

# PORTUGUESE DEMOCRATIZATION 50 YEARS LATER: THE IRRUPTION OF RELIGION INTO OFFICIAL MEMORY<sup>1</sup>

Democratização portuguesa 50 anos depois:  
a irrupção da religião na memória oficial

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates how the most significantly involved political actors in the official commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the April 25<sup>th</sup> 1974 revolution retrieved the role of the Catholic Church at the end of the authoritarian regime and in the process of transition to democracy. After a brief account of the historical context that situates the events evoked by the commemorations, the mobilization of the subject is explored. It is argued that the projected representation benefits a bloc of the political spectrum, namely the left, and that it obeyed purely political objectives, without inscribing or representing any change in the institutional relationship of public powers, that is, of the State with the Catholic Church. The aim of this article is to provide a starting point for research on the political uses of the past regarding religion and, in particular, Portuguese Catholicism.

## **Keywords**

25 de Abril; authoritarianism; democratization; Catholic church; Portugal.

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**Resumo**

Este artigo investiga a forma como os atores políticos mais significativamente envolvidos no ciclo de comemorações oficiais do cinquentenário do 25 de Abril de 1974 recuperaram o papel da Igreja Católica no final do regime autoritário e no processo de transição para a democracia. Depois de um breve relato do contexto histórico que situa os acontecimentos convocados pelas comemorações, explora-se a mobilização do tema. Argumenta-se que a representação projetada beneficia um bloco do espectro político, designadamente a esquerda, e que obedeceu a objetivos puramente políticos, sem inscrever ou significar qualquer mudança no relacionamento institucional dos poderes públicos, ou seja, do Estado com a Igreja Católica. O objetivo deste artigo é fornecer um ponto de partida para a investigação sobre os usos políticos do passado no tocante à religião e, em particular, ao catolicismo português.

**Palavras-chave**

25 de Abril; autoritarismo; democratização; Igreja Católica; Portugal.

**Resumen**

Este artículo investiga cómo los actores políticos más implicados en las conmemoraciones oficiales del quincuagésimo aniversario de la Revolución del 25 de abril de 1974 rescataron el papel de la Iglesia católica al final del régimen autoritario y en el proceso de transición a la democracia. Tras un breve recuento del contexto histórico que sitúa los eventos evocados por las conmemoraciones, se explora la movilización del sujeto. Se argumenta que la representación proyectada beneficia a un bloque del espectro político, concretamente a la izquierda, y que obedeció a objetivos puramente políticos, sin inscribir ni representar ningún cambio en la relación institucional de los poderes públicos, es decir, del Estado con la Iglesia católica. El objetivo de este artículo es proporcionar un punto de partida para la investigación sobre los usos políticos del pasado en relación con la religión y, en particular, el catolicismo portugués.

**Palabras clave**

25 de abril; autoritarismo; democratización; Iglesia Católica; Portugal.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In Portugal, the official commemorations of the military coup of April 25, 1974, and the subsequent democratization process have offered, over the past fifty years, opportunities to debate the authoritarian past and assess the consolidation of democracy, albeit with the clear aim of legitimizing the regime. In fact, fifty years after the transition to democracy, it amounts to no more than restating what has already become part of the canon of democracy in previous celebrations. These moments, varying in duration on the political calendar, organized to celebrate the end of the authoritarian regime and the transition to democratization, have converged on the subordination of historical phenomena, enhancing instead archetypes of the democratic regime (Sá, 2024). As such, they represent particularly fitting moments for projecting an intangible heritage, stabilized over the years, composed of ideals —namely freedom, equality, and fraternity, in a deliberate evocation of the trilogy of values of the French Revolution; of heroes— for instance, the people, as the first intelligible collective subject, authentic and fighting for a new direction for the country’s trajectory, or Salgueiro Maia, a military figure who became the personification of the armed forces’ victory over an “illegitimated civil power”, to use a phrase by philosopher and essayist Eduardo Lourenço (2013: 68); of symbols —for example, the carnation, a number of songs, such as those broadcast to signal the start of military operations (“Grândola, Vila Morena”, by singer-songwriter José Afonso, and “E depois do adeus”, with lyrics by José Niza and music by José Calvário), or the poem by Sophia de Mello Breyner, “Esta é a madrugada que eu esperava”; of achievements— which coincide with the three objectives of the Armed Forces Program: democracy, development, and decolonization.

The most widespread representations of the past in official commemorations still spring from a formulation, specific to each situation, of public

history, whose connection with the historical analysis of the transition phenomenon, despite the various academic contributions and developments produced in different academic settings both inside and outside Portugal, has varied in extent and intensity, even if blatantly second-ranking the latter. The explanation for this may reside in the contentious nature of the Portuguese transition, in which competing and strongly opposed visions of the model of democracy to be established played out, which historical and political analyses ought not to obliterate. Hence, when the goal is to ensure the reproduction of a shared social representation of the past as positive, victorious, and cohesive, as is the case with official commemorations, the complexity of the conflicts and of the agency-laden nature of the transition and consolidation process of democracy is downplayed or simply dismissed (Ribeiro, 2011).

It has been more common to integrate memories (of individual or collective subjects) into the projected representations of the past and, through these, into the public history that is disseminated, although the memories themselves are not exempt from the complexity and discord present in the genesis of democracy and its consolidation process. In managing memories, there has been an alternation in discourses, different emphases, as well as selective amnesias (Loff, 2014; Cardina, 2013; Cruzeiro, 2016; Jalali, 2004; Raimundo and Almeida, 2019), depending on specific objectives, more or less conjunctural, of the elites charged with constructing the meaning of the transition and of the consolidation of democracy. This shows that the existing diversity of memories has not represented a limit or an insurmountable problem for the agents tasked with framing political situations, such as the official commemorations, as a means of creating and reproducing historical memory. The usefulness of those memories lies therefore in its plasticity, necessary for constructing the worldview intended to be imposed, for creating identities, or, as Tilly (2006) argues, even for developing repertoires of collective action.

These perspectives are evident in how official actors, on the fiftieth anniversary of the “Carnation Revolution”, have updated the official memory of the transition to democracy. In this case, which deserves to be highlighted from the outset even though the commemorative cycle is currently ongoing, the update steps away from the reproduction or highlighting of different emphases on characters, events, policies, and introduces an element of novelty. This novelty, in my view, is the emergence of religion in the elaboration of the official memory. For the first time, there was an official commemoration, in the presence of high state dignitaries, of two episodes that are part of the history of Portuguese Catholicism in the 20th century and that have been highlighted as significant moments in the organization of Catholic dissent against the autocratic political power, both by historiography (Rosas, 1999; Almeida, 2008; Barreto, 2004; Araújo, 2011), and by memoirs (Lopes, 2007).

These are the vigils for peace, held in 1969 and 1973, respectively at the Church of São Domingos and the Chapel of Rato, both in Lisbon.

The present article analyzes this new dimension of the official memory, exploring how the role of the Portuguese Catholic Church in the final years of authoritarianism and its connection to the democratization process were invoked. It is argued that the projected representation benefits a bloc of the partisan spectrum, notably the left, and that it pursued purely political goals, without inscribing or embodying any change in the institutional relationship of the public powers, that is, of the State with the Catholic Church. The analysis attended to the interaction between the official actors and the Catholics who participated in the official commemoration of those vigils. Although attention was given to the various receptions of the constructed representation, its exhaustive survey was not undertaken, which only more in-depth research may ascertain, including testing whether political forces situated outside the left-wing bloc felt seduced by the representation of the past that was produced. The research focused on the strategies of the 50th Anniversary of April 25th Commemoration Commission, and of the President of the Republic and the members of the XXIII Constitutional Government, reconstructed from interviews, press releases, newsletters, mostly collected in national newspapers. From these sources, the behavior of the Rato Chapel community and some Catholic media about the commemorations held was also observed. The article unfolds in the following way. In section 2, I present a brief account of the historical context in which the vigils were held and characterize the relationship between the State and the Catholic Church towards the end of authoritarianism. Next, I investigate the mobilization of the theme in the context of the commemorations, linking it to how the management of the legacies of authoritarianism and the transition was carried out in terms of religion. I speculate about what was neglected and which conflicting dynamics, at play at the time, within the Catholic Church but also between the State and the Catholic Church, were kept hidden. In section 4, I investigate the constructed mnemonic signifiers and their impact. I conclude by asking whether the strategy of introducing religion into the official memory holds a potential for expansion, in these or in future commemorations of April 25th.

## **II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE PEACE VIGILS OF 1969 AND 1973 AND THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH WITH THE STATE TOWARDS THE END OF AUTHORITARIANISM**

Between 1961 and 1974, Portugal was engaged in armed military conflicts in the African territories under Portuguese administration, Angola,

Guinea, and Mozambique (where the war only broke out in 1964), seeking to quell uprisings led by the main liberation movements (National Front for the Liberation of Angola: FNLA; Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola; National Union for the Total Independence of Angola: UNITA; African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde: PAIGC; Mozambique Liberation Front: FRELIMO), which demanded the right to self-determination and an end to Portuguese colonization. The perpetuation of the colonial wars increasingly became a major reason for the rise in opposition to the Portuguese government, instigating divisions among Catholics, with sectors dissenting from the regime, aligned with the emancipation of peoples and opposing the idea of an empire and demanding an immediate stop to the war (Fontes, 2002; Almeida, 2008; Ferreira, 1999).

In this environment, in 1969, following instructions from the Holy See received in August 1968, the Portuguese bishops, through the Portuguese Episcopal Conference (CEP), instituted the celebration of World Peace Day, created by Pope Paul VI and scheduled for the first day of January each year, under a specific motto. The celebrations might involve religious celebrations, vigils, and educational initiatives. Since its establishment, the date prompted protests against the regime and criticisms from the opposition, many voiced by Catholics, regarding the continuation of the colonial war or the limitations of rights and freedoms imposed by the public powers. The first of these occasions was the 1969 vigil, organized by a group of laypeople at the Church of S. Domingos in Lisbon, which gathered 150 people and denounced, through a manifesto, what they considered to be a complacency of the ecclesiastical hierarchy with the State (allegedly expressed in the pastoral note of the Day of Peace of 1970), substantiated by a lack of condemnation of the war and colonial policy by the bishops. The impact of the initiative was not substantial. Although publicized to some extent, in the newspapers the following day, the case did not galvanize public opinion. However, it created further tensions within the Church of Lisbon, notably with the patriarch, D. Manuel Gonçalves Cerejeira, who condemned the instrumentalization of the meeting to carry out what he deemed an attack on the positioning of the episcopate, as well as the involvement of members of the clergy. On the same day, in Porto, another Catholic group distributed pamphlets at the entrances of churches, discussing the continuation of the war and the issue of peace in light of the new conciliar doctrine and papal guidelines. That same year, the first Justice and Peace Commission was created in that diocese, under the guidance of the local bishop, which in coordination with the Pontifical Commission of the same name, allowed the circulation of information about human rights violations in Portugal, managing to circumvent the surveillance of the police authorities (Almeida, 2008: 240-242).

Years later, in 1972, World Peace Day again served to denounce the scourge of war, also through the voice of the Porto prelate, D. António Ferreira Gomes, who would declare: “the hierarchy is [...] present at the war locally by the chaplains; and these chaplains impress us and scare us with their ‘military’ virtues”.<sup>2</sup> By questioning the support that the priests were lending to the combatants in the war in Africa, the bishop showed a distancing from the activity of religious assistance provided to the armed forces, as supported by the Portuguese episcopate and the Holy See, and made a clear, albeit not explicit, criticism of the government’s policy of prolonging that military conflict. The episode sparked lively discussion at the National Assembly, in which interventions were made both condemning and defending D. António Ferreira Gomes’ position. Despite the climate of political tension that the case aroused, the Executive, led by the former professor at University of Lisbon’s Faculty of Law, Marcelo Caetano, took no public position on the matter (Santos, 2011: 197-199).

On the night of December 30, 1972, another peace vigil was held. This time, at the Rato Chapel in Lisbon, promoted by some members of that community linked to the *Anticolonial Bulletin* group (a clandestine publication whose editors maintained relations with political organizations, also clandestine) advocating armed fight to overthrow the regime, such as: the League of Revolutionary Unity and Action (LUAR); the Revolutionary Brigades (BR) and the National Front for Popular Liberation (FPLN)). The initiative connected non-believers linked to opposition circles and the same was communicated, although without details of the action, to the ecclesiastical leader of that community and to the new patriarch of Lisbon (in office since November 1971), D. António Ribeiro. At the evening mass of December 30, 1972, a small group of members of the congregation announced the intention to remain inside the chapel for the following 48 hours, to reflect on peace and especially on the war being waged in the Portuguese overseas territories. Concurrently, outside, the Revolutionary Brigades publicized the initiative, launching, through petards (which injured two children severely), pamphlets in various points of the city and its surroundings, calling for solidarity with the participants—among whom were some relevant figures from Lisbon’s political and cultural circles, such as Sophia de Mello Breyner, Francisco de Sousa Tavares, and Francisco Pereira de Moura. This action by the BR triggered the intervention of the riot police, which arrived at that place of worship, early in the evening of December 31, where twenty people had begun a voluntary fast in protest against the colonial war. The space was evacuated and all the people

<sup>2</sup> *Voz Portucalense*, 8 January 1972, p. 1 and central.

present were arrested, some later released on bail. Among the detainees, fourteen people were taken to the dungeons of the Civil Government of Lisbon and later transferred to Caxias Fort, where they remained incommunicado. Police orders were also given to close the Rato Chapel that night and the following day, which D. António Ribeiro objected to, ordering that the religious services scheduled for the night of the 31st and the morning of January 1 continued to take place. At the end of the latter Eucharist, the priests who had conducted the celebration, Fathers António Janela and Armindo Garcia, were arrested by two agents of the Public Security Police (PSP). At the Chapel, evacuated in the interim, the police remained on guard at the door. Upon being informed of the arrest of the two priests, the patriarch sent his personal secretary, António Paes, to demand their release from the police. After only Father Garcia being released, D. António personally appeared at the headquarters of the General Security Directorate (DGS), demanding that Father Janela also be set free. Waiting several hours in those facilities until his request was met, he left the place only with the priest by his side (Araújo, 2004: 432-438; Almeida, 2008: 268-274).

The episode sparked a cascade of events. Over the following weeks, the patriarch was pressured by the political police to hand over the text read at the vigil, penned by the participants, a demand to which he never yielded. He also received direct criticism from the Minister of Home Affairs, Gonçalves Rapazote (Santos, 2021: 281). At once, both national and international public attention focused on the unprecedented nature of the police action (its occurrence in a place of worship and the detention of such a large number of people) and on the compulsory dismissal or termination of employment contracts of the detained civil servants. An appeal against this measure was filed with the Supreme Administrative Court by lawyers already renowned for their connections to the Opposition (among them, Francisco Salgado Zenha, Francisco de Sousa Tavares, and Jorge Sampaio) (Zenha, 1973). At the National Assembly, some deputies from the so-called “liberal wing”<sup>3</sup> criticized the intervention of the authorities. For example, lawyer Francisco Sá Carneiro

<sup>3</sup> A heterogeneous group of parliamentarians in the 10th and 11th legislatures, some openly Catholic, who in the exercise of their duties exerted some political pressure on the Executive on issues such as the restoration of fundamental freedoms, a political solution to the wars in Africa, the possibility of a transition to a Western-style pluralist democracy. Their action in the National Assembly has been analyzed under the category of “opposition”, with little emphasis on their lack of unanimity on some of the divisive political issues; the absence of leadership in the group; the viability they provided to some political decisions (made by either the Government or the parliament).



requested clarifications from the Government on the matter, while Professor Miller Guerra resigned from his parliamentary mandate. A number of ambassadors serving in Portugal requested interviews with the Bishop of Lisbon, seeking information on the Church's future strategy regarding the regime (Wery, 1994: 64). The proportions of the situation led the head of government to take a public stance, in a speech broadcast on radio and television, in which he reiterated the principles guiding the continuation of the Portuguese presence in Africa, pleaded the war effort, and accused the ecclesiastical authorities of deliberately refusing to intervene with those who had promoted the vigil, thereby warranting the police intervention and the detention of some participants. Abroad, the Rato Chapel case elicited protests from some European intellectuals and was harshly commented on in the international press, especially the police violence used against the protesters. To ensure that information circulated outside of Portugal, several Catholics and opposition members, some in exile, mobilized (Santos, 2011: 202-204).

Within the Church, particularly in the diocese of Lisbon, the events at Rato Chapel proved to be divisive. The publication of a note from the Patriarchate—in which the bishop, despite considering the principle that inspired the meeting legitimate and criticizing the actions of the police for intervening in a place of worship, disapproved of “certain abusive procedures, [...] in a manner and for purposes” that the diocesan authority “could not consent to” (Zenha, 1973: 62-64)—worsened an already highly emotional climate. This led to reactions from various Catholic sectors, some applauding the bishop's position and others repudiating the content of the document. For critics, it was a missed opportunity for the episcopate to condemn the colonial wars and the government's policy. From then on, a complex and difficult confrontation between the Rato community and D. António Ribeiro developed whose repercussions lasted for decades. The confrontation was rooted in a number of open letters from the parish priest Alberto Neto, responsible for the Rato community, published on January 8 and 11, 1973, criticizing D. António's attitude, especially the tone of the Patriarchate's note, in language considered provocative, which further polarized opinions about the case. An attitude of disaffection among the critics of the patriarch persisted, fueled by his decision to transfer Father Alberto Neto to another parish. There were also other manifestations, notably a petition with 643 signatures put forward by members of the Rato community, threatening both to reject the next priest assigned to them by the diocesan authority and to report the situation to Pope Paul VI. It was also in this environment that some Catholics, in solidarity with the Rato community, undertook the creation of a Justice and Peace movement in Lisbon. In January 1974, protests against the prolongation of the colonial wars and limitations on civic freedoms recurred in some

churches, for example in Porto under the organization of several priests (Santos, 2021: 262-263; Almeida, 2008: 275-276).

Despite the whirlwind of events surrounding the Rato Chapel case, the episode itself did not have major consequences for the relationship between the State and the Catholic Church. The replacement of Salazar by Marcelo Caetano, a significant political event, did not bring about substantive changes to that relationship, which continued to be governed by the same structuring norms: maintenance of the principle of the State's secularity, with a refusal to accept any religious considerations as a legitimizing source of civil power; recognition of the autonomy of the Catholic Church, with the establishment of a collaborative separation, without the state relinquishing mechanisms to monitor religious activity; establishment of specific norms for the Catholic Church, positively discriminated compared to other religious confessions, but highly dependent on the Executive's understanding of the religious phenomenon; tolerance of religious diversity, where religious freedom, although recognized, remained mitigated; and, finally, the political demobilization of Catholics, restricting their politically organized intervention to the sphere of the National Union. Upon assuming the presidency of the Government, Caetano did not touch these principles and simply upheld the cooperation with the Church in areas of mixed matters, such as education and assistance, which had been increased (through co-financing) since the beginning of the 1960s. Regarding the Catholic sectors contesting the regime, facing the diversification of their actions in urban areas, he intensified repression. During his government, various Catholic publications were subjected to censorship, surveillance over suspects of "subversion" was increased, and the number of detentions of laypeople and clergy members (especially missionaries working in Portuguese colonies in Africa) grew. He held the so-called "Catholic progressivism" responsible for the contestation directed at the colonial war and for exposing many Catholics to Marxist socialism, and the religious authorities for not ensuring the obedience deemed necessary to comply with the established power (Santos, 2016: 497-501, 504-509).

What in 1973 was perceived as the germ of change in the relationship between the State and the Church had other origins. Since the middle of the previous decade, the Holy See had undergone a change in political strategy regarding Portugal, with the intention of promoting the disengagement of the Portuguese Church from the authoritarian regime. Critical of Portuguese colonial policy, Paul VI had begun promoting the autochthonization and autonomization of the episcopates in Angola and Mozambique, anticipating future processes of decolonization and independence in those territories. Regarding the metropolis, Vatican authorities believed in the inevitability of

the country evolving, in the short or medium term, towards a democratic regime and, in that sense, showed themselves from 1971 to be little cooperative with Caetano's Government. For example, in 1970, the Holy See voiced, through its apostolic nuncio, the process of constitutional revision, and rejected the Portuguese proposal to revoke article XXIV of the Concordat, which allowed the granting of divorce for canonical marriages.

The most significant Vatican gesture towards a new relationship with Portugal involved, however, the appointment of D. António Ribeiro as bishop of Lisbon in 1971, with the aim of providing the Portuguese episcopate with leadership capable of resisting potential crises with the regime and of managing the situation of the Church in a context of political change. In a short time, the young patriarch changed the positioning of the religious authority vis-à-vis the State, although, as intended by the Holy See, without pursuing divisions that might lead the Government to denounce the concordat regime. He refused nationalist formulas for evangelization, defended the recognition of the autonomy of both Church and State, admitting mutual cooperation without fiefdoms and within a framework of legitimate freedom (Ribeiro, 1996: 13-26), supported the value of pluralism, driving, in 1973, the Portuguese Episcopal Conference itself to confer religious legitimacy to the situation of political plurality existing in the Catholic field (Portuguese Episcopal Conference, 1978: 110-125). He would also question the procedures of political power, notably in situations of human rights violations and the use of violence in repression, both publicly, as in the case of the Rato Chapel, and through official but unpublicized approaches, directly challenging Marcelo Caetano on several occasions throughout 1973, for example regarding the detention of Catholics by the political police or the government prohibition on the circulation of a document from the Episcopal Conference of Mozambique (CEM) concerning the Wiriamu massacres, which had taken place in Tete (October 1972). These massacres, perpetrated against the native populations by Portuguese military personnel, galvanized the political and ecclesiastical atmosphere in the closing months of the regime. The international community condemned the events and exacerbated the hostility against Portugal. At the same time, relations between the Portuguese State and the Holy See deteriorated abruptly, two months before April 25, following the expulsion and demand for the return to Lisbon of the bishop of Nampula, D. Manuel Vieira Pinto, and of a number of Combonian missionaries. They had denounced the massacres, called for the recognition of the claims of the liberation movements, the denunciation of the concordat agreements, and the renunciation of collaboration with the State in education (Reis and Oliveira, 2012; Santos, 2021: 285-288).

### III. THE MOBILIZATION OF THE SUBJECT

It being an anniversary unlike any other, associated not only with the fiftieth year since the April 25th coup but also with democracy having reached a significant lifespan in the country, the celebrations of the “Carnation Revolution’s” fiftieth anniversary began to be prepared in 2021, earlier than previous official commemorations of that event. The leadership of the democratic Portugal’s XXII Government was held by the Socialist Party (PS), supported by an informal coalition with left-wing parties holding parliamentary seats, the historic Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), and Bloco de Esquerda (inheritor of the Trotskyist and Maoist legacies, which absorbed several smaller parties: Unidade Democrática Popular –UDP, Política XXI, and Partido Socialista Revolucionário-PSR). In the 2022 legislative elections, achieving an absolute majority, PS formed the government again. The informal coalition from the previous government was dissolved, but both PCP and BE preserved common ground with the PS. The continuity between legislatures, with the same political force leading the Executive, determined that it was not necessary to rethink the strategy already outlined for those official celebrations. There were no changes to the National Commission for the 50th Anniversary of April 25th, composed of the holders of the sovereignty bodies and also the president of the April 25th Association, colonel Vasco Lourenço, who had been one of the captains leading the 1974 military coup. The only difference involved the change in the executive commissionership of the Mission Structure for the Celebrations of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the April 25<sup>th</sup> 1974 Revolution, which ceased to be headed by the sociologist Pedro Adão e Silva, meanwhile appointed Minister of Culture and replaced by the historian Maria Inácia Rezola. Despite this change, Adão e Silva, by virtue of his new duties, retained oversight of the Mission Structure, which conserved all options and programmatic lines previously decided by the XXII Government.

One of these options involved dedicating the period from March 2022 –the beginning of the celebrations –to April 2024 to the social and political movements that created the conditions for the military coup. Within this framework, which officially did not detail the closing date that would limit such a “composition”, the overall subject of the Catholics’ opposition to the dictatorship was revived, the vigil at Rato Chapel being selected as the event to be highlighted. During the same time frame, from March 2022 to April 2024, and still within that option, the commemoration commission retrieved other topics: the student struggles in the sixties; the final of the 1969 Portuguese football cup, between Benfica and Académica, during which the student movement also made itself heard; the assassination by the political police of a Law student at the University of Lisbon, Ribeiro Santos; the publication of

the book *New Portuguese Letters* by three female authors; the political reflection meeting promoted by the “liberal wing” in July 1973; the last political interventions of Amílcar Cabral, founder of the PAIGC, before his assassination in January 1973 by elements of his own party; the creation of the captains’ movement, in Alcáçovas; the Óbidos meeting, in which the Armed Forces Movement was put together; the 1973 Opposition congress, held in Aveiro. On the whole, the remembrance of these events was achieved through exhibitions, with the publication of their respective catalogs, documentaries, and theater plays, roundtables gathering historical actors and academics, decorations by the President of the Republic, Grand Master of the Portuguese Honorary Orders. The website of the National Commission for the 50 Years of April 25th, particularly the page dedicated to news about the promoted activities, let us know that the prioritized events were the student struggles, the assassination of Ribeiro Santos, and the vigils at São Domingos and Rato Chapel.

Of the two vigils, the one taking place at Rato Chapel received the most attention. The Mission Structure promoted, on December 8th, 2022, a session at the Church of São Domingos itself, which counted with the participation of the President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, the Minister of National Defense, Helena Carreiras, Canon António Janela, and university professor Luís Moita, participants in that action. The event also included the exhibition “Peace is Possible. The Vigil of Rato Chapel and the Opposition to the Colonial War”<sup>4</sup>. Days later, at Rato Chapel, the historic vigil was celebrated, also through a session that gathered protagonists, both organizers and participants, such as physician Isabel do Carmo, former leader of the Revolutionary Brigades, journalist Jorge Wemans, and Francisco Cordovil. At the end of the session, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa decorated the Rato community, in the person of its current chaplain, Father António Martins, with the Order of Liberty. Outside the building, a commemorative plaque of the vigil was unveiled by three political figures – Minister Adão e Silva, the Mayor of Lisbon – elected by the Social Democratic Party – Carlos Moedas, and President Rebelo de Sousa. The following day, at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Lisbon), in partnership with the Center of Religious History Studies of the Portuguese Catholic University, the Civil House of the Presidency of the Republic, the municipalities of Lisbon and Vila Viçosa, the public broadcasting television and the Ephemeris Archive of the social-democratic politician and former militant of the Communist Party of Portugal (Marxist-Leninist), José Pacheco Pereira, a new session in remembrance of the vigil was held, led

<sup>4</sup> <https://is.gd/nzPyIW>.

by four historians, one of them, António Matos Ferreira, at the time a student and member of the Catholic Student Youth, and organizer of that vigil. In the following month of January, the public television would broadcast the documentary *A Gesture of Freedom. "War and Peace" at Rato Chapel*, authored by RTP1 journalist Jacinto Godinho and camera reporter Carlos Oliveira, presented at the Arpad Szenes-Vieira da Silva Foundation (Lisbon)<sup>5</sup>. Finally, in March 2024, the Commemorative Commission inaugurated a Memorial to the Vigil of Rato Chapel, materialized by a sculpture by artist Cristina Ataíde, in Amoreiras Garden (Lisbon), in the vicinity of the Chapel, which integrates the premises where the PS headquarters is currently located. This ceremony was again attended by the Mayor of Lisbon and Minister Adão e Silva<sup>6</sup>.

The plethora of events enabled the elaboration of a narrative that emphasized five main aspects. The first, that the "overthrow of the dictatorship began much earlier [than April 25th]" and that in this process, there was "a Catholic mobilization in preparation for the overthrow". This idea was systematically conveyed by several members of the Commission, with commissioner Inácia Rezola emphasizing that the contestation of the regime had begun within the movements of Catholic Action, particularly within its youth organizations. She claimed, however, that the Rato Chapel represented a more significant moment as it involved both Christians and non-Christians<sup>7</sup>. On some occasions, Inácia Rezola highlighted the opposition led by some members of the clergy and the episcopate to Salazar's regime, naming cases such as those of father Abel Varzim, the Bishop of Porto, D. António Ferreira Gomes, and Father António Janela (in the celebrated vigils)<sup>8</sup>. This argument was further enlarged, however, by the President of the Republic, who declared, upon awarding the Order of Liberty to the Rato community, that the incident triggered by the vigil represented "a death-certificate moment for Marcelism".<sup>9</sup>

A second aspect focused on the propagation of the idea that there was an "alliance between the Catholic Church and the Estado Novo" or, in another version, that "a part of the Church" supported the authoritarian regime. Again, the two figures who most conveyed this message were the Commissioner of the Mission Structure and the President of the Republic. Their statements are also notable for their uniqueness, as both are self-proclaimed

<sup>5</sup> <https://is.gd/EzGNMq>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://is.gd/W22yI1>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://is.gd/Dlsd1H>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://is.gd/BVp2Xl>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://is.gd/GZSBV8>.

Catholics with varying degrees of closeness to ecclesiastical circles and collaboration with the Catholic University of Portugal. Both were born into Catholic families with ties to lay movements. In the case of the head of State, it is also significant that he is the son of one of Marcelo Caetano's ministers, Baltazar Rebelo de Sousa. Future investigations may determine whether the religious consciousness of these figures favored the inclusion of Catholic contributions in the emergence of democracy, and, in this sense, whether this was a factor that facilitated the 'eruption of religion' in these commemorations.

That "alliance" projection was complemented with the introduction of the third aspect of the narrative: the idea that those who participated in the vigils, especially at Rato, were occupying a public space, in transgression of prevailing norms<sup>10</sup>. This argument, which can also be seen as promoting the necessity of taking risks to achieve democracy, was emphasized to justify why the protagonists of the Rato vigil had coordinated with a political group engaged in armed struggle, the Revolutionary Brigades. The legitimization of this association, the fourth aspect of the projected memory, was primarily developed by the protagonists and approached with the greatest caution.

The reason for this lies in the fact that the collaboration between some organizers of the vigil (Luís Moita and his sister, Conceição Moita) and the Revolutionary Brigades (BR) was divisive for the Rato community at the time and continues to generate controversy and opposition within it to this day. The rejection, by other Catholics in the community, of the use of violence to overthrow the regime, as advocated by the BR's political program and practice, prevented them from accepting their collaboration, understanding it as incompatible with Christian action and as "contaminating" the spirit of that action. Therefore, during the commemorative celebrations, former BR leader Isabel do Carmo chose to justify it by stating that "it was the Catholics who took the initiative", and researcher António de Araújo concluded that the Brigades "played an instrumental role "in some "crucial dimensions of the protest", rejecting the idea, propagated over the years by other BR leaders, that they had entirely planned and organized the vigil. Another vector of legitimization was introduced by one of the participants, journalist Jorge Wemans, and was based on the idea that "the need to end the colonial war and the dictatorship" involved a broad network of people, with the numbers serving as pressure for action, for breaking with the context of pervasive fear<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://is.gd/nzPyIW>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://is.gd/fo6nct>.

During the celebrations, this reenactment and use of the past also triggered what I consider to have been a fifth, and final, aspect: the issuing of a challenge to the Portuguese episcopate, which simultaneously demanded that the Portuguese prelates issue an apology for the “dead, wounded, traumatized, abused, and displaced, victims of a long war, [...] and also for all those who dared to raise their voices against the colonial war”, “for what they failed to do. For what they failed to say. [...] For the amenities they accepted. For their lack of faith. For the silence they so unvaryingly maintained”. This stance, articulated by Jorge Wemans, resurrects the idea that something was left unaccomplished, and, in that sense, it is to some extent a reactivation of dynamics pertaining to a specific period of the revolutionary process. In fact, in the early months after the military coup, some Catholic circles, marked by strong activism, organized debate forums throughout the country, which they called “free assemblies of Christians”, in which they denounced what they considered to be the allegiance of the hierarchy with respect to the dictatorial State, the silence of the episcopate regarding the colonial war, the exiles, political imprisonments, and finally, the resistance of the prelates to the implementation of the provisions of the Second Vatican Council. Some circles highlighted other aspects: the collaboration of clergy members with the political police (Porto), the feebleness of pastoral care provided to the working class, rural communities, and the youth, and the questionable management of diocesan assets (Algarve and Bragança), the sectarianism of the diocesan Catholic press (Évora and Algarve). Overall, the groups of disapproving Christians demanded that the bishops make a public act of penance for the “collaborationist past” of the Church with the State, raised the issue of the removal of the prelates, and proclaimed the right of the Portuguese African colonies to independence<sup>12</sup>.

At that time, the idea of an apology addressed to Portuguese society divided the bishops, and in the *Pastoral letter on the contribution of Christians to social and political life*, published on July 16, 1974, the Episcopal Conference, at the suggestion of the Bishop of Porto, reflected on the relationship between the Church and the State over the previous forty years. Recalling that the relations between both institutions had, for almost the entire period, occurred in an atmosphere of understanding, without prejudice to the clear distinction of their respective competencies, the bishops declared that “the

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed follow-up on the positions of various groups of critical Christians, see: 25 Abril-Novembro 25. *Textos Cristãos*, pp. 22-26, 31-34, 52-56, 76-82, 102-103, 115-118, 160-170, 217-219; *A Igreja de Braga em Crise. Cinco comunicações boicotadas por “Cursistas”*, Braga, ed.<sup>a</sup> de autor, 1974.



Church did not fail to suffer from the shortcomings of the regime; and it is aware of having contributed to mitigate them. If it did not always denounce them publicly or in the manner desired by some, it often did so through direct efforts, as it deemed more opportune and effective". However, they accepted that "both at the level of the hierarchy and the laity, responsibilities for errors committed or shared may weigh upon it" (CEP, 1977: 136-137). With this statement, they did not dodge the accusations of challenging Catholics and communist and far-left political parties regarding their subordination to political power during the Estado Novo, but satisfied believers and non-believers who did not harbor a hostile attitude towards religious authorities.

In the ongoing celebrations, the subject of apologizing still arises as a complement to the second aspect mentioned earlier, which is the assessment that, in the past, there was a subordination of the Catholic Church to the authoritarian State. This position, controversial in Portuguese historiography, which records different interpretations of the relationship between the State and the Catholic Church<sup>13</sup>, also easily connects with the woke agenda<sup>14</sup>, which in Portugal has been mobilized by parties to the left of the Socialist Party (PS), by some leaders and members of the latter and even by the President of the Republic<sup>15</sup>. More recently, outside of these celebrations, there has been a repeated call to the Portuguese bishops to apologize for complicity with Portuguese colonialism, this time by the priest and journalist Manuel Vilas Boas<sup>16</sup>. This new intervention shows that the claim for reparation persists in the Catholic sector that is heir to the so-called "progressive" segment, and which gathered Catholics who challenged the regime and ultimately maintained a highly tense relationship with the religious authorities since the late 1950s. However, it is too early to determine whether this call will gain traction.

It is worth noting, however, that this claim for reparation retrieved only one aspect —the need for a public apology from the bishops for their alleged cover-up of the injustices committed during Portuguese colonialism— of the

<sup>13</sup> An historization and overview of that debate can be found in Santos (2016: 551-583).

<sup>14</sup> I am referring to the political stance that, in the aforementioned political sectors, over the past five years, has been characterized by demonstrations of attention and monitoring regarding what they consider to be racial injustices, particularly against people of African descent, as well as by denunciations of the alleged brutality of Portuguese colonization. More recently, other dimensions have been incorporated into this stance, suggesting the need to make reparation to the former Portuguese colonies through financial compensation, cooperation programs, or the restitution of assets.

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance: <https://is.gd/F2Hfjp>; <https://is.gd/YHokqr>; <https://is.gd/os4S8l>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://is.gd/oczEOF>.

demands that, between April 1974 and November 1975, dissenting Catholics made to the religious authorities. These demands were amplified, at the time, by political forces, namely the PCP and party groups to its left, such as as Movimento de Esquerda Socialista (MES), the UDP, or Movimento Democrático Popular/Comissão Democrática Eleitoral (MDP/CDE) (Santos, 2005: 116). The political actors involved in the ongoing celebrations also avoided mentioning those contentions, except for the President of the Republic, who referred to the phenomenon<sup>17</sup>.

#### IV. BRIEF ASSESSMENT OF THE CONSTRUCTED MNEMONIC SIGNIFIERS AND THEIR IMPACT

From the invocations of the past detailed here, it emerges that there were two main resources created by the official remembrance of the two vigils. One was a guide legitimizing the intervention of the organizers and participants in those historical actions, which, on one hand, aims to preserve a positive memory among new generations, and on the other hand, deals with still-conflicting memories, in the sense that there is a lack of consensus, and therefore aims to generate a broader support for the narrative that is intended to be conveyed. Within this last point, as previously noted, there is disagreement about the involvement of the organizers of the Rato vigil with the Revolutionary Brigades, but also about the actions of the Bishop of Lisbon, disparaged by some historical actors and still the cause of controversial memories, as the commemorations themselves reflected. This aspect is highlighted in Jacinto Godinho's documentary, with contrasting opinions expressed by Father Janela, favorable in his judgment of the patriarch, and another historical actor, the journalist Cesário Borge, who is quite critical. In the dossier dedicated to the vigil of the Rato Chapel, available on the official website of the commission responsible for the commemorations, there is also no reference to D. António Ribeiro, which elicits speculation regarding whether this was due to a deliberate allocation of benefit to the memory of disputing Catholics.

Another resource produced was strictly political and aimed at garnering/securing support among different audiences, which also means garnering/securing different segments of the electorate. This well-known strategy, already pointed out in other studies (Raimundo and Almeida, 2019), was naturally useful to PS, the supporting party of the XXII and XXIII Governments, allowing it to signal to its voters, through the role that religion was given in

<sup>17</sup> <https://is.gd/fo6nct>.

the commemorations, where they came from. This strategy served to mobilize the party's older electorate, which includes members of the democratic opposition to the authoritarian regime and their families. It is worth noting that among the party's younger voters, a secular stance predominates, which is less sensitive to the historical and social prestige of the ecclesiastical institution (Resende 2023: 591). This attitude aligns well with the growing trend among the Portuguese to devalue the Catholic Church as an influential entity in the ethos of dominant culture (Montero *et al.*, 2008; Moniz, 2024: 89)

Although the commemorations bear the socialist mark, the use of the past concerning the vigils is consensual for the main supporting parties of the Executive, PCP and BE, heirs of the revolutionary fight legacy against the authoritarian political power. The present research confirms, therefore, data presented by other studies, that the politics of memory serves to confirm political-party solidarities (Carvalho and Pinto, 2019). However, the most interesting aspect is that the representation of the past concerning the vigils, but also the role attributed here to the Catholic Church, conflicts with the memory of other times of PS, particularly during the leadership of its historical leader Mário Soares. For him, the major issue regarding the subject of religion during the transition resided in the fact that the PS had avoided reopening a "religious war", like the one that had marked the First Republic, and did not exclude the importance that the understanding he himself had established with the episcopate, notably with D. António Ribeiro, before and after the fall of the dictatorship, had in achieving a model of Western-type democracy in Portugal, halting the radical actions of the PCP and the far-left, including their attacks on religious freedom (Avillez, 1996: 343, 450). Now, the religion as projected by the official commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of April 25th represent not this memory of the past, but an alternative one in which the projection of the far-left—and of some of the more radical sectors within the PS itself, almost always critical of Soares' actions (before, during, and after the revolutionary period)—comes out triumphant. This is not a minor datum and may mean that the PS (or, at least, certain sectors of the party), are currently reshaping their identity regarding the party's history, and converging to its left. This certainly had not happened throughout the last quarter of the 20th century, especially while Mário Soares was the PS's secretary-general. Ultimately, the current reconstruction of the past suggests that there is significantly more consensus among these political parties around the legacies of the previous regime than around the legacies of the transition.

In this scenario, the center-right parties have remained silent regarding this approach to the commemorations. However, the hypothesis remains unverified that there are different interpretations of what has been projected about the role of religion and the Catholic Church at the end of Marcelism

and during the transition process. In this perspective, the collaboration of two Social Democrats in the celebrations, the President of the Republic and the Mayor of Lisbon, justified by the holding of offices rather than by convictions or party reasons, is not deemed meaningful. On the other hand, the attitude of guardedness, in the case of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Social Democratic Center (CDS), goes along with what the literature has already identified as their natural “stance” in the field of memory politics (Raimundo, 2018; Raimundo and Almeida, 2019), in which neither of the parties invest because doing so yields no worthwhile return in terms of visibility and popularity.

This representation of the past also did not elicit reactions from the episcopate or the Patriarchate of Lisbon. Their silence is difficult to analyze without more targeted research, particularly given the crisis the institution itself has been plunged into since 2021, following the investigation into sexual abuses within the Catholic Church, which has caused various communication difficulties for the Episcopal Conference with the outside world. Lisbon, moreover, has a new patriarch, appointed in August 2023, who has remained quite reserved in managing his public statements. To date, in fact, he has not made any pronouncements on this topic. However, an analysis of how the Portuguese media reported the official commemorations of the vigils shows that, in general, the main outlets, including the Catholic broadcaster Rádio Renascença, did not highlight them, sticking to reporting the decoration given by Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa to the Rato community. Greater coverage was provided by Agência Ecclesia and the digital newspaper *Sete Margens*, to which journalist Jorge Wemans is connected. In another digital newspaper, *Observador*, in which the presence of center-right collaborators, some of them openly Catholic, is substantial, a different discourse about the past relationships of the Catholic Church with the State and civil society began to be constructed, defending the existence of a “democratic Catholicism”, that is, Catholic sectors, including the episcopate, open to the challenges of building the option for democracy<sup>18</sup>. From this perspective, the defense of human rights, dialogue about peace, the choice for political plurality, criticism of the war effort and colonialism, and the promotion of innovative social policy projects involved various efforts by the Catholic Church throughout the country, some earning more recognition than others. These were also coincident with the reorganization that the Church itself was undergoing in its structures, at a time when new conciliar orientations were being applied. It is not the place for an analysis of this reorganization, created in a context of

<sup>18</sup> <https://is.gd/Zms856>.

competition for memory, but its emergence, at a political level, deserves to be noted, and its potential as an analytical concept should not be dismissed.

## V. CONCLUSION

All the commemorations represent an embracing of the power inherent in public policies, specifically the power inherent in memory policies, to show agency and change cultural discourses and meanings. All celebrations, one might say, are relatively false, given the distance between the recreated, sometimes dogmatic, memory and lived realities. However, this “distance” generates the possibility of observing and questioning the recreation in its effectiveness. Thus, on the one hand, it is inevitable to conclude that for the XXII and XXIII Governments, the politics of memory was an important area of investment, demanding much publicity and expanding subjects, with the subject of religion being introduced for the first time. In the first phase of the celebrations, which took place between March 2022 and April 2024, it can be surmised that the political actors were successful, to use an expression of David Meyer (2006), managing to construct a simple history, with well-defined problems and a focused guilt. Regarding the subject under analysis, a widely accepted idea was conveyed: the need to end the colonial wars mobilized Catholics, who were motivated to demand the end of the Salazar/Caetano regime.

On the other hand, it stands out that the memory politics constructed during the official commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the April 25th revolution, based on the choices of the PS, in dialogue with the PCP and the BE, treated history “instrumentally”, confirming what has already been highlighted by Bernhard and Kubik (2014) in other case studies. The authors remind us that, in order to construct a vision of the past, parties assume which elements will generate a more effective legitimation for their efforts to gain and maintain power. What was projected was a history produced within specific political groups, which reclaimed certain historical actors, notably some with public recognition, such as journalists and university professors. The prevalent framing of the past involved mobilizing the history of part of the opposition to autocracy and a particular vision of Catholicism, namely the anti-establishment Catholicism, as a tool to reinforce the legitimacy of the trajectory and identity of left-wing political forces within the party system.

The representations and uses of the past did not create any foundational myth around the subject of religion, nor did they involve any orientation for the future. This means that other political actors may come to inscribe other aspects related to religion and/or Catholicism in the official memory, and that

this might be an axis with expansive capacity. It also means that, due to the absence of foundational reading and guidelines, the official memory projected involving the religious element can easily be lost, especially when the vision of the past projected by Mário Soares, marked above, on the relations of parties and the State with the Catholic Church, remains more unanimous, even for center-right sectors and the parties they represent, because it is more faithful to historical reality.

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