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### A Brilliant Jewel

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**Title:** A Brilliant Jewel: Sex, Celibacy, and the Roman Catholic Church.

**Abstract:** With Catholic clerical sexual abuse scandals hitting the news and the crisis of vocations worsening each passing year, debates about the pros and cons of mandatory clerical celibacy seem to be at fever pitch. Whether the argument is for a tightening up of discipline, or a relaxation of the rules (making celibacy optional rather than mandatory), there is widespread alarm at the fact that ranks of vow-breaking clerics exist. The underlying assumption is that vow-breaking priests, some of whom break secular laws as well, constitute a threat to ecclesiastical structure, and thus an imminent threat to the survival of the Church in a religiously competitive and secularising world. Yet the long, ignominious history of clerical celibacy tells a different story. Evidence suggests that priests have been sexually incontinent in significant numbers throughout the centuries and yet, with the exception of a couple of momentous schisms, clerical sexual incontinence has barely effected the power of the Church. In this article I focus on the sexual ‘incontinence’ of one particular generation of Northeast Brazilian priests, uncovering its mechanics and banality. It is not the fact that priests break celibacy vows that is interesting here so much as the relative systematicity with which they have done so. Such systematicity, I suggest, points towards an ongoing stable-instability at the heart of the Church as an institution; a dynamic which, if better understood, can help to explain the most characteristic (but often overlooked) feature of certain institutions more generally: their impressive longevity.

**Keywords:** Institutions, Christianity, Catholic Church, Priesthood, Celibacy, Ethics, Masks, Discipline

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We were having lunch when Padre Miguel, an ex-Catholic priest, started speaking frankly about how he had met his wife Maria, whilst still a parish priest of the small town of Boa Sorte in Northeast Brazil. Maria was a novice nun. Romance had bloomed over the course of shared theological retreats and in the organization of various parish events. For a long time they carried on their relationship in secret. Evidently it was a sexual relationship. Padre Miguel spoke to me about their fear of the scandal that would ensue should Maria fall unexpectedly pregnant. ‘The heterosexual Padre has to live with this constant fear’ he said, ‘of an accidental pregnancy, bringing scandal to the Church’. Padre Miguel and I had just completed an interview in which he had expressed a good deal of cynicism about politics within the Catholic Church, so I was surprised when he went on to describe the wrenching pain he had felt at leaving it. That pain, he said, was both physical and emotional: a broken heart and a period of intense, but mysterious headaches. ‘It’s complicated..’ he exhaled through a drag of cigarette smoke when I asked him about it. ‘I loved Maria but I loved the Church more – the Church, for all her faults, was part of my being’ (*ela fazia parte do meu ser*).<sup>1</sup>

This meeting with Padre Miguel remains interesting to me not only for the questions of sex and scandal it raises but also for what it reveals about the nature of his relationship with the Church. For Padre Miguel, as for other diocesan priests I worked with, ethical negotiations of the world meant managing key relationships:

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<sup>1</sup> In this quote, the use of the gendered pronoun ‘her’ for the Church derives primarily from Portuguese, and does not refer to the theological notion that the Church is female. All the same, a productive ambiguity occurs whenever priests talk about the church as *ela* (she).

with ordinary people (colleagues, friends, family), with supernatural agents (God, Jesus, the saints), and also with the Church. Yet churches, unlike individual people, are remarkably difficult ‘agents’ for anthropologists to get to grips with. They can’t be interviewed and they can’t be readily observed engaging with the world around them, the way one might observe a basket weaver select and prepare rush stalks to make a basket. Are churches communities, actor-networks, complex organisations, or social institutions? Indeed they are all these things and yet when, as social scientists, we study their nuts and bolts, they are also somehow less. Despite ongoing debates among sociologists, anthropologists and organizational theorists about how best to define and conceptualise organisational institutions and whether it can be said that institutions have ‘agency’ or not, among Catholics, the Church continues to pop up in the course of ordinary discourse as an entity with ‘selfhood’ – an entity that acts like a person.<sup>2</sup>

At a meta-level this article seeks to explore what an institution is, or at least what it *could be* in the ethnographic context I am drawing from. How does an institution

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<sup>2</sup> In anthropology, personhood is broadly accepted as being a fluid category that varies cross-culturally (Carrithers, Collins and Lukes 1985). Personhood often maps onto, but is not necessarily isomorphic with understandings of what it means to be a human person. In this article, I refer to the Church as a person-like entity as a way of capturing some of the legal and affective connotations that pertain to it as a social collective. The Church is a person both in some of its legal dimensions, which allow it, like a corporation, to be taxed or sued, but also in the affective language of kinship that shapes individual relationships to it as a whole.

come to exist, not as an abstract sociological concept, but as a bounded supra-individual agent in the world that people on the ground can name and have an affective relationship with? How does something as elusive and abstract as an assemblage of ‘special pathways’ (Taves 2009; Halemba 2015), a set of ‘public rules of action and thought’ (Mauss 1968 [1906] I, 25) a ‘constellation of interlinked actions and events’ (Durão and Lopes 2011: 367) come to manifest itself as a person-like subject, capable of feeling and ‘thought’ (Douglas 1986)?

More specifically, this article will discuss a particular controversy that brings this problem (what is an institution?) to light: mandatory clerical celibacy and its malcontents. With Catholic clerical sexual abuse scandals hitting the headlines and the crisis of vocations worsening each passing year, debates about the pros and cons of mandatory clerical celibacy seem to be at fever pitch. Whether the argument is for a tightening up of discipline, or for a relaxing of the rules (making celibacy optional rather than mandatory), there is widespread alarm at the fact that ranks of vow-breaking clerics exist. The underlying assumption is that vow-breaking priests, some of whom break secular laws as well, constitute a threat to ecclesiastical structure, as well as an imminent threat to the survival of the Church in a religiously competitive and secularising world. Yet the long, ignominious history of clerical celibacy tells a different story. Evidence suggests that priests have been sexually incontinent in significant numbers throughout the centuries and yet – with the exception of a couple of momentous schisms - clerical sexual incontinence has barely effected the power of the Church.

In this article, in which I focus on one particular generation of Northeast Brazilian priests whose sexual incontinence was what I have come to define as ‘banal’ in the

sense employed by Arendt (2011 [1963]), I enquire into the nature of this banality.<sup>3</sup> It is not the fact that the priests can break their vows that should interest us, I suggest, so much as the relative systematicity with which they have done this. It is the manifest banality of their sexual incontinence that we should focus on because it points to an ongoing stable-instability at the heart of the Church; a dynamic which, if better understood, can help to explain the most characteristic feature of many institutions: their longevity.<sup>4</sup> As Weik (2014) has pointed out, the longevity and relative stability of institutions is a remarkably neglected topic in contemporary institutional analysis, which overwhelmingly is conducted as an analysis of institutional change.

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<sup>3</sup> My aim in referring to Arendt's famous title, I should clarify, is not to liken or compare 'evils', rather it is to draw out the notion of banality when it comes to large-scale transgressions. Arendt's point was that banality, in the form of routinization and bureaucratization enabled ordinarily normal people to commit atrocities with relative unthinking ease. In this article I am interested in the kinds of routinization that allow moral-religious rules to be persistently broken with relative, unthinking ease by otherwise devout and respected Catholics.

<sup>4</sup> See Durão and Lopes (2011) who argue that institutions are 'neither the stable coordinates of social life that the structural-functionalist paradigm made of them, nor inherently unstable formations capable of reflecting any type of social change, as post-structuralist and constructionist perspectives would have it.' Rather, institutions have a sort of 'unstable stability' (2011, 364).

Here, however, I want to look more closely at the mechanics of this stable-instability in order to ask the question: What has made regular consensual adult sex such a viable option for priests everywhere in the world, and particularly in Brazil? I will answer this question by showing how priests' relationships with the Church evolve through a fine play of two dynamics: singularity, which I here align with the phenomena of 'vocation', and doubleness, which I elaborate through the notion of 'mask'. Both these processes bring the Church into view for the priests, casting her as a particular kind of person/entity. I will argue that it is only because of a priest's vow-breaking, *his very difference from Christ*, that masking can occur. And masking, in turn, brings the Church into being as an entity quite separate from the priest: a gendered, person-like entity simultaneously dependent upon yet separate from those who serve her. Above all I hope to show how it is that priestly incontinence, something that appears at first glance to be a sign of organizational instability and imminent threat, is part of Catholicism's remarkable institutional stability across time.

### **The Context and Setting**

In 2001 I arrived in the rural *agreste* region of Pernambuco to conduct doctoral research on kinship and gender in the context of work, exchange, and economic survival. As time passed and friendships deepened, however, I found myself comprehending my informants' life-worlds increasingly through the lens of 'religion' – a religion broadly understood as Catholicism, encompassing both rites and traditions specific to the locality, as well as signs and practices continuous with a Brazilian secular, national identity (Mayblin 2010). In 2011 I returned to the region to



study the movement of Catholic priests into party politics. Accordingly my fieldsite grew and came to encompass a sprawling network of agricultural towns, cities and villages across the diocese and westwards, reaching deep into the *sertão* backlands.

The priests I worked most closely with in 2011 were no longer active as ministers. Most had left the Church to pursue careers as politicians, some were incumbent mayors, others had completed political careers and were supporting themselves through other kinds of work and occupation. At least two had no prospect of returning to the Church as they now lived openly with women and had fathered children. At the time of research one priest was, however, on ‘sabbatical’ from ministry, for he intended to return to the Church when his role as mayor was completed. A key point to note is that all my informants were at the time and remain to this day ordained priests.<sup>5</sup> All were known by the term of address *Padre* (Father),

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<sup>5</sup> Priests who take common-law wives but remain officially unmarried in secular legal and canon law cannot be easily or automatically laicised. Many of my informants had been invited by their bishops to formalize their unions through a Catholic wedding. Bishops encourage formal union because the sacrament of marriage will automatically discount the priest from ministry and protect the church from scandal. Many priests refuse the Catholic wedding (opting only for the civil ceremony) because they wish to retain their representative status as ‘Padres’ of the Church. Some even avoid civil ceremonies with their partners because this preserves the potent possibility of future material and legal encompassment within the Church.

none had been officially laicised or ex-communicated, and all professed a deep and continuing commitment to Catholicism.

The priests accepted me as a somewhat eccentric foreign researcher, carrying out a study on politics and the church, and the rapport I enjoyed with them reflected a mutual interest in Brazilian politics and Catholic theology. It was in the process of this research, which involved interviews and shadowing the working lives of a group of six priests, that I gathered a lot of tangential data on the sex lives of a particular generation of Brazilian Catholic priests.<sup>6</sup> Having a certain distance from ministry these men were freer than other clergy to speak out about their sexual lives and romantic involvements. The accounts I collected were all produced in the context of frank and serious reminiscences about periods in Church office, and were proffered to me without the slightest hint of timidity or shame. Sexual relationships had clearly been an important part of each priest's story, although discussions of it tended to

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<sup>6</sup> The priests I collected data with happened to be heterosexual. Heterosexuality was a typical trait among the politically oriented priests I worked amongst, and a socially significant factor in each one's rise to power in secular politics outside the Church. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the priests I worked with considered heterosexuals to be in the minority within the Brazilian priesthood. Most of their priest colleagues were, they attested, homosexual in orientation, whether or not they practiced full celibacy. 'In my estimation, approximately 80 to 90 percent are gay' said Padre Miguel. While somewhat beyond the scope of the present article, it is worth noting that in Brazil concepts of homosexuality may differ from those in the West. As Kulick (1997) shows, sex between men does not necessarily result in both partners being perceived as homosexual. See also footnotes 14 & 16.

happen in a more ‘off script’ manner, over lunches, or during long drives between towns in the confined privacy of a car. Information on clerical sex lives was thus offered to me, I believe, on the tacit understanding that as a foreign researcher from a secular university I would listen without judgement, and attempt to fit what I heard into the much larger picture I was there to construct, concerning the regional history, mission and politics of the Brazilian Church. Before proceeding, I should make it clear that the ethnographic data I here discuss derives from conversations with a total of six priests, but in order to protect individual identities, it will be presented through the voices of three ‘composite’ informants.<sup>7</sup>

### **Celibacy: Gift, Discipline, Law and Vow**

Canon law today decrees that priests are to be celibate. According to canon 277:

Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are obliged to observe celibacy, which is a special gift of God, by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and can more freely dedicate themselves to the service of God and humankind.

The meaning of this vow is ‘an absolute chastity, even of thought and desire’ and

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<sup>7</sup> In the interests of anonymity all names (both those of people and of places) have been changed. Padre Beto, Padre Marconi and Padre Miguel are composite characters whose narratives combine elements from a total of six informants.

‘virginity as a way of life’, and the priest’s vow to celibacy becomes absolutely binding at the moment of his ordination (Pfleigler 1967 cited in Sipe 1990, 35). During the ceremony candidates for orders are solemnly warned of the gravity of this obligation by the bishop. By stepping forward despite this warning when invited to do so the candidate is understood to bind himself by a vow of chastity and is henceforth unable to contract a valid marriage. Thereafter any act of sex is, strictly speaking, a form of sacrilege.

In a 1967 encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* Pope Paul VI officially rejected calls to reassess mandatory celibacy for priests by opening his address with the following lines:

‘To the Bishops, Priests and Faithful of the Whole Catholic World. Priestly celibacy has been guarded by the Church for centuries as a brilliant jewel, and retains its value undiminished even in our time when the outlook of men and the state of the world have undergone such profound changes.’ (Paul VI 1967)

This famous depiction of celibacy, as the most ‘brilliant jewel’ in the crown of the priesthood has been echoed in addresses and encyclicals ever since and continues to be one of the most intriguing and dominant metaphors for its understanding in theological debates. As Sipe (1990) summarily puts it:

‘Celibacy is the great validator of one’s beliefs. A priest’s statement that “I am so convinced of the Message and my mission that even my sexuality is unimportant in the face of this reality” is startling and strong proof of his

convictions, if nothing else. And this strength of conviction is what makes revolutions' (Sipe 1990, 48).

For all the revolutionary force imputed to it, however, celibacy has had a complex trajectory. The early Church Fathers were not celibate. Official recommendations that priests should avoid marriage started to appear in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, but they were more or less ignored until the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the clamping down on priestly marriage, and the purging of women and priestly offspring from the Church took off with a vengeance (Schillebeeckx 1968). The formation of the celibate consciousness is often described by historians as deeply entwined with attitudes of misogyny, for as celibacy became codified, the power of women and the development of a Christian theology of sex were sacrificed (Sipe 1990, 50; Duby 1983).

While it is often times recognized that clerical celibacy is not essential to the ultimate goal of salvation articulated by Christ, it is recognized as deriving, in part, from ancient notions of cultic purity that pre-dated Christianity. Early Christian presbyters who were married would practice abstinence before ritual occasions, such as performing a mass, but were not expected to live as such in a permanent state. As celibacy legislation intensified, it shifted from being a practice to be encompassed within the state of marriage to an 'angelic' alternative to marriage. In effect, the priest follows the example of Jesus Christ in 'marrying' the Church who, in turn, is viewed in Catholic tradition as the 'Bride of Christ'. With the passing of centuries, clerical celibacy has thus become less about 'purity' and more about relationality: the achievement of an 'undivided heart'.<sup>8</sup> By vowing themselves in marriage to the

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<sup>8</sup> There is ambiguity about whether clerical celibacy is defined as a charism or a discipline. Legislating the charism implies that discipline is involved, and sharp

church, priests vow monogamy to her entity. The time and energy they *would have spent* on an earthly wife they give to the church instead.

### **Celibacy: Failures and Controversies**

If mandatory celibacy has been famously described as one of the Church's most 'brilliant jewels', it has also been regarded across the centuries as one of its greatest scourges. Were the history of the Catholic Church to be told through the story of celibacy, it would read something like an epic political drama involving kings, popes, bishops and states. Watershed moments in this story would include the Council of Elvira, the great East/West schism, the Council of Trent, the Protestant Reformation, and Vatican II, each representing a definitive loss or victory for the practice. Local histories would be punctuated by these large moments, plus other significant events, and battles in which further losses and gains to celibacy were made.

Historical records from the eleventh century onwards imply that default standards of celibacy, particularly among diocesan priests, was never particularly high (O'Loughlin 1995; Barstow 1982). O'Loughlin's (1995) study of clerical celibacy cites a number of decrees, statutes, and local legislations from the Counter-Reformation onwards aimed at protecting the image of the clerical celibate, such as: detailed exhortations on the appropriate age of housekeepers, a prohibition on priests

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debates continue within theological circles about the legal requirement of celibacy to the priesthood.

having women sitting beside them in the front their car, a warning to bishops to watch the domestic arrangements of priests in isolated parishes, and a statute prohibiting a priest absolving his sexual partner of her sin (O'Loughlin 1995).<sup>9</sup>

Turning to the particular case of Brazil, it is necessary to balance out potential likenesses between European and Brazilian clerical experiences with an understanding of the different biopolitical regimes that historically shaped them. For

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<sup>9</sup> Accurate statistics on rates of celibacy among ministering priests from the twentieth century onwards are virtually impossible to come by, in part because of the difficulty in persuading clergy to participate in such research the reluctance of the Catholic hierarchy to support such endeavours (Keenan 2012). Nevertheless in 1990, A.W. Richard Sipe began publishing data on the matter. His research, which began in the 1960s and spanned a period of 25 years, involved some 1500 interviews with North American priests, their psychoanalysts and sexual partners and confirmed that sexual activity among the clergy was significantly widespread. In 2004 an influential American study by the John Jay College for Criminal Justice confirmed the difficulty that many priests ordained between 1930 and 1970 had sustaining a celibate life. These statistics, Sipe's work, and the results of other significant studies combined indicate that up to 50% of Roman Catholic clergy in the United States are sexually active at any one time. In addition to this evidence, there is an ever-growing body of qualitative reporting and literature (mainly from North America) that suggests the same.

most of the colonial period, the Church in Brazil was weak and decentralized (Levine 1999). In the early days following conquest, clergy were scarce on the ground, particularly in the semi-arid backlands, and entry to the priesthood was denied to Amerindians and Afro-Brazilians on the assumption that such 'races' were unable to stay celibate. This was paradoxical, however, because, as the historian Kenneth E. Serbin writes: 'to be a priest in Brazil was to be non-celibate' (2006, 38). Priests engaged, as did other colonials, in the sexual exploitation of the slaves they kept, many preachers had concubines, and it was fairly common for priests to live openly in consensual union with a woman and to father her children (Serbin 2006). It has to be remembered that early Brazil lacked the repressive cultural paradigm of Europe and that the state was less interested than the Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy in policing the sex lives of its clergy; indeed, given its enthusiasm for populating the colony, it practically condoned priestly concubinage with slaves.

By the middle of the twentieth century the Brazilian church had undergone successive waves of internal reform and yet, according to Serbin, lovers both male and female remained common behind the ecclesiastical scenes. Exact figures are hard to glean because of the hierarchy's opposition to the matter. In the 1960s Father Godofredo Deelen surveyed around three thousand Brazilian clergymen and speculated that 75 percent of Brazilian clergy maintained "illicit relations with women". The Church withheld responses to this research and deposited it in the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops' (CNBB) secret archive, as they did with subsequent data gathered on the topic. Later polls with Brazilian clerics clearly indicated overwhelming opposition to obligatory celibacy (some 77 percent) and suggested that most priests had difficulties remaining chaste (67 percent) (Serbin 2006, 167).



The ethnographic data I collected in 2011 bears out the findings of Serbin's research. The priests I knew had not remained celibate and neither, according to them, had most of their colleagues. At first I wondered if the accounts of loves past and present were only relevant to a very small number of outlying progressive ex-priests; although I cannot discount this possibility entirely, I have come to the conclusion, based on wider reading and research, that sexual incontinence among diocesan priests has long been and continues to be a widespread 'public secret' in Brazil and beyond.<sup>10</sup> There are complex and differentiated reasons for this, which I cannot hope to treat at any length here. In this article my aim is not to prove beyond a shadow-of-doubt the statistical prevalence of clerical incontinence and its historical depth, but to explore one of its intriguing concretions: the secret normativity (or 'banality') that accompanies sexual incontinence in some clerical circles. I knew this normativity in the first instance by the tone that accompanied sexual reminiscences: matter-of-fact, humorous, and oftentimes fond. Like the time that a youthful Padre Marconi and a

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<sup>10</sup> A key distinction is made in Catholic ecclesiology between diocesan priests, and priests of religious orders. The majority of the world's priests are diocesan priests, who are ordained to work in a particular diocese or archdiocese. Unlike religious priests, diocesan (sometimes known as 'secular priests') live in the wider community, rather than in a religious cloister, and they do not make vows of poverty. Therefore, they may own their own property, such as cars, and handle their own financial affairs.

See

[http://www.stjohnsphilly.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=26&Itemid=29](http://www.stjohnsphilly.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26&Itemid=29). Last accessed 21/6/16 @ 11.46.

priest friend escaped to a beach house for a week with a couple of married female parishioners who had told their husbands they were going on a 'prayerful retreat'. When Padre Marconi followed this story up with a jocular comment about having suffered sand 'in all sorts of places' I could only laugh to cover my shock.

### **The Church in View**

How was the Church known to the priests in an 'everyday' sense? There are two motifs in particular that I want to elaborate further; the first combines size, material footprint, and aesthetic visibility, and the second concerns temporality - the sheer number of years that the Church has been around.

The priests took their role as custodians of parish buildings very seriously and were continually preoccupied with the financial and political entanglements this involved. A parish was considered 'well kept' (*bem mantido*) if its churches and chapels remained freshly painted and in good repair. Statues had to stay clean of dust and adorned with flowers. Padre Beto had a suave, politicians' ecumenism about him. He strove to respect all forms of faith and would often make a point of visiting prominent Pastors and showing up at key Protestant evangelical events. Once he confessed to me that all such visits were merely 'duty', because in truth he found the Protestant religion 'ugly'. 'Afterall' he said 'where's the beauty in a row of plastic chairs and a man shouting his head off at the front?' Looks were clearly important to Padre Beto, he never failed to point out how nicely his church had been kept. Once, driving through a neighbouring town he slowed his car down to take in a weather-beaten

church. ‘Look at that’ he crackled under his breath ‘That’s what I call a lack of respect’.

In life histories priests would often dwell at length on the renovations they had overseen: a new church wing here, the expensive restoration of a neglected statue there, and so forth. The greatest pride of all was in having commissioned and built a new chapel, or enlarged an older one, perhaps adding a vestry, turning it from a chapel into a church. Bigger was invariably better in terms of corporate visibility, which in turn served to index spiritual might. Churches become literally wider and denser than adjacent buildings through the material addition of bodies packed tightly together for Mass. On feast days in particular where there is barely enough room inside the church, people spill outside onto the square outside. The open space of the *praça* in front of the church allows this religious body to literally expand in a way not possible for Protestant churches that have taken root in less central zones, in buildings flanked by narrow pavements and traffic-filled roads. The Brazilian Catholic love of processions maps onto this quest for corporate visibility. A mass of bodies snaking through the streets as one is, I often heard it said, ‘a beautiful thing’ (*uma coisa bonita*).

In Northeast Brazil where Catholicism is at least some 500 years old, churches often stand out from all other buildings as an archetypal form. Even those more recently built tend to reproduce the centuries old bell-tower and steeple model derived from medieval European architecture. Such architectural nods to tradition through the repetition of Portuguese colonial baroque detail ensures that Catholic structures are clearly distinguishable from Protestant ones. Many Catholics I knew were apt to

deride Protestants for the fact that they were content to worship anywhere: shop fronts, back yards, garages. Protestants, it appeared, were happy to turn any place into a church simply by filling it with rows of white plastic chairs. Marcia, one of my most devout Catholic informants explained the difference thus:

‘The “*crentes*” [“believers,” Brazilian shorthand for Protestants] do speak the word of God I won’t deny that, but they don’t have a church. Any man without training or knowledge can open his garage and call it a church - that’s not a Church! The Catholic priest doesn’t act on a whim, he submits to traditions much greater than him, traditions it took centuries to get right.’

Marcia’s pride in belonging to a Church which took ‘centuries to get right’ is typical of many Catholics whose faith draws deeply, if implicitly, on a theologically elaborated concept of tradition rooted in the historical passing of worldly time. It was tradition that Catholic priests alluded to when they discouraged parishioners from being curious about Protestant assemblies on the grounds that such assemblies appeared ‘overnight’. And for most Catholics, the fact that their churches did not resemble old community halls or spruced up garages made a crucial theological difference, as it rooted their faith in a mysterious and ‘beautiful’ sacred past, continually threatened by modern life.

A Catholic attentiveness to scale was particularly pronounced among priests whose own bodies were required, through processes of pious and committed self-extension, to mirror and sustain the church’s great potency and mystery. The priests I spoke to

experienced the church as a metaphorical ‘weight’ (*peso*) they had to personally bear. A load so ‘heavy’ (*pesado*) that it could potentially break them. In reflective moments, Padre Miguel would speak at length about it: ‘The priest has to carry this heavy weight, he carries the Church. You’re expected to be this superman, this angel. It is exhausting (*desgastante*)’ he said. In the course of other conversations priests referred to the pressure of image and the public role as a ‘drama’ continually unfolding and told stories of colleagues on the verge of self-destruction through drug and alcohol abuse.

Priests would oftentimes construe the laity as the source of such pressure. It was the laity’s insatiable ‘thirst’ (*sede*) for sacred role models and their unsophisticated tendency to ‘idolatry’ (*idolatria*) that was to blame. ‘I’m human like anyone - they don’t see this!’ Padre Marconi complained. In my field notes for that period I tentatively voiced a troubling, but deep felt impression of the priests:

‘It’s like a fleeing into sin... as if, by breaking their vows they prove their own humanity. They drink, take drugs, have affairs and it is OK because they are not gods and they don’t want to be....’ (Feb 2011)

The priests of my study who had left the Church clearly remained in a deep and complex relationship with her, and it often seemed to me that they were still working through their feelings about the split. The Church cropped up endlessly in narratives in the guise of a superorganic female person. Those who had fallen out openly with bishops and other superiors felt unfairly spurned by her, in the manner that a man feels spurned by a lover. And in the same way that being spurned by someone doesn’t

automatically negate the love you feel for them, the priests continued to love her all the same.

Padre Beto told me many Kafkaesque stories about his days of formal ministry. Stories of bureaucracy that were funny, ironic, and often acerbic. Highly educated and conversant in Marx, Bourdieu, and Foucault, Padre Beto used his extensive knowledge of secular sociology to criticise his political contemporaries, observe power-plays in action, and to reflect on the ‘absurd game’ (*jogo absurdo*) of managing a large diocese. But his criticisms were never aimed at the Church in the sense of a sacred organism, for Padre Beto retained a deep, reverential respect for her. He told me that in all his life, never had he suffered more than when he had to leave the Church in order to run for mayor. ‘How can I explain that suffering to you?’ He mused, noticing the look of puzzlement on my face: ‘For all her faults it was like being in the womb’ he said. ‘You know, how she grew me and educated me. Outside her you are all alone. I miss her protection.’

It is precisely this affective relation to and aesthetic appreciation of the institution that comes to the fore when priests break vows but keep these breakages hidden. Such secrecy, they reason, is not merely a way of protecting themselves, it services the greater good: by protecting the Church, priests care deeply for their flocks. A good priest does not parade his theological doubts or publically dismantle 2000 years’ worth of missionary activity because of a sexual urge; he disentangles himself from tradition. He offers ‘that comforting old-fashioned theology’ (*aquela bela teologia antiga*) to the elderly man on his deathbed even if he does not personally believe in it, he performs Mass early on a Sunday morning even with a hangover, he gives out

hope even when he has none himself. The people of the Northeast are ‘needy’ (*carente*) said Padre Beto, they have a great ‘thirst’ (*sede*) for the Word of God and for all things spiritual. The job of the priest is to water that thirst. A good priest therefore keeps a meticulous exterior, even if inwardly he sins or dissents.

### **Identifying the Church and identifying *with her* through the vocation**

Although priests speak of the church as an ‘other’ they also recognize her agency as their own. Among those ideas and practices that reinforce this perception is that of the priestly vocation. According to the Congregation for Catholic Education, there are two inseparable elements in every priestly vocation: a sense of ‘gift’ and a sense of ‘freedom’ in response to it.

‘A vocation is a gift of divine grace, received through the Church, in the Church and for the service of the Church. In responding to the call of God, the man offers himself freely to him in love.’  
(Congregation for Catholic Education 2005).

Contemporary theologians are often called to distinguish religious vocations from non-religious meanings of the term, particularly in relation to other work professions. Among those differences cited is the fact that a religious vocation (unlike a secular professional one) contains a vertical dimension, which is God’s will. God’s will introduces to that calling an element of obligation and obedience such that: ‘a vocation is not something that you can switch like a profession or career’.<sup>11</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.cam.org.au/vocations/The-Call/What-is-a-Vocation->. Last accessed

passing for the priesthood (being sacramentally ordained), unlike passing a secular professional exam, is a totalizing experience. By marking an ontological shift in the nature of the priest, ordination begins a process in which ‘the entire life of the sacred minister must be animated by the gift of his whole person to the Church and by an authentic pastoral charity’ (Congregation for Catholic Education 2005).

By ‘gifting’ ‘his whole person’ to the Church, the priest gifts, literally, all parts of himself including his most precious Christian asset, his conscience. The priest, in contrast to the secular professional, is welded irrevocably and irremediably to his role via the totalizing nature of the ordination ceremony. He has, in the words of Pope Francis, been called to ‘leave himself behind’ and to enter into a union with God ‘in every aspect’ (Francis 2014). It is this, the idea of a process based on conscious and careful discernment, followed by a total giving over of the self to the will of God, that makes the priest who breaks his chastity vow a hypocrite, but not the lawyer who knowingly defends a guilty criminal.

Perhaps it was concern over media headlines describing the Church as a ‘hypocrisy’ that lead Pope Benedict XVI in one particular address to priests in Rome, to state the following:

“One is not a priest for part of the time; we are so with our whole soul, with our whole heart,....this being with Christ and being an ambassador of Christ, this being for others is a mission that penetrates our being and must penetrate ever more the totality of our

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being.” (Benedict XVI 2011).

Problems of conscience loomed large for the priests I knew, particularly for those like Padre Miguel who reported having entered the priesthood because of a vocation. Talking of his youthful entry to the priesthood Padre Miguel described a desire to ‘help people’ and ‘work with the poor’.

‘When my father asked me to spend more time working for him, for the family trade— he mended and serviced clocks and watches – I felt conflicted. I was very involved with the youth ministry and the base community. This was the time of Dom Helder, whom I worshiped. So I explained to Padre X my dilemma: I did not want to disobey my father, but I also did not want to do his work. Padre X told me it was not disobedience, that I had a calling to serve the Church and that my parents would be thankful to God for this. So the calling was always there, and I can say that it pleased me. The idea of a vocation, it elevated me....’

Padre Miguel’s success as a minister was evident in the projects he initiated and the funds he raised for the Church. For the first five years he worked ‘non-stop’ (*sem parar*), he told me, which left him with little time or energy for an ‘intimate life’ (*uma vida íntima*). But when he fell in love with Maria his commitment to celibacy was challenged and, as he put it simply, ‘I had been celibate for five years, and then I stopped.’

Like Padre Miguel, Padre Beto's career as a minister had seen periods of celibacy and periods of sexual intimacy with various women. His love affairs, he told me, had felt 'right' despite provoking feelings of disquiet (*inquietação*) and fears of hypocrisy:

'Many priests, not just me, experience this disquiet. I am a priest, I am human and I am in the image of God. So why, when another person touches me, does my body enjoy it? How can I deny that I enjoy it?'

If vocation alludes to a oneness of purpose and mission - a total merging of the self and the Church - hypocrisy suggests an illegitimate rent in that fabric, a tearing into halves, an ill-gotten space between the will of man and the will of God. The word hypocrisy with its roots in the Attic Greek *hypokrisis* suggesting 'acting on the stage; pretense' points to an enduring concern among priests and laity with notions of sincerity. The importance of sincerity as both a theological and ethical imperative has been the focus of a great deal of scholarly attention, particularly within the anthropology of Protestantism (Keane 2002).<sup>12</sup>

Here, however, I wish to trouble this notion of sincerity a little because a straightforward lack of sincerity cannot satisfactorily account for the sheer depth and systematicity of the disciplinary breach we are speaking about. In what follows I want

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<sup>12</sup> Such importance frequently emerges in negative relief. For example, in the history of Catholic seminaries we see great concern about the development of a sincere sense of commitment and internal piety in seminarians, in a context in which the seminary was viewed by many as a shortcut to a secular education (Serbin 2006).

to add another layer to our understanding of the priesthood as an office built upon a total merging of individual will and spiritual mission by examining how spaces of difference are cultivated through hypocrisy understood in the older Greek sense, as a perfectly legitimate form of ‘acting on the stage’.

### **Acting Out the Mass**

We have seen how priests come to objectify the church as a body with a particular aesthetic and material presence in the world. By caring for Churches as objects, priests enact a kind of love and duty towards her just as they would toward a parent or spouse. Oftentimes they see themselves returning the care she has shown towards them in sheltering, guiding, and educating them, and in providing them with a profession, an income and with worldly status. This sense of gratitude to the great Church ‘womb/mother’ was particularly pronounced among priests from poorer backgrounds, for whom gaining a university education would have been otherwise impossible. Thus there is kinship – or at the very least, a ‘mutuality of being’ between priests and the Church (cf. Sahlin 2013).<sup>13</sup> A mutuality strengthened by vocation, but only up to a point.

Priests have to find ways of managing this mutuality, drawing force from it without allowing it to destroy them. They learn to do this through careful maintenance of

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<sup>13</sup> In its most basic sense, Sahlin’s (2013) phrase ‘mutuality of being’ is the claim that kinship emerges from participation in one another’s existence. In other words, kin are those who are intrinsic to your identity and existence whether or not that identity is based in shared biological substance.

spatial and temporal boundaries, through the use of facades and material props. In what follows I will argue that vocation gives way to the cultivation of doubleness. If vocation is a manifestation of unity—a unique sense of fusion and total identification with the church—doubleness marks separation, the cultivation of space between self and other.

We see doubleness in the Mass, where the priest acts *In Persona Christi* (in the person of Christ). In other words, the priest is just an ordinary man until that moment when he says the Words of Institution, turning the Bread into the Body of Christ and the Wine into Precious Blood. The priest *acts*, in that moment he impersonates rather than imitates Christ.<sup>14</sup> This is not possession, but a sense of super-imposition or masking is definitely involved. Acting *In Persona Christi* requires both a self-conscious use of costume and a more formalized accompanying script. The priest, as he readies himself for Mass, is like an actor preparing himself for the stage; the mysterious transformation he undergoes to become Christ is temporally circumscribed, and its effects are reversible once he moves off stage. The moments immediately before and after a Mass, when a priest passes through the vestry to put on and take off his robes are like moments of parenthesis separating the man from the

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<sup>14</sup> Whereas *Imitatio Christi* could be defined as the act of imitating Christ by copying his example, and therefore as a type of ongoing discipline accessible to all Christians, *In Persona Christi* is a charismatic and ontologically more transformative version of this idea. Rather than a discipline like *Imitatio*, *In Persona* is a gift bestowed only on the ordained clergy, allowing them to embody or ‘impersonate’ Christ at the moment of Eucharistic communion.

Christ he ‘impersonates’ in the moment of transubstantiation. Interludes in the vestry are often marked with sudden though subtle changes in a body language and facial expression. Padre Marconi, for example, would walk into the vestry conversing jovially with an altar-server only to stop mid-sentence as he turned to face the vestment wardrobe. Suddenly serious he would carefully withdraw one of the elaborate cassocks and kiss it reverentially before placing it over his head. Once the wardrobe door was closed and the priest in robes, talking might resume, Padre Marconi turning back to the various altar-servers might throw out a final joke as the servers lined up in procession after which his expression would turn serious again. With the music as cue – the head server would listen carefully at the door to the chancel for the opening lines of the first hymn and, following an exchange of nods, lead the procession onto the stage.

This sense of acting is heightened all the more by the manner in which the liturgy is understood by priests, the world over, as a sacred kind of theatre. Martin Stringer (2000) develops this point through discussion of the role of camp in mid-twentieth century Anglo-Catholicism. The liturgy is camp, Stringer suggests, not only because it assumes a certain distance between the performance and the spectator but also because it assumes an equivalent distance between the performance and the

performer.<sup>15</sup> The Mass is an antiphon, made meaningful by its call and response nature, punctuated by a distance between the priest and the parishioner. Consider Padre Beto who, mourning the loss of his role within the Church decided to don his robes ('my most precious possessions') and concelebrate a Mass alone. 'It was not the same thing – there was no one to respond to my biddings' he told me despondently. 'In theory, I know in theory it should have been the same, but it did not feel correct'. Padre Beto was so humbled by the experience that he never attempted to concelebrate Mass on his own again. To avoid any temptation he locked his robes away.

Brazilian Catholicism's baroque register is not irrelevant here. As writers on baroque aesthetics have emphasised, baroque's embrace of 'trickery' marks absence as an

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<sup>15</sup> This second assumption of distance between role and performer may be more strongly present within the community of performer/clerics than for the audience/parishioners. Cf. Van de Port (2012) who has described a certain affinity of gay men with camp for its ability to celebrate falsity, and (2013) for discussion of the dominant (Protestant) misunderstanding of baroque as 'failed ethics'.

<sup>16</sup> There is an interesting comparison to be made, I suspect, between Catholic baroque aesthetics, gay camp as an expressive register, and the camp of certain Catholic ritual contexts. Cf. Gross (2013), whose research on gay priests in the Vatican has led him to describe a 'culture of deception' which operates according to signals and conventions, including 'camp codes' by which gay clerics live their lives.

integral part of the continuing quest for sanctity.<sup>16</sup> Brazilian Catholicism's baroque register has allowed regular priests, when necessary, to cultivate a sense of themselves as actors in an ineffable sacred play, and of Church ritual as a sort of theatre. At the centre of this theatrical dynamic is a peculiar void that, following Agamben (2011), we could identify as an aspect of Catholic glory; that 'unsayable vacuity' which has nourished and fed the Church as power. The mass, the rituals, the sacred vestments are symbols that play on the anamorphic perspective wherein an initial distortion gives way to a deeper realisation, or 'truth' that can only be glimpsed from an oblique angle. Unlike the sincere, unmediated register of Protestantism, Catholic baroque involves multiple layerings, levels of mediation that can be approached by individuals both in a rigorously honest fashion or - to appropriate the words of Victor Turner on ritual - 'a certain looseness of fit' (Turner 1967, 271).

One of the effects of this baroque register, I here argue, is that it simultaneously foments and obscures the distance between three entities: the priest as man, the priest as Christ and the priest as Church. Baroque registers are volatile, as theorists have argued, flipping perspectives, they do not hold still. They are also good at holding or containing things within, thus articulating the inside/outside of bodies (Buci-Glucksmann 1994 [1984]; Corsin Jiménez 2013]. Catholic forms of baroque play on the composite nature of the Church as a spiritual and organizational entity, a play that, in turn, hinges on another composite entity: the priest as a man divisible from a role, and a man *indivisible* from his vocation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth emphasising that baroque capacities find particular salience in a wider Brazilian cultural context where playful inversions, and plays on visibility/invisibility are exceptionally elaborated in a diverse range of religious, ritual and even kinship contexts. According to Matan Shapiro's study of one working-class Brazilian neighbourhood, adulterous relationships are common to the point of normative, even as they are deeply challenging to conventional moral injunctions about the sanctity of marriage. Such 'affective paradoxes' are endured in part, because they depend on highly elaborated 'play-forms' which enable concealment. For Shapiro, Brazilian engagement with playful, deceptive, baroque registers is not the preserve of marginal rogues but a 'normative and inherently pragmatic approach to social interaction that accompanies persons since childhood' (2016, 11). The question of whether and to what extent Brazilian elaborations of doubleness through play have been shaped by southern European Catholic traditions of public/private concealment remains open to debate (cf. Heywood 2015), but the elaborated tension one finds in Brazil between public role and private self lends itself particularly well to the frequent practice of masking homosexuality behind a facade of compliance to heterosexual norms.



## **Of Masks and Men**

Padre Marconi described a relationship spanning several years with a female parishioner as ‘the great passion of my life.’ He told me that although they regularly saw one another in church, they avoided direct contact in that context and were careful only ever to speak to one another via the telephone. Trysts would be arranged, and all time alone together happened inside his car, driving for the sake of it across the landscape, sometimes to faraway motels.

‘Were there moments of regret? No. It is true that you have to be careful what you say and where you go. You can’t show affection whenever you feel like it, you have to take care. But regret love? No. I regarded her as a gift.’

And yet sometimes, he went on, there were moments of doubt. For instance those times when, during intimacy she playfully addressed him as ‘Padre’ rather than by his first name.

‘That sort of thing would mess with my head. It caused some fights. I don’t know if it was her teasing or a sort of pressure she wanted to apply to make me leave the Church. But when she called me Padre like that, I did not like it.’

Turning to Mauss' famous essay on the category of the person offers, I think, a productive route. In this essay (1938) Mauss gives a summarization the emergence of the 'person' or 'self' as a historically variegated concept, arguing that the concept of the person has always incorporated a potential duality in the sense of the 'mask' or role, assumed first through ritual and later through law. It is only with Christianity, he suggests, that the notion of the person becomes tightly compacted, singular, and indivisible. I here follow Laidlaw (2014) and Simon Coleman (2015) who argue that a Maussian sense of trajectory between one form of personhood and another in historical diachronic terms is more productively swapped for a synchronic approach, in which multiple forms of person coexist and surface at different times within the same subject. Turning to the ethnographic context we have already seen how Catholic forms of ritual and constructions of the priesthood provide fertile grounds for 'masking' and impersonation, dissimulation and separation.

To what extent, then, is the priest a man who wears a mask? The dimension of masking I want to draw attention to is an end in itself. Moving *In Persona Christi* is not a discipline or a 'cultivation of the self', it is a charisma: a mysterious, momentary transformation of the priest into an actual Godhead. In the moments before the consecration, the priest washes his hands before the congregation, uttering the words: 'Wash me O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin'. This washing, is both a symbolic purification of his sins, an act of humility, and an acknowledgement of the extreme ontological transformation about to occur.

In many anthropological accounts of ritual process, what is stressed is the ultimate weight of action itself. An individual's sincerity or level of belief in a ritual

performance hardly matters because the communicative context (the ritual genre or register) takes care of that (Rappaport 1999). Michael Lambek (2008), reflecting on the subtle distinctions between stage and religious performers has written at length about the sliding power of 'iteration' in different contexts of action. In many contexts of religious ritual, he argues, 'outer seriousness' cannot be 'confused with, seen as mere expression of, reduced to, dependent on, or viewed as lesser than (inner sincerity)' for 'ritual effects the production of a specific class or genre of performative acts in which seriousness is established from the outset' (2008, 71). Lambek goes on to focus on the way in which felicitous performances teach spirit mediums to 'mean' what they say. 'We only 'catch up with ourselves', come to realize that we do indeed mean what we say (or intend what we do) after the fact, in light of felicitous performances' (ibid, 81). Reflecting on Lèvi-Strauss's famous essay on the Kwakiutl shaman (1963), whose practice starts out as what he considers to be 'pretense' but in the course of performance becomes truthful, he notes how 'The irony entailed in understanding his deception gets transcended' (ibid, 74). What Lèvi-Strauss, Lambek, and Coleman each draw attention to is the transcendent or transformative potential of masking, performing, and acting in ritual contexts. In all three cases performance will eventually exceed or transcend the limits of theatre and there will be momentary fusion – a felicitous 'catching up' of the performer with the divine order.

The role of masking and theatre has been explored before in the context of the Catholic priesthood, notably by the Italian psychiatrist Vittorino Andreoli (2010) who draws attention to the mask-like quality of the priest's sacred vestments, which allow him to realize the sacraments. 'Without those habits' he writes 'without the stoles, the

white tunic and the humeral veil there is no difference between the priest as Christ and who he is ordinarily. Like anyone who uses a mask he could be a bad person, however the mask is not him...in the habit the priest loses his identity and turns into Christ' (2010, 192, translation my own). Andreoli notes the conscious and rapid nature of this change: 'after the ceremony he returns to the sacristy, puts his liturgical vestments back in their place and finds himself a man-priest again, perhaps dressed in jeans and trainers.' This, he categorizes as a 'rapid' process and an 'enormous leap' between roles. The Mass, thus, is not intended to transform the priest as a moral individual, nor by that token can his personal moral status transform it, for his consecration of the host will be valid regardless of his personal state of mortal sin.<sup>18</sup>

What happens if we focus, not on that moment of 'catching up' that has so interested Lambek (2008), but on the immediate 'leap' back into jeans and trainers? This 'leap' interests me as it speaks to the ways my informants resisted 'catching up' with their Christ-like performances, not merely for fear of hubris, but also because of the very real psychological and spiritual dangers involved. We then begin to see how even if a sense of vocation (singleness) brings a man into the priesthood, a sense of

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<sup>18</sup> CDF advice states that a priest who is in a state of mortal sin should seek to confess as soon as possible and refrain from celebrating the sacraments until he has done so. To celebrate Mass or receive Communion while in a state of mortal sin is, officially, to commit a sacrilege. Yet, the sacrament (for those receiving it) would still be valid; being considered a true consecration and a true sacrifice. The reason is: Christ is the principal actor of the sacraments, so they are efficacious even when performed by an unworthy minister.

separateness (doubleness) becomes necessary for him to live and endure it, day after day and for the rest of his life. The priests I knew had remained within the Church by emphasizing the boundedness of their Christ-like roles: Padre Marconi by refusing to respond to his lover's playful attempts to address him as 'padre' and Padre Beto, once he'd left the church, by locking away his sacred robes.

### **Double Lives**

The theatrical side of the Mass and the distancing effect that the mask has for its wearer carries over into the priest's life as a whole, and finds echoes in what many analysts of the priesthood describe as its 'culture of denial' or 'culture of secrecy' (Weafer 2014). This is a complex and sensitive issue, one that I can hardly attempt to do justice to here.<sup>19</sup> I shall therefore restrict my focus to a single culturally and historically specific manifestation: clerical 'double-life practice' and psychotherapy in contemporary Northeast Brazil.

While it is true that significant numbers of Brazilian priests break their celibacy vows with a certain degree of theological assurance and ethical reflexivity, it is also true that the sex lives of priests produce relatively little threat to the ecclesiastical structure as a whole because priests keep their rule-breaking private, and remain

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<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of the Church's 'culture of secrecy' see also Cutie (2011) in Huffington Post [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/father-alberto-cutie/culture-of-secrecy-alive-\\_b\\_819535.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/father-alberto-cutie/culture-of-secrecy-alive-_b_819535.html).

obedient to ritual form in public.<sup>20</sup> The priests I knew were careful to keep their sexuality relatively neutered or at least invisible in public. Such a thing is not hard to do, it is often enough simply to fulfil one's religious duties wearing a cassock. But other strategies could help this state of play.

Having broken his vows following five years of successful celibacy Padre Beto had lived through a series of illicit relationships with different women, some married, others single. To support this state of affairs he had bought a small apartment in the city where he could escape every week for a couple of nights. There he would drink whisky, enjoy the company of lovers, visit the beach, go to the shopping mall. When unable to escape his rural parish he would drive lovers to purpose-built anonymous sex motels along the rural highways. This apartment, he told me, was oftentimes 'borrowed' by colleagues – other priests and small parties of seminarians.

Padre Beto's cultivation of a double life was, in practice, little different from many married Brazilian men of means who keep mistresses and even 'second families' on the side. Had he any guilt or regrets? I asked. 'No' he answered, none whatsoever. 'Love is divine and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with sexual intimacy' he added. His only regrets concerned the disruption to people's lives his affairs had

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<sup>20</sup> This 'ethics' of concealment bears striking resemblance to Heywood's description of Italian notions of *Doppia Morale* (double morality), which we might regard as a culturally specific way of relating to public moral codes. A key element here, as Heywood argues is that 'whilst failure to adhere to moral codes are at least implicitly condoned, they can only be so if properly hidden. Once the transgression is made explicit it can no longer be a case of *doppia morale*.' (2015, 213)

caused. One woman had moved away to marry a man she did not love once she'd finally accepted that marriage with him would never be a possibility. Years of heartbroken letter exchanges had followed. What sort of coping tactics had the Padre employed over the years? I ventured to ask. 'I did then what I still do today – I go see my psychotherapist'.

According to Serbin the couch and the soapbox largely defined the Brazilian Church of the late 1960s (Serbin 2006). One of the large-scale concessions to priestly difficulties with celibacy to emerge in the twentieth century was a turn to psychoanalysis and similar forms 'talking therapy'. While many middle class Brazilians go in for this, the curious embrace of the practice at the highest levels of the Brazilian church seems to have been at once, part of the cultural revolution that followed on from Vatican II, and a survival strategy on the part of a Church facing a massive crisis of vocations. As Serbin shows, the introduction of psychoanalysis for priests in the 1960s was aimed at allowing a repressed sexuality out of the box, in order to better deal with the demands of celibacy. But what psychoanalysis let out of the box in the 1960s, today it shoulders the burden of containing safely from view. For the rural parish priest the psychotherapeutic sphere is co-extensive with a 'private' world of sex motels and anonymous big-city getaways. Psychotherapists usually reside in the nearest big city. A rural priest can access a practice tucked away in some back street in relative anonymity. The therapist is the new confessional in which rather than atoning for sin, the priest works through his 'issues'. The psychotherapist is bound by a similar code of confidentiality to the religious confessor. The system is hermetically sealed – priests see psychotherapists who work for Church-based institutions; the cost of therapy is split three ways, between the priest, the parish coffers, and the diocese.

What I am calling ‘doubleness’ echoes what many contemporary anthropologists would currently describe as ‘ethics’. Although the anthropology of ethics encompasses a large and somewhat convoluted body of literature, immune to simple summary, broadly speaking it engages the complex and myriad ways in which humans reflect critically on the social situations they find themselves in, and think consciously through the implications of prescribed moral rules before capitulating to, altering, or rejecting them.<sup>21</sup> All the same, while doubleness clearly involves what most anthropologists would recognize as ‘ethical process’, not all ethical process encompasses doubleness. Doubleness has a highly specific set of associations (theological, liturgical, and also practical in the on stage/off-stage sense) which I find useful for comprehending the kinds of ethical negotiations that the priesthood demands. It alludes to the essentially dual entity that is the mask plus its wearer, it resonates with western Christian dogma concerning the dual nature of Christ, as well as with Catholic ritual concepts such as transubstantiation and *In Persona Christi* which reaffirm a fundamentally Christian dualism of spirit versus matter.

But doubleness has other, more mundane analytical resonances because it usefully echoes what scholars who study total institutions, have called ‘adaptation strategies’. Marie Keenan, in her analysis of Catholic priests who commit sexual abuse, makes a

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<sup>21</sup> The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is mainly a descriptive one: that lived values are, in essence, conflictive, and humans evaluative. This makes for what many anthropologists call ‘ethical processes’: the continual unfolding-into-the-world of interior complexity in relation to formal moral rules. For key positions on the ethical turn see, for example, Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2015; Keane 2016.



distinction between two types of priests: ‘rule keepers’ who effectively ‘lose their personal selves and integrity in their attempts to embody a Perfect Catholic Clerical Masculine identity’ and clerics who find ways to keep ‘some distance, some elbow room, between themselves and that with which the institution and its promoters assumed they should be identified’ (Keenan 2012, 248). Keenan argues that it is from a pool of intransigent ‘rule-keepers’ that clerical predators emerge. My interest here, is somewhat perpendicular to Keenan’s, as my focus has been on priests whose rule-breaking is ‘more socially acceptable, if not fully Church acceptable’ to use Keenan’s words (ibid, 248). Keenan’s thesis concerning sexual predators is curiously supported by recent research by Robert Orsi (2017) with survivors of clerical sexual abuse, which reveals how clerical abuse frequently occurs *on* rather than off the sacred stage: ‘on the altar or close to it, sometimes during Mass, or in the sacristy adjoining the sanctuary’ (2017, 287-288). The point these scholars make about clerical sexual abusers returns us, I suggest, to the question of the mask, and to the speed and ease with which it can be taken off and on. The priests I have focused on throughout this article (whose sexual incontinence remains within the bounds of secular legality) are consummate mask wearers, or, to use Goffman’s (1975 [1961]) term, ‘stance-takers’: individuals who take up a position ‘somewhere between identification with an organization and opposition to it’ and are always ready at the slightest provocation to ‘regain the balance’ by shifting their involvement in either direction (Goffman 1975/61, 280).

One might interpret the doubleness I have described simply as a psychological adaptation strategy in the sense highlighted by Goffman and Keenan (wherein individual clerics manage the tensions between their evolving selves and identities and the ideal institutional identity of the priesthood), but if we return to the

ethnographic suggestion that the Church is also a ‘self’ (a mysteriously gendered, super-organic agent) we might equally argue that doubleness is her adaptative strategy as well. Doubleness serves both kinds selves (human and suprahuman) to the point that it becomes possible to see how the Church, by some counter-intuitive logic, needs vow-breaking priests (priests who are human, fallible, and therefore not entirely isomorphic with the Church in its mystical superorganic form) in order to reproduce herself as a transcendent-like agent in the world.

## **Conclusion**

Let us return to the concrete, ethnographic quandary: the double lives of ministering priests. In seeking an answer to this state of affairs I was returned, again and again, to the priests’ references to the church as a gendered, (womb-like, bride-like) agent in the world: an imperfect but - all the same - supernaturally endowed entity with a life much greater than and *separate from* their own. This Church, the Church that Padre Miguel loved *more* than Maria, deserves closer scrutiny. Neither entirely human, nor entirely supernatural, she stands in a category apart: sacred and transcendent yet possessing a kind of material vitality and immanent imperfection all of her own. To the priests of my study she was, indeed, a ‘complicated’ agent: a flawed and recalcitrant old friend, a tender kin-relation (mother, bride and daughter all at once), a supernatural force, and a material presence of paint and stone. It was because she was all this that they remained bound to her in the sincere yet contradictory and sometimes tragic ways that humans find themselves bound to the ones that they love. And it was because of their complicated relationship with this transcendent person that their vow-breaking took the form it did; a form that was, as we have seen, far

from damaging to the ecclesiastical polity as a whole.

Doubleness, as I have argued, can be interesting to us, not because it points up scandal and moral hypocrisy, but because it points to the bifurcated presence of the Church as an enduring institution – a complex assemblage of actions and intentions that is at once a part of and yet very much apart from the humans that make it up. From the perspective of the modern rational subject, the double life is nothing more than simple hypocrisy: a way to embody a virtue without having to incur some of its costs. From the institutional perspective, however, the double-life enables the ecclesiastic form to stretch well beyond individual instantiations making it a geographically and historically enduring feature of the world.<sup>22</sup> The sexually incontinent priest (whether he is aware of it or not) is a man who makes his life point in two directions; who honours two different – seemingly incommensurable – temporalities at once: the long *durée* and the individual life, the eternal and the historical. Putting it thus is not to imply that vow-breaking constitutes an easy or painless path for ministering priests. Nor am I suggesting that when it occurs it is always accompanied by some kind of conscious or rational reasoning about differences between offices and persons or spirits and institutions. Simply put, I believe that there is something in the pervasive doubleness of clerical lives that points to institutions (and their remarkable capacities for time-space endurance) as real and

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<sup>22</sup> Certain productive comparisons might be drawn between the vow-breaking of priests married to churches and the vow-breaking of lay men and women, married to one another.

agentive social forms.

The ethnography I have presented speaks, in some ways, to a question once asked by Mary Douglas (1986): Do institutions think? And if so, how do they do it? Douglas, like other anthropologists of her generation was motivated to understand the mechanics of the social order and to explore the forms of commitment that subordinates individual interest to larger social wholes. Returning to Fleck's (1935) depiction of the 'thought collective' and Durkheim's (1893) concept of society, she noted how intrinsically sceptical social science had become of these ideas.

Institutions, social theorists have for a long time reasoned, cannot have minds of their own, they cannot think, reason, or reflect as these sorts of cognitive processes are for individuals not groups. In light of this fact, explaining 'the corporate group' remains 'the central, repugnant paradox' for modern social science (Douglas 1986, 15-16).

In her meditation on the peculiarly thought-like capacities of social institutions Douglas zooms in on the phenomena she calls 'latency'. Institutions, she argues, are 'latent' precisely because they hide their thought-patterns (or logics) from common view.<sup>23</sup> What Douglas calls 'latency' (the unintentional, implicit presence of the institution) overlaps with – yet should not be reduced to – what she had to say about the naturalisation of social classifications. I find her writing on latency interesting

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<sup>23</sup> Douglas did not think of institutions as agents. As a social scientist at least, she did not indulge the view that an institution could harbour some sort of magico-invisible spirit or soul. She was more interested in the analytical purchase to be gained from thinking through how they would work if we gave them hypothetical agency.

inasmuch as it helps to explain the many slippages and contradictions anthropologists continually encounter, between practice and prescription, intention, thought, and speech. Latency, Douglas argued, concentrates most clearly the problems of collective action within the assumptions of rational choice for it presents the institution as ‘a plausible actor in its own right’. The institution thus becomes:

‘like the cardsharp forcing players to pick a card against their will.

This particular type of social group thinks along certain grooves; it has a mind of its own. In choosing to join this idealistic band of brothers, no one opts for the whole package of behaviour and beliefs. But they go together...’ (1986, 40)

My point is this: no one opts for a magnificent, ‘jewel-like’ celibate priesthood riddled with failed celibates. And yet, as I have tried to show ‘they go together’. Doubtless understood not as a psychological adaptive strategy, but as a social fact (i.e. the priest acting *in persona Christi* is a mask wearer and not completely isomorphic with the Church of Christ) helps to take us beyond a focus on the individual actor to the Church as a whole. I have tried to re-inscribe the point that the Church-as-institution is more than merely a material infrastructure, or the sum of individual work practices. Combining theological and ethnographic perspectives, it can be analysed as a ‘person’ too.

Mary Douglas has been one of relatively few anthropologists over the past few decades to think explicitly and at length about the nature of institutions in the sociological sense. This may not be surprising given her personal experience of

Catholicism. If the growing ethnographic record on Catholicism shows us anything, it is that a pressing sense of scale and a reified perception of the self as both part of and apart from a larger, collective sacred-cum-bureaucratic entity, is neither entirely abstract nor entirely mysterious. It is viscerally experienced by ordinary Catholics. The priests I knew, although they recognized their ‘doubleness’ as potentially hypocritical in the eyes of the laity, were not entirely constrained by such realisations because of the particular quality of their relationship with the Church. She, the Church, was a complex person: imperfect, mired in bureaucracy and tainted by human handling, yet still infinitely greater (more beautiful or sacred) than any secular organisation and greater than any individual priest. Codes of secrecy and mechanisms of dissociation constituted their strategies for protecting her from harm. Perhaps then, institutions are more than conceptual smoke and mirrors dreamed up by sociologists to explain social order in an otherwise chaotic world – they exist and, as Durkheim long ago evoked, they impress, they ‘think’, they demand responses from us. They have, in short, a superorganic agency of their own.

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