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Faith and Education: the Catholic Church's influence on educational policy during Getúlio Vargas's provisional government (1930-1934)¹

Fede e Istruzione: l'influenza della Chiesa Cattolica nella politica educativa del governo provvisorio di Getúlio Vargas (1930-1934)

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Abstract. This article examines the interplay between the Catholic Church and Getúlio Vargas's provisional Government in Brazil (1930–1934), focusing on the Church's efforts to influence educational reforms during a period of significant political and social transformation. Utilizing documents from the Vatican Secret Archive (AAV) and the Vatican Secretariat of State Archive (ASRS), it explores the Church's role in shaping the decree-law on secondary education introduced by Francisco Campos in 1931. The analysis highlights the Church's strategic engagement to safeguard its moral and institutional interests amidst broader debates between progressive and traditionalist educational ideals. Special attention is given to the internal debates within the Brazilian clergy, their coordinated advocacy for religious education, and their response to challenges posed by secular and positivist forces. The article further contextualizes these dynamics within the broader trajectory of Church–State relations in Brazil, offering insight into the consolidation of Catholic influence during the early Vargas era and its longer-term implications for educational policy.

Keywords: Church and State, Brazil, education policy, catholicism, nationalism.

Riassunto. Questo articolo esamina le interazioni tra la Santa Sede e il governo provvisorio di Getúlio Vargas in Brasile (1930–1934), concentrandosi sugli sforzi delle istituzioni cattoliche per influenzare le riforme educative durante un periodo di profonde trasformazioni politiche e sociali. Attraverso l'analisi di documenti dell'Archivio Segreto Vaticano (AAV) e dell'Archivio della Segreteria di Stato Vaticana (ASRS), l'articolo esplora la corrispondenza tra i membri del clero brasiliano e la Nunziatura Apostolica. L'analisi mette in evidenza l'impegno strategico della Chiesa nel salvaguardare i propri interessi morali e istituzionali in un contesto segnato dal confronto tra pedagogie progressiste e visioni tradizionaliste. Particolare attenzione è dedicata ai dibattiti interni al clero brasi-

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liano, alla sua mobilitazione per l'inserimento dell'insegnamento religioso nelle scuole e alla risposta agli ostacoli posti da settori laici e positivisti. L'articolo inserisce queste dinamiche nella più ampia traiettoria delle relazioni Chiesa-Stato in Brasile, offrendo nuove prospettive sulla formazione della politica educativa nei primi anni del varguismo.

Parole chiave: Relazione Chiesa-Stato, Brasile, politiche educative, cattolicesimo, nazionalismo.

INTRODUCTION

The period of Getúlio Vargas's leadership in Brazil, spanning from 1930 to 1945, marked an era of deep political and social transformation (Lippi *et al.* 1982), culminating in the so-called «Estado Novo» regime (1937-1945). One of the key areas of contestation during this period was Education, which, as academic literature has highlighted, Vargas's governments sought to use as a tool for nationalist indoctrination and moral regulation (Dallabrida 2009). In this context, the Holy See emerged as a significant player, negotiating its role in the new state framework through its diplomatic arm, the Apostolic Nunciature in Rio de Janeiro. This paper seeks to examine how the Church, through active engagement with the provisional government led by Getúlio Vargas (1930-1934), influenced educational policy. Considering this, the present contribution aims to analyse, through the analysis of documents from the Vatican Secret Archive (AAV) and the Vatican Secretariat of State Archive (ASRS), the relationship between the Holy See and the Vargas government in the early months of its legislative actions. The article is structured as follows: The first paragraph explores the historical context surrounding the rise of Getúlio Vargas as a national leader (Gaspari 2002), with a particular focus on the heated debate over Brazil's pedagogical and educational future (De Oliveira *et al.* 2023). The second section examines the role of the Apostolic Nunciature in Rio de Janeiro, highlighting its strategic interactions with the Brazilian government in the drafting and implementation of Francisco Campos's decree-law on secondary education (1931). Finally, a concluding section provides an overall assessment of the Brazilian clergy's strategy of action and the challenges it faced in safeguarding the moral interests of the Catholic Church in the early stages of Varguism, highlighting the Church's efforts to reassert its role in national moral education through schooling.

A PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT IN A CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT

In the years leading up to 1930, Brazil experienced significant social and political shifts (Sixirei Paredes

2020). The growth of an urban working class, the decline of traditional oligarchic alliances, cultural transformations spurred by immigration and the increasing political role of the armed forces contributed to a highly unstable environment (Iglesias 1994). Since the beginning of the Brazilian Republic (1889), federal leadership alternated between the elites of Minas Gerais and São Paulo, forming the so-called «café con leite» pact. This instability was exacerbated by the breach of the pact when São Paulo unilaterally backed Júlio Prestes for the presidency in 1930, sidelining Minas Gerais. The breakdown of this political arrangement combined with growing dissatisfaction among marginalized political factions and social groups, led to the formation of a heterogeneous coalition that brought Getúlio Vargas to power in October 1930 (Boris 1995). This heterogeneous alliance enabled the overthrow of the existing order and the establishment of a new provisional² government under him. In the first months, Vargas governmental action was carried out mainly through decree-laws aimed at restoring order and revitalizing the country's economy after the 1929 Wall Street Crash (Groppo 2009). This intense legislative activity significantly prolonged the process of drafting a new constitution, which was finalized only on July 16, 1934, following repeated demands from the opposition³. Although initially focused on restoring economic and political stability, the provisional government soon turned its attention to education, a sector long marked by institutional fragmentation and social inequality. During the First Republic (1889-1930), Brazil's educational system had faced persistent challenges, particularly in overcoming disjointed preparatory courses and segmented examination structures. In the absence of systemic reform, some schools, especially religious institutions, began to develop more cohesive models of secondary education. This level of instruction remained largely in private hands, with the Catholic Church playing a leading role through strategic alliances with regional oligarchies. The 1920s witnessed intensify-

² The provisional nature of the government was due to its initial goal of rewriting the Constitution.

³ However, the pursuit of social order and a centralist policy led Getúlio Vargas to suspend the Constitution just three years later, establishing a new regime with strongly authoritarian overtones.

ing debates on educational reform, revealing a fundamental divide between two opposing pedagogical camps. On one side were the advocates of the New Education movement. Emerging in the wake of World War I, this pedagogical trend emphasized child-centered learning, critical thinking, and creativity, challenging the traditional model of authoritarian, rote-based instruction (Valdemarin and De Lima 2017). Rather than passively adopting foreign models, Brazilian reformers actively reinterpreted progressive ideals, adapting them to local cultural, political, and institutional contexts (Gondra *et al.* 2014). This engagement extended beyond theoretical appropriation. Brazilian educators also participated in international pedagogical circuits, particularly those fostered by the New Education Fellowship (NEF), which held influential conferences throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Brehony 2004). The presence of reformers such as Laura Lacombe at the 1927 Locarno Congress, for example, illustrates how Brazilian actors contributed to global conversations on educational renewal, not merely as recipients but as co-authors of reform agendas (Gonçalves Vidal *et al.* 2023). Recent research has documented how international pedagogical models, especially those associated with Ovide Decroly, were translated into Brazilian classrooms through complex processes of reinterpretation and didactic mediation (Hai, Simon, and Depaepe 2015). In São Paulo's normal schools, Decroly's principles were rearticulated in ways that aligned with civic republicanism and the democratizing goals of public education (Hai, *et al.* 2016). This interplay between global models and national needs also shaped material and institutional dimensions of reform. The transatlantic circulation of educational books and journals played a key role in diffusing New Education ideals. Collections of progressive texts reached Brazil via Portugal⁴, influencing library holdings and teacher training programs (Toledo and Carvalho 2011). Educational periodicals became central vehicles of knowledge transfer. This was the case, for example, of the journals *Revista Escolar* (Portugal) and *Educação* (São Paulo), which functioned as platforms where educational modernity was debated, localized, and redistributed

(Cordeiro, and Carvalho 2005). The political laboratory in which these ideas converged was São Paulo, through the school reform of 1920, which integrated principles of democracy, science, and civic education into the framework of teacher training. (Nery and Honorato 2024). In this internationalized context, figures such as Fernando de Azevedo and Anísio Teixeira must be seen not merely as local reformers, but as intellectuals deeply embedded in global networks of educational transformation. Their efforts, culminating in the *Manifesto dos Pioneiros da Educação Nova* (1932), must be read in light of this broader interplay between transnational pedagogical exchange and localized adaptation. On the other side of the fence stood the traditionalist thinkers, who defended a more conservative and values-driven model of education rooted in Catholic principles. Among the traditionalists, figures such as Jackson de Figueiredo and Alceu Amoroso Lima played a pivotal role. After Figueiredo's death in the same 1928, Dom Sebastião Leme, Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, entrusted Alceu Amoroso Lima with the leadership of the «Centro Dom Vital» and the editorship of the magazine «A Ordem», the most important catholic review at that time. Through these platforms, Amoroso Lima continued to champion the traditionalist perspective, opposing the secular and progressive ideals of the New Education movement, which he and his peers saw as a threat to moral and religious values in Brazilian society (Zottele Loss 2023). The traditionalist agenda did not remain confined to Catholic associations or intellectual circles. After the 1930 Revolution, the provisional government led by Getúlio Vargas began to actively support the Catholic Church, both discursively and materially. This alliance was part of a broader effort to build national unity and restore social order through shared moral values. As Kenneth Serbin (1992) has shown, the Vargas regime introduced a systematic program of state subsidies to Catholic institutions, including schools, seminaries, and charitable organizations⁵. These subsidies were not merely financial; they also symbolized the government's recognition of the Church as a central actor in the moral reconstruction of the nation. Through education in particular, the Church positioned itself as an indispensable partner in shaping Brazilian citizenship according to its ethical vision, an arrangement that reflected a convergence between political authority and religious legitimacy in the context of

⁴ A notable example of this transatlantic circulation is the presence, in the Biblioteca Museu do Ensino Primário in Lisbon, of Brazilian volumes from the *Atualidades Pedagógicas* collection, published by Companhia Editora Nacional between 1931 and 1950 under the direction of Fernando de Azevedo, one of the leading figures of the Brazilian New Education movement. The library, directed by Adolfo Lima, an influential voice of the Portuguese New School, used these texts as central tools for teacher training. Among the titles included in the collection is the Portuguese translation of *A Brief Course in the History of Education* (1907) by American historian Paul Monroe, published in Brazil under the title *História da Educação*, which reached its eleventh edition in 1976 (Sooma Silva and Gimenez Favaro 2014).

⁵ The policy of subsidization was formalized through legal instruments such as the Ato n. 19.941 (March 1931), which allocated federal funds to support Catholic educational and charitable institutions. These transfers were justified on the grounds of social utility and the moral alignment between Church and State. By 1934, Catholic institutions had become regular recipients of federal assistance, reinforcing their role in public education and welfare (Surbin 1992).

authoritarian modernization. This clash between New Education and the traditional one, ultimately influenced the educational policy of the new provisional government led by Getúlio Vargas, beginning in October 1930. A major turning point came with the establishment of the Ministry of Education and Public Health in late 1930, led by Francisco Campos. Campos spearheaded an ambitious overhaul of the national education system, initiating reforms that culminated in the implementation of Decree n. 18.890 on April 18, 1931. This decree reorganized secondary education, introducing modern curricular structures and a more systematic approach to schooling. Among the key objectives of this educational centralization was the consolidation of a national civic identity through early schooling. In this context, religious education in primary schools took on a particularly strategic importance. This level of instruction, traditionally associated with the literacy and moral formation of the general population, became a crucial site for the transmission of shared values (Dallabrida 2009). The Catholic Church strongly advocated for its inclusion, viewing it not only as a spiritual necessity but as a tool for nation building – a way to morally anchor citizens from childhood in alignment with Christian principles (Surbin 1992). Vargas's government, in turn, recognized the stabilizing function of religious instruction in a volatile post-revolutionary environment⁶. (Oliveira *et al.* 2023). The insertion of religious content into elementary education thus reflected a mutual effort to forge a disciplined, cohesive, and morally upright national body. As will be seen, the Church's traditionalist mobilization shaped key aspects of Campos's legislative framework.

THE BRAZILIAN CHURCH AND THE STRATEGIC ADVOCACY FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM

As is well known, the Church had long been involved in Brazilian education, dating back to colonial times, and maintained a network of private schools and universities. To understand the extent of the Catholic Church's influence in Brazil during the 1930s and 1940s, it is helpful to consider the data from a study conducted by «L'Osservatore Romano» and commissioned to the Pontifical Pius Brazilian College on July 25, 1942, which provides the following information:

⁶ Unlike the Italian case, where the Lateran Concordat (1929) provided a formal framework to reintroduce religious education and recognize Catholicism as the state religion, Brazil lacked a similar agreement. This absence forced the Church to rely on personal lobbying, provisional decrees, and informal alliances. As a result, Catholic educational initiatives in Brazil were more vulnerable to political oscillations, particularly at the state level, as evidenced by the 1931 crisis in São Paulo.

In the vast territory of Brazil, covering 8,511,189 km², the religious landscape has undergone significant evolution. At the end of the colonial period (1808), Brazil had a population of 4 million, served by 1 archdiocese, 6 suffragan dioceses, and 1 prelature. During the Empire (1822–1889), the population grew by 10 million, and 5 new dioceses were established. By the early 20th century, with the proclamation of the Republic, the religious structure expanded dramatically. Currently, Brazil is home to 17 archdioceses, 60 dioceses, 25 prelatures, and 2 apostolic prefectures, serving a population exceeding 42 million. Notably, Brazil was the first Latin American nation to have two of its citizens elevated to the rank of cardinal (in 1905 and 1930). Brazil now boasts 3 regional major seminaries, 8 metropolitan major seminaries, 34 minor seminaries, and 7 preparatory seminaries, educating approximately 3,000 students. Additionally, the «Pontifical Pius Brazilian College» was established in Rome in 1934, under the initiative of Pope Pius XI and funded by Brazilian bishops, nurturing the future leaders of the Catholic Church in Brazil. The Catholic Church in Brazil is supported by 14 male orders, 27 congregations, and 3 institutes involved in various forms of apostolic work. Among women, over 9,000 nuns serve through 11 orders, 18 third orders, and 87 congregations. Catholic institutions of education, many recognized as equivalent to federal schools, educate over 80,000 students. In São Paulo alone, 25,830 young people are members of the «Marian Army», a movement devoted to practicing and professing their faith. Brazil has also hosted several National Eucharistic Congresses in key cities: Rio de Janeiro (1922), Bahia (1933), Belo Horizonte (1936), Recife (1939) and São Paulo (1942). (Arch. Segr. Stato Vaticano, AAEESS, Brasil, Period V, 541 B, 6-9.)

This growth and organization reflect the dynamic and expanding presence of the Catholic Church in Brazil, underscoring its critical role in the country's spiritual and educational life. The seizure of power by Vargas in October 1930 elicited immediate reactions from the Brazilian clergy. An initial reassurance regarding the nature of this new government was sent by the Archbishop of Porto Alegre, João Becker, dated October 16, 1930, and addressed to Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, Vatican Secretary of State. In the letter, Mons. Becker stated:

The revolution that simultaneously broke out in Rio Grande do Sul and several other states of Brazil is neither communist in origin nor character. Telegrams claiming otherwise are false and defamatory. The civil and military government, the press, and the population, as well as the armed forces, condemn and reject the ideology and subversive methods of Russian communism. The revolution, already victorious in most Brazilian states, is essentially

political, as it seeks only to reclaim constitutional freedoms and rights. (*A Federação*, October 17, 1930)⁷

After these initial reassurances, the key issue became the stance that the Brazilian Church should adopt toward this new government. On December 20, 1930, the Archbishop of São Paulo, Leopoldo e Silva Duarte, wrote to the Apostolic Nuncio, Benedetto Aloisi Masella, advocating the need for a Concordat with the Brazilian State:

It is evident that our politicians, whose faith is almost always doubtful, wavering, more sentimental than doctrinal, believe that the Church's role should be that of a submissive servant to the State, *a servile instrument rather than a guide for public opinion and politics in general*. On this matter, I have no illusions; the past does not justify them, and the present does not seem to dispel them. In Brazil, a concordat with concessions would benefit the narrow politics of statesmen with even shorter and more petty horizons. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1216, p. 3)

Eight days earlier, the Apostolic Nuncio in Rio de Janeiro, Mons. Aloisi Masella, informed the Holy See that he had received a letter from the Archbishop of Diamantina, Mons. Joaquim Silverio de Souza, dated November 26, 1930, which stated:

I do not believe that, in the constitutional reform, the Church will be granted the place it deserves. Political secularism is becoming increasingly entrenched among those who govern; however, a concordat might not be entirely impossible. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 12)

Within the Brazilian clergy, perspectives on the stance to adopt toward the new government were different, and the very idea of a concordat divided bishops and prelates. However, there was a shared sense of urgency for a clear and coordinated action to effectively impact and influence the new provisional government. On December 5, 1930, a confidential letter arrived from Rome addressed to the Archbishops of the Brazilian provinces. The letter stated:

Your Excellencies, considering your good relations with some of the gentlemen currently governing the Nation, could you not advocate for the election of representatives of unwavering religious trust to both the council in question and the future constituent assembly? (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 13)

The response to this confidential letter arrived on December 15, 1930, from the Archbishop of Porto Alegre, João Batista Becker, who stated that the following day he would send a long letter to Getúlio Vargas, head of the provisional government; Oswaldo Aranha, Minister of Justice; and Lindolfo Collor, Minister of Labor, Industry, and Commerce considering that «It is necessary to act as soon as possible because any delay could harm the interests of the Holy Church»⁸. The day before, on December 14, the Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, Sebastião Leme, had also responded to the letter from the Vatican Secretariat of State. He emphasized the hostility of the previous government toward the Church and the improved prospects under the current one, stating:

It is my deep conviction that now it will be easier to address this great and necessary matter of returning Brazil to God, and God to Brazil, through the mediation of the Church and the Holy See. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 29)

The various opinions and perspectives for action among the Brazilian clergy converged in a 12-point document outlining their main demands to the Government⁹. Among them are the elimination of the words «Ordem e Progresso» from the Constitution, full freedom for the display of the image of Christ in schools and courts, optional religious education during school hours, chaplains and religious assistance in the armed forces and the recognition of the civil effects of religious marriage through registration at the state notary's office¹⁰. On December 24, 1930, Cardinal Sebastião Leme directly consulted the Holy See regarding this resolution, seeking its opinion. In the letter addressed to Secretary E. Pacelli, Cardinal Leme proposes a «discreet yet decisive action, both direct and indirect, to be carried out immediately with the Government and influential individuals, along with the preparation of an impactful public opinion campaign through the press, conferences, telegrams, and meeting»¹¹. Card. Leme also notes that some bishops, strategically positioned due to local circumstances, have already begun acting «with satisfactory results»¹². However, he highlights that all dioceses will have a broader scope of action once the names of the council responsible for drafting the constitutional project are known, and later when candidates for the Constituent Assembly are presented. He stresses the urgent need to maintain absolute and complete unity of orientation and

⁷ The letter appeared the following day on the front page of the newspaper *A Federação*, the official organ of the Republican Party (Director João Carlos Machado), printed in Porto Alegre. Arch. Nunz. Brasile, n. 206, Fasc. 1216, p. 140

⁸ Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 14.

⁹ Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 19-21.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 42-46.

¹² Ibidem.

action within the Catholic environment. The unity of intent and action among the Brazilian clergy was further reinforced by the decision to focus political pressures on specific points. In a letter dated February 2, 1931, addressed to Nuncio Benedetto Aloisi Masella, the Archbishop of Porto Alegre, João Becker, argued:

We must demand the essentials to avoid suffering a setback like in 1925. Therefore, I propose three points: 1. Optional religious education; 2. Recognition of religious marriage for civil purposes; 3. Religious assistance for the armed forces. To regulate these three points, we have the constitutions of other countries, such as Italy, Germany, etc., as examples. Demanding that the new constitution be proclaimed in the name of God or that Catholicism be recognized as the religion of the Brazilian people, the placement of crucifixes in courtrooms, and other similar points, while desirable, I do not consider absolutely necessary. Demanding the union of Church and State would be impossible to achieve and, in my view, would be detrimental to the Church. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 24)

As the Brazilian clergy began to outline a unified strategy for influencing Vargas's educational policies, their position was strongly supported by the recent papal encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929). Issued by Pope Pius XI only ten months before the revolution of October 1930, the document provided a comprehensive doctrinal foundation for Catholic involvement in education. It reaffirmed the Church's exclusive competence in the religious and moral formation of youth and sharply criticized state attempts to monopolize education. One of the most forceful passages states:

Again, it is the inalienable right as well as the indispensable duty of the Church, to watch over the entire education of her children, in all institutions, public or private, not merely in regard to the religious instruction there given, but in regard to every other branch of learning and every regulation in so far as religion and morality are concerned. (*Pius XI, Divini Illius Magistri*, 1929, 23)

The encyclical further condemned pedagogical models that separated education from religion, branding such systems as "false, irriverent and dangerous"¹³ to both individual character and social order.

So today we see, strange sight indeed, educators and philosophers who spend their lives in searching for a universal moral code of education, as if there existed no decalogue, no gospel law, no law even of nature stamped by God on the heart of man, promulgated by right reason, and codified in positive revelation by God Himself in the

ten commandments. These innovators are wont to refer contemptuously to Christian education as "heteronomous", "passive", "obsolete", because founded upon the authority of God and His holy law. Such men are miserably deluded in their claim to emancipate, as they say, the child, while in reality they are making him the slave of his own blind pride and of his disorderly affections, which, as a logical consequence of this false system, come to be justified as legitimate demands of a so-called autonomous nature. (*Pius XI, Divini Illius Magistri*, 1929 62-63)

These ideas resonated with the Brazilian episcopate's insistence on religious instruction in schools, parental rights, and ecclesiastical autonomy. More than a general spiritual reference, *Divini Illius Magistri* functioned as a blueprint that helped legitimize the bishops' demands in their correspondence with the Nunciature and their lobbying efforts toward the provisional government. The doctrinal clarity provided by *Divini Illius Magistri* not only shaped internal ecclesiastical strategies but also empowered Catholic voices to assert their positions more confidently in the public sphere. At the same time, the encyclical imposed significant doctrinal boundaries. Its categorical rejection of secular or non-confessional educational models limited the scope for negotiation or hybrid solutions, especially in a culturally heterogeneous and demographically expansive country like Brazil. While it served as a unifying force for the Church's advocacy, it also constrained more pragmatic or context-sensitive approaches. This ideological confrontation soon spilled into the national press, where the debate over the future of Brazilian education intensified. On November 5, 1930, in the front page of the newspaper «O Horizonte», printed in Belo Horizonte (Dir. Cornélio Da Fonseca), João Penha wrote:

Because, in the end, the child becomes a slave to their own inclinations. This is the truth and the analysis of the new and proposed system. It is more prudent to follow the guidelines set by the Church, for it is enriched by twenty centuries of experience. The Church opposes charity to philanthropy, religious education to godless civics, and the habit of discipline to political habits. Without this, we will have nothing but educational anarchy. The child becomes a guinea pig for the experiments of the old men's whims. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 145)

In the newspaper «A União», a political-religious journal directed by Felício dos Santos and published in Rio de Janeiro, an article titled «The Importance of Religious Education» appeared on January 25, 1931. It was argued that greater effort by the Catholic clergy was needed to make religious instruction even mandatory. The article stated:

¹³ Pius XI, *Divini Illius Magistri*, 1929, p. 64.

It seems that Catholics have not yet fully grasped the importance of religious education in educational institutions, and therefore they are content with the concession of optional religious education during school hours. Such a measure would only be a true achievement in a country irritatingly secularized, where the Catholic population is a minority, or where the Church is recovering from recent religious persecution. But in our country, this should not truly be the aspiration of Catholics. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 147)

In this context, the unity of purpose and action promoted by Cardinal Leme, combined with Archbishop Becker's minimalist program, ultimately represented the core strategy of the Brazilian Catholic clergy in their efforts to influence Getúlio Vargas's policies. This approach was rewarded on April 18, 1931, with the promulgation of a decree-law strongly advocated by then-Minister of Education Francisco Campos¹⁴. The reform of secondary education granted religious institutions equal standing with government schools. On May 1, 1931, Nuncio Aloisi Masella conveyed the news in Telegram No. 58, stating: «Yesterday, a decree was published permitting religious education in schools. It does not fully satisfy because it does not make Catholicism exclusive. However, the decree contains good provisions».¹⁵ Six days later, on May 8, the same Nuncio sent a detailed report (n.6184) commenting on the April 30 government decree¹⁶. He noted that religious education was included in the decree and provided several key details: a) The religious curriculum and textbook selection would fall under ecclesiastical authority. b) The inspection of religious teaching would be managed by the State for school discipline and by religious authorities for content. c) School schedules were to be arranged to allow students to fulfill religious duties, such as attending Mass on holidays when classes were in session. d) Teachers of other subjects were prohibited from criticizing or attacking religious education. Despite these favorable provisions, Aloisi Masella noted that the «sword of Damocles» hanging over the decree was tied to its provisional nature, as well as to the government itself, which was temporary and would eventually be subject to review by the future constituent assembly.¹⁷ Masella concluded that, considering the mentality of the current leaders – many of whom were positivists – it was necessary to be grateful to the Minister of Education for this achievement. This final concern by the Nuncio finds

empirical validation in the events that followed the issuance of the decree. Infact, Francisco Campos's decree-law faced opposition from certain federal governors closely aligned with secular and positivist circles, fueling a renewed mobilization of the Brazilian episcopate. Initially, with Decree n.5.152, of August 7, 1931, Laudo Ferreira de Camargo, the Federal Interventor in the State of São Paulo, incorporated these provisions at the local level, allowing religious education in public schools in São Paulo¹⁸, validating Francisco Campos's decree-law. In November of that same year, Vargas appointed a new Federal Interventor for São Paulo, Colonel Manuel Rabello, who held a very different view on religious education in schools compared to his predecessor.

On Christmas Day 1931, Archbishop Duarte wrote to the Apostolic Nuncio:

I have unfortunate news to share with Your Excellency on this beautiful Christmas Day. The Federal Interventor, a fanatical positivist¹⁹, has been troubling us here since the day he took office. I have remained calm and silent in the face of this man's absurdities, who seems entirely unaware of the context in which he lives. However, after this unprecedented act of suspending or overturning the permission for religious education in public schools-granted by a federal decree-I felt it was no longer permissible for me to remain silent. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 22).

Mons. Duarte also stated that he would not appeal directly to the Interventor, as doing so would accord him too much honor. Instead, he chose to address the Head of the provisional government, arguing that allowing such a disgraceful act would significantly undermine his authority. With this message, Archbishop Duarte included a copy of the letter he sent to Vargas on behalf of the Diocese. The tone of Mons. Duarte's letter to Vargas was particularly harsh and impassioned. He wrote:

The Paulista Episcopate respectfully protests to the worthiest Head of the Nation against the unexpected act of the Federal Interventor (Manuel Rabelo Mendes) prohibiting religious education in public schools. By implicitly revoking the federal decree that allows religious education, the Interventor disregards the fundamental principle of political hierarchy, creating confusion in people's minds and fostering a situation of grave apprehension at a time when we need peace and tranquility to achieve political consolidation in our country. It is incomprehensible that, in the name of freedom of conscience, the positivist

¹⁴ Decree No. 19,890, of April 18, 1931. Official Gazette, Câmara dos deputados, 1/5/1931, p. 6.945.

¹⁵ Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc.1214, p. 123.

¹⁶ Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 126.

¹⁷ Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1214, p. 130.

¹⁸ Decreto no 5.152, de 7 de agosto de 1931, Law of the State of São Paulo.

¹⁹ The reference is to General Manuel Rabelo Mendes, the Federal Interventor of the State of São Paulo.

sectarianism of someone who, by mere chance, holds the reins of the state government, seeks to hinder the exercise of religious beliefs held by the majority of the paulista population. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 24)

Three days later, on December 28, 1931, Nuncio Aloisi Masella wrote to Archbishop Duarte Leopoldo e Silva, commending the appropriateness of the letter sent to Getúlio Vargas. He mentioned that, weeks earlier, during discussions with some of the most influential politicians, the potential suppression of religious education in São Paulo had come up. In that context, the suggestion was made to pursue legal action through the appropriate authority. In his letter, the Nuncio sought Duarte's opinion on whether this approach would be advisable.²⁰ On the same day, Aloisi Masella also wrote to Cardinal Leme, informing him about Duarte's letter to Vargas. In his message, the Nuncio asked whether Leme believed «it would be appropriate to pursue legal action against the suppression and whether all the bishops should send protest telegrams to the aforementioned head of government»²¹. With a prompt reply, on the following day, December 29, 1931, Cardinal Leme responded to the Nuncio. He expressed his belief that the decree was illegal and «discredits», more than anything before it, the provisional government. Cardinal Leme further added:

Under these conditions, I do not believe a general protest movement would be effective. It would amount to demanding that the President not allow himself to be insulted... In fact, I believe it would be counterproductive. Our movement would provoke retaliation from opponents, and in this moment of political confusion and fragility among the leaders, it would not be advisable. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 28)

Meanwhile, Colonel Manuel Rabello also responded regarding his suspension measure and the accusations leveled against him by another bishop, Francisco de Campos Barreto²². In an article dated December 29, 1931, his response was reported:

The sectarianism of which we are accused has served only to make us act with full tolerance and the necessary respect for the beliefs and opinions of others. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the separation of the two powers was nobly instituted by Catholicism in the Middle Ages, and we, as republicans, have merely systematized this noble achievement of humanity. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 29)

Day by day, the issue continued to gain significance. On December 30, 1931, the Nuncio wrote to Pacelli, informing him about a new telegram that Duarte, the Archbishop of São Paulo, would send to Colonel Rabello and Getúlio Vargas.²³ One of the key points raised by Mons. Duarte Leopoldo e Silva was the violation of Article 10 of the original federal decree n. 18.890, which stipulated that any doubts regarding its interpretation should be resolved through mutual agreement between civil and religious authorities. He argued that the Interventor had disregarded the liberal spirit of the decree, leaving the ecclesiastical authority unprepared for the decree issued on December 24²⁴. The Bishop of Botucatu, Carlos Duarte Costa, also joined the debate, stating:

The Church has always been at the forefront of patriotism and the civilization of Brazil. History stands as its witness. The Church does not seek privileges; it simply seeks what is rightfully hers, namely, to form good citizens through the teaching of her doctrine. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 36)

The full text of the controversial decree was published on the front page of the newspaper «Semana Religiosa» on January 2, 1932:

Colonel Manuel Rabello, Federal Interventor in the State of São Paulo, exercising the powers conferred upon him by Federal Decree No. 19.398 of November 11, 1930, and considering Decree No. 5152 of August 7, 1931, which regulated religious education in public schools and has led to various complaints that the government must address, decrees: -Article 1 – Decree N. 5152, of August 7, 1931, is hereby revoked. -Article 2 – This decree shall come into effect on the date of its publication, and all provisions to the contrary are revoked. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 37)

In commenting on the decree, the journalist emphasized that, in a democratic environment, laws cannot be revoked simply because complaints have been received. The situation finally eased on January 9, 1932, when Mons. Benedetto Aloisi Masella wrote to the Secretary of State, Eugenio Pacelli, revealing that:

It has been secretly promised that the federal government will, within a few months, publish a decree to regulate religious education throughout Brazil, thereby implicitly nullifying the decree that suppressed such education in the schools of the State of São Paulo. For now, it is merely

²⁰ Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 26.

²¹ Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 27.

²² Bishop of the Archdiocese of Campinas, São Paulo (1920-1941).

²³ Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 31.

²⁴ Letter dated December 31, 1931. Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 42.

a promise, and it is to be hoped that it will be kept. (Arch. Nunz. Brasile n.203, Fasc. 1220, p. 38)

CONCLUSIONS

The Catholic Church emerged as a pivotal actor during the early years of Getúlio Vargas's provisional government, leveraging its influence to shape key educational reforms. The Church's unified strategy, spearheaded by figures such as Cardinal Sebastião Leme, Nuncio Benedetto Aloisi Masella and Archbishop João Becker, prioritized the inclusion of religious education within the broader framework of state-led educational policy. While achieving notable successes, such as the recognition of religious education in schools through Francisco Campos's decree-law (1931), the Church faced ongoing challenges, including opposition from secular and positivist elements within the government. These events underscore the complex dynamics of Church-state relations in Brazil during this transformative era, reflecting the Church's determination to uphold its moral authority amidst shifting political landscapes.

This mobilization becomes even more compelling when viewed in the broader perspective of the later defence of this decree in the 1934 Constitution and its reformulation in Gustavo Capanema's 1942 educational reform during the height of the «Estado Novo» (1937-1945). These developments also open a rich avenue for further study, inviting deeper exploration into the long-term interplay between Church and state in Brazil's political and educational landscapes during this transformative era. In this light, the Church's effort to embed religious instruction into the national curriculum – despite the absence of a formal Concordat as in the Italian case – offers a valuable lens through which to examine strategies of institutional negotiation and moral nation-building.

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