

THE NEO-BYZANTINE MODERNIZATION OF APARECIDA'S IMAGE

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DOSSIER RELIGIONS: THEIR IMAGES,
PERFORMANCES AND RITUALS

ADRIANO GODOY¹

ORCID
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2347-5311>

The Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning, São Paulo, SP, Brazil, 04015-051 – postdoc@cebrap.org.br

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the contemporary display of the original image of Our Lady Aparecida. Based on the modernization project of her Basilica in the early 2000s, located in the National Shrine (Aparecida, Brazil), this article proposes to understand the institutional motivations and the practical effects of the artistic project in the devotion to the Patroness of Brazil. I argue that the Catholic Church opts for the neo-Byzantine iconoclasm as a reaction to the neo-Pentecostal iconoclasm. With a new niche developed simultaneously to the evangelical rise in the country, having the Second Vatican Council as a theological reference, I approach the image from the anthropological concept of “sensational forms”: I try to understand how the aesthetic engagement is institutionally produced over time as well as how the Brazilian Catholicism seeks to update itself in modern forms.

KEYWORDS
Anthropology
of Religion;
Catholicism;
Material Religion;
Modernism;
Neo-Byzantine.

INTRODUCTION

The original image of Our Lady Aparecida (Nossa Senhora Aparecida) is the National Shrine's (Aparecida, Brazil) main attraction. The clay statuette, found in 1717 in the waters of the Paraíba do Sul river, is prominently displayed in a golden altarpiece located in the south nave of Our Lady's Basilica. The so-called “niche” that houses the miraculous image is the most visited

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attraction in the shrine, and pilgrims can access it through an exclusive corridor, where they have the opportunity to see it up close.



FIGURE 1
Pilgrims interact in front of the niche with the image of Aparecida (Photo by author)

On festive days and weekends, devotees may wait for over an hour in line to spend less than one minute in front of Our Lady Aparecida. In those seconds, it is possible to observe a diversity of reactions, such as silent contemplation, effusive screams, and abundant tears. While some may touch the walls, stretching their arms to get as close to the image as possible, some will be on their knees throughout the journey and some may show restraint reverence as they bow to Our Lady Aparecida. Among the various reactions that I could observe, the number of photographs being taken caught my attention. As people approached the niche, there were many raised arms with cameras and cell phones seeking to frame Aparecida, either on her own or as a background in self-portraits. As I was one of those people during the course of field research² for the development of my doctoral dissertation (Godoy 2020), I would be annoyed by how difficult it was to get a photograph in which Aparecida's image would be clear and highlighted. Picture after picture, her golden niche would always dominate the composition.

² Preliminary results of this article were presented in the masterclass "Religions and the image question" offered by the Koninklijk Nederlands Instituut Rome (Rome, Italy 2019) and at the 43rd Annual ANPOCS Meeting (Caxambu, Brazil 2019). In this writing and elaboration process, I am grateful for the generous comments of Annalisa Butticci, Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, Jojada Verrips, Machteld Löwensteijn, Pooyan Tamimi Arab, Rodrigo Toniol, and Thais Tiriba.

In one of those visits, after walking by the niche, I realized that my frustration was shared with other people. Standing at the end of the corridor, I could observe several cases in which the pilgrims checked their recently taken photographs and lamented the results. Interested in this daily religious interaction, the presentation of the image of Our Lady Aparecida, situated in her niche and temple, will be addressed in this article as a “sensational form”:

Sensational forms shape both religious content (beliefs, doctrines, sets of symbols) and norms. Including all the media that act as intermediaries in religious mediation practices, the notion of sensational form is meant to explore how exactly mediations bind and bond believers with each other, and with the transcendental. These forms are transmitted and shared; they involve religious practitioners in particular practices of worship, and play a central role in modulating them as religious moral subjects. It needs to be stressed again that I do not use form in opposition to content and meaning, or ethical norms and values, but as a necessary condition without which the latter cannot be conveyed (Meyer 2009, 13).

I think that Aparecida’s niche and image are determining elements of a “religious aesthetic” that generates specific sensibilities as well as governs a “sensational engagement” of her devotees. Thus, seeking to understand the motivations and effects of such engagement, I will precisely explore the foundations of this contemporary display of Our Lady Aparecida’s original image in this article. Looking at the current sensational form, recontextualized to the previous forms in which she had already been displayed, my objective is to understand both how aesthetic engagement is institutionally produced over time and how Catholicism is materialized in modern forms.

APARECIDA’S OLD BALDACHIN

“Our concern was where to place a small image, so tiny, in such a large shrine? How to display it? We were restless, anxious”: were the words of Dom Darci³ in the homily he gave at the three-hundred-year celebration of Our Lady Aparecida in 2017. A narrative I also heard in the conversations with the priest who, at the beginning of the 2000s, was one of the supervisors for the elaboration and construction of a new niche for Aparecida. Far from being a novelty concern, the efforts directed to displaying the image are a constant in her trajectory.

Ever since she was found, Our Lady Aparecida’s miraculous image has stimulated the construction of altars and churches for her shelter and homage. As stated in the official history (Brustoloni 1998), and continually evoked in homilies and by the shrine’s media, after a stay in the

3. Dom Darci José Nicioli (1959-) was manager (1997-2005) and dean (2008-2012) of the National Shrine, as well as Auxiliary Bishop of the Aparecida Archdiocese (2012-2016).

village's port and in the house of the fishers who found her, the statuette gets her first temple on top of a hill where she would stay for the next two centuries.



FIGURE 2
Old Basilica's
baldachin (Printed
as Postcard -
Author's collection)

During this period of successive renovations, the church underwent transformations that would take it from a simple mud chapel to the condition of a well-known basilica. Parallel to the high popularity of that shrine was the Catholic Church's project to make Aparecida the queen of Brazil and her church a consolidated National Shrine. In the first half of the 20th century, in which dominant Catholicism saw itself threatened (Giumbelli

2012), the temple was considered insufficient, which motivated efforts to build a new basilica, characterized above all by its large dimensions. The new Basilica of Aparecida began to be built in the 1950s on a hill parallel to that of its preserved predecessor. Redemptorist Missionaries were in charge of management, and architect Calixto Neto was responsible for the project⁴.

Researching in archives⁵ [5], I could verify that the placement of Aparecida's image in her new church was emphasized and debated since the first architectural projects. In Calixto Neto's original project, approved by the competent authorities of the Catholic Church, Aparecida's image would be displayed, just as in the Old Basilica, in a niche right behind the altar. This changes drastically as the construction works progress.

The changes that follow are due to a significant alteration in that building under construction. With a growing number of visitors and a strong lobby from part of the clergy, the architect makes a series of changes to his original project so that the new Basilica would be even bigger than initially planned. One of these changes was the transformation of the church's plan from a Roman cross to a Greek cross: in the place of the altar's rear apse, it was decided to create a fourth nave for greater accommodation of the pilgrims. Without the apse, there was no longer the place initially planned for the niche that would house the statuette. Thus, the impasse of where to display the image of Our Lady Aparecida would continue in the following decades. When the architect, whose idea was to display the image below the church's central dome, died suddenly, the disposition of the image was not yet defined. When the image was finally transferred from the old to the new temple in the 1980s, it was decided that she would be temporarily displayed on the wall at the end of the south nave, where the apse would have been built, until a better solution was found, while the internal finishing work on that church was taking place.

4. Benedicto Calixto de Jesus Neto (1906-1972) was a prolific architect who designed more than 600 churches in Brazil. Hired to build the new Basilica of Aparecida in the 1940s, he died without witnessing the completion of the construction. He was the grandson of the famous Brazilian painter Benedicto Calixto de Jesus.

5. For this research, I was able to explore the collections of the Centro de Documentação e Memória do Santuário Nacional [Documentation and Memory Center of the National Shrine] (CDM) and the Arquivo da Cúria Metropolitana de Aparecida [Archives of Aparecida's Metropolitan Curia] (ACMA).



FIGURE 3
Our Lady
Aparecida's
niche in the
1990s (Photo
by Nair Martins,
reproduced with
permission)

As late as the mid-1990s, no suitable place had been found for the one that gave her name to the temple.

Due to the absolute financial impossibility of carrying out construction works on a larger scale, the purpose that we have in mind is to begin the finishing work in the south nave, as this is where the niche of the Miraculous Image is. We will start with the area around the niche, creating an environment as dignified as possible (and, as mentioned in the exhibition, replacing as best as possible the space that would have been created by the apse, had it been built) (Memória... 1994, 46).

At that time, the context of the economic crisis did not allow any of this to happen, but it was still a priority to find a dignified place for the statue. The project, however, never got off the ground.

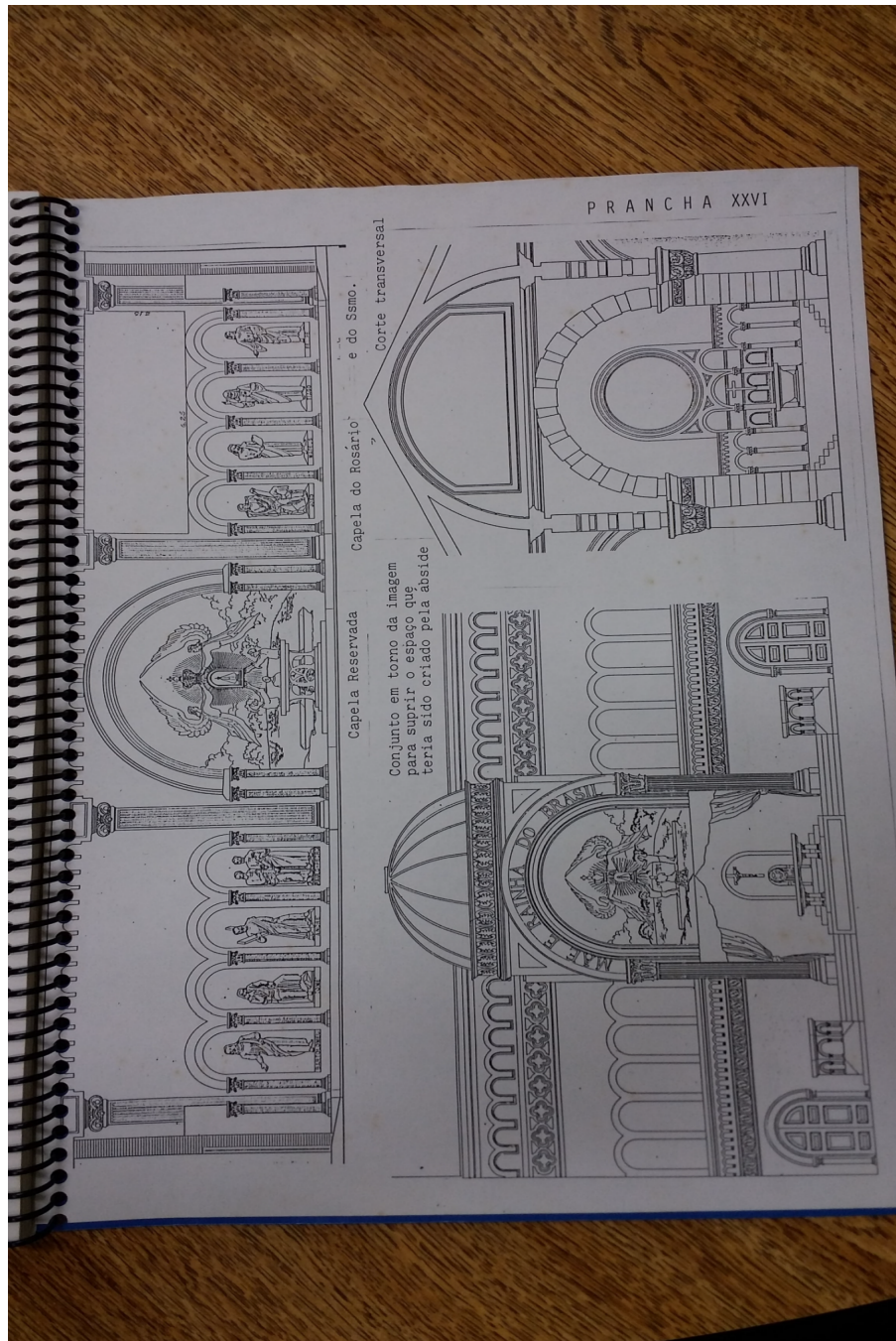


FIGURE 4
Project for the New Basilica (Source: ACMA)

The situation changed in 1995 when Cardinal Lorscheider⁶ took over the archdiocese, restructured the local administration and returned institutional prominence to the Redemptorist Missionaries. Among them, one of the cardinal's main interlocutors was Darci Nicioli, who at the time became the manager priest. Finally, between 1998 and 2000, when the economic situation began to stabilize, the construction of the Basilica could be resumed on new terms. In the words of the priest:

6. *Dom Aloísio Leo Arlindo Cardinal Lorscheider* (1924-2007) was the Archbishop of Aparecida between 1995 and 2004.

So we were organizing the shrine's infrastructure to give more comfort to the pilgrim and more security; at the same time, we were working on the finishing of the National Shrine so that the sacred space itself could preach. So it could communicate the mystery centered there. Today, when you enter the Basilica, you are automatically taken to prayer. Despite the crowd, 30,000 people, you find space for retreat. I mean, this is art at the service of evangelization (Dom Darci in an interview 2013).

He told me that he tried to rescue an “entrepreneurial look” and a “modernization” that would make the process more impersonal to priests and artists, through which “the space itself would preach” with “art at the service of evangelization”. In our conversations, I sought to understand the causes and practices of this “modernization” that he mentioned to have coordinated. On this issue, the archbishop was emphatic in saying that the inspiration was only one: the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II).

POST-CONCILIAR MODERNITY

Conceived and planned in the first half of the 20th century, all inspiration and projection of a new temple for the “Queen and Patroness Saint of Brazil” was contextualized to the ultramontane movement, even if belatedly materialized in that shrine that was institutionally peripheral in world Catholicism. However, less than ten years after the work began on the new Basilica, Vatican II took place drastically changing Catholic guidelines in this regard and impacting the development of the original project.

There was a need, very characteristic of the '60s, we know that very well, for a renovation. The whole world was longing to get out of a very normative time and was looking, then, for freedom. The Church too. (...) It was the whole movement of Vatican II in every sense: in the liturgy, in Mariology, in theology, in the social doctrine of the Church. It is a rethinking of the Church. No longer the Church as a model of a perfect society, of people who command and people who obey, but a Church of Communion, in which everyone is a servant. (...) This was also reflected in the construction of temples (Dom Darci in an interview 2018).

This “new idea of Church” concerned both the proposal of “communion” and a “return to the roots” of Christianity. Authorized and legitimized by Vatican II, these demands were persistently constructed and opposed throughout the first half of the 20th century, with the growing participation of laypeople. It is no exaggeration to say that, given the entire original architectural proposal, the *aggiornamento*⁷ took both the prestige and the institutional legitimacy of the Basilica of Aparecida. Furthermore, it can be said that the Basilica came to materialize everything that Vatican II sought to overcome: a colossal, nationalist, and clerical monumentality

7. From Italian – update – this is a motto of Vatican II in the attempt to adapt Catholic principles to 20th-century modernity.

of a “strong and powerful Church” in favor of a “Church of Communion” with the prevalence of communities of laypeople.

As highlighted in documents, Calixto Neto never delivered a project for the internal finishing of the Basilica: with the external part kept faithful to the original project of the 1950s and without a project for the internal finishing, Calixto Neto’s few sketches also referred to the pre-conciliar ideals. Even though there was a willingness to overcome the baroque on the facades, its interior was still designed according to Tridentine regulations, as was the placement of the image of Aparecida under the central dome.

However, as well demonstrated by Boff (2006), one of the post-conciliar marks in all of Latin America was the loss of prominence of Marian devotions, which started to be discouraged in favor of a liturgical centrality in the “Christ the Liberator”, evoked in the episcopal conferences of Medellín and Puebla. These are the same conferences that legitimize the creation and rise of the Liberation Theology (LT) movements, which have marked social action in favor of the so-called “preferential choice for the poor” during the following decades. A choice that did not include building large temples. Asked about the practical impact of Vatican II on the ongoing construction of the Basilica of Aparecida, the archbishop told me that:

It changed everything! Now, Benedito Calixto [Neto] planned for the image of Our Lady Aparecida to be in the center, under the dome. The Church of Vatican II says: no, the center of the Church is Jesus Christ. So, in the center of the church should be the altar, and not the image of Our Lady Aparecida, because the altar of celebration is a sign of the presence of Christ. (...) Now, two celebratory spaces were created: one centered on Christ Jesus, where the Eucharist takes place, and another centered on Mary, where the devotion of the people, separately, takes place. So much so that those who are going to participate in the Eucharist and those who are going to visit the image of Our Lady can do so at the same time, without one assembly interfering with the other (Dom Darci in an interview 2018).

When one recontextualizes the trajectory of the niche, exposed in the priest’s narrative, it can be said that when he took over the coordination of the church’s works, in the late 1990s, there was a certain creative freedom, after all, there was no artistic project. At the same time, as the original project was created in the pre-Council context, with few changes throughout the works, there was a challenge in adapting the structure to norms given more than thirty years earlier. The “modernization of the Basilica” takes place institutionally as a late *aggiornamento* of Aparecida, with the center and altar of the church as an ecclesiological principle.

(...) so we started the Basilica’s finishing from this perspective. Let’s start first with the presbytery, where the main al-

tar is. Where we gather for the celebration of the Eucharist. The center is there. Christ manifests himself there. So it is from the center that we are going to rethink everything else. Now the Virgin's throne was rethought long afterward. See the mentality: For Benedito Calixto [Neto], the most important thing is the image. For Claudio Pastro⁸, the most important is Jesus Christ. Why? They are based on a different theology, based on a different ecclesiology, based on a different Mariology. Mariology differs from Mariolatry because there was also a very big mistake in the way the Catholic people were educated. Mary as the center: this is deifying Mary. This is Mariolatry (Dom Darci in an interview 2018).

The priest's interview and homilies also make it clear that the concern about the works in the Basilica is always related to the placement of Aparecida's image, which is continually evoked. After all, it is difficult to diminish the role of Our Lady Aparecida in her own shrine. As in Aparecida there is a fine line between what is called Mariolatry and Mariology, the clergy is in constant search of balance. Without falling into the error of seeing an instantaneous and Manichean relationship of causes and effects of Vatican II, the changes in the niche in the search for this balance must be contextualized in the late 1990s and, for this, I resort to the concept of "conciliar cultures":

We call conciliar cultures the beliefs, representations, feelings, and practices that emerge among the different actors that welcome Vatican II – interpretations of the council that are made concrete in certain narratives (Caldeira 2019, 1531).

As already mentioned, the "conciliar culture" of LT was dominant from the 1970s onwards, mainly due to the influence and alignment of the National Council of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB). However, in the mid-1990s, with the exponential growth of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), another "conciliar culture" began to spread.

In the 60s, in its process of adapting to new times, in the *aggiornamento*, the Church found itself on a two-way street: on the one hand, it fermented left-wing actions and led to an important institutional change that was confirmed by the Second Vatican Council and that meant an important step towards a theological elaboration that was more focused on social problems, the Liberation Theology; on the other, it took the more conservative path that led to the Charismatic Renewal. (...) Every face of Catholicism in the 20th century will be marked by the great desire for change represented by Vatican II, an expression of contemporaneity and modernity (Prandi, Campos and Pretti 1998, 30).

As I will argue in the following pages, in the Brazilian Catholicism dispute in the 1990s over which strand would be the true heir of *aggiornamento*, the National Shrine sought to build its own "conciliar culture", reconciling both strands.

8. Claudio Pastro (1948-2016) was a plastic artist of great prestige in Catholicism. The setting of the Basilica of Aparecida was his main work.

NEOPENTECOSTAL ICONOCLASM

The Catholic Church is more than its councils and the reason for this modernization carried out thirty years after Vatican II must also be addressed in the national context. Since the Shrine of Aparecida is a privileged place in the religious dispute over national identity, it should be noted that the 1990s also marked an important “religious transit” with the “evangelical rise in the country” (Almeida and Montero 2001).

Concerning this dispute, I evoke a specific and significant event, when, by vilifying an image of Our Lady Aparecida on national television – on October 12, 1995 – a pastor of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God publicly challenged this “Catholic reign” and the holiday granted to her, accusing Catholics of idolizing images. In other words, the most substantial insult to the result of all the efforts involved in the action of the Shrine of Aparecida since the turn of the century was made precisely by the accusation of Mariolatry: in addition to the internal opposition of LT and CCR, there was the external opposition of evangelicals.

Popularly known as the “kicking the saint” (*chute na santa*) episode, with significant negative reverberation in the press, the event was repeatedly analyzed in articles such as those by Flávio Pierucci (1996) and Emerson Giumbelli (2003). Common to them was the realization that the long Catholic hegemony seemed to be threatened in Brazil. The event is so remarkable that Ronaldo de Almeida (2007; 2012) takes stock of its consequences and reverberations in the Brazilian religious field, both ten and seventeen years after the event. In the anthropologist’s assessment, it is evident that the most immediate consequence of the “kicking the saint” episode was a broad reorganization of the practices of confrontation both by the Universal Church and by a good part of evangelicals, necessarily impacting other denominations. Or, ultimately, the rules by which interreligious relations were placed in the Brazilian public space, especially with the decline of Catholic protagonism. As Renata Menezes (2012, 77) puts it:

Considering this historical process, what needs to be specifically asked about Aparecida today is whether the “kicking the saint” episode points to a new social configuration in which the evangelical growth would make the use of saints as symbols of Brazilianness unfeasible.

Responding to this question, I propose that the modernization of the Basilica of Aparecida be understood as a Catholic reaction to this evangelical onslaught: a new way of “making use of saints as a symbol of feasible Brazilianness”. In a decade when the LT declined and the CCR no longer contained the exodus of Catholics (Prandi, Campos and Pretti 1998; Theije and Mariz 2008), the National Shrine sought to regain its protagonism and the “kicking the saint” episode provided a union of forces within Brazilian Catholicism in favor of its patroness. This is not new. The construction

plans for Aparecida's Basilica had as one of their motivations precisely a Catholic unity to contain the spread of Protestant missions (Arruda 2005) in their "first wave" in Brazil. So again it would be so in their "third wave", now with the neo-Pentecostals (Freston 1995).

Cardinal Lorscheider's archiepiscopate begins two months before the "kicking the saint" episode, in a moment marked by a certain economic stability. Upon having sufficient funds and seeing itself threatened by the evangelical growth, the Catholic Church sought the theological bases for its new pastoral action in the norms of Vatican II. In order to achieve the desired modernity in this "conciliar culture" (Caldeira 2019), it was necessary to revise the building's architecture: just as the Old Basilica was insufficient at the turn of the 20th century, the New Basilica was insufficient at the turn of the 21st century.

ARTISTIC MODERNITY

Parallel to the theological transformations of the Catholic Church, the beginning of the construction of the Basilica of Aparecida coincides with the consolidation of modern Brazilian architecture. In this environment, with his name recognized in the Catholic milieu, Calixto Neto was hired to build a national temple for which he opted for neoclassical forms instead of the initially expected Neobaroque. At the same time that it moved away from this local architectural tradition, it sought inspiration in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception (Washington, USA), which had as one of its aesthetic proposals to stand against the modernity of the beginning of the 20th century, rescuing an eclecticism of the Catholic imperial traditions (Tweed 2011). The Basilica of Aparecida emerged as a conservative innovation.

Far from being an exception, a broader framework indicates that this movement was taking place on several fronts in Brazilian Catholicism in its process of becoming more Roman-centered. The most emblematic case would be the "public controversy" that took place in Belo Horizonte when the archdiocese refused to consecrate the Chapel of Pampulha. As Paola Oliveira (2018) demonstrates, the "modernizing agenda" put into practice by Juscelino Kubitschek in the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, in the late 1940s, was firmly rejected by the Catholic Church. The reasons they gave were the extravagance of the building, which was allegedly incompatible with Catholic practices, the fact that it was the result of a religious externality, and the political alignments of Oscar Niemeyer and Cândido Portinari. It was not until the late 1950s, when modern architecture gained even more public recognition, in addition to Kubitschek's rise from mayor to president, that the chapel would be consecrated by another bishop. Soon after, the same president would finance part of the

construction of the Basilica of Aparecida, without direct interference in the ongoing project.

Thus, it can be said that with the repercussions of Vatican II in the 1960s, if the Catholic Church still did not embrace modern architecture as a paradigm for its new temples, there was less resistance to this type of project, as it materialized in the Cathedral of Brasília by Niemeyer also in honor of Our Lady Aparecida. However, the two Brazilian Catholic movements that claim to be the result of Vatican II did not opt for modern architecture either. By seeking the “Church of Communion” in their communities, both the CCR and LT started to give less importance to the construction of churches, making use of sheds, residential houses, and open public spaces to conduct their liturgies (Prandi, Campos and Pretti 1998; Theije and Mariz 2008).

Oblivious to these two Catholic movements throughout his religious life, Claudio Pastro claimed that his artistic career began in 1975, with an exhibition of sacred art that he held on the premises of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo. Having studied Social Sciences at the same university, the artist said that the major’s choice was more due to financial conditions than affinity. Wanting to become an artist and lacking resources to go to art school, he would sell his artwork as a source of income as an undergraduate student. Parallel to this, however, were his visits to the *Convento das Irmãs da Assunção*, a convent located close to his family’s home in the Tatuapé district, São Paulo. With the enthusiastic support from these nuns, he was encouraged to continue with his artistic productions. That represented an informal training as he moved through the national and international networks of the Order of Saint Benedict, which “contributed in a theoretical and practical way, to the extent to which his most frequent work orders came from them” (Sartorelli 2013, 150). That is how he began to visit and exhibit his works in convents linked to the Benedictines in several countries, in addition to taking some art courses, until he was finally hired to design churches, mainly their interior.

Called a “vernacular architect” by César Sartorelli (2013), this author says that his research aimed to give the academic recognition still denied to Pastro, precisely because he did not have training in the area. This claim is similar to that made by Marília Torres (2007), who argues that he was little known outside the Catholic Church. On the other hand, Wilma Tommaso (2013) and Egídio Toda (2013) recognize him as the country’s biggest name in religious art. The object of research by both Torres (2007) and Tommaso (2013), the Christ for the Third Millennium, is recognized as the work that marks the then peak of Pastro’s trajectory, as it was commissioned by the Vatican, in an initiative of the pontificate of John Paul II at

the turn of the century. As the name suggests, the artistic proposal was to indicate the aesthetic references for Jesus Christ in the third millennium, which was beginning. Pastro did so both by rescuing the aesthetic references of the first millennium and refusing what had been done in the second millennium of Christian art, with a special counterpoint to the Renaissance and the Baroque. It was in this context that he was invited by the cardinal to make a draft for the internal finishing of the Basilica, about which he insisted on saying “that he thought everything was very ugly”, especially “a hideous baldachin above the image”. It was a recurring theme in his interviews:

In 1997, Dom Aloísio Lorscheider, who was Cardinal Archbishop of Aparecida, wrote me a letter, asking for my collaboration, asking if I wanted to participate in some meeting, a meeting with other people, architects, artists. (...) I wrote a letter explaining why I couldn't participate and that I could collaborate from afar. I hated Aparecida. It was cheesy as hell! Kitsch as hell! All in extremely bad taste. Popular in the negative sense of the word. It was ugly as hell! So I wrote all this. And from afar, because I didn't use to go to Aparecida, because I never liked it. I did some sketches that later came out in my book, edited by Loyola. And one of the elements was a baldachin, a kind of niche, where Our Lady was, made of concrete, which I placed on my floor plan, with a small arrow, saying: “this has to go to hell”. It was my luck because that's what they thought and didn't know what to do. [Claudio Pastro in an interview in 2012] (Toda 2013, 150).

Required simultaneously in Rome and Aparecida to create avant-garde sacred art, in the late 1990s, Pastro called himself the greatest specialist in post-conciliar artistic norms. In search of the roots of Christianity, he found his aesthetic references in Romanesque churches. The primary and recurrent accusation that Pastro made, whether in published texts or lectures and interviews, was that, over time, the Roman Catholic Church lost the sacredness of its art as it became Westernized. In his view, the decline begins with the division with the Orthodox Church, which, due to the Eastern Christian matrix, has managed to maintain its artistic quality to this day. In his opinion, what most marks this artistic decadence would be the transition brought about by the Renaissance.

When looking at the artist's work as a whole, Sartorelli (2013) argues that Pastro is part of the “modern project” in Brazilian architecture with Impressionist influences. By having as some of his references the Chapel of the Rosary by Matisse, in France, and the Cathedral of Brasília by Niemeyer, the artist himself admits that not all his references come from the first millennium.

His work appropriates this “modern project” with a personal bias, as he recovers the artisanal iconographer and Romanesque architecture, also coming from a unified past prior to the Eastern Schism, but inserted in projects that value the absence of “superfluous” ornaments because they do

not fulfill the need for unity. The ornaments the artist does not design create noise in his organized utopia. So much so that whenever he intervened in the renovation of churches and chapels, he first promotes a formal cleaning, removing ornaments, adornments, textures, etc., and creates surfaces with unified colors as a base, on which he makes his paintings, redesigning the “worship furniture”, again in the name of unifying the space in all his interference possibilities (Sartorelli 2013, 110).

Pastro’s Catholic modernism project is consolidated insofar as its creation seeks to unite the Romanesque aesthetic references of the “first Christian millennium”⁹ with a vernacular aesthetic of the original peoples of the country¹⁰. In his artistic and theological proposal of “return to the origins” of both Christianity and the Brazilian nation, there would be a “universal beauty” (Pastro 2010)¹¹, achieved by divine inspiration, and which would be immune to the Luso-Brazilian baroque.

Unlike the Minas Gerais controversies in the 1940s (Oliveira 2018), the singularity and achievement of Pastro in the 1980s are precisely in proposing an architectural setting within the “modern project” both with a solid theological foundation and with the institutional support of a Benedictine intellectual elite, that had a good reputation in the Vatican. At this point, rejecting the baroque was no longer an “extravagance” and, unlike Pampulha at first, what happened in Aparecida was entirely in line with the clerical plans: even without being a priest, Pastro was seen as an “insider” to Catholicism and not an “outsider” as were Niemeyer and Portinari.

9. Pastro had as a time frame the period before the “Great Schism of the East”, which peaked in the year 1054 with the institutional separation between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Catholic Church. Judging that this resulted in losses for the two religious traditions, especially in sacred art, what the artist sought in his work was to resume the aesthetic references of that period of unification.

10. As I will explore further in the next topic, elements of Amerindian and African origin are recurrent in the artist’s work. This, however, is done generically without localizing them regionally or ethnically.

11. I consider the “universal beauty” ideal an emic term, recurrent in the art world, but widely questioned in anthropological literature. In this case, what matters is how the search for this idealized aesthetic universality implies overcoming or denying established national traditions.

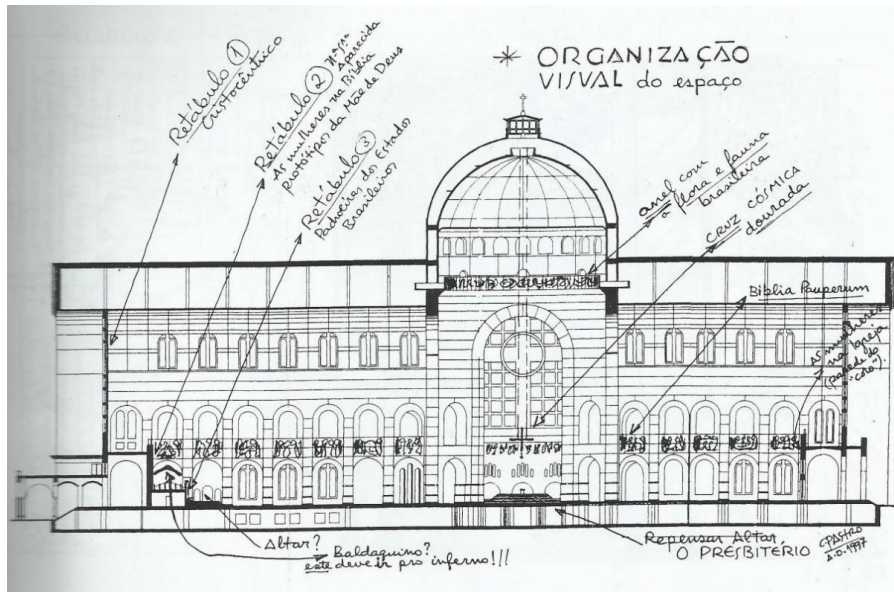


FIGURE 5
1997 Sketch for the modernization of the Basilica of Aparecida (Pastro 1999, 253)

It is with this proposal of convergence of both post-conciliar and architectural modernism, already consolidated in his trajectory in that period, that the artist created the preliminary project for the Basilica of Aparecida, whose baldachin, which in his assessment had none of these references and was superfluous, needed to “go to hell!!!”.

NEO-BYZANTINE ICONOCLASM

As said by Dom Darci, the internal finishing of the Basilica started with the altar and the presbytery, in the center and under the dome of that church. Then, having already decided to get rid of the baldachin over the image, at the end of the north nave, the artistic project created by Pastro transformed that place into what would come to be called the “Throne of the Queen and Patroness Saint of Brazil”.



FIGURE 6
Cardinal Lorscheider presents the art project in the south nave (Revista de Aparecida, January 2003 - Source: CDM)

Announced in January and completed in October 2003, three years after the beginning of the project and with the main altar and presbytery already completed, the “Throne” was inaugurated on the patroness’s national holiday of that year, October 12. In an interview, the cardinal explained his motivations:

Among the countless projects that we have to carry out, we gave preference to this one because it is the most visited place in this shrine and, without a doubt, one of the most important places. (...) It is not just a beautiful art project. It goes far beyond that. The biblical meaning of this work is something extraordinary. The artist hired by the Shrine, Cláudio Pastro, who many are already familiar with for his unmistakable artworks and style, captured the importance of the presence of Our Lady in the entire biblical context (Cardinal Lorscheider *in* Revista de Aparecida, July 2003 - Source: CDM).

Admitting that the place where the image of Our Lady Aparecida is displayed is both the most visited and one of the most important in that church, the cardinal emphasizes that calling it throne is above all for “popular understanding” and justifies that the title of queen would be less mundane than what is assumed. This, in my opinion, points to the post-conciliar modernization that started there, not erasing but adding new factors to the devotion to Aparecida. With the end of the baldachin, Aparecida remained queen and still had a throne, even in a Christocentric project. Our Lady Aparecida, who was the sovereign queen within that church, thus passed her title to her son, but continued to be a queen mother of great prestige.

Known as “the author of the throne of Our Lady” (Revista de Aparecida, November 2003 - Source: CDM), in an interview that took place in the same month as the inauguration of his work, Pastro emphasizes his modern inspirations. Rejecting not only the baroque but also Roman art, the artist makes an important distinction to understand his production: in his own terms, an opposition between “sacred art” and “religious art”¹². Pastro was anchored in Vatican II, which determines that “sacred art” is the “best expression” of “religious art”.

In free interpretation of the phenomenologists he paraphrased without citing (Sartorelli 2013, 56), Pastro operated in a binomial between “profane space” and “sacred space”, arguing that the church’s interior space - place of the sacred - was diametrically opposed to its exterior - place of the profane (Pastro 1999). Thus, the interior of the churches would only have space for “sacred art” and that was the art he claimed to produce (Pastro 2002).

12. For a deeper understanding of this theological binomial disseminated by the artist, see Sartorelli (2013) and Tommaso (2013).

In my opinion, in proposing a “sacred art”, Pastro fled and opposed a “baroque sensitivity” (Peixoto 2011) acting against its “tensions and turmoil” (Van de Port 2016), in search of a “universal beauty” found in minimalist forms, always having as a counterpoint the sobriety and the absence of excess. Thus, while his “sacred art” should be destined for the liturgy, “religious art” would favor “less correct devotions”, that is, “the baroque mode of knowing” (Law 2016) and, therefore, should not have space inside the churches.

At the beginning of his career, Pastro sought this sacredness of forms in what he called “primitive art”, based on his Romantic references of Amerindian and Afro-Latin elements, but he also said that this would only be appreciated among the European clergy who hired him.

In the beginning – I started when I was about 20 years old – I was looking for a very indigenous and African art, very primitive. I wanted to walk along that line, because I could not understand that Christianity in Brazil did not take this spirituality from our Indians and blacks. But as soon as I started working, the Catholic Church tamed me. I have to work to survive, and people wanted that melodramatic, cute, tearful thing. So I couldn’t advance in this area. When I have exhibitions in Europe, I can go there. Europeans feel happy and buy like crazy. But here I can’t even dare. [Claudio Pastro in an interview] (Sartorelli 2013, 126).

In his opinion, the neo-Byzantine appears as a strategy on his part to be able to “work to survive” with the approval of the Brazilian clergy, which is more conservative in this regard. By following Vatican II’s proposal of “going back to the roots”, it is in the Byzantine icon that he anchors the inspirations for his “primitive art” in order to be accepted. In the Basilica of Aparecida, this can be clearly seen in his icon of Jesus Christ (see Tommaso 2013) in the north nave panel, as well as in the Mary icon in the west nave panel, and also in the icon of the immolated lamb (see Toda 2013) on the east nave.

That said, it is noteworthy that it was not only the baldachin that did not converge with his artistic proposal: the image of Our Lady Aparecida is a colonial and 17th-century statuette, produced in the context of the Council of Trent, which fits in all of his previous definitions of “religious and devotional art”. As I heard from the artist in a lecture, statuettes of Catholic saints, in the Baroque tradition, were shaped by profane patterns inherited from the Romans and, therefore, encouraged idolatry. As Sartorelli (2013, 149-151) points out:

The memory of a baroque aesthetic in Brazil is still very strong, and its horror of emptiness runs counter to the “clean” space of his neo-Romanesque churches. This memory of a baroque aesthetic belongs to a good part of the population, which is closer to popular Catholicism than Church Orders or scholars of theology and sacred art. (...) In this

elitist perspective within the Church, the concept of sacred also ends up gaining this elitist characteristic, a sacred that requires knowledge of the liturgy to ground itself in understanding.

Thus, my argument is that the artist's efforts to create the niche in the south nave sought to transform it into "sacred art" within his elitist references and, at the same time, propose to overcome the "baroque way of knowing" in favor of a post-conciliar "Byzantine way of knowing". Aparecida's image was modernized at the same time as her temple.

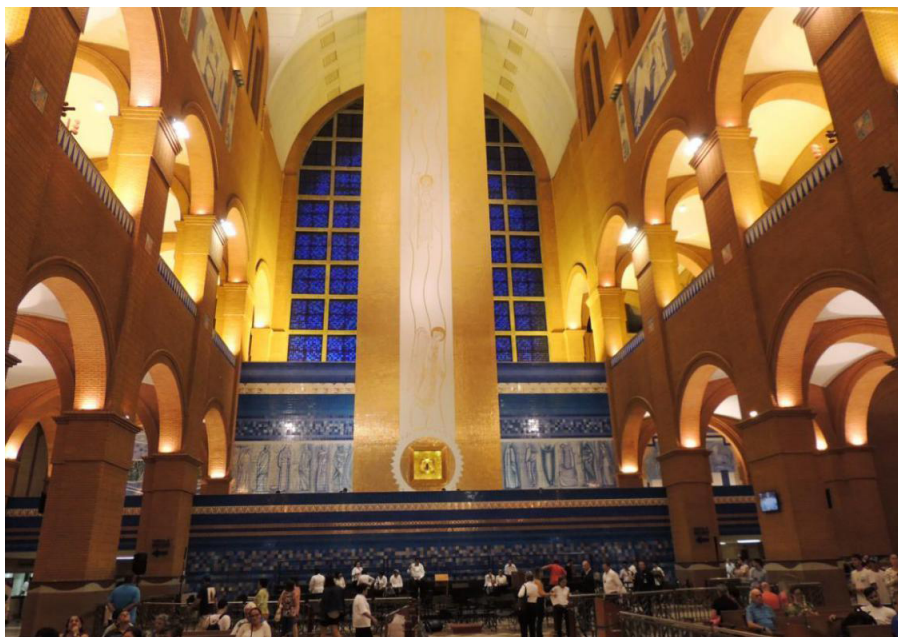


FIGURE 7
Niche of the image of Aparecida and south nave of the Basilica (Photo by author)

Since 2003, the original image of Our Lady Aparecida has been displayed in a gilded vault, located in two large panels at the end of the south nave. This has largely solved the issue of the absence of the original apse, as the vertical panel then promotes this differentiation in relation to the other naves, by partially covering the view of the stained-glass windows. With the due importance that the artist (Pastro 2007) gave to the chosen materials and themes, in this case, noble metals and Brazilian flora, Aparecida is located both as the successor of the women of the Old Testament and the "woman of the apocalypse": the female figures from beginning to end of the Bible. Without denying Aparecida's trajectory, since both her finding and her first miracles are on lower panels on the access ramps, the work's central message revolves around Catholic references about the mother of Jesus. Or, repeating his words I heard in a 2015 lecture, without "the nonsense of the sociological language" because "Our Lady Aparecida is not black, she is not poor, she is Mary". This is also put into words, since around the niche it is written: "The spirit and the wife say amen:

come Lord Jesus” and, below, “Mother of God and ours”. Christocentrism composes Aparecida’s image in the form of words.

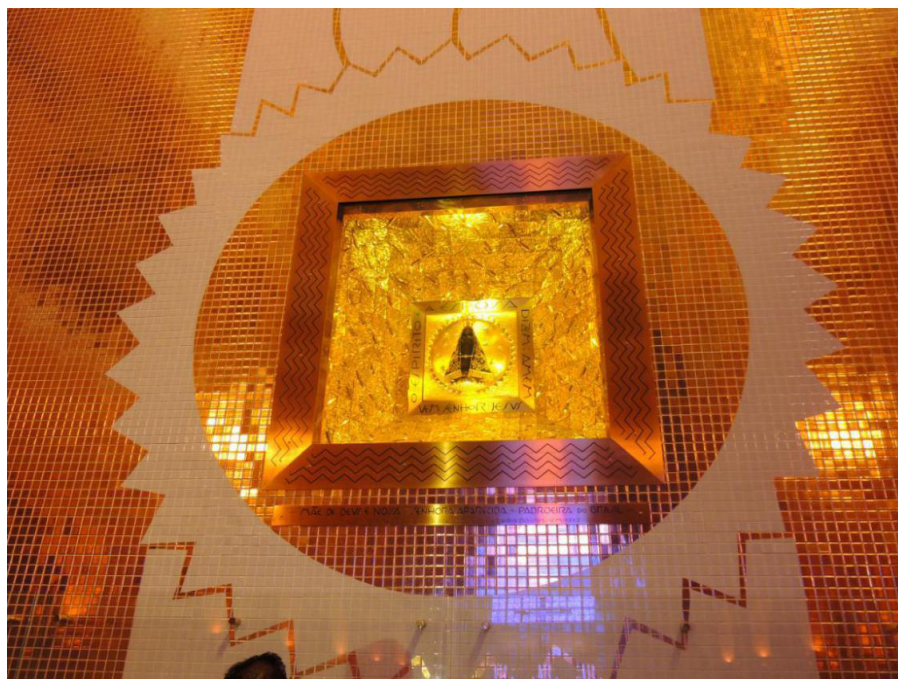


FIGURE 8
Niche of the image seen from the hallway (Photo by author)

Over time, the word “throne” was replaced by “niche” in official discourse, a change for which I found no explicit justification. However, taking into consideration the artist’s ideas about “sacred art”, even lacking a written reference to this by Pastro, I want here to relate this substitution to the great influence of Byzantine art in his work. Art historian Bissera Pentcheva (2009) demonstrates the importance and centrality of Mary icons, as the mother of God (*Theotokos*), for the relations of power and authority established by the Byzantine Empire. By converging the historiographical analysis of icons’ political and artistic contexts, she also demonstrates the existence of variations in the shapes of these icons. I highlight a specific case:

The Byzantine mixed-media relief icon is the best example of this phenomenon of swaddling the ineffable. Its material sheaths of gold and gems interact with the shifting ambient light and human presence in space. I will argue that these myriad appearances - *epiphaneiai* - give rise to a powerful experience of animation in the image. Like a reflective mirror, the meaning of the Byzantine *eikon* rises from the interaction of subject and object; the faithful projects his/her own image and breath on the surfaces of the icon (Pentcheva 2009, 223).

The author explores how a large part of Byzantine icons are not strictly two-dimensional and, although the framed painting format is the most recurrent, there are all sorts of icons in high relief that mix different

materials. Common to all of them is the absence of background ornaments and a monochromatic pattern, almost always gold and metallic. In the case of “mixed-media” icons, it is this predominant background in the forms, sometimes covering and blending with the portrayed sanctity – mostly of the Virgin Mary – that promotes an interaction of reflections with those who interact with it, depending on angle and light. Far from being the result of chance, the author demonstrates how this was planned by the creators and carries an artistic and theological proposal for the place of the sacred image among the Byzantines. This, however, can rarely be seen in icons displayed in museums, as these effects were created in relation both to the temples in which they were originally exhibited and to the expected flicker of candlelight from the religious person who would observe them.

As I already mentioned, my perception of this iconization of Aparecida’s statuette was due to the difficulty I had in photographing it. At a considerable height, with a glass reflecting the church’s lights, the golden crown, and the mantle in golden threads, the image seems to dissolve in its niche. Moreover, this is enhanced the greater the distance, that is, in the view that one has of the naves of the church and near the central altar. By being placed at the center of a box covered in gold, in which the support is invisible and the statuette seems to float, for me, the niche’s composition evokes a Byzantine “mixed-media” icon in dialogue with the artist’s tiled icons in the other three naves. In the search for a clean photograph that would only highlight the statuette, at a certain point, I accepted that the frame was part of the iconography.

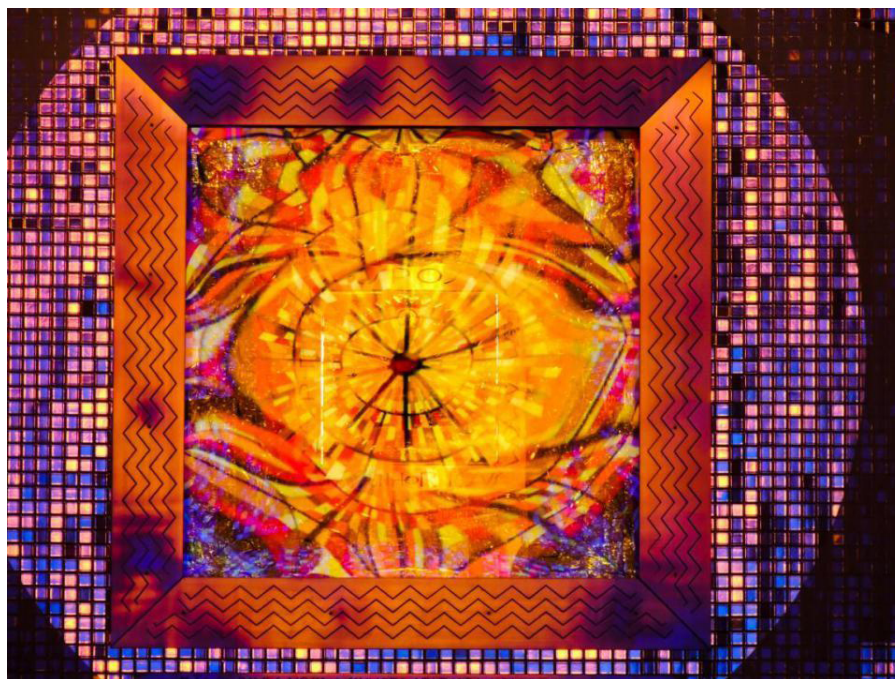


FIGURE 9
Niche of the
miraculous image
with the glass
reflecting the
stained glass
(Photo by author)

By dissolving the seventeenth-century three-dimensional statuette in the background of a gilded box which, in turn, dissolves into the church walls that offer a different view at every angle, Pastro sought to transform it into a neo-Byzantine icon displayed inside the Basilica. The “religious art” of a devotional character, in the artist’s conception, was thus converted into “sacred art” worthy of being in that “sacred space”.

This can be understood as a form of iconoclasm, after all, long before the iconoclastic riots carried out by the Protestant Reformation, there were the iconoclastic riots of the Byzantine Christians. Theme of Marie-José Mondzain’s (2005) dense work, Byzantine iconoclasm can be understood as a problem of translation and control of sacred images in that period of riots. Exploring the patriarchs and emperors’ theological treatises in this regard, the author indicates a binomial that structures the divergences concerning the icon, always characterized by the sacred (*hieron*) and the holy (*hagion*). In this polarization, what is at stake is not necessarily the categorization of an icon as an idol, but whether the way in which the icon was made is correct. For this, it was necessary to follow the norms of consecration, as well as observe the religious and moral legitimacy of the artist who wrote it (De Jong 2011). Thus, it was a dispute over the form and manner of making icons.

The icon itself, by virtue of its physical, tangible reality, constitutes an extraordinary treatment of space. Every graphic decision carries meanings that are both doctrinal and institutional. (...) In the struggle for mastery and control over iconic production, the two camps constantly accuse each other of being slaves to the idol, because each would like to seize power. One thing, therefore, is certain: to talk of iconolatry is to commit a serious error that shows a radical lack of understanding of the spiritual and political problems of iconicity. As for the iconoclast, it is clear that his hatred of the icon has its source in the unshakable attachment to what he considers to be the pure, true image (Mondzain 2005, 152).

In other words, what was at stake was a question of institutional power over more or less legitimate images: “the pure, true image”. And, with it, a dispute for the control of religious space and practices. Thus, as the author suggests, the analysis is fruitful if seen from the practical implications of power in the shapes of icons and not from the distinction between iconoclasm and iconophilia. These are categories of accusation and, as such, are always blurred. She recommends the use of the term “iconocracy”.

Interested in these disputes that are so recurrent throughout the history of Christianity and modernity, Bruno Latour (2008) also addresses Byzantine iconoclasm by classifying it as the most “classical” one. As the author points out, icons were a fundamental part of a convergence between religion, art, and politics of the former empire. In other words,

its destruction necessarily implied the deconstruction of “civilization”. When questioning the given opposition, he creates the term “iconoclash” to argue that this theme’s analysis is more fruitful if the focus is less on the act itself, frozen in time, than on the movement that the event implies. Which, in a way, has been an effort in this article to show the transformations of picturing Aparecida. Here, the cases of image transformation do not end in themselves. Going further, they materialize a certain institutional consensus of the present of each age, based on a specific selection from the past, and indicate a new form for the future of religious practices.

Due to the contemporary shape of Aparecida’s niche, which was yet another of these transformations, it is possible to draw a parallel to the Byzantine distinction between “holy” and “sacred” in the interpretation that Pastro evokes in his distinction between “religious” and “sacred”. Both for the chosen form – less representative of Aparecida and more figurative – and for its alleged mastery of institutional art rules, confirmed by the local clergy: his creative legitimacy came from the technique and as well as from his relationship with the Catholic Church.

As highlighted by Meyer (2019), Catholicism has long been accused of idolizing images, but it is necessary to go beyond the ten commandments when analyzing the relationship between religion and images. A look at other religious traditions shows how complex it is to assess the limits of idolatry outside of Christianity. Furthermore, according to the author, this type of assessment of the true religious meaning of an icon is not a task for the anthropology of religion. Her proposal is not to follow dogmas and commandments as categories to be analyzed, but the religious practices established in them. She indicates as a point of analysis the disputes about the correct way to materialize what is not and cannot be seen:

The title of this article, “picturing the invisible,” may appear paradoxical at first glance: after all, doesn’t the invisible necessarily remain outside of view, while the visible already presents itself as an object of our gaze? With the choice of this title, I want to signal an encompassing understanding of pictures as involving both visibility and invisibility. (...) and thus to somehow render present—what is invisible and absent through a performative act. While pictures, in general, have the capacity to re-present something else, this plays out even more explicitly in a religious setting (Meyer 2015, 334).

Coincidentally, “Picturing the Invisible” [Imagens do Invisível] is also the title of a book by Pastro (2013) in which, in the chapter on the Basilica of Aparecida, he just states that in Aparecida he proposes to “See the invisible, hear the inaudible: the silence, the nothing, the essential... to live in the presence of...” (Pastro 2013, 419). Thus, without having any pretensions or reasons to locate it in the theological debates of the Byzantine patriarchs

and emperors, even if the artist somehow referenced them in his creation (Pastro 2010), my objective in this article is to explore what were the practical implications of the cause, consequences and religious disputes of this new iconic “sensational form” – anti-Baroque, anti-Tridentine and post-conciliar – a “performative act” created in order to the Brazilian patroness and, consequently, her devotees and the Catholic Church, overcame “the baroque mode of knowing” (Law 2016) strongly identified with Brazil (Peixoto 2011, Van de Port 2016). Or how his new proposal for the image brings with it the materialization of a new invisible, without excesses.

True sacred art is **not** sentimental or psychological in nature, but ontological and cosmological. The image is man’s and sacred’s only universal language. The image, simple matter, is the loving language that the Creator chose to communicate... The Sacred is removed and the figure loses its meaning, the Spirit no longer vivifies, everything becomes permitted, the idol is born. (Pastro 2010, 53. Emphasis in the original)

In a recontextualization of iconoclasm at the end of the 1990s in Brazil, while a neo-Pentecostal iconoclasm of the “kicking the saint” episode promoted a virtual destruction of the image of Our Lady Aparecida with the accusation of Mariolatry made by the pastor, it was also with the accusation of Mariolatry made by Pastro that a neo-Byzantine iconoclasm promoted the dilution of Our Lady Aparecida in her Basilica. This was done with the intention of making that image more sacred than it already was, even if less central and less visible, based on his references of universal beauty. In his project, in order to save her from becoming an idol, instead of putting his art at the service of Aparecida, he sought to transform Aparecida through his art.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Among the most visible ways of identifying the modernizing transformation of Aparecida’s image are its replicas, sold in the shrine and its surroundings. As I have discussed on other occasions (Godoy 2015; 2017), commercial practices in the town of Aparecida are a fundamental part of devotional practices and, thus, following religious things proves to be analytically fruitful. Similarly, João Rickli’s (2016) approach indicates the centripetal and centrifugal movements that the Shrine of Aparecida provides in relation to devotional materialities. In this dynamic, with the protagonism of Aparecida’s statuettes, at the same time that the pilgrims bring with them all sorts of things to leave in the shrine, such as *ex-votos*, they also take with them other things acquired there, both to be given as gifts and to integrate domestic religious practices. The Official Store stands out, as the name indicates, for being an initiative centered on the shrine itself, that is, also managed by the Redemptorists. Unlike the vast commerce in the town, in the Official Store things acquire an official seal as they are more in line with the norms of the Catholic Church.



FIGURE 10
Commercialized
products (Source:
www.lojasantuarionacional.com.br/)

The store sells a wide variety of objects, among which, we can find the “Aparecida’s niches”. As it becomes self-evident, the niche that houses the statuette becomes part of her iconography, becoming a constitutive part of her image, and not a mere frame or a background. However, the niche is stylized in its forms and materials, far beyond what was idealized by its creator. Ultimately, if the artist made an effort to transform Aparecida’s image in its categorizations from a “devotional art” into a “sacred art”, the Official Store takes the opposite path. In the Catholic Church’s proposal to consolidate a National Shrine, the ability to bring together in one place all the strands of Brazilian Catholicism is at stake. However, this same movement, often forced, is responsible for their separation:

Aparecida can be the one that brings together, but she is also the one that separates: she separates Southeastern Catholicism from Northeastern Catholicism; she separates a devotional Catholicism from a more liberating Catholicism; she separates evangelical Christianity from Catholicism in general (Menezes 2012, 77).

In this scope, the Catholic Church seeks to create “sensational forms” capable of engaging all this Catholic diversity. By analyzing these transformations through the plasticity of the image of Our Lady Aparecida – which could be called an act of iconoplasty if one more neologism is needed – it is possible to conclude that, for Pastro, the creator of her niche, evangelization is at the service of art or, ultimately, it is sacred art that evangelizes. This vision, however, diverges from the concomitant role of the clergy in that same place and period, which repeatedly evokes their post-conciliar motto of “art at the service of evangelization”. This apparent change of word order brought with it a dissonance that caused much of this friction: “he declared that the Order of Redemptorists, who ran the Basilica, was too ‘cheesy’ to understand his work” (Sartorelli 2013, 137). In any case, this did not hinder mutual cooperation in developing the construction work.

At the heart of this misunderstanding was the inversion of priority between the form and content of religious images. As I highlighted in the previous topic, all of Pastro's artistic production assumes the overlap between form and content of sacred art. That is, for the artist, images are only sacred if they are made of specific shapes and materials. As for Redemptorists, the religious theme of artworks is often sufficient for the categorization, including those that the artist despises as merely devotional. While the artist's religious proposition was quite strict regarding the use and manufacture of images, among priests there is a malleability in integrating a greater variety of images in their religious practices, which is more evident in the Official Store. Thus, the modernized image of Our Lady Aparecida becomes a new "sensational form", more suited to new practices of Catholicism, but not the only one. Whether in domestic altars, in the media, in the shrine itself, or even during *Carnaval* (Oosterbaan and Godoy 2020), the creation of this neo-Byzantine icon is added to the official iconography, without disregarding the previous forms, in order to provide greater adherence rather than the exclusion of pilgrims.

TRANSLATION
Thais Tiriba.

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ADRIANO GODOY holds a PhD and a master's degree in Social Anthropology from the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp). He is currently a postdoctoral fellow at The Brazilian Center of Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP) as a member of the International Postdoctoral Program (IPP) and of the *Núcleo de Religiões no Mundo Contemporâneo*. He is an Associate Researcher at *Laboratório de Antropologia da Religião* (LAR - Unicamp). E-mail: adrianogodoy@gmail.com

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