



## ‘From religious women to religious women’: a study on the narrative construction of intellectual teachers in *Grande Sinal* magazine (1968-1969)

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**ABSTRACT.** This study examines publications from 1968 and 1969 in Revista *Grande Sinal* to analyze the works of three Catholic educators—Catarina Nourry, Irany Vidal Bastos, and Sylvia Villac, who contributed to the magazine. It aims to understand how the integration of teaching with religious life enabled strategies to structure their societal projects. The research analyzes the publication using Bardin’s method (2011) and the categories of representation (Chartier, 2002), religious field (Bourdieu, 2007), and intellectual (Sirinelli, 2003). It also draws on the studies of Rosado-Nunes and Orlando to understand female religious life and the use of printed materials by intellectuals, respectively. The results indicate that these intellectuals were aware of the challenges posed by a context considered repressive in religious, gender, and political spheres. Within this setting, they employed communication strategies not only to disseminate their ideas but also to promote their work in the religious and educational fields. They engaged with contemporary intellectual circles and contributed to progressive agendas, aligned with the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín Meeting (1969), as well as broader reflections within and beyond their religion. Their projects sought to ensure a comprehensive education for their readers, extending beyond religious instruction, through Catholicism.

**Keywords:** catholic intellectuals; female religious life; catholic publications; history of education.

## ‘De las religiosas para las religiosas’: un estudio sobre la construcción narrativa de maestras intelectuales em la Revista *Grande Sinal* (1968-1969)

**RESUMEN.** Este estudio examina publicaciones de 1968 y 1969 en la Revista *Grande Sinal* para analizar los trabajos de tres educadoras católicas—Catarina Nourry, Irany Vidal Bastos y Sylvia Villac – que contribuyeron a la revista. Su objetivo es comprender cómo la integración de la docencia con la vida religiosa permitió estrategias para estructurar sus proyectos para la sociedad. La investigación analiza la publicación utilizando el método de Bardin (2011) y las categorías de representación (Chartier, 2002), campo religioso (Bourdieu, 2007) e intelectual (Sirinelli, 2003). Además, se apoya en los estudios de Rosado-Nunes y Orlando para comprender la vida religiosa femenina y el uso de impresos por parte de intelectuales, respectivamente. Los resultados indican que estas intelectuales eran conscientes de los desafíos impuestos por un contexto considerado represivo en los ámbitos religioso, de género y político. Dentro de este contexto, emplearon estrategias de comunicación no solo para difundir sus ideas, sino también para promover su trabajo en los campos religioso y educativo. Establecieron un diálogo con la intelectualidad contemporánea y contribuyeron a agendas progresistas, alineadas con el Concilio Vaticano II y la Reunión de Medellín (1969), así como con reflexiones más amplias dentro y fuera de su religión. Sus proyectos buscaban garantizar una formación integral para sus lectoras, que fuera más allá de la enseñanza religiosa, a través del catolicismo.

**Palavras chave:** intelectuales católicas; vida religiosa femenina; impresos católicos; historia de la educación.

## ‘Das religiosas para as religiosas’: um estudo sobre a construção narrativa de professoras intelectuais na Revista *Grande Sinal* (1968-1969)

**RESUMO.** Esse estudo utiliza publicações de 1968 e 1969 da Revista *Grande Sinal* para analisar publicações de três educadoras católicas, Catarina Nourry, Irany Vidal Bastos e Sylvia Villac, que publicaram na revista, a fim de compreender como a apropriação da docência articulada à vida religiosa permitiu estratégias para estruturar seus projetos para a sociedade. A pesquisa analisa o impresso utilizando o método de Bardin

(2011) e as categorias de representação, de Chartier (2002), campo religioso, de Bourdieu (2007) e intelectual, de Sirinelli (2003), ancorando-se também nos estudos de Rosado-Nunes e Orlando para compreender a vida religiosa feminina e a utilização de impressos por intelectuais, respectivamente. Os resultados indicam que essas intelectuais estavam conscientes das dificuldades e percalços impostos por um contexto considerado repressivo no âmbito religioso, de gênero e político, e dentro dele, elas utilizaram de estratégias de comunicação para veicular não apenas suas ideias, mas seus trabalhos no campo religioso e educacional, construindo uma interlocução dentro da intelectualidade vigente e contribuindo com pautas progressistas, resultantes de alinhamentos com marcos importantes, como o Concílio Vaticano II, a Reunião de Medellín (1969) além de reflexões dentro e fora da religião, veiculando assim projetos que garantissem uma formação integral para além da religiosa à suas leitoras.

**Palavras chave:** intelectuais católicas; vida religiosa feminina; impressos católicos; história da educação.

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## Introduction

In 2020, we began mapping the presence of female authorship in the journals listed in the catalogue of the Studium Theologicum Library, which belongs to the *Claretian congregation* (Santos, 2020). This mapping revealed a significant presence of Catholic women authors, despite the fact that such authorship often remained in the background within the very materiality of the archive. In an initial analysis, the assumption raised was that, through periodicals, women were able to secure a space in which to make their ideas resonate and to establish networks of intellectual exchange with individuals from different places, thereby marking a position within the production of knowledge in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Among the mapped journals, the one selected for this article was *Revista Grande Sinal* (GS), a periodical ‘from religious women to religious women’, as it defines itself. Founded in 1947 by *Editores Vozes* [publisher], the journal is still published today by the Franciscan Theological Institute [Instituto Teológico Franciscano], now in the form of a scientific periodical. By delving into the histories and projects of past decades—which reflect aspects of contemporary fields of education and religion—it becomes evident that a portion of the journal’s authors were teachers or were in some way involved in education. This circumstance allowed us to explore the theme through the lenses of the History of Education and Women’s History.

The article is thus structured around three movements. The first seeks to understand the religious woman within historiography, as well as some of the disputes and practices of Catholic periodicals in Brazilian society between the 1930s and the 1960s, and how these intellectual disputes and positions ultimately impacted the educational field. The second movement situates itself within the discussion of the occupation of this medium by Catholic women intellectuals. Finally, the article presents an analysis of a selected portion of the production of three religious and lay women educators mentioned above, who published in the journal between 1968 and 1969. The corpus consists of six issues from those respective years. Here, we attempt to categorize and understand the themes of their publications, their objectives, the conditions under which their discourses were produced, what qualifies them as intellectuals, and how this trajectory within print culture enabled forms of social intervention beyond formal schooling, without abandoning their profile as intellectual educators.

Although male authorship was present in the journal’s editorials and articles, what drew attention was the number of women authors who articulated significant frameworks regarding the directions of religious life not only in Brazil, but also in Latin America and even in European countries within the selected time frame. The contributors to *Grande Sinal* translated works, fostered debates, recommended books, disseminated their ideas, and stimulated varied dialogues with the Christian readership through their publications, advancing toward themes that went beyond obedience and female submission—topics long crystallized in representations produced about and for women, particularly religious women.

This investigation led us to anchor the research in the History of Intellectuals, in order to situate these women’s stances politically within the struggles to occupy space through interventions in different narratives, productions, and cultural mediations, as suggested by Sirinelli (2003). The research was therefore outlined on the basis of the following reflections: through which paths is the narrative construction of intellectual women teachers who publish in *Grande Sinal* articulated? What debates do they engage in from their position of enunciation—as educators and religious women—within the intellectual circuit mediated by the journal?

In order to arrive at possible insights and findings, we analyzed the content of texts published by Catarina Nourry, Irany Vidal Bastos, and Sylvia Villac in the journal *Revista Grande Sinal* during the years 1968 and 1969, with the aim of identifying political and cultural aspects of their discourses, as well as the appropriations and representations present in their publications (Chartier, 2002). To investigate which themes gained greater prominence in their texts, and to understand how these themes were related to the historical context in which they were published, we employed the content analysis method proposed by Bardin (2011).

According to content analysis,

The reading carried out by the analyst [...] is not merely a 'literal' reading, but rather the highlighting of a meaning that appears in the background. It is not a matter of moving through signifiers in order to reach meanings, as in ordinary deciphering, but of reaching, through signifiers—or through (manipulated) meanings—other 'meanings' of a psychological, sociological, political, historical, and so forth nature (Bardin, 2011, pp. 47–48, author's emphasis).

Given that the subjects under analysis are Catholic intellectual women teachers, our theoretical–methodological framework draws on Sirinelli's (2003) concept of the intellectual, Bourdieu's (2007) notion of the religious field, and studies on women and religion by Rosado-Nunes (2004). Historical–documentary in nature, this article is situated within the field of the History of Education and is informed by the perspectives of the New Cultural History and Women's History. The sources used consist of issues of *Revista Grande Sinal* published in 1968 and 1969—a period of particular importance in Brazil due to the civil–military dictatorship and the social changes that took place during those years, including within the Catholic field.

Regarding the use of the press, in the words of Luca (2008, p. 145):

[...] newspapers and magazines are, more often than not, not solitary works, but enterprises that bring together a set of individuals, which makes them collective projects, as they gather people around ideas, beliefs, and values that are intended to be disseminated through the written word.

Such values could be mobilized or intensified through favors, financial motivations, and connections with different centers of power. In sum, print media quickly became an important space for legitimizing intellectual agency, whether that of an individual, a group, or an institutional vehicle.

## Women, Religiosity, and Historiography

Despite the specificity of the objective demarcation of gender articulated with the intellectuality of our modern object of study, it is necessary to recall that the path of women carving out positions for themselves and for their ideas in public life (Perrot, 1998)—whether through the press or through other means such as literary and militant practices—gained greater visibility and intensity in the Western world during the nineteenth century. This, however, should not lead us to forget that such movements can also be found among women in Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

For Michelle Perrot (1998, p. 91), “[...] understanding prohibitions also means understanding the strength of resistance and the ways of circumventing or subverting them.” Unlike social movements that confront an oppressive system through direct opposition, as is often the case with feminist movements, the Catholic women examined here made use of alliances and accessed spaces in which emancipation was permitted in ways that were “[...] easier than others, such as health or education [...]” (Perrot, 1998, p. 91).

These alternative means maintained a certain degree of discursive consonance without drawing attention or provoking open conflict, and their actions ultimately reached a broad audience, thereby shaping the formation of Brazilian society (Rosado-Nunes, 2001, 2004; Orlando, 2017).

It is precisely for this reason that Rosado-Nunes argues that religious women

[...] cannot be understood as passive recipients of male discourse or as faithful followers of practices determined by them. Nor do they constitute a fully homogeneous group, responding in a uniform manner to ecclesial exhortations. [...] The history of female religious life in Brazil is marked by submission and transgressions, passivity and creativity (Rosado-Nunes, 2004, pp. 573–574).

Nineteenth-century cultural historiography was produced in ways that excluded more comprehensive and inclusive forms not only of different cultures, but also of their singular modes of cultural production, transmission, communication, and reception, which permeate the social lives of historical subjects—and, consequently, both transform and are transformed by them over time. By the end of the twentieth century,

theoretical and methodological shifts introduced new discussions, problems, hypotheses, solutions, and authors—both women and men—applied to both new and established objects of study, thereby enabling new approaches and the emergence of a New Cultural History (Chartier, 2002). This movement also brought about a renewal of Cultural History, opening up new perspectives for the History of Intellectuals (Zanotto, 2008).

Within this context, we are introduced to the concept of the intellectual as defined by Sirinelli:

A broad, socio-cultural category, encompassing creators and cultural ‘mediators,’ and another, narrower one, based on the notion of engagement. In the first case, it includes both the journalist and the writer, the secondary school teacher and the scholar. On the steps leading to this first group stand some students, actual or potential creators or ‘mediators,’ as well as other categories of cultural recipients. The second is based on the notion of engagement in the life of the city as an actor [...], witness, or conscience (Sirinelli, 2003, pp. 242–243, author’s emphasis).

This concept is divided into two meanings that are both complementary and articulable, “[...] since both refer to the notoriety of the group of intellectuals, as well as to their capacity as specialists in a given field who can place their expertise at the service of the cause they defend” (Zanotto, 2008, pp. 37–38).

It is also necessary to address how Gender Studies — initially marginal and highly delimited — have, through the collective work of many scholars, moved beyond such boundaries by introducing problems, theories, and reflections that more fully encompass contemporary society. Gender is no longer relegated to a synonym for the feminine or for women, nor is it restricted to biologically oriented binaries (Scott, 1995; Zirbel, 2007). Current historiographical debates acknowledge that, in the history of women, both historiographical production — that is, the ways of constructing, revealing, and interpreting this history — and women’s own engagements over time have been marked by long processes of delegitimization and silencing. Nevertheless, this did not occur without resistance, which within the field of history became progressively more incisive from the 1980s onward.

When we look at the Catholic Church, at first glance it may appear to be a homogeneous and hierarchical block that follows a single order. However, the deeper we delve, not only into the institution’s documentary history, but also into the disputes and power struggles within it, the more its diversity becomes apparent, both in political terms and in relation to the agency<sup>1</sup> of the subjects who inhabit this field. Entering into this history allows us to observe the nuances and complexities within the apparent ‘gaps’ of this so-called block, as well as the gains, losses, and transformations that the institution both absorbs from and transmits to society (Rosado-Nunes, 2001). This block, full of disputes and values that carry specific meanings for its participants, was theorized and analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu through the concept of the religious field, which he defines as follows:

Because the position of religious instances—institutions or individuals—within the structure of the distribution of religious capital determines all their strategies, the struggle for the monopoly over the legitimate exercise of religious power over the laity and over the management of the goods of salvation necessarily organizes itself around the opposition between (I) the ‘Church’ and (II) the prophet and his sect. Insofar as it succeeds in imposing recognition of its monopoly [...] and also because it seeks to perpetuate itself, the Church tends, with varying degrees of rigor, to prevent the entry into the market of new enterprises of salvation [...]. Moreover, the Church seeks to conquer or preserve a more or less total monopoly over a form of ‘institutional or sacramental capital of grace’ (of which it is the depository by delegation and which constitutes an object of exchange with the laity and an instrument of power over them) through control over access to the means of production, reproduction, and distribution of the goods of salvation (that is, by ensuring the maintenance of order within the body of specialists), and through the delegation to the body of priests [...] of the monopoly over institutional or sacramental distribution and, at the same time, of an authority (or ‘grace’) of function (or of institution) (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 58, author’s emphasis).

For Bourdieu, society is composed of multiple fields, and the subjects who constitute each of these fields, in turn, possess different forms of value that are more abstract in nature and meaningful only within the specific logic of each field. Within this structure, although it is produced under a patriarchal and hierarchical logic, it is not sufficient to rely solely on the binary opposition between dominators and dominated:

[...] The development of academically grounded, analytical research with empirical bases has applied feminist concepts and research methods to the domain of religions. This has made it possible to assess the complexity of the relationships existing within the religious field. The ambiguous and contradictory ties between women and religions, and between religions and women, within religious organizations have thus been unveiled. Empirical observation

<sup>1</sup> The category ‘agency’ is understood here “[...] not as a synonym for resistance in relations of domination, but rather as a capacity for action created and facilitated by concrete relations of subordination historically configured” (Mahmood, 2019, p. 123).

has shown religions to be complex social spaces, bearers of contradictions, which do not always and in all societies function as conservative forces. Under certain circumstances, they may function as mobilizing forces, leading women to resist their disciplinary power (Rosado-Nunes, 2001, pp. 86–87).

The multiple dimensions of the religious field allow us to understand the diversity of actions and tacit negotiations that are established around a given project, for example, the investment in women as mediators between the clergy and the people when it comes to education and to bringing religion closer to culture.

## The occupation of periodical spaces by the Catholic Intellectuals

With the proliferation of periodicals that gained traction in Brazilian society during the nineteenth century, women found a space for their writing. The work of Constancia Lima Duarte (2023) highlights the diversity of journals and magazines produced by or intended for women during this period, whether as readers or as authors. These periodicals gradually became a medium through which dialogue with a female audience developed over the course of the nineteenth century. Initially produced for women—though often by men—women gradually infused these spaces with their own voices and began to produce discourses about and for themselves. Although the intended readership was primarily female, women increasingly assumed narrative control (albeit often subordinated) and engaged in the educational debates of their time on a daily basis through this type of print medium.

But which women occupied these spaces? It is not possible to define a narrow profile of the women who participated as authors, but one can infer, based on the competencies required to participate and the very logic of journal production, a representation of the notion of the woman who saw this type of print as a means of ‘leaving her room’<sup>2</sup> and transitioning from private to public writing: literate, cultured women, possessing sufficient symbolic capital to move within the intellectual and cultural circles of their time, and embedded in a solid network of sociability. These attributes enabled them to insert themselves into journals and into the circle of authors that formed around them<sup>3</sup>, expressing opinions on diverse topics and increasingly intervening in public life through the pedagogical mission they assumed, especially in educating other women.

In the context of this female movement revolving around journals, in the twentieth century, Catholic intellectuals found in this scenario an important means of popularizing Catholicism, fostering engagement and the formation of individuals, and, above all, of promoting the ideas of the groups to which they belonged. This aligned with the project of (re)Catholicization of Brazilian society, encouraged by D. Sebastião Leme<sup>4</sup> in his 1916 Pastoral Letter—not only through the dissemination of faith, but also through the formation of an engaged, activist faith. Some schools produced their own bulletins and other Catholic publications for the student body, such as the journal *O Eco*, while other periodicals targeted teachers, such as *Revista de Catequese*, and still others were aimed at the lay Catholic intellectual public with the goal of cultivating a Catholic *intelligentsia*, such as *A Ordem* or *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira*, among many others (Santos, 2020).

The use of print media for the education of the population was strongly encouraged throughout the twentieth century, with different groups addressing educational agendas aimed at distinct audiences. Researchers such as Orlando (2017), Magaldi (2017), and Paula (2018) demonstrate that the Church was aware of the need to renew its practices. In the context of the 1930s, the Catholic press also served as a vehicle for an important educational debate that remains controversial to this day. From the 1930s through the 1960s, much changed in the educational landscape; Catholics experienced both gains and losses in the field. Religious presence in public schools was secured through religious instruction, although this was contested by groups advocating for secular education (Magaldi, 2017).

During the entire decade of the 1950s, Brazil’s first National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (enacted in 1961 as Law No. 4.024) was debated by stakeholders from spheres far beyond education, with the Brazilian press taking a sharp and influential role in these discussions. Moreover, through journals, Catholic intellectuals defended their vision of family, which they sought to see reflected in legislation (Magaldi, 2017). In this context, the participation of women in seeking spaces for dialogue, advocacy, and action was crucial, and it has increasingly been investigated by historians.

<sup>2</sup> Here we allude to the idea defended by Virginia Woolf (2014) that women needed a private space to read, think, write, and cultivate their intellect, as presented in the book *A Room of One's Own*.

<sup>3</sup> Periodicals reveal themselves as spaces of sociability and show modes of political articulation among their agents, as well as strategies for strengthening the group circumscribed there and the ideologies that bring them together (Sirinelli, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Dom Sebastião Leme (1882–1942), Brazilian cardinal and Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, influential in the Catholic Church’s educational and pastoral policies, played a key role in promoting the (re)Catholicization of Brazilian society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

When we used the word ‘occupy’ in our search for journals to compose this article, most titles dealt with the political sense of the word. These refer to historical occupations, acts of resistance, or transformations initiated by a disadvantaged group claiming a place to which they never had a right, or which had been taken from them. Thus, we reflect here on the occupation of religious women in magazines and other media outlets as a way to overcome the barriers of their work behind the scenes of the Church, looking beyond the assistance and representations of “[...] unpaid work and limitless dedication” (Garcia & Rosado, 2014).

Most often, they were denied the right to speak, as well as positions of power within their religion, even though it carries a feminine figure as one of the main references in its spirituality and doctrines. With the advent of Feminist Theology, especially from the 1970s onwards, and despite the opposition of some clergy, we observe that Catholic religious women and laywomen have increasingly worked to change this scenario. For a group that lacked access to many spaces, not only within the sacred but also in the public sphere, print media was a crucial tool for conveying their ideas with a degree of autonomy — even though one controlled by male authorization (Orlando, 2017).

In their publications, we observe that they did not act merely as prescribers of Catholic customs. Intellectuals such as Irany Vidal Bastos, Maria Junqueira, Waleska Paixão, and others we will encounter further on, put their cultural capital into practice by producing and propagating projects, training programs, debates, among various other initiatives, thereby building a path to emancipation through religion. Mesquida (2017), when writing about the trajectory of the Catholic intellectual Stella de Faro, showed how her presence was fundamental to the realization of the Catholic project envisioned by Dom Leme in 1916 to “[...] Christianize science, scientists, justice, laws, politics!” (Mesquida, 2017, p. 106). Here we note Stella’s contributions to the magazine *A Ordem*, the publication of the Centro Dom Vital which held a conservative position within the Catholic intellectual movement and had incisive publications on education in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly regarding state investment in private, Catholic education (Magaldi, 2008). Although *A Ordem* was a publication of extremely difficult access for women, Stella, having cultivated a good relationship with Alceu Amoroso Lima, managed to navigate this space and was a present intellectual in this place dedicated to the formation of Catholic leadership cadres.

Beyond her work within the periodical, Mesquida (2017) also points to the religious sister’s contributions on many fronts, from trade union movements in rural and urban areas during the aforementioned period (though the author mentions the intellectual’s active participation in national life from 1939 to 1953), to roles in the Ministry of Education and Culture, investment in training for social work, and even engagement in the struggle for women’s suffrage. Observing the activities of intellectuals like Stella de Faro—an intellectual who wrote for a conservative-leaning periodical—makes it possible to understand the formative pathways of an intellectual, as well as some points of consensus and disagreement regarding the agendas they set out to defend. Following this period of Catholic restoration in the early decades of the 20th century, it becomes evident that women were present beyond the scenes in different social spheres as intellectuals.

## Educational voices in the pages of *Grande Sinal*

Based on studies conducted by Araújo (2018), David (2019), Bandeira (2019), Tortelli (2020), Orlando and Mesquida (2021), and the research underpinning this text, we can delineate a characteristic of the *modus operandi* of a group of Catholic laywomen and religious sisters, which stands out in comparison to other women intellectuals of the first two quarters of the 20th century: they are far more diplomatic than combative. This ability to negotiate with different groups, including the Church itself—associated with the dominion of literate culture—coupled with the attainment of missionary positions and international mobility, earned them important connections forged through all these practices and a solid cultural capital sufficient for them to navigate both within and outside the religious field.

It is worth mentioning that the religious sisters identified in the mapping prior to the selection of this article’s three authors came from privileged socioeconomic families. They had studied at the best schools in Brazil and/or abroad, cultivating a cultural and symbolic capital that afforded them a distinctive education compared to other women of the time, lending consistency to their discourses and broadening their intellectual horizons (Rosado-Nunes, 2004; Orlando, 2017). This may point to a still poorly understood limitation regarding religious sisters without such privileges.

We observe significant activity both in the production and circulation of their ideas, thereby reinforcing the thesis defended by researchers in women’s history that there has been an erasure of the memories and

productions these intellectuals left as a legacy. Fortunately, discoveries such as the periodical *Grande Sinal* allow us to understand, engage with, and attempt to interpret some of these trajectories.

Cardinal Suenens states: [...] it is a pity, says the Cardinal, that the apostolate of the Religious Sister is practically reduced to children, the sick, the crippled, and the elderly, instead of also reaching the vital forces of society: adults, intellectuals, educators, those who guide human destinies. By force of habit and custom, the Religious Sister remains enclosed in a closed world, in a ghetto, on the margins of the militant Church. [...] The life of the Religious Sister enriches the Church, and it would be lamentable to lose great energies in domestic services of little apostolic influence, when thousands of souls wander lost, without knowing the path to salvation. [...] It is necessary to establish a just hierarchy of values, giving due importance to the new dimensions of modern life (Celant, 1964, p. 19).

With a clear concern for disseminating the ‘good press’, Editora Vozes was one of the great promoters of Catholic renewal. Between the *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* and *Revista Vozes*, *Sponsa Christi* was born in Petrópolis in 1947, a magazine dedicated to religious sisters that proposed to dialogue with various congregations, both nationally and internationally. In 1968, aligned with the Second Vatican Council and the renewal the Church was undergoing, even amidst censorship from the Vatican<sup>5</sup> itself, the periodical persisted on its path, changing its name to *Grande Sinal* and remaining alive to this day, with bimonthly circulation.

Under the direction of Friar Frederico Vier as editor and Friar Neylor José as managing editor, *Grande Sinal* explained the change and the formation of a collegial team, seeking to diversely encompass religious congregations from different regions of Brazil. This team was tasked with making important decisions, such as suggestions and subjects to be treated with greater urgency: ‘With this, we believe we are placing the very destiny of our magazine in the hands of the Religious Sisters. This fact, i.e.<sup>6</sup>, the ‘co-management and decentralization’ of our magazine, is for us the great novelty and happy reality that marks the appearance of *Grande Sinal*’ (Bastos, 1968a).

The decentralization of decision-making is a theme that became recurrent in part of the analyzed material, especially in the writings by Sister Catarina Nourry, one of the three intellectuals on whom we maintained our focus. Both Nourry and Sílvia Villac were part of this collegial team, while Irany Vidal Bastos was the periodical’s reporter—a role maintained throughout the consulted documentary corpus.

Sister Catarina Nourry—French—is the representative in Brazil of the Mother General of the Congregation of Saint Charles of Lyon. She has lived in our country for two years, having attended CENFI [...]. In these two years, she came into contact with many regions of Brazil, thanks to the numerous trips her office required, and for one year she guided novices here, all Brazilian, allowing her to sound out their yearnings and sense firsthand a new way of thinking. Sr. Catarina, who has been a Religious Sister for 12 years, lived five years in Taizé, [...]. Besides being specialized in the education of mentally disabled children, Sr. Catarina qualified in the training of catechists and holds a degree in Dogmatic and Moral Theology (Bastos, 1968a, p. 124).

As we can observe, Catarina Nourry was a prestigious figure within the magazine. In the consulted sources, her work and publications were frequently cited by other authors. In external searches, we found only indications of one work<sup>7</sup> translated from French into Portuguese by the author, also published by Editora Vozes in Brazil, and a use of her publications in *Grande Sinal* in an article by Adriano Cecatto (2020).

In the texts ‘Crisis in the Female Religious Life of Brazil: An Explanation’ (1968) and ‘How is Female Religious Life Faring in Brazil’ (Nourry & Schroeter, 1969), Nourry offers clear criticisms about how the establishment of European congregations was taking place. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a boom in female congregations in Brazil due to European and North American investment in Catholicizing Latin America, in addition to the expulsions and religious persecutions promoted in Europe by the secularist revolutions occurring during this period. With great effort, these foreign religious sisters ended up learning our language, established the headquarters of their congregations, expanded, and founded schools, hospitals, and other institutions (Leonardi, 2012).

Catarina Nourry presents a perspective in which, for her, many of these establishments were located in the poorest areas, and—as the women and girls there lived without access to basic resources—religion became a means for them to acquire education, food, and opportunities. Although authors such as Orlando (2017) and Leonardi (2012) emphasize that many of these congregations came to educate young women from privileged families, the poorer female populace was not left without religious and educational assistance from the congregations.

<sup>5</sup> In the publication ‘Cem anos da Revista de Cultura Vozes’ (One Hundred Years of the Revista de Cultura Vozes), Friar Clarêncio Neotti (2007) cites the instances of censorship suffered by the three magazines of Editora Vozes.

<sup>6</sup> The text corresponds to the original spelling of the magazine.

<sup>7</sup> The work in question: *Psicopedagogia dos meios audiovisuais no ensino do primeiro grau* by Mialaret (1973). (The Psychopedagogy of Audiovisual Media in Elementary Education).

In her text, the author (like other religious sisters) expresses her concerns about the departure of many women from the congregations, especially because the influx of new entrants was small. For Nourry, while recognizing the important work of the pioneers, the guidance that foreign congregations provided to the sisters lacked proper training: “[...] a lack of comprehensive human formation, a lack of grounded spiritual formation, a lack of basic theological formation, a lack of conditioned pastoral formation” (Nourry, 1968, p. 125). Besides these congregations not having, in her view, an adaptation and a project that valued Brazilian culture, Catarina Nourry saw that many of the young women who joined these congregations viewed religion more as an escape route from the context of poverty, misery, and lack of opportunities they lived in, rather than a true path of spiritual life.

The author revisits this issue in 1969 in the text ‘How is Female Religious Life Faring in Brazil’, written with Sr. Cristina Schroeter. In her contributions, concerned with the sisters’ motivation to carry out apostolic work, whether in catechesis, caring for the sick, among other pastoral duties, she writes: “[...] Living off a so-called ‘apostolic’ work—schools, hospitals, catechesis—is often a pretext that conceals a certain flight from reality and which in any case does not help the government to assume its responsibilities” (Nourry & Schroeter, 1969, p. 602, author’s emphasis).

In this scenario of instability in religious life that the author presents, we see here an intellectual who is not immobilized; on the contrary, she mobilizes her readings on social changes, questioning to what extent religious work was doing something that was the State’s role. She thus demonstrates a need to rethink and rediscover (or reconstruct) the places and roles of religious sisters, also advocating for a decentralization of power from foreign congregations, upon observing an excessive dependence on what foreign religious sisters brought and directed, aiming to liberate the work of Brazilian sisters, as she points out in the conclusions of her text.

Amidst this religious crisis at its height, with the difficulties of reaching consensus within the congregations, the search for a middle ground between the answers of the past and the aspirations that the new winds of the present brought for the construction of their identity and agency as religious women, following the Second Vatican Council (Cecatto, 2020). Irary Vidal was another author who gained prominence in our research for shedding light on many of the practices occurring in the late 1960s.

A Missionary of Jesus Crucified, Irary Vidal Bastos was part of the National Board of the *Conferência dos Religiosos do Brasil* (Conference of Religious of Brazil) and served as sub-secretary of the Department of Religious of the CNBB (National Conference of Bishops of Brazil). In 1963, she began important work as coordinator of a Catholic community in Nísia Floresta (RN). Collaborating as a reporter for *Grande Sinal*, she brought updated information about practices of religious life in Brazil and abroad. Luzia Ferreira’s dissertation (2017) shows that the religious sisters of this community heavily invested in the education of the residents of that region, focusing on literacy and basic education, articulating consciousness-raising and evangelization of the people: “[...] the literacy program for youth and adults offered by the Diocese of Natal through the Radio Schools was, in Brazil, the first experience in grassroots education via radio. This experiment sought the integration between the rural community and society at large” (Ferreira, 2017, p. 53).

One need not delve deeply to remember that, in this same decade, under attacks by the military empowered by the Military Regime, the educator Paulo Freire was arrested and had to go into exile precisely due to accusations related to his work in adult literacy, having been accused of being a communist and a subversive. Observing that, while educators were persecuted across the country, religious sisters like Irary Bastos continued the project that aspired to emancipate Brazilians through an education that surpassed traditional methods, is indicative of the maneuvers and strategic strengths that religious sisters like Irary found as a way to navigate around the prevailing political authoritarianism of the dictatorship.

In her reports for *Grande Sinal*, Irary sought to publicize the efforts of religious sisters, who not only carried forward Catholic projects but also promoted significant improvements in the places where they served. In the text ‘*Religious Sisters: ‘Flashes’ that are a SIGNAL*’ (Bastos, 1968a), Irary presents testimonies from religious sisters and their work in disadvantaged communities. We even find the testimony of the educator Sr. Luísa Maria, ‘a specialist in experimental methods’ (Bastos, 1968a), indicating the care taken by Catholic women to use updated educational methods in their practices. Irary reports:

Many people on the hill do not know the name of the President of the Republic or the Governor of Guanabara, but Sr. Anne’s name is a banner for them. [...] Sr. Luísa Maria is something of a ‘mayoress’, discreetly helping politicians assume their role. Sr. Joselita teaches literacy to adults who work during the day and study at night. Sr. Rosa Helena leads some youth groups, guiding them toward God (Bastos, 1968a, p. 96-98, author’s emphasis).



One of the important events witnessed and reported in the magazine by Irany was the Medellín Conference (1969), where the Church paid closer attention to the social problems of Latin America. In the article ‘*Sister Irany: In Medellín, Latin America Had Its Council*’ (Bastos, 1968b), we find progressive statements from various religious figures, recorded by the superior. From the defense of agrarian reform to action on behalf of marginalized people, to the social exclusion occurring in Catholic schools, among other decisions and agendas emerging inside and outside the Church. Through her behind-the-scenes work, Irany allows us to perceive the political activities of religious sisters who were present in the institutional sphere and within the community. Aligning with the directives of the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín Conference, the religious sister also advocates for an ‘awakening’ of religious sisters toward a theological and pastoral deepening.

Drawing on María del Carmen Urbano, Cecatto points to a “[...] silencing of religious sisters in relation to academic formation in the area of theology” (Cecatto, 2020, p. 178). However, Irany, an intellectual who held important positions within the Church, seemed aware of the need for religious sisters to enhance their theoretical knowledge, keeping pace with social and structural changes and acting in response to them.

Another author from the periodical who stood out in *Grande Sinal* was Sylvia Villac. Through the review of the book *Cristo me chama para construir minha personalidade* (*Christ Calls Me to Build My Personality*), we can get an initial idea of who Professor Sylvia Villac was and how her work was represented beyond *Grande Sinal*:

Aiming to help catechists in Brazil, Sister Sylvia Villac, responsible for research on female religious pedagogy at ISPAC [Higher Institute of Catechetical Pastoral Studies], together with a group of students from the same Institute, brings to the public a series of catecheses for adolescents in the 3rd year of middle school (ages 13-16), compiled in the book [...]. The catechetical plans proposed by the author take into consideration the specific problems and yearnings of adolescence, which requires guidance leading to fulfillment on both a human and Christian plane (Vieira, 1968, p. 2).

A Missionary of Jesus Crucified and collaborator with ISPAC (*Instituto Superior de Pastoral Catequética* - Superior Institute of Catechetical Pastoral Studies) in Rio de Janeiro, in issue no. 6 of 1968 of *Grande Sinal*, Sylvia (‘Sílvia’ in the periodical’s spelling) published important research she conducted within the educational field on the representation that students from different schools had of religious sisters, resulting in: *The Religious Sister, a Signal for Youth*. Reflecting on the role of the Church before young people and seeing in them a potential for the humanization of the world, the article narrated the results and reflections of the research with 458 young people of both sexes, from religious and secular schools.

Even in religious schools, often in the surveys, Sisters do not appear as true Christians. [...] Are Religious Sisters considered as mere professionals and therefore equated to other teachers in the establishment, who do nothing more than fulfill the obligation for which they are paid? (Villac, 1968, p. 448).

Here, the author demonstrates a particular concern regarding these representations, so much so that, based on this research, she forwarded the results to an educational institution which the following year brought in religious educators more ‘integrated’ with the youth. This integration, for Sylvia, was necessary because, amid the inconstancy of youth, “[...] they need to find secure support in the authenticity of the adult. They need to feel that their educator is the same in the order of appearance to the world and in the order of existence, that they continuously live what they preach” (Villac, 1968, p. 452).

Initiatives like the research analyzed above demonstrate a prominent political stance, seeking reflection, questioning, and possible practical changes for the issues of their time, especially in education. For the educator, it was not enough to have a Catholic teaching staff present in schools; it was necessary for these teachers to demonstrate, through practical examples, Christian values, so that young people would recognize in them a positive representation of the religious sister. It was also essential that they could engage in dialogue with these young people in order to constitute themselves, for them, as a reference or a safe harbor.

## Conclusion

The process of individual formation consists of ideological and political directives that reflect competing national and citizenship projects. In Brazil, since the official separation of Church and State with the Proclamation of the Republic, the Catholic Church and some religious congregations, with their more diplomatic mode of activism, have been present in this field of dispute, claiming for themselves control over the formation of republican minds and bodies through education.

This research has allowed us to perceive the strategies of occupation in magazines and the mobilization of discourses that challenged prevailing representations and sought to incite reflections among their female readers regarding the social debates of the era. Many questions arose during the research process, primarily concerning which female voices stood out in this space, and to what extent this place of ascension and greater opportunities was accessible to all religious sisters. The trajectories observed in this study point only to intellectuals who already came from privileged social and ethno-racial origins. Therefore, we may ask: what space did Black religious sisters and those from rural or peripheral backgrounds have within the religious field, and as intellectuals? These are some of the questions raised by this research and left for future work.

Understanding the genuine attempt by these educators to work towards transforming the reality in which they were embedded, through Catholic projects that advocated for education and insertion into spaces of thought for other women, as well as their work with community education, means going beyond the 'conservative' label traditionally associated with female congregations in historiography. It means moving forward, in the sense of understanding that such labels rigidify our reading of the many practices and modes of existence, especially when we consider the intersection of gender.

## Data availability

The primary sources consulted are available at the Biblioteca dos Claretianos in Curitiba and the Hemeroteca Digital Catarinense.

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