

The Feminine Way 'O Jeito Feminino'

*Religion, Power and Identity
in South Brazilian Base Communities*



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VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT

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Contents

1	Researching religious women: the context	5
1.1	Introduction	6
1.2	CEBs and CEB-women in Brazil	7
1.2.1	CEBs	7
1.2.2	CEB-women	9
1.2.3	Question-raising	11
1.3	Women's religion, feminist science	11
1.3.1	The development of an anthropology of religion and gender	12
1.3.2	Current theories on religion and gender	13
1.3.3	Question-raising	17
1.4	The research project	17
1.4.1	Assumptions and key concepts	17
1.4.2	Objectives and research questions	19
1.4.3	Methodology	20
1.5	Structure	21
2	The town Águas, the popular neighbourhood Barro and its CEBs in historical perspective (1874-1995)	23
2.1	Introduction	24
2.2	The birth and generation of Águas (1874-1979)	25
2.3	The 'unofficial' history of Barro and its CEBs	30
2.4	The 'official' history of Barro and its CEBs	44
2.5	Between female activism and male ecclesialism	49
3	Religion: CEB-women of Águas on Liberation Theology and care	53
3.1	Introduction	54
3.2	CEB-women of Águas on the religious and CEBs: "the feminine way"	56
3.2.1	The religious and CEBs as a "women's affair" (" <i>coisa de mulher</i> ")	56
3.2.2	Women's religion or "the maternal face of faith" (" <i>o rosto materno da fé</i> ")	64

3.3	CEB-women on Liberation Theology: having “faith and fibre” (<i>“fê e fibra”</i>)	69
3.3.1	A discourse of corporeality	69
3.3.2	‘Reading’ the Bible	75
3.3.3	Bread of unity	78
3.4	The feminine way: restating religion, or the importance of experience and practice	79
4	Power: CEB-women of Águas on CEBs and survival	83
4.1	Introduction	84
4.2	The CEBs of the parish São Pio X	85
4.2.1	Social organisation of the parish	85
4.2.2	Religious and social practices	87
4.3	CEB-women’s participation: a description	91
4.3.1	The ministries	91
4.3.2	The mothers’ clubs	96
4.3.3	The pastorate of health	105
4.4	CEB-women’s participation: an analysis	109
4.4.1	Women members	109
4.4.2	Female leaders	111
4.5	The feminine way: restating power, or the importance of co-operation	117
5	Identity: CEB-women of Águas on ‘the self’ and connection	123
5.1	Introduction	124
5.2	On identification	127
5.3	On differentiation	136
5.4	The ‘art of presentation’	141
5.5	The feminine way: restating identity, or the importance of inclusion and Sameness	145
6	Conclusions	149
	References	155
	Samenvatting	169

1

Researching religious women: the context

1.1 Introduction

Since the very beginning of anthropology as a distinct discipline studying culture and meaning making, anthropologists have been fascinated by the religious beliefs and practices of mankind. It was often the study of religion in highly diverse cultural settings that inspired leading anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard, Durkheim, Douglas, Turner, Weber and Geertz to develop influential social theories. Of a much later date and considerably less theoretic in nature, however, is the anthropological interest in the religious life of particularly women. One of the first systematic studies in this field was undertaken by Ruth Landes. With the publication of her book 'The City of Women' in 1947 she did not only provide the academic world with a rich ethnography of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, but also made a first step towards the unveiling and understanding of the religiosity of women and their role in religious organisations. Since the publishing of Landes' much praised work, many books and articles have been written that have enhanced our ethnographic knowledge of and theoretical reflection on women's religion¹ in particular and gender and religion in general. In the 1980s and 1990s notably, a considerable amount of ethnographic data have been gathered, stimulating the development of hypotheses and theoretical notions concerning the genderedness of religious symbolism, ritual, organisation, ideology and the like. Nevertheless, the body of theoretical knowledge of women's religious lives is still relatively small and precarious.

This lack of substantive theory in the field of gender and religion has been the most important motive for undertaking the research project on Brazilian CEBs on which this book is based. In this chapter I show that current approaches available to and developed by (feminist) anthropologists of religion are still rooted in male-based and male-biased research. I argue that this inhibits a full understanding of the religious life of womankind (and consequently of mankind as a whole), and suggest new avenues for the study of gender and religion throughout this book.

In this introductory chapter, I paint the empirical, theoretical, and methodological backgrounds to my research on the form and content of women's religious lives in catholic base communities or *comunidades eclesiais de base* (CEBs) in the South-Brazilian city of Águas², Rio Grande do Sul. In section two, I first discuss how Latin American CEBs in general and Brazilian CEBs in particular have been presented in anthropological texts. Second, I describe the ways in which the so-called *questão da mulher* or 'women's issue' within CEBs has been addressed by anthropologists. In section three I give an overview of how 'women's religion' and 'women's religiosity' in general have been conceptualised in anthropological studies. Elaborating upon this prefatory reflection on both practice and theory of religion and gender as well as the preliminary questions raised by this reflection, I articulate the assumptions, final research questions, objectives, key concepts and methods underlying this study in section four. In doing so, I pave the way for a more detailed elaboration of the introduced issues in the chapters to follow, the structure and contents of which will be outlined in section five.

1 With the term 'women's religion' I do not refer to a religion which is dominated by women in terms of membership, leadership and focus (see Sered 1994). Rather, I use the concept to designate the conglomerate of women's religious ideas, focuses, practices and experiences within one particular culture, subculture, group or sub-group.

2 All proper names linked to the research population and research location are pen-names, which have been adopted to safe-guard the anonymity of respondents.

1.2 CEBs and CEB-women in Brazil

When I arrived in Brazil in February 1994, I soon contacted a young priest whose positive identification with Liberation Theology and catholic base communities was well-known in the metropolis Porto Alegre and neighbouring cities. Although my precarious Portuguese still had to develop into unadulterated Brazilian from the southern region, we managed to exchange ideas and mark a date for my first acquaintance with members of CEBs in the city of Águas (Rio Grande do Sul), whom the priest considered to be among the first founders of Brazilian base communities and last adversaries to the ongoing processes of spiritualisation, depoliticisation and centralisation of the Catholic Church.

The first meeting of CEB-members that I attended thereupon was a reunion of the so-called mothers' club (*clube de mães*) of the parish São Pio X, which took place on the first floor in the main church building. Packed together in a room of barely 12 square meters with walls painted brightly blue and hang with collages depicting the women's secret job aspirations, ten mothers with their children (aged 2 to 15) met to reflect on the Bible, sing popular CEB-songs, exchange the latest novelties, tell each other jokes, and to do some very creative needlework in the community hall downstairs (*salão comunitário*). At that moment, I did not realise yet that these women, like other CEB-women participating in mothers' clubs, liturgy groups, family groups, and pastoral works would turn out to be the backbone of the 15 base communities that were active in the poor, peripheral neighbourhood Barro. I did gather, however, unintendedly witnessing a dispute between Dona Ana, a female lay leader, and priest Márcio over the organisation of a *chá* (tea circle) at the same day, that priest Márcio had to interact cautiously with Dona Ana. It was obvious that he wanted to safeguard her participation in and contribution to the organisation of the tea circle without jeopardising his own authority, which was something in which he barely succeeded. In this respect, Dona Ana's naughty wink in my direction at the end of their conversation was telling.

This very first and following encounters with the daily practice of female CEB-members in a Brazilian setting allowed me to revive, reinterpret and evaluate insights, which I had assimilated from the available literature on Latin American CEBs. Leaving the reinterpretation of CEBs to be elucidated in the chapters three, four and five, in this section I limit myself to a portrayal of Brazilian catholic base communities on the basis of sociological and anthropological works that have been published since the 1970s.³ First, a short overview is given of the relevant data that research in this field has produced on their features, numbers, and historical development. Second, special attention is paid to the role and position of women participating in these religious communities.

1.2.1 CEBs

Catholic base communities or CEBs are participatory, parish-based groups that consist of 5 to 100 lay members⁴, who are proximate to one another in territorial and class terms. Usually, participants live in the same neighbourhood or block and belong to the lower urban or rural classes. Striving after the realisation of God's Kingdom on earth in imitation of Liberation

³Of course, CEBs have also enjoyed ample interest from the side of theologians, in particular those with a liberationist orientation like Boff, Bingemer and Gebara. Their contribution to the discussion on CEB-women is discussed elsewhere.

⁴The average minimum and maximum numbers of lay participants per base community that are provided by Latin Americanists show some variation. Whereas Adriance (1995:3) has mentioned an average of 10-60 members per community, Hewitt has estimated the number of lay people in CEBs to fluctuate between 20-50 members, although 'some claim to attract up to 200' (Hewitt 1991:2). Comblin, being a little more optimistic, has stated that most base communities consist of 20-100 lay participants (Comblin 1987:15).

Theology, the religious practices of participating CEB members and their lay leaders, religious sisters, friars and priests are often characterised by socio-political engagement. The weekly reflection on the Bible in so-called mothers' clubs (*clubes de mães*) and family groups (*grupos de família*), for example, is generally explicitly linked to an analysis of daily felt problems, such as limited health care facilities, lack of employment opportunities and precarious infrastructural provisions. As such, Bible-reflection fosters consciousness-raising and thereby stimulates activism in communal initiatives and political organisations that respond to these concrete local social and economic needs.⁵ Estimates of the number of CEBs in Brazil vary considerably. The most recent and extensive survey undertaken indicates that approximately 60.000 base communities are active in this country, involving about two million people (Valle & Pitta 1994), but other estimates run from 40 to 100 thousand CEBs.⁶

The history of the catholic base communities started about 40 years ago in the Brazil of the 1950s, when the Catholic Church experienced major difficulties to establish links with various segments of the population.⁷ In the Brazilian context, the European parish structure proved to be inadequate because of the shortage of priests, who were desperately needed to attend to the rather big and heterogeneous populations in the oversized parishes. An alternative organisational form was required to link the institutional church to the sectors of the laity, with which an alliance was needed to safeguard the Church's self-preservation, but which were increasingly getting involved in socialist movements and Pentecostal churches.⁸ The organisational alternative to effect new influence was found in both the Brazilian Catholic Action (*Acção Católica Brasileira*) and further stimulated by the foundation of the CNBB, the National Conference of the Brazilian Bishops in 1952. Through Catholic Action and the CNBB 'the Church became actively involved in promoting structural change in society. Support from Rome, encouragement from a changing or at least, challenged state, and the clear perception of environmental threats favoured such an approach. During this period, which lasted from approximately the mid-1950s until 1964, the church assumed a role in assisting socio-political change' (Bruneau 1982:150, cf Eckstein 1989:31).

A process of institutional renovation, theological reflection, and reformulation of the social and political strategies adopted by the Brazilian Catholic Church sparked off; increasingly, emphasis was put on the participation of lay people in communal initiatives and on the critical reflection on and analysis of the social and economic conditions of life in Brazil. The growing social consciousness of the church was reflected in the official call made for social and economic justice by the Second Vatican Council in 1962, and further elaborated upon during the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM II) held in Medellín (Colombia) in 1968. At the latter occasion, the Latin America episcopate again articulated the necessity for institutional reforms in the Roman Catholic Church and institutionalised the Church's '*preferential option for the poor*'. The creation of small basic communities for prayer and Bible reflection was specifically mentioned as an important means to revitalise the Catholic Church

5 See for similar descriptions or definitions of CEBs Bruneau (1979:227-9), Alvarez (1990:384), Mariz (1994:17), Valle & Pitta (1994:58-60) and Hewitt (1996:5).

6 Estimates of the number of active CEBs in Brazil do not only vary over the years, but also differ according to the adopted definition and political conviction of the scholars concerned.

7 See Adriance (1995), Barbé (1993), Bruneau (1974, 1982), Burdick (1993), Drogus (1997), Hewitt (1991), Ireland (1991), Levine (1992), Macedo (1986), Mainwaring (1986), Mariz (1994), Nagle (1997), Sanchis (1992) and de Theije (1999) for elaborate analyses of the history of the Catholic Church in Brazil, including the ecclesial base communities.

8 For case studies on Latin American pentecostalism, see Boudewijnse et al (1998), Brusco (1995), Lawless (1988a, 1988b) and Mariz (1994).

and liberate the poor from their deplorable circumstances of life (Bruneau 1982:47-54, Hewitt 1991:13-27, Adriance 1995:102-5).

In the meantime, Brazil had experienced a military coup in 1964, which ushered in 16 years of economic and political repression. The poor became poorer and the great majority of associations and parties were banned. As the church was among the few organisations that had been allowed to exist, it filled the void as a space for popular political protest and activism. Many priests and bishops put their preferential option for the poor into practice by promoting social involvement, criticising the violation of human rights and by developing a critical attitude towards economic measures taken by the military regime. In 1979, during the Third CELAM Conference, which was held in Puebla (Mexico), the Church's renovating spirit and social engagement were reaffirmed despite attempts from conservative forces in the Vatican and the Brazilian episcopate to bring the liberationist project to a standstill.

'During the following decade, however, the Vatican policy of replacing progressive bishops with those who emphasise more traditional concepts as holiness created a decisive shift in power in CELAM. As a result, the conservatives finally exerted their influence over the Fourth General Conference, held in Santo Domingo in 1992. The Santo Domingo documents repeat the same language of Medellín and Puebla, referring to human rights, the preferential option for the poor, and the importance of transforming unjust social structures, but in subtle ways undermine the consequences of the previous conferences' (Adriance 1995:106). While base communities and lay leaders were still considered to be of importance to the Catholic Church, especially in areas with a low degree of clerical vocation, an increasing emphasis was put on the centralisation of power in the hands of the bishops, the depoliticisation of the people, and the spiritual development of individuals, the first consequences of which could be easily observed in the parish São Pio X in Águas, Rio Grande do Sul. Self-evidently, the above sketched general developments and changes were closely intertwined with the form and transformative potential of women's participation in catholic base communities. Before elaborating on this theme in chapter two, however, I first give an overall picture of the specificities of women's participation in Brazilian CEBs as it emerges from literature.

1.2.2 CEB-women

Although women largely outnumber men in base communities, the role and position of catholic women has not been dealt with extensively in the books and articles that are currently available on CEBs. Besides, the few existing noteworthy contributions to the understanding of women's religious beliefs and practices in Latin American CEBs tend to focus on a limited set of closely interrelated issues. Most existing studies, dating generally from the late 1980s and early 1990s⁹, concentrate on the opportunities for the empowerment of women that CEBs possibly offer. This focus includes ample attention to the liberationist view on women, the occurrence of female leadership, the characteristics of women's overall participation in CEBs, the acts of consciousness-raising on the part of CEB-leaders and the development of effective political strategies by participating women. Alvarez' article on women's participation in the Brazilian 'People's Church' serves as an example in case: the leading questions to her publication are if participation in CEBs does empower women, whether or not it heightens their consciousness as citizens and thus makes them equal partners in the continental quest for liberation (Alvarez 1990:381).

⁹ See Adriance (1991), Alvarez (1990), Burdick (1990, 1993), Drogus (1990), Goldsmit & Sweeney (1988), Hewitt (1996), Macedo (1986, 1989), and Mariz (1994).

The answers given to these and comparable questions are rather contradictory; most authors seem to opt for either an extremely positive evaluation or a fairly gloomy scenario. On the basis of her research among CEBs in the rural north and Northeast of Brazil, Adriance (1995) has argued that participation in CEBs stimulates women's belief in equal rights with men and their participation in public activities. For Latin America as a whole, Goldsmit and Sweeney (1988) have stated that 'women participate equally in both the authority structures of the CEBs and in the labour of the community. Women, they claim, are active agents of social change in their groups and not just passive instruments' (Hewitt 1996:10-11). Likewise, the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff has claimed that 'in the basic Christian communities, especially, a very important space for liberation of women is being created', the main reason for it being that 'over half the co-ordinators of the communities are women. In all the basic communities it's the women who are most engaged in the work' (Freire 1970).

Other anthropologists and sociologists have been far less optimistic about women pursuing the course of their liberation by means of CEBs. Alvarez (1990:382,390-391), for example, has argued that CEBs indeed make women more aware as citizens with equal rights in the community; as women, however, they do experience no liberation, due to the ever strong essentialist catholic view on femininity and the limits this sets on both women's political articulation and processes of their self-empowerment.

Not adhering to either one of these perspectives, there are also scholars who are neither very optimistic nor very pessimistic about the CEBs potential contribution to women's liberation. As Drogus has stated, CEBs have encouraged women to take up leadership roles and as a consequence many women have become politically conscious and active. At the same time, however, most parishes still pay little or no attention to 'the specifics of women's situation. Moreover, (...) the Church uses women's labour, but does not include them in the decision-making process at the diocesan level' (1990:71).

Despite the different evaluations depicted above, some general findings concerning women's participation in CEBs can be identified. First, most authors note that the predominance of women in CEBs is almost total, both during the mass and in other church-related meetings and activities. It is estimated that often more than 80% of the membership in CEBs are women (Alvarez 1990:381, Drogus 1990:64). In this context, a famous Brazilian saying is often reproduced by way of explanation: '*religião é coisa de mulher*' or 'religion is a women's affair'.

Second, participating women regularly do take up important leadership roles in both all-female and mixed groups, but official positions in the established, hierarchical order are generally closed to women. Whereas men seem to have a reasonably good access to the positions of governing councillor, minister, friar and priest, women with leadership aspirations and abilities normally act as mere representatives or co-ordinators of mothers' clubs, pastorates, family groups, and traditional organisations like the *Apostolado de Oração* (Apostolate of Prayer) and the *Legião de Maria* (Legion of Mary), which are engaged in socio-economic projects and charitable works at the level of the neighbourhood or city.

Third, when describing women's participation in CEBs and CEB-related groups and meetings scholars invariably have put the importance of women's maternal identity to the fore. Drogus, Alvarez, and Hewitt have all pointed at the strong resonance of themes related to motherhood and (child)care within the religious and social practices of CEB-women, which are often directed at the accomplishment of spiritual well-being of their beloved, realisation of day-care facilities, improvement of health care facilities, development of a locally adapted dietetics, et cetera. Thus, in the context of CEBs motherhood is both a meaningful and fruitful identification.

Summarising the above, I argue that the limited number of studies available on the subject of gender-issues in catholic base communities exhale an interest in the general patterns of women's participation at the social or organisational level and, to a lesser degree, in women's positive identification with motherhood at the individual level. Little anthropological knowledge, however, has been generated on the ideas, perspectives and experiences of CEB women at the symbolical level. The air of social, economic and political empowerment and activism around issues of contraception, labour and formation, seems to have diverted the ethnographers' attention from the specificities of women's spirituality or religiosity. The preliminary research questions raised by this observation are discussed below.¹⁰

1.2.3 Question-raising

The issues discussed above all but one reflect the preoccupation of Latin Americanists with women's liberation within and through CEBs. Given the general objectives of CEBs themselves this can hardly be called surprising. This widely used approach, however, has led to limitations in scope when it comes to data-gathering and has coloured the interpretations of these data. Whereas ample written information and hypothesis-building is to be found on women's 'traditional' domestic and 'liberating' political activities in CEBs, in ethnographic research little attention has been paid to questions concerning the *religious* experiences and ideas of *women* in particular¹¹ and their relevance to women's *daily* social lives and personal identities. How do women experience the 'incorporeal' dimension? In what way do women relate to the world of God, saints and spirits? Can CEB women be considered to be more religiously devoted, devout, pious, spiritual or 'divine' as their male compares? What are important symbols and metaphors to women in the context of CEBs? How do women express their religious involvement in catholic base communities? What meaning do women adhere to their CEB-membership in daily life? Unfortunately, the lack of interest in the religious, the female and the daily in ethnographic research is also visible in works on religion and gender that are of a more theoretical nature, as the following section on women's religion and feminist science clearly shows.

1.3 Women's religion, feminist science

This section discusses shortly the ways in which the religious practices and experiences of women in general have been analysed by anthropologists of religion and feminist social scientists. The importance of this discussion lies firstly in the fact that a critical overview of the emerging field of gender and religion and of the approaches taken in it is still missing, as was already indicated by Moore in 1988. In her well-known inventory book *Feminism and Anthropology*, Moore noted that there is 'a lack of discussion concerning the role of religion in human social life, and I can only hope that other authors may take on the formidable task of providing a comprehensive account of the impact of the feminist critique in this area' (Moore 1988:viii).¹² Secondly, a succinct overview of the study of religion and gender will reveal the

¹⁰ The made distinction between symbolism, structure and identity is borrowed from Harding (1986:18).

¹¹ Of course, in theological circles much more insights have been produced concerning gender and religion at the symbolical level (see Gebara & Bingemer 1988, Tamez 1989, C. Boff 1995 and others), which will be commented upon in chapter 3.

¹² An appreciable exception is Sered's recent book *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sister*, in which she explores the issue of gender and religion in a cross-cultural comparison of twelve cases. Sered, however, focuses exclusively on women's religions, i.e. religions which are dominated by women both in terms of membership and leadership and in which women's concerns are central (Sered 1993:3-10). Of course, the short though critical overview presented in this section cannot make up for the lack of a comprehensive account of the impact of feminist critique in the study of religion, but should be regarded as the starting-point of more in-depth discussions in the

contours of the existing framework of thought that served as an inspiring starting-point for the research questions as formulated in section 3 of this chapter.

In this section, first a short history of the development of an anthropology of religion and gender is given. Next, a description and analysis of the most influential theories on women and religion is presented. Finally, on the basis of this short historical overview of central focuses and theories questions are raised that will serve as a starting-point for the objectives, assumptions and questions underlying the research project as described in section three.

1.3.1 The development of an anthropology of religion and gender

As has been touched upon already in the introduction to this chapter, the anthropological interest in the field of religion and gender is of a relatively recent date. The first studies addressing the religious life of womankind appeared only after the second World War. These publications tended to focus on individual women or groups of women who deviated from the accepted, traditional female roles by becoming either nuns, mystics, shamans, saints, or healers or by forming and participating in so-called 'women's cults' or 'women's religions', such as the Afro-Brazilian religion Umbanda, the North-African and Middle-Eastern Zar-cult and Burmese Nat religion. It would take some thirty more years, however, before the study of women and religion would really take off and somewhat crystallise out.

In 1969, Millet introduced her theory of 'the patriarchy' that conceptualised a system of dominance, oppression and sexism in which men ruled over women. Inspired by this grand theory, framing women's *subordination*, the few anthropologists studying female believers and leaders in the 1970s became more and more sensitive to the categorical exclusion, seclusion and invisibility of women in religious communities. Studies appeared on 'the' religious life of 'the' woman in several parts of the world, in which women's roles and positions were described with an emphasis on their subordination to men, women's lack of power and the necessity for settling the *inequality* between men and women. Furthermore, making use of the basic idea underlying newly designed theories that explained the origins of the 'universal' subordination of women as a category in terms of kinship arrangements, upbringing, and division of labour, anthropologists of religion embraced Rosaldo's public-domestic dichotomy to explain differences between men's and women's religious expressions. It was assumed that women's religious expressions were a direct derivative of their role in human reproduction and childcare in the private sphere, whereas men's religious activities were thought of as reflections of their role in the public arena as producers and rulers.

Around 1975, however, Millet's universal theory started to show signs of cracks. Oakley (1972), Rosaldo (1974) and others warned against the quest for the origins of sexual asymmetry, as this presupposed the universal constants 'woman' and 'man'. Apart from the concept of sex, with which scholars referred to the biological differences between men and women, the notion of gender became popular, which stands for the social, cultural and psychological *construction* of maleness and femaleness. Women and men were no longer thought of as unitary categories, which could be rigidly distinguished one from another. Slow but sure, an interest in the differences among instead of similarities between women became omnipresent in the scientific literature of the 1980s; the grand theory of patriarchy was exchanged for a set of new hypotheses, concepts and theories based on cross-cultural research, which aimed at analysing the complex historical and contextual contingencies that shape and define 'women', 'femininity' and

chapters to follow. See for other cross-cultural ethnographic studies on women in religion for example Holm (1994) and Eckstein (1989).

the underlying sex-gender system.¹³ For the study of religion and gender this shift meant an increasing interest in the negotiability and changeability of the sex-gender system in diverse religious setting through time, and in individual women as meaning-making subjects of scientific inquiry.¹⁴

Thus, categorical theory had to abandon the field for specificity, historicity and contextuality. This did not only stimulate the search for the multi-colouredness and multiformity of gender, women and women's lives around the world, but also furthered a feminist investigation into the male bias of science. It was assumed that not only women and men, but theories and concepts too were gendered constructs. Consequently, anthropologists studying women and religion started to deconstruct existing male-biased notions and look for concepts that would explicitly set out from women's experiences. A good example of these attempts to rehabilitate the female subject in the science of religion is Sered's domestication thesis, which will be discussed in more detail in the next sub-section.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the distinct constructivist gender perspective was increasingly being attacked, because it implied an almost exclusive emphasis on symbol and meaning. The interest in disembodied, rationally acting and negotiating gendered human beings was losing ground to a concern with embodied human actors, whose daily practices are explicitly linked to corporeality, experience and emotionality¹⁵. Consequently, over the last few years the first books and articles have become available on the relation between the body, gender and religion, as clearly reflected by recent titles such as 'Salvation through Gender Modification in Hinduism and Buddhism' (Humes 1996), and 'The Procreative and Ritual Constitution of Female, Male, and Other' (Poole 1996).

Summarising, it can be stated that the contributions made by (feminist) anthropologists to an anthropology of religion and gender show evidence of shifting emphases, closely following development in gender studies in general; through time, scholars have exchanged their interest in similarity, equality, unity, rationality and the mind for a focus on difference, diversity, inequality, emotionality and the body. Regardless of the described differences between the first studies and later works on gender and religion, however, one can say that up to now research on gender and religion primarily has been concerned with three central questions. Why do women turn to religion? How do women participate in religious organisations? And, does this participation give room for women's liberation, both within the religious community and society as a whole?¹⁶ These questions are generally addressed by explicit or implicit reference to three theories that I distinguish in publications on religion and gender and which I consider noteworthy to be discussed below.

1.3.2 Current theories on religion and gender

In the study field of religion and gender I feel that at current date three theories are available, which focus on deprivation, appropriation and institutionalisation respectively. To 'deprivation theory' or 'deprivation ideology' the notion is central that 'people who are deprived of

13 With sex-gender system I refer to 'the whole of arrangements by which biological sex is translated into gender at the symbolical, structural and individual level' (Aalten 1990:31).

14 See e.g. Brusco (1986), Rose (1987), Gill (1990), and Drogus (1990)

15 This does not alter the fact that the body itself too is very much regarded as a socially constructed one. 'How we feel our bodies to be, how others perceive them, and how they function and behave are in large part (not wholly) a function of culture' (Wallace & Wolf 1995:374).

16 A fourth question worth mentioning could be 'Are women more religious than men?' Although addressed frequently in the earlier days of the anthropological interest in religious women, this issue is hardly ever discussed nowadays. I briefly touch upon it in chapter 5.

satisfaction in other areas of their lives turn to religion as a compensation or as an outlet of frustration' (Sered 1994:62). Developed by Lewis (1975) on the basis of his research on Zar possession among Somalian women, deprivation theory propagates that religious conversion and participation by women can be explained in terms of their social, economic, political, psychological or gender-based afflictions. As the epitome of the functionalist train of thought deprivation theory reduces 'the religious' to 'the non-religious'. Women are not supposed to convert to or participate in a certain religion as an expression of spiritual quest, but because membership of a certain religious group provides them with social contacts, economic security, authority, alternative gender-models or an emotional exhaust-valve. Although some 15 years after its introduction Lewis abandoned deprivation theory as explanatory model, deprivation theory is still popular among scholars studying women's religion.

In Lerch' study on women in Umbanda cults, for example, we find ample evidence of the unfading influence of deprivation theory. Lerch argues that the predominance of female spirit mediums in Umbanda *terreiros* or temples in Porto Alegre, Brazil, is a reflection of the fact that the role of spirit medium 'emphasises "feminine" qualities in recruitment and (...) offers women (...) access to power and thus offsets the relative powerlessness typical of comparable socio-economic roles available to them in the modern economy' (Lerch 1982:238). Thus, becoming a spirit medium in an Umbanda temple is regarded rather a viable coping strategy for economically deprived women who possess precisely the required skills thanks to their roles as mother and (house)wife, than a way of securing long-lasting, intimate relationships with noncorporeal entities such as spirits.

Likewise, in her article on women in the Pentecostal movement in Bolivia's capital La Paz Gill (1990:716) states that through Pentecostal conversion women attempt to 'come to terms with gender- and class-based sufferings'. Membership of a Pentecostal church provides women with 'the possibility of establishing new social relationships' and adopting new gender roles, which are economically, emotionally and socially useful and which are validated through the Pentecostal rituals and beliefs.

As the latter example already indicates, women do not only convert to (a new) religion because it 'offsets', makes up for or neutralises political powerlessness, poverty, disorientation, illiteracy, stress or illness, but also because religious participation might be perceived as a step towards greater independence. As such, deprivation theory often has been reformulated as independence-theory that stresses women's autonomy and self-determination instead of their dependency and subordination. In fact, deprivation theory and independence theory are two sides of the same coin (Sered 1997:64) and roughly can be criticised for the same flaws.

In the first place, both theories are incurably functionalist in nature and seem to 'attempt to exorcise the demons [of mystery, paradox, and indeterminacy] with the ritual potency of a variety of reductionist discourses' (Cucchiari 1988:417). The spiritual and subjective has been dismissed as invisible and with that as scientifically unknowable and unprovable. Thus, neither deprivation theory nor independence theory explains why women start participating in religious groups, while membership of a nonreligious organisation would make a good or perhaps even better alternative given the 'deprived' situation in which most women apparently find themselves. In the second place, deprivation and independence theory suggest 'an externally determined subject who reacts to stimuli with a characteristic behaviour' (Cucchiari 1988:437). In short, they are rather mechanistic in nature, leaning heavily on structural determination and

historical causality. Accordingly, conversion stories of women are interpreted exclusively by reference to women's social, economic and political roles in society.¹⁷

Apart from theorising why women turn to religion, attempts have been made to conceptualise the way in which women shape their religious beliefs and practices. The most important theoretical contribution in respect of this issue is known by the name 'appropriation theory'. Appropriation theory assumes that people, who are excluded from official religion, appropriate elements of this institutionalised religion to produce their own, idiosyncratic version of it.

A striking example of appropriation theory is found in Sered's domestication thesis. On the basis of her research among elderly Jewish women in Israel Sered has developed the concept of 'domestication of religion', which she defines as 'the process in which people who profess their allegiance to a wider religious tradition personalise the rituals, institutions, symbols and theology of that *wider system* in order to safeguard the well-being of particular individuals with whom they are linked through relationships of care' (Sered 1988:506, italics added). 'Individuals who have a great deal invested in personal relationships, and who are excluded from formal power within an institutional framework, tend to be associated with a personally-oriented religious mode' (ibid). Although these individuals are not women per definition, it is particularly women who are engaged in the 'personalisation' of rituals and symbols of 'the wider system'.

Another example we find in McGuire's *Religion: The Social Context*, in which she makes the following, highly illustrative observation. 'A woman's religious experience and what she holds religiously most important are qualitatively different from men's religious experience and focus. Women's religion is nevertheless shaped heavily by the *larger* group because it is not a separate religion. The larger group attempts to form the individual's role through its teachings, symbols, rituals, and traditions. Thus, in the example of the Orthodox community, women's religion is strongly influenced by *men's* ideas of what a properly religious woman should do and be' (McGuire 1992:113, italics added).

Indeed, it is generally accepted that women and men, both as individuals and as groups, reinterpret and modify the teachings, values, rituals, and beliefs of the religious tradition to which they belong. In applying appropriation theory to women's religion¹⁸, however, Sered and McGuire go one step further and endow men's religious interpretations, practices and experiences with the predicates 'larger' and 'system'. Men's religious beliefs and practices are tacitly identified as being the most important expression of religious traditions as well as being constitutive of religious systems. Women's religious beliefs and practices, on the contrary, are stamped as personal 'version's of that 'mainstream' religion and are neither supposed to be coherent and consistent, nor to create, constitute or transform religious systems (Jacobs & de Theije 1996:12,15). Given the numerical predominance of women in most religions and their central roles in the organisation of religious systems, these tacit assumptions do not hold out. This will be illustrated in detail in chapter 4, which deals with the social organisation of the Brazilian catholic base communities studied for the purposes of this book.

A third theoretical approach in religion and gender studies, which in a way complements deprivation theory and appropriation theory by focusing on questions concerning the gendered dynamics of religious organisational processes, is the 'institutionalisation thesis' or theory. Several scholars have pointed out that in the process of institutional differentiation women's religious roles, beliefs and rituals are generally marginalised or excluded altogether (McGuire

17 Of course, this does not alter the fact that women can economically, politically, socially or psychologically benefit from religious membership.

18 The term women's religion is used for purely pragmatic reasons as a short indication of women's religious experiences, ideas and practices.

1992, DeChant 1993, Janssen 1993, Van Halsema 1991,1993). More specifically, it is the combination of the establishment of internal ranks and the centralisation of power (Sered 1994:254) that leads to the exclusion of women from positions of authority and the relegation of women's religious expressions to what is designated as the 'informal', 'noninstitutional', or 'private' domain.

Van Halsema, for example, has described how in the Afro-Brazilian religion Umbanda leadership positions were taken over by men when umbandistas started forming so-called federations, which had to administer the *terreiros* and publish materials in order to bring about unity concerning organisation and content. From these positions in the federations men 'set the rules and frameworks within which women, and especially female leaders, can operate at a local level' (Van Halsema 1993:3).

Clearly, one can argue that this process of religious institutionalisation generally involves the marginalisation of women since men are getting in the front ranks. Also, one can give more weight to men's religious roles and rituals as these get officially acknowledged by a higher power and are laid down in written rules and regulations. One can ask oneself, however, if a description of power-changes in terms of institutionalisation is a good graduator for power that is exercised in the religious field. Furthermore, as Dubisch has remarked quick-wittedly: 'men's public performances, rather than being an indication of their power, may be a manifestation of their lack of power in a central institution of social life, that is, within the domestic realm' (Dubisch 1991:40).

In reviewing deprivation, domestication and institutionalisation theory we have seen that in the short history of the anthropology of religion and gender a number of ruling thoughts have crystallised that have certainly stimulated developments in this academic field. At the same time, however, I think that a disquieting starting-point underlying the earlier listed central questions and the answers given to them in the shape of these theories or hypotheses has floated to the surface. In one way or the other, women's religious ideas, practices and experiences are supposed to be *derived from, encompassed by* and *subject to* men's religion, which is regarded as the '*wider system*' or '*mainstream religion*'. Therefore, women's religion is thought to be *in special need of explanation*, for which inspiration is sought primarily in psychological and sociological theories, as has been shown.

Thus, although in ethnographic or empirical respect religious women have become more and more visible in studies in the area of religion and gender, as many data have been gathered on women's religious leadership, conversion stories, rituals, and the like, in theories available for the interpretation of these data women's specific religious experiences still tend to disappear behind male-based and male-biased concepts and frameworks. Generally, female religious actors tacitly figure as reactive, passive human beings, whose religious expressions are labelled as 'personal', 'idiosyncratic', 'informal' and 'inconsistent' and are seen as a derivation of men's religious system. Male religious actors, on the contrary, are endowed with creativity, activity and initiative and their supposedly 'formal', 'consistent' and 'logic' religious expressions are thought of in terms of 'system' or 'institution'. Apart from the stigmatising effect of these labels for both men's and women's religiosity, it is the either positive or negative connotation that these labels generally carry which can be considered as highly problematic. After all, as with most dichotomies that originated from western dualistic thinking, these opposite qualifications do not only denote distinction but also hierarchy.¹⁹ Therefore, apart from the status of women as subjects in scientific inquiry as touched upon in my short review of literature on women in

¹⁹ This calls our attention to the importance of power to gender-relations in both the religious and the academic world, an aspect of gender relations which will be dealt with extensively in chapter 4.

Brazilian CEBs, it is the deconstruction or dismantling of binary oppositions and gendered concepts that is at the heart of this study, questioning the male focus and bias of the theoretical insights available.

1.3.3 Question-raising

Above I have showed that, despite the popularity of women's studies, both non-feminist and feminist scholars have studied women's religious ideas and practices almost exclusively in the context of men's religion, have interpreted them with the use of male-biased concepts and have valued women's religious lives by male standards. These observations left me with two basic questions for the research project on changing gender-relations in Brazilian CEBs. How can women's religious lives in CEBs be *researched* and *represented* in a way that does justice to their own experiences, preoccupations, interests, and viewpoints? And how can women's religious lives be *interpreted* without in advance relegating their religious ideas and practices to the domestic, unofficial, informal and hence less important and valuable sphere? In other words, how can we engage in an anthropological enterprise that goes beyond dichotomic thinking and includes women's insights and experiences in theory-building on gender and religion? It was these methodological and theoretical questions, summed up with the questions of a more empirical nature concerning the interrelation between the symbolical, organisational and individual (see sub-section 1.1.3), that led to the final research questions and research methodology chosen, which will be elucidated in the next section. First, the assumptions and key concepts central to the research are voiced. Second, the objectives and research questions are mapped out. Finally, the employed research methodology is elaborated upon.

1.4 The research project

1.4.1 Assumptions and key concepts

This study has four assumptions as its starting-point, which are all of equal relevance. They concern the meaning of gender to social life, the role of religion in society, the relation between gender and religion, and interrelation between men's religion and women's religion respectively. The first assumption regarding the meaning of gender in social life is voiced perfectly by Bynum's observation that 'all human beings are gendered' (1986:2) and by Scott's much quoted phrase saying that 'gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power' (1986:94). As both quotations exhale, gender is a central organising principle that shapes, pervades and gives meaning to socio-cultural arrangements and psychological constitutions. It provides people with models for masculine and feminine behaviour, while at the same time it is being modelled by cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Generally, gender is defined as the cultural, social and psychological construction of femininity and masculinity and as such it is distinguished from biological sex as a physical fact. Being constructs of human thought and action, the content, shape and degree of perceived differences between the sexes can vary considerably both intra- and interculturally. In the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, for example, female leadership is the norm and male leadership 'is believed to be against his nature', so that 'it is almost as difficult for a man to become great in Candomblé as it is for him to have a baby' (Landes 1947:36). In many other religious

communities, however, leadership positions are exclusively reserved for men, who are culturally endowed with qualities such as rationality, preponderance and decisiveness.²⁰

At the cultural level, gender refers to the construction of a symbolic system of meanings with masculine or feminine connotations that explains, reinforces, transforms and sometimes opposes gender divisions. At the social level, gender informs the creation and conception of organisational structures, through which tasks and responsibilities are allocated differently to women and men. At the psychological level, finally, gender is implicated in the (re)production of gendered components of individual identity. Because of its intrinsic constructivist nature, gender is characterised by a dimension of power, as has already come to the fore when I shortly discussed the feminist notions of subordination, inequality, and construction in section 1.3. Symbolically, socially and individually, the 'essence' of femininity and masculinity is constantly being contested, in which processes, mechanisms and resources of influence, coercion, legitimisation, domination, repression, mutual dependency and the like play an important role. One of the fields in which gender generally is a main issue is the religious field, which brings me to my second assumption.

In this study, I further assume that religion has a primary meaning and function in processes of cultural construction and social organisation. No other area of life seems to be so closely intertwined with questions of truth, reality and meaning and provides people with so many tools or resources to handle life. Religious rituals and symbols generally provide people with a window to understand and structure the world around them, including differences between the sexes. Although, like gender, religion is of great importance to human beings, it is substantially more difficult to define. Up to now I have not come across a satisfactory definition that does not in advance exclude women's presumed 'informal', 'unofficial' or 'private' religious practices. This is a symptom of much more serious problems in the study of religion with which I deal in greater detail in the chapters that follow to this introduction. Therefore, at this particular point I will limit myself to giving a provisional definition for the sake of clarity, which is an adjusted version of an operational definition designed by Klass. 'Religion in a given society is that process of (...) interaction among the members of that society - and between them and the universe at large as they conceive it to be constituted - which provides them with meaning, coherence, direction, unity, easement, and whatever degree of control over events they perceive as possible' (Klass 1995:38).

The third assumption concerns the interwovenness of religion and gender. Above I have stated that both religion and gender play a very important role in processes of meaning-making. Notions of masculinity and femininity as well as conceptions of the transcendent, incorporeal or the unseen colour the meaning that people attach to that which they experience, do and think. Apart from being both important signifiers, religion and gender are also closely intertwined. Religion shapes gender symbolism, gender roles and gender identity, a well-known example of which is found in the Virgin Mary, whose chastity and virginity have defined decent behaviour on young catholic women for centuries. Inversely, gender too shapes religious symbolism, roles and identity. For example, cultural ideas concerning the nature of (fe)male sexuality and celibacy influence the degree of freedom of movement of friars and sisters differently.

²⁰ Although recently the distinction between sex and gender has come under attack, because of the simple fact that 'we have no access to sex except through the social construction of sex, i.e. sex becomes absorbed by gender' (Moore 1994), I want to maintain this distinction; I agree with Brouns (1993:13) that taking the stance of radical constructivists, who regard both gender and sex as cultural constructs, would imply the loss of the power perspective, because sexual differences would no longer be distinguishable from sexual inequality. See also Ahmed (1998), Assiter (1996), Butler (1993), Friedman (1998), Humes (1996) and Herdt (1996) for enlightening discussions on the sex-gender distinction.

Fourthly, I assume that women's religion is not by definition encompassed by and subject to men's religion. Therefore, women's religion should not be studied expressly or solely as a derivative of or deviation from men's religion. I view women, like men, as creative social actors who are capable of shaping their religious lives in constant dialogue with prevalent social and cultural forces.²¹ Consequently, I presuppose that men's and women's religious expressions are interdependent and can be fruitfully studied in relation to each other, but can sometimes be marked by relative autonomy of which examples are given in the chapters to follow.

1.4.2 Objectives and research questions

On the basis of the reflection on women in CEBs given in section two, the overview and criticism of the study of religion and gender presented in section three, and the assumptions and concepts elaborated upon above, I have formulated the following objectives and research questions.

The objective of this study is two-fold. At the empirical level, it seeks to offer an ethnographic account of gender-relations in catholic base communities in the parish of São Pio X, which is located in the neighbourhood Barro that lies in the periphery of the Brazilian city of Águas in Rio Grande do Sul. Using life stories of and interviews with female members, lay leaders, and nuns of these base communities, distinct efforts are made to reconstruct women's contribution to the development of CEBs in Águas, and to voice women's religious practices and experiences in every day life.

At the theoretical level, this study intends to map out the study-field of religion and gender, explore its limitations and suggest new avenues for interpreting particularly women's religiosity. Incited by and grounded in the works and lives of the CEB members, lay leaders, pastoral agents and priests, who shared their fears, hopes, sorrows and happiness with me for one and a half years, the alternative course suggested seeks to put the imperative dualistic and hierarchical western thinking behind and to arrive at gender-inclusive theoretical considerations of the relation between religion and gender.

Thus, women are central to this dissertation in two ways. First, in the ethnographic 'reality' presented here it is particularly religious women who are put to the forefront. The leading research question in this is *what form and content women of the Brazilian catholic base communities in the parish São Pio X in Águas (Rio Grande do Sul) have given to their religious lives over time?* In other words, how do women express and experience their religious conviction and social concern within the domain of catholic base communities? In answering this empirically oriented research question I focus on the ideological, organisational and psychological level successively. At the ideological level questions concerning CEB-women's perspectives²² on the religious in general and Liberation Theology in particular are discussed, as well as the ways in which CEB- women ritual and symbolically experience and express their religiosity within the realms of the base communities: what do CEB-women hold and make of the religious and Liberation Theology? At the social level, issues of the division of tasks and responsibilities, the organisational structure, the institutionalisation of leadership and participation along gender lines in CEBs is addressed. How do CEB women act within CEBs and what limits are set to their participation? At the psychological level, lastly, the local dynamics of the formation of gendered identities in the religious field are focused upon. How do female

21 This emphasis on actors' creativity reminds of Arendt's notion of natality, with which she refers to people's ability to come up with something new, both in thought and practice (Arendt 1958).

22 See for a discussion on the legitimacy of distinguishing women's perspectives from men's perspectives the works of Trinh (1983) and Bartels (1993).

members, lay leaders, friars, nuns and priests (re)produce a gendered identity within the confines of the CEBs?

Second, the theoretical perspectives offered adopted in this book explicitly have women, femininity and femaleness as their frame of reference in order to arrive at interpretations that (re)value women's ways of being, seeing, acting, and experiencing in the religious field. The central question on which this intellectually demanding and politically engaging challenge is inspired is *how women's religious lives can be represented and interpreted when taking women's priorities and life experiences as a starting-point*, i.e. when not falling back on male-biased and male-based scientific concepts and when not stating a priori that women's perspectives are to a great extent constrained and conditioned by the dominant ideology (Ortner & Whitehead 1981)? In addressing this theoretically oriented research question I will alternate the presentation of ethnographic material based on in-depth interviews and life stories with the introduction of relevant (feminist) anthropological concepts and evaluate their usefulness in interpreting women's religious lives in CEBs.

Summarising, this book is intended to provide both a description and analysis of the feminine way or '*jeito feminino*' of believing, organising and identifying in South Brazilian base communities. This is not done with the intention to overthrow or discredit other studies on Liberationist Catholicism and religious women, but with the objective to provide a necessary, yet inevitably partial, complement to existing perspectives on religion and gender.²³

1.4.3 Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted in the catholic base communities of the Brazilian parish São Pio X in the popular neighbourhood Barro in Águas, Rio Grande do Sul from February 1994 until august 1995. During this fieldwork period, I participated on a regular basis in the different activities and meetings of the base communities and related groups, such as the mothers' clubs, the pastorate of health and the association for the disabled. Once relationships of trust were established, I recorded 18 life stories of female members, lay leaders, nuns, friars and priests, and held approximately 120 supplementary in-depth interviews on the three basic sub-themes: symbolism, social organisation and identity. Furthermore, secondary sources like newspapers, parish books, minutes, and other written accounts were consulted in order to facilitate a reconstruction of the neighbourhood's history and the development of its catholic base communities since the end of the 1970s.

The most inspiring of these research methods and techniques, the recording of life stories, perhaps requires some first explanatory remarks. The biographical method was developed by the sociologists Thomas & Znaniecki and the anthropologist Radin at the beginning of this century²⁴, who held different opinions on the starting-points, procedures and desired results of biographical research. Whereas Thomas & Znaniecki (1918-1920) recorded detailed life stories of socially marginalised groups individuals to further the development of sociological theory, Radin (1920)

23 As Harding voices it: 'women's lives are shaped by the rules of femininity or womanliness; in this sense, they express "feminine culture". Perhaps the critic of standpoint theories thinks feminists are defending femininity and thus "their own culture". (...) [But] feminist thought does not try to substitute loyalty to femininity for the loyalty to masculinity (...). It criticizes all gender loyalties as capable of producing only partial and distorted results of research. However, it must do this while also arguing that women's lives have been inappropriately devalued. Feminist thought is forced to "speak as" and on behalf of the very notion it criticizes and tries to dismantle – women' (Harding 1993: 59).

24 It should be noted, however, that as early as the 1890s initial efforts were made by the first generation of college-educated women to record the lives of eminent American women (Reinharz 1992:126).

shunned interpretation of biographical information and provided the anthropological world of his days with the integral, unedited life story of an American Indian.

The great diversity in biographies that were published following these rather different exercises in the biographical method have invariably reflected the different weighing that scholars made concerning questions of structuration and subjectivity. Limiting herself to the two extremes of a continuum, Morée (1992:44) has distinguished between spontaneous, descriptive and integral life stories that are an objective in themselves and structured, thematic and fragmented life stories that serve as a means to gain greater insight in social and cultural phenomena.

Parallel to this basic distinction, in the feminist anthropological tradition of oral (hi)stories, which was inspired on mentioned pioneering works and a renewed interest in women's individual lives during the 1960s, two approaches have been distinguished by Aerts et al (1988). The first approach aims at reconstructing a social reality hidden behind the life-stories of individual women. The second variant intends to provide insights into the way that women experience their roles, positions, tasks and responsibilities in a particular social reality. In the course of time, the boundaries between the distinct approaches and disciplines mentioned have faded, as has also been the case in my research.

I have used the biographical method in view of the possibilities it offered me to understand and interpret women's heterogeneous religious ideas and practices through the meaning that women themselves attach to them, and to put these meanings into a historical and contextual perspective. That is to say, life stories allowed me to connect to the daily practices, perspectives and experiences of CEB-women in the social, economic, political and religious field, and to develop theoretical insights that are rooted in this daily life of women.

Although I kept a short list of relevant themes in mind during our conversations, most interviewed women spontaneously related their whole life story after just one or two introductory questions from my side. It should be noted, however, that '(...) a personal history is not an unfolding. It is a construction, something made. What is 'made', specifically, is the coherence, intelligibility, and liveability of one's social relationships through time' (Connell 1987:220-1). To the women's constructions my construction is added, when I reproduce only small selections of meaningful parts of their life histories in this book and provide them with analytical remarks. As such, the biographical method can be questioned for its extremely subjective character, but as the Danish novelist Høeg has remarked: 'A story might not be always true, but the storyteller and the story together are always true'.

The life stories and interviews recorded on tape were transcribed by my research assistant, a Lutheran student of Theology, after which I analysed her transcriptions through a four-steps-plan. First, the obtained data were ordered in chronological and thematic respect in order to enhance my understanding of the historical and contextual setting in which events occurred and to distinguish relevant issues respectively. Next, both the original texts and reorganised fragments were analysed, focussing on recurrent themes, central concepts, contradictions and inconsistencies, and meta-statements. Third, the texts were interpreted at both the individual and group level, the group referring either to the imaginary community of CEB-women or to the base community as a whole, depending on the issue at stake. Fourth, the findings were evaluated for their theoretical implications for the study field of religion and gender.

1.5 Structure

The structure of this dissertation and its separate chapters requires some explanatory remarks, as it does not follow the unwritten rules prevalent in most academic circles concerning the design of theses. In other words, this thesis does not obey the rather rigid sequence of introduction,

theory, methodology, empirical data, and conclusion. As a consequence of the importance attached to women's religious experiences as voiced and interpreted by them, each chapter will start off with crude fieldwork data or unedited excerpts from women's life stories. Next, structured ethnographic data of the theme under discussion will be presented, alternated with theoretical reflections on important sub-themes. Finally, each chapter is concluded with a provisional summary of ethnographic and theoretical considerations, the loose threads of which will be taken up in the final chapter. This means that instead of following a sequential, linear order in presenting theory and data a parallel structure will be applied in which ethnography and theory are continuously consciously dovetailed and interwoven. This adopted structure resonates with my conviction that all forms of theory are directly dependent on and reflect 'a certain set of social experiences' (Flax 1987:628), which calls for a breakdown of the rigid lines drawn between practice and theory, subjectivity and objectivity, and the private and public (cf. Dubisch 1995:12).

Concordingly, the structure of the book is as follows. In chapter 2, the joint history of the neighbourhood Barro in Águas and the catholic base communities of the parish São Pio X in Águas is described, distinguishing the 'unofficial' history as told from the perspective of CEB-women and their lay leaders from the 'official' history as related by the clergy. In chapter 3, the focus is on CEB-women's perspective and experience of the religious in general and Liberation Theology in particular. A discussion is pursued on the genderedness of the religious field, the particularities of women's religiosity, and CEB-women reception of and contribution to Liberation Theology. Chapter 4 deals with the social organisation of CEBs: it describes the specific roles and positions of both common CEB-women and female lay leaders and analyses their participation with reference to an alternative concept of power. In chapter 5, the focus is turned to issues of identity. It describes the way in which CEB-women experience and position themselves c.q. are positioned by others in relation to the ideology and social organisation prevalent in CEBs. In chapter 6, the conclusions of the separate chapters are summarised and related explicitly to the research question as formulated above. On the basis of this recapitulation of research results and meditations, suggestions are put forward to arrive at a gender-inclusive anthropology of religion that is capable of reliably mirroring and analysing women's religious ideas and practices. After all, 'the real problem about incorporating women into anthropology lies not at the level of empirical research but at theoretical and analytical level' (Moore 1988:2).

2

The town Águas, the popular neighbourhood Barro and its CEBs in historical perspective (1874-1995)

2.1 Introduction

In 1992, the IBGE (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) announced that Águas was the city of Rio Grande do Sul ranking third in terms of favelisation, leaving the first and second place to Porto Alegre and Caxias do Sul respectively. In the local newspaper of 2 April 1993, the Águas Daily (*Diário de Águas*), the alarm was given: 1 out of 5 Aguenses was calculated to live in one of the 37 ‘irregular neighbourhoods’ (*vilas irregulares*) of the city under inhumane circumstances:

“Generally, they are obliged to live alongside enormous, open-air drainage trenches, which are not taken care of and end up in the rivers; they often lack water and electricity supply. Taunted by constant and repetitive outbreaks of louse, scabies, jigger and other diseases like verminosis, these 20% of the Aguense population who occupy a piece of land hardly escape the classification of favelisation”.

The biggest and poorest irregular neighbourhood of Águas is Barro¹. Unlike the other neighbourhoods, however, Barro is locally and regionally not exclusively known for the miserable circumstances that the people living there face daily, but also for the religiously inspired social and political engagement of its inhabitants. The ecclesial base communities and other popular initiatives that have arisen in Barro have brought forth a great number of leaders, who are acting in a vast array of local and regional organisations, boards, committees, parties, and the like, and have served as an inspirational source for other popular movements. For example, when in 1993 the Aguense Tutelary Council of the Child and Adolescent (*Conselho Tutelar da Criança e do Adolescente*)² was founded, the four councillors elected were all lay leaders who had received their training in one of the 15 ecclesial base communities that Barro counts.

In this chapter, the history of the city of Águas, the neighbourhood Barro and its ecclesial base communities is related. A description of the genesis and development of Águas is given in section two, which is primarily based on the few written sources available on the history of Águas and on the memories of the first settlers of Barro, who by now are mostly in their sixties and seventies.

The focus of the historical and contextual descriptions is then turned to Barro, Águas’ popular neighbourhood that came into existence as a result of two land occupations that were organised by newly founded ecclesial base communities towards the end of the 1970s. Since the very beginning, the history of the neighbourhood Barro and the development of the local ecclesial base communities have been closely interwoven and are therefore discussed simultaneously. Their joint history is, however, described from two different perspectives,

1 As with Águas, the name Barro (Mud) is a pseudonym. Symbolically, the pseudonym chosen is closely associated with the actual nickname of the neighbourhood, which carries negative connotations of “dirt and mud” and of “being the lowest of the lowest”, according to its inhabitants. The explanation given for the origins of the town-name Águas is also directly derived from the historical accounts on Águas and thus close to its original name in the symbolical sense.

2 The Tutelary Council intends to ‘transform itself in the short run into the primary agent that helps, assists and trains destitute youngsters, in particular the 11.000 children of our town who live in a situation of extreme misery. (...) In the period from October 1993 until August 1994, 4.476 children were attended who were implied in 1.119 incidents, primarily involving maltreatment, general misbehaviour, family conflicts, criminal acts, elopement, begging, abandonment, and sexual abuse’ (Boletim Comemorativo ao Primeiro Aniversário do Conselho Tutelar de Águas, 1994, my translation).

covering both the ‘unofficial’ and ‘official’³ narratives that circulate in Barro. Section three relates the unofficial history that voices the memorised experiences, thoughts and actions of common CEB-members and the lay leaders and pastoral agents of the first hour, most of whom are female. This reconstruction is a result of the analysis of life stories, interviews, informal conversations, minutes of meetings, leaflets, and a memorial book of one of the central female leaders. In section four, the floor is given to the official history of Barro and its CEBs, as related to me by the former clergy and present priests and friars, all male, through life stories, interviews, lively discussions, the parish book (*livro de tombo*), minutes and videotapes of meetings, and master theses based on their own fieldwork experiences in the neighbourhood. The chapter is concluded with a summarising analysis of the most important phases in the development of ecclesial base communities and a reflection on meaningful differences between the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ history.

2.2 The birth and generation of Águas (1874-1979)

The construction of the railway between Porto Alegre and São Leopoldo in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, which was inaugurated on the 14th of April 1874, was the starting point of the formation of a new village⁴. On the so-called *Fazenda da Brigadeira*, where landowners camped regularly accompanied by their family members, soon the first guards (*posteiros*) and vergers (*zeladores*) of the farms (*fazendas*) formed a small settlement, consisting of various ranches where they as well as the landowners’ slaves⁵ lived. This settlement received the name Águas, referring to both the swampy and open waters crossed by four Indian brothers, who transported timber-wood and other commodities by canoe from the estates of the landowner Major Vicente Ferrer da Silva Freire to his house in Porto Alegre.

The actual spot of Águas was determined by Major Vicente himself, who had inherited his landed property in 1836 from his father Colonel Vicente, owner of the extensive Fazenda do

3 In feminist literature the distinction between ‘unofficial’ and ‘official’ is correctly criticised for being rather arbitrary, biased and exclusive in the sense that it a) obfuscates the constant interplay between the unofficial and official, b) generally equates ‘the official’ with the male domain and the unofficial with the female domain, and c) reinforces the assumption that the unofficial (female) is subordinate to the official (hence male). Nonetheless, in the absence of more appropriate terms, in this chapter I use the term ‘unofficial history’ to refer to the history of Águas and its CEBs as told by common CEB-members, and the term ‘official history’ to voice the accounts given by their pastoral agents on the development of the town, neighbourhood and religious communities, either in speaking or writing. While using these terms, however, I do not automatically assume that the unofficial discourse on the history of Águas and its base communities is marginal or subordinate to the official discourse on their joint histories.

4 There is, however, evidence of the existence of earlier settlers in the area. According to da Silva (1989:33-79), the territory of Águas had already been used as grazing ground and farmyard by cattle drivers from the Laguna and subsequently as an area for live stock breeding by the fazendeiro Francisco Pinto Bandeira, who was rendered the honorary title of first settler of Águas, povoador de Águas. Also, it had been functioning as a zone of military importance. The King of Portugal, John V, had ordered the expansion and consolidation of the frontiers of South-Brazil through the permanent occupation of the fields of Viamão that include the territory of Águas; therefore, in 1725 a group of pioneers were sent off to Viamão to protect the borders of Rio Grande, who prevented the entry of the Spanish and Indians in the military strategic territory of Rio Grande by erecting a fort and by inhabiting the area in small, scattered groups.

5 In the 18th century, slaves were committed to mount guardian posts near the borders of Rio Grande. Later on, they were increasingly used as protectors of the much smaller territories of private farms and as labourers on the lands and household that were part of these fazendas. In 1884, the emancipatory effects of the movement for the abolition of slavery were felt in Gravataí; Major Vicente, for example, organised a barbecue (*churrasco*) for his slaves and let them the choice to leave or stay at his fazenda. All of them stayed, but most settled independently in the woods or alongside the few roads of Águas, thereby turning into the other pioneer settlers of small-town Águas (da Silva 1989:45). Four years later, in 1888, slavery was abolished in Brazil.

Gravataí. The dimensions of Major Vicente's estates were made official and public in 1861, when the first, authorised map of this fazenda was drawn up. Probably encouraged by the legal status of his land title and by the anticipated visit of Peter II to São Leopoldo and other places of Rio Grande do Sul, Major Vicente had a prestigious mansion built at the banks of the Rio dos Sinos between 1865 and 1866, the example of which was followed by other wealthy landowners. Furthermore, Major Vicente arranged for the erection of a guardian post in the woods where the railway was to be built, in an attempt to prevent the arriving railway labourers from stealing or killing his live stock. All trees of the selected stretch of woodland were felled, the wood of which was worked into canoes needed by the guards to escape from the region in times of heavy rainfall and floods. It was this deforested strip where Águas was to about to develop, turning Major Vicente into the official founder (*fundador* or *iniciador do povoamento urbano*) of Águas.

Another landowner among the first people to settle in the accompaniment of their families and slave servants alongside the new railway was Colonel Barro of the *Guardia Nacional*. In the 1870s and 1880s he regularly bought pieces of land from other early settlers until his landed property stretched from the railway station to the banks of the *Rio dos Sinos* (lit. the River of Bells). Up to the 1950s, Colonel Barro put it to use as a plantation for the cultivation of wet rice; later on, it would turn into the popular neighbourhood Barro, the cradle of many ecclesial base communities.

From 1885 onwards the population grew rapidly, as Águas turned into a favourite summer-residence and retreat of well-to-do Porto Alegrenses. Making use of the extra train services on Saturdays and Sundays, wealthy families used to picnic on the open spot close to the railway station in the *Capão de Águas* (Coppice of Águas), later to be called *Estação* (railway-station) *de Águas*. The success of *Capão the Águas* was partly due to a German named Witrock, who bought some land from Major Vicente very near to the spot. He arranged for a German style restaurant and hotel, and provided for small wandering tracks in the most beautiful parts of the woods. The upper class families that had initially visited Witrock's premises and the *Capão de Águas* started to build their own summer chalets on lots they had bought from Major Vicente towards the turn of the century. As a consequence, in 1907 Águas counted already about 600 inhabitants, who were living in approximately 100 buildings and were primarily engaged in the cultivation of fruits, grapes and figs.

In 1912, Águas turned into the official seat of the fourth district of the municipality Gravataí; in March 1938 it gained the status of *vila* (small town or borough) and two years later Águas was considered an autonomous municipality. At this time, approximately 12.000 people were living in Águas, who were mainly occupied as day-labourers, cultivators, entrepreneurs, and contractors.

The growing presence of landowners, summer-guests, labourers who worked on the extension of the railway, vergers, guards and others for its part stimulated the development of small local industrial activities. New Aguenses arrived from all over the state to work as small industrialists and factory workers. Increasingly, lots were sold and rented along the ancient high-road (the so-called *antiga faixinha*), which nowadays still is one of the main roads of Águas.

In the 1950s, the process of industrialisation really took off in the metropolis of Porto Alegre. Job opportunities in the port, construction, petrochemics and metallurgy led many people to migrate to the peripheral area of Águas. They left their native soil in the interior of the states of Santa Catarina, Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul behind and settled on illegal as well as legal *lotes*⁶ (plots) and on disputed grounds.

6. In 1954, the municipalities of Porto Alegre and Águas enacted leis de loteamento (land laws) in an attempt to control the process of urbanization. This led the so-called loteadores to act primarily in the municipalities of

Migrants did not only arrive from various regions, also their ethnic and cultural backgrounds varied considerably. Most of them were descendants of the European migrants, who had come to the South of Brazil since the beginning of the 19th century as a consequence of official colonisation policy. In 1808, the Portuguese emperor and coloniser João VI by decree had ordered the opening up of the ports for foreigners and had provided them with the right to land property. These measures were taken mainly for geopolitical, demographic and economic reasons. The colonial government intended to foster trade relations between Brazil and Europe, to stimulate the occupation and cultivation of land, particularly in the southern regions of Brazil, and to meet the growing shortage of manual labour on the coffee estates. In this way, the colonial government hoped to increase the economic value and productivity of the land (Petroni 1982:32), to protect the southern frontiers against Spanish attacks⁷, and to 'whiten the Brazilian race' (*branqueamento da raça*) that was considered to be 'too black' in those days (Petroni 1982:38-45). Between 1851 and 1953 an estimated 5 million Europeans migrated to Brazil (Marli Lando & Cruxên Barros 1981:29).

Bringing along their Italian, German, Swiss, Dutch, Polish, and Russian cultural traditions and language, and mixing with the ex-slaves and other Águenses already present, Águas in general and the forming popular vilas in particular turned into a melting pot of distinct popular cultures.

"In my family you can see the history of Brazil. My grandfather was the son of ... well, you know, he did work for a patron.... He was a slave boy, in fact. But when he was small, slavery was abolished, so he could go wherever he wanted. My grandmother was a black woman (*uma pretinha*) from Bahia. They had a lot of children, my father was one of them. He ran off with my mother, an Italian girl, she was beautiful. It was a big scandal in those days. Well, and my children all married people from the neighbourhood (*da vila*). When it comes to my grandchildren, everything is present (*tem de tudo*): little whites, little blacks, browns, everything."

In their home village most of the migrants had worked as small farmers or rural labourers, and had lived under harsh conditions that were well-remembered by all elderly female leaders of the local CEBs.

"I don't know how to read or write. My parents were very poor and could not send us to school. We lived in the country in a wooden small house, which was entered by the wind at all sides (*onde entrava o vento por tudo que é lado*). We felt hungry and cold all the time."

Dona Marinete

"I was born in the country. We always had to work. I had no infancy, especially because I am the eldest of seven sisters. I worked day and night, each and every year: cleaning the table with a broom, milking the cows, taking care of the pigs, fetching water and brush wood for the oven, cleaning the iron pans, taking care of the small ones [her siblings]...When I was 16, I got married, I was ready to start my own family. My husband had a problem with his stomach, so he couldn't work on the land, it was right in the middle of the harvesting season. I had to pull out the onions with my pregnant

Viamão, Gravataí and Guaíba, which turned into the first dormitory suburbs. It was only from the beginning of the 1980s onwards, that the newly founded neighbourhood Barro developed into a dormitory, sheltering thousands of workers for the nearby metropolis Porto Alegre.

⁷ Officially, for this purpose the immigrants were solely stimulated to colonise and inhabit the southern regions of Brazil for this purpose. In practice, however, under the veil of 'colonisation' part of them was recruited to serve as soldiers in the foreign battalions that had to defend the borders (Marli Lando & Cruxên Barros 1981:35).

belly (*barriga de gravidez*), bending carefully over with one leg to each side... It was a harsh life. I lived close to my parents, but I did all the work by myself.

When I was 25, I was widowed. Perhaps my husband died of cancer, the doctors of that time didn't know. I had a nervous breakdown and the doctor said I had to return living with my parents... to not stay alone. 'But why can't I go to Porto Alegre?', I thought. I had a brother there. They [the parents] said: 'Leave the two children with us', but I couldn't. After all, I had already lost my husband. We went to Porto Alegre, and I started cleaning for the company of my brother. There, many new problems awaited me, as I had no husband, no home and no money. And I only knew my brother there."

Dona Maria

The isolation and protection of the country was traded by the relative insecurity of and unfamiliarity with the developing town of Águas. For some, their move to Águas was an outright shock, as Dona Marinete so evocatively related:

"That day I got married. And that very night I moved house to Águas. I had no idea where I was, it was still a real wood here. I didn't know a single soul. I was very much alone, without my family, and I was even afraid to put my head out of the window, as I was afraid of the blacks (*negros*) passing my house. Just imagine, I had never seen a black! I thought the devil had sent them. But then the woman next door came to see me and asked: "Hey, Dona Marinete, would you like to come to the Sunday Mass?" So I went and from that day onwards little by little I got used to living here."

Dona Marinete

Part of Águas' new population settled in the immediate vicinity of the area of Barro that was situated in the North Eastern part of Águas on the humid and flat land of the fazenda owned by Colonel Barro. Until the 1950s the land, which was surrounded by big swamps and thick woods, had been exploited as a rice plantation that was gradually abandoned by its owner⁸.

The few people living in the area of Barro itself were plagued by frequent inundations, caused by the Rio dos Sinos that regularly crossed its borders as a consequence of heavy rainfall⁹. In 1965, a serious flood struck the area of Barro; for two months there were no celebrations in the local church as the water reached to its windows, at a height of approximately 1.20 metres.

"Since I came to live here, six floods have occurred, one very serious (*muito brabo*) in 1965. Someone from the municipality came over twice to get us out, but I didn't want to leave my house behind. The third time it was a beautiful day, just like today, it drizzled a bit every now and then, but that was it. But the man said: 'Dona Irma, you have to leave right away, now, because a nasty inundation (*enchente feio*) is expected! I have reserved a safe place especially for you near to ... er... where the supermarket is now'.

I didn't want to believe it, but when I turned around and looked, I saw the water

8 'Already before 1930, rice had developed into an important cash crop [in Rio Grande do Sul]. (...) Especially during the 1940s and early 1950s, cultivated area and output increased, while substantial progress was made in terms of mechanization. But from the mid-1950s onwards, rice production stagnated: the area under cultivation hardly expanded, mechanization came to a hold, and output even dropped between 1955 and 1960' (Koonings 1994:187-8).

Part of this stagnation was due to the nature of regional industrial entrepreneurship: 'the small businessman predominated, as a rule organizing the company's administration along traditional family lines, which puts limits to both innovative capacity and financial possibilities' (Koonings 1994:194).

9 Until today, the lower (and poorer) parts of the neighbourhood are frequently inundated, since a proper drainage system and pumping-stations are still lacking. In 1995, the chapel of the ecclesial base community Sacred Heart (Sagrado Coração), which is located in this very area, was out of use for almost a month as the water reached to one's knees.

coming in such speed... it was rising and dragging along trees and all, girl oh girl! We left quickly, we escaped by boat. The stream was impressive. Never in my life I saw a thing like that. The water entered and ruined everything. We were desperate, but the friend of the mayor said: 'You have a roof over your head, your house is still erect. Look at those people over there, they even don't have a house anymore'."

Dona Irma, one of the first inhabitants of Barro

"I remember that one day a tornado passed through the neighbourhood. Where it passed, it took everything with it: roofs, bricks, wood, everything, everything. It passed almost right over my house with a terrible, terrible, roaring noise. I stayed inside with the children and prayed to God that he would save us."

Dona Cláudia, CEB lay leader

In the 1970s, as a consequence of the migration flow building up, the pressure on the available land increased. More and more people entered the swampy area of Barro itself and met with threats and insecurity. As friar Ivo explains: 'The process of the introduction of new shacks was met with intimidation from the part of the owners and their henchmen (*jagunços*). This process of intimidation consisted firstly of attempts to expel the person who installed himself individually on the terrain by building a "small ranch" ("*ranchinho*"). Confronted with the resistance by the person (who would tell about his degrading history of misery, his inability to pay rent, the struggle for his children, and would say that he just wanted a place to stay), the owner consented with his temporary stay, asking in return the person's co-operation in preventing the entrance of other settlers. He enforced claims with threats of burning down the person's house, with death threats, actual blows, etc. And the owner always used to say that he was about to rent the area, to work a plantation, et cetera.' (Fiorotti et al.1985:2).

Between the new settlers, who all struggled with the same problems and helped each other out occasionally in times of economic or personal distress like "a death in the family", the initial impetus for popular organisation was given around the feast of São João in the year 1976. The atmosphere of this feast, so popular among Brazilians, was described in a leaflet circulating in the neighbourhood.

'A campfire [was organised] in the centre of the green. There were people helping to pull the lorry that was carrying the remnants of tires. After that, they helped to prepare the campfire. Many people collaborated with a bit of money for the *quentão* (hot rum with sugar and ginger), sweet potatoes, and peanuts. An enormous fire was lit. And the people of the neighbourhood came together. An endless row of men, women, and children.

The accordions and guitars began to sound (*começaram o barulho*), and the gracious gauchos (*a gauchada fagueira*), each of them accompanied by his wife, were whirling about on the green. Also, a play was put on of a marriage in the country (*na roça*)! It was a shame that there was little chance to eat one's fill (*que a comilança fosse pouca*); we had expected 80 people at the maximum, but more than 300 turned up. But everything was well-shared (*a repartição foi boa*). Nevertheless, it was a shame that some could take home only the nice smell of the *quentão*!

The feast was a success and a few people realised that 'our neighbourhood needed a space for meetings, feasts, sport activities and so many other things. And we started to roll up our sleeves' (unpublished leaflet, s.d.). A petition was drawn up to demand the raising of the selected terrain with 40 centimetres and the installation of sewerage pipes. It was signed by 302 inhabitants and handed over to the mayor, who promised to send 150 trucks of soil. Also, 350 roofing tiles, 50 zinc sheets, and a number of chairs and old tables were acquired. In this way 'the unity and collaboration between the inhabitants grew' (ibid).

Spontaneous initiatives like these proved to be fertile soil for the development of popular organisations a few years later, when poor Aguenses who were living alongside a road traversing the abandoned rice plantation of Major Barro¹⁰, occupied part of this old fazenda. This first, well-organised occupation marked the beginning of Barro as a popular neighbourhood, and was soon followed by a second occupation. The genesis of the resulting Vila Santo Operário and Vila União dos Operários reflects the close interwovenness of their shared history and the rise of ecclesial base communities, on which two histories circulate.

2.3 The ‘unofficial’ history of Barro and its CEBs

In 1978 the Marist brother Antônio Cechin came to live in the *favela* of Guabijú, currently named Vila Cerne. Persecuted, jailed and tortured by the military regime after engaging in the writing of *fichas catequistas* using ideas of the Theology of Liberation and participating of the *Semana Internacional de Catequese* in Medellín, Cechin settled in Águas to “stay further away from the centre of the Church and of Porto Alegre”. He went to work in the periphery for both religious and safety reasons.

Friar Cechin rented a house in Vila Cerne and through the priest of the parish of São Miguel he came into contact with the couple Seu Roberto and Dona Carmen, the faith healers (*rezadores*) of the vila. They used to recite the chaplet on special occasions, opening the Bible and lighting a candle. Cechin and his sister Matilde, a catechist, proposed to take up the Bible for reading and reflection and after some time a small Bible-reading and a praying group formed. It was this group that provided the organisational base for the occupation of land, inspired by the theme of the novena of 1979: ‘Jesus occupied a stable to dwell, we, poor people occupy an uncultivated terrain to dwell’. Speaking with brother Antônio’s words: “the first ecclesial base community started to walk when the Bible entered”. From then on, the CEBs have valorised the Bible as ‘their book’. It occupies a prominent place in the chapels on the table of the Word (*mesa da Palavra*) and in the acts of celebration, and ‘accompanies the whole journey of the life of the people’ (undated pamphlet).

With the praying of chaplets and the rosary and reflections on the Bible as most important religious activity, the families involved in the Bible group extended their practice to the celebration of annual feasts, such as Christmas and Easter. For these celebrations, leaflets were prepared by brother Antônio with the intention to stimulate the reflection of the participating believers on their harsh living conditions, using Bible texts as an inspirational source. For example, the text for reflection during the Mass of Christmas 1977 read:

‘Today it is Christmas. It’s a night of happiness. Jesus is born in “crib because there is no place for him in the hostel”. Son of Mary and Joseph. The Son of God. João Barbosa is born in the queue at the INPS, because there’s no place for him at the hospital. Son of Antônio Severino and Maria Quitéria (common names of poor people from the North East of Brazil). Son of God. It’s a day of uncertainty: what will become of the son of this father who owns just one minimum wage?

Jesus is born poor, surrounded by pastors. João Barbosa is born poor, surrounded by untrustworthy people, beggars, and exploited workers.

It’s a day of gifts. Pedro Riquinho (Little Rich Peter) receives many presents. Jesus receives the persecution by Herodes who ordered the killing of the children. Today,

10 ‘The rice plantation was unproductive and the taxes had not been paid for many years. It only served for the harvesting of turf, which was transported by trucks to Porto Alegre for the laying out of borders close to newly built viaducts. The grass was removed and only an area of black earth remained’ (*A Força do Bairro*, September 1991, my translation).

Herodes kills through famine, through illness, or makes small, abandoned children head for a career in crime.

Christmas means feast. Antônio Severino did not get a day-off, because he could not afford to have his salary cut back. In the house of Riquinho the table is full of turkeys, champagne, nuts and cakes. In the hut of Maria Quitéria the pan is empty.

In Bethlehem, the affliction of Mary who gives birth in a stable. The pastors were sent the angel of the Lord. The queue at the INPS was sent a guard to get Maria Quitéria, who gave birth in the police car. The family of Riquinho is sent a roasted pig that they ordered at the best restaurant in town.

Today it's Christmas. Jesus is born in the children without schools and without a future. Jesus is born in the hearts of the workers who discover the force of their unity. Jesus is born in the womb of a prostitute who doesn't know love. Today it's the day that God is born in our hearts (...). Today is the day to demand justice where there's oppression, equality where there's discrimination, respect where there's exploitation, division of goods where there's division of class. Where love and justice is born, peace is born between people, and God is born.'

Leaflet for the Celebration of Christmas 1977

Similarly, for the feast of São João (the so-called *festas juninas*) a leaflet was made to which the message of John the Baptist was central: people were called upon to share their belongings with the poor in the harsh winter times in which the *festas juninas* take place: 'that people who have two suits give one to someone who has none'.

Women of the catholic families dwelling in the favela Guabijú and Vila Cerne who were involved in the religious meetings mentioned, decided to make blankets of old pieces of cloth and rags, which next were distributed among the poorest of the poor. Meeting weekly, this group of women formed the first mothers' club (*clube de mães*) or clothing mutirão¹¹ (*mutirão do vestuário*) of Águas in June 1979 and as such was primarily involved in charity (*serviço de caridade*). Initially, the women met every Tuesday and Thursday, but as the raw materials made available to them by a confection factory and pupils from a local catholic high school ran short within a year, they soon limited their meetings to Tuesdays and started focusing on the structural solution of daily problems through this and newly founded mothers' clubs. In doing so, they added one more form of popular mobilisation to other, already existent expressions of collective protest at the national level, such as the *Movimentos do Custo de Vida* (Movements of the Living Costs) and the *Associações de Moradores* (Housing Associations).

"So, there we started with some families, we slithered along (*patinamos*) for quite a while because our methodology was pretty precarious, (...). The whole thing accelerated in the second year that we went there, exactly when we started with.. . apart from some families that used to meet in function of the prayer.. . (...) when we started with the women in winter time around São João, they together making blankets of rags. (...) And so, starting with the women.. . with the children they brought along, we already organised a group of children that was led by either one of them.

When there was no more space in the house where I lived, we organised a tea-circle (*um chá*), and they brought their husbands, we enlarged the space and look: the base

11. The noun *mutirão* is probably derived from the word *mútuo*, which means mutual and refers to something that is done between two or more people on the basis of reciprocity. As such, a *mutirão* denotes a rather informal group of people that meets once or at a regular basis in order to reach by means of co-operation a specified practical goal, which the participants would not be able to reach when acting independently. In Águas, various *mutirões* exist, among which the *Mutirão de Mães* (*Clube de Mães*) attract most attention. In English, I have not come across a comparable noun.

community had risen, because we had what the ecclesiology of the CEBs says nowadays. We had the fundamental basic services: it started off with charity (*serviço da caridade* or *ministério do compromisso social*), which is the service of social engagement, isn't it, which was exactly making blankets, solve problems, invite other mothers who weren't part of the community, who were out of it, even *crente*, isn't it, Adventists, for the whole world to be involved in the making of blankets...

So, next to this, the mothers had the service of the Word (*serviço* or *ministério da Palavra*), linked to the Bible, the reflection, the hymns (*cantos*), and the children themselves also reflected on the basis of the *Evangelho*. (...) And there was the ministry of cult, of celebration (*ministério do culto*), isn't it, of liturgy, and... since these three ministries, services had to form a unity... the ministry of unity (*ministério da unidade*), the co-ordination of the community. So, the little church was complete. Well, and with this pilot-experience realised, it was easy for us to extend ourselves."

Antônio Cechin, Marist brother

As brother Antônio Cechin indicates above, the first ecclesial base community of Águas had formed under the impetus of women's participation. Subsequently, a chapel was erected in which all religious and communal activities took place.

The construction of chapels was not a new phenomenon in Rio Grande do Sul. Italian migrants or *colonos*, who started arriving in Brazil around 1870 and were employed as agricultural labourers or worked as small farmers, built innumerable *capitéis* and *capelas*¹². *Capitéis* were small chapels containing the image of a particular saint, which were erected by groups or individuals to express their devotion to that saint. Some of these *capitéis* developed into places of pilgrimage¹³, others into chapels although most chapels were built expressly as chapels. Chapels were of bigger size than the *capitéis* and functioned both as church and as community centre. In these chapels, which were directed either by lay leaders (*padre leigo* or *capelão*) or by chapel boards (*diretorias da capela* or *os fabriqueros*), the Mass was said, confirmation classes were held, the rosary was prayed and social events of the Italian communities took place in the so-called communal hall (*salão comunitário*) (Galioto 1988:24-30).

The arrival of ordained clergy in the region rang in the introduction of the parochial system. The chapels were assigned to specific parishes and priests were put responsible for the administration of the Holy Sacraments, the realisation of religious ceremonies and feasts such as processions, and the religious education in the settlements. According to Galioto (1988:28), religious life in the chapels was characterised by strong ritualism, veneration of saints, a constant search for the diminution of affliction and - following the romanisation of the Church - the importance of religious lay movements¹⁴.

Many of these traits of religious life in the chapels in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul also marked the initial character of the first ecclesial base communities in Águas. Formed on the basis of daily needs felt relentlessly in the poor favelas in Águas, the first CEBs practised an urbanised

12. Herewith they partly copied the model of the Italian Roman Catholic Church in rural areas, with the exception of Brazilian parishes integrating generally more than one chapel, whereas in Italy each parish consisted of just one chapel and had its own priest.

13. For example, the participants of the mothers' clubs and the municipal *Grupo da Terceira Idade* (Group for Elderly People) customarily pay a yearly or two-yearly visit to the holy sanctuary of Our Lady of Carvaggio in Farouilha.

14. Examples of religious lay movements are *Legião de Maria* (Legion of Mary), *Filhas de Maria* (Daughters of Mary), *Apostolado da Oração* (Apostolate of Prayer) and *Sagrado Coração de Jesus* (Sacred Heart of Jesus), of which only the Apostolate of Prayer is present in Águas.

form of popular Catholicism, using the surfacing ideas of Liberation Theology as an important source for inspiration.

In 1979, within the scope of Christmas a novena of nine weeks instead of nine days was organised in which base community members met weekly to pray and reflect on the meaning of Christmas to their own daily life. To stimulate the reflection, brother Antônio and his sister again prepared leaflets. In one of these so-called *fichas* the problem of housing was put forward, being an issue that had been raised earlier in the mothers' club: the lack and inaccessibility of land on which to construct a home, the lack of good drinking-water, seasonal floods and the like. These experiences were linked to readings of the *Evangelho* in which Joseph and Mary in vain searched for shelter after which Mary had to give birth to Jesus in a stable.

In the same period, weekly meetings also took place at the home of a Lutheran woman, Leontina. These meetings brought together people who were threatened by the police after having build their houses on the abandoned rice plantation, given the shortage of land in its direct surroundings. A Capuchin friar who arrived in 1987 in Barro recounts the events of the end of the 1970s as follows, stressing the important part played by CEB women in the land occupations.

“The history of the base communities in Águas started with Antônio Cechin and Dona Matilde. This group started in about 1979, 1980. Vila Santo Operário didn't exist yet, it was a big rice plantation, a *fazenda*. Next to it existed a big *favela*, called the *favela de Guabijú*. And Antônio and Matilde arrived there with the proposal of the Theology of Liberation, and something really needed to be done there. Antônio already was a Marist brother in that epoch and already had a national articulation with Leonardo Boff, Clódovis... a national movement for the Theology of Liberation was forming. This movement tried to construct itself on the basis of something fairly concrete. The discourse was there and passed through the political. So, in the 1970s there was nothing, there were things like the *Pastoral Operário*, the *Juventude Operária Católica*, there were these catholic movements. Something happened, but it never went beyond a certain level and there was no talk of transformations.

Then there was this methodology to descend and to make the people [*o povo*] subject itself to do things, break away from history and make things happen. So, they started with the community *Divino Mestre*, with the mothers' club, that still exists. This women's group was the starting point of the whole occupation, and there the feminine was represented, there enters the participation of the women in the history.

On Christmas 1979 the women organised a feast for all the poor children of the neighbourhood.. . until today they have this feast.. . and they decorated a mimosa tree, a tree full of spines. From this day onwards, with this story of Joseph and Mary they struggled for Jesus to be born, so they started struggling for the occupation of land. And all these women (*toda aquela mulherada*) with their children occupied the land... fighting with the police, building slum dwellings, occupying the land. At that time you had to run the risk to hazard your life for a cause, for an ideal. That was very strong back then. This came from the Gospel. It happened to me and for sure it happened to these women as well. They have this to them.. . to guarantee a life for their children, they go beyond this type of thing.

From then onwards they started occupying the whole vila, and you will notice that it is a very well wreathed vila. Parts were occupied to serve as communal space (...), so you can see that it was a very well organised occupation.”

Friar João, voicing the 'unofficial' history

In the house of Leontina more and more people gathered every week, until their number amounted to approximately 200 persons. It was decided to mark the area to be occupied with

wooden poles, thereby laying out the map of a big part of the future neighbourhood Barro, which in total (i.e. when including Vila União dos Operários) would come to measure 5,6 kilometre square: a perfect rectangular of 7 by 0,8 kilometre.

In the conviction that the area had already been plotted some people built a shed on the territories. They were soon driven off by the police, with some notable exceptions; families of which the women and children stayed at home during the day while their husbands and fathers were on the job were harassed by the police, but their houses were not demolished. This observation was later on turned into a viable strategy. In the week of Christmas the families occupied the area, which was divided into private lots and communal grounds where a school, chapel, nursery, and health post were to be established. Brother Antônio Cechin remember the measuring as follows:

“We used a very long rope with knots to establish the seize of each lot, and poles to mark the lots. So, just imagine us measuring this enormous array of mud land, of... swamp, just using a rope! Most lots measured about 12 x 30 metres.... And it was not easy, because of the size... but we succeeded”.

On the private lots sheds were build that were defended by the women and their off-spring. When the police arrived after having enjoyed some days-off, the whole plantation had been built upon. Two years later, in 1981, already 4.000 families were living in the occupied territory which was baptised with the name of Vila Santo Operário¹⁵, in the honour of Santos Dias da Silva, a factory worker who died in a manifestation of factory workers in São Paulo: referred to by a local PT-leader as “our fellow factoryworker (*companheiro operário*) who died fighting for unity and for better days for all factory workers in Brazil”.

The success of the occupation of the rice plantation spread rapidly through mouth-to-mouth communication between settlers in the wider area of Águas, and inspired a second occupation concerning an area next to the antique rice plantation, which was commonly referred to as *O Prado* (the Hippodrome). *O Prado*, one of the most famous horse race tracks in the Rio Grande do Sul of the 1950s¹⁶, had been deserted for some time when the mothers’ club in co-operation with the newly established local Neighbourhood Association and the help of brother Antônio and sister Matilda occupied the area.

“We [the mothers of the mothers’ club] worked here, with a few mothers sitting on the grass, as we had nowhere to settle ourselves. There we worked and we had to struggle very, very hard. Every week we were intimidated by Bergenthal, the so-called owner of *O Prado* (the old hippodrome). The police set our houses on fire, demolished our houses. Our struggle was horrible, but thanks to God we survived. (...) So, this big guy, mister Bergenthal, called himself the owner of all this. But we knew that it wasn’t true, that we saw so many people like us, who had nowhere to live. We invaded there because it was abandoned, there we camped. And we saw the people in need, under the bridges, in the streets; we weren't in the condition to buy a site, we didn't have the money to pay rent, so where were we to stay? Here! (...) But mister Bergenthal was the owner, he had the support of the Brigade, he had the support of all policemen, both civil and the brigade, who are supposed to protect the people, but in that epoch they were here to massacre it.

The police would enter. And the henchmen.... when we were building a house, they

15 In 1984, the number of inhabitants was already estimated at 80.000 inhabitants, and in the year of 1995 approximately 110.000-130.000 people were rated to be living in Barro.

16 At that time, horse races were very popular among the rural workers (*campeiros*) of Rio Grande do Sul. At the hippodromes people from the suburbs and neighbouring villages gathered every Sunday and at festival days to watch rivaling horses race.

arrived and demolished everything. They called the police, beat us up, broke everything, they did a lot of cruel things (*faziam tudo quanto judiaria*). They broke everything. One time... the second time we tried to occupy the land... the houses were already built, you know...there was this house of a friend of mine, and they [the henchmen] destroyed everything with a crowbar. There were two children inside the house, they were twins and ill, one of them just had had an operation, and they destroyed the house on top of their head. Then we shouted a lot, we... the women, then three men got together and they got the bed with the children on top of it out of the house. Then the house was completely destroyed, completely.. They destroyed everything, all the boards, planks and the brazilite with the crowbar. Everything turned into dust.”
Dona Bracedinha, protagonist of the land occupations

Like many other women, Dona Bracedinha experienced personally the many atrocities the new inhabitants had to endure on the part of the police.

“When we arrived at the police post the delegate had just arrived and I saw him beating up my husband [her husband was mistaken as Dona Bracedinha’s eldest son because of his young appearances and had been arrested to intimidate her]. Beating him up badly. Then I grabbed him [the husband] by the pulses, and again they beat him, then they beat me, they hit him hard on the chest, they kicked him, and then my husband fell, hit the head and cut it. Then I almost fainted and two policemen wrenched my arms, one at each side, because I didn’t let go of him. Then I felt a bit weak-kneed (*frouxei um pouco*) and sort of fainted. They also had injured the bones of my foot with all this kicking. I know that when I had fainted, that they dragged my husband to a corner and beat him as much as they wanted. I had fainted, but I could hear everything, I just couldn’t see anymore. But I heard all the noise.

Then when they beat him without stopping, I said I wanted to see him. They let me go. I stood up and was very dizzy. When I came there in the corridor, he had left his rain cape (*capote de chuva*) behind, soaked with blood, pure blood. Then I brushed my face against his chest, against that blood and looked pretty firmly at the policemen. They asked why I did that, that I shouldn’t do that. I said: ‘I did it, because you’re a bunch of bandits. One day you will pay for it, because we didn’t do anything bad’. Then I said so many things to them, that they grabbed my husband and put him in a cell and they wanted me to go home. But it was already pretty dark. They tried to get me home by whatever proposal they could think of, but I said that I didn’t want to go, I said ‘Not a chance, because my husband needs me there’. Then I stayed there.

When they saw I hadn’t gone home, the delegate grabbed me by the arm and lifted me up brusquely, because he was a tall man, and he pushed me inside the cell, together with my husband. He said: ‘Don’t you feel ashamed, there are 8 prisoners there in that cell, and only you as a woman together with them’. I said that I didn’t care. Even if there were 50, 100, whatever, I don’t care, because my husband needs me, so I don’t care. Then they promised me money, they promised to pay my bus ticket, and I said that I didn’t want to. Then he grabbed me again like this [by the arms] and threw me with force in the corridor. I almost died, I heard a crack (*estalo*) in the neck and then he saw that I was going to faint, then he ordered the policemen to put me straight up with my back against the wall. Then my vision blurred (*escurrecem os olhos*, literally meaning it became dark in my eyes), and I lost control. It seems that when they propped me up against the wall... it seems that I reacted. Then they asked me: ‘So, and have you decided to go home now?’

Dona Bracedinha was released after a few days after negotiations between the police and people from the community, a lawyer and the priest of that time, priest Sérgio. She was seriously ill and

when she returned home “there were lots and lots of people from the community, most of them crying, because I was so very ill. They said: ‘Now Bracedinha will die’.”

Giving this and similar experiences, the decision was made to use a bell located in one of the new main streets of Barro as an alarm to warn the population for the frequent police attacks. When rung, whether day or night, all present in the neighbourhood would immediately reunite on the spot to defend themselves or discuss the problems that had arisen. On this very spot, the so-called Centre of Communities was to be built in 1987, serving as a central meeting point for the ecclesial base communities of the parish São Pio X and a neighbouring parish.

Once both vilas were occupied, the neighbourhood Barro started to expand. From the midst of the 1970s onwards already, families had arrived from the inner regions of the state of Rio Grande do Sul in search of employment. Job opportunities in the industrial sector grew rapidly given the continued industrial expansion, whereas life in the rural areas became harder and harder due to decreasing food prices and recurrent crop failures. With insufficient means to cover the costs of house-rent and of daily expenditure in an urbanised setting, most migrants had no option but to occupy available land in Águas, by then famous by the success-stories circulating among poor peasant families, or to buy a swampy terrain close to the occupied areas.

Dona Ivete, one of the first inhabitants of Barro, tells how she and her husband found their way to Águas as a consequence of the lack of job opportunities in the rural parts of Rio Grande do Sul and in view of easily accessible and better remunerated employment in Porto Alegre.

“I got married when I was 21 years old. In the course of time we came to Águas. I’ll tell you why. With much difficulty we had arranged for a house in our native region. We had our things, all of our own, but there wasn’t any work for my husband (*o negão*, literally meaning big, black man). He was working as a carpenter, and only could find a job at the railway or in the metallurgical industry. Then he started working in an office, but soon that job ended too.

Then one night a neighbour came over and we started to talk, you know, the way people talk: ‘How are things going’, and so on, that sort of talk. We talked about the lack of work and so on, and then this neighbour he was from there, but worked in Porto Alegre... he said: ‘There are lots of jobs to be done there, if you want to I arrange work for you as soon as tomorrow. It was a Saturday night. But I didn’t want to leave. We had everything of our own there. Batista [surname of the neighbour] spoke: ‘Tomorrow you have to be ready very early in the morning, pack a bag and I will come to fetch you’ [the husband]. They took the bus, which in that epoch still ran along the shore, so it took a long time to get to Porto Alegre. Nowadays, with these Federal buses, it’s a marvel...you get on in the morning and arrive in the afternoon.

He [the husband] went to live in a rented room and upon the first day of his arrival he got himself a job as a carpenter in the stadium of O Grêmio [local football club]. He earned 25 centavos a day. After a while, with the first money he had earned, he came to fetch me: he wanted to take me to Porto Alegre. I left everything that was mine behind, and came over with two children and one well on the way (*uma na véspera*). We lived in just one room, it was very cramped and difficult. I wanted to return... I said: ‘Buy me a ticket for the bus so that I can return home. I didn’t even know where I was, I had no idea where Porto Alegre was, and I didn’t even know how to get back home again! So I asked him to get me a ticket and send me home, but then a couple got divorced and we could get the two rooms they were living in. Then we were a bit better off.

But our dream of always was to have our own plot of land. A friend of ours told us that lots were sold in Águas... that it was a swamp, but that at least it would be ours. We bought a terrain and every time we would put earth on top of it and bit by bit we

constructed our house. Room by room, first one room, then another, then a bathroom... all made of wood by my husband. And every time we had to put in more soil as the house kept subsiding, so wet and swampy the terrain was..."

The living conditions in Barro were far from favourable. Infra-structural provisions, such as paved roads¹⁷, electricity, water supply and sewerage, as well as social services like schools, day care, and health care were completely absent.

"There was no midwife or nothing in those days. You just had to work out your own salvation. I had 5 children, but one of them died after six days. He died because of an infection of the navel. But what can you do?"

Dona Vanilda, founder of a mothers' club

"How I suffered...our house was basically a shack that was made of wood, plastic, old tires, a zinc plate on top... Very cold and humid in the winter, and very hot in the summer. The terrain was swampy, often with pools of water. Very often we had to take off our shoes to get in. There were lots of mosquitoes also. My children were sick all the time with pneumonia: they were with high fevers and coughing. But I couldn't buy medicines. There was not even a doctor. Like today, at least you can go to the health post, although you have to wake up at 4 a.m. to pull a number. Or we go to see the women of the Pastorate of Health. They are kind and help us out."

Dona Barbara, member of the Pastorate of Baptism

In view of the lack of provisions and services, the catholic women who were participants of the mothers' clubs and base communities gradually developed the so-called services (*serviços*). The services were formed on the basis of seven primary needs that were formulated by residents of the neighbourhood and according to them required immediate action: alimentation, health care, education, communication, housing, concerted action, and religion.

The initiatives taken under the terms of these services, some of which were later baptised as 'pastorates', were multiple and variegated. For example, in the area of health care from 1982-1983 onwards the Pastorate of (Children's) Health successfully started a popular pharmacy, selling at a low price home-made medicines that were produced by women from the neighbourhood in co-operation with the nuns, using local herbs and fruits.

'Our club, besides providing herbal teas and medicines that we ourselves make, visits the ill in order to pass on to them the love and hope of life. We organise meetings with the pregnant mothers, together with sister Ivanice; we make home-made serous fluids (*soro*) and provide diverse treatments, so that everyone can be in good health and knows how to act in case of illness. We are always ready to work at any day and at any hour we are needed.'

Mães Unidas Voz da Libertação (1987:11)

As this extract from this regional journal of catholic women shows, from 1985 onwards the Pastorate also organised meetings with pregnant women and their small children, both of whom were accompanied, weighed and advised by health agents (*agentes de saúde*). Besides, alternative cooking courses were developed, teaching women how to cook nutritious, tasty meals with weeds and leftovers of vegetables that can be obtained for free or at a very low price from grocery stores.

The limited quantity and quality of alimentation were also alleviated by the organisation of co-operatives. In Vila Santo Operário in 1987, the first mini co-operative emerged where

¹⁷ Initially, bus services from Barro to the railway station were also lacking, which on a daily basis implied long walks for those employed in the center of Águas or in Porto Alegre.

catholic women produced bread, cakes and sweets, partly for home consumption, partly for selling in the neighbourhood. This innovation was followed by other female community members, who organised mini co-operatives for the production of soap, and who founded communal kitchens, communal gardens and a distribution group that arranged for the selling of products from the country side to the new townsmen in Barro, mostly factory workers and day labourers, the Beneficent Association of Farmers and Labourers (*Associação Beneficente de Colonos e Operários*).

The service of communication arranged for the installation of loudspeakers in the neighbourhood, which were used to transmit local news and religious messages, while considerable time was also invested in preparing informative newspapers and flyers.

The service of co-ordinated action primarily targeted at meeting the basic needs of the landless peasants, who lived in camps near Barro, for which the women of the CEBs gathered weekly in the Mothers' Clubs of the CEBs. Furthermore, it aimed at the formation of the mini co-operatives mentioned above, that co-ordinated the disperse individual, often home-based productive activities within an economically more viable structure. With regard to the religious life of the neighbourhood, the establishment of biblical courses and catholic schools was proposed by the women, who by their own initiative also started children's clubs with a missionary zeal.

In the area of education and housing, finally, it was not so much services from within the base communities that aimed at improvement of the educational opportunities for both children and adults, and of the precarious infra-structural provisions in Barro. Rather, men and women from the base communities proliferated themselves within political parties, trade unions and other popular movements to reach these goals through political pressure and lobby-work.

The services or pastorates proved to be of importance in several ways. First, they were a powerful means to mobilise the poor women and men in Barro. Throughout the neighbourhood, services shot up like mushrooms, integrating large numbers of inhabitants with different religious backgrounds, although the great majority of them professed to be Catholics. Second, the members involved in the services developed leadership skills and sought articulation with other local and regional groups, thereby heightening their viability and establishing new links between popular initiatives. Third, the concrete actions of the members and leaders participating in the services, directed at helping specific poor target groups and at lobbying among more powerful political agents (such as politicians, the mayor, political candidates, and trade union leaders), led to the improvement of the living conditions in the parts of Barro that were situated closest to the railway station. Under the impetus of their participants, infra-structural provisions and social services like electricity, sewerage and schools were arranged for.

And last but not least, the organisation of services through the mothers' clubs were often the first and vital step in the formation of new base communities. The participating members and leaders, mostly women, combined the innovative way of expressing their religious conviction through services with both traditional and new forms of religious practice. Supported by brother Antônio and sister Matilda they established family and prayer groups, that engaged regularly in the praying of the rosary, in nocturnal vigils, processions and pilgrimages, and in the circulation of small images of the Virgin Mary (*capelinhas*) throughout the neighbourhood. Furthermore, the provision of so-called Celebrations of the Word was called for, during which people could reflect on the Bible, exchange experiences and profess their faith as a community seeking the 'Kingdom of God on Earth'.

'During one of the first celebrations co-ordinated by the mothers, which reflected on the text of Marcus 7:31-37 on Jesus curing a deaf-mute, one mother reread the life of

the community and understood the cure by Jesus as follows: “In the Church of past years only the priest was speaking and we were being deaf-mute. This was because we didn’t have the *Evangelho* in our hands. Today, Jesus cured us, and we are speaking and talking...that’s what Jesus did. He cured the poor who were mute, who could not participate at that time. Jesus wants us not be mute. He wants us to talk about our unity, about our works for all the poor and he wants us to have an organisation like the people of the Bible and to obtain the land promised by God. This land will be full of families, and - if God wills - we will win, we will have our water, our electricity, our beautiful road, everything will be all right, much better than Barro is now”.’ (Costa et al 1984:31).

The political, social, and religious activities undertaken by the catholic poor in co-operation with others, did not remain unnoticed by the clergy of Barro of that time. Until the beginning of the 1980s, there was, however, little articulation between the efforts of brother Antônio, sister Matilda and the lay women on the one hand, and the Capuchin priests and brothers that had started to administer Barro since the 1950s on the other hand. In 1980, however, the Catholic Church started to take a real interest in the emerging base communities, family groups, mothers’ clubs, the services and their activities; the seriousness of the situation of those living in the occupied territory “and the unity and strength of the people fighting for a better life with the help of the faith little by little sank in”, said priest Sérgio. From their part, the people involved in the occupations and emerging base communities realised they needed help from third parties to withstand the pressure exerted by the land owners, police, henchmen and local government, to act as their representatives in relevant institutions and to extend the religious services offered in their chapels. “Solidarity was sought with priest Sérgio and the Capuchin friars and Franciscan nuns accompanying him” (Costa et al. 1984:37), who put the inhabitants into contact with a lawyer, an engineer, the leadership of sympathising local political parties and the human rights department of the Legislative Assembly. Also, the clergy and pastoral workers entered into the discussion whether or not to accept the proposal of Liberation Theologians to form ecclesial base communities.

In 1981, after having accompanied and supported the emerging base communities for over a year, the priest decided to divide the area of the parish in nuclei. In each nucleus, the establishment of services was foreseen, which in the long run would develop into base communities “under the supervision of the parish” (Dona Irene). Existent services and emerging base communities expressly became integrated parts of the parish of São Pio X, for they were taken into the new scheme. From then on,

“the priest didn’t keep to the parish so much, but often came to visit us out here. Before, he didn’t know a thing about our reality, he didn’t know a thing... about the hunger, the misery, the police attacks, everything that was happening right under his nose...but then he learned about our reality. He saw us fighting. He helped us out a lot then... talking to the police, talking to the mayor...giving a little strength to the people.”

Dona Catarina, member of a mothers’ club

Nevertheless, priest Sérgio was still reluctant to make a clear political stand, as discussions on the right spot for erecting the chapel of the newly forming base community São Paulo illustrate. Dona Eva, who participated of a youth group recalled:

“We started arranging for meetings, reflections and we assumed the struggle of our community, of the Neighbourhood Association, the liturgy, and so many other activities. We started arranging for funds to construct our seat, our church. We organised a campaign to obtain planks and bricks. Our group was very animated, very

lively. We gave our best to realise the construction of our church. During a celebration, we told everyone that we already had the materials to start the construction works. But priest Sérgio didn't want to assume the construction inside of the area of conflict. He said that it was very dangerous and that nobody would help. He convinced us that the communal centre [i.e. the chapel] had to be constructed outside of the area of so much conflict. It was agreed upon with that group residing closely to Rua São Sepé to construct a joint church in the immediate surroundings of Rua Florianópolis [one of the main roads], within the area of the 40 metres pertaining to the activists of the Antigo Prado. There was much conflict in the area where we lived, so we constructed the church outside of it. We didn't like it much, but the Priest convinced our parents. There were people in the new community that saw us as land-grabbers, as squatters, as marginalised, but not all of them, there were also lots of nice people who accompanied our struggle for land. But we didn't feel good outside, because our struggle was here, within the vila. (...) So, we started to organise our struggle to construct our own seat within the vila itself at the beginning of 1981."

Dona Eva (Costa et al. 1984:60-1, my translation)

This conflict was an expression of the differences between the Catholics who were organised in informal base communities that were involved in "the struggle" and who followed the lines of brother Antônio on the one hand, and the Catholics with institutional affiliation on the other hand, that is to say the clergy and the economically better-off Catholics frequenting the parish. Base community members of the first hour generally took the poor living conditions in Barro itself as the primary point of departure; consequently, they opted for social and political engagement within the realms of their vila, which was directed at both the immediate alleviation of these living conditions and at the gradual altering of existing structures. In this struggle the catholic faith offered ample "opportunity for reflection" during meetings of the "People-Church" and provided "the people with strength to continue their hazardous enterprise", as brother Antônio explained.

The clergy and better-off Catholics, on the contrary, initially departed principally from their religious conviction. Taking the Biblical message as an inspirational source, they thought it the clergy's and parish members' duty "to care for their neighbour". For this, the institution of the parish was seen as the most appropriate structure, which could channel charity works and provide practical and moral support: "The Church was present, next to this people that wants to have a place to construct houses. The people starts feeling secure, helped by the Mother-Church, sister and companion on the way, which through its pastoral workers helps in the organisation, being a constructive force of the new society and adopting in this way its mission of Christian and follower of Jesus Christ and his Good News." (Costa et al 1984:59). The clergy and parishioners themselves, however, did not yet want to be implied in the political turmoil surrounding the occupations and demonstrations; at this point their goal was rather to search for "an encounter with God and our neighbours".

Between 1980 and 1983 approximately 12 ecclesial base communities were founded or formally acknowledged as such. During this time, the priest started the monthly celebration of Mass and administering of the Sacraments to each community, acted occasionally as their representative in local and regional meetings and arranged for the establishment of the formal positions of minister and catechist in the chapels belonging to the parish territory. Among the membership, opinions differed on the institutionalisation of lay leadership. Part of the Catholics warmly welcomed the initiative and perceived it as a sign of the clergy's intention to support the effectuation of a church for and by the poor.

“In that epoch the first ministers were installed. The priest had come over to my house... he asked me to become a minister... to help with the Eucharist and to visit the sick, since I knew the neighbourhood well. I knew all the people, because of my work with the mothers’ club and the service of health. I said: “All right”. So I became a minister, together with my husband. Seu Roberto and Dona Eva also joined. We did a small course in Porto Alegre. It was a big step forward for the communities. [Why?] Because from then on we poor had a space to speak up. Because we were taken seriously...”

Dona Clara, minister and co-ordinator of a mothers’ club

Others regarded the newly established positions of minister and catechist as a means of the priest to exert control over the catholic lay organisations and activities that had been developed so far. According to Dona Aldina, lay leader of the first hour, it was an attempt by the clergy to “force the popular initiatives within the framework of the parish” and to “take away the power from the people (*o povo*)”. She and other female lay leaders regarded the ministers and catechists as extensions of the clergy, the first of whom were likely to “eventually turn into mini-priests”. Also, some of the believers had difficulty accepting the female ministers and catechists as full representatives of the priest; they did neither want to accept the sacred host out of their hands, nor attend to meetings where the catechists reflected on and discussed biblical texts. “That’s a priest’s affair... the Father [priest] should do it”, as Seu Raúl explained.

From 1985 onwards, the base communities of Barro started to show signs of internal rupture: a discussion developed among CEB-members and between the faithful and the clergy in which the relation between religion and politics was at stake. Some lay people who had received theological and organisational training within the realm of the Aguense base communities had turned into powerful leaders, who were willing and ready to become (more) engaged in local politics, like Seu Martin.

“I have always been a Catholic, but I have known some times of doubt. My mother was always sick, I had 9 brothers and sisters of whom one was very ill, and we were always working but were gaining hardly anything. After a long day of hard work we would come home and find only some *farofa* (roasted manioc flour) and black coffee with coarse sugar to have. My mother stayed at home all the time and needed constant care. She went to a hospital, her health improved a bit, came home again and fell sick again. I thought: ‘Perhaps God isn’t that good’. Then one day I went to the first reunion of the Labour Pastorate with brother Antônio. There were streetworkers, labourers, electricians, et cetera, so... people with whom one could talk. I saw that we had something to fight for, to make things better. We formed a group of (married) couples, all labourers, we reflected on the Gospel and we discussed our lives. And with the occupation.... My house is own property, it is located right in the middle of the occupied terrains.... So we worked at night and in the weekends to measure out the land, to make streets, measure the terrain you know, to dig sewerage, et cetera. At that time, around 1979, I also became involved in the reunions of the labourers in the firm where I worked. In 1982 I was chosen as the president of the labour union. I had worked for that firm for 20 years... never made promotion or received salarial adjustments, which they had according to the law. For two years I studied my rights at SENAÉ, but it didn’t work out. So... four years later I was fired and remained unemployed for one year. I worked for a bit of money here and there, and became candidate for the PT [Labour Party], to become a local councillor, but I lost the elections. Oh, there were many fights those days in the community over politics. There was a real political dispute going on between the pastoral workers, the laity and the non-laity. It was a real bad thing (*coisa feia*), because in the end we all wanted the same... to

better the life of the inhabitants of Barro. In 1994, finally I was elected, so... But it really complicates things. I cannot invite people just like that anymore, everything has consequences, I have PT written all over my face.”

Other lay members, however, became resilient towards the mixing of religion with politics. They felt that the Catholic Church in Barro was increasingly favouring politics over religion, and that the initial distinction between religion and politics became every time more diffuse. Initially, the base communities had served as ‘a space for reflection and discussion on all spheres of life’ (Trein 1993:70) and had provided an inspirational starting-point for the formation of other organisations and movements that were of more political nature. Gradually, however, the boundaries between CEBs and other popular initiatives became blurred: often they shared the same membership, were presided by the same board, and both religious and non-religious meetings were opened and ended with prayers. Furthermore, the language used and rituals carried out in church became more and more secular (Trein 1993:70). Consequently, the CEBs did no longer meet people’s need for spiritual guidance, alleviation, and comfort, and were no longer places where people could fully express and experience their faith.

“In the Church [at the end of the 1980s] there was much talk about politics... about the PT, whom to vote for, the problems of the poor labourers... Always we were invited to join the Housing Association or go to the Municipality, to ask for a new hospital or so. There was hardly time left for the religious things! But I don’t go to the Church to hear about politics... I want to learn more about God... pray... celebrate the faith that we feel inside our heart.”

Dona Isaura

Instead, CEBs contributed to a ‘disenchantment of the world’ (Mariz 1993:26). Some CEB-members were even ridiculed.

“For example, at one point people of the PT ridiculed this labourer who lived next to me and who was ringing the bell of the church every morning that functioned as a alarmclock, because within the religiosity that he remembered, of the interior, the churchbell was ringing in the morning, at midday, and in the evening. So, you see this type of influence of the intellectuals who start to rationalise....”

Brother Antônio (in: Trein 1993:232)

To tackle the problems arising a discussion group called ‘Faith and Politics’ (1987-1988) was called to life. It consisted of lay members and pastoral workers, who regularly evaluated the relation between religion and politics. According to brother Antônio, there were basically two proposals put forward: that of the *Cristandade* (Christianity) and the proposal of the *Igreja Popular* (Popular Church). In the model of the *Cristandade* a base community was the centre of the neighbourhood, which articulated with the world through organisations that represented its interests, such as the Christian Democrat Party (PDC), the Christian Youth Association (ACM), Christian trade unions, et cetera. In the (newer) model of the Popular Church, also referred to as the ‘Articulation model’, the base communities were no longer seen as the main initiators of popular initiatives and as the ultimate tool to change the world, but rather as ‘a space where small victories are celebrated, where one asks for the remission of sin, and from where one returns with more mystic (*mística*) to the struggle realised by other entities’ (Trein 1993:71-2). Or, as brother Antônio voices it: “The base community is not the instrument to change the world; it is the place where we think through all the [available] instruments (*ferramentas*), starting from the faith, and where we see if they are authentic (...) in the light of the Gospel” (brother Antônio in Trein 1993:72).

The majority of the integrants of the working group 'Faith and Politics' opted for the model of the Popular Church, which has been implemented in the course of time by pastoral workers and lay leaders. It was welcomed by those who wanted the base communities to return to their original task of "being a church of and for the people that celebrates the faith" (Dona Nargi) and by the laity who approved of political activism but shunned explicit party political action within the confines of the chapel. Lay leaders and members closely involved with local political parties, however, regarded the adopted model as an attempt of the Church to regain its influence over the faithful; after all, the clergy and pastoral workers took on a paternalistic attitude by defining the limits to 'authenticity' and by monitoring and reshaping the autonomous political course taken by the Aguense base communities.

Of course, the discussion on politics and faith was not limited to the working group mentioned; the mothers' clubs and services also entered into a period of reflection on their strategies and goals, but their conclusions were of a somewhat different nature. In a meeting of the Group of Clothing (*Mutirão do Vestuário*) in December 1989, the women present concluded that they had to:

'be simple like doves, but sharp like snakes¹⁸. We tried to classify the virtues of snakes (prudent, sharp, cures with the help of its own poison), etc. and also of the dove (hope, symbol of peace, tameness (*mansidão*), signal of the strength of the Holy Spirit, etc.). We stated that we women today need to look for something new, to go beyond, to be a snake to look for a much wider struggle (Housing Association, trade unions, political party,...). We have to use the right arms, as the poison of societal conflicts needs to be tested. We thought also of the example of the midwives of Egypt, who were obedient of the Pharão, but plainly disobeyed his orders, his wrong rules, in the defence of life. We looked at the women-prophets who are a signal of stimulance and hope for us all, like Ruth, Naomi, Sarah, Rebecca, and others.'

Minutes of the Main Meetings of Mothers' Clubs of Águas 1987-1994, original underlining).

In the next meetings it was decided that it was necessary to 'animate the existing groups (mothers' clubs), help new groups that are forming, strengthen the faith' and 'to link up with the movements out there in the vilas'. The mothers' clubs also decided to organise a 'new instrument for the organisation and liberation of women', which took the shape of the civil, autonomous organisation *Associação das Trabalhadoras Domésticas* (ATD, or the Association of Domestic Workers) and church-related mini-cooperations (*Elementos históricos*, s.d: 3). Also, the first seeds were sown for the establishment of two so-called Litter Recycling Sheds (*Galpões de Lixo*) through the joint effort of the Association of Litter Collectors (*Associação de Catadores de Lixo*), CEB-women, and one of the friars, the short history of which eventually turned into a major success story of grassroots organisationbuilding known throughout Brazil. As such, the mothers' clubs and services increasingly focussed on internal organisational dynamics as the adoption of the proposal of the Popular Church silently implied, but also persisted in their efforts to organise new popular initiatives both within and outside of the religious realm; they did this, however, no longer from an explicitly political perspective centered around notions of "inequality", "justice" and "rights", but started more and more from what they called "an engagement with life"¹⁹.

¹⁸ The original Bible text is: "So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

¹⁹ At the time of my research, one of the friars who had just recently arrived in Águas commented upon his experience in Africa with so-called Life Communities (*Comunidades de Vida*). He stated that "these were base communities as envisaged by our women... base communities where the life itself is celebrated and cherished".

In practice, the developments initiated by these meetings of the working group, mothers' clubs and CEB-services heralded a new era, in which 'Faith and Politics' were traded slowly for 'Faith and Life'. The focus of the Aguense base communities and related services and pastorates increasingly shifted in the direction of the internal organisation of CEBs, the articulation between distinct base communities, the formation of new CEB-leaders or CEB-animators, and the "spiritual question of how to experience the faith and to celebrate life", either through religious or socio-economic efforts. In short, they became more sensitive towards the internal structure, towards the articulation with newly established or existing socio-economic organisations and towards the religious tasks of base communities.

The consequences of these developments were already clear by 1994-1995, the years in which the fieldwork for this thesis was conducted. In the weekly meetings of the mothers' clubs, pastorates and services explicit, extensive political analyses focusing on structural inequality had made room for much shorter and concrete reflections on daily problems encountered by individual people and the neighbourhood as a whole as well as on religious issues such as 'resurrection', 'love for your neighbour', 'forgiveness', "hope" and 'surrender'. Similarly, the Sunday celebrations of the CEBs as a whole exhaled an increased concern with the personal and local, which probably can also be seen as a function of CEB-women's majoritarian presence (see chapter 3).

Summarising, the unofficial history as told by brother Antônio, sister Matilda, female lay leaders and CEB-members, most of them women, relates of a continuous struggle for the transformation of a deserted rice plantation and horse track into a lively neighbourhood and for survival in the harsh living conditions of Barro through popular initiatives at the political, socio-economic and religious level. As will become clear below, this account contrasts at certain points with the history of Barro and its CEBs as seen from the perspective of the clergy of the parish of São Pio X. This 'official history', told to me in the course of time by the friars of the Capuchin Fraternity of Águas is related below.

2.4 The 'official' history of Barro and its CEBs

On the 24th of July 1942, the foundation of the first Province of the Capuchins in Latin America was announced by Friar Donato Welle, the General Minister of Order of the City of the Vatican, by way of a cablegram. It was the result of 46 years of mission work that had been initiated by the French Capuchins Friar Bruno de Gillonnay and Friar Leão de Monsapey²⁰. Three days later, a letter of the same General Minister defined the territory of the Province: "the whole state of Rio Grande do Sul, to which we add the Diocese of Florianópolis in the state of Santa Catarina".

It took until the beginning of the 1950s for the Catholic Church to start to religiously administrate the area of Barro by means of six masses per year and by way of a 'chapel on wheels' (the so-called *carro-capela*). This chapel on wheels was a truck driven by a priest from the archdiocese of Porto Alegre. He would stop at the central square, open up the backdoors and hold a sermon in the open air for all people gathered. As Dona Irma recalled:

"In the early days, the priest came from [the centre of] Águas²¹, from the Church of

20 These three friars are regarded as the official founders of the Capuchin Mission in Rio Grande do Sul, which was established in 1896.

21 Most inhabitants of the neighbourhood Barro refer to the city-center by the name of 'Águas', as if Barro does not belong to the territory of the city of Águas. This usage is probably indicative of their perception of the relation between Barro (and other popular neighbourhoods) and other parts of Águas, which in economic, social and cultural terms is characterised by an enormous distance: "Águas [i.e. the center] is for the rich, Barro for poor people like us."

Saint Michael, with a chapel on wheels with this small altar inside. Seu Mathias was the announcer. He used to call the people to Mass with a loudspeaker. The priest then opened the doors and in this way we attended the Mass. Whether rain or sunshine, we always went. It was in the middle of open country, there was nothing here yet, just that neighbour from the corner.”

On the ‘square’ where the people use to attend the open air Mass, a small wooden chapel was built in 1955 at the initiative of Priest Leão. This chapel, initially attended by the so-called *Padres Brancos* (lit. the White Fathers²²), would five years later be formalised as a parish.

According to one of the believers from the very beginning, Seu Aniceto, the White Fathers made an enormous effort to turn the little wooden chapel into a “respectable, brick church” that would be visited by many neighbours, so they were highly appreciated by their flock. Because of their dedication to the church and their rapport with the local believers, the White Fathers did not expect to be assigned to other regions after some years of devoted service. Dona Mercedes remembered:

“How we liked the Dutch²³ friars! They were sent over here by the bishop, and always came to see us on Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays. After the Mass coffee would be ready at my place... they would always come to my house and we would talk. After their final Mass too they came over to my house, but they were no longer able to smile or talk. My sister-in-law started to cry, and soon after all of us were crying. There was nobody who didn’t cry”.

And Seu Aniceto recounted that:

“The history of the White Fathers ended very sadly. The bishop simply said that they weren’t needed anymore, that they could stay as helpers (*ajudantes*), but that they no longer could be vicars (*vigários*). After the final Mass, the White Fathers knelt in front of the altar, they... they couldn’t talk anymore and wept like two small children, and the whole community was crying with them. Never again I saw a thing like that... the people liked them so much. Although they were not from Brazil, they felt Barro was their home. They always used to say: ‘To us, Barro is like our Dutch hometown’... Excuse me... [Seu Aniceto sobs]... I’m not a man who cries easily, but the thought of the White Fathers on their knees always makes me cry. As you can see, Elsa, it still leaves me emotional... [long silence]... After that, one of them went to do missionary work in Mato Grosso, the other one’s whereabouts I don’t know. Anyway, after they left, the Capuchins took charge.”

‘The White Fathers’ were followed up by the first Capuchin friars who arrived in Vila Barro in Águas in 1958, totalling four, among whom was friar Inácio Curtelli. Living in Porto Alegre, initially the friars visited Barro only at weekends, but when the Capuchins bought the transmitters of radio Difusora in 1960 in order to broadcast religious programmes, they began to frequent the area with more regularity to administrate these transmitters. Soon the Capuchins bought some land near to the radio station and built a house on it where two friars made their home. Step by step the Capuchin friars became involved in local pastoral activities and developed into important pastoral agents and leaders of the base communities to be.

Priest Inácio Curtelli, whose formation and practice were marked by a strong centralism, sacramentalism and strong moralism, became the first priest of the brand new parish that was

22 It is doubtful whether this epithet refers directly to the order of the White Fathers or is based on “the white habit that the White Fathers were wearing”, as one of the CEB-members implied.

23 It is uncertain whether or not the nationality of the White Fathers was indeed Dutch. According to some, the White Fathers were of French origin, whereas other CEB-members insisted that they were Dutch.

inaugurated on the 15th of August 1961. Elderly women, like Dona Isolde, remembered priest Curtelli with mixed feelings.

“I remember that whenever children were playing and jumping in front of the church, he would tell them to stop. The children were very afraid of him...and we were also afraid, because he was very strict. But we girls also liked his strictness in a way. We used to go to Mass with our heads covered, and this made us feel very good, very pure. Like... like we were doing a good thing.”

The parish was named after Pope Pius X, São Pio X in Portuguese. Concerning the whereabouts of the name of the parish, two stories circulate among the inhabitants of Barro.

“The parish received the name São Pio X, because... you know... he was the first pope who allowed children to take part in the Eucharist celebrations. He was a good person.”
 “The lot on which the chapel was built was donated by São Pio X’s nephew, who was a lawyer. He [the nephew] said: you can have the terrain to erect a chapel, but then you have to call the chapel after my uncle.. and it was this that happened.”

In the same year a second chapel was built in Barro, alongside the house of the Capuchin friars. It was named Chapel São José Operário by the inhabitants of the neighbourhood after the patron of the factory-workers, who make up the majority of the residents of Barro.

After 18 years of religious service, Priest Inácio was replaced by Egidio Bielski and Cláudio Mossi in 1979. The parish was marked by big changes in the direction of pastoral work and started orienting itself towards the option for the poor. Followed by priest Sérgio Dal Moro, the organisation of the parish was ‘renovated’. Friar Sergio departed from the methodology of the Mundo Melhor - NIP (*Nova Imagem da Paroquia*, New Image of the Parish) as formulated on the basis of proposals by the CNBB. In practice this meant that more emphasis was laid on the evangelisation of the inhabitants of the Barro in general and the poor among them in particular: the first catechism and baptism courses (*cursilhos*) were arranged for, in which lay members started to play an active, though unofficial role as animators and leaders of meetings.

During the first assembly of the parish in 1980, its territory was divided into 27 nuclei. The formal decision was taken to walk into the direction of the formation of ecclesial base communities in each one of these nuclei. Informally, steps were taken to embrace of the Theology of Liberation as a theological and ideological guideline. This was reflected firstly by the clergy’s explicit preferential option for the poor, who were regarded as both primary *evangelizados* (evangelised) and *evangelizadores* (evangelisers), the latter of which provided local Catholics with the opportunity to play an active role in their religious community. Secondly, the priests and pastoral agents gradually subscribed to the importance of articulation between the Biblical message and socio-political action, with the objective to create “God’s Kingdom on Earth”. Thirdly, they accepted the three-step methodology of seeing-judging-acting (*ver-julgar-agir*) to stimulate reflection on the Bible as an ‘experience-model of life’ (*experiência-modelo de vida*) and to foster the analysis and transformation of “the social, economic and political reality that we have to face each and every day”.

According to the parish book (*livro de tombo*), the first of the fifteen future ecclesial base communities (CEBs) was formed in the same year (1980) and was baptised Nossa Senhora da Luz (Our Lady of the Light). Furthermore, the official positions of minister and catechist were created and courses were organised for emerging leaders²⁴. Thereby, a formal space was opened

²⁴ For example, in the year 1981 a course was organised for a group of as much as 150 lay leaders, which indicates the disposition and enthusiasm of the Catholics of Barro to take part in ‘the project of Liberation Theology’, as it would later come to be known.

up for lay men and women to perform religious tasks both inside and outside the four walls of the church building.

In the course of 1980 the radio Difusora was sold and a new home was built for the three friars to arrive on the 24 of February 1982, called the Educandario São Jose Operário. They were students in Theology and would stay for about a year in order to acquire experience in practice. In this same year the community of friars for the first time hosted *vocacionados* who resided in Porto Alegre, and were offered the opportunity to integrate themselves into the daily life in the vila in the accompaniment of the friars present. One of these friars was the current priest of the parish, friar Darcy. Soon more space was needed to house the priests and *vocacionados*, and the chapel São Pio X was extended. The so-called 'apartment 1' was constructed, which would later on be used as the parish hall (*salão paroquial*) when a second community of Capuchins was realised, just a few streets away from the church São Pio X.

In 1987 one more house for Capuchin friars was built in the area of Vila União dos Operários, an occupied territory in the Northeast of Barro. This new community of friars was also named Santo Dias da Silva, after the deceased factory-worker. Later on that year, the Capuchin Fraternity of Águas gained an autonomous status by secession from the Capuchin Fraternity of Porto Alegre and received its official name: Fraternidade Santo Operário.

Slowly, the organisational structure of the parish in Barro crystallised out: by now, the parish had embraced or founded 15 base communities that were administered by one priest and a number of pastoral agents. They were living in two separate houses in Barro, but operated mainly from 'the centre' or 'mother-church' São Pio X (*igreja-mãe* or *paróquia-matriz*), the centre being both a geographical and symbolic term of reference. The mother-church was located at the very entrance to the neighbourhood and borders with the main public square of Barro, and it represented the space where all important decisions were taken; "the people was [indeed] consulted, but the final decision was always in the hands of the clergy" (friar Faustino). According to friar Faustino, the base communities served as extensions of this mother-church, and so did the ministers who were only "present whenever and wherever the priest couldn't be present". In this phase, the pastoral workers validated the essential role that the catholic poor had played in the first phase of the emergence of base communities, but regarded themselves as a *sine qua non* in their successful continuation.

'Initially, a service (i.e. a certain group of people) has the function of agglutinating, within a certain space, people who little by little become a point of reference. Soon thereafter, the necessity to amplify tasks is felt, implying the insertion of the Celebration of the Word, catechetical formation, the administering of the Sacraments, Masses, characterising, in short, the existence of an Ecclesial Community. This depends highly on the counselling (*assessoria*) that is provided by the [pastoral] workers. With good counselling, the community progresses with higher speed, because the enthusiasm is bigger. In the opposite case, the service might fall due to the temptation to close itself off.'

(Elementos Históricos das CEBs da Área de Águas - Rio Grande do Sul, s.a., s.d.).

In fact, the priest and pastoral agents felt increasingly frustrated by the slow progress made by base communities in terms of lay leadership, of the structural organisation of and articulation between existent base communities, and of their dependency on the clergy for the continuation of activities. They decided to give priority to the strengthening of ties between the various existent services, which were still powerful in mobilising and organising the faithful, and the improvement of the accessibility of courses for lay leaders. For this purpose a new organisational structure was called to life, the outlines of which were developed by leading CEB-women, mainly co-ordinators of mothers' clubs and other services. It was baptised 'the Network of

Communities' (*Rede das Comunidades*), and foreseen by the female CEB-leaders as "an integrated, close-knit network of religious communities in which the Mother-Church, that is to say the clergy, no longer played a central role", according to Dona Nargi.

The clergy took on this proposal of developing a close-knit network; in 1987, it was officially laid down that the CEBs had to develop into relatively autonomous "centres for the promotion of the life and faith of the people", to which "the priest and pastoral agents would be subservient", according to friar João. Furthermore, it was established that from then on the works of the CEBs would be increasingly organised around the services (*serviços*), which would come to function as the cross-bracing between the base communities at the parish level. In practice, however, these measures did not lead to the formation of the proposed network. First, most base communities started to concentrate on a redefinition of their own organisational structure and activities, as they had more freedom as regards both the form and content of the religious life in their chapel. Second, although the services were legitimised as very vital to the base community life, decisions made by integrants of the services at a the level of the area or parish now were subjected to the (dis)approval of the councils that headed each and every community. As a consequence, questions concerning the internal articulation of CEBs gained a primacy over issues of the strengthening of lateral ties.

Rumours spread among strong CEB-leaders, that the clergy intendedly had accepted and misinterpreted CEB-women's proposal to blow up the powerful, already existing cross-organisational links by redirecting the focus of leaders to the internal organisation of each CEB. The reorganisation indeed had serious, unforeseen drawbacks; eventhough an Assembly of Services was organised every now and then, local CEB-leaders of diverse CEBs by bit lost contact with each other as they increasingly focussed on the development of their own base community. For the pastoral agents, however, the organisational change meant an enlargement of their range of action. Whereas they had previously accompanied the '*caminhada*' of one single community, being endowed with the counselling of a specific service they now travelled through the whole of Barro to visit, animate and support on request all CEBs that rendered a specific service, leading to some sort of specialisation among the pastoral agents. Albeit in a different way, the pastoral agents remained at the centre of parish organisation.

Whereas these innovations on the organisational terrain were developed and accepted relatively peacefully, local priests, pastoral agents and lay leaders were much less unanimous on another issue that had slowly come to dominate the agenda of the weekly and monthly meetings since 1985: the relation between religion and politics within the realm of base communities. Problems with regard to the support of candidates to be elected as local politicians had arisen between pastoral agents and lay leaders, who had spontaneously stood up or were formed in the course of years. Some opted for a political 'moderate', while others, mainly the lay leaders, supported a PT-member with alleged communist backgrounds. The community of Catholics was divided and two camps emerged: those who believed in the inseparability of faith and politics, and those who wanted to strengthen the celebratory and biblical aspect of CEB activities. Initially, the sitting priest supported the PT-candidate and insisted on the undiminished articulation of faith and politics at all levels of the parish organisation and works, but after the archdiocese had threatened to withdraw the Capuchin friars from Barro, the clergy withdrew from the political arena and redefined the CEBs' assignment. From then on,

'the community turned into a place for the refuelling or provisioning of the militants who chose, with other *companheiros*, to organise themselves and to fight in the party, which is an instrument of societal transformation. And into a place for the celebration of this important task to build a more humane and just world'.

Friar Orélio (1988:27)

This redefinition set off several new customs in the base communities and ended some others. No longer it was allowed to spread pamphlets of political parties or have politicians deliver a speech in the chapel, nor were priests to express their political preference in front of their believers while preaching. Conversely, popular expressions of Catholicism were revived, such as processions, visits to sanctuaries, and the blessing of houses, water, salt, pictures and clothing of the sick.

Despite the fact that the clergy in Barro increasingly shunned the entrance of politics into the celebrations and social activities of the base communities, the pressure from the diocese and archdiocese, backed up by the provincial directory of the Capuchins, on the priest in Barro heightened to recapture his institutional and sacred power at the cost of the ministers and pastoral agents. In the years of 1992 and 1993, the tasks and responsibilities of the latter were limited by a decree that read that only the priest could lead and administer the sacraments. Many lay leaders of the first hour protested in vain, and some of them left the CEBs: utterly disappointed and each of them taking with them a number of faithful followers.

2.5 Between female activism and male ecclesialism

On the basis of the (hi)stories sketched above, the period in which the CEBs of Barro formed and developed into strong, community-based religious organisations can be roughly divided into four phases. From 1979 to 1983 the majority of CEBs formed in Águas. In these years the first and most viable CEBs emerged, starting from practical problems with which slum dwellers in Águas were confronted. With the objective to alleviate problems of lacking sewerage, electricity and water supply, CEB-members worked closely together with, for example, the Neighbourhood Associations, supported demonstrations and petitions at a local and regional level, and organised themselves in the so-called services. To these services, women's organisational drive and activism were central; many of their mothers' clubs developed naturally into CEBs and the services these religious communities provided thrived mainly on women's initiative and participation. Eventually, all resulting base communities and services were assimilated into the formal ecclesial organisation of the parish on the initiative of the clergy, thereby both acknowledging their legitimacy and limiting the independent course they had taken thusfar.

From 1984 and 1985 a period of reflection on the daily conditions of life in Águas as linked to the message of the Bible was ushered in, leading to a heightened consciousness among CEB-members as well as to even more social and economic activism in the neighbourhood, for which mainly women were responsible. This activism was increasingly organised around so-called Pastorates, the ecclesial equivalent of the popular services, and ; slowly, CEB-women's activism was being institutionalised within the parish structure and their reflections on the Bible being supervised by the clergy. The limited number of male CEB-members present concentrated primarily at political action and engaged in trade unions and political parties.

The period of 1986 to 1988 was characterised by a discussions concerning the relation between faith and politics, which led to the definition of CEBs and politics as two distinct fields. Once the ground of the CEBs was defined, the base communities dedicated themselves increasingly to their religious tasks and responsibilities, to the articulation of internal sub-organisations and activities, and to a heightened search for spirituality; this lead to a cautious rehabilitation of popular religion and more emphasis on the personal and local. Although some female CEB-leaders felt frustrated by the separation of religion and politics, most common CEB-women welcomed the religious turn as they viewed the base communities rather as a space for spiritual quenching and local social activism than a floor for 'abstract' political discussions (see chapter 3).

From 1989 onwards, this trend of 'religionisation' went side by side with a redefinition of the relations involved between CEBs and parish. Despite the promising attempt to form a Network of Communities conform the wishes of leading CEB-women, the early 1990s showed a decrease in elbowroom for lay leaders, whether male or female, 'informal' or 'formal'. Not only did the clergy take over the organisation of the services at the parish level and did they redirect the focus of CEB-leaders to their own base community; also popular initiatives (such as the Pastorate of Baptism) that provided a platform for the active participation of female lay leaders and mothers in the baptism of their children were slowly undermined, as a consequence of pressure from the diocese to increase the clergy's control over the CEBs by the centralisation of power in the hands of the priest once more.

On the basis of the unofficial history, it can be concluded that the ecclesial base communities in Barro initially arose spontaneously from poor lay people, who had occupied the abandoned territory of Barro with the help of brother Antônio and sister Matilda. Later on, they sought articulation with the pastoral workers of the parish, who next to the lay leadership developed into key actors in the CEBs. As has been shown and illustrated in this chapter, in all these phases the catholic women of Barro played an indispensable role, both in number and content. They were of vital importance to the organisation and enforcement of land occupations, to the formation, continuation and transformation of the religiously inspired services (*serviços*) and other popular initiatives and organisations, and to the enactment of the celebrations, Masses and the administering of the sacraments. On the basis of their experience and knowledge stemming from this engagement, many of them have secured both informal and formal positions in the communities as co-ordinators, ministers, catechists, animators, and the like. And although the institutional church is becoming less and less favourable towards such initiatives and lay leadership, most women continue their 'struggle' (*luta*) to improve the living conditions in the neighbourhood and to profess a catholic faith that is grounded in their own experiences.

The contribution of women to the genesis and development of the ecclesial base communities, however, is not acknowledged similarly by all social agents involved. Brother Antônio, sister Matilda, and all nuns and lay leaders interviewed continuously point at the importance of women's contribution when relating historical events, to such an extent that they repeatedly ensured me that "the base communities would not be existent today, if it weren't for the women". To their stories, suffering, unbroken resistance, activism and heroism of the poor in general and of the women in particular, are central. The former and current priests and friars, on the contrary, rather focus on the organisational structure of the parish and the clergy's ideological standpoint as primary ingredients to the genesis of the base communities and as important factors in the limitation or stimulation of new historical developments. In this light, they tend to recall important meetings held and measures taken that shaped the organisational structure of the parish and the content of CEB-activities. Common members and lay leaders appear primarily as believers, who might put forward viable ideas such as the Network of Communities, but who are in need of ecclesiastic guidance to ensure organisational survival and strategic action.

Within these historical and contextual specific frameworks, which they themselves have partly created, the catholic women of Barro give form and content to their religious conviction and social concern. The way in which they interpret, create and transform the Theology of Liberation at the ideological level, the manner in which they engage in religious and non-religious organisations and activities at the social level, as well as the way in which the catholic women define and proliferate themselves within the religious field at the individual level, are coloured by and for their part have coloured these histories and the current state of the Barro ecclesial base communities. The particularities of the dialectic process of mutual influencing

between the catholic women and the ecclesial base communities at both the ideological, social and individual level are discussed in the following chapters.

3

Religion: CEB-women of Águas on Liberation Theology and care

3.1 Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, liberation theologian Clodóvis Boff stated that it is generally known that women form the majority of members of the ecclesial base communities in Brazil. He asked himself, however, if 'women do find a space to put forward their problems there? Are CEBs places where 'female values' (that concern everyone, both men and women) like tenderness, sensibility, delicacy, et cetera can be manifested?' (Boff 1993:73-4, my translation). With this observation and subsequent questions, Boff took a widely-accepted stand concerning the so-called 'women's question' (*questão de mulheres*). First, he placed Brazilian women simultaneously within and outside of the CEBs. On the one hand, Boff acknowledged women's numerical predominance in CEBs. On the other hand, he overlooked the fact that by this very presence catholic women have made a structural contribution to CEBs in both social and cultural respect and are therefore inextricably bound up with the religious system in question¹. Second, Boff made references to specific 'female values', underlining liberation theologians' notion of women as the 'absolute alterity' or 'the other' (cf. Tamez 1989).

Since the very beginning of the institutional, political and theological renovation of the Brazilian Catholic Church that started off in the 1960s, liberation theologians have bend their minds over issues related to this 'women's question'. Debates were triggered of on the desirable role of women within the church and in broader society, and on their unique 'voice' and 'vocation', in which liberation theologians often met with opposition from conservative church leaders, women's movement lobbyists, catholic feminists and men church activists.

In her article on women's participation in ecclesial base communities, Alvarez draws up the balance sheet of thirty years of Liberation Theology on the women's question, both in terms of ideological stand and concrete practice. She describes the church's new, overall perspective on women's roles in the public and private sphere, following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Medellín meeting (1968) and the Puebla meeting (1979), and embroiders on the inherently contradictory nature of its discourses in this respect. According to Alvarez, 'a biologically essentialist view of women's "special qualities" oddly coexists with liberation theologians' economist view of women's oppression' (Alvarez 1990:387). On the one hand, liberation theologians acknowledge women's subordination and marginalisation as members of a politically and economically disenfranchised class and consequently warmly acclaim women's participation in the public world of politics and production to fight their oppression. On the other hand, liberation theologians continue to stress women's unique vocations of virginity and motherhood, which are inextricably bound up with the private sphere and with notions of abnegation, altruism, solidarity, and love for others. As such, Pope John XXIII called on women "to participate as co-equals in the construction of the human community", but expected them to participate in a specific way congruent with their traditional roles of mothers and wives (Alvarez 1990:381-408).

¹ One of the very few authors who do explicitly refer to CEB-women's structural contribution to CEBs are Viezzer and Bingemer. Writing on mothers' clubs in São Paulo, Brazil, Viezzer observes that 'it is the common opinion of the interviewed women that the Mothers' Clubs have highly influenced the actual configuration of the CEBs. As one of them voices it, the Mothers' Club is like a "mother of the other movements in the neighbourhood". Generally, "it's from the Mothers' Club that other community groups are formed". Often, "it's the club that initiated the struggle, after that, the whole community helps".' (Viezzer 1989:66, my translation). Similarly, the theologian Bingemer observes that 'poor women are the great leaders of the new way of being Church in Latin America, that is the characteristic trace of the new face of the Church of the continent. (...). Women of the popular classes, poor women, (...), are in the forefront of the whole renovation of the ecclesial movement of the continent' (Bingemer 1990:86, my translation).

The uncomfortable coexistence of this new message of women as equal citizens 'worthy of rights and human dignity' (Alvarez 1990:385) and the old message of women as caretakers has implications for the imagined solution to women's oppression. While 'feminists maintain that the realms of family and sexuality (...) are central loci of women's oppression', 'liberation theologians, following the Marxist tradition, situate the locus of women's oppression in capitalist power relations' (Alvarez 1990:387). The discussion on abortion and birth control is an example in case; 'abortion and contraception are rejected as legitimate issues for debate because these are seen as primarily economic problems, caused by an unjust social system that prevents women from having the children they want' (Drogus 1990:66). In accordance, the reforms realised in the Catholic Church have not led to a re-formulation of core church doctrines concerning the family, morality, sexuality and maternity. The traditional family is still seen as the central pillar of society and the Church persists in maintaining the indissolubility of matrimony, the prohibition of artificial contraceptive methods and the condemnation of abortion (Viezzler 1989:57-71).

Whereas the Catholic stance on the women's question has been elaborately discussed in social scientific literature on CEBs, CEB women's perspective on and reaction to Liberation Theology in daily practice has received little attention, with the notable exception of Drogus' work (1990). On the basis of field research in São Paulo, Brazil, she states that 'two dominant patterns emerge for balancing the exhortation to political action and the traditional feminine discourse ambiguously appealed to in the CEBs. First, the majority of women CEB members simply reject the class implications of Liberation Theology. For them, "politics" remain distasteful, but neighbourhood movements become acceptable because they are defined as an extension of women's religious charitable work. The second group, a minority of leaders, is more politicised, and accepts Liberation Theology's class definitions. While they, too, use motherhood and charity to justify political activism, this group conceives of politics more broadly, and is willing to go further into that "male" realm. Many of these women are moving toward a reassessment of the relationship between their public and private roles. As a result, they are also moving toward conflict with the local Church authorities' (Drogus 1990:63-74).

Interestingly, in her discussion of the ways in which women engage the ideas of Liberation Theology and the contribution they make to its practice, Drogus focuses nearly exclusively on the political pretences of the liberationist message. As said in the introduction to this thesis, this is somewhat indicative of how social scientists generally approach the issue of women's participation in the religious realm. Adopting a functionalist and reductionist approach, the religious aspects of women's religiosity remain largely untouched upon; instead, social, political and economic issues are treated elaborately. Furthermore, it is representative of what de Theije (1999:25-7) refers to as the 'politics paradigm' in the study of Brazilian Catholicism; intrigued by questions concerning the opportunities for secular political transformation offered by the Liberationist social activism, many studies on Brazilian CEBs evaluate their forty-years old history in terms of an increase in political and social consciousness and democratisation. In doing so, the religious is neither recognised as meaningful nor seen as explanatory in its own right. Finally, Drogus limits the discussion to an evaluation of how the message of Liberation Theology is received and appropriated by CEB-women; unfortunately, she does not analyse what amendments and contributions are made by female lay leaders and members of base communities to the discourse of Liberationist Catholicism.

In the light of these lacunas or shortcomings in scientific literature regarding CEBs and in view of the central question of this thesis (see Introduction), I intend to embroider on Drogus' work and dedicate this chapter to the form and content that CEB-women give to their religiosity

at the cultural level that encompasses both ideology and symbolism. In section two, the focus is on CEB-women's perspectives on and their relation to the religious in general: how do they view and relate to the religious? I argue that CEB-women define the religious primarily as a feminine instead of masculine field, in which they practise a form of religiosity that is characterised mainly by particularism, pragmatism, and eclecticism. Section three discusses CEB-women's perspectives on and experiences with Liberation Theology: what do CEB-women do hold and make of Liberation Theology and how do they symbolically express their personal religious conviction as well as the social concern that stems from their Liberation Theology? I state that in their daily religious practices CEB-women (re)create a Liberation Theology that is characterised by localised social action and personal spiritual development, both of which exhale women's preoccupation or intimacy with what I call (corpo)r(e)ality. In section four, by way of conclusion, a discussion is pursued on the contribution made by CEB-women to religious life in CEBs: are CEB-women's religious expressions and experiences largely derived from, dependent on, and subject to mainstream Liberationist Catholicism or do they add new elements or interpretations to the ideology and practice of Liberationist Catholicism? And what implications do the findings presented in this chapter have for the definition of religion?

3.2 CEB-women of Águas on the religious and CEBs: "the feminine way"

3.2.1 The religious and CEBs as a "women's affair" (*"coisa de mulher"*)

The large majority of CEB-women of Águas have followed in the religious footsteps of their parents and grandparents and consider themselves Catholics (*católica*) or 'of the Catholic faith/religion' (*da fé católica* or *da religião católica*) from birth. As such, Catholicism comprises for most women of Águas their religious starting-point and spiritual beacon, notwithstanding the fact that many of them regularly frequent alternative religious communities, such as the ever-growing number of (neo-) Pentecostal churches and the widely established Afro-Brazilian temples in the neighbourhood.

In this subsection, however, the focus will be mainly on Catholicism. It is argued that CEB-women's perspectives on and relations to the religious bear some common characteristics. First, CEB-women are convinced that religion is primarily a female sphere and that CEBs can be considered as 'feminine' in many respects. Second, within this supposedly female realm, preoccupation with the well-being of those people with whom they are linked through interpersonal relationships of care are central to women's religiosity. Third, as a consequence CEB-women's religiosity is marked by pragmatism, particularism and eclecticism (cf. Sered 1994:283-5). All three characteristics are discussed below, starting off with CEB-women's notion of religion as a female and feminine sphere.

It is the Aguenses' widely shared conviction that 'women are much more religious than men' and that 'religion is a women's affair'. This indicates that not only the cultural construction of men and women as distinct categories is gendered, but that social structures, symbolic systems and individual experiences are also far from gender neutral (cf. Acker 1991). In daily life, highly diverse experiences, perspectives and practices of individual women and men, who are differentiated on the basis of their biological sex, are continuously being essentialised and reified in and through the gendered cultural categories of woman and man. Individual people are endowed with specific characteristics that are thought to be typical of women or men. Similarly,

the fields and organisations in which they act, the practices in which they engage regularly, and the experiences and perspectives they have are characterised as either feminine or masculine.

This observation urges us to approach the political, the domestic, the religious and the like as gendered fields with female and male connotations, where divisions along gender lines are constantly being constructed, interpreted, contested, reproduced and transformed, both at an ideological and at a practical level. In general, there is a relatively high consensus with regard to the gender connotations that different fields carry. The political field is generally thought of as a male public arena, whereas the domestic sphere is commonly conceived of in terms of female private relationships². On the 'gender of the religious field', however, anthropologists and sociologists prove to be less unanimous. Gelpy, for example, states that 'religion (...) is a man' (Gelpy 1983:45). Thompson, on the contrary, holds the premise that 'religion continues to be a feminine institution, and that being religious is a consonant experience for people with a feminine orientation' (Thompson 1991:382).

Although seemingly opposite, these characterisations might stem from similar observations and analyses, which indicates that the gender one attaches to a specific field is highly dependent upon the aspects on which one focuses within that field. Stressing ecclesiastic hierarchy, Gelpy defines religion as a male institution, whereas Thompson in focusing on religious experience and participation, arrives at the opposite conclusion that religion can be nothing else but feminine. Thus, it is impossible to arrive at conclusions concerning the genderedness of the religious without specifying what aspects of religion one is referring to.

Interestingly, this means that the assessment of the gender of the religious field is closely related to implicit or explicit assumptions or ideas concerning an important issue in religious anthropology: what are the central and most meaningful aspects of the religious, or, to put it differently, how can religion be defined? On the basis of their experience with and participation in CEBs in Águas, partial answers to this question on the definition of religion are provided by both CEB-members and pastoral workers in the neighbourhood Barro. In the form of spontaneous, gender-coloured statements concerning the identity, singularity or quality of CEBs, they describe their religious communities as a female field with typically feminine characteristics, which they further apply to the religious field as a whole, as is shown below.

When pointing at the religious in general and Liberationist Catholicism as practised in the ecclesial base communities in particular, Aguenses often use gendered imagery and metaphors to stress their feminine character, both at the level of the individual believers and at the level of the base community as a whole. When it comes to personal devotion and individual experience with the religious, most catholic Aguenses assume that women are 'more apt' or 'better able' to serve and connect to God and to participate in a church, which is supposed to explain partly women's numerical predominance in the CEBs in Barro.

'The men are more involved when there's a feast; then they take responsibility to go on errands, to roast the meat, to organise. But in the church itself, for the church work itself, it is more the woman [*mas na igreja mesmo, o serviço da igreja é mais a mulher*]. (...) It seems that women have a more intimate relation with the divine, with God, because they are more ... er ... open, aren't they? It seems that they are more frank ... and also I think that men are more of a ... a sinner.'

Dona Vera, minister of Eucharist

² The associated terms 'arena' and 'relationship' are meaningful in themselves, as the word 'arena' calls forth associations of a battlefield, whereas the word 'relationship' evokes images of an intimate bond between people.

‘A woman is not afraid to devote herself, she easily opens up. In the community, when people line up to confess, there are only women. The women are not afraid to tell their sins. I think they really know how to communicate with God. They have the gift of servitude, they put themselves at the service of God, of other people, yes ... and of the community.’

Seu Valdair, leader of a Family Group

“It has to do with the issue of machismo. Because men are not given the chance to rely on others, he himself has to do it, while women, she already feels more submissive. For example, at home it’s the man who orders, she [the woman] already feels much more submissive to the man. So, she doesn’t have difficulty to recognise the greatness of God, let’s say that this Superior Being can influence her life, and that men does not let that happen. Men were taught that they have to do things themselves, that they have to sustain the family, that he has to go and look for things. So for them it’s difficult to let God guide them. As you can gather from the lives of the great saints, like Saint Franciscus, ... even for him it is difficult to let God dominate his life. But he himself says that the Lord has led him to his brothers. So he already accepts that God guides. And in that way he finally leads his life, letting God guide him.... Perceiving the small things that happen in his life and linking that to ‘what is it that God wants from me through this?’. This is exactly what women also do and men don’t. Men are much more keen on dominating, they don’t leave this space for God to enter. Even within the community they do not let God enlighten them, they don’t ask themselves: ‘This and this happens in my life. Why? What is it that God wants for me?’ This question of sensibility is very difficult for men, and much easier for women.”

Sister Estella

‘Women are more spiritual, more religious, they have this connection, don’t they ... they are firmly rooted in faith. Men don’t have this. It’s because women have this connection to life, they know the mystery of life.’

Friar Cleto

Novães heard similar remarks on qualities attributed to women that would foster their intimate relation with the religious. She quotes CEB-members saying that ‘women are better equipped to make sacrifices’ and that ‘women’s hearts are more open to the works of God’ (Novães 1985:73, my translation). Dona Eva, catequist and former sister, too links women’s readiness to engage actively in a religious community to their capacity to open up and serve God and others.

“So, Jesus talks with the Samaritan and the Samaritan passes on the message that He’s there. So, I think that from the moment onwards that we read the Bible and the few messages in it in which women walk together with Jesus, that women start to become stronger, you know, on the journey [*na caminhada*]³. So, when He calls like that ... for every manifestation like that the woman leaves everything and goes. But not men, the men are very much captives of their work [*estão muito presos ao serviço*]. Not women, a woman is like that, she’s more emotional, she’s more in the forefront, she is ... more

³ ‘Caminhada’, which can be literally translated as ‘walk’ or ‘journey’, refers to the path that CEBs follow or have to take in search for the Kingdom of God on Earth. According to Macedo, ‘the notion of caminhada involves everybody, each and every one, and the collective whole. From that stems the necessity of actions, mobilisations, catechesis, courses, feasts, that is to say, of an entirety of practices that may guarantee the cohesion of everything in the process of transformation of the fundamentals of the church as much as of the society’ (Macedo 1992:216). As such, the process of establishing a just society through daily struggle is emphasised, and not so much the realisation of the Kingdom of God on Earth itself (Lehmann 1990:123).

sentiment, isn't it? She's more emotion. So, she assumes more, she follows her heart more [*ela vai mais pelo coração*]. Not that men only follow reason, it isn't like that, is it? But women are more heart."

The observation that women appear to be 'more religious' than men is not limited to the Brazilian case of liberationist Catholicism; studies on religion and gender in other cultural and religious contexts often confirm this image (eg. MacGuire 1992, Dubisch 1991). In debates on the backgrounds of differences in religiosity along gender lines social scientists generally come up with three explanations. First, it is argued that women's social, economic and political marginalisation in broader society accounts for their relatively high participation in religious groups; affiliation to a religious community might provide women with opportunities to find compensation for and improve on their living-conditions by acquiring legitimate freedom of movement, a reliable social network, economic support, an emotional exhaustion-valve, or access to leadership⁴ (e.g. Gill 1990, Brusco 1986, van den Hoogen 1988, 1990, and de Theije 1996). As such, women's conversion to or participation in religious communities is often seen as an attempt to come to terms with gender- and class-based sufferings⁵ (cf Gill 1990, Cucchiari 1990). Second, appropriation of the theology and moral codes of the religious communities in which women participate is thought to provide them with means to (re)define or (re)value both women's and men's traditional roles in society. Van den Hoogen (1988, 1990), for example, shows how female ritual healers in Minas Gerais establish and legitimise religious authority by using catholic idiom and rituals and through explicit submission to the catholic mores. Gill (1990) indicates how the Pentecostal emphasis on paternal responsibility and strict sexual morality encourages women to adopt the Pentecostal faith and to 'evangelise' their husbands in an attempt to curb the 'male behaviour' (in casu gambling, alcoholism, marital infidelity and physical abuse) that threatens the economic and emotional survival of the household. Third, the diverging psychological development of men and women is sometimes mentioned as an explanatory factor for gender differences in religiosity. Leaning on the psycho-analytic insights of Chodorow (1978) and Rubin (1983) concerning women's open, permeable ego boundaries, several authors have analysed women's readiness to become involved with the suprahuman world and their ability to open up to possession by spirits (see e.g. Tambiah 1970 and Boddy 1989). Furthermore, on the basis of Gilligan's work (1982) who has analysed women's concern with 'concrete others' (as opposed to men's preoccupation with 'generalised others') and the ethics of care and connection that results from it, some authors are led to conclude that women's concern with and care for concrete, significant others causes them to be more active than men in

4 When women do hold positions of authority, however, this does necessarily imply or reflect changes in power relations between the sexes. Frequently, the basis, form, content and range of women's religious leadership underline existing gender differences. Rose (1987), for example, points out that the leadership of evangelical women is often directly linked to male leadership in the sense that they engage in shared leadership with their husbands, respecting the gender division of labour and space between the spouses. However, even when confined to 'feminine' tasks, women will enjoy greater freedom and benefit from the public prestige attached to their position (see e.g. van den Hoogen 1990) Similarly, in many religions men's and women's leadership is conceptualised differently by church members, voicing and reinforcing the accepted gender ideology. In a Pentecostal church on Sicily, for example, a distinction is made between 'ministry' (based on the Word and as such related to masculinity) and 'gift' (a Spirit-dominated experience linked to femininity), which legitimates men's dominance while guaranteeing a space women's activism in the religious community (Cucchiari 1990). See for a further discussion on this issue Jacobs & de Theije (1996).

5 Lehmann (1993) states that through conversion women try to get control over or 'cure' the hardships they experience in daily life, such as illness, death and family problems; converting men, however, rather seek control over themselves, over their own weaknesses and temptations, which is symbolised e.g. in the abstinence from smoking, drinking and womanising.

the search for spiritual meaning. The latter explanation comes closest to CEB-women's evaluation of the backgrounds to women's religiosity; they acclaim that women "from a young age onwards are simply more of God", that they are subject more often to "visions", and are "more easily touched" by superhuman forces because, as Dona Isaura suggests, we women ... as little mothers (*mãezinhas*)... are like that".

Female members also stress the feminine character of CEBs when describing the history of the ecclesial base communities, their organisational form, the general attitude of their members, and type of activities undertaken by the CEBs as a whole. By way of illustration, CEBs in general and the Pastorates and Services in particular are often compared with Mary's visit to Elizabeth⁶. Like most CEB-women, Dona Isolde, leading member of one of the mothers' clubs of the parish, regards the informal meeting of these two biblical women some months before the birth of John the Baptist as "the first base community". Her best friend Dona Selma, who also participates in the mothers' club and who is called up every once in a while to lead in prayer at death-watches, explains why:

"Already in that time it was the women who got together first! Mary went to Elizabeth's house. She helped her to prepare herself for the arrival Saint John [the Baptist] and they talked of God. They visited each other, just like us, as united mothers ... like when we make layettes, blankets, or the communal bread. And we also talk of God ... reflecting [*fazendo reflexão*, on the Bible]. It is always the women that get together, there are hardly any men [involved] ... you can see this in our community, in all the base communities in this area. It is always the women who do it all, who help each other."

Dona Selma

Thus, Dona Selma sees women both as the pioneers in the foundation of base communities and as their pivot in terms of membership, having Mary's visit to Elizabeth as an important source of inspiration. Interestingly, this view does not at all correspond with generally accepted theological reflections on the inspirational organisational model for CEBs; according to Barbé, it is rather the community of the twelve male apostles that serves as an example, as 'it was in all epochs of renovation of the Church' (Barbé 1983:134, my translation). Furthermore, in rewriting the history of ecclesial base communities in this way, CEB-women do not only emphasise women's organisational primacy in the past (and presence), but also underline their prominent contribution to CEBs in cultural terms by pointing at the rather 'informal' and unconstrained character of weekly CEB-meetings. This is regarded as indicative of what both female and members, as well as pastoral workers call 'the feminine way' of CEBs.

'The [base] communities have *o jeito feminino*⁷. At meetings people sit together, talk, work and share things. Also the idea of the 'network of CEBs' as an alternative structure for the parish ... it was the women who were the protagonists of this.'

Friar Flavio

'There are few men. The women clean, celebrate, sew, manufacture... And well, the men only blow the whistle in the Patrimony [of the chapel], in construction works, ... oh... and when there's a feast. But the women do all the rest. Because for making the Catechese the women are more apt [*têm mais jeito*], for the liturgy the women are more

⁶ See Luke 1:39-56.

⁷ The word 'jeito' in Brazilian Portuguese is difficult to translate into English. It does not only refer to 'a certain way of doing things', but also carries the connotation of adroitness and dexterity, of doing things cleverly and skillfully. See for an extensive discussion on the cultural meanings and social uses of 'o jeitinho brasileiro' DaMatta (1986 and Hess & daMatta 1995).

apt, for this women are simply more apt. (...) The women bear the community on their shoulders. This is it, yes, in conclusion [*para fechar*] I think this is it. It is they who carry the community. So, I think that the communities, the CEBs, are very feminine. Very feminine, because it is the voice of the woman, it is the own physiognomy of the woman that is the community itself.⁸

Dona Eva, catequist and former sister

The 'feminine way' is also found in the attitude that Aguenses feel is required to be able to keep up church activities in poor, deprived neighbourhoods such as Barro. This attitude, of which personal involvement, patience, creativity and perseverance are the main qualities, is thought to be generally found in women, mothers in particular, and to be lacking in men.

"In this work [of the CEBs] you don't get big results immediately, it's a little ant's work, work of donation. For example, when you see a malnourished child and you are able to reach it, than you are glad when you are able to get it out of that situation. So you need much sensibility, much ... er ... let's say ... er ... maternal sense, and for men this is difficult. (...) You have to await the minimal results. And what exists too is more personal contact. That's difficult too for men."

Sister Regina

"The women of the mothers' clubs are very resourceful [*caprichosas*]⁹. They know how to make many things. In case of disappointments they don't run off immediately, as men do. Even when things go very slowly. The women stay and try to make the best of it. And in our club [mothers' club] everyone mixes with everyone ... there's no gossip like there is in other clubs. We are friends."

Dona Angelina

The supposedly feminine qualities of persistence and creativity are of vital importance to successfully engage in CEB-activities, the majority of which coincide with the tasks and responsibilities of women in larger society. Both religious activities that are related to the weekly or monthly celebrations, administering of sacraments, Catechises and mission, and social activities that are carried out by the Pastorates and Services to improve the living conditions of both CEB-members and non-CEB-members in the neighbourhood demand a focus on care and communality. That is to say, they thrive on educational, care-taking and co-operative skills of their members.

"We provide the people with [medicinal] herbs, prepare home remedies for the needy, we visit the sick. Other women are active in the Catechesis or the Liturgy Group. There are also women, many women in the ... perhaps it is only women in the Services and Pastorates ... the communal garden, the Family Groups, the Little Chapels. Also, we women sometimes organise tea circles, celebrations for the disabled, or co-ordinate actions like that for a new hospital in Águas. We women do and know how to do many, many things."

Dona Cláudia, member of the Communal Gardens

8 "É isso, pra fechar eu acho que é isso. É elas que carregam a comunidade. Então, eu acho que as comunidades, as CEBs, elas são muito feminina. Muito feminina, porque é a voz da mulher, é a própria fisionomia da mulher, que é a própria comunidade..."

9 Unlike the English word 'capricious' the term '*caprichoso*' has a positive connotation in Brazilian Portuguese. A *caprichoso* person knows how to do many things with few means; he or she is considered handy, active, creative or inventive and dedicated. Therefore, I opt for the translation of *caprichoso* into 'resourceful', rather than 'capricious'.

The fact that men do hold a relatively high number of formal leadership positions, control the administering of sacraments and steer decision-making processes within the CEBs does not profoundly alter this image of CEBs as feminine groups. It is women's religious involvement and spirituality and female social activism that are stressed by most members and pastoral agents, not male ecclesialism. Importantly, this does not merely reflect what catholic Aguenes think to be at the heart of their base communities in particular and religion in general, but also what they identify as desirable features for CEBs: religious devotion, personal involvement at the service of community-building, engagement in the liberationist project, participation of the poor, and lay leadership. In a way, the 'feminine way' is both put into practice as a simple function of the fact that women have always predominated numerically in CEBs and is viewed as a good and effective way to proclaim and confess the catholic faith and to realise the building of vital local religious communities and achieve the Kingdom of God on Earth.

"What I'm saying is, is that women's view of donation is something that is more on the inside than that it is an elaboration. This is what I see, perhaps things are different, but I believe that it is much more sincere, evangelical. (...) I would say that women have the real communal spirit and that with communal spirit of women, if women were more powerful, the world would be different ... a better world."¹⁰

Friar Clesio

Thus, CEB-women like their fellow-Catholics from Águas feel that women put their feminine stamp on the base communities in terms of spirituality, devoted religious servitude, membership, missionary and social activities, and the attitude required for the CEBs' maintenance. In this respect it is telling that at the symbolical level, CEBs, pastorates and services are compared to unborn or small children who are in need of constant care.

"The CEBs are like children. You have to teach them how to walk ... that takes a very long time. You have to have patience."

Dona Maria, co-ordinator of a mothers' club

In interviews it was stressed by both CEB-women and pastoral agents that CEBs exist thanks to the creative force of God through women's life-bearing capacities and that they grow and flourish only with maternal care, after which the young life generates new life. In a way, CEBs 'are' new life and 'create' new life. As already indicated, the central or root metaphor¹¹ used for CEBs in this respect is that of 'children'; this links these religious communities directly to women, who are the bearers of life and move within the scope of gestation, birth, and child care accordingly. In the discourses used in the small journal '*Mães Unidas: Voz da Libertação*' (MUVL, United Women: Voice of the Liberation), which is published on an irregular basis by the Pastorate of Poor Women since May 1986¹² and spread among CEB-women in the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre, the generally accepted connection between CEBs and women is made very explicit.

10 Note that 'the ascription of moral virtuousness to certain social categories, like women, generally goes hand in hand with the rendering of certain types of obligations, tasks and responsibilities' (Komter 1990:79, my translation).

11 The notion of root metaphor, introduced by Pepper in 1942, refers to symbols with great conceptual elaborating power. 'We may say that the root metaphor formulates the unity of cultural orientation underlying many aspects of experience, by virtue of the fact that those many aspects of experience can be likened to it' (Ortner 1973:1340).

12 Most editions of this journal appeared between 1986 and 1989, with occasional issues being published in the years to follow. Copies of the older editions, however, are still spread on a regular basis during meetings of the Mothers' Clubs and other Services and Pastorates and used as a starting-point for discussions.

“Our little mothers (*mãezinhas*), when they leave home to work in the Services of the community, when they go look for other poor women, when they help a club or family group to be *born*, they are the *midwives* of the Liberation, blessed by God, and much like Our Lady (...) In the unjust society in which we are living, every day mothers and fathers bring about the miracle of obtaining a little food and shelter for their children. What we are seeing is that unity and organisation are necessary for the *birth* of Liberation. In the CEBs we make this happen.”

MUVL, July 1987 (italics added, original capitals)

‘In Águas children’s clubs exist since 1986, that are like *children* of the mothers’ clubs and which follow more or less the same orientation: 1) together the children engage in diverse pieces of work; 2) they share the Gospel in the same way; 3) they play together; 4) at the end, they share the food together.’

Dona Miriã, co-ordinator of the children’s clubs

Not surprisingly, in their capacity of life-giving and caring mothers, CEB-women are repeatedly compared with the Virgin Mary who serves as their most important role model¹³. Often, distinguishing features and episodes of Mary’s exemplary life are mentioned to emphasise women’s central roles and domestic talents that are put at the service of their religious communities. As such, in following Mary’s example, CEB-women assume responsibility for the procreation of the Church, the propagation of the Gospel, and the realisation of God’s Kingdom on Earth.

‘Just like Mary, woman involved in struggle [*mulher de luta*], servant of God, we want to respond with happiness to the call of Service that God entrusted us with. We want to renew the desire to live (*renovar a vontade de viver*) and, like Mary, to help in the struggle of the oppressed people. She who saw her son being persecuted, tortured and assassinated by the powerful of that time, assumed the mission of Mother of the Church, living and acting in the first Christian communities.

The Book of the Apocalypse presents, through symbols, a pregnant woman in painful labour, who meets a dragon with ten horns and seven heads. That woman stands for Mary and also for the Church, giving birth to Jesus Christ. The dragon symbolises all who are against Life, against the Liberation of the people. And who would say that such a powerful dragon could be conquered by the fragility of one simple woman in painful labour!’

MUVL, August 1987 (original capitals)

In other words, both Mary and CEB-women are thought to combine all traits essential to and characteristic of base communities: they are ordinary women of the people and special “Mother-Prophets of the Liberation” (*Mãe-Profetas da Libertação*) at the same time; they have “the real communal spirit”, according to Dona Neda, and are closely related to or even identified with God’s Kingdom of Earth.

Summarising it can be stated that, since women are considered more apt for the religious than men, predominate numerically and highly influence the organisational form and daily practices of CEBs, CEBs themselves are thought to be female in number and feminine in nature. Of course, women’s predominance and the feminine, communal spirit of CEBs might also have been the main cause of base communities attracting predominantly women and discouraging men. As Dona Ivanice, woman sexton (*zeladora*) of the small chapels (*capelinhas*), says: When a woman starts to participate, she doesn’t stop anymore. At a certain point, the movement of

¹³ See chapter 5 for a more elaborate discussion on the Virgin Mary as model of and model for femininity.

women was so strong in the base communities that the men weakened. That's it, they weakened because they stayed only in the shadow of women. The women do everything, although we should be a community of men and women, but who work are the women. Really, I experienced this personally [*sentí isso na pele*].” Base communities being regarded as a field of and for feminine practice, CEBs are often symbolically represented as ‘children’. Being children, however, base communities only prosper thanks to the good care provided by CEB-women who follow the Virgin Mary's example, which again explicitly links CEBs to the female domain.

References to CEBs, their services and pastorates with the use of concepts, metaphors or equations with masculine connotations were absent in the accounts of actively involved catholic Aguenes concerning the essential features of their religious communities. There was, however, one notable exception: the Labourers' Pastorate (*Pastoral Operária*), once was described as a very masculine group by one of the friars.

“The Labourers' Pastorate is almost masculine, no, very masculine, because the thinkers behind this Pastorate always have been men [*pois quem pensou nessa pastoral sempre foi os homens*], so that's a totally different Pastorate. If you observe the Pastorate of Health, which is organised by women, you can see a big difference ... the dynamics are different [*tem uma outra dinâmica*]. The Labourers' Pastorate is hard, it's dry [*é dura, é seca*]. The people don't manage to go there. I particularly don't manage to go there, because I don't manage to discuss, to converse with them, because it's very rigid, it's very hard. A feminine Pastorate is much more cheerful [*alegre*].”

Friar Carlos

Starting from their own religious experiences and practices within the realm of CEBs, base community members and pastoral agents generally also stress the femininity of the religious field in its entirety; many of the excerpts from interviews and life histories presented above were followed by the concluding remark: “After all [*afinal de contas*], religion is a women's affair”, or no distinction whatsoever was made between religion and CEBs at all during conversations.

3.2.2 Women's religion or “the maternal face of faith” (“*o rosto materno da fé*”)¹⁴

Above, it has become clear that most Aguenese Catholics view the religious in general and CEBs in particular mainly as feminine spheres or fields, which they explicitly relate to women's numerical predominance and to their structural contribution to CEBs in both organisational and cultural terms. Within this supposedly feminine field, CEB-women's religious views, experiences and practices share some basic characteristics. Sered has noted that ‘historical and ethnographic accounts describe women's religious activity as embedded within, complementary to, enriching of, growing out of, and occasionally rebelling against women's familial involvements. An intense concern with the well-being of their extended families characterises the religious lives of many women’ (Sered 1994:6). The same goes for CEB-women; deeply concerned with particular, interpersonal relationships as they are often the primary caretakers of their families, either as mothers, daughters or as wives, CEB-women's life stories exhale a perspective on and experience with religion that are consonant with this concern and which can be described as pragmatic, particularistic and eclectic.

In the first place, CEB-women's faith is congruent with what Lora calls women's ‘sense of finality’ (*sentido de finalidade*), i.e. with their concern with the ‘what for’ or ‘where to’ of things

¹⁴ With the words “a motherly face” I quote a very active CEB-woman, whose level of education and further formation suggest that she is winking at Leonardo Boff's work ‘The Maternal Face of God (1979).

(Lora in Tamez 1989:29-36). In other words, CEB-women's religious conviction is pragmatic in nature in the sense that the explanatory force and concrete applicability of religion are considered highly relevant. As Dona Iracema says: "For me the Catholic faith serves. What's the point of a religion if it doesn't serve you?" The issue of the 'finality' of the catholic faith in confronting the daily hardships that are implied in the unfavourable living conditions in Barro does come up regularly during meetings of the pastorates, services and mothers' clubs. Stories are circulating among CEB-women of how God, Mary, a saint or women's own faith has learned them to interpret, understand and overcome difficulties. These are regarded important teachings and welcomed much more warmly than the obligatory weekly reflections on the Bible or the priest's latest homily.

"You know, one day my mother got missing. She was in a real bad state because of my eldest brother. He had shot the neighbour that night... they were having this fight, I don't know. The neighbour died. She [the mother] was already suffering from very bad headaches... she left and didn't show up for days. She was out in the woods. We were very worried. I prayed and prayed, and even made a promise to Our Lady. Oh woman (*bab¹⁵ mulher*), how I prayed! The people said to me: "Look, she's gone, she will not return". But I kept my faith and asked Our Lady to take care of her and to let her return home. Then, a few days later, she [the mother] suddenly appeared. She was totally wet, with a very cold skin... If it wasn't for Our Lady... she took good care of her when I couldn't."

In the vein of this pragmatism, theological insights and social initiatives are being held up against the light or developed in view of their general or specific 'applicability' and 'effectiveness', which is evaluated in terms of the women being enabled to "do the right thing", "solve one's own problems", "take good care of the children", "help those in need", and "support the community", as the following comments of CEB-women also suggest.

"For me having faith means to follow the example of Christ and to live with conscience, to help my neighbours... not to remain blind when there's trouble in other families. That's what being catholic really is. Religion helps us to do the right thing, to communicate, we get together and pray for our children, for the community, for the unity of our communities."

"We have to read the Word of God. That's important in these times, because less and less people are religious in the communities nowadays. There's so much conflict in families... people get divorced, they fight and scold each other. In families that are more religious divorce is not so common, so... it's good to have faith."

"I find the reflections in the mothers' club very important. We talk about family problems, we read a small part of the Bible, we share what's inside. We discuss and pray over the difficulties. We come together... we talk. I don't know how to read, but I learn a lot this way. We learn with the community. It makes sense, now I understand a lot more. Why things happen... The Gospel says many things..."

"I think that faith expresses itself in simple things: drinking *chimarrão*, saying some comforting words, showing tenderness to another mother... The faith is... is giving voice to us women who look for harmony and community. These are only small steps... leaving the house and getting up to speak... but these are very precious steps to us. We have to keep on looking for what we want and for the ones that need us."

15 Typically gaúcho exclamation expressing astonishment, surprise, fright or fear (Novo Michaelis 1961)

As such, CEB-women's religiosity is inextricably linked up with both personal care and social activism, the latter of which is characterised by situationality and locality as will become clear in the following section on the particularities of CEB-women's Liberation Theology.

In the second place, CEB-women invest much time in the establishment of an intimate bond with God, Jesus, Mary, and 'particular' or 'personal' saints¹⁶ in order to enhance their spiritual growth and to safeguard the well-being of their loved ones. These personal relations are established and maintained primarily through prayer and are appealed upon for protection, guidance or help.

"Every day I greet my little saint when I enter and leave [my house]. You see, there's his portrait overthere [above the entrance to the living-room]. When I forget to greet him, I go back. He helps me out whenever I'm in trouble. He protects me and my children. He has helped me many times already, protecting me and my children."

Dona Cláudia, co-ordinator of a mothers' club

"Saint Franciscus has a very strong presence in my life. He was a very good person, humble, he suffered a lot... struggling against everything and everybody, but he went ahead. That's a very strong example for me, a light. This issue of struggling... Jesus Christ was the first one to do this, he gave the example that Saint Franciscus followed... to continue struggling even in difficult times."

Dona Neusa, co-ordinator of the *capelinhas*

"I pray to God, at home... or when I'm in the community. I tell him about my problems... I ask for favours and thank him for everything he does for us... it's like a conversation, it helps to alleviate myself. But I feel more close to Our Lady. When the small chapel arrives (*capelinha*) in my house, we sit next to it with some of my neighbours (*vizinhas*) and we pray... for the health of our children, for the needy, to secure her help in family problems, anything... Seeing that small figure of her always gives me desire to pray."

Dona Angelina, participant of the communal garden

Some saints are associated with specific problems or situations: for example, Santo Antônio is called upon in case of illness or social, Santa Rita helps when a couple meets with marital problems and Our Lady can be invoked for all sorts of family problems. These and other saints are relied upon for spiritual refuge, which is considered of vital importance as most women do not view God as an omni-potent force.

"God is very powerful. So is the Pope, but sometimes you notice that something is wrong in the Church, something which is not in concordance with the Bible, but well, we cannot disobey the Pope, can we? I know it has been like this for centuries. The Church itself has made serious mistakes, even crimes, vis-a-vis the people, for example by not telling the people to read the Bible. Just like the government and education; the government don't want us to learn how to read and write, because they don't want the people to become smart (*esperto*) and to ask questions. Only in 1978 we began to take up the Bible and read it by ourselves. We learned more about God this way, and about our lives, and now I know that God is more important than the Pope; His Word is in the Bible. But still you cannot leave everything to him [God]. It's like this: you receive a bit

¹⁶ Likewise, Christian who studied women in rural Spain, found that 'women are more likely to fix on personal patrons than are men (...) Such a close relationship carries over into old age when practical requests from the women still centre on the children, now grown up, and when there is a deepening of the personal, affective ties between the woman and the divine patron' (Christian 1972:133).

from God, but the rest is up to you.”

Dona Zezé, participant of the Communal Oven

“A man likes to solve his own problems... he believes in God, but not in the same way as women. Sometimes we women even say: ‘I will put it in the hands of God and he will show me the way’, and we’ll have this trust (*confiança*) and will fight for the things. Because we can’t remain seated and leave everything to God. He does many good things in our lives, but He needs our work and co-operation for it. We have the responsibility to accept and work for His project to liberate the people. We ourselves are responsible for that. The Word of God provokes us and we have to obey Him, and we will take pains for (*vamos nos esforçar para*) our answer.”

Dona Gina, participant of the Pastorate of Health

Women’s tendency to establish close, personal bonds in the religious field is not limited to ‘supranatural’ or divine actors, but extends itself to religious specialists. CEB-women regularly turn to other religious specialists within the Catholic realm, such as ritual healers (*benzedeiras*) in search of meaningful explanations, effective rituals and evocative symbols. In her article on ritual healers in Minas Gerais, van den Hoogen describes *benzedeiras* as ‘(...) ritual healers who treat various diseases and problems of other people by means of their special relation with the supernatural and by employing Catholic symbols and prayers. They regard these healing rituals as Catholic activities, based on and inspired by the Catholic faith. The Brazilian church, however, has subsequently condemned these rituals of prayer as superstition and as religious errors’ (van den Hoogen 1988:177).

In Águas too, some CEB-women are well-known and respected for their supernatural *graça* (gift of having access to supernatural forces), knowledge of medical herbs and healing power. They are visited mainly by women¹⁷ who are in search of cure for a wide array of diseases and problems, such as head-aches, infections, insomnia, crying-babies, drug-addiction, and domestic violence. During the healing rituals *benzedeiras* often employ a profoundly Catholic discourse and use common Catholic prayers and symbols, such as candles, a wooden cross, and herbs or branches that often have been previously blessed by the priest.¹⁸

“I’ve visited Dona Bracedina many times. She’s a very sweet person, strong, she’s a powerful healer (*benzedeira*), but now she’s sick.. she’s a bit weak now. So now it’s only at times that you can go there. Q: You go there sometimes? A: Yes, I go there whenever my children are sick. She says powerful prayers for them, purifies them with special branches, or lays hands on the child.”

Other CEB-women occasionally also rely on competing belief-systems; they frequent Pentecostal churches, Umbanda centres or Candomblé temples to alleviate specific spiritual or social problems, or visit a locally well-known male spiritist healer.

“There was this problem with my neighbour. Someone broke in her house and stole her 5-year old. He was found later on a spot very near to the house, in the sewerage. He was

17 Van den Hoogen too notes that men are underrepresented in the clientele of *benzedeiras*. She states that in ‘this way a female domain is created in which men participate only marginally and where they are largely dependent on the knowledge and expertise of women. Men show special respect and fear towards *benzedeiras*, who have exceptional qualities to solve problems, because they are afraid of being at the mercy of the benevolence of these ritual and supernatural specialists during the act of blessing’ (van den Hoogen 1988:189).

18 Although one or two members of the Aguense clergy disapprove of the healing rituals of *benzedeiras* by referring to it as “nonsense” and “superstition”, the attitude of the priest, friars and nuns towards *benzedeiras* is generally one of tolerance and acceptance.

still alive, but his belly was cut open, like this and this, and his fingers were cut like this. God, he was covered with blood... he was really in a very bad state. So the police came and they took a look at the house... it was locked from the inside, but no one was in! She [the neighbour] said: "Someone is performing black magic on my son, someone's trying to get at me". So we went to see a *mãe-de-santo*. She explained what my neighbour had to do lift the curse..."

"You know, we have a spiritual healer here in the neighbourhood. I don't know his religion, but he's very powerful. I talked to one of the leaders of the Catechesis group, a young girl... I said: 'Why don't you go there and talk with him?' She has this problem with spirits, you know. She feels sick and vomits all the time when she has drunk some water... I said to her: 'Those without bones and flesh don't like water, you'd better go to the house of that spiritist'..."

In the third place, CEB-women rely on a wide range of rituals and symbols that bear direct spiritual meaning to their everyday lives and provide effective means of alleviating their suffering. Next to rituals and symbols legitimised through the Catholic Church, such as attending Mass, having your children baptised with holy water, carrying out novenas and praying the rosary in front of Mary's image, CEB-women also engage in rituals and employ symbols that are generally labelled as 'popular religion'¹⁹ (*religião popular*) by both clergy and laity. They engage in pilgrimages, venerate and make vows to saints, receive small chapels in their houses, visit ritual healers for healing, experience spirit possession and so on. Also, most CEB-women have their house and other belongings blessed by the priest. As Dona Nilda explains: "I like my house to be blessed (*gosto da benção da casa*). The blessing is a very good thing... It was the first thing I asked for when we got here. It's important. It purifies and we feel protected." The priest classifies this blessing as superstition²⁰, but nevertheless co-operates in performing it "because the people want it". He stresses that personally he does "not believe in the force of this blessing. I even didn't know how to do it, because in my home region (*na minha terra*) it was not done. Now I have this small booklet... it carries all the formulas, so I take that with me on my visits and bless the houses when asked for." Making an eclectic use of Catholic and 'popular' rituals and symbols, examples of which are given in the next sub-section, CEB-women seek multiple, persuasive means to experience, celebrate, control and express the uncontrollable and inexpressible: life itself.

Summarising it can be stated that the form and content of CEB-women's religiosity are highly influenced by their deep concern with interpersonal relationships as mothers, wives and neighbours, and are characterised by pragmatism, particularism/personalism and eclecticism. As such, women's religiosity in CEBs has a 'maternal face', or, to put it differently, it is intrinsically bound up with women's²¹ commitment to particular persons²². This commitment is

19 The concept of 'popular religion', which generally refers to religion of and by the people (see e.g. Rostas & Droogers 1993), is not unproblematic given its opposition to 'official religion'. As such, popular religion is often wrongfully associated with the informal, personal, unstructured and unsystematic.

20 While the blessing of houses was still considered acceptable by priest Darcy, he outright complained about the increasing use of amulets by CEB-members: "Instead of putting a step forward, the people slides back. More and more they use these amulets: an elephant, a fist, Boeddha... here enters also the New Age. The people doesn't believe in that, but feels secure when looking at these amulets."

21 Komter (1990:97) rightly states that this commitment is not specific of the female sex, but rather of the cultural context in which women act and of the social positions they hold. As such, 'the ethic of care' is not inherent in and thus a universal characteristic of the female sex; it is rather a predominantly feminine trait in the context of the base communities under study.

labelled by Friedman as an ‘ethic of care’ (Friedman 1993:258-73)²³. of which ‘the key issue is the sensitivity and responsiveness to another person’s emotional states, individuating differences, specific uniqueness, and whole particularity’ (ibid: 268). According to Friedman, this orientation on care privileges a focus on particular persons over a ‘principled commitment to values, forms of conduct, or human virtues’ (ibid: 270)²⁴. In the religious field this means that, firstly, women generally reproduce and create religious meanings and practices that are congruent with their preoccupation with person-oriented care, which often serves as an important criterion when assessing the religious in terms of its ‘finality’. Secondly, it implies that in situations of moral ambiguity, women are inclined to turn to the guidance inherited in the examples set by meaningful others, such as family members, CEB-members, God(s) or saints, instead of obeying or abiding to the Catholic doctrine, as also already has become clear. In short, it is against the background of this ethic of care, that the message of Liberation Theology is received, shaped and amended by CEB-women, the particularities of which are discussed below.

3.3 CEB-women on Liberation Theology: having “faith and fibre” (“*fé e fibra*”)

3.3.1 A discourse of corporeality

In the introduction to this chapter references were made to the double message implied in the teachings of Liberation Theology concerning women’s role and vocation in life and in the church. In this subsection the focus is reversed; it describes CEB-women’s perspectives on and relation to Liberation Theology, using the findings presented in section 3.2 as a general frame of reference. The main concern here then is in what way CEB-women turn the ‘public’ message of Liberation Theology into ‘private’ meanings and influence the face of Liberation Theology within their own base communities: in other words, what do CEB-women of Águas hold and make²⁵ of Liberation Theology, given CEB-women’s preoccupation with person-oriented care and their general preference for pragmatism, personalism and eclecticism within the religious field?

In evaluating women’s reproduction of and contribution to the Liberationist discourses²⁶ as voiced by the priest, nuns, brothers and lay leaders in leaflets, during celebrations, at meetings et

22 Likewise, in her article on women’s participation in neighbourhood associations, Caldeira has stated that ‘Women (...) did not see the slightest problem in demanding childcare and health centres, nor in going to the meetings.... Since they interpreted all of this as ‘working for the welfare of my children’. Thus, it was as responsible mothers that they were able to take over the mayor’s office, in the same manner that the fact of being conscious mothers allows them to leave home more easily to ‘face the outside world’ to work” (Caldeira 1984).

23 Friedman’s work is a reinterpretation of Gilligan’s ‘In a Different Voice’; she attempts to surpass the care/justice dichotomy as introduced by Gilligan in 1982 by considering ‘just treatment’ as an inseparable aspect of care.

24 Friedman (1993:272) rightly points at the fact that these somewhat stereotypical view on women as person-oriented and men as rule-oriented actors is perhaps ‘based more deeply on occupational role stereotypes than on gender stereotypes’ (cf. Eagly & Steffen 1984). In the practice of everyday life in the religious communities under study, however, CEB-members’ views on women’s roles and femininity largely converge.

25 I deliberately avoid the concept of appropriation here. This concept refers explicitly to the process of reproduction of public meanings in idiosyncratic meanings by social actors, yet it silently presupposes a primacy of ‘the public’ over ‘the private’ in the sense that these actors are primarily regarded as receivers, consumers or reproducers and not so much as creative human beings who may add new elements to the public message.

26 The gender aspects of Liberation Theology are further addressed in chapter 5, when the focus is on CEB-women’s identity as private experience and social positioning.

cetera, a distinction needs to be made between common CEB-women and their female leaders. By the majority of CEB-women the liberationist discourse on the capitalist system, social injustice, and economic exploitation is considered rather abstract or incomprehensible, since it is primarily located at the national level and focuses on the complicated rationale of structural inequality.

Furthermore, it is regarded as pretty impersonal and unrealistic, because common liberationist discourses focus on the subordination of 'the people' and because solutions for this inequality are sought in structural change in the political and economic field at large. As such, CEB-women consider Liberation Theology as voiced by the Catholic clergy and their lay leaders as "very far off (*muito longe da gente*)" and "just beautiful words"²⁷. Like Dona Ana says: "Perhaps it's the truth, but what can we do? It doesn't help to know all this. We have to survive... here and now."

Also, reflections of a less political and more theological nature that are made by Liberationist pastoral workers are often regarded as "difficult reading" (*leitura difícil*). One of the CEB-women commented that "the priest and the friars talk a lot, my God, and sometimes I don't understand it what they say...they use difficult words (*palavredo*)", whereas sister Anizia complained to me after a meeting of all Aguense Mothers' Clubs, to which a sister from Porto Alegre was invited for a joint theological reflection on the Canticles: "Did you see, during the reflection many women didn't participate...some even dozed off, they only started moving when it was time for the intercessory prayers". Illustratively, when a couple of minutes later the sister in question walked by she was thanked by a CEB-mother for "the talk" (*a palestra*).

Finally, many CEB-women told not to apprehend of the mixing of (party) politics with religion. Dona Santana, member of the Apostolate of Prayer, for example, outright rejects Liberation Theology as "politics that makes the people (*o povo*) turn away from religion". And Dona Mina adds:

"I don't like it that politics (*a politica*) enter the community. Those new priests are very young and talk a lot about the liberation of the people... but they are stubborn and think they're always right. They think they own the CEBs or that the Church owns the communities, but in fact it is us, the people, we should be the ones in charge of the communities! They interfere with everything, they slow down things, break the organisation and then move away. In the old days, priests were not allowed to make political propaganda, but now they walk around with buttons of the PT, telling us secretly whom to vote for. I don't say that things were better in the older days (*tempos antigos*)... the priest preached in Latin, with his back turned to the people, telling us when to stand up and sit down, and then... all this people with this faith although they didn't understand anything! And the priest remained up there, and during the preaching we didn't read the Bible. I even didn't have one. I bought my first [Bible] in Alvorada, about 30 years ago."

Dona Mina

Female leaders, however, generally underline and actively spread the liberationist message. Having taken courses in e.g. Popular Theology (*Teologia Popular*) at the ESTEF and being

27 On the basis of her research among Catholics in Garanhuns de Theije (1999:127) states that the 'political discourse of the liberationist campaign is not only difficult to understand' and infeasible, but also often inconvenient. It implies passing moral judgments of the behaviour of others, the rich in particular, with whom many CEB-members are acquainted through social or economic ties, and as such 'contradicts the peacefulness that the Church preaches'. Among the CEB-women of Águas, however, I found no real evidence of such concerns or considerations.

engaged in the co-ordination of services and pastorates at the local and sometimes regional level, these women do explicitly refer to and adopt (parts of) the Liberationist message. They stress the importance of understanding the “social and political dynamics of society”, as Dona Nair puts it. As a consequence, they plea for a democratisation of the ecclesial organisation of CEBs and want to initiate and participate in socio-political movements that surpass the geographical and religious boundaries of the local base communities.

“The Mother-Church (*Igreja-Mãe*, i.e. the base-community located in the main chapel of Barro) is more traditional. And the community Nossa Senhora Romeiros also. There is still a discussion going on in the communities. The old ones (*antigos*) want a directory with a president, vice-president, and so on, but I try to explain that no one is more than another (*nenhum é mais do outro*). And I take this Bible text to explain... I say: “Jesus Christ is the head of the [Church] members. And in the Council nobody orders (*manda*). Do you understand?” And they say: “We understand, but we are not convinced.”
Dona Zenaide, member of the Apostolate of Prayer and co-ordinator of a Mothers’ Club

“The mothers try to salvage the solidarity between people; we did that already in Águas, we shared bread, clothes and so on. But we want this also to happen at the level of the country. God did the same as political leader with Jesus as his protagonist. How we long for this (*temos saudade disso*).”
Dona Sarai, co-ordinator of a Mothers’ Club

This political engagement, however, is not shared by most common female CEB-members. Although CEB-women were the main protagonists of the land occupations, initiated many organisations and co-operations, founded of a numbers of base communities and lead political demonstrations in the early days of Barro and its CEBs, nowadays their focus becomes more and more centred on personal development and spirituality and on localised action in the form of charity.

“Nowadays, the work has come to a standstill (*parado*). The mothers are not very open to new ideas; they keep on walking in the same street, but what’s the use of just making blankets and having the same sort of reflections every week? Why not becoming more engaged in other work or politics. The youngsters of the neighbourhood often help me in the political campaign for the PT (Labour Party), but the women offer little help. They only know where to find me when they’re looking for a job for their unemployed children... their political conscience is very limited.”
Dona Nargi, campaigner for the PT and co-ordinator of a Mothers’ Club

“The mothers repeat the same *roteiro* every week. They don’t make any step forward. They just do not want to see what is happening around them. They think that politics is dirty.”

“We have this social duty (*compromisso social*). It doesn’t help to be happy, if we see the problems of others. Then we forget ourselves... my happiness lies in what I do.”
Dona Eliane, participant of the Pastorate of Health

In short, female CEB-members are often either not able or not willing to reproduce the Liberationist socio-political analysis and its implications; instead, they feel a moral obligation to discharge social duties when faced with concrete cases of poverty. Nonetheless, when analysing CEB-women’s discourses on Liberation and Liberation Theology it becomes evident that regardless of their complaints on the abstractness and their doubts concerning the political

pretences of Liberationist discourses, they do share ‘the preference for the poor’ and have widely adopted the terminology involving struggle (*luta*) of the poor or the people (*os pobres, o povo*), oppression (*opressão*), injustice (*injustiça*) and social mission (*missão social*).

By accepting the central notions of liberation theologian discourse into their daily vocabulary, both common and leading CEB-women do explicitly present themselves as believers in favour of Liberation Theology and position themselves within the Catholic field. At the same time, however, CEB-women (of whom common participants in particular) often give different meanings to concepts such as poverty, injustice and struggle, and hence picture a different road to liberation; CEB-women of Águas tend to rephrase or amend the Liberationist discourse with another discourse, which can be labelled as a discourse of corporeality. This discourse is informed by women’s direct involvement with both procreation and survival; it reflects their daily experiences as “bearers” and “maintainers” of life (*geradoras de vida* and *portadoras da vida* respectively) with the life cycle and the struggle for survival that is implied in the harsh reality of Barro. As such, the discourse of corporeality contains notions that refer to physical pain and pleasure, to women’s traditional chores, and to co-operation in a context of extreme poverty.

The discourse of corporeality is constantly reproduced and amended in local CEB-meetings and further spread by the small journal of the Pastorate of Poor Women, which circulates among the Mothers’ Clubs and other CEB-related Services in the region of Port Alegre and which is produced by female CEB-leaders from Águas and neighbouring towns. The following excerpts provide nice examples of how CEB-women rephrase as well as supplement Liberation Theology.

“Our little mothers (*mãezinhas*), when they leave home to work in the Services of the community, when they go look for other poor women, when they help a club or family group to be *born*, they are the *midwives* of the Liberation, blessed by God, and much like Our Lady (...) In the unjust society in which we are living, every day mothers and fathers bring about the miracle of obtaining a little food and shelter for their children. What we are seeing is that unity and organisation are necessary for the *birth* of Liberation. In the CEBs we make this happen.”

MUVL, July 1987 (*italics added, original capitals*)

POOR WOMEN, KNITTERS of a NETWORK that will remake the SOCIAL FABRIC (*o tecido social*) starting from the base. A NETWORK??? Yes. Poor women, oppressed by the very necessities they experience, necessities concerning LAND - BREAD - WORK - HOUSING - HEALTH - CRECHE - SCHOOL, ETC. ETC. leave for a joint struggle. For this, they give each other a great embrace of resistance. This embrace is not undone anymore (*não se desmancha mas*): one helps the other in necessity, one ... In this happiness BONDS are created that lead to an organisation of COMMON-UNITY (COMMUNITY). It is as if they are making a NEW FABRIC, each of them representing in their embrace a link that only persist if one is bonded with another. This COMMUNITY that is thus forming opens up for another woman, yet another, yet another...and...in this way the communities start remaking the whole social fabric starting from the base. A new type of relations is created; between equals, all people become COMRADES-SISTERS (*COMPANHEIRAS-IRMÃS*).

This is RADICAL, PARTICIPATIVE DEMOCRACY, improving step by step, conform our strength (*nossas forças*).²

MUVdL (June 1994, *original capitals*)

Instead of being explored by the capitalist system, poor women feel ‘oppressed by the very

necessities' they experience. The liberationist focus on structural inequality at the national level is substituted by a focus on step-by-step improvements and on small victories, such as 'the miracle of obtaining a little food or shelter'. And rather than calling for participation in social movements and political parties, the importance of helping others through personal bonding and networking is emphasised, for which a symbol is used that derives from women's domestic chore of providing clothing: the 'knitting of fabric'.

In interviews held with common CEB-women too, the discourses of Liberation Theology and corporeality generally merge.

"We feel prostituted by the system, and that's no good. We have to look for people in our group, in our community, who are in need of help, who have necessities. So that we can help and give life."

Dona Jurema, participant of a Mothers' Club

"God chose someone like us to give birth to Jesus... he chose Mary. She dedicated herself to Him, she became responsible for this small child. We poor mothers of Barro are also dedicated; we have our own [children], we are dedicated to the community... we are also bearers of life, just like Mary. But it's difficult to keep the communities alive. Despite everything, despite all the good intentions, there's rivalry, lack of communication... all communities have their difficulties. (...) [But] we cannot disanimate... Mary also had to fight the bad thoughts of others, and also we're too involved in the CEBs. We feel the people need us and we need them, we need to do the things together, in *mutirão*. (...) We are like their [the CEBs] midwives, mothers, and nurses; we accompany their growing pains. And now I'm already becoming a granny!"

Dona Giusepa, oldest member of a Mothers' Club and participant of the Apostolate of Prayer

To understand the rationale underlying the processes through which CEB-women negotiate and contribute to Liberation Theology, the theory of connectionism as voiced by Strauss and Quinn comes in use. These authors state that all people have cultural understandings, schemas or learned prototypes that are summarised versions of our experiences stored in our memory and which are interconnected through association. These cultural schemas are constantly activated and consulted simultaneously, which ensures flexible responses to a new situation for one thing and guidance by previously learned patterns of behaviour for another. The schemas have the tendency to be thematic, shared, stable in persons, and to have historical durability, but can also be subject to change due to people's experiences and emotions that provide motivational force (Strauss & Quinn 1994, 1997).

Applying connectionist theory to CEB-women's redefinition of and contribution to religion in general and Liberation Theology in particular, as analysed and described above, we see that CEB-women on the one hand 'obey' and reproduce common cultural schemas on religion and Liberation Theology. For example, just like other CEB-members and leaders they feel that religion 'is something very important in people's life that has to do with God' and that Liberation Theology 'is there to teach and liberate us'. On the other hand, however, starting from their life experiences and motivated to improve their living conditions, CEB-women redefine these schemas by rephrasing and amending the Liberationist discourse in such way that it exhales person-oriented responsibility, localised communality (or unity) and social engagement, rather than class conscience, social struggle, and political activism. In this way, the partial incompatibility of Liberationist discourses with women's daily lives are overcome and mediated

or negotiated, so that it serves women's needs for a religiosity that has explanatory spiritual force, is personalistic in nature and also meets social interests.

The results of this process of women "making theology" are described as 'feminine mysticism', both in theological works on gender and Catholicism and during meetings of CEB-women at the regional level. Employing this notion of 'feminine mysticism' (*mística feminina*)²⁸ as a general term of reference for women's religious practices and experiences, both feminist theologians and female CEB-leaders assume that women have "a different experience of God" and "a special manner of practising the faith", as Dona Isolde of Águas puts it.

Bingemer summarises the contents of the notion of feminine mysticism as follows: 'The feminine mysticism that is unhooking itself from the writings and sayings of women theologians here on the continent [Latin America] presents with internal coherence and correct articulation a powerful force of synthesis and integration. Integration between experience and practice, between "the felt" and the practised, between the passionate love and the imperious necessity to devote oneself to the service of the Kingdom, that is concrete and manifest in the faces of the poor and oppressed, most of whom are women. (...) The theology made by the women of Latin America today is (...) affective and effective, it springs from an experience of loving and attentive listening, and helps to make it and translate it into a practice that is as much effective as affectionate'. This means that feminine mysticism has an 'inevitable collective dimension' in the sense that 'contrary to the classical model of theologising, which is markedly individualist in production and conclusion, women's theology was happening as a *mutirão*' (Bingemer 1990:87-9). Here again the importance of (life) experience, practice and unity is stressed. In this way, it seems that whereas Liberation Theology primarily provides answers to the questions "Why us (labourers, poor)?" and "How to change society?" and as such parts from the national level, CEB-women through their religious participation in CEBs mainly seek satisfactory answers to the questions "Why me/my child?" and "How to improve the living conditions of my family and Barro?" and take their own lives as a starting-point.

This means that CEB-women do not seem to cherish Liberation Theology primarily for its 'abstract' political analysis and 'complicated' theological doctrine. Rather, they value it for the opportunities it creates to arrive at an understanding of one's personal life, at localised action and democratic self-organisation²⁹. For this, ritual and symbolic renewal serves as an important vehicle. In this respect, women's way of reflecting on the Bible and their introduction of the 'communal bread' as a powerful symbol of femininity and 'feminine mystics' are examples in case, which are discussed below³⁰.

28 Generally speaking, the word *mística* refers to the study of the mystical or spiritual.

29 See chapter 4.

30 Another example of ritual and symbolic renewal that serves women's spiritual needs is found in the Mass of Health. CEB-women through their participation managed to stretch the boundaries of 'official religion' by having the popular ritual of home-blessing inserted into the religious curriculum of CEBs³⁰. In the beginning of the 1990s they had pressured the clergy to start administering regularly a so-called Mass of Blessing (*Missa de Benção*) or Blessing of Health (*Benção da Saúde*) after the example of home-blessings and after the model of the public blessing of objects like photos, water, salt and clothes in religious services of local Pentecostal churches. Initially rejecting the proposal, after two years the clergy agreed in an attempt to satisfy the CEB-women's need for spiritual protection through an eclectic range of rituals as well as to countervail the growing attractiveness of Pentecostalism. Nowadays, next to the Masses said on Christmas and Easter, the Masses of Blessing are the ones best visited and most appreciated by the female CEB-members.

3.3.2 'Reading' the Bible

Most participants of base communities and associated services and pastorates enact weekly the ritual of the 'reflection on the Gospel'. Analysing CEB-women's reflections on the Bible or the Gospel, three observations call for attention. First, pastoral workers stress that they consider it important that women participate in the reflections on the Bible, but in practice CEB-women receive little orientation from their pastoral workers. Instead, the co-ordinators and animators themselves supervise the reflections, which makes them personally responsible for own religious training and the religious education of dependants. The priest, friars and nuns address the lack of pastoral accompaniment to time-pressure that result from the large number of activities and groups that need guidance, but do not regard this as problematic per se. As friar João says: "Everyone is an apostle and co-ordinator... most women already participate a long time and have much experience in reading the Bible." This means that CEB-women have much freedom to interpret and discuss the Bible texts in the way they choose.

Second, CEBs and CEB-associated groups are supposed to follow a strict, three-step routine in 'making the reflection' (*fazendo reflexão*): a short text of the Gospel is read a couple of times, participants rephrase the section and pinpoint the issues that call for attention, and finally the main message is translated and adapted to the concrete living world of participants. Brother Antônio explains that "in the beginning, we didn't have these three questions. One of the mothers who knew how to read would read the biblical history, and then they would comment upon it. So, look: the mothers went straight to the today (*vinham direto pro hoje*); a facility to link things...it's incredible! But I started to notice that the comments started to lead a life of their own and very often watered down to common religious discourses. The specific (*o específico*) of that Bible verse was not recognisable anymore (Trein 1993:235). The three questions were introduced to monitor and strengthen the link between the biblical text and CEB-members' reflection for one thing, and to focus the application of its message primarily to the confines of the Church or base community for another. Lacking pastoral orientation within the organisational structure of CEBs, however, CEB-women keep skipping the second question and engage in reflections that are marked by personal experience and a concern with local issues. Study and knowledge of written biblical texts is subordinate to face-to-face, oral exchange of spiritual experiences and to engagement in communal rituals (cf. Finnegan 1988:165), and it is not as much the Church or community that is taken as their main horizon, but their own families and the neighbourhood as a whole. Similarly, studying the hermeneutics of members of the Mothers' Clubs in Águas, the theologian Trein concludes that 'a) their [the mothers'] horizon is wider [than that of pastoral workers]; they do not have an institutional compromise with the Church. Their horizon is family life; b) with lively "cases" they establish new scopes within the texts; c) in the majority of cases they accept the directions of the pastoral workers [if present], but sometimes they fight for their own directions; d) the dogmas of the Church need to pass through the sieve of life experience; (...)'³¹

Third, this means that in practice women's reflection on the Bible is influenced highly by the concrete experience of being a poor woman in the South of Brazil. Using their life experience as 'a sieve', CEB-women generally do not follow the *roteiro* provided by the Diocese, but choose a text in which inspiring Biblical women like Mary, Ruth, Agar and Naomi feature or which gives room to reflection on daily problems encountered. For example, after the

³¹ Accordingly, the authority to speak up during meetings is much more based on participation, action (*o fazer*) and life experience than on biblical knowledge (*o saber*), or as Dona Wilma says: "We learn most from the experience of life" (cf. Trein 1993:112).

reading of Lucas 8:4-11, which treats of Jesus telling the parable of the sower whose seeds dropped alongside of the road, on rock-bottom, in the middle of thorns and in fertile soil, the following conversation arose in the mothers' club São Pio X.

Dona Nargi: "I see it this way. We are the seeds. Out of our work something beautiful arises. We do our work with love for our fellow-men [*com amor ao próximo*], and with a lot of faith. With prayer, faith and love our club will always go ahead, and we will give life, as women do."

Dona Zelda: "The spines are the things that hamper our work [*que atrapalham o nosso trabalho*], that make our work more difficult. For example, many of us are of poor health, there's much violence in the neighbourhood, but we should not let ourselves be intimidated by this."

Dona Nargi: "Yes, because there are many people who try to damp our activities, our gusto. I went to one of the communities, together with friar Márcio, to propose that the women make stew for the needy children. Some women soon became enthusiastic. Others said: 'No, there are no poor children in our neighbourhood.' The first group convinced the second, and they made stew. Will you believe that the first time already 32 children attended!"

Dona Iracema: "But our work is going all right too, thanks to our faith... and thanks to the presence and help of the friars."

Dona Nargi: "May God illuminate us and give strength."

Dona Irene: "Also on Mothers' Day. That He may help the mothers with children, as well as the mothers who lost a child."

Dona Maria: "Aye, it's been 3 years ago now, that I lost my only daughter. She was just 42 years old. She was washing clothes with black soap and then she became unwell. She went to the hospital. She had a heart attack and died. My God, I shouted so hard that the whole quarter [*vila*] could hear me. I cried and shouted so much that my eyes became bloodshot. I even needed an operation. It helps to talk, to unburden myself (sighs). It keeps suffocating us, so I cry a lot [*Fica sufocando a gente, então choro muito*]. Sometimes I go alone to the bedroom and I pray to Our Lady. She also went through much suffering, She lost Her only son, She knows what it is like. I don't have anything against God, but She understands better. At home I say the rosary every day."

Also, the discussions that follow often surpass the imaginary spatial boundaries of the CEBs and the ideological limits to femininity set by the Catholic Church. An example of all this is found in the discussion that followed in a group of female catechists after reading Luke 10, verse 38-42. It tells the story of Jesus, who visits Mary and Marta and starts to preach. Mary sits down in front of him and listens. Marta, however, remains busy complying with her household duties. She starts complaining to Jesus that Mary has left her alone with all the housework. Jesus reacts with the words: "She has made the right choice". On the basis of this verse, the women present engaged in a discussion on the difficulties of being housewives, on their intimate relation with God and the Virgin Mary, and on the good example that Jesus gives in terms of communal involvement and patience. They did not only conclude that they should follow Mary's example and tune in to God's intentions, but also proposed that in order to be able to do so, childcare and household duties should be more equally divided between them and their husbands. In a similar vein, during a monthly meeting of the Council of Mothers' Clubs of Águas, the story of Salomon was commented upon by a CEB-woman, who said:

“Just like Salomon, who was a bad king, we practice idolatry, don’t we? We have false Gods, like money, the television, and there are men who marry different women... Often we leave God really behind, only in times of trouble we turn to him, when we are ill or in need of an abortion. We need to find God again... to be called by God like we used to be called to the church through the loudspeakers in the neighbourhood. Those people calling us were people that God placed in our life, on our way. That’s love. We need to be aware of this love and find it within. We women are not only there to make coffee, to be at the side of our king, but we are here for life! We women have to be strong, we don’t expect much, but we go ahead anyway. (...) We have to salvage the right to be who we are, not through a war, but we don’t need to be subordinate anymore. We are adult women, we have faith and fibre (*fê e fibra*), we are no longer girls. We need to believe in the new, the different, inspired by our faith.”

Fourth, the reflection on the Bible is regularly skipped altogether and traded for the performance of short rituals. The women then form a circle, light candles and carry the Bible around while singing a favourite CEB-song or making intercessory prayers. This led one pastoral workers to comment somewhat patronising that “the mothers still don’t have this understanding of what is fundamental. Sometimes they read the Bible, sometimes they don’t.” But it seems that it is not the acquaintance with the Word of God, but the experience of being close to God, Jesus, Mary and other saints that is most valued by CEB-women. In this respect, friar João made a very interesting remark and said:

“The women don’t feel much at ease when reading the Bible, they like it better to pray, to make petitions (*fazer preces*), et cetera. There’s this contradiction between Word and Spirituality, which is reflected in their use of symbols. They respect the Holy Bible, but mainly take it as a symbol of God’s Word, as a message from God, as a sign that he’s close by, and not as a book that you pick up to read.”

The petitions or intercessory prayers mentioned by friar João indeed are very popular among the women; they often supersede the act of Bible reading and are expressed while standing in a circle and holding hands.

Dona Ivete: “I want to ask God to take care of the children, who roam the streets without their parents, who don’t even have a place to sleep at night and who have nothing to eat. That they may return to their families and have a better life...”

All: “Lord, hear our prayer...”

Dona Isolde: “For all the mothers who aren’t with us today, that they will participate next time, and that our club will remain united... that the mothers like each other, that they don’t gossip, because that’s the utter sin [*fim do pecado*].”

All: “Lord, hear our prayer...”

Dona Augustina: “I want to pray for the intentions of my daughter, who is going to have her first child. That all will go well and that the baby will be healthy.”

All: “Lord, hear our prayer...”

In all, when engaging in Bible reflection CEB-women first and foremost give voice to their experience as poor women. They also express their preference for spiritual intimacy with the divine and for concrete solutions to personal and local problems. In doing so, they question the strict boundaries between Church and society, between the private and the social, and thereby sometimes those boundaries between men and women.

3.3.3 Bread of unity

A second example of the way in which women reproduce and contribute to Liberation Theology involves women's introduction of the so-called communal bread within the realms of the base communities. The communal bread (*pão comunitário*) was mentioned to me many times as a religious symbol particularly apt to express both womanhood and women's religiosity. The communal bread is made by CEB-women who participate in the so-called Communal Oven (*Forno Comunitário*). These groups of four to six women, mostly mothers, meet on a weekly basis. Most groups receive approximately three to four kilograms of flour from the priest, collected throughout his visits during the week. In some case, however, the women make sure they themselves get the flour needed through personal contacts with medium-sized business and supermarkets. The women themselves bring sugar, oil, yeast and firewood. Two of them knead the dough, while others exchange the latest news and engage in handwork. When the dough is rising and baking in the oven, a passage of the Gospel is read and reflected upon (see previous sub-section). After the bread has been baked, each woman can take some bread home and provide her husband, children and other household members with a relatively cheap meal in this way.

Until the beginning of the 1990s it was also very common for the base communities to share one of the resulting communal breads during the act of the Holy Communion, together with some wine provided by farmers from nearby colonies. Nowadays, more often manufactured hosties are used, which are obtained from Porto Alegre, following the closing down of most Communal Ovens and the installation of a *sacrório* in the most vital base communities, where sacred hosties can be kept. Nevertheless, some CEBs still cling very much to the use of communal bread in token of co-operation, equality and liberation of poverty.

CEB-women and pastoral workers alike link the communal bread to femininity and CEB-women's religiosity in several ways. First of all, bread is the basic alimentation that stands for and generates "life". It has "creative power". Without the daily bread there would be no life and people would die. This also goes for women and their contribution to CEBs; without women children and CEBs would not be given birth to. Second, instead of being bought at the supermarket, the bread is laboriously made by the women themselves. It is a labour of love and devotion by female CEB-members exclusively, who in their role as mothers and caretakers are held responsible for the physical and psychological well-being of both their households and CEBs. Just like bread, women keep the family and religion alive and are capable of bringing back their family-members to the pews: 'By a little piece of bread and a little wine, I also saw many people find their way to heaven again' (excerpt from a CEB-song, my translation). Third, the communal bread is the fruit of co-operation and equality. Together, women bring in the necessary ingredients, bake the bread and share it equally among all participants, regardless of the contribution in kind that they have made.

In short, the communal bread or bread of unity symbolises the communal spirit, will to co-operate, tendency to equality and creative power of CEB-women who express and practice their faith; as such, it expresses or transmits values that are considered important to the social identity of CEB-women (see for an elaborate discussion of CEB-women's identities chapter 5) and which are characteristic of CEB-women's way of enacting Liberation Theology.

3.4 The feminine way: restating religion, or the importance of experience and practice

Above, it has become clear that CEB-women view religion in general and ecclesial base communities in particular as both female and feminine realms and that women's religious conviction within these fields is primarily characterised by pragmatism, particularism/personalism and eclecticism. Accordingly, CEB-women do not focus on the 'abstract' political analyses and theological reflections of Liberation Theology, but accept the Liberationist 'preference for the poor' as a call for localised charity and replenish common Liberationist terminology with a discourse of 'corporeality', in which the physical experience of generating and caring for 'life' and the local reality feature as starting-points. Consequently, CEB-women reproduce a common ritual such as reflection on the Bible in a way that enhances a personal experience of the divine and legitimises immediate, localised social action in the Church as well as their households and neighbourhoods, or arrange for the administering of a new ritual in the shape of the Mass of Blessing (see note 30) to ensure the well-being of their beloved. Furthermore, they introduce and foster new symbols, such as the communal bread, which express the essence of womanhood and women's religiosity and as such epitomise their contribution to CEBs.

In this manner, CEB-women do not only turn the meanings of the publicly embodied message of Liberation Theology into 'private' meanings, but also (re)shape the public message itself and thereby influence the ideology and social organisation of the CEBs as a whole (see also chapter 4). They do this in a way that is congruent with their personal life experience as mothers and poor women, which generates the need for spiritual protection and support and which motivates them to form co-operative networks through CEBs to help others. As such, CEB-women's religiosity is both private and public; it is both 'in their hearts and heads' and 'part of the world', i.e. it is not only constituent of themselves (see chapter 5) but also of the religious as both system and practice.

The latter is important to stress given the earlier noted tendency among social scientists to define women's religiosity primarily in terms of the 'informal' and 'personal', to conceive of it as subject to, derived from and dependent on men's religiosity, and to judge women's religiosity concordingly as marginal to 'the religious system' and to 'religious practice'. In this chapter I have illustrated how South-Brazilian CEB-women redefine, amend and shape the religious life within the base communities of Águas by stressing the importance of life experience and social practice. In doing so, they do not only express their femininity, but also have influenced the face of Liberation Theology in their neighbourhood to such extent that the religious field is considered both a female and feminine one, and that CEBs are recorded to "have the feminine way" in content as well as form.

This observation triggers off two questions concerning the definition of the religious or religion. First, what are to be considered meaningful aspect of the religious according to CEB-members (mostly women) and second, to what extent is it desirable to arrive at a definition of religion that includes these women's perspectives? To start off with the first question: generally, anthropological definitions of religion contain explicit references to a system or institution that relates to a supernatural, sacred reality and is concerned mainly with the providing of answers to the ultimate questions of life (see Pandian 1991:9-13). The answer of catholic Aguenes participating in base communities, however, seems to be that religion primarily concerns an intimate, personal relationship with God, the passing on of the Gospel to others, and the doing of good works for those worse-off to alleviate the burden of daily life through 'informal'

networking. In the context of CEBs specifically, this means to pray regularly and attend frequently to the celebrations and other meetings, to talk to and with others about God through reflexive liturgy, catechesis, education and mission, and to engage in charity with communal spirit and devoted servitude. In short, those catholic women actively involved in base communities define religion in terms of experience rather than system³² and of practice rather than hierarchical order.

A second question involves the possibility and desirability to arrive at a definition that includes women's religious perspectives, experiences and practices. As Spiro has stated, anthropologists have an 'obsession with universality' and 'universality is a creation of definition' (Spiro 1966:87). This statement criticises the universal pretences of definitions, as well as contains a recognition of the power of definitions.³³ Nowadays, anthropologists acknowledge that it is impossible to arrive at a universal definition of religion, 'for at least three kind of reasons: the terms of the definition may be ethnocentric; the precise formulation of a definition may wrongly take superficial resemblance as the index of underlying commonalities; or such a formulation may obscure certain aspects of the phenomena' (Boyer 1994:30).

Nonetheless, Spiro's observation on universality as a creation of definition implies that it might be desirable to develop definitions that account more fully for CEB-women's religiosity, simply because definitions are powerful discourse³⁴. Parting from the direct life-world of CEB-members in general and CEB-women in particular, the importance of religious experience and practice as meaningful aspects of religion need to be re-valued and included in any definition of religion employed here; after all it is particularly this 'feminine' face of religion that is valued by the majority of CEB-members.³⁵

When accepting that the 'feminine' is an intrinsic part of the CEBs' form and content and thus of the religious field in Águas, and when acknowledging the power of definitions, Klass' notion of religion as 'that process of institutionalised interaction among the members of that society (...) which provides them with meaning, coherence, direction, unity, easement, and whatever degree of control over events they perceive as possible' (Klass 1995:38) is no longer satisfactory. His emphasis on religion as 'institutionalised interaction among the members of that society' is neither in consonance with nor encompasses CEB-women's emphasis on non-institutionalised or non-formalised experiences and practices which are partially grounded in and give rise to their (corpo)r(e)ality and their perception of the superhuman world.

In this light, it is useful to look at the contribution made by Keesing (1994) to the discussion on the definition of 'culture'. Keesing argues that it is desirable to exchange the focus on 'culture(s)' for an emphasis on 'the cultural', thereby accounting for historical situatedness, production of culture by both dominant and partially submerged actors, and the hegemonic force of cultural meanings yet permeability and changeability of cultural boundaries (Keesing 1994:306-9). In a similar vein, a focus on 'the religious' instead of 'religion' or 'a religion'³⁶ opens up possibilities to view religion no longer exclusively in terms of ideological and

32 Nonetheless, CEB-women are constitutive of the religious system as I have argued before.

33 Or as Abu-Lughod (1991:150) voices it: generalizations themselves are 'inevitably the language of power'.

34 After all, 'there is no definition without an intention or without a programme behind it' (ter Borg 1999:405).

35 It is probably in this respect that CEBs make a major contribution to women's positive self-definition, -identification and -evaluation (see Chapter 5), which I think is well reflected by one of the songs popular among women of the base communities in Águas: 'Who says we are nothing, who says we have nothing to offer? Look at our opened hands and our gifts of the good living. Just look at our opened hands that carry the gifts of our living (*Quem disse que não somos nada, que não temos nada para oferecer, repare nossas mãos abertas, trazendo as ofertas do nosso viver*)'

36 See Boyer (1994:30) and ter Borg (1999:405) for a discussion on the distinction between religion and a religion.

structural ‘coherence, sharedness and stability which can easily lead to essentialism and reification’ (de Theije 1999:53) and in terms of ‘an organization or institution, that just happens to be there, but as a consequence of the human condition itself’ (ter Borg 1999:405). Thereby, the notion of ‘the religious’ rehabilitates the historically situated and contextualised reproduction and creation of religious ideas by *all* actors involved in general, and emphasises first and foremost the importance of practice and experience to this process of continuous reproduction and creation in particular. As such, it comes close to CEB-women’s understanding of liberationist Catholicism; after all, for them the epitome of the religious does not lie in the ecclesial structure of their parish, the ideology of Liberationist Catholicism or in knowledge of the written Word, but in spiritual experience and concrete practices. These practices are more deeply discussed in the next chapter on power relations in the realm of Aguese CEBs.

4

Power: CEB-women of Águas on CEBs and survival

4.1 Introduction

In most books and articles on the post-1960s Catholic Church in Latin America the emphasis is on the progressive message of Liberation Theology, the participatory model employed by base communities, and the social and political engagement of CEB members. Besides, some authors go explicitly into the role and position of women in catholic base communities and assess the degree of emancipation experienced by female CEB members in joining the liberationist project. From this body of literature roughly the following features of the quantity and quality of women's participation in catholic base communities emerge. Most authors note that there is a numerical predominance of women in CEBs, who carry out activities that embroider on their domestic chores. The few men active in CEBs are thought to be primarily involved in activities of a public nature. Formal positions of authority are mostly limited to men, and women are considered relatively powerless in sphere of decision-making and estimated to lack control over the organisational dynamics of the base communities.

The assessment of the nature of women's participation in base communities by Alvarez, based on her research among Brazilian catholic women, is quite representative of the findings of most authors writing on gender relations in the Latin American Catholic Church of the 1980s and 1990s. She writes: 'Women continued to engage in social welfare or charitable activities consistent with their traditionally defined "nurturing and mothering" roles and remained barred from positions of authority within the institutional hierarchy. Moreover, reforms did not lead to a re-formulation of core church doctrines about the sanctity of motherhood and the family' (Alvarez 1990:386).

In this chapter, I hold common assessments of the particularities of women's participation in catholic base communities against the light. First, I do so by providing extensive ethnographic data on the way in which the Aguense catholic women give form and content to their religious life and social involvement within the confines of the parish and local base communities. In what type of church organisations and activities do CEB women engage? What are the main focuses, tasks and responsibilities of both women members and female leaders? And do their activities indeed revolve around women's traditional chores of loving and care-taking? I suggest that CEBs constitute a space in women's lives where they can obtain 'public' approval for the execution of 'private' tasks in their quality as mothers, wives and housekeepers, because within CEBs those tasks are sacralised and re-valued. Furthermore, I pose that within CEBs women can experiment to a certain point with alternative roles and positions.

Second, at a more theoretical level I pursue a discussion on women's participation in terms of power. To what extent and in what way do CEB women exert influence or have power within the confines of the parish and the base communities they belong to? Is their power indeed restricted, as most authors suggest, since women are negated access to most formal leadership positions and have to act within the confines of the ecclesial organisational structure? Or are CEB women capable of generating power on other grounds, such as their indispensability to the religious and social life of the Aguense base communities? I suggest that notions of power that assume a power centre, dominance, asymmetrical relations and causality, or that start from an analysis of formal structures do not suffice when trying to conceptualise and understand power as exercised by CEB women. In an attempt to make the other side of the coin of power visible, I start from CEB women's own vision of power that is based on notions of survival and co-

operation within informal networks, which serve as a fruitful starting-point for a more nuanced analysis of gendered power relations in the base communities of Águas.¹

The structure of this chapter is as follows. Section two shortly describes the organisational structure of the parish of São Pio X and the base communities that are part of it. In section three the focus is on the religious and social practices prevalent in both the parish of São Pio X and its base communities. It gives a description of the most important practices of CEB women and men that exhale their religious conviction and social engagement. Also, the groups, pastorates and services operating within the context of the Catholic Church in the neighbourhood Barro are described. Section four provides three case studies of religious and social practices; successively, the history, organisation, objectives and activities of the mothers' club, the ministries, and the pastorate of health are treated. In section five the particularities of women's religious and social participation in the Aguense base communities are portrayed and analysed. It describes both the pre-occupations, tasks and responsibilities of common female members, as well as the form and content of the positions taken by female lay leaders, after which both women's and men's contribution to and role in CEBs are analysed briefly. On the basis of this extensive presentation of ethnographic data, a theoretical discussion is pushed on the face of power in catholic base communities in section six. Two general perspectives on power are discussed, which serve as a starting-point to evaluate male and female power in the catholic base communities. For this, CEB women's own, alternative notion of power, that starts from their everyday experiences as both powerless and powerful believers and citizens, will prove to be of vital importance.

4.2 The CEBs of the parish São Pio X

4.2.1 Social organisation of the parish

At the regional level the Roman Catholic Church in Brazil is organised in dioceses that consist of parishes. Águas is divided into four parishes, of which the parish of São Pio X covers an area of approximately 5,6 square kilometres and accommodates 15 base communities.

In daily life, the seemingly unequivocal notion of parish (*paróquia*) is used in a rather ambiguous and non-transparent way by catholic Aguenses. By 'parish' most of them refer to the main church building at the entrance of the neighbourhood, where the secretary and priest's office are resided ("*lá em cima, na paróquia*"), or to the power centre associated with it ("*a paróquia manda, a gente faz*", meaning "the parish orders, we do the job"). Others, however, take the parish to be the geographical area covered by the jurisdiction of the parish of São Pio X ("*na paróquia de São Pio X ainda tem lugares onde falta a luz, a água*", i.e. in the parish of São Pio X there are still places that lack light and water). Only seldom, the word parish is used in its original sense, meaning an ecclesiastical district with its own chapel and clergyman.

The notion of community (*comunidade*) suffers from the same obscurity and too embraces many meanings. Most often it refers to the base community one belongs to (for example, *a comunidade Santa Rita*), or to the blocks of the neighbourhood covered by the base community in question (*na comunidade da gente*, in my community). Others, however, use the word community to denote the people gathered at a particular meeting (*a comunidade presente*, the

¹ On the face of it, the distinction made between (men's) power as the capacity to control others and (women's) power as the capacity to secure survival seems to run parallel with an etic-emic distinction. It is important to note, however, that CEB women to a certain extent share men's notion of power as control over others; they generally do not, however, consider themselves to be either in the possession of it or to expressly strive after it.

community present) or, more abstract, the imaginative ideal community of catholic people living by and following Liberation Theology.

One can imagine this picture to become even more complicated when realising that in the language of the Aguenses the notions of ‘the parish’ and ‘base community’ sometimes coincide through the obfuscating use of the name ‘São Pio X’ by way of reference. The base community celebrating in the main church building - just like the juridical parish - carries the name of São Pio X. And in a meeting on alternative cooking with women from a neighbouring parish I heard Dona Iracema remark that “in São Pio X [meaning: the base communities of the parish São Pio X] we all have a mothers’ club”.

In this chapter, I use the concept of parish to refer to an ecclesiastical district, the inhabitants of which are attended by a priest and gather regularly in the main chapel (*igreja-mãe* ou *matriz*) or one of the smaller chapels present. With the notion of base community I denote the Liberationist Catholic groups of that form the basis of religious life in the parish. They consist of lay people who are united on the basis of geographical or class proximity and who engage jointly in the celebration of the catholic faith through religious meetings, the doing of ‘good works’ and political engagement. Base communities and related groups, pastorates and services are visited regularly by the priest of the parish and are under the guidance of one or more lay leaders, friars or nuns.

As commented upon earlier in chapter 2, the link between the parish of São Pio X and the emerging base communities was officially established in 1981. On the 11th of October 1981 a course was organised for all the leaders of the parish on the theme ‘New Image of the Parish’ as an attempt to open up space for the explicit formation of base communities. The presented ideal parish of the future was described as ‘a Parish of Base Communities in Organic and Dynamic Communion’ (*uma Paróquia de Comunhão Orgânica e Dinâmica de CEBs*). The parish area was divided into 27 nuclei; geographical units in each of which a base community was expected to form in due time, with its own chapel for religious celebrations and meetings of the services. In practice, only 15 base communities were established, each of them integrating one or more nuclei.

Officially, the parish is ruled by the parish council (*o conselho paróquial*). The parish council consists of five or more representatives of the base community São Pio X, who meet every two months “*para aprofundar questões sobre a Igreja*”, i.e. to deepen questions concerning the Church. The council is responsible for the maintenance of the main chapel, it controls the incoming and outgoing of funds, sets the agenda for religious celebrations, feasts and other meetings that take place within the parish, and is directly involved in discussions that concern the liberationist project.

Likewise, the organisation of the other base communities is in the hands of the community council (*conselho da comunidade*), which generally consists of three or more people who are delegates of the existing services, groups and pastorates for a period of two years. The community council too is in charge of the upkeep of the chapel, it controls the common fund and lays down the schedule for most religious and social activities. Furthermore, it discusses proposals made by the priest concerning for example the installation of new lay leaders, and forms the bridge between community members, the clergy, and the big council of communities [*Conselhão das Comunidades*]. All community councils meet once a month.

The community councils and parish council meet yearly in the big council to evaluate the past year and to outline the general policy of the communities of the parish of São Pio X for the coming year. In this big council the articulation of the diverse services, groups and pastorates at

the level of the parish is attuned, general problems are discussed, and areas for special attention are set.

4.2.2 Religious and social practices

At the level of the parish of São Pio X and in the day to day routine of its separate CEBs an impressive number of daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly activities take place. In the archdiocese of Porto Alegre, to which the Aguense parish of São Pio X officially belongs, most parishes take the trinity of liturgy (*liturgia*), catechesis (*catequese*), and charity (*serviço de caridade*) as their starting-point for pastoral action. This means that religious and social life at the level of the parish of São Pio X is mostly organised around Mass, the administering of the seven sacraments², religious education through confirmation classes (*crisma*) and catechesis, and works of charity. Moreover, a number of recurring festivities take place in the parish, such as the feast of the patron saint of the parish (*feira do padroeiro*), the yearly procession of Nossa Senhora Aparecida (Our Lady) and the pilgrimage for Palm Sunday (*Procissão de Ramos*). Finally, approximately 200 small chapels (*capelinhas*) with images of Our Lady circulate among the parishioners.

The organisation of these religious and social activities lies in the hands of several groups and services. These are officially guided and supervised by the priest, but in practice function rather autonomously: the liturgy group or team (*grupo de liturgia* or *equipe de liturgia*), the confirmation group (*grupo de crisma*), the catechetical group (*grupo de catequismo*), the service for pre-marital orientation (*serviço de orientação pre-matrimonial*), the pastorate of baptism (*pastoral do batismo*), and the pastorate of the poor (*pastoral do pobre*).

The liturgy group is responsible for the preparation and elaboration of the liturgy of the Sunday Mass (*liturgia dominical*). Each week its three to five members sit down at the church benches in front of the altar and discuss and elaborate on the theme of the week, which is inspired on important events in the neighbourhood, approaching religious feasts and the *folheto do domingo* (sunday fly-sheet) or *roteiro* (manual), both provided by the diocese. During the preparation, they are often supported by a minister of Eucharist and a member of one of the existing groups, services and pastorates, for which a schedule is drawn up and hung in the vestry adjoining the chapel.

The catechetical group integrates young children from the age of five onwards to teenagers who want to take Communion in the nearby future and is directed at their religious orientation. Young children make acquaintance with the Bible through short stories, the mutual accomplishment of small tasks, and playful interaction, while the education of teenagers revolves around the reading of the Bible, reflection on the Gospel, role-plays, and, incidentally, a weekend at a catholic centre in the region of Porto Alegre for a spiritual retreat (*retiro espiritual*). In a way, the confirmation group can be seen as the follow-up to the catechetical group. Every year it prepares 20 to 40 young Catholics for the sacrament of Confirmation, which most of them take when they are in their late teens or early twenties. The course they take has a duration of about six months and the confirmation itself usually takes place in November, before the summer holiday. Depending on the age and openness of the crisma leaders, the confirmation group also provides a platform to discuss issues related to adolescent life, which for some CEB-women is a reason not to get involved and to let the younger generation act for itself.

2 Of these the sacraments of baptism, confession, and marriage are considered the most important.

“I wanted to offer my help in the confirmation group, but there are themes that young people only like to talk about when they are among each other, when they feel more at ease... drugs, sex, gangs. Frederico doesn't control the group, they are making a row-de-row all the time, so in his case we split it into two: the ones who really want to learn something and the ones who mess about, they talk mainly about the other things. My niece Miriam, however, is firm and handles them well, so she sticks more to the religious.”

Dona Zenaide

The service for pre-marital orientation organises a course (*curso*) for engaged couples (*os noivos*) to inform them about the catholic standpoints on the nuptial tie. During the meetings the lay leader in charge enters into the details of the marriage vow, explains the nature of conjugal love, the importance of conjugal fidelity, and reflects upon the plights of those to be wed. Likewise, the pastorate of baptism organises a short course (*cursilho*) of three or four meetings for the parents and godparents of new-born babies. The meaning and importance of the catholic sacrament of baptism is explained³, the ritual gone through, and appropriate Bible texts are reflected upon. Only after having taken the courses mentioned, can the catholic fiancés marry and the new-born babies be baptised.

The pastorate of the poor, finally, is in fact constituted by a number of pastorates, which operate at the level of the base communities, even though regular meetings at the level of the parish, diocese and archdiocese take place. Of these, the pastorate of health and the pastorate of poor women as embodied by the mothers' clubs, are the most viable in Águas.

The people in charge of and involved in these activities roughly fall into four categories: that of the ordained ministers (*ministros ordenados*), the pastoral workers (*agentes pastorais*), non-ordained ministers (*ministros*) and other lay leaders, and common members or laymen (referred to as *membros* or *leigos*). The ordained minister, in this case the priest, is responsible for animating and conducting the Mass, the administering of the sacraments, the act of blessing, the monitoring and guidance of the base communities and related groups, services and pastorates, the support of the friars, nuns and lay leaders, and the proceedings of the secretariat of the parish. Furthermore, he maintains the external contacts at the level of the diocese and archdiocese. This is often no easy task, and priest Darcy more than once entrusted me with the doubts and feelings of loneliness that go with his ecclesial position.

“As a priest I always have to deal with the difficulties, with all the conflicts that take place. At the minimum you get to know what's going on, but very often you also have to solve the problem itself or serve as an intermediate. This also goes for personal conflicts... then you have to know what to say to whom. Some leaders are more political, others start more from the necessities. And without privileging one over the other I have to look for a consensus. And I'm seen as a model, a holy person, so I have to mind every word I say. It's hard, because... er... there's no one to back me up, to smooth things down for me. At the end of the day, I'm in it alone in a way, because I'm also the one responsible for the well-being of the other friars. So, I am one of them, but at the same time I'm different from them.

Most of them [the friars] have a hard time in the communities at the beginning. Sometimes they are so de-motivated that they drop out. There's the problem of the usage of language (*problema da linguagem*) and how to capture the attention of the

³ In public, the priest always stresses the indispensability of catholic baptism, which should be seen against the background of the widespread use of home baptising by South Brazilians.

believers. And there are problems of distance and involvement between the pastoral workers and the laity, but also between the friars... I mean.. er... concerning chastity. Sometimes they engage in homosexual relationships, perhaps because of the lack of other opportunities, and this intervenes with their faith and dedication. Many friars resign... I think that about... er... 30 % of them resign in bad times (*nos períodos graves*). But what can you do? Faith weakens when they have an affective necessity (*carência afetiva*), doesn't it (*verdad*)?

And what complicates my situation even further is that I am a sort of friar-priest (*frei-padre*). I am friar in the capacity of Capuchin, and I'm a diocesan priest through the diocese. It's a contradictory situation, but well, I've visited the bishop only twice up to now and apart from that I go to the monthly meetings with other priests in the archdiocese of Porto Alegre. Adelina [the parish secretary] goes to the bishop more often, to hand in documents and so on. And of course I have to render an account of what I do to the Province of the Capuchins. So... I'm sort of relieved that next year I have to choose between rounding off my formation or to become a parish-priest (*padre-pároco*), because the bishop doesn't want these two roles to mix."

Friar Darcy

The echelon of pastoral workers (*agentes pastorais*) is composed of about 15 Capuchin friars (*freis*) and 3 Franciscan nuns (*irmãs*), most of whom are still students of Theology or Philosophy at the ESTEF in Porto Alegre and divide their time between studying and working in the daily practice of CEBs. Until the mid 1980s each pastoral worker monitored the base communities in a specific area and coached a specific service for all communities. From 1987 onwards, however, it was decided that each pastoral worker had to accompany all the services prevalent in one particular base community and should pay more attention to the internal articulation of community efforts.

"In course of time, the pastoral workers became aware that the accompaniment per service led to too much of a sectorisation and that the community itself was not participating in the *caminhada*. Only the meeting places were maintained, but the communal organisation itself in each and every area was not given concrete form to."

Friar Carlos

Nowadays, both friars and nuns consider it their duty to accompany, animate, support and articulate the base community assigned to their care and the groups and activities related to it. They teach the people (*o povo*) the message of unity, sharing, and organisation building, and help them to get access to and a better understanding of the Gospel. The pastoral workers live spread over four houses, in three *casas dos freis* (friars' houses) and one *casa das irmãs* (sisters' house), which are all located in the neighbourhood of Barro.

The non-ordained ministers, commonly referred to as *ministros*, are authorised by the priest or bishop after having taken a diocesan course designed for the training of lay people for the specific tasks to be fulfilled by ministers. In the parish of São Pio X and some of its base communities three different ministers exist: the minister of the Word (*ministro da Palavra*), minister of Eucharist (*ministro extra-ordinário da comunhão eucarística*), and minister of baptism (*ministro do batismo*), the responsibilities of whom are discussed in a case study of the ministries later on in this chapter. Of the non-ordained ministers approximately 70 % are female.

Apart from these formally trained and installed lay leaders, a number of informal lay leaders as well play a role in base communities. The most important ones are the co-ordinators (*coordenadores*) of the various services and pastorates, the so-called animators (*animadores*)

who attend to specific communities⁴, the catechists and crisma-leaders, the sextons of the chapels of the base communities (*zeladores*), the sextons of the little chapels (*zeladores das capelinhas*), the members of the parish council and community councils, the heads of the families that are in charge of the family groups, and in some cases, from outside the formal church structure, representatives of political parties and the popular movement (such as the Neighbourhood Associations). They are the ones who are primarily responsible for the realisation of “the popular project of CEBs”. This is done by organising their catholic fellow-men into CEBs, by uniting their forces and co-ordinating their activities, and by representing the lay members in the community councils, the big council, the parochial assembly and other overall organisations in the neighbourhood and region. Almost all lay leaders are female, except for those who are active in the group of communion and for those who take part as CEB-representative in non-religious organisations at the level of the neighbourhood or city, such as the local Neighbourhood Associations or trade-unions.

The laymen or common members (*os leigos* or *os membros*), lastly, are those who attend regularly to the weekly religious celebrations and participate in other activities of their base community, without fulfilling a role as minister or lay leader. Their numbers per community vary considerably (from approximately 20 to 250), but in all cases about 80 to 90% of them are women. Together, the priest, ministers, pastoral leaders, lay leaders and common members give form and content to the religious and social practices of the parish, but even more so of those in base communities. After all, the parish of São Pio X is ‘a parish of base communities in organic and dynamic communion’, which merely provides the ecclesial structure for the ‘New Church’ (*Igreja Nova*) in the shape of ‘real communities of Christ’⁵: the base communities.

At the level of the base communities religious and social life roughly evolves around three categories of activities, which are of a celebrative, reflexive and practical nature respectively.⁶ The celebrative character of base communities is found in most meetings of the preparatory groups for the sacraments, the groups of liturgy (*grupo de liturgia*), and the family groups (*grupos de família*). Furthermore, celebrative activities form an integrated part of the confirmation classes and Catechesis provided, and are also at the heart of the many expressions of popular religiosity still found in the neighbourhood of Barro. The circulation of the small chapels, the yearly procession (*procissão*), the novenas, peregrinations (*romarias*), the feast of the Divine (*a festa do Divino*) are all in celebration of the Word of God (*Palavra de Deus*). Most of these activities are attended by music, singing, theatre, and dance.

The reflexive nature of base communities comes to the fore in the permanent room given to reflection on the Gospel and on the theme of the yearly Brotherhood Campaign (*Campanha da Fraternidade*)⁷ during meetings of the diverse pastorates (*pastorais*), mothers’ clubs (*clubes de mães*), family groups, youth groups (*grupos de jovens*), and so on.

The practical character of CEBs, finally, is expressed in the many working groups (*mutirões*)⁸, pastorates, services (*serviços*), and economic projects that have been initiated by

4 Often, the functions of co-ordinator and animator come together in one person and are hard to distinguish in practice.

5 Da Costa et al (1984).

6 I borrow this classification from Valle & Boff (1993:23).

7 Each year, a thematic Brotherhood Campaign is organised and promoted by the CNBB between Ash Wednesday and Easter.

8 I have not come across a good English equivalent for the Brazilian Portuguese word *mutirão*. In the Novo Michaelis (1961:878, Volume II) it is described as ‘gratuitous work (esp. in rural regions) of all the neighbours for the benefit of one who foots the bills on that day’. In *Águas*, the word *mutirão* is used to refer to a group of people, who engage in works that serve the collective interests of the community to which they belong.

catholic Aguese men and women over the last twenty years, as well as by their participation in socio-political organisations, such as trade-unions, political parties, and the popular movement. Most of these so-called services, pastorates, projects and political ties spring from the precarious living conditions of the people inhabiting the neighbourhood of Barro and have as their main objective the supply of basic needs: food, housing, clothing, drinking-water, electricity, health care and education. The quantity and quality of practical activities of CEBs in the parish of São Pio X are hard to assess, because the harsh conditions in Barro sometimes lead to the sudden death or the very revival of a particular activity, but generally the following can be discerned: the pastorate of health (initially named pastorate of the child), the communal oven, communal garden, the mothers' clubs, and the pastorate of labour.

The specific features of the reflexive, celebrative and practical activities of CEB-related groups, pastorates and services can be best understood by the presentation of in-depth research data in the form of case studies. In the next section, I offer three such case studies and focus on the mothers' clubs, the pastorate of health and the existing ministries in the base communities respectively⁹. My aim in providing rather detailed ethnographic data on these groups and positions is two-fold. First, I want to give insight into the particularities of CEB-members' participation in general and women's participation in particular. How do the mothers' clubs, pastorate of health and ministries function, and what are the specific backgrounds to and characteristics of women's activities, responsibilities, focuses and problems in these groups? Second, I use the case studies to preamble the discussion on gender and power in the last section of this chapter. How are we to assess women's power in catholic base communities, when keeping the noticed characteristics of their participation in mind?

4.3 CEB-women's participation: a description

4.3.1 The ministries

Between 1980 and 1983, when the majority of CEBs was officially established, the sitting priest decided to structure the religious and social activities that were taking place in the parish. Starting with the monthly celebration of Mass and the administering of the Sacraments in each and every community, he arranged for the instalment of so-called ministers (*ministros*), who could help him with the execution of these tasks in the whole territory that belonged to the parish São Pio X. Nowadays, 11 out of the 15 base communities present have such ministers, who are responsible for the ministry of the Word, Eucharist and/or Baptism.

The minister of the Word is in charge of the preparation and/or execution of dominical celebrations, the celebration of all seven sacraments and the celebration of the so-called sacramentals (such as funerals and processions). Furthermore, he or she minds the liturgy in consultation with the liturgy group, and takes care of the homily during celebrations in which the priest is absent.

⁹ The cases selected differ in three respects: they vary in terms of their relation to the organisational structure of the parish, the importance of religious reflection, and the degree of social activism. The mothers' clubs are rather autonomous, and value religious reflection or education and social engagement equally. The pastorate of health is linked to the parish through the nun responsible for its co-ordination and the monthly meetings of its lay leaders at the parish level, and focuses primarily on social action to which religious reflection is subservient. The ministries, finally, are inextricably bound up with the parish structure and almost exclusively directed at the provision of religious services.

The minister of Eucharist assists the priest at the Eucharist. If consecrated hosties are not available at the base community, this minister is in charge of collecting them in the mother-church, after having assisted the Eucharist celebration there. In case the base community is in the possession of a tabernacle (*tabernáculo* or *sacrório*) where ‘*o Santíssimo*’ can be stored, the minister of Eucharist has to make sure that sufficient hosties haven been blessed and left behind by the priest during the last Mass. At the hour of the distribution of the Communion, the minister of Eucharist, together with the priest, is the first to partake of the Holy Communion, after which the Eucharist is administered to those present. Furthermore, the minister of Eucharist visits the sick and handicapped in the parish or in his or her base community, providing them weekly with the Eucharist.

The minister of baptism, finally, organises the courses of baptism, and guides the parents and godparents during the ritual of baptism. As many people who confess to Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Umbanda, still value the catholic sacraments of baptism and marriage, these courses are not only attended by faithful Catholics who fill the church benches every Sunday. Much to the discontent of the responsible ministers, “half of the people participating are *macumbeiros*”, a pejorative term widely used for those who profess their allegiance to an Afro-Brazilian religion.

The number of ministers acting in the communities varies considerably. For example, the base community of the ‘mother-church’, São Pio X, has eleven ministers, while the community Nossa Senhora da Graça has none. Most communities, however, at the minimum have a minister of the Word and a minister of Eucharist.

People who become minister do so after first having been approached by the priest during a visit at their place. At that occasion the priest explains his interest in their candidacy in terms of their “capacity to have a positive influence on the formation and unity of the community”, “their spirit of donation”, and of their “undisputed reputation”, according to priest Darcy. Subsequently, their candidacy is put before the community of believers, who can vote in favour or against the new candidate. Most of the time, however, the candidacies prepared by the priest are accepted without any further ado, which can be seen as an indication of the confidence that the community of believers has in his power of judgement, his good intentions and his knowledge of the ‘*caminhada*’ to follow (cf. Baldissera 1988:106), as well as a sign of the limited number of people available for the position of minister. Once the prospect ministers have been elected, they follow a part-time two-months course in Porto Alegre which is provided by the Pastoral Co-ordination team of the Diocese. Thereafter, the ministers are formally bestowed of their new rights to “guide” the communities during an investiture rite, which is presided by the Diocesan Bishop or, in his absence, by priest Darcy himself.

Theoretically speaking, the position of minister can be taken up for a period of two years by either a man or a woman, but in the practice of every day life of the base communities a gendered division of labour shows that is in consonance with the gender division of labour in Brazilian society as a whole. The position of minister of the Word - being an expressly public position of relatively high authority within the community - is almost exclusively filled by men, whereas the ministry of Baptism - focusing on interpersonal relationships and care - is solely exercised by women. The ministry of Eucharist is taken up equally by men and women, as it is often married couples that fulfil this role, but given the low rate of participation of men in the base communities, men are definitely over-represented.

“I became minister of the Word in my community on the priest’s request. He came over to my house and talked to me. He said: ‘You already have so much experience in the community, the people trust you, you’re a good person, you’re strong in the faith’. He

must have told the community the same, because they all voted for me, so I accepted the position... that's my obligation, isn't it? That's my contribution to the community. But there was also some resistance from the elderly people of the community. 'How is it that she is going to talk about God?!', they said. 'That's the responsibility and right of the priest!' But the priest explained that everyone can talk about God, if they speak directly from their heart and respect the Gospel, but still they didn't like it."

Dona Stefi, minister of the Word

"The people have difficulties in accepting a female minister of the Word. When I do the homily, when Seu Darci isn't there to talk, it doesn't have the same impact. I also don't like to do the homily. The people don't pay attention, perhaps they think it's all nonsense that leaves my mouth" [laughs].

Dona Zenaide, minister of the Word

This means that, apart from influencing the division of ministries along gender lines, the sex-gender system prevalent in the catholic circles of Águas also colours the evaluation of the performance of male and female ministers.

"When it's with me to distribute the hostie, together with the priest, I always see some people who cross the path [in the middle of the chapel] to enter the queue of friar Darcy. As if his hosties are more sacred than mine! But they don't do that if Seu Joel is in charge as minister of the Eucharist!"

Dona Clarete, minister of Eucharist

Apart from the (un)suitability of men and women for the separate ministries, the very existence of the ministries themselves is also subject to discussion. The priest and pastoral workers are all in favour of formalised lay involvement (albeit in different degrees), since it is regarded as an inalienable aspect of liberationist base community life and since it reduces their heavy tasks of supervising, guiding and inspiring the communities.

"A big advancement was the instalment of ministers in various communities...trained lay people who assume a leadership role. It's problematic however to conscientise the people, so that they accept the important role and authority of the laity. It's a slow process."

Friar José

Lay CEB-members, however, travel to and fro between enthusiasm, acceptance, and outright rejection. CEB-members who are in favour of the ministries, value the fact that through the ministries "the long-time activism of the common people is now being recognised" and legitimised by the ecclesial structure, which means that they can "visibly influence the events in the parish". Those who are against such ministries primarily view the priest's attempt to institutionalise lay leadership through the instalment of ministers (in particular those of the Word and the Eucharist) as an unmistakable signal of the ongoing "process of centralisation of power in the hands of 'the parish'", as explained Dona Elva.

"The day before yesterday priest Darcy came to my house and said: 'Hein, Dona Elva, I wanted to talk with you about the ministry yet another time. You know I think it would be good to have a minister of the Word in [the base community] Santa Clara too. There's So-and-So from the community São Pedro and he would make a good minister. He's good for the people... he understands the road of the CEBs. I said: 'Look, friar, I even don't know this man. If he was from our community, if he knew our situation, and if he was a nice person, we might have considered it. But right now everything goes

swimmingly. We don't need a minister, we can handle things ourselves'."

Dona Elva, lay leader of the community Santa Clara

Others fear that the "middle class is taking over" at their expense, which urges sitting ministers to defend themselves against such rumours.

"I took a course in Porto Alegre, the training for instalment (*formação*) took two months, but it wasn't such a big thing. As I said to Dona Nargi: 'I have learned more in the twelve years that I participated in the communities, than in this course.' There are some ministers in the mother-church who have blinkers on, they only perceive their own world and they don't look at either side of them. They only see a church here, a feast there, confirmation, catechesis and that's that. They would remain paralysed with open mouths if they saw the reality of some of our communities. They don't know anything. There are also people who think that ministers should be a married couple. What nonsense (*Que bobagem!*)! They think that a woman can only accept this task when she's joined by her husband, because then you have a pair, a nice couple, and that a husband can only accept... and so on. But if he alone wants to go and she doesn't, it's no problem. And there are also ministers who dress better than Our Lady herself. They think they're better than the other community members, because they are installed as ministers (*formados*). But for me it's not like that. We are here for the people and with the people, and not the other way around."

Dona Zenaide, minister of the Word

Reflecting on the meaning of their formal position in the CEBs for their own lives, the female ministers indicate that their ministry offers them the possibility to legitimately "leaving the house", to "contribute to my community", to "get to know and help other people", to enter into a process of "personal formation", or to go beyond the boundaries set to feminine behaviour.

"It's very good to work for the community, to learn more about life, to.... er... to contribute to the 'caminhada' of the community. Just staying at home and taking care of children isn't satisfactory."

Dona Odila, minister of the Eucharist

"I look at it this way. As a minister and catechist I can teach other people things about society; we can go beyond our personal interests and see that it is important to be there for other people. For this we need the co-operation of our husbands, children and so on, so that we are free to do this work, to get the formation we want and need... in a way we ourselves need to be shared! It is time for the people to realise this, but the people are often in a hurry when they come to the celebrations, and they don't assimilate what's said in the Gospel."

Dona Salete, catechist and minister of Baptism, during a meeting of catechists

"I used to be an ignorant person. I always kept quiet, I was afraid to speak up. When I saw these women [female CEB-leaders] for the first time I was appalled! Them being women and speaking like that, out loud, about what they felt and thought. But little by little I understood that they were good people. They always invited me to their meetings, they invited me to come, to participate, to speak up. Now I'm much like them, they have become my friends. The people respect me, I go anywhere in the neighbourhood, I go to the centre [of Águas], I even go and see the mayor if I want to, to tell him about the problems here in *vila*. I'm a different person now than I was then, a better person, no, a better woman."

Dona Helena, minister of Baptism

It is particularly the ministers of Baptism, all women, who tell to have made much progress during their term of office, both in personal and organisational respect. While the ministers of the Word and the ministers of the Eucharist have always been working together closely with the priest, pastoral agents and liturgical groups and as such are regarded as extensions of the ecclesial hierarchy, the ministers of Baptism operated relatively autonomous during the first ten years of their office. All ministers of Baptism were community leaders of the first hour, who at the time of their installment enjoyed the trust of the sitting priest and who already had quite some experience with community development, popular projects and lay participation. Having much freedom to organise the service of baptism according to their own ideas and personally being capable of converting these ideas into viable practices, the ministers of Baptism realised some small revolutions in the parish São Pio X.

First, they ensured a central role for the laity in the parish's ritual of Baptism. Not only the parents, godparents and siblings of the babies to be baptised, but also the community as a whole and ministers of Baptism themselves played an indispensable role in the proceedings. The candles, holy water and oil used to be brought in procession to the altar by the child's family, while the minister of baptism would address those present on the importance and meaning of the baptism, make the homily, and take the parent's vows. Then the community would hold hands and welcome the baby with a song and light candles, thereby also renewing their vow to take good care of their own children. Finally, the priest, a friar or nun would baptise the child with the words "I baptise you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit", crossing the child with water and anointing the child with oil.

Second, the ministers of Baptism pressured the priest and community councils to refrain from cashing money from the poor for the performance of the baptism. Many faithful Catholics of Águas could not afford the amount requested by the parish, while it was exactly their children who ran the highest risk of entering the national statistics of infant mortality during the first five years of their life. The proposal was mockingly accepted and for many years, the baptism of children whose parents had not paid the officially requested fee was both performed and registered.

Third, slowly but steadily the socio-cultural norms concerning the category of children allowed to be baptised were stretched. Whereas previously only children of a legally married couple could be baptised, nowadays

"... single mothers are accepted by the community. They are now allowed to have their children baptised, before this was impossible! It's not to say that it still doesn't take a lot of work to realise it, but the people don't talk and comment upon it so much anymore. Now the people understand that a single mother has many problems to encounter. Often she has been left behind, raped, maltreated, or has other serious problems... like a husband who drinks a lot and keeps on abusing her, even after the separation. I tell the people who gossip and complain: 'Despite everything these women didn't have an abortion, but assumed the responsibility for their children, despite all their problems.'"

Dona Nargi, minister of Baptism

"We also baptise the children of the second mother of a divorced father now. But people who live together and who have no reason not to get married, should marry first. Then their children can be baptised."

Dona Loreni, minister of Baptism

Staying in such close contact with the families of new-born babies, looking after the interests of vulnerable categories of people in the neighbourhood, and representing positive models of self-

realisation and formation, most ministers of Baptism were highly appreciated by their fellow-believers. However, from the beginning of the 1990s onwards, the diocese has made several attempts to reverse the developments realised by the ministers of Baptism. The responsibilities of the ministers of Baptism are now limited to the organisation of the course of baptism. Nuns and friars (other than the priest) are no longer allowed to baptise children. The official fee for the baptism needs to be paid again (even by the poorest), and only children of married couples are officially allowed to become part of the catholic flock through baptism. Although the pastoral agents and the priest initially protested fiercely against the bishop's attempts to centralise more power in the priest's hands at the cost of lay participation, lay participation has decreased considerably, much to the discontent of the ministers of the first hour.

“The new measurements led to all sorts of problems, as I already told you... And also simply because the priest didn't know what to say or do. For such a long time it had been with us women only, we did everything. I had to tell him what to say to the parents, I had to explain to him all the details... of the candles, the gestures, when to do what. Just imagine, he didn't know, also because he came from the countryside where they didn't have ministers. The first time that he had to do everything, I hid in the vestuary next to the altar and whispered to him in a very low voice what to do. What madness! And what sadness... just imagine, all the things that we had realised... What sadness.”

Dona Nargi

Some ministers persisted in their efforts to enlarge the space open to the laity, but most resigned from their position as minister of Baptism and focused increasingly on their other leadership roles, such as co-ordinating one of the parish's mothers' clubs.

4.3.2 The mothers' clubs

Of the services and pastorates mentioned above, the mothers' clubs (*clube de mães*) of the so-called Pastorate of Poor Women (*Pastoral da Mulher Pobre*) are at the heart of the base communities. A mothers' club is a group of 5 or more women between the age of 25 to 75, the majority of them being between 30 and 50 years of age, who meet weekly around the trinity of *Trabalho, Evangelho e Luta* (Work, Gospel and Struggle). They do so at the co-ordinator's home, in the chapel of the base community they belong to (either in the communal hall, in the back or side of the church building), or in a room specially reserved for the mothers' club. During the weekly meetings the mothers engage in reflection on the Bible, prayer, creative needlework and the sharing of food and clothes, while exchanging the latest novelties and keeping a half eye on the children present.

As indicated earlier in chapter two, the first mothers' clubs of Águas formed in the mid 1970s, an era in which participation in such church-related groups represented one of the very few opportunities for women to act outside the confines of their own homes. As Machado (1993:103) has rightly stated, 'the only two political parties at the time were organised on a hierarchical basis (...). They did not offer any direct channel for the people to express their views, and they neither proposed specific programmes for women nor took up women-related issues. Nor were the unions able to offer any channel for popular political expression, since they were both politically and financially controlled by the government (...).'

The first mothers' club that formed met twice a week at brother Antonio's house until the Centre of Communities was established in 1987 with foreign funding. The number of women involved soon increased to such an extent, that separate mothers' clubs were formed and the

need was felt to appoint co-ordinators: "It was decided that all the firmest mothers who believed in the work were to be called 'co-ordinators' and had to bring along the ladies who lived in their surroundings, and that they would be held responsible for their group, so that the women would turn up again even after finishing the blankets" (Caderno de Atas do Clube de Mães da Vila C 1980, 2nd of May). As the number of clubs already amounted to 4 in 1981, it was decided to establish a General Co-ordination (*Coordenação Geral*) of co-ordinators of the separate mothers' clubs. This CG still functions today and evaluates, supervises and supports the activities of the mothers' clubs, and also organises monthly meetings open to all mothers of the parish. The latter are of great importance in terms of networking, as Dona Márcia, co-ordinator of one of the clubs, indicated:

"...we get to know many people in the communities en many people know us. When I travel by bus there are always people who recognise me and greet me. That does make me feel happy and realise that my community is not just here..." (Fiorotti 1985:58).

Still now, most interviewed catholic Aguense women stress the importance and uniqueness of the mothers' club as an important space where they can meet legitimately and relatively undisturbed outside the home, be together among equals, converse and discuss problems, and establish ties that surpass the boundaries of the domestic realm. Many women say they cherish this weekly contact with other women. They often feel isolated at home, are in need of someone to share and tackle their difficulties with, or they simply want to break away from the harsh and dull routine of daily life.

"Why I like going to the mothers' club? How could I not like it! They're my friends, I like them a lot. I was one of the first to go there because I was one of the founders and I never missed a single meeting in fifteen years... except for when my daughter died. I like to go there to talk, to hear the Gospel, to make... er... to feel good. I learn a lot there."

Dona Maria

At the same time, women's participation in a mothers' club is motivated by religious, economic and charitable considerations.¹⁰ Within the confines of a mothers club women can express their religiosity and comment jointly upon the message and implications of the Gospel. Guided by the nun or co-ordinator who is in charge of the meeting, they are enabled to become acquainted with the Bible, to experience the proximity of God and fellow-women through brief rituals, and to engage in intercessory prayers for the benefit of themselves and their beloved.

Some catholic Aguense women also say to participate in a mothers' club because of the economic benefits they possibly gain from joining. The new skills they acquire, ranging from the capacity to co-ordinate meetings and speak up for oneself to learning how to sew, to make soap or to paint on cloth by attending one of the mini-courses (*cursinhos*) offered, can be converted into money-gaining activities.

"It was here [in the mothers' club of base community São Pio X] that I learnt how to make blankets from the residues of others (*resíduos de lá*)¹¹. But I already knew how to

¹⁰ These considerations are listed in order of importance.

¹¹ Many women distinguish between themselves as inhabitants of the popular neighbourhood Barro and others who live in the richer areas of Águas, by making use of adjuncts of place: *cá* (here) versus *lá* (there). Similarly, the neighbourhood Barro itself is often divided into two parts with the use of adjuncts of place: *cá embaixo* (here below), where houses are built on invaded land and where infrastructure is poor, and *lá encima* (up there), where most people belong to the upper lower or lower middle class, live in concrete houses and enjoy basic infrastructure.

make very neat stitches, *bab*, very beautiful stitches. Now at home I also make blankets, sometimes two a day. I have a big table and work little by little, one part and then another. A shame my eyes aren't too good anymore.... A fine blanket I sell at the price of 10 *Reais* for a single and 15 *Reais* for a double bed. But there are people who cannot pay that much. If they are poor, really poor, God forbid (*Deus os livre*), I give the blankets away for free. Only last week, I gave one away to that chatterbox (*papudinha*), you know... Dona Evinha [laughs and winks]¹², together with a box of soap-powder. She needs it, she really does. She's as poor as a church mouse (*pobre como João*). And very, very thin."

Dona Angelina

Women like Dona Angelina, who stress the importance of the club in learning new skills to generate economic gains, generally belong to the hard core of the mothers' club. They are also the ones with the first rights, when it comes to the distribution of available goods, such as clothing, shoes, flour and bread, from which the family members entrusted to their care directly benefit. But since goods are scarce, the permanent members of mothers' clubs observe with regret that women, who attend to the mothers' club primarily at the hours of the so-called sharing (*a partilha*), still benefit as well.

"Well then (*agora*), some women only appear three or four times. They participate until they gain a blanket and then they disappear. Or they send their children over to have lunch here... soup (*sopão*), polenta or a plate of rice with black beans (*arroz com feijão*). And you can't send them away with an empty stomach, can you? But I get annoyed by that, really annoyed (*a gente fica chateada, muito chateada mesmo*)."

Dona Evora

Although lamenting the "covetousness" and lack of participation of other poor women in the neighbourhood, most mothers of the mothers' clubs consider it their duty to offer help to those who are less well-off, generally referred to as the poor (*os pobres*). The doing of charitable works is also mentioned as an important motive to participate in the mothers' clubs.

"The mothers' club is a grain of seed, it helps the poor, it gives hope."

Dona Olinda

"It's our duty to help the poor. Nobody notices them (*se dá conta deles*)... the street children, the handicapped (*os deficientes*), the people in the encampments (*nos acampamentos*, of land-less farmers). My God, there are many poor people, many problems... and what else can you do but help, when you see these people suffering? They don't deserve to be in this situation. It's [because of] the government. The government is starving us (*está matando a gente à mingua*)."

Dona Ivanice

Ideally, second-hand clothes are collected, meals prepared, bread baked, blankets made and food gathered with the intention to distribute them among the groups just mentioned by Dona Ivanice. In practice, however, I have only seldom witnessed that people other than the regular and irregular participants of the mothers' groups benefited from the available goods. In the first ten years of their existence, however, most mothers' clubs were highly engaged in the doing of good works in their neighbourhood and surrounding areas, and were also very active in 'the struggle'

¹² This is a joke; Dona Evinha is an extremely quiet woman, who hardly ever speaks at the meetings of the mothers' club. On the rare occasions of her answering direct questions of other mothers, she speaks in such a low voice that her words are almost inaudible.

or *luta* (see also chapter 2).

“I remember that three, four years ago we sometimes visited an encampment [of landless farmers] close to Guaíba, together with a sister and four women of the club. Imagine, all the huts covered with black plastic, beds on legs... and there was one woman who wasn't poor, but who wanted to struggle with the farmer-tenants [*colonos*] who lost their land. She said: 'I go wherever they go.' I liked her a lot. We helped to plant black beans, maize, rice, and for lunch food was always shared [*partilha*]. Everyone would bring something. New persons who hadn't planted anything yet, still received food-stuff (*os alimentos*). Really great (*Muito bacana*)! I liked it a lot, there was this spirit of 'those who don't have, receive, and those who have, give'.”

Dona Paulina

“How we were active in those days. We made stew every week for the poor children, it [the chapel] was always filled with children. We gained black beans, tomatoes, onions, I even don't know where it all came from. It seems that you can ask it from an organisation, but then you have to fill in a form. With Christmas we organised a big feast for them [the poor children], so that everyone would have a small present. How we made dolls for them! One of us sew up the hairs, the other the eyes, the third the doll's clothes. We organised a really beautiful Christmas feast. There were clothes, a doll and a present for every child, and hot dogs to eat. They ate so much, what a bliss [*a coisa mais linda*]! There were even children who put a hot dog in their trouser pocket, and another in their blouse!

We also made trips to Farroupilha to visit Nossa Senhora do Carvaggio, a woman farmer who performed many wonders. We visited the sick, we had our co-operations for the production of bread that we sold at reasonable prices in the neighbourhood. And we also earned a bit of money in that way. I even can't tell you how much we did, I forget many things. I'm already over sixty years old (*da terceira idade*), dear. I also helped in the Group of Friends¹³ [a local organisation that supports disabled Aguenses with food, medicine, education and information], but... aye, aye, there was so much sadness. It really, really touched me, so I stopped doing it, I couldn't take it any longer. So much suffering...”

Dona Maria

At the time of my visits, the mothers' clubs clearly kept more to themselves, which the women attributed primarily to the poignant lack of resources, the continuously increasing age of the clubs' members, the lack of new, young, spirited co-ordinators, and the general tendency of CEBs to exchange the focus on national politics and politicised communal struggle for an interest in local charitable action and individual spirituality.

In 1995, the mothers' clubs of the parish São Pio X all followed roughly the same pattern. On Tuesday afternoon around two o'clock the women enter the chapel of their base community, some accompanied by their (grand)children. The mothers sit down on the available chairs or the backless Mass-benches of the community, and the co-ordinating mother suggests to sing a welcome song (*canto de boas vindas*), such as 'I'm happy in the community' (*Sou feliz na comunidade*). The most important events in the women's lives of last week are exchanged, the backgrounds of the absence of some mothers is discussed, and inquiries after sick family members are made.

¹³ Like all other proper names used in this thesis, the name 'Group of Friends' is a pseudonym.

Guided by the main co-ordinator and some sub-co-ordinators, soon small groups of women are formed who engage jointly in all sorts of needlework: the making of door-mats or rugs (*tapetes*), blankets, pillows, children's clothes, layettes, dolls, et cetera. The tools needed to do this needlework work are limited in supply. Most mothers' clubs merely possess some needles, two or three scissors, a reel of cotton and plastic bags or a cupboard to store their needle-works. Some clubs are more lucky and are in the possession of knitting-needles or an old hand-operated sewing-machine. The most valuable article of use present, the so-called cloth-grinder (*moedor de retalhos*), is shared by all mothers' clubs belonging to the parish of São Pio X, but is out of order most of the time and finances lack to have it repaired.

Apart from needlework, some mothers' clubs also engage incidentally in the baking of bread in the so-called communal ovens (*forno comunitário*) or in the making of stew (*sopão*) on the stove available in most communities. In these cases, four to five women get together, light the oven with firewood or gas, knead the dough or prepare the stew. While the dough is rising or baking or when the stew is boiling, they read a part of the Gospel and reflect upon it.

The materials available come from various sources. For the stew, the requisite food items, such as black beans, rice, eggs or tomatoes, are mostly taken in by the mothers themselves. Occasionally, meat and vegetables, like marrow-bones, ribs, beet-leaves, dry carrots and half-mouldy potatoes, are collected at the local butcher and grocer, who sympathise with the mothers' clubs and donate food items that are no longer fresh and for sale. The flour needed for the baking of communal bread, however, is provided by some primary and secondary schools in Águas, the municipality, and private enterprises, for the obtaining of which the priest serves as an intermediary. Moreover, some flour is obtained through women's personal contacts with better-off Aguienses.

The cotton patches and shreds of woollen jerseys needed for the needlework are the left-overs from factories where clothing is produced. Every now and then, a couple of sacks are donated to the mothers' club of São Pio X, which distributes them among all other mothers' clubs in the parish region. The second-hand clothes mainly come from the organisation *Caritas* that receives them from foreign countries and through charity campaigns in Brazil itself. The clothes are collected from Porto Alegre by the priest, accompanied by the co-ordinator of the women's club, making use of the priest's car or the friars' omnibus. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the mothers neither had to pay for the clothes nor for the consumed petrol. This arrangement, however, smelled after assistentialism and paved the way to unilateral dependency. Therefore, nowadays, the women have to pay a small sum for the received clothes and make a contribution to the CEBs' communal fund to cover the expenses of the ride.

After about two hours of work (*Trabalho*), the women gather again in the main circle or room. Mostly they present each other with the result of their efforts, poetically phrased as "the fruits of effort" (*os frutos de esforço*). This moment is often accompanied by the singing of the refrain from the song '*Louvado sejas, ô Senhor*' (Be praised, oh Lord). The mothers present sit down in a circle and prepare to engage in what they call "to do the Gospel" [*fazer o Evangelho*]. A part of the Gospel is read once or twice by the co-ordinator, the pastoral worker or one of the mothers. Then the mothers reflect upon the biblical verses read (see chapter 3 for further information). Often, the conversations centre on the problems experienced by the mothers' club and its participants in daily life, both in the community and at home.

After the reflection on the Bible, some time is reserved for the intercessory prayers. These are considered of utmost importance by all those present and are expressed by the women while standing upright in a circle with hands held. Intercessory prayers, prayers in which people implore God's mercy or thank him for favours granted, generally revolve around health

problems of family members, problems related to severe poverty, relational problems experienced between family members, and difficulties encountered by the mothers' club. Each intercessory prayer is concluded with a common '*Senhor, escutai a nossa prece*' (Lord, hear our prayer). Then two final prayers are said (the Lord's Prayer, Ave Maria), after which the women cross themselves.¹⁴

The meeting of the mothers' club is concluded¹⁵ with the having of a communal meal (*refeição comunitária*), mostly sweet tea with bread or *cuca* (a sort of cake, made of eggs, butter, flour and yeast). Before going home, the remaining food as well as other goods are distributed among those participants in need, after which most mothers run home to be there before their husbands return.

"My husband has never complained that I leave home to go the mothers' club. He thinks it's a good thing. I have been married for 37 and we never had fights because of jealousy. But I make sure that I'm at home before he gets back from his work (*do serviço dele*)... I wait for him with the house all tidied up (*com a casa todo arrumadinha*)."

Dona Elva

"At five I have to be at home, because of my husband. And I have to do everything well (*bem direitinho*) that day, so that he won't open his mouth [to complain]. And I already have so much work (*serviço*) to do as we are seven, and Mateus [her youngest son, a straggler] is always pestering me. Sometimes my daughter helps me, when she's not cooking or cleaning in other houses, but mostly it's just me. So I have to make a sacrifice to participate."

Dona Zenaide

The difficulties experienced by mothers' clubs are manifold. First of all, the harsh economic conditions in which most women of the mothers' clubs are living set limits to women's participation. Due to the poor financial situation of most households, many women need to work outside the home and cannot make it to the weekly meetings that take up a whole afternoon. In others, the years of poverty and the monotonous diet of paste, black beans and bread have resulted in physical weakness or lingering diseases, which causes them to refrain from participation in unfavourable weather conditions, such as heavy rainfall in winter time or radiating heat in summer time.

Second, about half of the women experience a lack of co-operation or even opposition on the part of their husbands, who do not agree with or hamper their wives' activities outside the safe walls of the home. Next to the need of working outside the home, opposition of the husband

¹⁴ If the women are not short in time, which by the way is rarely the case, the reflection on the Bible is preceded by or concluded with a simple procession. One of the mothers walks the room with an opened Bible held in front of her at eye level, while the other participants follow suit with a lit candle in their hand.

¹⁵ Sometimes the mothers diverge from the usual course of events that consists of 'Work, Gospel and Struggle' and engage in what they call *brincadeiras* or playful entertainment. I once witnessed that small lots were made that carried the names of those mothers present. At the same time some presents, such as a belt, plastic chain and knickers, were wrapped up and put in a jute sack. Then some lots were drawn and the lucky women received one of the presents, after having accomplished a funny task. On another occasion, when the mothers didn't feel like making blankets due to the sultry, moist heat inside the room in which they had gathered, they sat down in a circle and started telling each other jokes till they cried with laughter. The favourite *brincadeira* of most women, however, seems to be dressing up as a well-known Brazilian personality, such as the t.v. personality Xuxa, singer Eliane, or PT-politician Lula, leaving the other women to take a guess at the person they depict. The joy generated by this *brincadeira* lasts for a long time, since these dress-up parties are remembered fondly very often during the break enjoyed by the women after the accomplishment of the weekly needlework.

is the most common cause for women's drop-out in the mothers' clubs. It makes often great demands on a woman's courage and inventiveness to persevere in her wish to participate of the mothers' club.

"At the beginning my husband was very angry and upset. He said: 'I don't accept it that you neglect the children, I don't want you to go off to the street'. But I talked to him calmly, and explained everything, I talked about the good things we do. But still he didn't like it, he said: 'You can't leave the kids alone, so you can't go. I don't like it'. So, now I neither lie nor tell the truth: I go to the meetings and take my three children with me, and they stay quiet. They don't tell him. But another woman, Alberta, stopped participating because of her husband. He didn't like it and mistreated her all the time (*ficava judiando ela*). She was three months pregnant and even lost her baby, because he hit her so hard... they fought a lot in the doorway, she had a nervous breakdown and lost the child. I was shocked (*apavorada*)..."

Dona Rosa

This was the only really serious incident reported to me, but according to priest Aldair, four women got separated or divorced because of the continuous fights with their husbands concerning their time spent on and dedication to the mothers clubs during his service (1992-1993).

Third, the organisation of the mothers' clubs is subject to some internal and external organisational weaknesses. Internally, all mothers' clubs have to contend with a lack of co-ordinators and sub co-ordinators in whose hands the organisation of the meetings of the mothers' club rests. The co-ordinator is chosen, for a period of one or more years, to mobilise and inspire the women of the neighbourhood and to co-ordinate the activities undertaken by the mothers' club. Also, she accompanies the weekly biblical reflection, represents the mothers' club at other reunions, takes care of the common fund, and discusses possible problems with the priest or pastoral workers. In some communities, a sister or friar attends irregularly to the meetings to give religious orientation and be of assistance during the hour of reflection. And occasionally, the priest or pastoral workers from other communities or parishes pay a visit to the mothers' clubs, both to show their interest and to keep their finger on the pulse; they do not, however, provide structural and frequent guidance.

The lack of co-ordinators is partly related to the ever increasing average age of the mothers: while the hard core of the mothers' club grows old and often lacks energy or enthusiasm¹⁶ to take on a leadership position, only few young women enter the mothers' clubs. Also, some mothers feel that they are not in the possession of the right qualities to become a co-ordinator: in their own words, they lack "the courage to speak up" or are not sufficiently well-informed in the events, practices and networks of the base communities. Another internal problem is the lack of formation of existing and new leaders, which Dona Nair blames to ecclesial policy: "They [the priest and pastoral workers] simply do not want to take on the formation of women, they don't want us to become too clever."

Externally, the mothers' clubs meet with the direct competition of mothers' clubs that are organised by the municipality in imitation of the parish-based mothers' clubs. According to the CEB women, the municipal mothers' clubs are vehicles for "political mobilisation" and

¹⁶ The co-ordinator of the mothers' club São Pio X, Dona Nargi, once told me that it is even difficult to make sure that the hard core participates every week. "You do not want to know how I spend the Tuesday mornings! I'll tell you, Elsa... I go to the place of each one of them [the mothers] and have to talk a lot. I say: 'Hey, So-and-So (*fulana*), this afternoon the mothers' club takes place, why don't you come to participate'? If I don't go, they don't show up. Sometimes I am really discouraged (*a gente se desanima*). It's terrible (*Barbaridade!*)"

“manipulation” in favour of the government party and they are especially called into existence during times of election-contest to take the wind out of the sails of the labour party PT. By giving assistentialist aid “publicity is made for the PMDB” and the “protest and initiative of the poor are stifled”. As CEB mothers have to struggle for the obtaining of each and every resource, the members of the municipal mothers’ clubs gain all needed materials on request, organise free courses, and receive financial support to undertake special activities. This is a very tempting datum, particularly for very poor women, and during the elections of 1994-1995 I witnessed several women leaving the church-related mothers’ clubs to join a municipal mothers’ club.

Fourth, the lack of both financial and material resources sometimes frustrates the proceedings of the mothers’ club. The little money that enters the cash funds of the clubs is generated by the organisation of tea circles. The week before a tea circle takes place, admission tickets are sold by the women of the mothers’ club to local residents at the price of about two *Reais* each. This ticket entitles the owner to visit the tea circle tea, at which hot, sweetened tea and a variety of cookies are served in the nicely decorated communal hall (*salão comunitária*). Sometimes, the whole is varied with music, dance or playful entertainment. The proceeds of the tea circles, however, are generally not sufficient to cover the costs of the purchase of needles and threads or to pay for the reparation of sewing-machines that are out of order.

The few materials available generally enter the group through mediation of the priest, friars or nuns, who collect the goods in Porto Alegre at factories or at Caritas, using the communal van. Of course, this regulation carries the risk of dependency. At a certain point, the entry of clothes, rags and patches faltered in the mothers’ club São Pio X. It turned out that priest Márcio took them to a community recently founded in the outskirts of the parish territory, instead of bringing them to the mothers’ club São Pio X, which used to co-ordinate the distribution of goods among all mothers’ clubs active in the area. One of its founders, Dona Maria, however, undertook immediate action.

“I said to friar Márcio [the priest]: ‘Listen, friar, I want you to know that I’m not at all happy with the way things go in the club’. He asked: ‘Oh, Mam, but why?’ I said: ‘Why do you no longer pass the rags on to us?’ Will you believe that he said that he thought that that material was of no use! I said: ‘You should just know how many people we already covered with the blankets that we made out of such rags... how many children didn’t freeze. Even the friars come to see us for blankets, they cover themselves with these at night, so that they are able to sleep’. He said to me: ‘Ah, Dona Maria, I didn’t know’. I said: ‘You can leave the materials with us. If you like, I can even bring along those people [who benefited] along, so that we can show you how many people are served with our work, since you don’t show up much anyway’. After that, never again he held back the rags.”

Dona Maria

Even the room that is used for the weekly meetings can be at stake, as was the case with the same mothers’ club São Pio X. After the incident with the withheld rags, friar Márcio decided to reassign the room at the first floor of the main chapel, in which the women of the mothers’ club had met weekly for almost 15 years. He informed Dona Nargi at a day’s notice that this would be taken up by the group of catechism, and that he would see to another room for the mothers’ club. Indeed, after pressure of Dona Maria, another, smaller room at the same floor of the chapel was arranged for the mothers, which was actually pretty much to the women’s like because of the many windows and presence of a water-tap. The very first meeting in the new room friar Márcio dropped in for no apparent reason. He was friendly greeted by the elderly women, of whom Dona Santana commented: “We like the new room a lot, friar”. Friar Márcio looked somewhat

disappointed and quickly disappeared with the words “That’s good” (*Que bom*).

Obviously, Friar Márcio’s actions were by no means harmless interventions, even though he played the injured innocence. According to Dona Nargi, the club’s co-ordinator, friar Márcio tried to undermine her position of authority as co-ordinator, minister of Eucharist and member of the service of baptism in the base community, because he favoured a centralisation of power in the hands of the clergy. Also, she suspected that he wanted to weaken the strong nucleus of adherents of the PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*), the Labour Party. For this leftist party, Dona Nargi ran an information and publicity office at the entrance of the neighbourhood during the general elections of 1994/5, after having entered in competition with fellow CEB members for a position as town-councillor in the local elections of 1990.

“Friar Márcio isn’t in favour of the poorest. In the service of baptism we have to collect money for the baptism of the [people’s] children. We always took the economic situation of the people into account, so that people like Dona Dilma did not have to pay, as she’s very poor. But friar Márcio said: ‘Everyone has to pay.’ Will you believe that now there are even people that are not having their children baptised, because they cannot pay the fee! But the chapel [of the mother-church] has been painted every year since 1991! Friar Márcio says that ‘Appearance is very important’... I tell you, friar Sérgio of the old days was a difficult person to work with, but I like him a hundred times better than Márcio. I always got on very well (*sempre me dei bem*) with all the priests, we always talked, conversed. But with Márcio there’s no opening. He himself wants to pull the strings. Many groups have disappeared: the children’s clubs, the group that animated the celebrations, the service of baptism, and this year the mothers’ club doesn’t organise Christmas for the children of Barro anymore... He simply doesn’t trust anyone. During the feast of the Tenth Meeting of the CEBs of Águas also, he didn’t trust anyone with the money. And then now there are these affairs with the rags and the room... Bit by bit everyone is discouraged because of his opposition and the lack of support by Márcio. He was sent by the bishop to break us [PT-adherents], to put the parish’s affairs in order, and he’s hard (*duro*), really hard, short but tough (*baixinho mas brabo*). But do you know, Elsa, that we... that that small group of PT-members (*petistas*) is getting stronger and more reunited every day, because of his opposition? He thinks that we left the political, but in reality we are stronger than ever. On the surface [(*or encima*), we don’t let the political penetrate in the church anymore. In church I talk about ‘the parties’ instead of the PT, and people accept that. Only old people don’t want to know anything about it. So you have to be careful, and not be like sister Matilda. One time she came with the wife of Olívio [local PT-leader] and two PT-members, and they handed out pamphlets in the church. You just can’t do that... I can tell you that this wasn’t taken well (*isso não caiu bem*).

Dona Nargi

Another version of the story was that of the female lay leaders of the diverse pastorates and services, who claimed that friar Márcio feared the comprehensive yet elusive power of women in the base communities (see section 4.5). Supposedly, he wanted to call a halt to their communal involvement and confine them to work of a missionary and catechetical nature.

“We women are the pivot on which everything hinges, we are the cement of the base communities. We have to obey the priest, because he understands the Gospel... he has this special relation with God. But we have to do what we have to do, and sometimes we can’t respect the rules of the parish... [Q: The rules?] I mean...er... we can’t ask friar Márcio for his opinion, because it’s the necessities that steer us. I always entered in a

service or pastorate out of necessity, never because of politics. But of course, when you work in the communities for a long time you know many people and you have many relations. There's always someone to help you."

Dona Ada

This type of tensions and conflicts between the priest, pastoral agents and (leaders of the) mothers' clubs is rather common. On the one hand, the priest and pastoral agents acknowledge that religious life in the parish thrives thanks primarily to the endless efforts made by female CEB-members in general and the women of the mothers' clubs in particular. On the other hand, the content and range of activities carried out by CEB-women are sometimes somewhat feared by the clergy; when the women no longer focus on their 'motherly' duty to care, educate and evangelise, when their action radius starts to surpass the organisational or geographical boundaries of the parish, or when their power becomes a threat to the administrative or sacral grip of the priest and pastoral agents, the latter often react by denying the women in question institutional support, by limiting financial and other means or by attempting to cooptate the group in question (cf. Alvarez 1990:391).

A fifth and last hindrance the mothers' clubs have to avert, has to do with the prevailing atmosphere within the clubs themselves. Repeatedly, the mothers complain about the "lack of donation", "lack of readiness to share", and "the unceasing gossip" among the women (cf. Burdick 1990), which threaten the unity and co-operation between individual club members and - more importantly - the energy put into communal efforts.

Over the last few years several solutions have been proposed by the mothers to countervail the experienced difficulties. The most important of these are the instalment of a special pastoral worker to accompany the mothers' clubs, the recruitment of new, young members, the improvement of the formation of leaders, and to enhancement of their knowledge of the Bible, of how to prepare religious celebrations, and of typically female activities such as the cooking of home-made remedies and sewing. But in daily practice, the realisation of these proposals is still far-off.

4.3.3 The pastorate of health

In Águas, the pastorate of health, sometimes also referred to as the pastorate of children (*Pastoral da Criança*) or working groups of health (*Mutiroes da Saúde*), dates back to the year 1985. In this year, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB, *Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil*) accepted the proposal of UNICEF to start a project that would improve the health of young children in the age group of 0 to 4 years old and of pregnant women in Brazil. The archdiocese of Porto Alegre soon decided to engage in a pilot project and chose the neighbourhood Barro as the area of implementation, as most of its inhabitants lived in very poor conditions with inadequate basic health care. Many people dwelled in shacks that were built of wooden laths and topped off with agricultural plastic or sheets of corrugated iron. In a big part of the neighbourhood water-works were lacking or provided only polluted water, a proper sewerage was absent so that excrements ended up in the provisional ditches, and the instalment of electricity was still being negotiated with the local authorities. The most common diseases that struck (and still strike) the population of Barro, such as parasitic infections, dysentery, diarrhoea, anaemia, infection of the bronchial tubes, pneumonia, and several skin diseases, were often not treated due to the under-funded and inaccessible health care.

At the very start, brother Antonio and sister Matilda were the main pioneers of the pilot project. Helped by a sister who had experience with and knowledge of popular health care

systems, they discussed the ins and outs of the health project, wrote a proposal and called a meeting with the proper priests of the archdiocese. Confronted with the plans, the priests of Barro and neighbouring quarters did not, however, react enthusiastically right away. They wondered about UNICEF's interest in mobilising the Catholic Church for projects that would 'simply repair the effects of a bigger crisis'. Furthermore, they feared financial dependence of the municipality. It was agreed that the Secretary of Health would cover all expenses to be made, but no guarantees for future projects were given.¹⁷ Therefore, the priest of the parish of São Pio X was not prepared to officially take up the administration of the project. Instead, it was decided that the women of the mothers' clubs and working groups would serve as the main organisers and executors of UNICEF's health project, so that 'the existing leaders would not be overloaded and the bomb would not explode within the parish itself'.¹⁸

The main objective of the subsequent initiatives expanded by these CEB women, who were helped by professionals from the public health service, such as physicians, nurses and nutritionists, was to improve the health care conditions in the neighbourhood by offering useful training on feeding and child welfare. Furthermore, they wanted to break out of the existing relationship of dependency between local residents and the (precarious) public health system, by providing the first with preventive medical assistance of local origin. Therefore, the CEB women involved decided to train the women of Barro in the preparation of home-made remedies, to start courses on how to render first aid, to organise informative meetings on health-related issues, and to monitor the development and physical well-being of children under six years of age and pregnant women in bimonthly meetings.

Initially, the project functioned as follows. Pregnant women and mothers of children in the age of 0 to 4 years old were identified and organised in groups of six women. All groups were accompanied by co-ordinators, who in their turn were supported by a supervisor to be chosen among them. To bring down infant mortality and to improve on children's and pregnant women's health, communal gardens, ovens and a popular pharmacy (*casa de saúde*) were called into existence. In the communal gardens people of the neighbourhood could get a small lot to grow basic vegetables that could aliment their families, in particular children and gestating women 'so that they would produce good milk'.¹⁹

The communal ovens were set up to make sure that the families of women taking part in this sub-project would have at least two or more decent bread meals a week. During meetings of the communal oven, groups of about five women gathered on a weekly basis to bake bread for their households. The flour was partly supplied by richer Aguenses through intercession of the priest, by the LBA (*Legião Brasileira de Assistência*) and befriended entrepreneurs in Águas, while the requisite sugar, yeast, oil and fire-wood were brought in by the participating women. To use the communal ovens more optimum and provide women with an extra source of income, some groups also functioned as small scale co-operations that baked and sold cookies and sweet bread to local residents. However, due to the persistent economic crisis in Brazil, which in Águas had the face of a steady increase of the number of unemployed men and women, of prices continuously building up, and of an ever lowering of the spendable income of households, these mini co-operatives were not viable.

¹⁷ The parish of São Pio X already had had a bad experience with projects supported financially by the municipality.

Initially, the weekly stews (*sopões*) prepared by CEB women were financed by the municipality, but suddenly its monetary contribution was cut, leaving behind the communities in despair of how to continue this service.

¹⁸ C.F. Costa et al. (1984:16-7), *Pastoral familiar nas comunidades eclesiais de base*. Porto Alegre, Mimeo.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

In the popular pharmacy, home-made remedies, such as cough syrup, anti-inflammation ointment, serous fluids to combat dehydration, and mashed papaya-seeds against amoebas, were sold at a low price. Furthermore, courses were held to transmit recipes of common medicines, and meetings for pregnant women (*dias das gestantes*) were organised to inform them on the proper alimentation during the period of gestation. Lastly, regular visits were paid by one or two nuns and volunteering CEB-women to the catholic base communities in the neighbourhood of Barro. During these visits, the participating CEB women learned how to prepare home-made remedies with the use of locally available, cheap ingredients, such as flowers of the banana tree, egg-shells, carrot-tops and wild herbs. Also, the women present were taught the basics of first aid. Finally, the children were all weighed and checked up; the results of this were written down on charts provided by UNICEF that enabled the women of the pastorate to control the gain and loss of weight, and to undertake timely action if needed.

In 1987/88, the tasks of the pastorate of health were extended. Under the reign of the Brazilian president José Sarney (1986-1990) a social project was issued that supplied the poor with so-called 'tickets of Sarney' to obtain milk, for the registration and distribution of which the pastorate of health was held responsible. Each family with at least one child under the age of 7 and an income of two minimum salaries or less could register, which entitled them to one ticket a day to the value of one litre of milk. The women of the pastorate initially welcomed the project, but it soon turned out it had its flaws.

"The problem was that lots of people didn't use the tickets for milk. They would go to the grocery (*armazém*) and trade it for booze (*cachaça*, sugar-cane brandy), cigarettes... For the grocer it was all the same. Whether he sold milk or booze, for him it was all the same."

Still, in 1994-1995 during the time of my research, the pastorate of health proved to be one of the few pastorates that had survived ten years of economic hardship and social struggle.²⁰ Although differently organised as a result of the declining financial aid of the municipality and the mental support by UNICEF, the basic elements of the initial health project - the communal gardens, ovens and pharmacy - are still functioning, but the milk tickets are no longer issued.

The pastorate of health is now being co-ordinated and supervised by one of the three nuns who work in the parish of São Pio X, sister Stella. She takes care of the tuning in of inter-CEB activities in the field of health care, she runs the local pharmacy, organises courses at the level of Águas or the neighbourhood Barro, and pays the communities regular visits to support the lay leaders of each community in problem-solving.

"I co-ordinate the pastorate of health at the level of Águas²¹, and also the popular pharmacy, because these two belong together. I attend to all the communities directly and visit them always. Only last week I couldn't make it to the neighbourhood of Marumbé because of the bus strike, but I normally drop in on (*eu costumo dar uma passadinha*) other communities too because of the pastorate of health. I go there because sometimes the women have doubts, because the pastorate of health receives a minimal quantity of money. So all of them are preoccupied with the question of how to pay the

20 During the same decade, pastorates and services like the Labourers' Pastorate (*Pastoral Operária*), the Pastorate of Communication (*Pastoral da Comunicação*), the Pastorate of the Minor (*Pastoral do Menor*), the Pastorate of the Black (*Pastoral do Negro*), the Service of the Supper (*Serviço da Ceia*), and the Service of Farm-products (*Serviço dos Produtos da Roça*) either weakened considerably or died by inches.

21 There are two other parishes in which CEB-members engage in projects under the umbrella of a Pastorate of Health or Pastorate of the Child. Sometimes, joint activities and courses are set up by these two parishes and the parish of São Pio X.

bills. So I help them with this. I help.... but I do so more in the sense of inciting them (*no sentido de incentivar elas*), that is to say, I encourage them and I'm encouraged by them too, because... then they present their work. And for them that's important too, that presentation... that someone comes to see them, and things alike. So I often feel that it is more me that is motivated by them, than I who motivate them. But when they want help, then I give it in this sense, that I give them the minimum and then they resolve it themselves. They are very autonomous in this respect, to do things, to go and invest in the struggle. They are good leaders.”
Sister Stella

The meetings of the pastorate of health in each community follow more or less the same monthly or bi-monthly pattern. They take place in the chapel or communal hall of the base community, and each is attended by approximately 20 to 50 women²², who generally also bring their children along. As with the mothers' clubs, each meeting starts off with Work [*Trabalho*]. In this case, the Work consists primarily of the weighing of the children present, for which the responsible pastoral worker, who is always a sister and never a friar, brings along a simple balance. One by one, the children are pulled up in the sack attached to the balance to check their weight, which is jotted down in a notebook. A fast increase in a child's weight is cheerfully welcomed by those present, while worries and anxiety are expressed when a seriously underfed child has lost another pound, particularly when it concerns a baby or small toddler. Sometimes, the mothers of these children gain food from the other mothers present to feed the under-weight child.

Furthermore, problems related to breast-feeding, symptoms in sick relatives, such as diarrhoea, and the course of common diseases like pneumonia are discussed. Most of the time, the health problems experienced by the participants are taken as the starting-point of discussion, but it also occurs that the sister or co-ordinator in charge prepares a group discussion or play (*dinâmica*) on a pre-established theme.

To close of these discussions or *dinâmicas*, cheap and accessible treatments are suggested by lay leaders, such as the administering of a home-made oral re-hydration solution that is made of boiled water, sugar and salt. Furthermore, the mothers of malnourished children can obtain cheap, home-made food supplements through the nun, which help to improve the children's physical condition: triturated sweet cassava flowers, powder made of the coats of unpolished rice, triturated egg-shells, and a multi-mixture powder containing balanced quantities of the first three nutritious powders.

As in the mothers' clubs, the Work is completed by moments of reflection on the Gospel and the singing of religious songs. Also, in some cases, the last ingredient of the trinity of Work, Gospel and Struggle is concretised in meetings where women are taught to prepare nutritious as well as stimulated to participate actively in the petition for a new hospital in Águas, or in the occupation of the local health post to call attention to its malfunctioning.

According to its participants, the strength of the pastorate of health lies in the unceasing emotional and organisational support provided by the sisters of the parish to these leaders. Not only the sisters of the parish of São Pio X dedicate a fair proportion of their time to the pastorate of health, but two sisters of a neighbouring parish too invest plenty of energy in it. Their engagement and enthusiasm attracts and produces strong lay leaders, who also empower this pastorate. Indeed, the pastorate of health seems to be a good breeding ground for strong leaders. When in 1993 four representatives for the newly established *Conselho Tutelar da Criança* (Tutelar Council for Children) of Águas had to be chosen, which is in charge of defending the

²² In the 1980s, each meeting of the pastorate of health was visited by an average of 80 women, according to unpublished documentation of the friars and sisters working in Barro at that time.

rights of and securing help for children and adolescents in trouble, all of them were members from catholic base communities and three of them, all women, originated from the pastorate of health. Furthermore, the results scored by the pastorate of health, particularly in the combat of malnutrition, have a great appeal on the people of Barro.

Nevertheless, the number of participants in the monthly meetings is dropping²³ and somewhat disappointing when set alongside the crying health conditions in Barro, particularly in the recently occupied territories. Also, the popular pharmacy is consulted less and less. According to sister Stella, the economic conditions in the neighbourhood have deteriorated to such a degree, that even the lowest prices for the medications offered at the popular pharmacy are too high for the local residents. Most people who visit the pharmacy nowadays come round to discuss their health problems, but the means to cure them simply lack on both sides. As is the case with most services in Águas, the pastorate of health seems to be dying a slow death...

4.4 CEB-women's participation: an analysis

4.4.1 Women members

On the basis of the three case studies presented above and the descriptions given in chapter 3 of women's perspective on and practice of Liberation Theology, the contours are becoming visible of the main features of CEB-participation by catholic women, both common women members and their female leaders. These features are discussed successively in the following two sub-sections.

Not surprisingly, the spheres of female activity within the catholic base communities seem to be in line with the general Brazilian division of space and responsibilities along gender lines. CEB women mostly engage in religious and social activities within the *domestic terrain*. They often meet within the confines of their own homes, the kitchen of their base community, the communal hall that is located within the chapel of their base community, the popular pharmacy which adjoins the sisters' house and is located on the same compound, or in the communal gardens that lie next to it.²⁴ In the early days of the CEBs in Águas this picture showed more grey areas as many women undertook daily actions in public space. Fighting for electricity, water, asphalted roads, health posts and day care facilities, CEB women undertook regular organised action to lobby for their good cause and exert pressure upon local politicians; they collected signatures for the digging of ditches, demonstrated on the streets of Águas, invaded the townhall, and the like. But with the local authorities conceding some of women's demands and with the increasing emphasis within CEBs on spirituality instead of political action, most women have retreated to the domestic domain again, with the exception of some female leaders (see next sub-section).

23 In the beginning of the 1980s a usual number of 80 or more people met; nowadays, 50 people at a maximum participate in the meetings.

24 The few CEB men present are predominantly active as the ministry of the Word, member of the patrimonial committee, *festeiro* (entertainer or amphitryon), or member of the pastorate of labour, which are all considered "*posições de destaque*". In other words, men fulfil prominent and noticeable positions that allow them to act publicly, either within the religious domain itself (in front of the altar making the homily, buying meat and drinks for the barbecue at local stores, building and restoring the church) or through contacts outside of the religious sphere (with trade unions, political parties, social movement).

Within this domestic sphere women basically have primarily a *this-worldly orientation*.²⁵ Instead of being focused at for example self-perfection or life after death, as is the case in many other-worldly religions, CEB women seem to aim first and foremost at improving the conditions in the here and now, that is to say the life circumstances of their households and base communities. For this a wide range of rituals and social actions directed at concrete problems are put into practice by the women. For example, as shown in chapter 4 and the preceding case studies, God and Our Lady are often invoked for help through intercessory prayers at the meetings of the mothers' clubs. With holy water special foods are prepared to cure sick co-religionists. Furthermore, religious meetings generally have a component of reflection that translates into concrete, often short-term activities, which are designed to face the negative effects of the government's 'neo-liberal policy' on the neighbourhood, such as impoverishment, and crime.

In most cases the this-worldly orientation of catholic CEB women is shaped profoundly by their specific position within the family, in particular their *motherhood*. As I show in chapter five, both male and female religious leaders, lay leaders and common members of the Aguese base communities address women primarily as mothers. It is basically in this quality and from that perspective that women engage in the celebrative, reflexive and practical activities of their base communities. As mothers the CEB women want to safeguard the physical and psychological well-being of the people who are entrusted to their care and responsibility, their children in particular. As mothers they are concerned with the often degrading fate of the young, elderly, homeless, sick, handicapped and land-less in the world around them. And as mothers they primarily engage in activities related to education (catechesis), cooking (pastorate of the poor), cleaning (of the chapel, altar, priest's clothes) and care (baptism of children, care for the young, sick, elderly, and handicapped).

Furthermore, women's participation in base communities is marked by the centrality of *interpersonal co-operation* or *communal spirit*²⁶. Both social and religious activities undertaken by the catholic women of the base communities in Barro are essentially of a communal nature: sewing of blankets for the poor, drawing up the liturgy, weeding the communal gardens, visiting the sick, jointly baptising the children, and so on, are all activities that are expressly carried out in groups of three or more women to which the experience of 'unity' is of great importance.

Fifth, within the CEBs and related groups, pastorates and services linked, most women pursue the establishment and maintenance of a *non-centralised organisational style*. Although most groups, services and pastorates have elected (female) co-ordinators, whose task it is to organise, educate, animate and articulate, explicit efforts are continuously made to decentralise power, knowledge and material goods, and to stimulate women's participation on the basis of equality. In this respect co-ordinators are often compared to mothers: good co-ordinators guide but do not dominate, they support but do not foster dependency, they share instead of impose knowledge, and they stimulate others while respecting the internal development of the group. Thus, although there are ranks within the different services and mothers' clubs, these ranks are not marked by centralisation which is also illustrated by the circulation of tasks from meeting to meeting.

In short, I suggest that CEB women's participation is characterised by 1) its domestic strain, 2) a this-worldly orientation, 3) the decisive importance of motherhood (or care in general, see

25 As opposed to a so-called 'other-worldly orientation'. 'This-worldly religions emphasize life in the here and now, relationships between people, and the alleviation of suffering in this world during this lifetime. Other-worldly religions focus attention on life after death, future redemption, and mystical truth' (Sered 1994:145).

26 See also Ireland (1991:169) and Napolitana (1997:293).

chapter 3) in choosing specific activities, 4) the centrality of interpersonal relationships in the execution of these activities, and 5) the pursuit of a non-centralised organisational style. The characteristics of CEBs and CEB-meetings are largely consonant with these features of women's participation, as has become clear in chapter 3; it is, however, important to stress that women were not attracted to CEBs because of these features, but that the involved women themselves developed the CEBs with these characteristics. Contrary to what most authors on religion and gender implicitly state, the participating women are thus not only part of the religious system, but also creative of the religious system.

Even though CEB women seem to be expressly oriented at establishing non-hierarchical and non-centralised organisational styles, as women tend to do according to sociological theories²⁷, there are several positions open to women in base communities that can be qualified as positions of leadership. As has come to the fore in the previous sections of this chapter, lay women in the CEBs under study can become minister, catechist, sexton, co-ordinator or animator, and council member; the only position officially closed to women is that of priest.

When discussing the issue of female leadership in the Aguense base communities, four questions suggest themselves. First, what conditions stimulate the nomination or candidature of Aguense women for a leadership position? Two, how can their leadership style be characterised? Three, what are the consequences of being a female leader for the woman's status and position within the religious organisation she belongs to? And four, are there any differences with regard to the history, style, and status of the diverse leadership positions open to women in base communities? In the following sub-section I deal with these questions to explain the dynamics of female leadership. With this, the presentation of ethnographic data on women's participation in CEBs is closed, before turning to a discussion of the face of women's power in Aguense base communities in the final section of this chapter.

4.4.2 Female leaders

The road to women's leadership in catholic base communities is often a long and painful one. When comparing the life stories of and other interviews with female leaders, some striking corresponding themes come to the fore, which direct our attention at the importance of intense suffering, specific character traits, certain skills, and personal networks to women in acquiring a leadership position. All leading women have a personal history of intense and often endured *suffering*, mostly caused by the loss of one (or more) of their children, a severe illness on their own part or of one of their beloved, or extreme poverty²⁸.

"I had a very difficult childhood (*uma infância sofrida*). My parents already had two boys, and we had a pretty good life, but then, after me, three more sisters were born. And when I was about 5 years old, my father started gambling. He lost almost everything that he and my mother had worked years for to acquire. But well, we didn't give up, and my father started working again and my two brothers also. Then when I was seven, me and my friar Carlos... we were sent to the house of my maternal grandparents, so that we could study and also work for our grandparents. Aye, we went through a lot of work, because they didn't let us be children, because I, and my brother as well, we were obliged to work. Our grandmother treated us really badly, my grandfather was a bit nicer, he felt sorry for us, after all we were just two children. But they never ever

27 See, for examples, Rosaldo (1974), Barfoot & Sheppard (1980), Gilligan (1982), Young (1983), and Johnson (1988).

28 Note that, instead of relative wealth, extreme poverty potentially stimulates leadership in women.

showed any affection towards us. My grandmother never passed her hand over my hair, let alone give me a kiss. She was a tough, harsh woman, real Italian, with no love in her heart. And how we suffered from hunger in this period... my stomach ached with pain, I felt like dying, but we could not go home. After all, these things were worse, because my father had started gambling again. Even the money earned by my eldest brother, he lost in gambling. But with a lot of faith in God, we took life as it came (*fomos levando nossa vida*).”

Dona Nargi

“Then, one day, I fell ill. I couldn’t move my legs anymore, I felt giddy (*fiquei tonta na cabeça*)... I lacked strength, I was totally limp. I wanted to drink *chimarrão* on the patio when I sagged. I even burnt my left hand because of the hot water. My youngest son was in the house and he heard the noise. He put me on the sofa and there I was for a long time. It was at that time that I had this experience I told you about the other day²⁹, remember, dear?”

Dona Nair

“Then I gave birth to a very small girl; she was blind. The doctor said at first that it was some family disease... she was very small, and she cried a lot. I didn’t know what to do with her, she wouldn’t eat or drink. She was very difficult, and very, very weak. Then I found out it [her blindness] was because of the medicine (*remédio*) I had taken for my stomach pains. She suffered a lot when she was small, but she survived. Then one day she fell in the river behind the house, because she couldn’t see a thing, and she drowned. She was only four years old...[sighs]. She gave me a lot of trouble when alive, but I have suffered even more from her death”

Dona Angélica

The female leaders related that the pain experienced through the trial of such suffering had provided them with extensive knowledge of life, which they regarded as indispensable for leaders, as it fostered their insights in human relations and stimulated the development of faith, empathy, liberality, mildness, and carefulness. As Hutch notes, ‘the internal processing of personal experience (...) [is] a source of religious authority in itself’ (Hutch 1984:159). The fact that knowledge of life is thought to be so important, meant in practice that only few leading women were of a young age, that is to say younger than 40 years old; most had just or amply past the age of menopause, with the exception of the catechists, who were generally between the age of 18 to 35 years.³⁰

Faced with so much adversity, the women displayed considerable courage, buoyancy, and perseverance in overcoming its negative effects. These character traits were partly cultivated through the need to defy the experienced pain and sufferings, but most women stressed that they “were already there”. The female leaders said that from a young age onwards they had felt as *being different* from other girls in terms of idiosyncrasy, interests, perspectives, and dreams of the future. They qualified themselves as uncompromising when faced with inequality and injustice, and particularly obstinate in their relation to their parents and to elderly people. Also, the women leaders said to be found particularly bright in comparison to others, which formed the

29 During an earlier, informal interview, Dona Nadir had described a near-death experience to me.

30 Given their young age and limited life experience catechists who restrict themselves to their task as catechists (and hence do not participate in other services or pastorates), however, are generally not conceived of as leading figures in their community. Often, their role as catechists is a derivative from the leadership position held by their mothers or based on their literacy.

seed-bed for their wish to exchange the accepted life course of teenager-labourer-wife-mother for a career as teacher, nurse or bank employee.

“From a small age onwards I was different [from other girls], you know... escaping home, being very bold, not paying attention to my school work... so I didn't finish school, but I always had wanted to be a school teacher...I was very very bright, so I learned very quickly how to read and write with sister Stella in the [base] community... so now I am a sort of teacher... not of children, but of the women who visit our pharmacy”.

Dona Bela

In all cases the women employed both these specific character traits and their history of suffering to legitimise their leadership. As Dona Nair said: “It was just meant to be”. Next to these, their life stories female leaders mentioned repeatedly the importance of certain *skills* in the process of becoming a leader. The skills they referred to were, amongst others, described as follows: “knowing how to take care of people, not only of [your] family, but also of the others”, “being a mother to all”, “animate and motivate the people”, “give strength...er... give a push when needed, know how to organise the people”, “know how to do many things well, like sewing, cleaning, cooking, taking care of the sick”, “know how to handle the people”, and last but not least “have faith”, “have this internal force, have soul [*alma*]”, “have a strong spirituality... to understand the mystical [*a mística*]”, or to have “this contact with the spiritual”.

Furthermore, the life stories revealed that already prior to their installation as leaders, the women had excelled in the establishment and maintenance of a comprehensive *personal network* in the neighbourhood Barro and the city of Águas. These networks embraced a wide range of individuals who already belonged to the base communities or formed the Catholic Church's target group, the people [*o povo*], and helped the women in supplying their own and other persons' needs.

“The thing that helped me most in reaching the people in this area was that I already knew many people, rich and poor. Whether I needed food or clothing, or whether I had to find a home for some street child, I knew whom to turn to, whom to talk with...the people knew me and I knew them... there was this confidence.... And I wasn't afraid to go to their houses and ask, to ask whatever was needed”

In fact, before being elected as co-ordinators, ministers or animators, the future female leaders of base communities were often already considered as central figures or authorities in the neighbourhood Barro. Therefore, their nomination as community leader on the proposal of their fellow-believers or the priest did not come as a surprise.³¹

Furthermore, in one way or the other, in the life stories women's leadership in CEBs was linked up to the *presence or absence of male leadership*.³² Particularly at the beginning of the 1980s, when lay leadership was introduced in the CEBs of Águas, many women and men

31 The account of Dona Nilda proved to be the exception to the rule. Although Dona Nilda displayed all the described common traits of female religious leaders, she was shocked by the request of priest Darcy to become minister of Eucharist. “I had recently separated from my husband. I felt an enormous shame and I felt I couldn't accept that ministry. I said: ‘Look, friar, you know that I'm a very religious person, but I can't stand in front of the church because of this situation of mine. You have to have a pure person for this, a good example.’” In a later interview, she told me that her separation was directly related to her husband's transvestism. At the end of 1995, she became the president of the Group of Friends, a local organisation initiated by Catholics to support the disabled of Águas.

32 In one case I witnessed that a woman, who had entered into a sexual relationship with a local friar, secured a leadership position through him.

engaged in shared leadership with their spouses, based on a stereotypical division of tasks between the spouses. Such arrangements symbolised the high value placed on conjugality within the catholic realm. Still today, this shared leadership is viewed upon with great appreciation by most CEB members and is pretty common. In the case of Adão and Marisa, however, this joint leadership lead to marital problems, because Marisa established greater leadership skills and feelings of competition entered into the marriage relation. In the end, she decided to take a step back in favour of her husband's personal prospects, as the common idea is that every men is potentially a leader³³.

For two women, however, it was exactly the absence of suitable men to fulfil the leadership role of *festeiros*, which triggered off the taking on of such position by them. To my questions concerning the reasons why they thought the priest and co-believers had specifically opted for them to become leaders, however, most women stressed - again - their knowledge of life, their skills concerning church-related tasks, and their extensive personal network.

Summarising, female leaders are generally women with a great deal of life experience, acquired particularly in times of extreme suffering, who are endowed with some favourable character traits. They are in the possession of certain skills and a vast personal network, which they themselves have developed and which help them to attune well to the social and supernatural world, which encompass them.³⁴ Interestingly, in leading women's life stories there is a striking absence of references to their first acquaintance with Liberation Theology as an important step on the road to female leadership. As most of them said, they became leaders out of personal or organisational necessity; the social and political *engagement* in liberation theological terms, as displayed parsimoniously by them in interviews and informal conversations, seem to have formed only at a later stage. Similarly, no references were made to the role of *education and formation* in their development into community leaders, although most leaders took courses in popular theology once being elected or installed and enjoyed the positive aspects to their personal formation (as became clear in the case study on the ministries). Nevertheless, it was clear that all female co-ordinators, ministers, sextons, and animators knew how to read and write, as was symbolised by the agendas they always carried with them to jot down important agreements and appointments.

The leadership styles of women and men in Brazilian base communities differ considerably. According to Adriance (1990), women tend to value the emotional rewards of personal and religious commitment, whereas men tend to regard their leadership as a career and are less open to participation of laity in conducting activities related to their leadership position. The experiences of the CEB members of Águas are similar to Adriance's observations. In the conducted interviews they point at several differences between male and female leadership that catch the eye.

Female leaders are thought to rely heavily on interpersonal relationships, which they activate to help out particular individuals. They do so as someone "different among equals"; with their knowledge of life and specific qualities and skills, they "stimulate co-operation" and "empower the community" to achieve concrete results, without centralising power in their own hands and without establishing a fixed hierarchy. As such, female leaders are more of a 'specialist' than a leader. This does not automatically imply that ranking is absent in organisations run by women. As in other organisations, hierarchical relations do exist in groups

³³ See Rose (1987) for a similar observation.

³⁴ In contrast, the religious leadership of men in base communities is mostly grounded on external sources: education, ordination, and authority through a formal position in the social movement or political parties (cf Sered 1994:237)

like the mothers' clubs and pastorate of health. Power is, however, not centralised in the hands of few and leading positions basically remain open to all.

Male leaders were said to adopt a totally different style of leadership. CEB members reported that male leaders are much more interested in theological issues and "abstract" social problems, which they try to solve through taking the course of the official canals. Once announced leaders, men incline towards the fortification of their own position, among others by "setting new rules", by "withholding information" and by "the creation of new committees where decisions are made". Not seldom, they radiate "authority" and "charisma", and turn into "mini-priests" who govern the whole community and consider it their own, without necessarily consulting other members.

Although female leadership was described in much more positive terms than male leadership and in better consonance with the ideal of the good CEB co-ordinator³⁵, the status of leading women is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, female co-ordinators, ministers and sextons are both acknowledged and admired as leading people by the base communities. Most members and pastoral workers of the Aguense base communities described their female leaders as "saints" (*santas*) and "very good persons" (*peessoas muito boas*), who have one firm foot in the spiritual world and another in society, of which the ministers of Baptism are a good example. On the other hand, female leadership still is not in agreement with the prevailing gender ideology, so that leading women sometimes also face opposition within the base communities and are valued differently from male leaders, particularly in their role as ministers of the Word.

Apart from not being in consonance with the prevailing gender ideology, in the Catholic Church women's leadership generally also goes against what Ruether (1993) coins as 'ecclesiastical clericalism in sacramental life, education and administration'. In churches that are characterised by ecclesiastical clericalism, like the Roman Catholic Church, it is the professionals with specialised knowledge and a position of authority that is legitimised, licensed or ordained by God and/or the organisational laws who claim that 'the divine power and efficacy of (...) symbols belong to the clergy alone, through a special infusion of this power from God that takes place at ordination' (Ruether 1993:201). According to Ruether, this 'disempowers the laity by denying them access to divine power and efficacy'. Although within CEBs women are allowed to take up a position of authority, the degree of divine power represented by it and the efficacy of their actions are still perceived as limited by the believers. Thus, although women as life bearers and caretakers are thought to be better attuned to the spiritual, supernatural world, they are not always taken seriously when they preach the Gospel and engage as intermediaries between God and the community in official church rituals. Outside the confines of the church, however, healers [*benzedeirias*] like Dona Bracedina and Dona Maria are consulted continuously for intercessory prayer and healing sessions, and are thought to be in the possession of highly effective divine power.³⁶

The gains for women in female leadership are mainly consonant with their leadership style; they are first and foremost voiced in terms of emotional satisfaction and of the acquisition of new skills through the learning from fellow-believers or courses provided by the diocese.

35 In a working paper for the '5o Encontro Estadual de CEBs' in Caxias do Sul (1988), the good co-ordinator was described in terms of love for the people and the community, reliability, honesty, humility, firm convictions, sacrificial spirit, permanent availability, discipline, criticism and autocrisicism, and mysticism..

36 Comparably, in a Pentecostal church on Sicily a distinction is made between 'ministry' (based on the Word and as such related to masculinity) and 'gift' (a Spirit-dominated experience linked to femininity), which legitimates men's dominance while at the same time guarantees a place for women's activism in the religious community (Cucchiari 1990).

“When I see these women united, I feel a great sense of realisation”.

“My life is a very rich one. I talk with many people, I get a lot of human warmth and strength, much friendship. This keeps us going (*anima a gente*).”

“I have even more confidence now and I have learned many, many things in the community. I go everywhere to organise the people, and they listen to me when I speak. For me, that’s very positive.”

Some female leaders succeed in converting these newly acquired skills into new opportunities in other areas of social and political life in Águas, as the election of female CEB-leaders for the Tutelary Council, and Dona Nargi’s candidacy for town-councillor have shown.

Above, it gradually has become clear that, when women do hold leadership positions within base communities, this does not necessarily imply or reflect changes in the gender relations. Frequently, the form, content and range of women’s leadership seem to underline existing gender differences to a certain degree. Female leadership is often somehow linked up with the presence or absence of male leadership, it is conceptualised differently, and it differs in style from male leadership.

I did not find, however, that women lacked total access to formal leadership positions in catholic base communities. Except for the positions of priest and friar, all formal leadership positions are open to CEB women, including that of sister, and most pastoral workers and CEB members preferred female leaders over male leaders. Nor did I discern that female leaders were explicitly constrained to leading women’s groups and organisations, as Alvarez (1990) suggests. Perhaps, it is rather the other way around. Given the fact that the focus, interests and main activities of base communities are primarily consistent with women’s roles in the household and society, few men feel attracted to leadership positions in base communities.

To conclude this section on the religious and social participation of women members and female leaders in base communities, I think one final general pattern needs to be brought under the attention, which highlights the main difference between women’s chores and responsibilities outside and within the base communities. In the latter case, a process of sacralisation of sphere, activities and persons is involved. Congruent with women’s daily life, women are mainly involved in the domestic in base communities in their qualities as mothers, housekeepers and wives. Within the CEBs, however, this sphere and these qualities are interpreted as being sacred and powerful, as they are connected directly to ‘Life’ and immanently encompass the supernatural. Similarly, the predominantly female activities of cooking, cleaning and care-taking are raised to the spiritual level and take on a new meaning, as has already become clear when discussing the ‘bread of unity’ in chapter 3. Also, the profane experiences of women’s suffering take on a new meaning when seen in the light of their later leadership, which “was meant to be”; these experiences turned them into spiritual, faithful persons. Perhaps it is exactly this process of sacralisation, against the background of Liberation Theology, that triggers off the conception of catholic Aguenses that women’s religious space, activities and leadership are as ‘good’ and vital as, if not ‘better’ and more crucial than, men’s religious sphere, activities and leadership.³⁷

Having painted the picture of women’s participation and female leadership in the catholic base communities in the neighbourhood Barro in Águas, it is now time to view women’s position in terms of power, as many other authors before me have done. As I have indicated before, scholars like Drogus, Hewitt and Alvarez have suggested that women’s power in CEBs is rather

³⁷ For women-dominated religions, which are generally also have a this-worldly orientation, the same holds true. Sered (1994:150) states that ‘the clearest implication (...) is the use of commonplace - “profane” - locations, individuals, concerns, and instruments in “sacred” rituals’.

limited, as they are generally not found in position of authority and decision-making. But is it indeed so that female leaders are relatively powerless, because of the mere fact that women's leadership is more often than not non-institutionalised, linked to having personal relationships with male leaders, co-operative in style, and valued differently from men's by common CEB members?

4.5 The feminine way: restating power, or the importance of co-operation

In the final section of this chapter I go into this central question concerning the powerfulness or powerlessness of Brazilian CEB-women. I first describe two basic, complementary perspectives on power as discerned by Brouns (1994). Next, I show that a well-balanced assessment of CEB women's and men's power requires the employment of both perspectives on power, but that only one of them corresponds well with the conception and practice of power by catholic women of the Aguense base communities themselves.

To evaluate women's and men's position in CEBs in terms of power several theories are at our disposal, which are provided for by leading theorists, such as Lukes (1974), Elias (1972, 1976), Foucault (1979, 1980, 1983), Giddens (1979, 1984), and Bourdieu (1977, 1989). In their multi-vocal ideas, conceptions and insights, Brouns (1994:148-50) roughly distinguishes two perspectives on power and power mechanisms, to which she refers with the metaphors of the 'billiard-ball' and the 'fish in the water'. The billiard-ball represents a perspective of power that assumes the existence of a centre from where power is wielded. Power is understood as the property of an individual or collective (the ball) and as a form of regulation (the rules of the game), which cause certain effects (the effect of clashing balls). In this model, inter-human relations are basically asymmetrical and grounded in dominance of one group over the other. Examples of theories that start from the billiard-ball perspective of power are found in the works of Elias, Lukes and Giddens, although the latter has more eye for agency of the dominated.

The metaphor of the 'fish in the water' exemplifies a perspective on power as a constitutive and omnipresent force that circulates diffusely in social life (the water). People (the fish) are not necessarily aware of the powers that surround them, and automatically conform to the demands made by social life. To this perspective on power, an understanding of strategies and networks is central, instead of an analysis of causes and consequences, and the stress is on the opportunities generated by this power in terms of meaning-making and subjectivity. These ideas we find partly reflected in Foucault's work and are more extensively elaborated in Bourdieu's work on symbolic violence.³⁸

Both perspectives are useful in the context of base communities, but generally scholars apply the perspective of the billiard-ball to understand the power dynamics at play. The billiard-ball perspective illuminates how male leaders, the clergy in particular, control vital positions, resources and decision-making processes within the religious domain. It also focuses on how they set the stage to and define the boundaries of the form and content of the religious conviction of CEB-members, who are mostly women, as several examples in this and previous chapters have illustrated: the measurements taken by the diocese vis-a-vis the ministers of Baptism, the attempt of priest Márcio to control the distribution of rags, the cooptation of CEBs and services

³⁸ Hartsock (1983) has argued that power theories developed by male scholars are marked by an emphasis on power as an individual or collective property and vehicle for domination, whereas the power theories developed by female scholars stress the enabling, creative and communal aspects of power: Foucault and Bourdieu have proven her wrong (cf Komter 1990:117).

by the ecclesial hierarchy, and the like. Consequently, CEB-members often complain that “*o padre manda e a gente faz*” (the priest orders, we do it).

Unfortunately, this perspective on power and power mechanisms does not leave much space for the understanding of women’s contribution and importance to CEBs. In informal conversations and interviews it came to the fore that the Aguanense CEB-women hold a radically different conception of power than the one voiced by the ‘billiard-ball perspective’. In their eyes power neither necessarily stands for domination as an individual or group asset nor by definition implies hierarchy; rather, it evokes images of strength, perseverance, co-operation, community-building, and personal interdependency. It is the capacity to survive and to live through co-operation with others that comes closest to their definition of power.

“All these women united.... have an incredible power. They know how to cope with the most difficult circumstances, in the face of all this misery in which we live they... er... they never give up. Look, if everything was with the men, the communities would die a slow death, I assure you, dear.”

“Whether women have power? Just look at all the things that the women do. They feed and cloth their children with a minimum of resources, they always go ahead to help in the struggle of others... they are the bearers of life. In this sense, the women have much strength (*uma força grande*), they are much more powerful (*poderosas*) than the men. But it doesn’t show (*Mas não aparece*), the women don’t show off (*a mulher não fica de destaque*). So, it’s a silent power, but it’s certainly there.”

This finding is in accordance with the observations of Gebara (1994), a Brazilian theologian of Liberation. She states that men’s coercive power does not automatically imply women’s powerlessness. Even though women have probably less access to this type of power, do not directly produce it, and often morally deny it, they generate another type of power that exceeds the interplay of dominant forces. Gebara describes it as ‘*o poder de manter a vida*’, that is to say, the power to preserve life or to keep alive.

The generation of power in the sense of increasing one’s capacity to secure survival and improve life conditions makes other demands on individuals and groups than the generation of power in the sense of increasing one’s capacity to control, dominate or exercise coercion. In the latter case, the domination and centralisation of resources, the establishment of hierarchical relations, the institutionalisation of positions, and the creation of unilateral ties of dependency are of great importance. Power as described by the CEB-women, i.e. as the capacity to survive, however, can only be achieved in reliance on and through co-operation with other people with whom one is linked up through relationships of trust and care. These relationships guarantee a decentralisation of and thereby collective or ‘democratised’ access to relevant resources, which can be put to use in the development and execution of successful strategies. Thus, ideally, CEB women and their household members, neighbours, fellow believers et cetera engage jointly in the establishment of viable networks (e.g. mothers’ clubs) and strategies (e.g. production of blankets) that empower them to guarantee the survival and well-being of themselves, their families and others (e.g. landless farmers). As indicated earlier, it is precisely the examination of strategies and networks, which enhances our understanding of power, when power is seen from the ‘fish in the water’ perspective (Brouns 1994:148-50).

Women’s pursuit and exercise of the ‘power of survival’ can be regarded as a coping strategy. Lazarus and Folkman (1984:141) have described coping as ‘constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person’. Initially designed to understand

and treat the consequences of short-term stressful events and experiences (such as the internment in a concentration camp), Lazarus and Folkman apply coping theory primarily to lived tensions in everyday situations. They relativise the goal-orientedness and rationality of people's coping strategies, and recognise the importance of 'intuition', which Morée describes as 'the informal appraisal of available means to handle the problem' (Morée 1992:28, my translation).

Lazarus and Folkman basically distinguish two types of coping strategies: problem-solving and emotion-regulating strategies. Problemsolving strategies are directed at effecting change in the actual situation, and can be either aimed at the external world or be inward-oriented. As such, this type of coping strategies can, for example, adopt the shape of seeking help from others through networking or of redefining one's own priorities, aspirations or ideas. Emotion-regulating strategies, on the contrary, generally serve to deny, redefine, relativise or canalise the experienced tensions in order to make life liveable and therefore do not threaten the status quo (cf Morée 1992:28-32).

In a way, the perspective of Lazarus & Folkman comes close to the connectionist theory elaborated by Strauss & Quinn (1994, 1997). As I have indicated in chapter 3, according to Strauss & Quinn people gradually build up associative links among repeated or salient aspects of their experience, which are labelled as cultural understandings or schemas; 'if these associations are learned along with strong emotional reactions, they may acquire powerful motivational force'. This means that they too conceive of change not as an 'inevitable functional requirement of systems' or 'of human need to find meaning through socially given symbolic systems', but as a 'product of interaction between minds and a world shaped in a certain way' (Quinn & Strauss s.d., quoted in D'Andrade 1995:148). Thus, a continuous interaction takes place between people and the world around them, and people cope with the surrounding world by either modelling the world to their cultural schemas (phrased by Lazarus and Folkman as 'problem-solving') or by modelling their schemas to the world (voiced as 'emotion-regulation').

In CEB-women's pursuit and exercise of the 'power of survival', problem-solving strategies generally alternate with emotion-regulating strategies. Regular discussions among CEB-women on the existent gendered division of labour within CEBs and the society at large can serve as an example. Instead of bringing this division of labour up for discussion within the mothers' clubs, generally the vital importance and sacredness of motherhood is repeatedly stressed to emphasise women's value to their families, the CEBs and the larger world. Thereby, women's dissatisfaction with the situation they are in is reduced and courage is kept up so that "all remain firm in the struggle". In some instances, however, women's confinement to the domestic terrain and their limited division is openly criticised as has been illustrated in chapter 3: discussing Luke the women present concluded that their men and children had to contribute to the performance of domestic tasks, so that "the women can realise the revolution in our neighbourhood" and make sure that their "families survive".

Focussing in more detail on CEB-women's problem-solving coping-strategies, it seems particularly *networking* and *decentralisation* that colour women's efforts to secure survival (and which hence increase their power). Most women are part of several networks that have formed on the basis of familial, economic, social, religious or political ties, and which are activated for companionship and support in life-crisis situations. For example, they help women to realise the reduction of costs or the increase of incoming goods in times of economic hardship.

Networks also play an important role in, White's (1995) analysis of power mechanisms in complex societies. She employs the notion of heterarchy, as distinguished from hierarchy, to refer to 'overlapping spheres of influence' that are neither by definition legitimised nor per se controlled by existing power centres and which are characterised by strong horizontal linking,

decentralisation and flexible ranking. It is through these spheres of influence that people relate to, manoeuvre between and play on the different power centres present.

The networks formed by CEB women on the basis of familial, religious, economic, social, and/or political ties share common characteristics with heterarchy. Basically, these networks are created and activated by women themselves for companionship and socio-economic support in life-crisis situations; for example, they help women to realise the reduction of costs or the increase of incoming goods in times of economic hardship. The clergy do neither necessarily create nor legitimise these networks and generally have limited control over them.

To guarantee a fair distribution of costs and goods, and the optimal utilisation of forces, these networks cherish a culture of decentralisation. CEB-women explained that they preferred “personal power over positional power”, meaning that leadership was often situational and circulated among group members in different constellations, depending on the requirements of a specific situation or problem that needs to be solved. On several occasions I have witnessed how the co-ordinators of the mothers’ clubs voluntarily and temporarily handed over their positions as chairwoman and central organiser of a meeting to another member when the circumstances required.

As such, CEB-women’s power is not intrinsically bound up with formal positions in the religious hierarchy; in this respect, the CEB-women from Barro perceive their power to a certain extent as ‘subversive power’. Not only do they have the capacity to generate power without consulting or leaning on the official system; they also create their own, alternative structures, which they use to unfold activities that suit their interests. They do so silently and invisibly, but notwithstanding their networks and actions are existent, concrete, viable and enduring.

‘Together women look for participation, for housing, for health. They avoid having to buy medicine and make sure that their products come directly from the farmers. They make their husbands see where the bread comes from that they bake in the mothers’ club, and what they learn to prevent diseases. The women of the neighbourhood (*vilas*) unite and organise on the basis of the necessities. While their husbands are there (*estão lá*), making their patrons richer and getting more exploited every time by these patrons, the women work happily and construct real fraternity.’

(*Livro de Encontros do Mutirão das Mães de Águas*, 19.3.1986)

As women’s power is primarily generated through the activation of networks and essentially decentralised in character, it is elusive and omni-present at the same time. It is exactly this elusiveness though potentially omni-presence of women’s communal power to survive that is somewhat feared by the clergy and male pastoral workers; potentially, it provides women with a certain form of autonomy and opportunities to go beyond the limits set by the Catholic Church (cf Siebers 1996:135) to effectively control the flock, as the notion of heterarchy already suggested.

This became very clear when CEB-mothers, after having been unofficially engaged in charitable works, demanded the recognition of the ‘Service of Charity of the Parish’ in the Paroquial Assemblies of 1984 and 1985. For years, the women had laid themselves out to reach all the chapels of the parish, and in areas where chapels were absent, they turned the *mutirões* themselves into a central space where soon dominical celebrations were held. The women’s proposal gave rise to a violent quarrel. The clergy protested fiercely against such recognition, as it was a thorn in their flesh that the women carried out their works of charity rather autonomously “trespassing the authority of the church” and without “respecting the geographical boundaries of the parish”, according to friar Márcio. The clergy realised, however, that it was important to render the mothers legitimacy in order not to antagonise them and cause a rupture in

the Catholic Church of Águas. Thus, in the end the proposal was mockingly accepted. It was decided “that the materials obtained through campaigns and all other help to the needy have to be directed through the Mothers’ Clubs”. Later developments proved that the women of the Mutirão were the protagonists of a network of services, groups and pastorates existent in the parish; this network would later on serve as the model for the network of communities.

It seems that the elusiveness and omni-presence of women’s power do not only provide opportunities for a certain autonomy of acting, but are also at the core of the strength and buoyancy of women-dominated pastorates, services and groups, such as the mothers’ clubs and the pastorate of health. The collective power base, in which interpersonal co-operation is the key word, empowers women to translate their religious participation into benefits that serve both themselves and their families, and the base communities to which they belong. As such, female power is of vital importance to the survival and continuation of Brazilian CEBs. As Dona Zenaide remarked aptly:

“We have an enormous need, lots of things lack. The only thing we have in abundance is unity, creativity and love.”

Of course, the face of women’s power can be seen (and is often seen) as a mere adaptation or reaction to the religious system in which they participate; partly barred from formal functions of authority women as a result of the gender ideology prevailing in Brazilian society as a whole and the Catholic Church in particular, CEB women have developed their own ways to secure survival within and outside of the religious realm. As such, they can be regarded as people marginal to the system, whose actions consist in re-actions and whose power is limited to specific spheres and concrete tasks considered marginal to the religious system, which would be consistent with most theories on religion and gender as explained in chapter 1.

I suggest, however, that women’s so-called ‘informal’, network-based and decentralised, co-operative style of leading and organising can be regarded not only as indispensable but even as characteristic of the heterarchical face of Aguense CEBs today. The catholic women of Águas have themselves created and constructed the religious system present in the parish of São Pio X from within, based on their life experiences, world view and concrete activities, both making use of and giving rise to their elusive form of power³⁹. To this power, their sacralised life experiences as mothers and wives are central and serve as a legitimation.

Taking this assumption as a starting-point and therefore accepting that women’s specific notion and exercise of power indeed generates opportunities in terms of meaning-making and subjectivity, as suggested by Brouns (1994:148-50), it is interesting to examine how women give form and content to their religious conviction at the personal level. It is this issue that is at the heart of the next chapter.

39 Note that in assessing both women’s and men’s power in CEBs, not only two forms of power meet or collide, but also two perspectives compete or meet up, complicating such evaluation. In this chapter I show that merely focusing on men’s formal power in terms of control over others disqualifies women’s experiences and distorts well-intended assessments of the amount of power the latter can exert.

5

Identity: CEB-women of Águas on ‘the self’ and connection

5.1 Introduction

Since the late 1970s, anthropologists have become increasingly fascinated with issues of personal identity, selfhood and collective identity. Against the background of a growing concern with reflexivity in anthropological research and a rising preoccupation with 'the Other', scholars started questioning the production, meaning and significance of self-identities and social identities. Anthropologists and the anthropologised¹ were no longer taken for granted as fixed and different - if not opposing - social actors, but became more and more subjected to an intense scrutiny in terms of their changeability, variability, likeness, and interrelatedness.

Not surprisingly, it was feminist scholars in particular who made a major contribution to the inquiry into the nature of identity and to the heated debates on sameness and difference. Politically striving after the inclusion of women in the universal definition of the collective identity of 'mankind' in the political field, they stumbled at the construction of women as the excluded, different Other in the scientific field. This experience inspired a far-reaching critique of the very logic of identity as a so-called 'logic of exclusion' (Weir 1996).²

To understand this critique, it is necessary to first point at the notion of identity itself, which has a rather contradictory ring to it, as Moore already pointed out in 1994. Friedman voices the double nature of identity as follows: 'On the one hand, identity means sameness, as in the word identical, and involves the perception of common qualities. (...) This requires the foregrounding of one aspect of identity and backgrounding of others in an emphasis on what is shared with others in that group. On the other hand, identity requires a perception of difference from others in order for the recognition of sameness to come into play. (...) [Thus], the formation of any category of identity involves equally a symbiotic perception of sameness with some and difference from others' (Friedman 1998:75). In other words, identity is a process of both identification and differentiation.

However, up to now in feminist studies the main focus has been on issues of difference and scientific discourses have been produced that tend to 'suppress attention to sameness produced in the liminal spaces in between racial, ethnic, sexual, class, religious, or geopolitical difference' (Friedman 1998:75). In focusing on difference instead of sameness, most current identity theories are built on the tacit assumption that identities by definition are based on the exclusion, negation, domination or sacrifice of difference(s), more abstractly referred to as 'the Other'. On the basis of this 'logic of exclusion', it is commonly assumed that individual people have a rather fixed core self, the *internal* differences of which are excluded or repressed in order to enhance a sense of internal coherence and consistency. People who regard themselves as 'independent', for example, will tend to suppress or expel character traits that are in contradiction with their assumed independence. Comparably, the identity of social categories is thought to be based on a repression and domination of *external* differences, meaning that, for example, women shape their feminine identity by excluding and negating so-called masculine traits that are characteristic of the 'opposite sex'. As Moore puts it: 'Deciding on difference is one way of delineating identities. Difference(s) from others are frequently about forming and maintaining group boundaries' (Moore 1994:1-2).

The recording of life stories of CEB-women soon led me to understand that the formation, experience and presentation of identity is less straightforward than the above described 'logic of exclusion' suggests. First, the interviewed CEB- women of Águas often exposed and experienced a multiplicity of seemingly contradictory aspects of their identity without regarding

1 I borrow this term from Cohen (1994:3).

these differences as problematic per se and without making elaborate attempts to suppress or obfuscate such difference(s). Second, CEB-women did not by definition seem to consider CEB-men and masculinity as 'the Other(s)' in contrast with whom their feminine gender-identities were forming; instead, CEB-women often explicitly took the 'sameness' of the social category of women as most important point of reference in identity-formation, and incidentally even referred to some male religious actors as enlightening role models³. Third, the CEB-women under study did not regard themselves as 'the Other(s)' who are excluded from collective identities such as the Liberationist Catholics from Águas. On the contrary, the CEB-women under study frequently identified very strongly with the CEBs, almost obliterating the boundary between themselves and the community at large of which they were part. As Dona Zenaide used to repeat during meetings of the liturgy group: "We women are the [base] community and the [base] community is us" (see also chapter 3).

Confronted with these incongruities between ethnographic 'reality' of the base communities in Águas and scientific 'truth' as I came to know it from literature, and preoccupied with the interface between religion and gender at the social, ideological and individual level, I dedicate a separate chapter of this thesis to the issue of gender identity⁴ within the domain of catholic base communities. In other words, in the light of my general inquiry into CEB-women's expressions of religious conviction and social concern (see chapter 1), I pay specific attention to questions of gender identity.

From a theoretical point of view, it is often assumed that identity incorporates both an individual self and a social self. The notion of individual self, which is sometimes alternatively described as self-identity or personal identity, refers to the subjective experience and positioning of oneself as a person, i.e. to one's self concept or 'I'. The notion of social self, social identity or collective identity is then used to designate the inter-subjective experience and positioning of a separate socio-cultural category of people that is united along e.g. gender, ethnic or class lines, i.e. 'we women', 'we black' or 'we labourers'.

In practice, however, it is problematic to hold on to this 'logic of separation' and to contend that the individual self is somewhat independent of and thus separable from the social self. After all, the individual self is primarily, if not exclusively, constructed in social interaction and experienced through symbolic frameworks that coherently give meaning to the self in relation to others (Ewing 1990:258). As such, identities seem to be 'sociocentric-organic' rather than 'egocentric-contractual'⁵ (Shweder and Bourne 1984). Especially when it comes to gender identities or selves, questions concerning the (in)separability of the individual self and the social self present themselves with much fervour; one's biological sex is often the first criterion for

3 Cf Macedo (1989:87). She states that 'contrary to present representations and perspectives the opposition to men does not show clearly' (my translation) and assumes that differentiation from 'important adversaries: the state, boss, the dominant and the superior classes' (ibid) is of more relevance to poor CEB-women's identification.

4 Identity is not only shaped by gender, but also influenced by for example class and ethnicity. It is, however, beyond the scope of this book, to deal with issues of class identity and ethnic identity.

5 Note that the egocentric perspective, which assumes a split between the individual self and society, is of Western origin and has unjustfully informed most cross-cultural studies. According to Wekker (1994:24) the scarce attempts to transcend this inherent dichotomy focus on an analysis of local linguistic references to the self. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the interviewed Brazilian CEB-women employ the notion '*a gente*' (meaning either I or we) much more often than their male counterparts who alternate this notion much more frequently with the concept '*eu*' (meaning I)

positioning and experiencing oneself vis-à-vis others, which from the very start of identity-building obfuscates the boundaries between one's self-identity and social identity⁶.

Thus, although the 'logic of separation' certainly requires further scientific attention and attempts need to be made to reconcile individuality and sociality in theoretical respect (see Kondo 1990 and Cohen 1994 for a first contribution), I limit myself to a discussion of the 'logic of exclusion' in this chapter. In practice, this means that in describing CEB-women's identities I do not focus on the distinction between self-identity and social identity, but instead emphasise women's subjectivity in its relation to men's subjectivity.

To people's selves or identities, I distinguish the following aspects⁷: the presented self or who one says to be, the ideal self or who one wants to be, and the 'real' or core self or who one really is. However, in this chapter I focus exclusively on a discussion of women's presented selves for two reasons. First, I assume the 'real' self to be multi-vocal and to exist only at subsequent moments of construction through presentation in, for example, a narrative such as a life story. Therefore, I intentionally do not engage in the rather fruitless enterprise of detecting the 'core self' or 'real self' of catholic women from Águas and their religious leaders. Second, I assume that, like the real self, the 'ideal' self too is only accessible through the presented self, and that in practice the distinction between these two aspects of gender identity is often hard to discern⁸. Thus, when discussing the gendered identities of CEB-women, I focus on their presented selves. In this sense, I conceive of the 'presented self' as 'a style of imagining' (Anderson 1992:6) and hence 'style of imaging'; it is not the issue of 'true or false' that counts, but the ways in which the self is produced within discourse and in which it operates socially.

This chapter is structured as follows. Making use of extracts from women's life stories⁹, field notes, minutes of meetings and secondary sources¹⁰, in section two the most expressive features of CEB-women's presented selves (as distinguished from men's identities) are painted, emphasising processes of identification. I argue that the subjectivities of CEB-women, both common members and female leaders, revolve around the seemingly contradictory themes of

6 Accordingly, object-relations psychologists like Chodorow (1978) and Gilligan (1982) have argued that gender is at the very core of identity and has a sort of ontological status.

7 Wekker (1994) distinguishes two central aspects to identity: self-image and ideal self-image. With the term 'self-image' she refers to 'what someone is really like' (the ego), whereas the notion of 'ideal self-image' refers to 'what people say to be like' and 'what a human being should be like' respectively; as such, Wekker states that [ideal self-images] 'are normative explanations concerning the characteristics that a 'good woman' or 'good man' should have in their own environment' (Wekker 1994:95, my translation). To my opinion, however, someone's presented self (what one says to be like) cannot by definition be put on a par with someone's ideal self (what one should or wants to be like in society). As becomes clear in this chapter, several CEB-women stressed their deviation from the internalised gender norms that apply to south-Brazilian catholic women, either because they could not live up to them or because they questioned cultural gender stereotypes. Therefore, I distinguish three aspects to identity: self, presented self and ideal self.

8 While some anthropologists assume that the ideal representations of the self and mental self-concepts correspond (e.g. Hallowell 1960), others (e.g. Spiro 1987) assume a universal tension between the two.

9 The transcribed material of the recorded life stories is pretty extensive and part of it is not functional for the analysis. Therefore, only meaningful passages of women's testimonies are included in the text.

10 While in Brazil I gathered a vast amount of written secondary sources, the most important of which are: the Paroquial Register (*Livro de Tombo*), *o Livro de Atas dos Mutirões de Mulheres*, *os Livros de Atas dos Encontros de Agentes Pastorais*, the journal *Mães Unidas Voz da Libertação*, *o Livro de Atas do Conselho* of the CEBs in question, and various monographs and papers concerning the neighbourhood Barro, the parish São Pio X, the base communities and the mothers' clubs in Águas. The latter were written by friars as part of their curriculum at the ESTEF in Porto Alegre.

connection, perseverance, and respectability,¹¹ which all serve as basic cultural schemas of and for feminine experience and positioning.

In section three, the emphasis shifts to processes of differentiation. Attention is paid to women as a heterogeneous category by discussing the specific position of catholic nuns, and to the ways in which CEB-women distinguish themselves from men. In section four, the particularities of CEB-women's capacity to express, negotiate, and transform their subjectivity in the context of catholic base communities are discussed. I argue that CEB-women, being extensively trained in this 'art of presentation' given their subordinated position in Brazilian society at large, turn their presented subjectivity itself into a viable strategy to combine the efforts implied in care (see chapter 3) and survival (see chapter 4), for which not only the Virgin Mary but also local female leaders and Jesus Christ serve as important models of and for catholic femininity.

After having provided these descriptive fieldwork data, in section five I engage in a much more theoretical discussion on the nature of CEB-women's identities. For that, I embroider on the interesting contributions to the conceptualisation of identity by feminist scholars, such as de Beauvoir (1972), Chodorow (1978), Benjamin (1988) and Kristeva (1984, 1986). The first question that is addressed is whether CEB-women's identities are indeed based on the exclusion or repression of internal difference, or whether they are rather instilled on the inclusion of difference? In other words, should we exchange the 'logic of exclusion' for a 'logic of inclusion', when taking CEB-women's experiences and positioning of themselves as the starting-point of our analysis? A second question that is pursued involves the centrality of 'the Other' or external 'Difference(s)' to identity-formation of CEB-women. Does the production of identity by definition require opposition to a fixed Other, or can identities also be formed in the absence of external Difference(s) or on the basis of Sameness? It is concluded that in processes of gendered identification and differentiation, CEB-women strategically opt for internal and external connection, and therefore privilege inclusion and Sameness over exclusion and Otherness.

In short, this chapter aims at exploring the interrelation between gender identity and religion in the specific context of catholic base communities in Águas. It does so by providing ethnographic data on the presented selves of CEB-women and nuns, by discussing their 'art of presentation', and by addressing theoretical issues of exclusion/inclusion and sameness/difference.

5.2 On identification

Over the last few years, the identity of Brazilian women has become more and more of an issue in scientific literature.¹² There is, however, a marked lack of explicitly descriptive material elaborating on identity markers of Brazilian women. For example, as an answer to the question 'what is the face of women in this country', Carneiro's essay on feminine identity in Brazil merely indicates that women's definition of women deviates from the definition of women given by society. While women are described by others in terms of 'objects', 'housewives' and 'muses', women themselves identify rather with the terms 'labourers' and 'mothers' (Carneiro 1994:187-93).¹³ Carneiro does not, however, provide more detailed descriptions of the supposed

11 Inevitably, this representation of women's presented selves is based on abstraction, simplification, textualisation and decontextualisation; as such, it is neither real nor made-up but something in between (Taussig 1993).

12 See for example Cardoso (1994) and Nolasco (1993).

13 As this section shows, the contradiction between CEB-women's definition of themselves as a distinct social category and the definition of the female sex as provided by priests, brothers, nuns and male lay leaders is comparatively small.

feminine characteristics mentioned. In this section I present such material when discussing and analysing issues concerning the identities of CEB-women, that is to say their (inter)-subjective experience and positioning of themselves as individual women and as a separate socio-cultural group. What are the particularities of women's selves in catholic base communities, as presented by the women themselves and their female lay leaders. And how are these women positioned and experienced by others, such as the priest, friars and nuns?

As in most societies, both CEB-members, lay leaders and the clergy of base communities divide mankind roughly in two distinct gender categories on the basis of biological sex: men and women. These categories of 'men' and 'women' are attributed specific characteristics that are generally essentialist in nature. In other words, women and men are endowed with different, if not opposing, capacities, interests and objectives on the basis of their biological sex and these features are thought to be 'typical' of their gender.

In discourses of CEB-members and CEB-leaders women mostly feature as reproductive human beings and 'mothers', who are oriented towards care and interpersonal relationships (see chapter 3), and who act mainly in the so-called domestic sphere. Men as productive human beings are mostly presented as 'breadwinners'. As such, they are assumed to be most active in the public domain and are generally associated with domination and institutionalised relationships.

It turned out hard to catch Aguense CEB-members and leaders making explicit statements on masculinity. For many it just did not seem to be a topic worthwhile discussing and when directly invited to talk about issues of manhood, most people found it difficult to describe the particularities of masculinity using adjectives or nouns depicting certain qualities. Instead, they predominantly referred to social roles when expressing manhood and came up with the images of the labourer (*trabalhador*), leader (*líder*) or patron (*patron*), and womaniser or seducer (*sedutor*).

"We are labourers. The history of our neighbourhood is the history of labourers, fighting for their rights. Men of the metallurgy, bricklayers, smiths, motorists, tillers (*lavradores*), farmers (*agricultores*), the landless (*os sem terra*), the unemployed, all of them labourers, hard-working men... er... in a difficult situation."

Seu Aldino

"When a man starts participating in a group, he soon wants to wield the sceptre ... he wants ... er ... to take over. They don't want to work together, they want to give orders..."

Friar Alberto

"The men deal with the material stuff. In the community 'the Holy Heart' they helped to construct the chapel, especially those who work in the construction. They made the fundamentals, they brought the tools (*ferramento*) that we needed... But today even this is difficult! After the celebration [in the community Saint Anthony] last week I went to the houses to ask for help... to reconstruct the church. The church we have now is made of wood and in a very bad state (*está tudo muito ruim*). But there is nobody who wants to help us, really nobody, and it's hard, difficult work (*trabalho muito puxado*). So, we women... the mothers of the club [mothers' club]... we are going to do it by ourselves (*Então, nós mulheres... as mães do clube... a gente mesma vai fazer*)."

Sister Iracema

"Men (*O Homem*)? What can I say? He's the patron. My husband was a very ferocious man, really ferocious (*homem muito bravo, muito bravo mesmo*), bah! The children got beaten often (*a criançada levou muita tapa*), but he was a good man (*homem bom*)."

Dona Angelica

"I suffered a lot (*como sofri*) when I found out that my husband had another woman. I took care of him all the time (*de dia e de noite*) when he had cancer. I made him his meals, went to get his medicines in the centre. I was very worried, my God, I didn't know what to do... I even changed his diapers when he was really sick with the treatment, just imagine, Elsa. Without me he would have died... [long silence].

When he was well again, perhaps two months after that, Dona Maria, the little black woman (*a negrinha*) knocked the door. She said: 'Hey Nargi, I saw your Carlos on the other side of the little bridge, near to the house of Egídia', so then I knew, because before he was also with her... Despite of all my dedication.... I was shocked. Why did I have to suffer so much? First I lost my son [he died in a motor accident at the age of 19], then my husband... Now, when I talk with the mothers in their houses, I know that there are many women like me, who have the same experience. I am not the only one. The other women too suffer because of their husbands. Every man likes women (*todo o homem gosta de mulher*). He may be rich, he may be poor, fat, tiny (*miudinho*), married or single, even old (*até um velhinho*). But he never stops eyeing women from head to toe (*mas nunca deixa de olhar as mulheres dos pés a cabeça*) ... they are *machista*, he never stops to call the attention of other women, to chase them. Even when he's a drunkard, like the man from across the street. Yesterday he called me, when I was washing clothes in the yard. He said: 'Hey, do you want to see my little poult?' (*Hein, quer ver o pintinho?*)... [she grins]. That's how things are, Elsa (*é assim, Elsa*)."

Dona Nargi

Some women, like Dona Tereza, add to the qualifications of labourer, leader, patron and womaniser that of a 'child' (*criança*) and talk about their husbands as half-grown men, who are still in need of motherly care and attention.

"I have five children at home. The two boys (*os gurijs*), my little girl (*meiê*) and my husband. Sometimes he requires even more attention than our children themselves!"

Dona Tereza

The apparent absence of a more extensive reflection on manhood and the existing difficulty to characterise masculinity in more detail in the context of CEBs might have the following background. First of all, most CEB-members hardly ever reflect explicitly on the issue of masculinity as the few men around are generally addressed in their capacity of labourers, not men, and do not organise themselves as a separate social category, like women do in mothers' clubs. Second, the general Latin American image of the morally weak, irresponsible, selfish, dominant and sexually active macho-man (Steenbeek 1986) is not in consonance with the utopian view of followers of Liberation Theology of God's Kingdom on Earth, where men and women maintain caring relationships based upon love, respect, trust and mutual understanding and support. Ideally, CEBs are laboratories for God's Kingdom on Earth. But reality is unruly and most priests, friars and nuns seemed to be somewhat reluctant to admit the slow advance made in the field of inter-human relationships in general and relationships between the sexes in particular in the context of base communities. Consequently, they either refrained from characterising CEB-men or referred proudly to the case of Neucir. Neucir is a 34-year old father of four and one of the few men actively involved in the CEBs of Barro. Together with his wife,

one of the prominent lay leaders in the parish São Pio X, Neucir is active in the council, family group, and the patrimony.

“Take my neighbour Neucir, for example, do you know Neucir, the one who lives here close by, next to the supermarket? He’s a very sympathetic person (*pessoa bacana*). He always lends a helping hand, he really is involved. What I want to say is that the men involved in CEBs are different. They change. They become more respectful, stop roaming about the streets (*deixam de percorrer as ruas*), they keep a better eye on their family.”

Friar João

Contrary to manhood, womanhood receives much more attention on the part of CEB-participants and clergy. The numerical predominance of women, the existence of special mothers’ clubs, the importance of femininity to the marking of the group identity of CEBs (see chapter 3) and the recent interest in CEB-circles in the ‘culture of women’¹⁴ probably have stimulated reflection on the particular roles and characteristics of women. Thus, when womanhood and femininity are at the centre of attention, the discourses made during meetings of the mothers’ clubs, the group of liturgy, the pastorates and other groups as well as during the Mass, are far more detailed and less exclusively oriented at women’s explicit roles and positions.

It is true that members of the female sex being first and foremost addressed as *mulheres* (women) who enact the all-embracing role of *mãe* (mother) or *mãezinha* (little mother). According to Dona Iracema, active participant of one of the mothers’ clubs in the parish and member of the municipal organisation of the ‘third age’ (*Terceira Idade*),

“(…) women are very important in the bearing and raising of children. Being a mother is like the most important thing for women. But nowadays women also work outside the home, like Dona Rosa. You know her, don’t you? She works in a factory in Sapucaia where they produce gloves or towels or something. She goes there at night, on foot. But she’s a mother in the first place. And also a grandmother, because her youngest daughter just gave birth to a baby. Imagine, Dona Rosa herself recently got her youngest!”

But starting from this all-embracing role of mother, most people first and foremost mention a multitude of specific qualities that women are thought to encompass in this capacity. The notion of a woman/mother is linked by both CEB-members, lay leaders and clergy with a great number of positive nouns that appear in most discourses. These nouns stress the value of mothers in the domestic realm and describe the nature of their contribution to CEBs and local popular organisations. Women in general and mothers in particular are repeatedly characterised in terms of commitment, respectability and perseverance.

Firstly, being committed to their children, husband and their communities, women are thought to ‘radiate’ “love” (*amor*), “affection” (*afeto*), “sweetness” or “tenderness” (*carinho*), “comprehension” (*compreensão*), “reception” (*acolhida*), “unity” (*união*), “solidarity” (*solidariedade*), “charity” (*caridade*), “donation” (*doação*) and “helping others” (*ajuda*):

“I adore my children, my grandchildren... and the mothers of the mothers’ club, we like to do things together, talk, sing... do things together... they help me out when I’m in

¹⁴ As commented upon earlier in chapter 3, this interest in women’s issues stems from as early back as the 1960s, but has been revived by recent discussions within CEB-circles on ‘inculturation’ (*inculturação*). The notion of inculturation refers to the deliberate efforts of the progressive Catholic Church to give room to the adoption and appropriation of cultural elements of hitherto oppressed groups, such as Indians, blacks and women, in catholic theology and practices.

trouble and I help them. I always lend a helping hand, because I'm a bit better off than most."

Dona Ivete

"We women have this power of donation, we take that after Jesus Christ. He was always there to help others, he didn't think of himself first. One day, someone put a little baby girl of only six days at my doorstep. It had a little card on her chest, begging that I would raise her. I took her (*eu peguei*). I had a fight with my husband... he said: 'Are you crazy, woman?! We already have two of our own, we're not in the condition to raise another one!'. But I took her, I have to take care of others and give to those who don't have anything to give themselves."

Dona Selma

"It's only women who have the gift of donation. It's the mothers who give everything that they have ... er... to give to their children. And to the community. In fact, the communities are an extension of the family. And the families are the fruits of donation (*fruta da doação*) of women."

Sister Terezinha

"What I know is that women are more considerate, loving, more ... er ... open, whereas men are more close, they don't render an account of what they do, do they? They don't tell anything. So, women take charge of others right away (*são acolhedoras*), they are more loving, they pay more attention to others. So, this is already typical of women ever since they are small and so on. They are more attentive, more inventive, they are more hospitable, while men are more *machista*, more ... well, I don't know how to explain ... he sees more to himself, only. Whereas women are more talented, they have more talent for this, haven't they? But men have that too, but they are more close, more ... they stay ... they don't say a thing, that's what I observe in general."

Friar Cleto

Secondly, both CEB-women, female leaders and the clergy stress that women should be and often are respectable, a notion that refers to "sensibility" (*sensibilidade*), "patience" (*paciência*), "humbleness" (*humildade*), "goodness" (*bondade*), and "being silent" (*quieta*).

"I have to be good with others. It's in the Bible. But also you have to be good and respectable, because one day you might encounter difficulties and other people might have to take care of you. As a poor woman you can't afford to have enemies."

"Women have this sensibility towards others... they have to, because of their children's needs and the needs of the community. It's their responsibility. The women fight for this... for a better life for their children... and also for the community...they fight with... er... dedication and humbleness, isn't it? The people (*o pessoal*) often even don't notice, they don't notice their contribution. It is silent."

Thirdly, perseverance is seen as an unalienable feminine asset, which is phrased as "benevolence" (*boa vontade*), "endeavour" (*esforço*), "determination" (*determinação*), "inner strength" (*força interior*), "creativity" (*ser criativa*), "hope" (*esperança*), "life" (*vida*) and being "a hard case" (*durona*).

"I am a woman of little money. I never have boulder (*prata*), but I know how to accomplish many things. I talk with one, then with another, and somehow I find a way. You have to find a way (*tem que dar um jeito*). You have seen what we mothers make in the clubs, haven't you! With just a few patches, we make a warm blanket, a nice door-

mat, new clothes for the one in need (*pra quem precisa*).”

Dona Celina

“A mother has her own standards, she’s ... discovering her own space. Some mothers’ clubs are weak, but the mothers never give up.”

Sister Terezinha

“We even think that the women are courageous, because they don’t disanimate, they never give up. The only thing that makes them leave is the economic question, the money, because they have to work to help their husband. So, great women we had in the Pastorate of Health, who knew how to weigh the children, how to make syrup, creams and home-made medicines, they are working now, they work all week and sometimes on Saturdays and Sundays in order to help to sustain their families, because the salary is very low, it’s unbearable. That disorganises everything.”

Sister Julia

The notions of commitment, respectability and perseverance serve as basic cultural schemas of and for feminine experience and positioning. As learned prototypes these schemas have gradually formed under the impetus of women’s experience, on which I was partly informed via the life stories as well as the ‘unofficial history’ of Barro and its CEBs as related to me by CEB-women. Through the parallel processing of these schemas, either through associative or rational processes, CEB-women constantly (re)produce a way of seeing and ‘being in the world’ that is labelled by themselves and their leaders as well as the clergy as typically of women and mothers. In doing so, they neither simply copy these patterns nor associate freely, but use “regulated improvisation” instead (Bourdieu 1977:11).

It is only in the second instance that CEB-women and their lay leaders linked up women, just like men, with a number of different roles (other than that of mother), many of which can be regarded as an extension of the supposed feminine or rather motherly qualities described above. The social roles mentioned most often in this respect are that of educator (*educadora*), animator (*animadora*), co-ordinator (*co-ordenadora*), fighter (*lutadora*), and labourer (*trabalhadora*). Other roles mentioned, which are conceived of as being of a more religious nature, are that of ‘liberationist midwife’ (*parteira da Libertação*), prophet (*profeta*), and missionary (*missionária*). In their social and religious roles of organisers and caretakers in the broadest sense of the word, women have to incorporate the mentioned feminine or motherly traits in an optimal combination, as is voiced clearly by the so-called Mandates for Female Co-ordinators. Their ideal behaviour has been committed to writing by the Pastoral da Mulher Pobre (PdMP 1988:18-9), of which the following is an excerpt.

“The good co-ordinator (*co-ordenadora*) [of a mothers’ club] is humble, has much faith, is patient, a friend, she’s warm and welcoming, understanding. She knows how to trust others and always feels herself equal to others. The co-ordinator accompanies everything and gives everything unity and life. She needs to give soul, to give life to the group of mothers, to create the conditions for the participation of all in the works of the club and in the reflection on the Bible and the Struggles. To co-ordinate means to share power, knowledge and goods (*o poder, o saber e o ter*), and to prevent the concentration of power, knowledge and goods. It means to be a co-ordinator-mother at any time, not a co-ordinator-patron. To be a co-ordinator-mother means to extend your own family, gathering neighbouring families, and by that to be the foundress of the Community.”

As such, female lay leaders are expected to serve as a role model, and were indeed often referred to as such by common CEB-women.

“Dona Nargi is a great person. She has much patience, she knows how to talk well, she always shows us the right way of how to do things, of how to act. If necessary, she fights as a lioness for us, for us mothers. She isn't afraid of the priest or the police... but she is also humble.”

In consonance with the remarks made about the commitment, perseverance and respectability of 'good women and mothers' and the preferred traits of female leaders, when describing themselves as individuals CEB-women also stressed being “irreplaceable” (*insubstituível*) to their households, “respectable and sociable” (*digna e sociável*) in their contacts with others, and “persistent and resourceful” (*perseverante e caprichosa*) in “the everyday struggle”. Through these aspects of feminine subjectivity the need “to stay in control” can be met.

Attempts to “stay in control” can be considered central to women's persistence, respectability and sociability, and irreplaceability in the economic, as well as domestic and religious field. Women's persistence or perseverance was said to have formed in the face of poverty. When relating their life stories, time and time again CEB-women reported on the hardships they had to experience as young girls.

All of the women of over 45 years of age I spoke with did not originate from the riograndense city of Águas. As daughters of small farmers, day-labourers and small entrepreneurs, they were born in small hamlets or villages in the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul or the neighbouring states of Santa Catarina and Paraná. From the age of five, six years onwards most of them had to work full-time; some spent their time on the fields, weeding and herding cattle. Others worked at home assisting the elder women of the family with the household tasks. Most families experienced enormous economic hardships and could hardly make the ends meet, but managed to survive. But when a failing harvest, unemployment, serious illness of a family member, new-born babies, or bad luck in business announced itself, the income of the households dropped under the poverty line.

Thereupon the step was taken to migrate to the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre where Águas is situated, so that the main breadwinners could find a job as day-labourer or domestic servant. Given the lack of housing in Porto Alegre many families moved to Águas and tried to start a new life on the swampy grounds, which they bought with great difficulty from the local landlord or which they invaded with the help of friends residing in the area. The younger women I interviewed were generally off-spring of this first generation of migrants, and were born in or near Águas.

At the time of my research, in 1994-1995, most of the women's households still floated around the minimum of existence, officially rated at 100-120 Reais, allowing for nothing else but the purchase of sober food: black beans, rice, pasta and bread. Most female lay leaders, however, lived in an economically more favourable situation and were part of households with an average monthly income of 5 minimum-wages. The hardships experienced turned them into persistent and resourceful women. In the course of her life, when combining labour with childhood or motherhood in situations of extreme poverty, Dona Celina told to have learned the importance of the will “never to give up” (*não desistir*) and of the quality of being “resourceful” (*caprichosa*).

Through such persistence and resourcefulness one can stay in control in difficult economic and political situations in which most poor people, women in particular, lack power to improve on their living conditions through official channels. And 'staying in control' is considered essential, since the survival of the household is at stake. In this respect, women describe themselves as the maintainers of the family in both the physical and social meaning of the word. As such, they are irreplaceable which provides them with domestic power and social appreciation.

In the confines of the household, being in control means indefatigably exercising control over one's household, the children in particular, whom they love very much: "My children are the most beautiful gift I ever got. Now they are big, but they are the most important to me". It means to make sure they are healthy, well-fed, attend school and do not lead astray. The women disagreed on the best way to effect the necessary control over the children¹⁵; whereas the elderly women of over 50 years of age stressed the importance of being tough (*dura*), firm (*firme*), strong (*forte*) and rigid (*rígida*), the younger women thought it important to relate well to the children (*manter uma boa relação*), to also be tender or sweet (*carinhosa*) and to converse a lot with them (*bater papo*).

The sacrifices women make for this amount of control are endless, and when things go wrong, many women blame themselves personally and endlessly. This became painfully clear, when Dona Santana's youngest son was brutally murdered while celebrating his cousin's birthday in Porto Alegre on the 1st of May 1995. Leaving the festive hall to get a bottle of wine, he was shot in the back of his neck from a long distance by armed robbers who according to an eye witness had commented: "Let's shoot that tall one' (*Vamos tirar naquele grandão*) just before committing the crime. He died on the spot and reportedly lay for hours on the pavement in the mud flow, caused by the heavy rains that came pouring down that day. I visited Dona Santana three days after the terrible event. Dona Santana was lying in her son's bed and was surrounded by her eldest son, his girlfriend, and friends from the base community. She cried bitter tears and blamed herself for his death.

"My whole life I took care of him and made sure he wouldn't die. And now he has died and I wasn't even there. For one moment I wasn't looking... And I made him go, you know. It was me who told him to go to Jaime's party and to enjoy himself for a change. He didn't want to go, but I insisted and said: 'Go, son, you're young and should enjoy yourself. He went and he was dead when he returned home. I shouldn't have insisted upon him going, because he really didn't want to go. He didn't like to go to parties. He should have stayed at home with me, safely."

Women's responsibility for the well-being of the family is often enhanced by their ability to maintain close social ties with family members, neighbours and friends, who might enlarge their access to economic, political, symbolic or social resources (see chapter 4 on the power of survival through co-operation). In this light, most women said to have developed a high degree of 'sociability', while others stressed that women "just like being around others" and "sitting down to have a *chimarrão*".

In the confines of the CEBs, staying in control is associated with "not gossiping", "being chaste and respectable" and "being a good mother". When CEB-women do not meet the cultural standards of a good woman-mother (*mulher-mãe*), CEB-women and their leaders qualify them in the much less complimenting terms of "backbiter" (*fofoqueira*), "vain creature" (*vaidosa*), "snake" (*cobra*), and "stupid bitch" (*banana*) and "virago" (*mulher brava*) respectively. These terms inform us on the limits to feminine behaviour. For example, in CEB-circles, women are expected to be clean and dress as well as their economic situation allows in order to show off respectability, but they should not invest their precious time on the improvement of their appearance in order to show off their beauty. Instead, they should focus on gaining an understanding of the world they live in, so that they will be able to pass good judgements and

¹⁵ In this example, it becomes clear that the cultural schema fostering 'control over your children' is durable yet subject to change.

make the right decisions. To attain this, women should unite in mothers' clubs or get involved in pastoral work, where friendship, openness and directness are highly valued.

"How I have suffered over the last few years, trying to maintain the unity of mothers' clubs! At times it is very hard, genuinely very hard. There's a lot of gossip in the clubs, almost all women are backbiters (*fofoqueiras*). It really is a problem. And the communal ovens (*fornos comunitários*) also experience difficulties. The women of today don't want to work, they are afraid that their fingernails might break."

Dona Nargi

Several observations can be made concerning the ways in which CEB-women are described and describe themselves, both as individuals and as a distinct social category. First, women and femininity are associated almost exclusively with character traits that are considered positive in the Brazilian context; as such, the given descriptions seem to reflect ideal (self-)images rather than 'real(istic)' (self-)images. According to Wekker, 'cultures differ in terms of the distance that is allowed between self-image and ideal- self-image'. She assumes that people in cultures that conceive of subjectivity as multiple, layered and pluriform as opposed to a fixed, authentic, real self experience less cognitive dissonance between ideal selves and real selves (Wekker 1994:97, my translation). Whereas I often judged the descriptions of CEB-women's selves to be descriptions of ideal selves, CEB-women themselves unproblematically presented them as one and the same.

I want to suggest that, apart from an apparent lack of dissonance between CEB-women's ideal selves and selves 'in the mind', it might be precisely the practical problems created by the dissonance between shared normative statements on ideal feminine behaviour and CEB-women's actual behaviour 'in the world'¹⁶ that strengthen this tendency of 'indiscriminate presentation'. Of course, many women cannot live up to the high moral standards set; for example, some women never become mothers or harm their reputation by 'indecent' behaviour such as gossip. This discrepancy between ideal and practice does not only potentially threaten the existent positive image of women/mothers, but may also harm that of their families and the CEBs associated with them. Infertility threatens both the image of women as mothers and their families as a social unit, and gossiping is at right angles to the ideal of women's communal spirit and might possibly cause discontinuity of the social networks established within the imaginary confines of the CEBs (cf. Burdick 1990)¹⁷. Thus, it is not only CEB-women's image but also their power claims that are at stake, and hence their capacity to survive (see chapter 4). It seems that exactly because of this, CEB-women indefatigably try to maintain the image of women as human beings oriented at unity, care and commitment, which is well received and cherished in CEB-circles.

Second, the three basic schemas that inform femininity apparently make contradictory demands on women. For example, being 'silent and humble' and being 'perseverant and a hard case' do not go together well in times when you have to stand up against armed henchmen who try to destroy your newly-built house, like Dona Bracedinha. Commitment to one's children may interfere with community involvement. Nevertheless, in their life stories CEB-women seldom pointed at conflicts created by these varying behavioural 'demands'; rather than viewing them as

¹⁶ Turner (1967) calls this discrepancy between ideal norms and actual behaviour 'situational incompatibility'.

¹⁷ Note that at the same time gossip has an important social function in that it enhances the exchange of life experiences and knowledge among preliterate women and furthers the development of shared moral standards. See Fonseca (1995) for a discussion on oral history and gossip, and Dalmiya & Alcoff (1993) for an interesting exposé on 'old wives' tales' as oral, practical and experiential yet legitimate knowledge.

contradictory assets that need to be reconciled and put restrictions on their behaviour, CEB-women regarded them as interrelated, enabling aspects of their identities.

Third, relatively few references are made to 'men' and 'masculinity' as being 'sample sheets' that are opposed to the social category of 'women' and to 'femininity'¹⁸. Instead, when describing women's assets, mostly adjectives and nouns are used that invoke images of motherhood and sisterhood itself, for which the Virgin Mary (see also chapter 3) and female lay leaders in the realm of the CEBs serve as inspiring role models.

Fourth, as the excerpts from the interviews with Dona Selma and Dona Luisa indicate, instead of using men as an oppositional, essentialised social category from which they have to differentiate themselves in order to enhance the production of a feminine, 'coherent' identity, CEB-women sometimes take men (in particular Jesus Christ and the saints) as role models.¹⁹

Summarising these observations, I want to suggest that for CEB-women 'sameness', 'identification with' and 'relating to others'²⁰ apparently play a bigger role in the process of identity-building than 'differentiation from'; CEB-women do not seem to experience a cognitive dissonance between their ideal selves and real selves, they conceal practical dissonance between their presented selves and their behaviour 'in this world', they generally do not explicitly present themselves as a social category that is opposed to an essentialised category of 'men', and sometimes even take male figures as important role models. In other words, differences among individual women and the social category of women, as well as differences between women and men receive relatively little attention in the life stories of CEB-women and female leaders. Before going further into the particularities of CEB-women's 'art of presentation' and its theoretical implications, I dwell shortly on these differences in the next section. By this, I intend to provide some necessary insights in the processes of *differentiation* that occur in the CEBs under study as well as to highlight an important difference between the discourses of the clergy and CEB-women when it comes to issues of gender identity.

5.3 On differentiation

The relative lack of emphasis on differences between men and women in the testimonies of CEB-women and their female lay leaders, is probably partly related to the influence of the Theology of Liberation. In consonance with Liberation Theology, CEB-women and CEB-men alike are addressed by the clergy as responsible, oppressed citizens, labourers (*trabalhadores*) in particular, who all have an important role to play in the realisation of the project of Liberation. Friar Darcy and the pastoral agents employ discourses that stress the equality of women and men before the face of God and their equality in the pursuit of improvement of the living-conditions in the neighbourhood. They stimulate both men and women to get involved in base communities and to engage in the struggle for land, housing and health care and both sexes are expected to do so on equal terms. The mediated remnants of this discourse clearly come through in the

18 Examples of such references can be found in chapter 3.

19 To a certain extent one can doubt the masculinity of these role models; Jesus Christ in particular is often seen as of ambiguous or androgyn gender in the sense that he is supposed to encompass both masculine and feminine traits.

In this respect, the religious field is seen by Thompson (1991) as a field that attracts people with a feminine outlook on life. De Theije suggests that, therefore, 'a leadership position might be an acceptable "excuse" for men to take part in the religious. With respect to masculinity, being a leader probably reconciles "being religious" with the ideals of general gender ideology' (de Theije 1999:117).

20 Prado (1995) distinguishes between individuals and persons, and states that in the context of small urban towns in Brazil it is almost impossible to be an 'individual'. 'One is always a 'person', identified and positioned in various ways' through reference to other meaningful actors: i.e. people are identified as the daughter of Dona So-And-So, the neighbour of Seu So-And-So, et cetera (Prado 1995:61, my translation).

following excerpts of interviews with CEB-women.

"We are poor and we have lived through much oppression from the part of the government. During the invasions day by day we experienced the violence used by armed policemen against us labourers ... men, women and children. Can you believe it, dear (*filha*)²¹? They even set fire to our houses...they used strong-arm squads for that."

Dona Bracedinha

"Men and women have to struggle together, not ahead of one another. We need to support each other, a man doesn't know more than a woman. We have to help each other."

Dona Irene

"God created men and women after his image, with the same rights. Jesus valued women by sending them to the villages to warn the people that he had resuscitated. Women are the force of the church."

Sister Terezinha

"Man and woman are equal before the face of God. Only together we can fight for our rights. And we have the certainty that God is with us in the struggle for Liberation. We can feel his presence, can't we, in the things that happen to us everyday."

Dona Braulinha

The ways in which men and women supposedly (should) fill in their faith and engagement differ, however, according to the liberationist teachings of the priest and pastoral agents of Águas. Women are assumed and expected to make a *specific* contribution to the project of Liberation Theology as a function of their "special characteristics" and "gifts". A Brazilian catholic woman's place in struggle might be indeed at the side of her husband, but the form of her participation in this struggle is preferably different from that of men.

As has been noted already in chapter 4, the participation of women and men in base communities is generally consistent with the sex-gender system prevalent in Latin American countries, which is known by sociologists as the 'marianismo-machismo complex'. Marianismo refers to the cultural understanding of women as human beings who are spiritually and morally superior to men, powerfully symbolised by the Virgin Mary. Machismo refers to the cultural understanding of men as active, violent and sexually potent human beings, who dominate the public life and are embodied in the Brazilian *machão* or supermacho (Stevens 1973, Steenbeek 1986). In accordance with this sex-gender system, CEB-women engage most often in pastoral and missionary work and become *co-ordenadoras* (co-ordinators) or informal leaders of groups that are dedicated to activities that can be labelled as 'feminine': so-called mothers' clubs, the pastorate of health, communal gardens, the association for the handicapped people, catechesis, et cetera. (see chapter 4). Men are mostly in charge of the patrimony of the chapels, they are relatively overrepresented among the officially appointed *ministros* (ministers), and act

21 The literal translation of *filha*, however, is daughter. Most elderly CEB-women addressed me as *filha* during meetings and private conversations, while younger CEB-women used to call me Elsa or simply *mulher* (woman). The priests, nuns and friars generally addressed me as 'Elsa', with the exception of friar João. When leading prayer during a collective lunch at the friars' house (*casa dos freis*), he jokingly thanked God for the presence of *a nossa querida E.T.* (our dear Extra Terrestrial). This nickname E.T. would occasionally pop up during the many friendly, informal conversations we had.

occasionally as *festeiros* ('entertainment organisers') during the annual festivities for the patron saint.²²

The clergy's discourses on women's specific assets and women's gendered participation in the shape of informal leadership of mothers' clubs delineate what women are thought to be like; to speak with Geertz' terms they are 'models of' the feminine. At the same time, the discourses create the desirable gendered social identity of catholic women; as 'models for' the feminine religious language, imagery and actions are effective cultural messengers that indicate what assets female CEB-members need in order to be considered as good catholic women, who are God-like human beings and Mary-like believers.

It is at this point that we can lay bare the two basic paradoxes that the discourses of clerical Catholics exhale. Firstly, as *imago Dei* or image of God, women and men are equals and should pursue a new, just society while standing by each other, as Dona Irene rephrased it. Women, however, are also expected to behave as Mary-like believers. In that quality they need to be as motherly, chaste and charitable as possible. They have to maintain close ties with the natural and material world and to have conscience of their specific role as women, given their reproductive capacities, moral superiority, spiritual strength and social qualities. Secondly, as oppressed citizens both men and women should participate in the liberationist project of catholic base communities. Women, however, are expected to participate in this struggle in a specific way on the basis of their 'different' gender.

Thus, on the one hand it is asserted that women should participate as equal citizens in society as images of God, on the other hand women are talked to about their unique contribution to the continuity of their families as mothers and caretakers.²³ As Chiriac and Padilha (1982:195,198) have very rightly stated: 'The equality affirmed in discourse is translated in practice into a form of female participation different from that of men ... women are always called up to perform tasks (not to make decisions) and in the case of mothers' clubs, those tasks are mere extensions of those that women execute in their own homes.' In other words, women are encouraged to participate in base communities as equals of men, but are urged to do so by making a specific contribution as women (cf Drogus 1990, de Theije 1999).

To a certain degree, CEB-women reproduce the clergy's discourse on gender differences, by stating that CEB-women indeed do excel in commitment, care, perseverance and the like, and as such do make a specific contribution to CEBs. CEB-women do so, however, from a starting-point somewhat different than that of the clergy. The latter start from the assumption that women are inherently different from men, and as such (should) make a specific contribution to the religious life of their communities. Recognising the centrality of motherhood to their lives, CEB-women, on the contrary, state to have developed certain qualities which are desirable in view of the need to take care of their children, the base communities²⁴ and society at large. They consider these qualities as desirable assets not only for women, but for all catholics who want to effectively contribute to the Kingdom of God on Earth. Thus, CEB-women imply that they do not make a specific contribution to CEBs because of inherent feminine traits, but because of the general, culturally approved assets and skills acquired in their position as mothers and wives. In practice, this means that when CEB-women of Águas "invite their men to take part in the

22 De Theije (1999:110-2) rightly argues that the marianismo-machismo dyad cannot be uncritically applied to the religious context, as this might depict women's participation in CEBs as 'a negative choice' for legitimate action in a 'women's affair'. As she explains and as also has become clear in chapter 2 and 3 of this thesis, CEB-women also participate because of spiritual, economical and social reasons.

23 See Alvarez (1990:388-90) for a similar argument.

24 Note that CEB-women often symbolically represent base communities as children (see chapter 3).

struggle", the latter are asked to do so not by making use of their supposed 'masculine' character traits (which are scarcely described), but by joining CEB-women in their 'feminine way'.

'One single woman doesn't realise liberation (*faz libertação*), but a whole group, fighting united, makes the liberation happening. The history of Miriam resembles the history of many women. The oppressing system was very strong in the time of Miriam, but the women were courageous, behind the back of the Pharãoh (*passaram para trás do Farãoh*) they saved Life. Many women succeeded Miriam. Nowadays, also, many women are the Life in the communities. (...) Women liberate themselves in the family, in the community and they start to discover their values. Women have to struggle not to let the community down (*não deixar cair a comunidade*). Women are firm, they are fighters ... while their husbands are working, the women stay in the neighbourhood to organise, to demand the right on water, light, and housing. Women are more at disposal (*disponível*) for the communal struggle. The struggle of women is a provocation for men to participate too. On terms of equality (*em pé de igualdade*) everything goes better.'²⁵

It is, among other things, the paradoxical nature of the clergy's discourses within the context of base communities, and the discrepancies between the clergy and CEB-women on gender identity that provide women with space to raise questions about their definitions of the self and, if desirable, to experiment with alternative presentations of the self. Obviously, such temporary or definite changes in gender identity can lead to conflict and negotiation, the result of which can be both the reinforcement and the transformation of existing models of gender identity. To this 'art of presentation' the next section is dedicated, but before going into this in more detail, some words need to be said on the heterogeneity of the social category of women (and men).

On the face of it, it seems that what separates men from women, unites men and women as two distinct categories. At a closer look, however, the two distinct categories of 'men' and 'women' are less homogenous than prevailing stereotypes on both genders and gender differences suggest. In CEBs, like elsewhere, other characteristics of men and women involved, such as age, race and social role or position colour the identification and differentiation of women and men as female and male beings. In this context, the identities of *irmãos* (friars) and *irmãs* (nuns), whose experiences and positions differ from those of common CEB-members, might serve as an interesting example.

Generally speaking, nuns or sisters are considered women and non-women at the same time, on the basis of which they can perform certain activities that are normally associated with men and are located in the 'male' sphere (Jacobs & de Theije 1996:13). Comparably, friars are sometimes categorised as men and sometimes as non-men, and are therefore allowed to engage in practices which are labelled as typically feminine and which take place in all-women contexts.

"We [five friars living together in the same house] don't have a domestic servant like they have in the other house [friars' house in the same area], so we clean the kitchen and do everything by ourselves."

Friar João

"Without giving it the slightest thought, the women invite me for the women's reunions. Once I asked: 'But isn't it for women only?', and they said: 'Yes, but you're a friar'. It's as if they consider us to be of a third sex.."

Friar Marcelo

²⁵Quotation taken from the minutes of the Fourth Meeting of the Clothing Group (4-11-90) as written down in the Livro de Atas dos Encontros de Mulheres.

“Yes, that’s true. You can sit in everywhere, but sometimes you’re not taken seriously.”
Sister Regina

At meetings of the pastorate of health, for example, I observed that the nuns were frequently being reminded by the participants that, although the nuns had acquired valuable knowledge and skills through training and education, they had less right to talk on issues concerning sexuality, family planning, birth and education than other women present. To legitimise their relative exclusion from this sphere of life, their specific social position and experiences involved in it were mentioned.

“It’s good that the nuns give us religious orientation, teach us how to read the Bible, to make a nice reflection...but they should keep to that... not meddle with the education of the children. It isn’t them who gave birth and are raising them. They don’t have the experience of a mother as I do. How is it that she’ll know what to do. I know what to do. You have to be a mother for that.”

Dona Rosa

In order to frame the prevailing image of nuns as non-women or as a sex in their own right as friar Marcelo implied, the insights of Tcherkezoff are useful. Tcherkezoff states that the categories of female and male are implicitly based on the husband/wife dyad, implying, for example, that friars and sisters are not representative of the categories men and women, and as such cannot be judged as being either masculine or feminine. He states that while ‘sexuality and sexual reproduction are associated with men and women (read husband-wife), social reproduction and social continuity are associated with sisters and brothers’ (Tcherkezoff 1994:200).

Although Tcherkezoff uses the terms ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ to refer to siblings with whom one is linked through kinship ties, his argument triggers off some interesting thoughts concerning nuns, friars, and priests who are commonly referred to as *irmãs* (sisters) and *irmãos* or *freis* (brothers or friars) respectively. Both *irmãs* and *irmãos*, who have to make the vow to live in celibacy and to refrain from starting a family, abstain from sexuality and sexual reproduction. Instead, they are valued for their contribution to community-building in the neighbourhood, and consider themselves responsible for the stimulation and continuation of community-based initiatives and organisations. Their homes function as meeting-places for active CEB-members and leaders, and can be considered as important social centres of the neighbourhood.

There is, however, an important difference between male and female pastoral workers that is always stressed by CEB-members.²⁶ Priests and friars generally stay for a much shorter period of time in the parish than do the nuns; in this respect, the first contribute less to the social continuity of CEBs than their female counterparts.

“The friars are staying more and more for only one or two years, at its maximum. This really affects the communities. By the time they know how they [the communities] function, they are leaving. Every time they leave us behind, crying. We already

26 Furthermore, friars are considered to be less not-masculine than sisters are thought to be not-feminine. As a kind of ‘genderless’ or disembodied being a sister can often cross the gender-boundaries in the religious community much more easily than a friar. Many CEB-members voiced that they were in favour of the giving up of celibacy by brothers and priests, while they considered it “of no use” for a nun to enter into a relationship with a man, because “the sisters know how to get on by their own. They don’t need a man”. They also pointed at the fact that friars relatively often engage in love affairs with women, because “they are men. It would be very good if priests could be married, for them to have a wife and children.”

complained about it to the priest." [Q: "Does this also hold true for the sisters?"] "No, the sisters stay much longer....sometimes they stay even for five or ten years, or even more, like sister Giusepa. Sisters hardly ever leave, that's to say, voluntarily."
Dona Carmen, co-ordinator of a mothers' clubs.

In this respect, religious sisters do share the three basic, South-Brazilian cultural schemas concerning femininity with common CEB-women in that they are generally valued for their commitment, perseverance and respectability. While common CEB-women put these positive character traits at the use of both their families, the CEBs and broader society, the catholic sisters' contribution however is confined to the religious domain but unlike common CEB-women they can travel there to and fro between the categories of women and 'not-women', depending on the context, time and place.

Despite the fact that the social category of catholic women is by no means homogenous²⁷, as this example shows, CEB-women and sisters find each other in their respective contribution to the liberationist ideal of 'community' as a 'normative ideal designating how social relations ought to be organised' (Young 1990:320). As is the case with CEB-women's subjectivity itself (see above and below), this 'ideal of community (...) privileges unity over difference' (ibid:300). In this respect, the CEBs are often considered femininity incarnate: unity embodied in and through women's commitment, as illustrated earlier (see footnote 8) with the words of Dona Eva, who said: "(...) the CEBs are very feminine. Very feminine, because it is the voice of the woman, it is the own physiognomy of the woman that is the community itself".²⁸

Of course, at this point some question marks are in place concerning the utopian view that is presented by CEB-members and the clergy of CEBs as social organisations and of femininity as cultural construct. During my fieldwork, there were many instances in which people acted contrary to the presented images of unity and cooperation; regularly, internal organisational conflicts and personal rows occurred. Furthermore, one can doubt the political viability of this ideal of community as organising principle of urban society as a whole (cf. Young 1990).

Nonetheless, this utopian view is considered meaningful by CEB-women, because of the legitimacy it renders to their religious group vis-a-vis other religious groups (such as pentecostal churches), to their contribution to the struggle for God's Kingdom on Earth, and to CEB-women themselves as valuable persons. They artfully present themselves accordingly, as is discussed below.

5.4 The 'art of presentation'

I have illustrated above that during meetings of the base communities and in personal interviews, CEB-members, lay leaders, nuns, friars and priests often transmit messages concerning CEB-women's (and men's) identities, and consequently about the proper behaviour of women within the confines of the base communities and in society at large. For the transmission of these gendered messages, discourses and symbols are important vehicles.

27 Of course, the social category of women is also heterogeneous in terms of age, ethnicity, et cetera.

28 Community is often opposed to individualism; this opposition 'receives one of its expressions (...) in the opposition between masculinity and femininity. The culture identifies masculinity with the values associated with individualism - self-sufficiency, competition, separation, the formal equality of rights. The culture identifies femininity, on the other hand, with the values associated with community-affective relations of care, mutual aid, and cooperation.' (Young 1990:306). Theorists like Derrida (1976) and Benhabib (1986) have tried to go beyond this over-simplifying dichotomy of individualism.community by developing a dialectical conception of community as the synthesis of sociality and individuality, starting from a concept of (comm)unity in which differences are reconciled (see also section 5.6).

In both verbal utterances and written texts narratives of women's selves are told, in which the 'author' - in the broadest meaning of the word - employs or expresses a certain discourse on femininity and/or masculinity. In other words, the priest's welcome word to the bi-annual meeting of the sextons (*zeladoras*) of the little chapels (*capelinhas*), the exegesis made by the minister of the Word during a religious celebration, women's intercessory prayers at the mothers' club, minutes on the meetings of the Pastorate of health, testimonies on the history of the neighbourhood, et cetera can all contain clues with regard to womanhood and manhood. Similarly, symbols are used to support these discourses and the prevailing gender ideology.

In order to express the specificity of women's way of being, seeing and acting the participants of the base communities, the discourses enacted figure several symbols that stand out in conveying important cultural messages about the social identity of women (see also chapter 3), of which - not surprisingly - the Virgin Mary is the most powerful and serves as an important frame of reference. Within the confines of the CEBs, the image of the Holy Virgin Mary is a powerful religious symbol that embodies virginity, obedience, chastity, modesty and religiousness, but nowadays also represents struggle, rebellion and companionship in the face of poverty, injustice and inequality. The Virgin Mary is woman, mother, comrade and warrior [*mulher, mãe, e guerreira*] at the same time. Her image is to be found in every single chapel of the Aguiense base communities. Moreover, many small chapels [*capelinhas*] circulate in the parish, which accommodate a small statue of Mary, presenting her for example as Our Lady who holds little Jesus in her arms. In her manifold capacity of woman, mother, comrade and warrior the Virgin Mary expresses the importance of women's qualities as caretakers, as guardians of the Catholic ethics and faith, and as distinctly socially-minded beings.

"Our Lady is like my mother ... also because I lost my mother, as you know. She teaches me how to love like a real mother..."

Dona Nilda

Consonant with the described machismo-marianismo sex-gender system of Brazil (and latin America as a whole) women are regarded as morally superior to men: women are unselfish, conscientious, and morally steadfast. This makes them particularly apt to raise children, to transmit the catholic doctrine and morality to their family-members and fellow-believers through education and mission, to act by prayer as intercessors between God and their families in need, and to engage in social work in the form of charity.

Manifestations of these Mary-like qualities and roles can also be found in the CEB-songs that most catholic women enjoy to sing during celebrations, reunions of the mothers' clubs and the pastorates, meetings of the Group of Liturgy and family groups, and gatherings of friends. Directly and indirectly these hymns relate the desirable assets of the identity of women. First, women are usually addressed as mothers, midwives and birth-givers, not only of their own earthly offspring, but also of the heavenly Kingdom of God on Earth. Second, women are seen as sisters who get together to pursue a good life for their families. Third, just like Mary, women are fighters who struggle for justice.

In this respect, the figure of the Virgin Mary also possesses the feminine qualities of commitment, perseverance and respectability and reconciles the potentially contradictory roles and assets that CEB-women presumably possess. Most of these elements are reflected in the song that the women of the mothers' club Pio X Batista chose as one of the two sung lemmas for

the opening of an exposition on their works in the communal hall of the parish on 8 March 1995 (International Women's Day).²⁹

'So sweet, beautiful colour, feminine
Woman of the new Church that is being built
Your song is that of love
Your secret is the faith
And your God the liberator
He is Jesus of Nazareth

You walk in the lines of this peregrinating people
Little by little conquering your space
You carry in your womb the communion of peoples
Generating equality and peace
It's beautiful to see your struggle!
In the country, in town, in the favela, wherever you are.

So wise, so human, you are of the people
Tenderness and confidence, you are of God
Like Mother Mary you carry on
Happy, because the Lord didn't forget you
In your arms the tomorrow, and in your eyes much light
I know that deep down inside you have the hope that effects.

In the social circles and movements of your people
I hear your voice, there you are
Making a new way happen in society
To see women and men walk together
Without fear, without domination
Sign of the New Kingdom
That is being made.³⁰

As I have described them up to now, the discourses employed by CEB-members and clergy appear to be rather homogeneous, unitary, consistent and fixed; moreover, they seem to co-exist peacefully. They are, however, to a certain extent differentiated, heterogeneous, inconsistent and competing. In their discourses on femininity and masculinity, CEB-members and leaders do not all employ exactly the same words as some of the quotations have shown, nor do they attach the same meaning to the used symbols: whereas some stress the quality of the Virgin Mary as a mother, others think her role as fighter more significant in the church of today.

Also, when analysing the 'variety of possible femininities and masculinities' (Moore 1994:63) offered through discourses, it is important to realise that these discourses are hierarchically ordered in two ways. First, within every single discourse the dominance of one gender is generally asserted over the other(s). For example, when priest Márcio described men as the head of the church and women as the building, he explicitly positioned women and men differently. Second, between discourses prevalent in one single, social and cultural setting we can observe a hierarchical ordering along gender lines, an ordering which is contextually,

29 In general, one has to be cautious in taking the lyrics of popular songs by way of an illustration, since the lyrics of most songs are uttered without paying particular attention to the meaning. This song, however, was picked consciously by the CEB-women; according to them its lyrics were capable of succinctly expressing womanhood.

30 '*Tão meiga, cor bonita a esperança que conduz*' (my translation).

biographically and historically variable. The so-called dominant discourse is generally a male discourse, according to which, for example, women might indeed be subordinated to men within the church. The alternative, 'dominated' discourses in this case would be that of CEB-women and female lay leaders, who agree that "women are the real source of power in the church".

The dominance and deterministic power of this so-called 'dominant discourse' is, however, relative. In the first place, dominant discourses too are contradictory constructs, marked by gaps, ambiguities, inconsistencies and cracks. Although most religious leaders in CEBs share the opinion that CEB-women should be Mary-like, the definitions of this qualification show variation in contents, range, emphasis, accents and importance. For example, while friar Jorge considered Mary's virginity as an important sexual norm to be passed on to young CEB-women in the battle against teenage-mothers and abortion, friar João stressed that it obfuscates the image of Mary as a woman like all other women, of her being a carpenter's wife. And his roommate, also a Capuchin friar, is reported to have stated once that 'the virginity in the biblical sense is much more in the sense of a declaration of intent; in the sexual sense it's a priest's joke (*piada de padre*)'.³¹

In the second place, people do not completely absorb ideas about their 'appropriate role', because they simply cannot or do not want to. As Anyon rightly has stated: the development of gender involves as much a passive reception as an active response to social contradictions (Anyon 1990:14, in Guareschi 1994:79). Many of the women presented in this chapter cannot live up to the rather romantic picture of women that pervades the discourses and symbols quoted. Although all expressed the desire to be 'just like the Virgin Mary', in real life this strive is rather complicated. For some women the dominating image of women as caring, loving mothers proves to be painful or hard to accept for other reasons. In the mothers' club of São Pio X, for example, two women had never given birth to a healthy child. Dona Iracema had had three miscarriages when she was still in her twenties. Her physical condition deteriorated so much after each miscarriage, that her doctor had advised her to stop trying.

"I cried for a long time. Why can't I have children? I also felt very sorry for my husband. If it were for him, I would have given it another try. But he said: "No, let's face it, it isn't God's plan". (...). In the mothers club I sometimes feel out of place. I raised many children... nephews of mine, a child from across the street. But I'm not considered a real mother (*uma mãe de verdade*)."

Dona Angelina also tried to have children for many years, but in vain. She adopted an orphan, but the inability of her and her husband to have a baby still fills her with sadness and feelings of failure at times. The women of the mothers' club, however, did not show much compassion in this respect. I witnessed several occasions in which rude jokes were made about infertile couples, which visibly hurt Dona Iracema and Dona Angelina.

Other women have trouble living up to the ideal of a good woman and want to break loose from the gender frameworks set by the local cultural and religious standards. Some react by openly criticising these frameworks and by providing an alternative discourse; in this respect, the image of the Virgin Mary as a powerful, poor woman who fights for justice is an example in case, which has been promoted explicitly by the female CEB-leaders of Aguas. Others introduce new symbols of womanhood, such as the biblical figure of Miriam. At other times, however, women use the rather essentialist gendered notions themselves to their advantage. As such, the presentation of oneself as a good woman can be used as a strategy to attain certain objectives, such as legitimacy or respect. Many women suggested to pretend to be less 'sharp' (*esperta*)

³¹Transcript of an interview conducted by Trein (1988:121).

than they actually are, in order not to cause trouble with the leading men of the CEBs, in casu the priest, friars and male lay leaders.

In the third place, people also adapt their discourse to the situation or context they are in. When finding out that the mothers of the club São Pio X had lost access to the room in which they held their weekly meetings over the last 15 years - an attempt of the priest to curtail their influence - the co-ordinator Dona Nargi was furious. During the meeting she told the women repeatedly that they had to speak up and fight with the priest, and that she would give him a piece of her mind. After all, "we women have to be strong in the struggle". But she never spoke up, because shortly afterwards the priest came over to her house with a bouquet of flowers to congratulate her on the passing of an exam in popular theology. In the meantime, Dona Maria took charge of the priest and had plainly asked him if he didn't feel ashamed to take away the room of the mothers' club and to pass by the club when there were clothes for distribution. The priest quickly arranged for a new room, and it was Dona Nargi - not aware of Dona Maria's action - who broke the good news during the next meeting. She said that it had proven a good idea to keep quiet and not to show anger in the face of the priest, because by that he understood that "the mothers are good and harmless."

This is just one example of how people adapt their discourses to changing contexts: the situation they find themselves in, the people present, the time of day, the place of the act, the event happening, the phenomena at the background, their mood, et cetera. The capacity to adapt, mould and change discourses is an art in itself, and some people - particularly female leaders - are better 'artists' than others. In artfully presenting themselves CEB-women try to reconcile dominant discourses on femininity in broader society (the marianism-machismo complex) and within CEB-circles with their own conception of womanhood.

Interestingly, the quality of the art itself seems gendered, as the example above suggests; women's way to increase their opportunities and possibilities for self-definition and social definition seems to start from an art of presentation that is often characterised by 'silent' influence. According to Rocha-Coutinho, this obfuscated, silent influence might be a highly effective medium to achieve a strong position of authority, without challenging the publicly recognised authority of others (Rocha-Coutinho 1994:140, my translation).³² I suggest that, in this respect, it is again indicative of CEB-women's orientation at unity through the reconciliation of differences between contradictory feminine character traits, between men and women, and between individuals and their communities, the theoretical consequences of which are discussed below.

5.5 The feminine way: restating identity, or the importance of inclusion and Sameness

In the introduction to this chapter I have stated that most identity theories are based on a logic of exclusion. This logic of exclusion is voiced by the tacit assumption that identities are based on the exclusion, negation, domination or sacrifice of internal difference(s), which are more abstractly referred to as 'the Other'. It is generally accepted that individual people have a real self, the internal differences and contradictions of which are repressed in order to enhance a sense of internal coherence. Comparably, the identity of social categories is thought to be based on a repression and domination of external differences, meaning that, for example, women shape their feminine identity by excluding and negating the masculine traits that are characteristic of

³² In chapter 4, in which I entered into the particularities of the social organisation of ecclesial base communities from a gender perspective, this hypothesis was subject to further investigation

the so-called opposite sex. As such, the logic of exclusion or 'sacrificial logic of sameness' presupposes that external as well as internal repression of difference is at the core of identity-building (Weir 1996:3-14). According to Butler (1990) this perfectly reflects the 'binary logic' that is at the very heart of Western thinking and which dichotomises mankind in hierarchical binary oppositions, such as man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual.

Confronted with the dichotomising sacrificial logic of identity studies, feminist scholars have theoretically tried to come to terms with issues of sameness/difference, connection/separation, and domination/non-domination since the beginning of the 1970s. This has resulted in important studies on identity by leading feminist theorists, such as de Beauvoir (1972), Chodorow (1978), Gilligan (1982), Irigaray (1985), Kristeva (1984, 1986), Benjamin (1988) and Butler (1990, 1993).

The way these authors address problems of difference, essentialism, fragmentation and domination varies considerably according to their perception of how human beings acquire a self-identity. Within feminist theory roughly three views on identity can be distinguished. The first is voiced by de Beauvoir, Chodorow, Butler and Irigaray, who analyse identity in terms of subject-object relations, phallogocentrism and construction respectively. De Beauvoir (1972), for example, analysed male-female relations in terms of 'a subject-object or self-other model, according to which men's subjectivity - his self-assertion as a free, autonomous, and independent being - is established through opposition to, and thus dependent on, women's absolute and eternal Otherness' (Weir 1996:14). Quite similarly, Chodorow (1978) evolved a theory explaining why men develop a detached, individualised conception of the self with rigid ego boundaries, embroidering on the psycho-analyst tradition of object relations theory. According to Chodorow, in the process of acquiring a sense of physical integrity (subject), while demarcating themselves as person from the object world (object), men are forced to differentiate themselves from their mothers and to repress femininity in order to achieve an autonomous, masculine self-identity. As such, both authors theorise self-identity as something inherently repressive and accept an oppositional conception of the self, in which there is no room for difference (Jacobs 1996:4).

Like de Beauvoir and Chodorow, Irigaray and Butler also perceive identity as repressive of otherness. Irigaray, however, locates its repressive character rather in what she calls a 'phallogocentric logic' of presence or absence of masculine traits. And, contrary to de Beauvoir and Chodorow, she does not proclaim acceptance but subversion of self-identity through a total identification with difference, in *casu* femininity. Problematic in both the acceptance of repression of difference and dominance as the building stones of identity, and subversion of identity through identification with difference is that it results in clear-cut essentialism. Therefore, Butler, who locates repression primarily in language as a system that fosters domination through oppositional structures, does not only reject self-identity, but also denies the existence of a 'woman's identity on the grounds that any identity is repressive of non-identity and difference' (Weir 1996:11).

The second view of identity than can be distinguished in current feminist theory-building can be summarised by referring to the work of Benjamin (1988). She has attempted to evolve an inter-subjective model of identity-building, in which the development of a self is not only the result of internalisation of dominant norms and the repression of instincts, but also a voluntary identification and affective interaction with others. This leads Benjamin to view identity-building as an inter-subjective process that on the one hand represses an individual or group, but on the other hand allows it to participate in the social world. As such, she neither accepts, nor rejects the notion of identity.

Although these first two views enhance our understanding of identity by pointing at the importance of subject-object relations, they have not succeeded in providing alternative theories of identity that do include instead of exclude difference, connectedness and diversity, and that are capable of framing agency that is not based on repression and domination; after all, the assumption that identity is necessarily a product of the repression of difference, has remained unaffected.

The exception to the rule is Kristeva (1984, 1986), who is the sole representative of the third feminist view on identity. She conceives identity not merely as 'a product of repression or domination, but as capacity for participation in a social world, a capacity which ideally entails the recognition, acceptance, and expression of 'non-identity', i.e. difference (Weir 1996:12). Thus, self-identity and social identity are not founded on the repression of difference, but are ideally based on the acceptance of difference, both of others and within oneself. As such, identity is not the sacrifice of difference in order to achieve conformity in a given social and symbolic order, but can be regarded as a capacity for the expression of differences and uniqueness (Kristeva 1984, 1986, see also Weir 1996).

It is important to note that Kristeva does not think 'difference' to be something that is 'regulated by a law of contrariety: if one term is true, the other must be false. Both cannot be true, but it is possible that both are false'. She thinks differences to be mutually exclusive, but not mutually exhaustive, as is the case with dichotomies. Taking the self-concept of CEB-women as a starting-point of analysis, Kristeva's description of difference³³ seems to be of use. When she states that differences are mutually exclusive and not mutually exhaustive, she implies that the notion of 'difference' does not necessarily refer to one of the two contradictory terms of a dichotomic pair, but points at a specific characteristic in a field of objects with many other characteristics.³⁴

The importance of Kristeva's conception of difference lies in the fact that CEB-women's commitment (in terms of being sweet, tender and caring) and perseverance (in the shape of being 'a tough case', persistent and combative) do not necessarily have to be considered as each other's opposites and as properties that cannot be combined in one person at the same time. As CEB-women's self-images have shown, women experience themselves as being tender and harsh at the same time, character traits which stem from the same basic need: to stay in control. Thus, although there are big differences in being tender and harsh, these are aspects of women's selves that can unproblematically coexist; women do not seem to experience a cognitive dissonance between the multiple aspects of their self on the one hand and their sense of identity on the other hand; they artfully play with the multiple aspects of their selves, without feeling forced or compelled to repress any part of it either temporarily or for good.

This brings us a little closer to the answers to the questions I raised at the beginning of this chapter. Are CEB-women's identities indeed based on the exclusion or repression of internal difference, or is it rather instilled on the inclusion of difference, as Kristeva has suggested? And to what extent do CEB-women form their identities in opposition to a fixed Other? Trading dichotomies for differences in taking CEB-women's self-concepts as a starting-point for

33 See Komter (1990) for a discussion on the different meanings of 'difference'.

34 Likewise, Trinh (1989: 104) attempts to find a way out in the discussion on the relation between identity and difference by stating that difference should not be understood 'as an irreducible quality but as a drifting apart within "woman" [which] articulates upon the infinity of "woman" as entities of inseparable "I's" and "Not I's" (...) Difference does not annul identity. It is beyond and alongside identity'. As such, difference is always potentially undermining identity and should be seen as a process 'which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation' (ibid).

analysis, it seems reasonable to exchange the logic of exclusion for a logic of inclusion. Kristeva's identity theory allows for such a notion of identity that includes difference, yet excludes opposition to a fixed otherness.

It remains evident, however, that within discourses circulating in the CEBs of Águas, women and men are identified differently and in turn experience and position themselves differently, both at the individual and social level. Differences are made between men and women in terms of character traits, qualities, weaknesses, roles and positions. Striking is the fact that discourses on women's identities are far more detailed than discourses on men's identities; whereas most Aguenses had trouble describing men and masculinity, all men and women interviewed elaborately informed me on women's assets and femininity using evocative language. It seems that in identifying themselves, however, CEB-women rather take other CEB-women, their own mothers and role models like the Virgin Mary as a point of reference, and do not, as identity theories often suggest identify themselves primarily or explicitly in opposition to an Other, in casu men. It seems that within CEBs, processes of identification are of more importance than processes of differentiation; instead of setting themselves alongside men as the Others and speaking in terms of opposition and contrast when identifying themselves, CEB-women rather seem to focus on women in general and significant other social actors whose character traits they want to adopt or accept.

I assume that this not only reveals the influences of Liberation Theology as suggested earlier, but also has much to do with the feminine character of the religious field in general and of CEBs in particular, and with CEB-women's concern with survival. Within the realm of the CEBs, few male 'Others' are at hand to contrast with, whereas female role models to identify with are plenty. Second, the few men present are often considered as role models by both men and women, who want to identify themselves with their positive character traits, especially when they occupy important leadership positions in both a sympathetic and successful way. Third, to top this, the few men present in CEBs are not really representative of Brazilian men; CEB-men, whether superhuman (God, Jesus Christ, or saints) or human (clergy and laity alike) themselves do not excel in masculinity in the traditional sense of the word. Instead of being prototypes of male behaviour, they often share 'a feminine outlook on life' (Thompson 1991). And fourth, in an attempt to enhance their power of survival through unity and cooperation, it is in CEB-women's best interest to establish networks that are elusive and powerful yet acceptable to the clergy and male CEB-members who fear women's omni-present power. As such, CEB-women often explicitly do stress that women and men are the Same: both are in search of the Kingdom of God on Earth. It is also against the backgrounds of this shared utopian image of the future, partially embodied in the CEBs of Águas, that inclusion and Sameness are central to processes of identification among CEB-women.

6

Conclusions

The leading question of this book has been twofold. The first question was ethnographic in nature and focussed at the form and content that women of Brazilian ecclesial base communities or CEBs in the parish São Pio X in Águas (Rio Grande do SUL) have given to their religious lives. The second question, which addressed issues of a more theoretical nature, concerned the way in which the religious lives of the women involved can be represented and interpreted when taking their priorities and life experiences as a starting-point. As has become clear in the introduction to this book, these questions sprang directly from a discontentment with existing ethnographic descriptions of the daily practices of CEBs and with the analyses of women's religious lives within these liberationist catholic communities; the specific contribution of Brazilian women to the spiritual life, social organisation and identity of CEBs had remained largely obfuscated and too often this contribution had been analysed starting from the assumption that women's religious lives were by definition encompassed by, subject to and derived from men's religious lives.

In this respect, the before-lying book has tried to fill a void and to arrive at a description and analysis of CEB-women's religious lives that does justice to the *jeito feminino* or feminine way of believing, organising and identifying within the realm of ecclesial base communities. After all, as Dona Nargi remarked during a meeting of one of the local mothers' clubs: "It is important that the mothers note down the issues (*assuntos*) and activities [in a notebook]... all the things that we mothers do... to save the history of the group... to understand that we are valuable people (*gente valiosa*)... er... that's to say, not vain persons, but that we make an important contribution."

To provide satisfactory answers to the questions raised, four themes have been focussed upon. First, a description was given of the historical developments of Águas, its neighbourhood Barro and the base communities it houses. From this description it became evident that from the beginning onwards women have played an important role in the formation of the neighbourhood through their participation in land occupations and in the establishment and consolidation of ecclesial base communities by their ceaseless and often innovative involvement with mothers' clubs, services, pastorates, ministries et cetera.

Second, the religious conviction of CEB-women was studied, focussing on their definition of the religious field, and their relation to the religious in general and Liberation Theology in particular. It turned out that CEB-women, just like their pastoral workers and male co-religionists, view both the religious field and general and CEBs in particular as feminine realms. Within these religious realms, however, CEB-women's religiosity is not so much characterised by a concern with the (written) Word, theological discussions and party political action, but rather by pragmatism, personalism and eclecticism in view of their care responsibility towards others. As a consequence, Liberation Theology is received and amended in the direction of localised action, organisational democratisation and personal spirituality, all of which both express and support CEB-women's preoccupation with life, survival and death. To understand this specific reception of and contribution to Liberationist Catholicism, the common practice approach as voiced by for example Bourdieu and Ortner did not suffice. After all, it does not take the factors of emotion and motivation into account, which feature so explicitly in CEB-women's life stories in the shape of directional personal experiences and the heartfelt desire to change the living conditions in Barro for the benefit of their children. Therefore, the connectionist approach of Strauss & Quinn was introduced, which provided insight into the linkage of the particular features of women's religiosity with these experiences and practices.

Third, the organisational and power aspects of women's religious lives were focused upon. Their participation in the religious life of the parish and the social activities connected to it were discussed, distinguishing between common CEB-women and female lay leaders. It was

concluded that in general CEB-women's religious and social activities are primarily carried out in the domestic terrain and shaped heavily by a this-worldly orientation, which is in consonance with their roles as mothers and wives. Also, the centrality of interpersonal co-operation or communal spirit of women's participation was noticed, which was also reflected in the non-centralised organisational style of the services and pastorates. Of these women, it was particularly those with a history of endured suffering and with an elaborate personal network in the neighbourhood who developed into inspiring, strong leaders. The question of to what extent both common CEB-women and their female leaders could be regarded as powerful or powerless proved to be rather complicated due to definitional problems concerning the notion of power. Starting from the 'billiard ball' perspective on power that takes power as the capacity to influence others the most obvious conclusion was that CEB-men, whether clergy or laity, control vital positions, resources and decision-making processes in the parish and define the limits to CEB-women's religious lives. This perspective did not explain, however, the overall felt omnipotent, evasive force or power of CEB-women. Therefore, CEB-women's own definition of power as the capacity 'to survive and live' and the so-called 'fish in the water' perspective were also discussed. This explained CEB-women's feelings of 'being in control', for which organisational decentralisation and networking served as important means.

Fourth and finally, the form and content of CEB-women's religious lives were evaluated in terms of their self-concepts or identities within the realm of CEBs. An elaborate description was provided of how CEB-women experience and position themselves and of how they were identified by the clergy and male CEB-members on the basis of their role in the ecclesial organisation and with the help of religious imagery. It turned out that the widely held assumption that identity is primarily based on the exclusion or dominance of differences did not hold true for CEB-women's identities: rather than stressing their differences from men as the Others and trying to control internal discrepancies, CEB-women rely mainly on inspiring female role models, such as their own mothers, lay leaders and the Virgin Mary, for their identification and seem to accept that femininity in the context of Águas requires apparently contradictory assets like tenderness and harshness. This observation was commented upon theoretically with reference to the work of Kristeva, who defines differences as things mutually exclusive yet not mutually exhaustive in the sense that differences do not automatically refer to either one side of two contradictory terms of a dichotomic pair; thereby, Kristeva leaves room for a view of identity as a capacity for participation in the social world that entails recognition, acceptance and expression of differences.

Of course, the empirical findings on CEB-women's religious lives at the ideological, social and personal level are interrelated. An overall image surfaces of CEB-women, who as mothers and wives take their personal experiences as a general starting-point and who are primarily preoccupied with the *care* for and *survival* of their families. Therefore, they value spiritual support from divine actors and religious specialists with whom they relate personally through an eclectic and often innovative use of rituals and symbols that center around the notion of 'life'; furthermore, they cherish cooperation with and socio-economic help from and to CEB-members with whom CEB-women preferably link up through self-founded, decentralised networks. In this way, CEB-women have made and still make an important contribution to the face of Liberationist Catholicism and ecclesial base communities today, make successful attempts to generate more power to their own understanding (for example, through the Pastorate of Health and mothers' clubs), and engage in processes of identification and differentiation that sacralise motherhood and which privilege sameness over difference, and *connection* over Otherness.

Also in theoretical respect, the conclusions of each separate chapter share common characteristics. Taking women's life experiences and perspectives as a starting-point, widely shared assumptions concerning the religious, power and identity were put up for discussion and alternative insights were offered to understand the form and content of CEB-women's religiosity. These all radiated a concern with the overcoming of well-known dichotomies between e.g. the religious system and religious practice and experience, power and powerlessness, and oneself and the Other(s). Instead, these insights stressed the importance of personal experience, activism, co-operation and inclusion. On the one hand, this reinforces a rather traditional image of women and femininity within the religious realm. At the same time, however, starting from different assumptions and defining notions differently, the analysis based on the empirical findings does not depict women consequently as irrational, powerless, deviant, or marginal to the religious system. On the contrary, CEB-women's life stories and interviews with female lay leaders show in what specific way women have contributed to the establishment, consolidation and renewal of CEBs in Águas, pinpointing to the fact that women are part of the religious system since they themselves have partly created, reproduced and renewed it. Common notions employed in the study of religion and gender, such as informal, personal, domestic et cetera, unjustly give the impression of women being apart from the religious community as a whole instead of being a part of; this study shows that in the case of South Brazilian CEBs it is exactly the personal, pragmatic and domestic are distinctive of the religious life of the majority of the poor, Aguense Catholics, which requires a redefinition of the religious.

It has also become clear throughout the book that the religious is very important to CEB-women's lives: they turn to and draw from the religious for their self-identification and social identity, it provides them with meaning and spiritual support and offers democratised forms of social organisation to tackle the ultimate questions of life. The fact that CEBs are beyond their prime seems relatively unimportant in this respect. Indeed, the numbers of CEBs and CEB-members are decreasing, but the way in which CEBs develop qua form and content appear to come every time closer to CEB-women's ideas of what is important to their religious lives. The recent change of CEBs from a focus on 'Faith and Politics' to 'Faith and Life' that parts from concrete life experiences and privileges spirituality over party politics serves as an example in case. Furthermore, in CEB-circles women's vital contribution is slowly being recognised. With the new attempt of effecting the inculturation of other 'cultures', such as "women's culture", within the daily life of CEBs full attention is given to the particularities of women's participation and contribution, thereby offering them not only a forum to speak up but also a legitimate role in further developments of the CEBs. In view of the findings of this book, however, this recent attempt seems to be a bit misplaced. Women's perceptions, intentions and practices being an intrinsic, meaningful and influential part of South-Brazilian CEBs in both cultural and social respect, a concern with the inculturation of men seems more in order.

As such, the CEBs certainly contribute to women's spiritual fulfilment, empowerment and positive self-definition. This is well phrased by a CEB-song that is always sung with heart and soul by the women of the base communities of Águas: "Who says we are nothing, who says we have nothing to offer? Look at our opened hands that carry the gifts of our life together".

From this book speaks that, as with culture, the religious is both public and private, both in the world and in people's minds, both system and experience, ideology as well as practice. Similarly, power is conceived of as being both the capacity to influence others and the ability to survive. Finally, identity was not conceived of as a sacrificial logic, but as a capacity that involves the inclusion of differences and as such a capacity to relate to others. In these pages, I have primarily paid attention to the second side of these coins to evaluate the ethnographical and

theoretical implications of CEB-women's experiences. The next step would be to study women's religious lives and men's religious lives explicitly in relation to each other, instead of treating them as separate worlds.

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Samenvatting

De Vrouwelijke Weg/‘O Jeito Feminino’ Religie, Macht en Identiteit in Zuid-Braziliaanse Basisgemeenschappen

In deze dissertatie staan twee vragen centraal. De eerste vraag is etnografisch van aard en richt zich op de vorm en inhoud die vrouwen aan hun religieuze overtuiging geven binnen Braziliaanse basisgemeenschappen (CEBs). Deze CEBs zagen begin jaren '70 het levenslicht; ze moesten de belichaming zijn van een Katholieke kerk 'voor en door de armen' en streefden naar de totstandkoming van 'God's Koninkrijk op Aarde'. De tweede vraag is meer theoretisch van karakter en heeft betrekking op de wijze waarop het religieuze leven van genoemde vrouwen zinvol geïnterpreteerd kan worden, wanneer we hun religieuze ervaringen, overtuigingen en praktijken als startpunt van analyse nemen en niet terugvallen op 'male-based' en 'male-biased' theoretische modellen en begrippen.

In het inleidende hoofdstuk van dit boek wordt duidelijk gemaakt dat deze vragen direct voortkomen uit gevoelde onvrede met bestaande etnografische beschrijvingen van de dagelijkse praxis van katholieke basisgemeenschappen en voor handen zijnde analyses van het religieuze leven van vrouwen binnen deze geloofsgroepen, die de Bevrijdingstheologie als belangrijke inspiratiebron hebben. De specifieke bijdrage van Braziliaanse vrouwen aan het spirituele gedachtengoed, de sociale organisatie en identiteitsvorming van CEBs is tot nog toe onderbelicht gebleven; bovendien is hun bijdrage te vaak geduid vanuit vooronderstelling dat het religieuze leven van vrouwen per definitie een afgeleide is van, ondergeschikt is aan en besloten ligt in het religieuze leven van mannen.

Het voorliggende boek beoogt derhalve een leemte te vullen door in zowel een etnografische beschrijving als een theoretische analyse van het religieuze leven van CEB-vrouwen te voorzien, die recht doet aan de *jeito feminino* ofwel vrouwelijke weg of wijze van geloven, organiseren en identificeren binnen de grenzen van basisgemeenschappen. Tenslotte is het, zoals Dona Nargi tijdens een bijeenkomst van één van de parochiële moederclubs opmerkte, "belangrijk dat de moeders de onderwerpen en activiteiten opschrijven... al de dingen die wij moeders doen... om de geschiedenis van onze groep te bewaren.... Om te begrijpen dat we waardevolle mensen zijn... uhm... dat wil zeggen, geen ijdele mensen, maar dat we een belangrijke bijdrage leveren".

In een poging bovengenoemde vragen bevredigend te beantwoorden, wordt in dit boek in vier afzonderlijke hoofdstukken achtereenvolgens ingegaan op de historische wortels van de bestudeerde CEBs en de vorm en inhoud van het religieuze leven van CEB-vrouwen op ideologisch-cultureel, sociaal en individueel niveau. Ten eerste wordt een geschiedbeschrijving gegeven van de stad Águas en de wijk Barro in het Zuiden van Brazilië, waar het veldwerk voor deze studie van februari 1994 tot september 1995 werd verricht; tevens wordt verhaald hoe de basisgemeenschappen zich ontwikkelden in de parochie São Pio X van Águas. Uit deze beschrijving wordt duidelijk dat de katholieke vrouwen, die met hun families vanuit naburige staten naar de moerassige, verlaten rijstplantages in Águas trokken, vanaf het allereerste begin een belangrijke rol hebben gespeeld in de wording van Barro door hun deelname aan de vele landbezettingen; tevens blijkt dat ze onlosmakelijk verbonden zijn met de oprichting en bestendiging van de basisgemeenschappen door hun onaflatende en vaak innovatieve betrokkenheid bij de moederclubs, zogenaamde diensten (*serviços*), pastoraten, et cetera.

Ten tweede komt de religieuze overtuiging van CEB-vrouwen onder het voetlicht, waarbij aandacht wordt besteed aan hun definitie van het religieuze veld, hun relatie tot 'het religieuze', en hun visie op de Bevrijdingstheologie. Duidelijk wordt dat CEB-vrouwen, net als hun mannelijke geloofsgenoten en de lokale pastorale werkers, het religieuze veld in het algemeen en basisgemeenschappen in het bijzonder beschouwen als vrouwelijke domeinen in zowel

historisch, als organisatorisch en inhoudelijk opzicht. Religie is in hun ogen eenvoudigweg 'coisa de mulher', ofwel 'iets van vrouwen', 'een vrouwenaangelegenheid'. Binnen deze vrouwelijke domeinen wordt de religiositeit van CEB-vrouwen niet zozeer gekenmerkt door een preoccupatie met het geschreven Woord, theologische discussies en partij-politieke actie op regionaal of nationaal niveau, maar veeleer door pragmatisme, personalisme en eclecticisme, die ingegeven zijn door de zorgverantwoordelijkheid van vrouwen t.o.v. afhankelijke anderen. Dientengevolge wordt de Bevrijdingstheologie, zoals hen die wordt aangereikt door de clerus, omgebogen in de richting van lokale actie, netwerkvorming en persoonlijke spirituele beleving, hetgeen zowel een uitdrukking is van als ondersteuning biedt voor de bemoeienis die vrouwen hebben met leven, overleven en de dood. Dit spreekt overduidelijk uit de religieuze vertogen die tijdens wekelijkse bijeenkomsten uit de monden van CEB-vrouwen opgetekend kunnen worden; hierin vervloeien gangbare bevrijdingstheologische begrippen, zoals onderdrukking en strijd, met noties die direct betrekking hebben op lichamelijke (bijvoorbeeld fysieke ervaringen van pijn en genot) en de lokale realiteit (bijvoorbeeld extreme armoede).

Vastgesteld wordt dat de zogenaamde praxis-benadering, zoals die bijvoorbeeld door Ortner en Bourdieu verwoord is, tekort schiet om te kunnen begrijpen hoe CEB-vrouwen het bevrijdingstheologische discours ontvangen en 'bewerken'. In deze benadering is namelijk weinig tot geen aandacht voor de invloed van emotie en motivatie, terwijl die expliciet in de levensverhalen van CEB-vrouwen terug te vinden zijn in de vorm van richtinggevende persoonlijke ervaringen en in de hoedanigheid van het verlangen om de leefomstandigheden in hun wijk Barro te verbeteren omwille van hun kinderen. Derhalve wordt de connectionistische benadering van Strauss & Quinn geïntroduceerd om het verband tussen de specifieke religiositeit van CEB-vrouwen enerzijds en deze ervaringen en praktijken anderzijds te verhelderen.

Ten derde wordt ingegaan op de sociale aspecten van het religieuze leven van CEB-vrouwen, waarbij speciale aandacht is voor het machtsvraagstuk. Voorzien wordt in een beschrijving van de participatie van vrouwen in de dagelijkse gang van zaken in de parochie São Pio X, waarbij onderscheid wordt gemaakt tussen 'gewone' CEB-vrouwen en leken leidsters. Hieruit komt naar voren dat de religieuze en sociale activiteiten van 'gewone' CEB-vrouwen zich voornamelijk binnen de 'domestieke' sfeer afspelen en op 'deze wereld' georiënteerd zijn (i.p.v. op de 'andere wereld'), hetgeen in overeenstemming is met hun rol als moeder en echtgenote. Ook wordt duidelijk dat CEB-vrouwen onderlinge samenwerking hoog in het vaandel hebben staan, wat zijn uitwerking vindt in de gedecentraliseerde organisatie van de diensten en pastoraten. Ook lekenleidsters hechten veel waarde aan een esprit van gemeenschappelijkheid, maar onderscheiden zich van 'gewone' CEB-vrouwen doordat hun religieuze leven zich (soms ver) over de grenzen van de parochie heen uitstrekt, door een persoonlijke levensgeschiedenis waarin lijden, pijn en verlies steeds terugkerende elementen zijn, en door een uitgebreid persoonlijk netwerk in de wijk.

De vraag in hoeverre zowel 'gewone' CEB-vrouwen als hun lekenleidsters als machtig of machteloos beschouwd kunnen worden, is moeilijk te beantwoorden doordat binnen de sociale wetenschappen geen sprake is van een eenduidige machtsopvatting, getuige de werken van onder anderen Elias, Lukes, Foucault en Giddens. Derhalve wordt onder verwijzing naar een studie van Brouns onderscheid gemaakt tussen het zogenaamde 'biljartbal perspectief' en het 'vis-in-het-water perspectief'. Uitgaande van het 'biljartbal perspectief', volgens welke macht wordt gedefinieerd als het vermogen anderen te beïnvloeden, is de meest voor de hand liggende conclusie dat CEB-mannen - zowel de religieuze specialisten als leken - de belangrijkste posities, bronnen en besluitvormingsprocessen in de parochie controleren en derhalve in staat zijn duidelijke grenzen te stellen aan het religieuze leven van CEB-vrouwen. Dit perspectief

maakt echter niet inzichtelijk waarom de meeste inwoners van Águas van mening zijn dat vrouwen over een alomvattende, doch moeilijk grijpbare macht of kracht beschikken. Daarom wordt ook verwezen naar het zogenaamde ‘vis-in-het-water perspectief’ en de machtsdefinitie van de betrokken CEB-vrouwen, die macht opvatten als het vermogen om te overleven in moeilijke omstandigheden, waarvoor organisatorische decentralisatie en netwerkvorming belangrijke elementen zijn.

Ten vierde wordt de vorm en inhoud van het religieuze leven van CEB-vrouwen geëvalueerd in termen van identiteitsvorming. Hiertoe wordt een uitgebreide beschrijving gegeven van hoe CEB-vrouwen zichzelf en anderen ervaren en positioneren, en hoe zij door de clerus en anderen gezien worden op basis van hun rol in de basisgemeenschappen en met hulp van religieuze beelden. De gangbare vooronderstelling dat identiteitsvorming geworteld is in het buitensluiten of domineren van ‘Verschil’ lijkt geen opgang te doen voor processen van identiteitsvorming bij CEB-vrouwen: in plaats van te benadrukken hoe zij van mannen als belichaming van ‘de Ander’ verschillen en in plaats van pogingen te ondernemen om intrapersoonlijk gevoelde discrepanties op te heffen, vallen CEB-vrouwen voor hun identificatie voornamelijk terug op inspirerende vrouwelijke rolmodellen (zoals hun eigen moeders, lekenleidsters en de Maagd Maria) en lijken zij te accepteren dat vrouwelijkheid in de context van Águas noodzakelijkerwijs ogenschijnlijk tegenstrijdige kenmerken in zich verenigt, zoals tederheid en hardheid.

Deze observatie wordt theoretisch toegelicht door te verwijzen naar het werk van Kristeva, die verschillen definieert als dingen die elkaar buitensluiten doch elkaar niet uitputtend uitsluiten, in de zin dat verschillen niet automatisch naar één zijde van twee contradictoire termen van een dichotomie verwijzen. Hierdoor laat Kristeva ruimte voor een visie op identiteit als het vermogen om in de ons omringende sociale wereld te participeren; in dit vermogen liggen erkenning, acceptatie, integratie en uitdrukking van verschillen besloten.

Het empirische materiaal over het religieuze leven van CEB-vrouwen op ideologisch, sociaal en individueel niveau dat in dit boek gepresenteerd wordt vertoont een zekere samenhang. Er komt een beeld bovendien van CEB-vrouwen, die als moeder en echtgenote hun persoonlijke ervaringen als belangrijkste startpunt nemen en die zich primair bezighouden met de zorg voor en het overleven van hun families. Dientengevolge hechten zij grote waarde aan de spirituele ondersteuning die hen door goddelijke entiteiten en religieuze specialisten geboden wordt en aan wie zij zich persoonlijk verbinden door een eclectisch en vaak creatief gebruik van rituelen en symbolen die om ‘leven’ (*vida*) draaien. Voorts koesteren zij samenwerking met en socio-economische hulp van en aan andere CEB-leden, met wie CEB-vrouwen bij voorkeur in contact staan via door hen zelf opgerichte en vormgegeven gedecentraliseerde netwerken. Op deze manier drukken CEB-vrouwen een belangrijke stempel op het gezicht van de Bevrijdingstheologie en basisgemeenschappen vandaag de dag, slagen ze erin om enigermate controle te krijgen over het overleven van hun families (en dus macht te genereren), en geven ze op dusdanige wijze vorm aan hun eigen identiteit dat ‘Eender zijn’ en verbondenheid prevaleren boven ‘Anders zijn’ en afgescheiden zijn.

Ook in theoretisch opzicht is een rode draad te ontdekken in de bevindingen van de afzonderlijke hoofdstukken. Bij het analyseren van het hierboven beschreven empirische materiaal blijkt dat gangbare vooronderstellingen rondom religie, macht en identiteit ter discussie komen te staan, en dat er alternatieve visies nodig zijn om de vorm en inhoud van het religieuze leven van CEB-vrouwen goed te kunnen analyseren en zinvol te kunnen duiden. Deze visies hebben gemeen dat zij allemaal een poging zijn om halsstarrige dichotomieën in het sociaal-wetenschappelijk verloop te overstijgen, bijvoorbeeld die dichotomieën waarin het

onderscheid systeem-praxis, macht-onmacht, Zelf -Ander als vanzelfsprekend wordt vastgelegd, waarbij de tweede zijde onveranderlijk met vrouwelijkheid wordt geassocieerd. In plaats daarvan worden theoretische modellen en begrippen naar voren geschoven, waarin de twee zijden van dergelijke dichotomieën steeds meer 'samenvallen' en waarmee zichtbaar kan worden gemaakt dat het leven van CEB-vrouwen zich in het middengebied hiervan afspeelt i.p.v. aan de marge.

Hiermee lijkt het empirische materiaal in dit boek - waarin zorg, overleven en verbondenheid als belangrijkste aandachtsvelden in het leven van CEB-vrouwen in Águas figuren - reeds bestaande, tamelijk traditionele beelden van vrouwen en vrouwelijkheid op het religieuze terrein te versterken. Echter, door gangbare vooronderstellingen te herzien en de definiëring van centrale begrippen als 'religie', 'macht' en 'identiteit' te heroverwegen, komen de religieuze levens van CEB-vrouwen in de analyse vervolgens niet naar voren als levens die gekenmerkt worden door irrationaliteit, machteloosheid, afhankelijkheid, of marginaliteit, zoals vaak in andere studies wordt gesuggereerd. In tegendeel: de levensgeschiedenissen van CEB-vrouwen en interviews met hun leidsters laten zien welke bijdrage zij hebben geleverd aan de oprichting, consolidatie en vernieuwing van de katholieke basissgemeenschappen in Águas, waarmee benadrukt wordt dat vrouwen intrinsiek onderdeel zijn van het religieuze systeem aangezien zijzelf dit systeem deels gecreëerd, gereproduceerd en vernieuwd hebben. Het gangbare gebruik van begrippen als 'informeel', 'persoonlijk', en 'domestiek' in de bestudering van de religiositeit van vrouwen geeft vaak ten onrechte de indruk dat vrouwen 'apart' van hun religieuze gemeenschap opereren i.p.v. dat zij er 'a part' van zijn; deze studie toont aan dat in het geval van Zuid-Braziliaanse basissgemeenschappen juist het persoonlijke, pragmatische en domestieke kenmerkende elementen van het religieuze leven van de meerderheid van de arme bevolking zijn.

Uit deze studie wordt ook duidelijk dat 'het religieuze' een belangrijke rol speelt in het leven van CEB-vrouwen: zij richten zich op en putten uit het religieuze voor hun individuele en sociale identiteit vorm te geven, het religieuze helpt hen om betekenis en zin te geven en voorziet in spirituele ondersteuning, en het biedt hen ook een veld waar gedemocratiseerde vormen van sociale organisatie tot stand kunnen komen om dagelijkse problemen het hoofd te bieden. Het feit dat CEBs hun hoogtijdagen al achter de rug hebben lijkt in dit opzicht tamelijk irrelevant te zijn. Het aantal basissgemeenschappen en CEB-leden daalt dan wel gestaag, maar de richting waarin CEBs zich ontwikkelen lijkt het religieuze ideaal van CEB-vrouwen steeds dichterbij te komen. De recente overgang van een focus op 'Geloof en Politiek' naar 'Geloof en Leven', waarin concrete (levens)ervaringen en spiritualiteit centraal staan is hiervoor illustratief. Voorts wordt de belangrijke bijdrage van CEB-vrouwen aan het (voort)bestaan van basissgemeenschappen langzaam maar zeker erkend. In een poging om de 'inculturatie' van andere culturen - zoals 'de vrouwencultuur' (*cultura da mulher*) - binnen CEBs te effectueren, wordt in de dagelijkse praktijk van kerkzijn binnen CEBs steeds meer gepoogd ruimte te bieden aan de specifieke inbreng van vrouwen; dit biedt hen niet alleen een forum om zich uit te spreken, maar ook een legitimatie om hun rol van betekenis te blijven vervullen. In het licht van de bevindingen van dit boek is een dergelijke poging echter enigszins misplaatst; aangezien de visies, intenties, en praktijken van vrouwen een intrinsiek, betekenisvol en invloedrijk deel uitmaken van Zuid-Braziliaanse basissgemeenschappen, in zowel cultureel als sociaal opzicht, lijkt de noodzaak tot 'inculturatie' van mannen vooralsnog groter.

Al met al kan gezegd worden dat de bijdrage van de Katholieke vrouwen in Águas gezichtsbepalend is voor de lokale CEBs, en dat hun participatie in deze basissgemeenschappen doorgaans positief uitwerkt op spiritueel, sociaal en persoonlijk vlak. Dit wordt goed verwoord door een CEB-lied, dat de katholieke vrouwen van Águas wekelijks met hart en ziel zingen op

groepsbijeenkomsten: “Wie zegt dat we niets zijn, wie zegt dat we niets te bieden hebben? Kijk naar onze geopende handen, die de vruchten dragen van ons samenleven”.