

SEX EDUCATION IN THE CONFESSIONAL: MEDIATION OF SCIENCE BY CATHOLICS IN THE JOURNALS *LAR CATÓLICO* AND *FAMÍLIA CRISTÃ* (1950S)

A EDUCAÇÃO SEXUAL NO CONFESSIONÁRIO: MEDIAÇÃO DA CIÊNCIA PELOS CATÓLICOS NOS IMPRESSOS
LAR CATÓLICO E FAMÍLIA CRISTÃ (DÉCADA DE 1950)

EDUCACIÓN SEXUAL EN EL CONFESIONARIO: MEDIACIÓN DE LA CIENCIA POR
LOS CATÓLICOS EN LOS IMPRESOS LAR CATÓLICO Y FAMÍLIA CRISTÃ (AÑOS 50)

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to analyze Catholic discourses on sex education during the 1950s from readers' letters sections with readers in the journals *Lar Católico* and *Família Cristã*. We consider that these sections, written and kept by Maria Madalena Ribeiro de Oliveira and Father Videns, respectively, were privileged spaces for lay mediation and evangelization. The 1950s are a period marked by significant institutional transformations in the Catholic church, specially by a closer approach to scientific discourses and the growing evangelization through the lay apostolate. Among the prescriptions for 'good sex education' was the recommendation of the practice of reading, which served as a guide not only to incorporate the scientific precepts considered valid but also to reaffirm the value of morals and preserve sexual differences.

Keywords: sex education; catholicism; press; reading.

Resumo: A proposta do artigo é analisar os discursos católicos sobre educação sexual durante a década de 1950 a partir de seções de correspondência com leitores publicados nos impressos *Lar Católico* e *Família Cristã*. Consideramos que tais seções, escritas e mantidas por Maria Madalena Ribeiro de Oliveira e Padre Videns, respectivamente, eram espaços privilegiados de mediação e evangelização dos leigos. Os anos 1950 são um período marcado por transformações institucionais significativas na Igreja Católica, em particular por maior aproximação junto aos discursos científicos e a evangelização através do apostolado laico. Dentre os preceitos da 'boa educação sexual' estava a recomendação da prática da leitura, que servia de guia tanto para incorporar os preceitos científicos considerados válidos quanto para reafirmar o valor da moral e preservar as diferenças sexuais.

Palavras-chave: educação sexual; catolicismo; imprensa; leitura.

Resumen: El propósito del artículo es analizar los discursos católicos sobre educación sexual durante la década de 1950 a partir de secciones de correspondencia con lectores en los impresos de *Lar Católico* y *Família Cristã*. Consideramos que estas secciones, escritas y mantenidas por María Madalena Ribeiro de Oliveira y el Padre Videns, respectivamente, fueron espacios privilegiados para la mediación laica y la evangelización. Los años 1950 se caracterizan por cambios institucionales significativos en la Iglesia Católica, en particular por un enfoque más cercano a los discursos científicos y la preocupación por el apostolado laico. Entre las recomendaciones para una 'buena educación sexual' estaba la recomendación de practicar la lectura, que sirvió de guía tanto para incorporar preceptos científicos considerados válidos como para reafirmar el valor de la moral y preservar las diferencias sexuales.

Palabras clave: educación sexual; catolicismo; imprenta; lectura.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, sex education mobilized different groups in Brazil such as doctors, educators, hygienists and priests. Sex education campaigns were undertaken as ‘prophylactic crusades’ aimed at fighting sexual perversions, venereal diseases, crime, and family problems all at once, thus contributing to the formation of a ‘sex science’ (Carrara, 1996; Oliveira, 2012). Reading materials became crucial in the strategy to reach the lay public and propagate this type of education, particularly from the first decade of the 20th century, when there was a great increase in the production of books on sex education aimed at this public (Reis & Ribeiro, 2004).

Catholics stood out as one of the groups attempting to assume a position of authority on the subject, emphasizing the importance of the family in the moral education of individuals (Felicio, 2012)¹. This article deals with the participation of Catholics in debates on sex education by analyzing the sections ‘Intercâmbio com as leitoras’ (‘Exchange with female readers’), published in newspaper *Lar Católico* [*Catholic Home*] (1912-1984), and ‘Confie-me seu problema’ (‘Entrust me with your problem’), from magazine *Família Cristã* [Christian Family] (1934-present). Both sections answered questions from readers, thus encouraging their readership’s participation. In addition, they provided an interesting and specific dynamic of evangelization of the flock by addressing several topics in the light of the Catholic doctrine, including sex education. In the Catholic publications analyzed here, these sections gained greater prominence in the 1950s².

Though the clergy had participated in the national education debate for a long time³, it can be said that the 1950s were particularly interesting as that was

¹ Their participation at the I National Education Congress in 1927 is worthy of note. The Congress was organized by the Brazilian Association of Education, founded by Heitor Lyra da Silva, and included the participation of intellectuals; educators such as Fernando de Azevedo, Anísio Teixeira and Lourenço Filho; doctors; and Catholic orientation groups linked to the Dom Vital Center, led by Alceu Amoroso Lima (Felicio, 2012).

² The 1950s were when the publication of the ‘Intercâmbio com as leitoras’ section in the *Lar Católico* newspaper began (1954). However, the time period analyzed meant that we had limited access to sources: in the case of *Família Cristã*, we were only able to retrieve the issues published from the 1950s onwards, which did not allow us to map when the publication of ‘Confie-me seu problema’ actually began. *Família Cristã* was consulted in the Biblioteca Nacional, and *Lar Católico* in the Digital Media Library of the same institution.

³ Discussing the long trajectory of Catholics’ participation in education is not applicable here. However, when analyzing higher education in Brazil, from the 19th century onwards religious education can be seen to lose space and there is competition between different projects such as the liberal and the positivist models. Prior to the existence of universities in Brazil, Catholics sought to maintain a religious hegemony in higher education with their discourse, favoring subjects such as Thomist philosophy and the influence of Aristotelianism in Law, Literature, and Theology (Romano, 1979; Vergara, 2003).

when their work made evident the profound tensions between tradition and modernity. In fact, the

period was marked by an intense debate about modernizing customs, with changes that clashed with conservative moral boundaries, thus creating the need to emphasize what the role of men and women in marriage and therefore in society should be (Pinsky, 2014). In other words, we are discussing the following question: in a period of rapid changes in customs, how was sex education presented in religious discourse, establishing new relationships between religion and science? What strategies were created by the Catholics in order to counterargue nonreligious explanations about sexual matters in laypeople's education? The period in question also included important changes both in the institutional sphere of the Catholic church, with Pope Pius XII more open to scientific contributions to pastoral work, and in the modernization of the material production of printed matter, an important resource for evangelizing the faithful.

In the 1950s, Brazil was mostly a Catholic country. It had 51,944,397 inhabitants, 93% of whom declared themselves 'Roman Catholic' (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics [IBGE], 1959). As in other traditionally Catholic countries such as Italy, Austria and Scotland, this accounts for the importance and influence of religion in the public debate on sex education (Sauerteig & Davidson, 2009). By mobilizing the mass media – especially the press – to promote an appropriate sex education, Catholics played an important role in the public debate on the topic, rejecting any educational measures that shifted the central role in the sex education of children, adolescents and young people away from the family. Although they recognized the importance of the principles of hygiene and prophylaxis, they understood sex education as part of a general schooling directed towards creating chastity. Therefore, it was up to parents to play a leading role in the sex education of children and adolescents in order to teach them to “[...] defend themselves [...]”, “[...] maintain the purity of the soul [...]” and “[...] dominate impulses [...]” using their will (Negromonte, 1958, p. 31-32).

The importance of sex education as a field of religious action is also related to the new pastoral orientations that resulted from important institutional changes within the Catholic church. In this regard, the papacy of Pius XII (1939-1958) is crucial for understanding this movement of ecclesiastical opening to the secular questions dealt with by science. We understand that this movement was not separate from another phenomenon – the strengthening of science itself in the international setting, especially in the context following World War II and the creation of UNESCO. As Maio (2004, p. 147) states, “[...] science would then assume a central role in the construction of a liberal-democratic world [...]”, in opposition to the xenophobic nationalism that had caused the war. It can be said that this period was marked by the internationalization of science, as a symbol of development itself – in several spheres – and overseen by nation states. By the end

of the Cold War, science had emerged as the authority in terms of knowledge, recognized as a higher magisterium over the sublunary world (Pestre, 2015). It was precisely at this point in time that science also became a political authority whose legitimacy was a consensus among nations, and which constantly provided evidence of its strength through new technical-scientific capacities.

The debate about the intersection of Catholic sex education with science appeared more explicitly in the press. It is worth pointing out that the 1950s, mythically and nostalgically called the 'Golden Years' in Brazil, were marked by the growth of mass consumption of new cultural products, an example being the increase in the production of books and new media that would impact on societal behavior patterns. The Americanization of the city lifestyle, new artistic expressions, and the press's growing professionalization and technical modernization were part of a political scenario of greater democracy after the end of President Getúlio Vargas's New State (Ribeiro, 2003).

Because the press became a valuable evangelization tool for the Catholics from the late 19th century onwards, it is interesting to observe how the Catholic sex education proposed in printed matter reflected the new institutional orientations of the mid-20th century church, impacting on the way in which it related directly with the faithful. These changes appear in the publications *Lar Católico* and *Família Cristã*, selected for this study for their representative importance and circulation. Through their respective columns, two Catholic intellectual mediators – Maria Madalena Ribeiro de Oliveira and Father Videns – corresponded with lay readers, thus creating spaces that stood out as important resources for educating laypeople in matters of Catholic doctrine. From these sections, it is possible to observe how Catholic agents used the press to advocate or reject sexual behaviors, thus controlling what was read about sex, as a way in which to promote a sex education considered adequate for the faithful.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE 1950S

Although the Second Vatican Council, convened in 1961, is considered the main milestone in the church's dialogue with the secularized world, the 1950s heralded certain changes in the orientation of the Catholic church. While the 'dark side' of the Papacy of Pius XII (1939-1958) has also been highlighted (Costa, 2006, p.112), it can be said that it was an important transition period from a position that up until then had been combative of secular issues, to an 'extramural' dialogue with other fields that included science (Soffiati, 2016). This conduct can be observed, for example, in the encyclical *Humanis Generis* (Pius XII, 1950), in which the Pope clarified that theology did not represent 'a hindrance to progress and an obstacle in

the way of science', and in his participation at several international psychology congresses⁴.

The fact that the church drew closer to Catholic professional associations is considered an important milestone in its modernization, as it recognized the incorporation of science into the pastoral care of the flock (Desmazières, 2011). Without wanting to enter into specialist subjects, Pius XII sought to value the contributions of science and, at once, to highlight its limitations by stating that medical and scientific knowledge should not be above morality, but should walk alongside it, taking into account the interests of science, but also those of the patients and community. He cited psychoanalysis as an example of this dialogue, clarifying that the church did not reject it, as "there are other psychoanalytic methods which are not infected with the vice of pansexualism; that furthermore, all [...] have in common certain principles and psychic experiments which are in no way contrary to natural ethics or Christian morality" (Pius XII, 1952).

The Brazilian Catholic church followed this movement. According to Scott Mainwaring (2004), it went from being the church of neo-Christendom (1916-1955), marked by a combative and anti-secular posture⁵, to being a reformist church (1955-1964), characterized by a greater openness to contemporary issues and in tune with Roman guidelines. Certain factors specific to the Brazilian political context also explain the transformations in the Catholic institutional organization: the increase in the number of Protestants and spiritualists, the 'communist threat', the strengthening of social movements, and the instability of the political alliances with the post-Vargas democratic governments. These phenomena contributed to the church's awareness of its difficulty in holding a dialogue with the masses and of the need to review its own pastoral actions (Mainwaring, 2004).

Among the Catholic organizations and associations involved with the education of the laity, the Brazilian Catholic Action⁶ stood out. Its 'lay militants'

⁴ For example, the First International Congress of Histopathology of the Nervous System (1952) and the Fifth International Congress of Psychotherapy and Clinical Psychology (1953).

⁵ Idealized by Cardinal Dom Leme, neo-Christendom was characterized as a reaction to the political and institutional fragility of the church after its rupture with the republican State, a refusal to incorporate popular religious practices, and a reaffirmation of ecclesiastical hierarchy. The movement included the participation of lay Catholic intellectuals – such as Alceu Amoroso Lima and Jackson Figueiredo – in the dissemination of religious-related political projects through magazine *A Ordem*, and of important Catholic organizations and associations such as the Dom Vital Center, the Catholic Electoral League, the Confederation of Catholic Press, and Catholic Action, with the aim of increasing the participation of Catholics in institutions and in the State itself (Mainwaring, 2004; Costa, 2006).

⁶ Created by Cardinal Dom Leme in 1935 and presided by Alceu Amoroso Lima, the Brazilian Catholic Action was inspired on the Italian Catholic Action founded in 1922 by Pope Pius XI and was aimed at participating "[...] actively in the apostolic mission of the church [...]" and defending Catholic values through politics (Souza, 2006, p. 48). The groups were organized by gender and age group: Catholic Action Men (HAC), for married men or men over 30; Women's Catholic Action League (LFAC), for married women or women over 30; Brazilian Catholic Youth (JCB), for boys and men aged 14-30; and

removed from the clergy their exclusive responsibility for pastoral education and incorporated the laity themselves as agents of education in Catholic doctrine (Souza, 2006). The new strategies for teaching the faithful were linked to a 'catechetical renewal', which understood Christian initiation as an ongoing, permanent process and therefore not limited to childhood and also needing to take place in adulthood. There was also a concern for the repercussion of Christian education on the daily life of the faithful (Lima, 2016). Thus, we can understand that sex education became part of the wider education of the Catholic flock, turning into a 'necessary discipline' (Negromonte, 1958). Monsignor Alvaro Negromonte was one of the main Catholic spokesmen for this new way of teaching catechesis, and he dedicated a good part of his life to the production of catechism manuals for parents and teachers, following the example of *A educação sexual* [Sex Education] (the first edition of which was published in 1939) and *Noivos e esposos* [Engaged and Married Couples] (1955). These books attempted to provide tools so that Catholic educators could offer moral orientation for children and adolescents. While Negromonte dealt with the subject in books, other actors stood out for their more active evangelization in the press. This was the case of Maria Madalena Ribeiro de Oliveira and Father Videns, responsible for the readers' letters sections of *Lar Católico* and *Família Cristã*. As we will see further ahead, they both recommended Negromonte's books to their readers.

It must be said, however, that espousing sex education and a broader dialogue with the secularized society of the time was not a consensus among Catholics. Based on the categorization proposed by Scott Mainwaring (2004) about Catholic groups, we can identify our authors as conservative modernizers, a group that had a greater dialogue with social change through more active pastoral work. These Catholics differed both from the traditionalists, who completely rejected secularization, and from the reformers, who were more progressive and advocated social change as an end in itself, and were thus closer to the country's left-wing groups. As conservative modernizers, both Maria Madalena Ribeiro de Oliveira and Father Videns acted as Catholic mediators engaged in sex education, sometimes criticizing Catholics for the 'excessive reserve' with which they addressed sex, and at others disapproving of an exclusively scientific sex education alien to Christian moral values.

Catholic Women's Youth (JFC), for girls and women aged 14-30. From the 1950s, this form of organization became increasingly specialized and more focused on social groups. The Catholic Student Youth (JEC), Catholic University Youth (JUC), Catholic Workers' Youth (JOC), Catholic Agricultural Youth (JAC), and Catholic Independent Youth (JIC) were then created.

THE MAGAZINE CONFSSIONAL: THE PRESS AS AN EVANGELIZATION RESOURCE

The laity mobilized by Catholic associations found in the mass media – especially the press – an important resource at the service of evangelization. This is the case of *Lar Católico* (1912-1986)⁷ and *Família Cristã* (1934-), publications whose target readership was the family and which addressed various subjects beyond Catholic doctrine such as politics, history, geography, fashion and cooking. Both publications stood out for having sections that included intense, direct participation by their readers. In *Lar Católico*, there was the section ‘Intercâmbio com as leitoras’, signed by Maria Madalena Ribeiro de Oliveira and published since 1954 in the fortnightly supplement ‘Página Feminina’ (Women’s Page), where subjects such as dating, marriage, family, studies, work and domestic tips predominated. In *Família Cristã*, the interaction with readers took place in ‘Confie-me seu problema’, a section where a priest who used the penname Videns answered readers’ questions about general themes of the doctrine, including sex education.

The *Lar Católico* newspaper was published weekly in the town of Juiz de Fora by the Society of the Divine Word priests, known as Verbites⁸, and had subscribers across the country, mainly in the states of Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo⁹. *Família Cristã* (1934-) is a monthly magazine published in São Paulo by the Pious Society of Daughters of St. Paul, the Pauline Sisters¹⁰ and remains one of the country’s main Catholic publications till this day. It circulated in 13 countries (Italy, Brazil, Argentina, United States, Japan, Mexico, Colombia, Philippines, France, Spain, Chile, Portugal, and Ireland) but after Italy, the Pauline Sisters’ and the magazine’s country of origin, the highest circulation was in Brazil at 110,000 copies per month (Panoramas..., 1957, p. 6)¹¹.

Both publications were by religious congregations, which is a particularity of the Catholic press. The Society of the Divine Word and the Pious Society of Daughters of St Paul are religious orders for which communication is an

⁷ The first issue of *Lar Católico* was published in 1891 and its circulation was interrupted the following year. Publication resumed in 1912, launching its second phase, which continued until 1986.

⁸ The Society of the Divine Word (*Societas Verbi Divini*, S.V.D.) was founded in 1875 in the city of Styel (Netherlands) by Father Arnold Janssen. The Verbites emigrated to Brazil in 1895 in order to provide religious assistance to German settlers living in the country. They first arrived in Santa Leopoldina, in the state of Espírito Santo, and later established the congregation’s headquarters in Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais.

⁹ By the 1950s, *Lar Católico* had approximately 32,000 subscribers. The copies were sold through an annual subscription costing 55 cruzeiros (Cr\$ 55.00) and was delivered by mail.

¹⁰ The Pious Society of Daughters of St. Paul was founded in 1915 in the city of Alba (Italy) by Father Tiago Alberione, in collaboration with Sister Tecla Merlo. Brazil was one of the first foreign countries to host the Pauline Sisters, who arrived in São Paulo in 1931.

¹¹ In the 1950s, single copies were sold for three cruzeiros (Cr\$ 3.00) and the annual subscription cost 25 cruzeiros (Cr\$ 25.00).

evangelizing mission, and this has given them an important role in the constitution of the Catholic press in Brazil ever since the 19th century¹². Thus, the Catholics sought to incorporate new strategies into the production and circulation of printed matter in order to fight against the secularism of the ‘impious press’ and to guarantee a sphere of political and social action (Gonçalves, 2008). As stated by Aline Dalmolin (2012), the missionary purpose of taking the church to the faithful through the most modern means of communication allowed publications run by fellowships to remain in circulation for longer periods, in contrast with other types of Catholic printed matter, such as newsletters and diocesan bulletins. The incorporation of technical novelties into their publications by religious fellowships gave greater longevity to *Lar Católico* and *Família Cristã*.

Despite the diversification of the mass media during the ‘Golden Years’, the press remained the main resource for producing and circulating knowledge as a result of the technical and technological transformations that modernized journalism (Ribeiro, 2003). Magazines in particular became symbols of the ‘consumer era’ and heralded novelties in the economic development and democratic political scenario of the time, at the same time as they manifested these changes in their pages through material and graphic features (Corrêa, 2015).

Due to the informative nature of these periodicals¹³ and the segmentation that characterized their readership, we can consider them privileged sources for analyzing the social and cultural tensions related to sexual roles during the 1950s. Understood as specific cultural mediation goods, aimed at a readership that wanted to both shape and mirror itself, these publications allow us to observe aspects such as the reaffirmation of the functions of men and women in marriage, of the family as a guarantee of conjugal harmony, and of the social order. They also make it possible to observe how censorship remained very present when it came to sexual matters. The reaffirmation of traditional sexual standards was a constant in Catholic sex education proposals, which aimed to shape sexuality within marriage and correct any deviations from the reproductive sexual function.

Additionally, the readers’ letters sections played the role of magazine confessionals in the sex education of laypeople, as they encouraged readers ashamed of confessing their intimate anxieties in person to a doctor or priest to write in anonymously. Although ‘Intercâmbio com as leitoras’ and ‘Confie-me seu problema’ do not contain very detailed information about the authors of the letters – such as name, age, marital status or locality –, they clearly present the subjects that most concerned the laity in their search for emotional and spiritual counseling,

¹² Many religious congregations established themselves in Brazil between the late 19th century and early 20th century. This immigration process is related to the Catholic church’s Romanization project and the reaffirmation of ecclesiastical superiority over popular religious practices (Bittencourt, 2016).

¹³ Despite *Lar Católico* being called a newspaper, as Ana Luiza Martins states (2001, 2003), both periodicals fall into the more general category of ‘magazine’.

as well as the advice offered to them. Sex education shows up linked to broader issues related to marriage, dating, family and vocational discernment. Based on the readers' confidential accounts, Maria Madalena and Videns advised, censored and offered possible solutions to the problems confessed to by men and women in their letters – always in an individualized manner, in conformity with the doctrine of the Catholic church, and presented in clear and objective language.

Thus, our characters are dealt with here based on the practices of 'cultural mediation' that they exercised, as they acted both as producers and as disseminators of sexual knowledge from a religious standpoint. As Gomes & Hansen (2016) propose in their analysis of intellectual mediators, these characters held a strategic position in the production and communication of ideas as they acted on the threshold of processes of creation and reception of knowledge. In their specific role dealing with sex education and a non-specialized public, these agents used the correspondence sections as a channel of direct communication with readers. 'Intercâmbio com as leitoras' and 'Confie-me seu problema' were characterized as a dialogical space with the readership in their respective publications, demonstrating a strategy of approximation with the public, although there is not much information on the real identity of these subjects. These sections also demonstrate an interesting sort of mediation, because at the same time as they opened a space for the readers' voices, these dialogues with the public were also a mediatized creation that was sanitized, selected, edited or even invented by the editors¹⁴.

We can also consider that Maria Magdalena and Father Videns occupied an intermediary position between the intellectual elites and the reading masses they addressed, in a model of 'popularization' or dissemination engendered through the press (but also other media)¹⁵. The sections allow us to analyze how the mediators conceived their audiences and what strategies they used to reach them. In the case of the sex education of *Lar Católico* and *Família Cristã*, correspondence with readers was the resource used to reach laypeople and to carry out their individual sex education. Although the mediators shared the same strategies in their search for legitimacy and closeness with the flock, the difference in their position in the ecclesiastical hierarchy can be noticed, and was reflected in the type of relationship

¹⁴ Here, we echo the considerations of Elina Absalyamova and Valérie Stiénon about the readers' voice. Focusing on the 19th century French press, the authors state that the readers' voice is a 'media construction' as well as a discursive manifestation. They state: "Therefore, considering the specific poetics of the media prism, a measure must be maintained of the balance between the objectification of these discourses and the adherence to the information conveyed by the words in the press" (Absalyamova & Stiénon, 2018, p. 15, free translation). "Il convient, donc, en considérant la poétique propre au prisme médiatique, de garder la mesure d'un équilibre entre objection de ces discours et adhésion aux informations portées par les paroles dans la presse".

¹⁵ This model, which served the consumption of science, was established in the previous century in Western countries (Lightman, 2010).

they established with their public. The section signed by Maria Madalena was published in a women's supplement and therefore women were the main readership. She also took the opportunity to portray herself as a friend to her readers and thus establish a relationship of trust and intimacy. In addition, she used the section to publicize and sell her own books, such as the collection 'Cadernos de preparação para o casamento' ('Marriage Preparation Notebooks'), which could be purchased by mail order through the section itself for 200 cruzeiros (Cr\$200.00). This dynamic allows us to conclude that 'Intercâmbio com as leitoras' was not only a space for advice, but also for literary dissemination and for expanding Maria Madalena's pastoral activities of marriage preparation for men and women.

Father Videns, in turn, assumed a more traditional attitude of confessor and authority. In his answers, stricter counseling and even censorship can be observed in the way he dealt with his readers' questions. Although women were also a majority among the readers who wrote to 'Confie-me seu problema', his audience was more diverse than that of Maria Madalena, as he also answered letters sent by men. The letters answered by Videns dealt with more general topics, and matters were clarified more explicitly in the light of the Catholic doctrine, with mentions of official church documents and Bible verses.

In dialogue with Michel Foucault, we understand confession as a discursive ritual '[...] that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession [...]', and which, therefore, "[...] produces in those who articulate it intrinsic modifications: it exonerates him, redeems him, purifies him, delivers him from his faults, liberates him, promises him salvation" (Foucault, 2017, pp. 69-70). Even though only one of the mediators was a priest and therefore a confessor in the more traditional sense of the doctrine, we understand that the readers' letters sections resembled a confessional, since the laity resorted to these interlocutors in their search for guidance, counsel and redemption. The dynamic of the magazine confessional reminds us of the fundamental importance of confession for Catholic religious experience, as a healing sacrament through which one can be reconciled with God. Although the laity did not receive a penance and a chance to purge their sins from the Catholic mediators in the printed confessions, the interactions in the readers' letters sections allow us to glimpse a relationship of authority established between evangelizing agents and laity. The latter wrote to the readers' letters sections because they recognized in their counselor an authority able to advise them and solve their individual problems anonymously when they were ashamed to confess their intimate thoughts and doubts. In any case, the Catholic mediators emphasized that their help did not exempt readers from seeking an in-person confessor.

More than retrieving the possible lessons learned by the readers, our intention when analyzing these correspondence sections was to identify the advice

given by the mediators, and their stance regarding the topics that led laypeople to write to the magazines. The sections inform us what the laity were meant to do according to the situations described, in the counselors' and confessors' opinion, and their replies usually emphasized reading. The practice of reading was considered indispensable to "cultivate the spirit" and thus strengthen will in the face of immorality and bad influences that might corrupt the faithful. Therefore, it was also possible for us to find out the sex education titles recommended to readers, for which cases this type of literature was advised, and what the criteria for evaluating and selecting these readings were.

SEX EDUCATION ACCORDING TO CATHOLIC MORALITY

For Catholics, the main purpose of sex education was to prepare for marriage and, as an extension of the matrimonial vocation, to bring up children. Education in sexual matters was meant to be an education in morality, that is, "[...] according to right reason and the positive will of God" (Negromonte, 1954, p. 18). According to the Catholic doctrine, a moral act is defined as a human action guided by conscience. The emphasis on the moral dimension of sex was constantly referred to by priests and laity as a fundamental aspect of Catholic sex education. Sex education was therefore presented as synonymous with an 'education in purity', able to teach the faithful self-control and to protect the integrity of body and spirit by controlling their sexual instincts (Pius XII, 1953; Negromonte, 1958).

Additionally, the clergy stressed the importance of understanding sex education as part of a broader education that was integrated with other aspects of Catholic morality. Young people were meant to be educated "[...] for matrimony with the same seriousness with which we prepare children for First Communion" (Oliveira, 1959, p. 9), but sex education was not meant to be limited only to scientific knowledge about sex. More than "a course in biology, physiology or sexology [...]", teaching the subject to the faithful had to be based on doctrine (Negromonte, 1958, p. 27-28). Teaching only from a biological and scientific point of view was seen as a 'cult of eroticism' and serious failure, since it ignored the moral dimension of sex. Thus, Catholics sought to dispute the role of authority in sex education directly with doctors and scientists. Freud, Havelock Ellis, Wilhelm Steckel and other authors were accused of turning sexual vices into "[...] scientific theories [...]" and disregarding "[...] nature's requirements [...]", that is, reproduction (Negromonte, 1958, pp. 22-23).

It is important to point out that although these authors were the target of religious criticism, they often shared the sexual morality espoused by Catholics, in which sexual relations are limited to being between men and women and for reproductive purposes. Much like religion, medical science understood reproduction as the sole purpose of the sexual act, and any practices disassociated

from marriage were classified as ‘vices that need to be corrected’. This was the case of the field of Hygiene, which advocated sexual abstinence as prophylaxis for venereal diseases, and of Psychoanalysis, which proposed marriage as corrective therapy for homosexuality and masturbation (Carvalho, 2019).

Thus, relations between Catholics and scientists were very ambiguous. On one hand, the Catholics accused science of offering an incomplete and dangerous sexual education. On the other, they incorporated certain scientific ideas, especially from biology and psychology, to reaffirm the roles to be played by men and women in marriage and the family based on sexual differences. This ambiguity caused doubts in the laypeople themselves, who wrote to Catholic publications seeking guidance about Catholic doctrine on the matter. In this regard, the correspondence sections played an important role in the religious education of the faithful by clarifying the particular concerns sent in to the magazines. In response to one of his readers, Videns stated that the church did not frown upon education in these matters, but upon a ‘sexual pedagogy’ based solely on scientific criteria. To prove his argument, he also mentioned the encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* (Pius XI, 1929) on the Christian education of young people, which warned that many sins against ‘good morals’ were committed as a result of a weak will, not of ignorance about the matter. Catholic sex education was meant to be individual, carried out by experienced people, and in dialogue with religious educational principles in order to prevent young people from being exposed to sinful situations (Videns, 1958b, p. 4).

The understanding that access to incorrect information could be even more dangerous to the spirit than ignorance was used by Catholics to reaffirm the need to speak about the subject. In addition, there was concern for so-called ‘dangerous’ discourses such as science because they did not address the moral dimension of sex. In *Noivos e esposos: problemas do matrimônio*, one of the books recommended to *Lar Católico* and *Família Cristã* readers, Father Negromonte denounces the ‘antimatrimonial propaganda’ present in scientific books and leaflets, accused by him of ‘corrupting the morals of marital fidelity,’ ‘glorifying free love,’ as well as promoting ‘the cult of pornography and obscenity’. According to him, the best way to fight against such discourses was via the same means of communication, i.e. books and magazines (Negromonte, 1955). Hence the importance of reading as a vital didactic resource for educating the faithful in sexual matters, and of magazines for disseminating titles considered to be appropriate.

Tensions between Catholicism and science appear even more clearly in the criteria for selecting sex education literature. Firstly, the habit of reading was considered the main way in which to protect oneself from bad influences and one of the main pieces of advice given by Maria Madalena and Videns to the faithful with whom they communicated in ‘Intercâmbio com as leitoras’ and ‘Confie-me seu problema’. Among the books recommended to the laity in these sections were

broader theology books to guide the faithful, but also books exclusively dedicated to the theme of sex education, such as *A educação sexual* and *Noivos e esposos* by Monsignor Alvaro Negromonte, and the collection ‘Cadernos de preparação para o casamento’ by Maria Madalena. Foreign books were also on the list, such as *A serviço do amor* (In the Service of Love), signed by Doctor and Edith Carnot, and the collection ‘Intimidade conjugal’, (‘Marital Intimacy’), by Pierre Foyer, which had different editions for men and women.

The argument that a sex education in line with Catholic values should prepare men and women for marriage was accompanied by rigorous criteria for selecting literature on the subject. The books had to be specific to the target public – women’s editions could not be read by men and vice-versa. This is the case of *A serviço do amor*, one of the books most recommended by Videns and Maria Madalena to their readers. Authored by French doctor J. Carnot, the female edition was also signed by his daughter Edith Carnot as a strategy for creating greater proximity with the female readers, who were supposed to consider the book a guide to educate them ‘scientifically’ on love. Since reproduction was reaffirmed by Catholics as the main meaning behind the sexual act, women were given even more attention. In *Amor e paz* (Love and Peace), Maria Madalena emphasized that “[...] the young woman who wishes to marry must first of all prepare herself to be a good mother [...] and be well informed, so that she can take care of her children’s sex education effectively” (Oliveira, 1959, p. 11).

Procreation and motherhood were celebrated as a ‘physiological need’ of the female body and therefore appeared exclusively in women’s books. Similarly, the authors and mediators emphasized that young people of marrying age required a more detailed education than those who did not intend to marry soon, which indicated a concern with readers’ age groups. Maria Madalena warned in the preface of her books that they should not fall into ‘young hands’ so as not to give female readers ideas.

In addition to publicizing books, the readers’ letters sections of the Catholic press also presented more specific areas in which sex education was indicated as being necessary. Since women were the main readership of *Lar Católico* and *Família Cristã*, it is not surprising that most of the correspondence dealt with marriage and family-related topics such as dating, vocational discernment, studies and work. Based on the questions sent in, the Catholic mediators took the opportunity to advise or even censor their readers. Sins against purity were alerted to as being the most ‘serious’, therefore, readers were advised to be very mindful of sinful situations in courtship such as excessive caresses, being alone with one’s boyfriend, and even kissing. Often, ‘taking a break’ and separating was the most prudent decision when the ‘low passions’ could not be controlled or when there was no certainty that the courtship would constitute a marriage. It was important for ladies to prepare for married life, even if they were still single, so that they would know

how to choose the right suitor, fulfilling the family vocation appropriately and avoiding the threat of divorce¹⁶, considered ‘illicit’ in any situation (Videns, 1958a).

Preparing for marriage had to include learning ‘practical skills’ such as sewing and home economics. Studies and work were considered good for the spirit, but the emphasis was on charity work and professions that leaned towards the ‘female vocation’ for jobs involving caring for others, such as nursing. Even so, these activities were more encouraged in single women, while married women were advised to fully devote themselves to the home and to raising their children (Oliveira, 1954, p. 3).

Another aspect of reading that troubled many of the readers who wrote letters to the Catholic magazines concerned what exactly could be read. As important as reading was knowing how to select literature according to moral criteria in line with Catholic doctrine. Although the mediators underscored the importance of reading literature by Catholic authors, some of the books recommended to readers were by doctors and other specialists, not only by the clergy or laypeople¹⁷. This dynamic indicated not only an effort to control what was read, but also the mediation between science and the laity. The readers themselves wrote in with curiosity, in search of opinions and suggestions about specific titles, in order to find out whether or not they were appropriate and what sins might be committed by reading immoral texts. In response to a reader who signed off as *Undecided*, Videns listed the dangers of immoral reading materials:

a) It is a grave sin to read immoral books and magazines because they strongly stimulate sensual pleasure. Such reading is only legitimate for the *purposes of studies necessary* to one’s own profession. [...]

b) Reading somewhat indecent things is *in itself* a venial sin. It can become mortal if the reading is done with bad intention or if as a result of the experience one is sure to consent to temptation.

Young people in particular are advised against reading erotic novels that threaten Christian morality. Reading obscene and pornographic magazines is even more prohibited, as their venom obfuscates the splendor of purity and paralyzes the soul’s energies. (Videns, 1956, p. 4, author’s italics).

¹⁶ The debate about divorce in Brazil gained more prominence during this period, with an increase in the number of separated women in the demographic censuses carried out between the 1940s and 1960s, but divorce was only legalized in 1977 (Pinsky, 2014). The Catholic church was one of the most active institutions in anti-divorce campaigns, and still considers marriage an indissoluble sacrament, although it simplified the canonical process for cases of marriage annulment in 2015 during Pope Francis’ pontificate.

¹⁷ In addition to the direct and individualized literary dissemination in the sections ‘Confie-me seu problema’ and ‘Intercâmbio com as leitoras’, the activity of reading also appeared in literary review columns such as ‘No mundo dos livros’ (In the World of Books) in *Família Cristã*, which classified books according to the specific readership they wanted to reach (girls, boys, fathers, mothers, educators), or even as “reprehensible”, “inadvisable”, or “recommendable only to people of strong judgement”.

Although it is hard to know if the letter writers actually followed the advice given in these sections, the public's curiosity was used to educate them about the criteria for good literature, especially in the face of competition with other publications, at a time when reading was becoming more popular in Brazil (El Far, 2006). The sections can therefore be understood as a privileged cultural mediation resource, as Maria Madalena and Videns made the most of their readers' curiosity and used it to recommend or censor certain types of literature¹⁸.

There is a circularity between the writers-producers of the periodicals and the manufacturing of their receivers (the relationship between production and reception has a circular form in these sections). It is often difficult to hear the readers' voice for this reason. To what extent were they locked into this relational circuit? Although it is not easy to have a clear idea, we can at least infer that there was a range of possible literature about sex available to them, including forbidden texts. That is, such texts, whether advisable or not, were among the existing possibilities. This meant that they either read or were aware of such books (and therefore there was a desire or intention to read them, or at least a curiosity about them). The importance of emphasizing certain types of literature indicates that scrutiny by Catholic counselors in the face of the gaps opened by new cultural patterns and sexual behaviors was necessary. We are therefore speaking about these readers' desires and curiosity.

The list of forbidden texts included books and magazines. Popular magazines symbolic of the conservative customs of the time such as *Cruzeiro*, *Grande Hotel*, *Querida* and *Capricho*, were classified as 'too sensationalist' due to their "[...] lack of modesty when presenting sexual problems" (Videns, 1955a, p. 7). Many books were assessed as 'unadvisable' or 'reprehensible' by the Catholic mediators, e.g. Diderot's *Memoirs of a Nun*, Henry Perez Escrich's *The Martyr of Golgotha*, as well as Émile Zola's novels, 'esoteric' books, or those from Protestant publishers.

While certain literary works were considered reprehensible because of immorality and the excess of imagination aroused in their readers, scientific works were also caught in the crosshairs of Catholic censorship and accused of dealing with 'delicate matters with little moral discretion'. Depending on the readers' level

¹⁸ The dangers attributed to evil literature have a long tradition in the history of Catholicism, as demonstrated by the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, the index of books prohibited by the Catholic church created during the Council of Trent. The *Index* was published until 1966 and although it was not possible for us to find the most recent 20th century editions, it is a known fact that certain books on sex education, including those written by priests such as Frenchman Marc Oraison (who was also a doctor) and published with the seal of *nihil obstat* [nothing stands in the way], were also included in the index for violating Catholic sexual morality (Desmazières, 2011, pp. 176-177). In Brazil, the best-known censorship effort was the publication of literary guide *Através dos romances: um guia para as consciências* (Through the Novels: A Guide for Consciences), written by Friar Pedro Sinzig. First published in 1917 by Editora Vozes, it was a kind of 'veto manual', which classified a considerable number of books and authors as either appropriate or inappropriate (Paiva, 1997).

of education, they might be allowed, but only for the purposes of study, as demonstrated by *Undecided* and a reader called Ana Maria, who asked if she could read *Our Sex Life*, by German doctor Fritz Kahn¹⁹. Her love of reading was praised but accompanied by a warning: “[...] take care not to read everything that comes before you. For if books are good friends and even soothing to our pain, sometimes you may find amongst them a false friend, a poison to your soul” (Videns, 1955b, p. 14). As for the book in question, Videns advised her not to read it, for the book dealt with “[...] delicate matters with little moral discretion [...]” and could therefore “[...] be harmful rather than useful”. Lastly, he recommended her other works praised for presenting the same subjects with ‘dignity’: *A serviço do amor*, by Dr Carnot, and Father Negromonte’s books *A educação sexual* and *Noivos e esposos* (Videns, 1955b, p. 14).

In *A serviço do amor*, we find a good example of the appropriation of scientific discourse by Catholics for their model of sex education. Authored by a doctor, the book clarified that sexual pleasure was a ‘God given’ physiological function to ensure the transmission of life, as natural as the pleasure in eating and drinking. Therefore, there was nothing immoral in its essence. The author also emphasized that ignorance about the ‘realities of marriage’ left women ‘more exposed’ to psychic traumas caused by excessive decency or lack of knowledge, such as frigidity (Carnot & Carnot, 1955). For the Catholics, a total absence of pleasure was considered as serious a threat to marital harmony as the immoralities that might dissociate sex from reproduction. Although it is not possible to identify whether the author of the book was Catholic, it is important to consider that it refers to something of a consensus between Catholicism and Medicine –that normal sex should be linked to marriage and reproduction. Thus, science was used by the Catholics to reaffirm the naturalness of pleasure, although they clarified that this should be the means but not the purpose of the sexual act. Maria Madalena’s frequent recommendation of this book to the readers of *Lar Católico* highlights the Catholics’ strategy of incorporating scientific knowledge into the sexual education of the faithful, in order to prepare them correctly for marriage and prevent possible affective disorders that might compromise matrimonial happiness and harmony, especially sexually.

Nevertheless, the recommendation of scientific books reveals some conflict among Catholics in terms of the criteria for selecting and rejecting this type of sexual literature, as exemplified by the divergent opinions on the book *A educação sexual e afetiva* by French psychoanalyst and pedagogue André Berge²⁰. The book

¹⁹ Fritz Kahn (1888-1968) was a German Jewish doctor known for having published several scientific works made popular by his own elaborate illustrations.

²⁰ André Berge (1902-1995) was one of the founders of the *École des parents et éducateurs de Paris* and dedicated himself to research on psychoanalysis and psycho-pedagogy for the sexual education of

dealt with “[...] the harmonious and healthy development of men and women [...]” based on three pillars: pedagogy, psychology and morality, and was aimed at married people, young people preparing for marriage, and anyone interested “[...] in solving human problems caused by the conflicts of sex and love, and the social problems caused by or causing these personal disorders” (Berge, 1957, dust-jacket). The preface, written by Dominican friar Pedro Secondi, emphasized Berge’s authority as a Catholic man of science while clarifying that his approach was scientific: “[...] the author is certainly a Christian, but [...] desires to bring us only the results of his experience as an attentive father and his studies as a doctor in the scientific and practical field” (Berge, 1957, p. 10)²¹.

But the fact that he was an expert on the subject was also a criterion used to consider *A educação sexual e afetiva* ‘reprehensible’ reading. This was Videns’s attitude. As a priest, he stressed that the book should not be read precisely because it broached the subject only from a scientific viewpoint, and not a religious one. To the readers who wrote to *Família Cristã* asking for an opinion on it, he offered the following clarification:

Although André Berge is a good writer, psychologist and specialist in the problems of childhood, youth and family, this book of his is disapproved of. [...] He stubbornly remains in the entirely natural field throughout it. He defends certain principles rejected by the church. Although nobly written, it harms those lacking a very strong moral education (Videns, 1959, p. 5).

Not even the fact that the work was published by Catholic publishing house Agir was a guarantee that it was a good-quality read. Videns concluded his censorship by stating that “[...] unfortunately, due to a shortage of time on the hands of those responsible, who should be aware of all the works that they distribute, or for some other reason, it just so happens that there are also books from Catholic publishing houses that are not good”. His advice, therefore, was that the book should not “[...] enter Christian homes” (Videns, 1959, p. 5).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

children and adolescents (Giami, 2007). He was also one of the coordinators of the dialogue between Catholicism and psychoanalysis in France (Desmazières, 2011).

²¹ This book was part of a collection titled ‘Família’ (Family), aimed at addressing “[...] issues concerning the family such as [...] preparation for marriage, marital problems and education in the light of new data from modern psychology” (Berge, 1957, dust-jacket). Two other books by him – *Como educar pais e filhos?* (*How to Educate Parents and Children*) and *Defeitos das crianças* (*Children’s Problems*) – were part of this collection, which also featured titles by Brazilian authors such as Alceu Amoroso Lima, Maria Junqueira Schmidt, and Gustavo Corção.

The cultural mediation carried out in the Catholic press and the suggestion of reading materials through the readers' letters sections allow us to draw conclusions about the Catholic model of sex education. Firstly, religious sex education attempted to compete with a knowledge about sex that was labeled as 'immoral' and 'pornographic' because it did not address the topic in the light of Christian morality. At the same time, it sought to fill a gap left in the education of the faithful in sexual matters by the Catholics themselves. The realization that religion was losing ground in the face of other discourses such as Medicine and Psychoanalysis mobilized initiatives incorporating sex education into evangelization strategies; the press being the main tool for disseminating sexual knowledge according to Catholic principles, such as in the case of the religious congregations responsible for publishing *Lar Católico* and *Família Cristã*. The publications acted strategically, especially in the readers' letters sections, which invited participation by the laity by promising anonymity and offering advice and friendly words to individual anxieties. Although they do not give away much information on the profile of the sections' participants, the work of the counselors as intellectual mediators was a crucial dynamic in sex education, as they acted in an individualized and attentive manner regarding the situations confessed to. Reading, in particular, was used as a tool for education.

Another aspect we can highlight is the fact that in these publications' discourses, sex education had the purpose of preparing the faithful for marriage, reaffirming the specific functions of men and women in the family. Marriage and the family were, in the Catholics' view, threatened by the non-religious and 'modern' influences disseminated in the mass media and sex literature then in vogue. The emphasis on sexual differences justified a different orientation for men and women, in reaction to the changes in social roles heralded by the 1950s such as women's work and contraceptive methods. The functioning of the sex organs, maternity as a function of the female 'nature', and the psychological differences in male and female behavior were some of the scientific aspects used by Catholics to reaffirm sexual differences not only according to divine Creation, but also to the specificities of the 'nature' of each sex, based on scientific evidence²².

Despite there being some appropriation of scientific discourse on sex education on their part, the Catholics' position with regard to science was ambiguous. On one hand, they recognized the importance of scientific knowledge about the body and even recommended certain books written by doctors and specialists to laypeople. On the other, they criticized sex education strictly from a biological point of view that ignored the moral and spiritual dimensions of sexual union. Therefore, it was necessary to prescribe reading materials that did not threaten the moral integrity of the faithful. Acceptance of some authors who were

²² The reaffirmation of sexual differences by scientific discourse is a theme widely discussed in historiography, particularly in Laqueur (2001), Schiebinger (2004) and Rohden (2009).

partly representative of science can be regarded as an adaptation to scientific discourse, in view of the church's greater openness to secular issues, and as a strategy of competition with books that were already 'popular' and that the laity could have easy access to in bookstores and newsstands.

The advice given to the laity by Maria Magdalena and Videns in the sections 'Intercâmbio com as leitoras' and 'Confie-me seu problema' also emphasized the importance of reading for sex education – not only by disseminating publications considered to be in line with Catholic doctrine, but also by controlling what the laity could read with restrictions or should not read under any circumstance. Although there was a consensus that morality should be the starting point of Catholic sex education, this was not kept to in the criteria for evaluating sex education books.

In this regard, we understand the Catholic mediators active in the readers' letters sections to be 'conservative modernizers' (Mainwaring, 2004), as they recognized the importance of approaching and instructing the faithful in sexual matters, criticizing the more conservative groups who ignored the issue, but maintaining a less progressive stance with regard to the issue of individual freedom. Although they admitted the importance of sexual pleasure for maintaining conjugal harmony and of women undertaking courses of study, the sex education promoted by the intellectual Catholic mediators was intended to reaffirm the Christian values of marriage and family, in a historical context in which other discourses threatened to occupy their position of authority on intimate relations between the sexes.

Even those who recognized the importance of sex education according to the official doctrine of the church, such as Father Videns, had reservations about a strictly scientific approach to sex and censored authors – even if they were Catholic – who approached the issue purely from this perspective. Maria Magdalena and Monsignor Negromonte (who did not write in periodicals but was very well suited to the readership) highlighted the contributions of science under the condition that it be amalgamated with religion in order to reaffirm the moral meaning of sex and ecclesiastical authority on the matter. Although the appreciation of sex education is considered a modern posture by the Catholics because it replaces the silence that prevailed on the subject for a long time, it did not signify the disappearance of religious conservatism. The sexual act continued to be reaffirmed and valued for its reproductive function and circumscribed by marriage, while 'secondary' purposes such as pleasure were only accepted as legitimate as long as they did not jeopardize the ultimate purpose of divine Creation.

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Received: 2019.11.02

Approved: 2020.06.24

How to cite this paper: Carvalho, C. C.; Kodama, K. Sex education in the confessional: mediation of Science by Catholics in the journals “Lar Católico” and “Família Cristã” (1950s). (2020). *Brazilian Journal of History of Education*, 20. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4025/rbhe.v20.2020.e133>

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Note:

This study was financed in part by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel – Brazil (Capes) – Funding Code 001.