

Place and Religious Geographicity of the New Catholic Communities of Sobral (CE)

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Abstract

Place Studies in Geography cover a diversity of perspectives, from location and identity conditions to existential manifestation. The present study intends to contribute to the epistemology of place by understanding the new Catholic communities Maranata and Rainha da Paz, in the city of Sobral (in the northeastern state of Ceará, Brazil), and interpreting them in light of the concept of *liminal place*. Methodologically, it draws upon Cultural and Humanistic Geography, especially in the subfield of Geography of Religion, and incorporates both community members' and the researcher's own experiences, as well as annotations, photography, interviews and poetic expression. This has resulted in multiple meanings attributed to place, highlighting the intersection between religious conservatism, and collective and individual experiences.

Keywords

New Catholic Communities, Experience, Religious Geographicity, Place

1. Introduction

Places are not strictly material; they are also phenomenal immateriality, situated in space-time relations. Each individual—to their own extent and in their own religious or non-religious worldly identitarian experiences—produces a place. We intend to contribute to the broad discussion pertaining to the epistemology of place, which reinforces the importance of Cultural Geography, situated as a subfield of Geography of Religion in Brazil.

Our approach stems from investigating the new Catholic communities (NCCs) Manatana and Rainha da Paz in Sobral (in the Brazilian northeastern of Ceará) and understanding them by the notion of *liminal place*. The experiences of both NCC members and the researcher were part of the methodological approach,

and were incorporated by means of annotations, photography, interviews and poetry, which resulted in a geographical approach to the plural meanings of place.

The review of literature comprises Cultural and Humanistic Geography, with an emphasis on Geography of Religion. In this context, authors such as Relph (1976) and Tuan (2012) approach the concept of *place* as belonging and affectivity, while Buttimer (1985) and Serpa (2019) explore the world from lived experiences. Cosgrove (2012) contributes with reflections on the meanings attributed to spaces, while Dardel (2011) discusses geographicity. Oliveira (2014) discusses the international projection of Catholicism, while Souza (2017) tackles the sacred. Finally, Turner (1974) addresses the notion of *communitas*.

The following sections contribute to the dialogue about place in Geography.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Approach

Experience does not determine the idea, the condition and the concept of *place*. Place may be fixed or ephemeral; such continuous reality may be understood as one's *liminal*, imbued with meanings across time. It is a marginal moment of subjects-in-space, when their practices are not determined, and they are liable to transitory processes of redefinition, which constitutes, in this case, an important in-between for Geography which is always found wanting the geographer's inspection (Turner, 1974). The present study stems from research conducted in 2020, 2021, and 2022; it intends to understand how *liminalities* elaborate *communitas* in the case of the two of Catholic charismatic NCCs in Sobral-Maranata and Rainha da Paz (Moraes, 2023). These are the places where we experience a *Marian* reality, a political, conservative and plurally potential *communita* of belonging, which, methodologically, expresses a *liminal* condition from the encounter of experiences of both NCC members and the researcher (Merleau-Ponty, 1999, Berger, 1985; Tuan, 2012; Relph, 1976). This dynamic constituted by the subjects in their group interactivities is one of religious living, so that the ritualizations are plural and incessant in the production of meanings of the *liminal* place (Turner, 1974). In this section, we have elaborated on some of these understandings.

Figure 1(a) represents one of the *liminalities* that make up the religious life in *communitas* (Figure 1). It is the front of the headquarters of the NCC Rainha da Paz. The images in Figure 1 help us understand the spatial context of the place, stimulating the imagination for a plural interpretation.

The chapel may be variously interpreted. Its architecture displays a mix of symbols: the frontal iron grid separating the chapel from the street; the arch above the entrance; at the top, a cross, identifying the maintenance of a conservative dynamics of devotion; in the interior, benches and an altar with a pulpit for services. It is a charismatic Catholic context. Hence, the durandian attention to these geometric arrangements (Durand, 1989). The building corresponds to the mystique and centralization of the NCC's political context. The multiscale missionary diffusion is projected from within that building, from the local to the



Figure 1. NCC Rainha da Paz, headquarters, Sobral (CE). Source: Authors' archives, 2022.

(inter)national. Additionally, the incorporeal religious event, on which members lean with devotional support, is manifest in the symbols therein.

The symbolic narrative of Marian devotion shows the communion between place and NCC members. This occurs in the easily accessible images, such as Our Lady of Peace (**Figure 1(b)**), placed at the entrance and visible to those going in. In that post, it may greet and be greeted before anything is done inside. There seems to be a concern about the message honoring the NCC. Therefore, the comings and goings of the place must be in accordance with their Marian devotional practices. Religious life in the NCCs, and especially in their headquarters, is known to replicate a ritualistic methodology of the Church; however, despite obedience to the canonical hierarchy, it is arranged spatially according to their worldviews, joining religious and political reality in one place—in other words, it is there that one prays and plans practices of evangelization, maintenance and diffusion (**Berger, 1985**).

There are other significant symbols in this environment—namely, the staircase and the cross, which represent the universalization of Christianity, the staircase as cosmic access, and the cross as the reaching point after the ascent (**Figure 1(c)**). The cross has a strong symbolic appeal in the charismatic Marian imagination and practices. This symbol, apart from elsewhere representing Christian reality, also relates to the centralization of NCCs, among which versions of the cross are spatially distributed in chapels, staircases and murals. The staircase, despite its meaning of link between above and below, reaches another passage-way between worlds when, in NCCs, its direction implies a movement of adoration; in the case of **Figure 1(c)**, the cross meets other activities undertaken inside the second floor. The meanings of staircase and cross are reinforced by NCC members' religious habits, such as the use of pendants (to be discussed in the following section), dresscodes, *banners* and books. It indicates the maintenance of the singularization by political forces exercised by the institutional reality

of these religious associations within the Church (Moraes, 2022).

The gift shop and coffee shops refer to important economic goods at the entrance to the headquarters of this community. In the case of the present research, they contributed to expand relations and produce understandings based on the situations experienced, supported by how Tuan (2012), Relph (1976) and Claval (2010) understand spatial experience (Figure 1(d) and Figure 1(e)).

The economic context enables the collection of financial resources and the promotion of evangelization. The place denotes a symbolic, religious and spatial form, with meanings that represent relations between the sacred as instituted by the Church and by the experience of the faithful (Souza, 2017; Corrêa, 2007). This construction of place encompasses everyday life, as well as tensions and social relations with local, national and international conjunctures (Lukermann, 1964). The gift and coffee shops are examples of this, as they serve not only NCC members, but the public in general, as they are situated in the city's commercial quarters.

On the other hand, Figure 2(f), below, shows the front of the Maranata headquarters, at a distance from the commercial quarters, displaying an infrastructure centered on the process of preparation for evangelization, surrounded by explicitly economic factors.

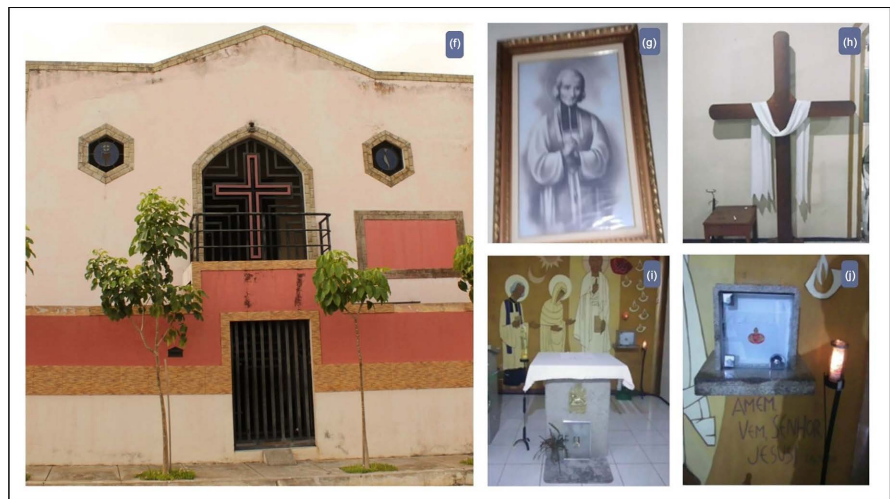


Figure 2. NCC Maranata, headquarters, Sobral (CE), and other images. Source: Authors' archives, 2022.

Unlike Rainha da Paz, the NCC Maranata headquarters is built as a single pavilion where management, chapel, auditorium and common areas are distributed. Its circumstances are not entirely different, as its primarily arranged in connection to Marian symbolism. The two-story architecture is divided between management (ground floor) and the first floor, where ceremonies and reunions are held. Additionally, it is decorated with paintings of the Stations of the Cross end of Saint Jean-Marie-Baptiste Vianney, the NCC's bastion and patron, as well as the cross as a symbol of the NCC (Figure 2(g) and Figure 2(h)). These im-

ages may help the Church hold sway in face of secularization, which slowly reacts to ecclesiastic influence; this shows that individuals are not entirely free in religion, but contribute to Catholic hegemony (Oliveira, 2014).

In both images, the sense is very accentuated, involving religious spatial differentiation. **Figure 2(g)** refers to a religious mode of life, somewhat akin to *live as he did*, whereas **Figure 2(h)** is symbolic of NCC Maranata's particular devotion. The collective meaning of the symbol is understood among the *religious geographicities* of the place. The sense of the Church is spatially rearranged. Temples, cathedrals, shrines and other Marian buildings are more focused on a clerical routine, with rites closed in their Catholic doctrines, and life in a religious *communita/community* is this *liminal/continued* group experience that seeks renewal, adding layers of religious meanings beyond Marianism to spatial organization (Cosgrove, 2012). The paintings and the altar (**Figure 2(i)** and **Figure 2(j)**) correspond to the meanings of conscious efforts during the daily experience in the place (Buttimer, 1985; Serpa, 2019).

Thus, **Figure 2** shows the NCC members' engagement, beyond what is visually evident. This engagement refers to religious behavior that sacralizes the place. Behind the altar, the Trinity is incarnated in the Holy Family, and also in the transcendental dimension of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. These characters ascend toward the one God. The remnants of an incorporeal reality, materialized in the place's way of life, involve mythological and contemporary contexts (Durand, 1989). It may not be as didactic to see this point, but it may help to turn to the spatial attributes, such as the electric candle, the glass and marble in the furniture and lock-enclosed heart, and they may point to a hierarchical conduct demanded for belonging to that place. It is a specific geographic situation that allows only a few to stand behind the pulpit, facing the congregation, and have access to that mysterious heart (Marandola Jr, 2020). These rules cause an understatement or *gulliverization* that would serve, according to Durand (1989), to mitigate the effects of catastrophes in an arduous path.

Iconography continuously multiplies religious symbology, showing the presence of textualizations in the sacred-secular way of life: the saying *Amén, come, Lord Jesus* on the wall, the framed heart, the painted electric candles, the dove as a representation of the Holy Ghost, the halos, the sun and the moon, the elements of nature that split religious life in night and day. The existence of a divided space may be of little importance, but the geographer must not forget to understand the images his geographic gaze reaches; they are not self-sufficient, but belong to a less normative, more vivid world dynamics, loaded with peculiar spatial meanings produced in the social life of the place (Buttimer, 1985; Serpa, 2019). The images may be said to establish a two-layer understanding in which the spatial dimension is inserted. It is an *a priori*, readily available photographic layer complemented by an imagetic layer, stemming from experiential geographic imagination, from the political and religious narrative which makes essences and meanings out of world-bound items (Holzer, 2011; Marandola Jr., 2020). Religious life is composed of situations reinforcing the spatial dynamics

of *liminal place*, and, in some cases, produce *religious geographicities*.

3. Religious Geographicity of Place

This is a poetic effort that enabled us to join Eric Dardel (2011), for whom geographical reality is hidden and ready to unveil itself (Dardel, 2011: p. 34), averse to the succession of everyday events, symbolizing a return to a mysterious knowledge or *not knowledge* (intrinsic to what is apparent to the eye), but not to the senses; it is the world, as Buttimer (1985) states. It is an attempt to address the sense of *inhabiting* as/in things, and their alliance with the surroundings, externalizing their links to Earth. This effort refers to *geographicity* (man-earth relationship) and to *religious geographicity*, which is a peculiarity of the present research, and stems from the religious community's behavior in place, revealing a set of communal experiences. Place is thus understood in the realm of Marian imaginary. In mystic religious experience, for instance, place expresses that which gives meaning to human existence (Souza, 2017, 2018). It is, in short, the encounter between the researcher and religious experience in place.

On May 15, 2022, we visited on foot the following: 1) The Arc of Our Lady of Fátima, 2) Menino Deus Church, 3) The Our Lady of Conception Cathedral, 4) NCC Rainha da Paz headquarters, 5) Our Lady of the Rosary Church, 6) The Shrine of Saint Francis of Assisi, 7) the diocesan curia, 8) the Shalom mission, and 9) the Heart of Mary headquarters; at night, we travelled approximately 5 km by an app-guided car to 10) NCC Maranhã. There, it was possible to attend a 11) meeting with celebration. **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**, show the route and the places visited.

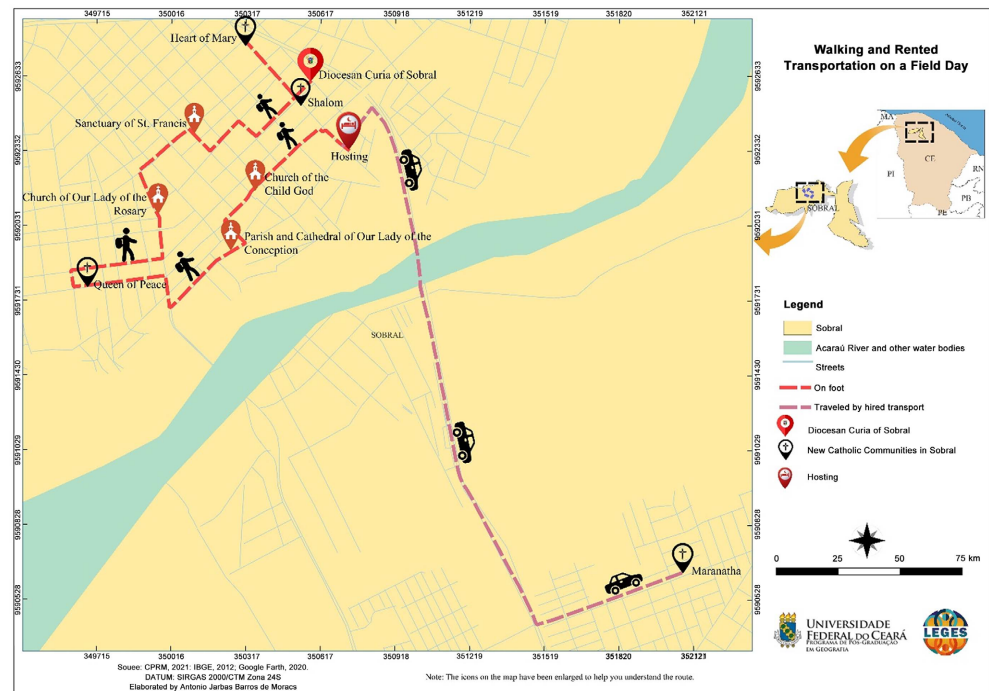


Figure 3. Field trip map. Source: The authors, 2022.

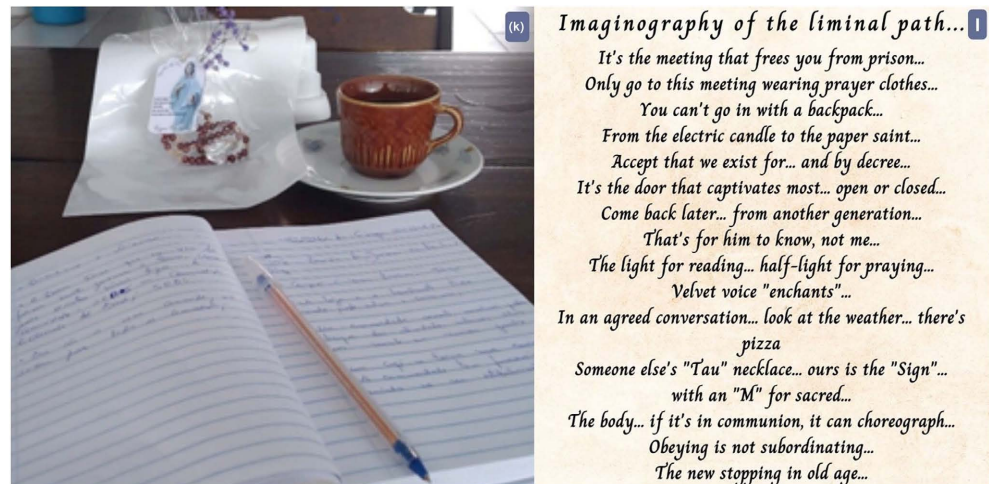


Figure 4. Pages from the field trip journal (photo taken at NCC Rainha da Paz common area). Source: The authors, 2022.

Imagination expresses *religious geographicities* on our way to these places, which are recorded in the field trip route and journal (**Figure 4(k)**). This exemplifies perception in action, a primordial relation, immediate sense contact with the world, as understood by Merleau-Ponty (1999), in which the researcher interacts with spatial subjects interlinked by behavioral patterns established in religious practice. The coffee shop is open to clients regardless of faith, but the staff holds an intimate connection with the sacred organization of the NCC, to which the very logo in their uniforms bears witness, representing their status as members. There, it was possible to observe the movement related to the religious and commercial context. The meanings thus perceived and felt were recorded in the journal. Notes were taken during our stay, which was allowed by our taking part in the daily routine, as evidenced by the purchase of coffee and a rosary.

Conversation with the staff has yielded a description of the place, with no mention to its internal dynamics, as “only members may join preparation activities, non-members being allowed only in general meetings”, and as workers were there for the sole purpose of serving the association. Such discretion is most likely to be a part of their conduct, although this may not be stated beyond doubt. It was the behavior seen in the shop. Work there means not mentioning the NCC complex. The community is available to all so long as this serves its interests. A fund-raising raffle is widely advertised, and not limited to members. The founders, on the other hand, may only be reached with permission.

Exchanges are viable alternatives for a closer interaction, but are not a final requirement for interpretation. Narratives may add or omit; what is said is important, but what is left unsaid shows the community’s need to restrict access to their actions. Sitting there chatting or in silence, writing about what I had felt, made me note/register/listen that “no animals, use of mobile phones or letting restroom lights on allowed”, that there was wi-fi connection, that “the community is submitted to the actions of the Parish of Patrocínio, Sobral” and that it is

“subdivided in ministries: music, audiovisual, prayer group coordinators, among others”. This is unusual at NCC Maranata, both in terms of ministry organization and of the actions directed toward a parish—Our Lady of Fátima in the latter case. Cyclically, the member moves from the community headquarters to the parish, safeguarding their community identity in practices of consecration, in the use of the Tau or Sign pendants—in Durand (1989), an ascension symbol within the charismatic imaginary.

The pendants worn by the NCC members under study are named *Sign* and *Tau*. Other communities usually wear them as symbols of renewal of faith and to single out membership to one given group. For NCC Maranata, the meanings of belonging and salvation are expressed by the Sign pendant—to wear it is to belong to that place (Tuan, 2012). Internally, there exists only one Sign pendant: a bronze cross with a stole spread across its arms, symbolizing charisma and, consequently, the NCC’s founding moment. I was told the pendant shows a commitment to faith “which is not a burden, but a bridge to heaven”; bearing the cross means to be grateful and strive to acknowledge holiness. NCC Rainha da Paz’s pendant is called *Tau*: a silver (or slivery) cross with the word *mir* (Croatian for *peace*) written on it; however, other meanings are uncommon—the bridge, link and staircase are related to wordly Catholic life (horizontal) and divinity (vertical meeting with salvation). This dynamic of community conversion is expressed as members living in daily mission. The Tau and Sign pendants are signs not only of spirituality, but also of differentiation, dispute and identification in the essences of the place (Holzer, 2011).

In one of the aforementioned coffee shops, one member told me that “social action in the community is not the same as in laity”, but “more concerned with the basic wholeness of Church doctrine: to evangelize”. The symbolic purpose behind the actions is the continuation of community work (donating, building nurseries, etc.), followed by invitations to get to know the group’s facilities. The symbols of infrastructure, buildings and various services are part of the invitation to an encounter with evangelization. This sets them apart from actions “in laity”, where various actions interact with various social contexts. Religious action is thus a set of conservative practices that, according to Stump (2008), control that sets boundaries on spatial religious behavior, allowing community interests and those beyond its limits. One such attitude intends to attract new members in spite of incentives to plural communication with society.

The relation between youth and community highlights sudden bodily excitement, as viewed in the consecration process within charismatic evangelization. As Merleau-Ponty (1999: p. 122), we may say that the body is the vehicle of being in the world; for a living being, to have a body is to conjoin with an environment, continuously engaging in certain projects. It is though the body that one is both aware of and partly available to the world. This is the content of experience. These are the *religious geographificies* communicated through NCC members’ bodily existence. Such an understanding implies a religious life filled with attributes of control and affirmation of place. As the faithful are drawn to

the place, community religious practices need to be configured as to suit young members. In other words, a more movable and less formally clad body is accepted, unlike what is required to attend celebrations in other temples. Spatial organization is also important, with chairs arranged in circles for synchronized performances, with a view to retaining group members; this is how religious practice is represented, and it should be added that, according to Carranza (2009), technology is an ally to communities in the mediatic stage of the 2000s.

In both NCCs here under study, coordinators lead group performances. Similar practices among those present in a given meeting seem to show agreement among members, as may be seen during Bible readings, closed-eye prayers and crying, during song performances, in the way bodies are touched and greeted with hugs and hands placed on shoulders, in the repetition of catch phrases such as “you need this brother to reach heaven”, “you pray for me and I pray for you”, in the swaying movement of bodies standing up, hands behind their backs. Charismatic and neopentecostal practices are here similar, being attractive to the youth, but they differ in former’s devotion to Our Lady and other saints. These places of religious preparation are attractive to those willing to experience charismatic Catholicism, due to their infrastructure, ceremonies, symbolism and to the experience of faith they provide. However, besides the controversial idea of renewal and of members’ personal choices in seeking a renewal of faith, these places are also extensions of the Church, and, as such, their peculiarities do not exclude Catholic doctrine; the clergy previously validates a part of what is done. Suárez (2014) stresses that charismatic movements are oriented by Catholic dogma.

The map in Figure 3 shows our stopping points on our way. It was possible to prolong our stay in some of them, for both NCCs. Part of our experience was committed to writing en route, especially where it was possible to stop and observe. It was an attempt to understand textually and poetically what was presented by devotional Marian culture. This is not to say a poetic attempt will fulfill writing requirements such as cohesion, coherence and clarity, and it is thus called “imaginography of the liminal route” (Figure 4(I)); it was made by geography in action in the research field and from the spatial poetics of these places (Dardel, 2011; Bachelard, 1993). The symbolic meanings previously presented in these places reappear in a poetic sense of community life, linked to writing and spatial imagination.

The beginning is related to Maranism (Moraes, 2022), that which, as a rule, sets the profile of templegoers and NCC members. Religious way of life would set one free from the abstract prison of social evils (Berger, 1985). One must abide by the religious principles of the place, such as the use of appropriate attire, and the prohibition of entering administrative areas with certain items, such as backpacks. It is a structural character re-signified in certain items, such as electric candles and framed saint images. The existence of these places has a legal sense, as their activities are acknowledged by normative documents. Despite the relative autonomy of the practices there conducted from outer actions that find

their way into the Church, there is a narrative, as previously discussed, of these communities being acknowledged by both the diocese and the Vatican.

The act of captivating, mentioned in the poem, is directly related to meeting with the NCCs, the discovery of the meaning of things by the geographer (Marandola Jr., 2020). This is how we came across the refusal to hold certain meetings—online, face-to-face or hybrid—, which evidenced with which groups the NCCs will establish relations. It is appropriate to stress that attention to detail is evidenced in some of these places and in prayer groups celebrations by the use of light during prayer. Light is for reading and dancing, half-light for praying. Another perceived meaning was in the various voice intonations—romanticized, embargoed, imperative, affirmative and negative—, which account for an ephemeral immersion in the charismatic rite. Such ritualizations imply devotional practices that contribute to the construction of Marian devotional symbolism in place (Rosendahl, 2018).

Even though the devotional movement's context is created by community events, permanence as a member is related to availability, as one may only take up so many daily appointments. Actions must thus be agreed on in space and time. After a collective prayer group experience, life goes on in colleges, pizza parlors, bakeries and hospitals. This shows the interrelation between NCC members' religious and everyday activities.

The NCCs vary regarding their accessories, such as the aforementioned pendants and garments painted with patron saints. Maranata's "M" (for *Mary*) relates to the Marian devotion that links members together. If any group practice harmonizes with such a devotional act, it is canonically admitted. Thus, in addition to following the minister's commands during celebration, such as sitting, rising, and answering with "Amen", the body may also choreograph. Obedience is as strong as it seems—after all, founding members are or were part of the curia's administration. Obedience thus stems not from the community, but the Church, as it is the Church that decides what assemblages are, indeed, communities. Even if members deny subordination, abiding by a conservative hierarchy will counter such denial; the community's existence is more dependent on the Church than the vice-versa.

Place is associated with everyday institutional and personal means, by which members experience both the Church and the community. Members are guided by their choices, life rules and clerical demands, which are some of the means that favor the existence of the aforementioned *religious geographicities*. Such an approach contributes to an understanding of place founded on the religious, political and economic reality of charismatic Catholicism in Sobral's NCCs.

Prandi (1997) defines charismatic Catholicism as a conservative movement that opposes Neopentecostalism; such a view goes from the interior to the exterior of the movement; to look within is hegemonically the policy of the Church. Charismatic opposition is not limited to Neopentecostalism, but encompasses various religious denominations, showing an aversion to the social plural dynamism of minorities, related to family, sexuality or the role of women. Despite

the cosmovision centered on Our Lady, there is close connection to conservative and political issues related to a renewal within Catholicism. It is a netlike Marianism focused on the geopolitical interests of the Church, as opposed to the plural potentiality of Marian devotion centered on tourism, women and contact with Afro-Brazilian religions.

4. Final Remarks

Place gears towards geographic paths that have few definitions and are rather experienced. It is not restricted to language, municipalities or ancestry, opening itself to the world as horizon. The approach of the present paper was guided by such horizontal breadth, understanding place and the NCCs Maranata and Rainha da Paz in Sobral from the perspective of the liminal, an evading and continuous meaning of community that produces religious geographies in liminal place.

Place denotes human creativity beyond official routine, it encompasses the (in)corporeality in the symbolic construction of space. This type of reflection is an increasingly emerging theoretical-methodological challenge in Geography. The methodology here employed has allowed us to reflect on place as a space of power, with both stability and rupture. This understanding is extended to Catholicism, with Mary being frequently used as an instrument for maintenance of hegemony. Marianism, developed throughout the centuries, has become one of the most efficacious strategies the Catholic Church employs to perpetuate its influence over the faithful. Mary, venerated as the mother of Jesus, is presented as a model of virtue and purity, and as intermediary between the faithful and God. This position attributed to Mary not only strengthens Church authority, but also deviates attention from other theological and social issues that may question its hegemony. The geography of place includes not only its corporeality, but also symbolic and political layers, revealing how certain places are exploited and manipulated for the maintenance of established power structures.

This is a contribution to Science and Cultural Geography—more specifically, to Geography of Religion and Humanistic Geography—, serving formal intentionalities of the objects proposed. However, the multiplicity of fluent and *liminal* meanings, of a political, religious and representational nature, by principle, may not constitute a rigorous conclusion, as it serves to fuel future reflection, both ours and of other geographers, in the future. In addition, it is crucial to explore the potential of these places as catalysts for plural and inclusive debates. Instead of restricted instruments of political maintenance, they may play an interactive role, promoting a more democratic and participatory approach in the religious and social sphere. By taking advantage of the decisional influence, they hold, whether in relation to Mary or other Saints, this charismatic reality in *communita* could help build a more cohesive and understanding society. This broader perspective not only enriches the field of Place Studies in Geography and its dynamics, but also contributes to a broad understanding on the relations between society, power, and religion.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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