

## Faceless no more

**The Fishermen's Pastoral Council has effectively contributed to several political changes in Brazil**

The Fishermen's Pastoral Council (CPP) is a Brazilian organization close to the Catholic Church structure. Recently, during the celebrations of its 30th anniversary, from 17 to 19 November 2000 in Lagoa Seca Village in Paraíba State, several people recalled various aspects of the history of the movement. Since its beginning, CPP has played an important role in supporting the fishermen of Brazil, and has effectively contributed to several political changes. Today, many *colônias* around the country are headed by active fishermen or fishworkers. (*Colônia de Pescadore* is the traditional name for the municipal or district-level organization of fishermen in Brazil.)

According to Bernardo Siry, the present national co-ordinator of CPP, at the end of the 1960s, when the movement began, it was made up of fishermen, priests, nuns and other supporters. Starting in some of the beaches of Olinda (in the neighbourhood of Recife, the capital of Pernambuco State), the movement centred around the work of a Franciscan priest, Alfredo Schnuetgen, a priest whose memory is still alive among many fishermen's groups, notably in the northeastern region of Brazil.

The movement soon outgrew its local character, spreading rapidly to other regions of Pernambuco and beyond. As Professor Luiz Geraldo Silva, from Paraná University, recalled at the celebration, around 30 years ago, two trajectories met—CPP's and that of the organized fishermen in Brazil. Since then, the histories of both have been intertwined.

Bernardo Siry nostalgically recollected the initial adventures of Alfredo the priest, who didn't want to be "confined to parishes, but wanted to find the people."

During his walks along the Olinda beaches, Alfredo had observed the neglected fishermen, whose lives were characterized by isolation, distance and subordination to merchants. He began to work in two communities in Olinda. Initially, it was not an easy task to get them to discover their own reality.

Out of the first meetings with the Olinda fishermen was born "Christian Fishermen", which began to publish an informative bulletin, *O Leme (The Rudder)*. One of the main difficulties the bulletin addressed was the existence of middlemen. Toinho, a fisherman who was part of the early movement, recalled that the middlemen owned the boats and the gear, and they forced the fishermen to sell their products through them. Soon, Alfredo's discussions stimulated interest in an effective organization for fishermen. Groups of fishermen began to form associations within the *colônias* to acquire fishing gear. These groups were the seeds of the future co-operatives.

Those early initiatives soon expanded to the other beaches of Pernambuco and the neighbouring States. Literacy groups began to be organized for the fishermen and their families. Meanwhile, *O Leme* was increasing its circulation, while a radio programme, *Voice of the Fisherman*, began to attract listeners in the northeast region.

### **Autonomous entity**

In 1974, Christian Fishermen was recognized by the Regional Northeast CNBB (National Conference of Brazilian Bishops) and, in 1976, it was declared a "pastoral of national interest", and named the Fishermen's Pastoral Council, with headquarters in Recife. In 1978, it became an autonomous entity, and began to hold general assemblies and meetings for national co-ordination.



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The fishermen wondered whether it should turn into a movement for fishermen or remain a pastoral service for them. After a great deal of controversial debate, they decided on the latter objective.

Today, the Council has both religious and lay members. It participates in the religious and cultural occasions of the community, and also in the struggle for the rights of the fishermen.

The profile of the fishermen is no longer that of a bunch of workers subservient to merchants, the military and politicians. Increasingly, more and more fishermen have been mobilized in a lot of *colonias*, and this has led to a national movement of fishermen.

Today, the role of women is an important part of the Council's work. As early as 1974, it supported the organization of *pscadeiras* (fisherwomen), as reported in the early editions of *O Leme*, copies of which were displayed at the 30th anniversary meeting.

At the meeting, Bernardo emphasized the pioneering role of Sister Nilza, who, in the 1970s, began working closely with a group of fisherwomen of Itapissuma, in Pernambuco. It was from Itapissuma that, for the first time in Brazil, a woman became the president of a fishermen's *colonia*.

The president of the fishermen's *colonia* of Remanso, in Bahia State, recalled, "The fishermen didn't know they had somebody who could do something for them." An added disadvantage was the lack of organization.

Today, thanks to the support of the Council and some parishes and dioceses that gave priority to the cause of the fishermen, four *colonias* in the Sobradinho area are ruled by fishworkers. "Today, a fisherman can sit down and talk with anyone, even with the head of the country," said the president.

The testimony of Divino Alves, another professional leader, was along the same lines: "The fishermen today see themselves as a category of workers, with specific problems. The Fishermen's

Pastoral Council began to show fishermen that they are individuals with rights and dignity."

Toinho, president of the *colônia* from Penedo, So Francisco River Region, recalled the initial support from Centro Josué de Castro, as well as the help of a technician from the old official fisheries institute, SUDEPE. Those days, he said, were marked by surveillance by the military regime of Brazil, which was suspicious of any workers' meetings.

As an important consequence of the work initiated by the Council, a fisherman was elected president of the National Fishermen's Confederation. Soon, the fishermen were clamouring to be officially recognized in the country's constitution, egged on by Dario, a fisheries technician who came to Olinda in 1986.

In Brasilia, the country's capital and home to the federal government's headquarters and the National Congress, the fishermen participated in a seminar with deputies and senators who were engaged in the constitutional process.

A team of fishermen's leaders and support technicians took charge of lobbying the constitutional assembly in Brasilia. As Toinho reminded the audience, MONAPE, the national fishermen's movement, was born of that early process. "The fight of the fishermen continues, but it was never easy," he recalled.

In 1986, a Constituent Movement was organized to put before the country's Constituent Congress, the views, interests and propositions of the fishermen. Ricardo Campos, a lawyer and an old member of the Fishermen's Pastoral Council, recalled that not more than 20 years ago, the *colonias* were dominated by the military.

#### **Forced affiliation**

The Constituent Movement sought to struggle against the obligatory affiliation of fishermen to the *colonias*. It also fought against State interventionism, which was manifested as statutes promulgated by the Ministry of Agriculture, and by the fact that the president of the National Confederation of Fishermen was nominated by the minister.

**R**ené Schärer, of Prainha do Canto Verde and a member of the NGO, Instituto Terramar, of Ceará State, pointed out the positive and negative aspects of the fishermen's history. Among the positive ones were the training courses for leadership. "The present leaders of Ceará came from the school of the Fishermen's Pastoral Council," he said. The courses that Instituto Terramar conducts today are inspired by those early programmes. As negative points, René pointed to the inefficient operations in a lot of the colonies. He also believed that a larger discussion on fisheries management is yet to occur.

The posters presented at the 30th Assembly meeting referred to several seminars and events that had taken place during the period, both locally and nationally. On display was a copy of a bulletin published by MONAPE, called *Fishing and Struggling*, as well as a copy of a "Letter on the Fundamental Rights of the Artisanal Fishermen of the World," which talked of the right for women to participate in fisherworkers' organizations and in fishing activities.

Professor Luiz Geraldo da Silva, a historian who had worked in the Council between 1986 and 1990, and who is the author of *The Fishermen in the History of Brazil*, reminded the Assembly that the first indigenous inhabitants of Brazil used the swamps, the rivers and the sea. With

the arrival of the Portuguese and, especially after the 18th century, slaves began to be employed in the fisheries. The price of a slave fisherman varied with specialization. There were shrimp fisher slaves, shell collectors, manufacturers of rafts, etc., Geraldo explained.

The professor also reminded his audience that since the 18th century, middlemen have been operating on the beaches. Then they owned corrals (fixed traps), nets, and ranches of coconut trees. Fishermen had to pay for the right to build the straw huts for their boats and fishing materials. Their freedom was restricted, as they were obliged to the middlemen.

#### **Navy recruitment**

In the 19th century, Geraldo continued, the State began to see the fisherman as an "ideal type of servant for the navy." After 1840, the navy began to create "Districts of Fishing" along the Brazilian coast, in a recruitment drive for warship crew. Fishermen, along with other seafaring categories, were supposed to enroll in those districts. Though those early mariners were seen as the advanced sentry for the nation, they met with repression, and were forced to move away from their families and communities. Around 1919, the navy embarked on a military mission of creating *colonias* of fishermen, along the whole Brazilian coast. The intention was, always, to recruit individuals into the navy.

In that era, male and female fishers were socially invisible, although they were essential as food producers, and were responsible for the profits of several categories of middlemen. In time, their profile changed, as different strategies entered their agenda, such as the fight for enlightened public policy and development programmes, the search for a rational use of aquatic resources, and the recognition of the role of women in fisheries. Nowadays, fishers are no longer content with fighting for mere existence and organization. They demand the right to dignity and public recognition, production infrastructure, a healthy environment, political representation, professional capacity enhancement, and social and welfare rights. ♣

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