity inevitably played important parts in the history of celibacy. In the colonial era the lack of clerical discipline facilitated contact with the opposite sex. The seminaries partially reversed this trend, making illicit contact with women publicly unacceptable. Women were portrayed as protectresses or temptresses. Seminarians cultivated devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus—pure, lovely, but unattainable. During the anti-Tridentine revolt priests and seminarians questioned celibacy, rediscovered real women, and witnessed a partial breakdown in the male monopoly on Church power—although women still could not be ordained or occupy positions in the hierarchy. Nuns from traditionally cloistered religious orders took a greater role in missionary work and even started teaching in the seminaries. For the first time women gained at least a modicum of recognition for their prominence in the Church. Catholic culture was changing.

The tensions described here—between other-worldly orientation and humanness, between rationality and instinct, between commitment to vocation and sexuality, and between the masculine and the feminine—stirred much conflict in Brazil’s seminaries and became generalized among the clergy and the hierarchy in the period after World War II. Tensions also appeared in the dichotomies of contemplation versus action, institution versus mission, legalism versus pastoral practice, tradition versus modernity, and conservativism versus progressivism.

Additional conflict arose from the clergy’s dual allegiances. The Church was a unique institution—perhaps the first multinational, multicultural organization in history. On the one hand, many of the clergy were native-born patriots. On the other hand, these men expressed loyalty to a foreign entity (the Vatican) and its leader, the pope. (Institutions such as the armed forces also absorbed foreign influences but had only Brazilians in their ranks.) Tridentine discipline enhanced a certain cultural dualism. Boys entered the seminary as Brazilians and left with a heavy grafting of European ideas and manners. Europeanization aided sanctification but also created cultural distance between the clergy and the people. Cultural frictions were exacerbated by the continual arrival of foreign priests to alleviate a shortage in vocations caused in part by Rome’s demand for (European) cultural uniformity. Priests embraced nationalism and the faith. This phenomenon is crucial for understanding both the Church’s millennial desire for unity and the nationalism of the Progressive Church.

Given Catholicism’s multinational character, was there anything unique about the Brazilian Church’s political transformation? After all, the Church
was the quintessential borrower of personnel and ideas from the mother continent, taking cues from such European innovations as Catholic Action, the worker-priests, and humanistic theology. The flow of people and ideas to Brazil in the second half of the twentieth century constituted a third wave of evangelization in which the clergy once again acted as agents of modernization. Was progressive Catholicism just another colonial project—this time from the left instead of the right? Did allegiance to Rome ultimately cause nationalism to fizzle? These questions concern not only religion. They go to the heart of identity, which, in the complex multiethnic history of Latin America, is one of the central quandaries of everyday life.

The Brazilian Church did indeed make unique contributions by engaging in the Brazilian tradition of cultural anthropophagy: devouring European culture, assimilating its positive traits, rejecting the negative ones, and creating an original ecclesial culture. The native and foreign elements of Brazilian Catholicism are inseparable. To be a Brazilian Catholic—or any Brazilian—is to partake of a complex cultural tradition involving Native, African, Euro-Western, and other influences. Progressive Catholic writers frequently cite poverty as the key historical and cultural context of their movement. Yet it is hard to see poverty as unique for the region or historical period. More important was the distance of Brazil and other Third World churches from the locus of European Church power. Because it did not play a major role in international Church politics, Brazil was a convenient proving ground for certain experiments. Innovation could fly loose—at least for a while. This was Brazil’s greatest contribution. As Sydney Mintz has drawn the powerful conclusion that the industrial revolution began not in England but in the sugarcane processing plants of colonial Latin America, so we can affirm that significant changes in world Catholicism developed not in Europe but in Brazil and other outposts of the neocolonial periphery. (Similarly, while working in China in an exile forced by the Jesuits, Father Chardin developed ideas that would shake the foundations of Catholicism.) Moreover, cultural, intellectual, and political sharing flowed both ways. In some instances the intended transformers of Latin American religious culture became the transformed because of their profound experiences in the region. And no matter how foreign the models, priests employed great creativity in adapting them to the local context.