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**"O CÍRIO DE NOSSA SENHORA DE NAZARÉ:"
A FAITH ASSESSMENT AND BEYOND**

(for a copy of the original article with pictures, please go to
<https://blogs.reinhardt.edu/ich/2019/11/01/o-cirio-de-nossa-senhora-de-nazare-a-faith-assessment-and-beyond/>)

A Fascinating, Mystical Festa

During the first two weeks of October this year, the city of Belém, Pará, a northern gateway to the Amazon River, Brazil, hosted the most interesting religious event I have ever witnessed, not too many people know about, even among the followers of Roman Catholicism.

After a series of preparatory activities during the first days in October, as they are usually carried out every year,[1] on the Friday morning of Oct 11th, a small statue of the Virgin Mary, representing “A Nossa Senhora de Nazaré” (lit. “Our Lady of Nazareth”), regarded as “The Matron Saint of Pará” and called “The Pilgrim Image,”[2] was taken from the “O Colegio Gentil Bittencourt” to the Basilica of Nossa Senhora de Nazaré in order to lead a 19.6-kilometer procession (about 12.2 miles) to the city of Ananindeua and nearby areas. After the completion of this procession, the first of 12 scheduled, the Saint stayed at the church “Nossa Senhora das Graças” in Ananindeua, until the morning after, while later during the evening of that day, a Eucharistic Service for young people was held at the Belém Basilica.

On Saturday, Oct 12th, very early, a romaria of police cars, firefighter vehicles, and other official means of transportation went to the parish of Nossa Senhora das Graças,[3] to accompany the image of the Virgin on a 22 kilometers ride (about 13.6 miles) to the pier of Icoaraci. After her arrival to that port, she was put on a Navy Corvette to lead a stunning, river pilgrimage comprised of hundreds of ships and boats through the waters of the Guajará Bay, and headed to a pier at “A Estação das Docas” in Belém.

Therein an enthusiastic multitude was patiently waiting for the arrival of the popular courtship to pay homage to their beloved Naza, Nazinha or Nazica as she is lovingly called. Received by fireworks and joyful acclamations upon her arrival, by mid-morning, the Saint was escorted back to the “O Colegio Gentil Bittencourt” via Avenida de Nazaré, but now by an impressive and noisy romaria of about 15,000 motorcycles.

While all these events were occurring, thousands of humble romeros, from nearby towns and impoverished rural areas (whom are called “riberinhos,” lit. “people from the river banks”), had already ended their long and painful-on-foot journey to Belém to fulfill the promises made to the Virgin and were hosted at the “A Casa do Plácido” near the Basilica. Therein their wounds were cured and shown hospitality by compassionate brothers and sisters in the faith. The same Saturday, at noon, at the Basilica, the original statue of Our Lady of Nazareth was solemnly brought down from the “The Glory” (where she stays all year long) so that believers would pay their respects. It

was a matter of hours before the two and last major processions would be held by the faithful crowds.

In the afternoon, after Mass, preceded by several individuals who were walking on their knees to fulfill their vows, the image of “the Pilgrim Virgin” was placed on a beautiful-flower-bedecked carriage (called a Berlinda) for a 3.7-kilometer procession (about 2.2 miles) from the Gentil Betancourt School to the Da Sé Cathedral (near the area where she had disembarked a few hours before).

Pulled and guarded by a group of selected volunteers, to this holy carriage was tied to a 400-meter-long rope that weighed about 700 kilograms,[4] and to which a large group of barefooted supplicants, practically glued to each other, hurting and exhausted, squirmed over and struggled to put a hand on such a rope to symbolically show their deep union with their Holy Mother.

Thirteen allegorical vehicles called “The Cars of Miracles or Promises”[5] also participated in this spiritual march, as well as an entourage of faithful who were walking and saturated every inch of the Avenida Nazaré. For about five hours, the scene was dramatic, contemplative, and strangely inspiring, only to be repeated the morning after for the last and major pilgrimage back to the Basilica.

At daybreak on Sunday, Oct 12th, the archbishop of Belém conducted the image of the Matron Saint to the royal carriage as the bells of the Sé Cathedral tolled, fireworks exploded in colorful emotions as the multitude sang praises with her arms extended to the Matron, with tears in their eyes and hoping to be blessed one more time. Thousands of people of all ages filled the streets of Belém again at the sound of hymns, prayers, and praises to accompany the symbol of Our Lady of Nazareth from the Cathedral back to the Basilica for another unique 3.7-kilometer walk, the last one.

Four hours later, in a climate of absolute jubilee and tropical heat and humidity, the Virgin and her rope-faith-bound-extended family reached the square in front of the Basilica. Soon thereafter, the image was removed from the Berlinda for the celebration of a concluding Mass, and then lifted so that everybody would be blessed by the “The Mother of the Church”, “The Queen of the Amazon.” Later, from Oct 13th until the 27th, other religious and cultural activities took place to make this feast more inclusive and bring it to a successful closure until next year. [6]

Regarded as “the Christmas of the Amazon,” and declared as a cultural patrimony by the “O Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional” since 2004, O Círio de Nossa Senhora de Nazaré, as it is formally known, has been celebrated since 1793 in Belém do Pará, and today is considered to be the largest procession in the world. It is estimated that every year, this spiritual and cultural holiday attracts more than two million devotees and tourists, with several supporting religious activities before and after the main processions.[7]

In addition to its captivating and intriguing nature, the Círio of Our Lady of Nazareth has a series of characteristics that are unique but also similar to the beliefs and practices of other world religions. Because of the presence of these two traits, the symbols, beliefs, rituals, and activities that make this feast extremely appealing, such a celebration may be analyzed through the concepts

and methodologies we normally use in the cross-cultural analysis of world religions. By the same token, the Círio, being a sensorial-contextualized-faith-driven-human creation that facilitates a conservative, Christian relationship with Jesus' mother, has a series of strengths and weaknesses worth identifying.[8] With these ideas serving as premises, I would like to invite you to reflect with me about the Círio.

From a Theophany[9] to an Institution

In world religions, the main rituals have extraordinary stories (technically called “myths”) that structure and legitimate the beliefs and practices of their followers. They are also social phenomena that, as time goes by, move from simplicity to complexity, from informality to formality. The Círio of Nazareth exemplifies these universal rules, but it also adds its own unique, mysterious nuances.

Although there are different versions available, the story of the Círio goes back to the year 1700 in the city of Belém. It is being said that a Caboclo farmer called Plácido José de Souza[10] one day was walking through the old road of Utinga (currently called “A Avenida Nazaré” and where the main pilgrimages take place) and unexpectedly found a 24 centimeter-high-baroque-wooden statue of the Virgin Mary on one of the shores of the Murutucu creek (which was located behind what is now “A Basilica de Nossa Senhora de Nazaré”).[11] After he found the holy statue, Plácido took it to his home, put it in an altar where he had the images of other saints, and went to sleep. The morning after, when looking for the statue, he found that it had disappeared. Puzzled by this strange event, Plácido went back to the creek where he had found the statue the day before and, to his surprise, he found it there. He brought the statue back home, but the statue disappeared again only to return to the same creek; this miracle happened several times. After hearing about the story, the governor of the city determined that the image was to be brought to the Government Palace instead, where it should spend the night, escorted by guards. But to everyone's surprise, the next morning, the statue of Mary had disappeared again and was later found on the banks of the Murutucu creek. Plácido then realized that the wish of the Virgin was for him to build a chapel where he had found it the first time, and so he did.

Over time, the news of this miracle spread rapidly and many people started visiting the informal sanctuary built by Plácido to pay homage to Jesus' Holy Mother. Each year, the number of believers increased. Many went to the house of Plácido with votive offering in gratitude or devotion, wax objects representing the members of the human body to be healed; also with crutches and portraits to demonstrate that their wishes had been fulfilled.

With the visit of the first Bishop of Pará, Don Bartolomeu Pilar, the devotion to Mary and the pilgrimages gained strength to a point in which they became an official ceremony. Between 1730 and 1774, a new chapel was built to receive the faithful of Our Lady. In 1773, with the visit of the fifth bishop of the state, Don João Evangelista, the devotion to the Virgin Mary was formalized and Belém was placed under the protection of Our Lady of Nazareth. But it wasn't until 1793, when the captain-general of Pará, Francisco de Sousa Coutinho, authorized the celebration of this holiday known as “O Círio de Nossa Senhora de Nazaré.” Initially, that name was given to the processions in which the faithful carried candles with them, [12] but after 226 years it ended up

applying to a series of long processions and related religious activities, in which millions of people each year have had to follow and venerate Mary through the streets of Belém.[13]

A Bouquet of Virtues

All religious phenomena have positive aspects worth describing for the benefit of those involved as well as those who look at them from a distance and puzzled. Through different lenses and with fairness, allow me to mention the most important ones pertaining to the Círio of Our Lady of Nazareth.

1. *The Power of Faith.* In world religions, the sufficiency of faith is as undeniable as its defining character. Creating and nurturing its own truths about the cosmos, faith is everything. No one can fully understand its core and expressions much less stop its force unless you become part of its world of meaning originated by that faith. Despite the tensions and contradictions that often cross our paths and challenge our philosophies of life, faith is a mystery that ultimately sees what the eyes deny.

The certainty of what is invisible and is not here but still drives people to hope for its arrival (to paraphrase Hebrews 11:1-2) is what moves and defines what happens during the Círio. Only the mystical and mountain-moving power of faith among simple people can achieve what this feast achieves every year. Believing and trusting in Our Lady of Nazareth is an honest, profound, and free act of the will culturally and historically rooted among Paraenses. No one can take that away from them. Mary is a person who, sacramentally represented by the original and pilgrim statues and proclaimed by millenarian traditions, they all love, respect, admire, celebrate, and are grateful for unconditionally. Faith is the secret of the remarkable synergy we witness and that grows every year.^[1]

2. *Fraternal Fellowship.* Along with other elements, faith in “the Mother of the Amazon” has managed to unite people from all walks of life of the Paraense society, at least for a few weeks once a year, making the Círio a true, cultural event. Despite its Roman-Catholic character and focus, this spiritual feast brings all families together to enjoy a time of peace, fellowship, relaxation, love, hope, and traditional meals.[14] There is a striking togetherness.

Whether the participants are Christians or not, one can certainly feel an atmosphere of unity and joy everywhere one goes. At every corner, one could easily hear “The Happy Círio” wishes. Even Evangelicals joined the feast offering water and meals to the pilgrims. Perhaps no other festival in Brazil or another part of the world has this appeal. Thus, it is rewarding to know that once a year the best of the Paraense society becomes manifest, reminding us that good things can happen elsewhere when common ground is sought after and ritualized. In a world that oftentimes is fragmented and at the verge of destruction, may this example be an incentive to embrace and support each other as we lift high our cultures, histories, and folklore.

3. *A Life of Gratitude and Commitment.* The processions formed by more than two million people, motivated by a profound faith, demonstrates, without a doubt, how grateful many Christians are to Mary’s gracious intercession on their behalf and how serious they appear to be in

making their faith grow even stronger. October gives the people an opportunity to renew their trust and belief in Mary.

Based on the personal testimonies of a lot of people, the Círio does transform lives, even the lives of outsiders and critics. Somewhat they come back differently as I did. Unconditional loyalty is given in exchange. Ultimately, in real life and for all practical purposes, what we do for God and others is what makes our spiritual journeys healthier, stronger, and lasting.

4. *Reciprocity.* A remarkable aspect of the Círio is how the activities illustrate, model, and help develop a spiritual relationship characterized by mutuality. Many people are not aware of this value, but it is so important that it deserves to be identified by name, visibility, and praise since it has so much to contribute to interpersonal relations.

There is a give-and-take relationship between Our Lady and her devotees. Out of love, according to Roman-Catholic theology, the Virgin Mary presumably intercedes for graces to be granted and miracles to occur for their faithful and their loved ones. It is normally believed and taught that it is not the image of Mary that performs miracles, but the Triune God who, through her mediation, accomplishes the impossible. In exchange, Christians respond in gratitude participating in pilgrimages or walking on their knees as a pre-condition for favors to be given or as an action that follows the grace they have already received. While the believers are blessed tangibly, the Virgin receives honor and sacrifices of profound gratitude instead. In this way, and to reinforce Christian identity, a relationship of reciprocity is cultivated, which should well be replicated in our daily lives with one another. Let us remember that stable, strong, and lasting relationships with God or others are always those in which each one does his or her part.

On the other hand, one wonders whether such loyalty would exist in cases where the requests are not answered. And I dare to think that people would still be loyal to the Matron because the vast majority of the time miracles, facilitated by her or not, do not happen; they are the exception. But this does not matter. Whenever there is devotion, people choose to trust and believe.

5. *Involvement of the Younger Generation.* To see a large sector of the Millennial or I-Phone generation involved, as it has been called, is a breeze of fresh air and hope. Their active starring-less involvement in all the activities as volunteers, even to a point of sacrificing part of their selves to honor something higher than themselves, are glimpses of the possibility of a better world.

Thank God, not all members of this generation are secular, atheistic, agnostic, and easy targets of post-modernisms as some studies indicate. Not all of them are preys of instant gratification, addicted to social media and electronic devices, and lacking compassion and empathy. Fortunately, in Belém, as in other places around the globe, many of them are not selling their souls to the impersonal aspects of money and fame, globalization, and science and technology where is no place for the spiritual world or the possibility of a higher reality. The good thing is that spirituality is still part of many of them, which means that we must do anything in our power to capitalize on this trend before we lose them completely.

6. *An Outpouring of Emotions and Mental Health.* The atmosphere created by the festivities surrounding the Círio purges repressed feelings and negative thoughts. It is impossible not to get emotional as we become one with the faith of the feeling and the bare faith of the people. Not too many people have the luxury or the culture to go see therapists that could help them cope with the unresolved, emotional issues they struggle with or help them leave the ghosts of the past that hurt their present. Getting our emotions out of our chests is a healthy practice; personal or group catharsis is necessary.

By no means, complete, definitive or close to a group therapy, the Círio somehow provides an outlet for the struggles of the heart of a suffering community. However, this should not be the end of the plot. While relying on a supreme power is the first and most important resource we have when we are going through “the valley of shadow and death”, this is not the only one and should not be used as an easy and momentary escape route. We should also seek the help that professionals can offer, as well as seek the shoulders and wise counsel of our good friends.

7. *A Well-Deserved Shabbat.* On some level, for communities that are exhausted by their hard work in uphill circumstances (as is often the case in Third World countries), the conditions created by the Círio of Our Lady of Nazareth serve as an occasion to pause, put our ideas and emotions together, straighten our priorities and regain the strength to move forward. It gives individuals and families the much needed time to stop, pray, and rest, namely, to enjoy a personal and collective Sabbath. It is a moment that invites the introspection and renewal of the faith in order to improve at all levels.

As an opportunity to focus on what is really important in life, this form of an institutionalized rest serves the people of Belém well and reminds them that it is important to take care of themselves, in addition to their relationship with the divine and others.

8. *Collateral Benefits.* Beyond the religious fruits, there are additional benefits that are experienced and harvested during the first two weeks of October each year. Crime rates momentarily decrease and even criminals can pause to show their religious side and participate of the festivities, repressing for a few days their contradicting moral lives. Spiritual or not, families come together, enjoy communion with each other, strengthen their sentimental bonds, abandon the routine that characterizes their daily life, and relieve stress. Fortunately, new friendships are made and old friendships are revived as well.

The local economy receives a necessary boost as sales rise; revenue is reported in millions of reais (R\$) each year. At the end of the day, with the right motivation and actions, everyone wins, no one loses. What is unfortunate is that this environment of successes is not maintained for the rest of the year.

Tensions, Ambiguities, and Contradictions

Religious ideologies and their implementations are not perfect, nor are the structures, ways of thinking, and the communities that defend and preserve them.

While the display of emotions, acts of gratitude, and expressions of devotion are genuine, life-changing and beautiful, there are important aspects of the Roman-Catholic-Christian worldview with which the *Círio* is at odds or in contradiction with. A faith that seeks understanding to finally attain wisdom always needs the input of constructive criticism, to which I move next from different angles.

1. *Mary's Characterization and Treatment overshadow Jesus' Image.* Despite the tireless efforts of Catholics to defend the centrality of Jesus and the supporting role that his mother exercises, the Mariological prominence of the festivities are crystal clear. Paradoxically, this is done to a point where Jesus is virtually invisible momentarily if not for the rest of the year. Nossa Senhora gets all the attention. In addition, there is no equivalent event in honor of Jesus in the liturgical calendar in Belém, Brazil or the rest of the world. This internal inconsistency should lead us to question what this Christianity faction really believes in and proclaims about the nature, position, and role of Jesus in relation to Mary. This is not a point of view that seeks to lay wood on the fire of the old debate between Protestants and Catholic-Romans that sadly continues to mark history. It is rather an observation about the double message conveyed by the *Círio*.

Looking at the issue from a broader perspective, the celebration of this religious festival reinforces the notion that in Christianity, as in other religions, there is no absolute coherence in the way devotees classify their beliefs and norms and what they do or do not to be consistent with them. Doctrines do not always harmonize with practice. Being aware of this gap is the first step in removing it, narrowing it, or making other appropriate adjustments. Either some Christians should strive to honor the name of their religion through consistent use of symbols, rituals, and activities in order to truly show what they believe and are, or they should simply consider changing the name of their religion to “Marianism.” In both cases, the issue of integrity is at stake.

2. *Reality and Fiction are Entangled.* The unusual notoriety given to the Virgin of Nazareth is inseparably fused with a characterization in which the lines of demarcation between “the real person” (Mary) and her “public image larger than life” (the icon) cannot be clearly identified and differentiated because they appear as if they were equivalent representations of the same person. The causes and factors that have generated this popular interpretation are many and complex. The story behind the construction of the public image of the Virgin in the Church is very old; and after all, devotees don't really care about the information we might bring to light using this background. What is clear is that the profile that can be articulated about Mary from the scarce information given by the New Testament and by the oral traditions that emerged many centuries after Early Christianity shows a radical change in Mary's image from being a simple, Jewish, peasant woman, with a few spiritual and moral qualities, to that of a quasi-divine character full of traits imposed centuries later. The *Círio* reinforces this last stage through the way she is treated and the titles that are used to refer to her. “The Mother of the Church, “the Mother of God” (which in itself is logically an “oxymoron”) and “the Queen of the Amazon”, among others, are three of the most popular.

In addition, in a culture where mothers are traditionally put on the highest pedestal (and with plenty of reasons due to the selfless work many of them do for their sons and daughters despite being victims of the despicable machismo), the legendary representations of Mary also reveal how entire populations subconsciously project or transfer to Jesus' mother the great love and deep

appreciation they feel for their own mothers through a romanticized characterization of Mary and the symbols and ceremonies used to this end – perhaps a recreation of the mothers they had, who never had or would like to have. After all, Jesus himself, despite his extraordinary profile and revolutionary praxis, was and still is a male figure with patriarchal traits who, to some extent, needs to be complemented by the image of a great and noblewoman, not necessarily the same, but very close to his stature. In this unconscious and massive process of attributing idealized characteristics to Mary, we end up learning more about the people themselves than about Mary: about their faith, loyalty, grateful hearts, mistakes, struggles, and dreams. Seen through the crystal of popular religiosity, these strong tensions, however reasonable, end up reaching deaf ears and blind eyes.

Starting with the faith and going beyond, another element of the history of the Círio needs to be addressed with similar criteria. Upon hearing the account of Plácido's mystical experiences with the Medieval statue of Our Lady of Nazareth (if we are honest with ourselves) and her miraculous appearance in Portugal and then in Brazil the same way, it is impossible not to question its truthfulness or at least aspects of it. In part, this is so because of the worldview that does not give any room to these kinds of miracles. In real life, statues, no matter how "holy" they may be, do not appear and disappear as if by magic, much less several times, in different countries, and after being guarded. Another aspect that could lead to questioning the plausibility of some elements of the story is the practice in all peoples and cultures of adding more content and nuances to inherited stories until the point at which the historical core of truth, so to speak, is buried under the thick layers of later interpretations and interpolations. As a result of this long, unpredictable, complex, and uncontrollable process, the lines that separate "fantasy" (what has been imagined or experienced supernaturally) from "factual reality" can no longer be distinguished because they are fused. And the further away we are from the original events, the further away we will be from having access to that objective truth. When this happens, as it is said in the academic field, history is mythologized and mythologies are historified.

3. *The Ultimate Meaning of "Religion."* Honoring the Matron of Nazareth brings to mind an old and controversial subject, that is, the relationship between what is abstract (in this case, forms of the deity or beings and realities very close to them) and what is concrete (that is to say, people in space, culture and time), and where the focus should be.

On some level, it is problematic to see how the memory of a pious woman (Mary) (who is not physically present and whose profile is not even close to the characterization preserved by Church traditions and popular feelings) receives so much attention in October and even for the rest of the year. Meanwhile, the specific needs of human beings are neglected or not treated with the same intentionality and intensity with which rituals or ceremonies are performed. When was the last time more than 2 million people, for example, devoted so much time, energy and resources to preparing meals to feed the poor, collecting clothing and medicine for them, organizing health fairs to help the sick, teach them to write and read, train them to get a job, help rebuild their homes, or clean the streets? Why is there no colossal volunteering ready and organized to carry out these tasks? Why do ecclesial leadership, communities of faith, sponsoring organizations, and the government not take the initiative to fill the streets of Belém to carry out this welfare enterprise for the benefit of everybody? It is true that Christian love is expressed during the festivities of the Círio and for the rest of the year, but qualitatively and quantitatively the emphasis of the faith

seems to be elsewhere without anyone noticing the spiritual and moral incongruity that this involves.

While it may be argued that the activities I speak of as examples are much more difficult to organize, especially involving so many people, the point I am making is as valid today as it was during the time of biblical prophets. This means that we should do much more than analyze, meditate, and pray about the situation. Why worship or celebrate so much what, at the end of the day, cannot be seen, touched, felt, smelled or tasted, while the palpable needs of our suffering neighbors become after-thoughts or secondary? That being said, I wonder if the celebration of the *Círio* could be taken as a modern form of “idolatry” (lit. “worshipping or serving what can be seen”) (because in the end it is not celebrated or adored explicitly and directly to God), which further marginalizes the vulnerable victims of our society and takes us away from the present and suffering world. Aren’t loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves the two most important commandments of the Christian tradition, as Jesus himself recognized and modeled after all? How do we frame or line up the concept and realization of the *Círio de Nazaré* with all these approaches? Is religion, in practical terms, what we do for others as an expression of our love and faith in a higher reality, is it serving primarily our neighbors (especially those in most need), or is it both? And to what extent are our symbols, rituals, and actions consistent with any point of view we adopt?

4. *The Psychology of Masses and Lucrative Fervor*. Wrapped up by the collective emotions of the moment, in several stages during the processions and as is often the case every year, some people broke the sacred rope linked to the *Berlinda* or this simply happened because of the great pressure to which it was subjected. In any case, what I witnessed soon thereafter was something as strange as it was unfortunate. On several occasions, I saw several people form groups whose members were fighting for a piece of the broken rope to sell it later, as I was informed and read in secondary sources. To my astonishment, I also learned that a small piece of this rope could cost up to R\$ 1,000 (approximately \$238), which is a considerable amount of money for the cost of living in this region of Brazil. Suddenly, I was reminded of what I knew for many years but this time with very different nuances: to our disappointment, faith and making money go together too frequently.

This unblest habit, which is not a new issue and that the Church itself has opposed but has done little or nothing to eliminate, has several dark facets. Regardless of what many people claim, miracles happen when God decides for them to materialize through the agency of people’s faith. Putting our trust in the magical forces that objects supposedly possess is nothing more than a form of *fetishism*, which is a way of thinking contrary to Christian beliefs. It would be something similar to those who believe that people who wear costumes or participate in recreational activities during Halloween are literally worshipping demons or death itself because this holiday, thousands of years ago, was originally related to these beliefs and this connection remains in place forever. People who do this would be “guilty” of doing something wrong because, according to this way of thinking, these symbols and practices cannot be separated from their original meaning, regardless of whether their users or practitioners are aware of it or do not intend to do so as the ancients did or Satanists do today. Unless one believes that certain objects and activities are literally “alive”, that they possess “a will of their own” and have “the power to change social reality”, objects and activities will always be symbolic mediations, not ends.

Moreover, in the practice of faith, we should not underestimate the power that greed has and how this moral vice can easily deceive and corrupt believers. Taking advantage of people's faith (whether they are Catholic-Roman, Orthodox-Eastern, Protestant or Evangelical) for economic gain is as deplorable as buying pieces of rope from those vendors; it is like being complicit with what must not be part of the festivities and Christian character. It is not in vain that early Christian writers claimed that the root of all evils was (and still is) the love of money. Unfortunately, when religious fanaticism and the uncontrolled appetites of the flesh are exacerbated by the emotions of the majorities, there is no ability to distinguish between what is morally correct and what is not. Faith needs to be monitored, moderated, and periodically refocused. We must not be naive and let ourselves be carried away by internal impulses and group pressure. As long as the organizers do nothing to address these problems, the celebration of the Círio will be darkened by these and similar moral vices.

5. *A Differentiated Treatment of Our Mothers.* The aftermath of the Círio of Nazareth made evident a paradox if not a contradiction of life and death. While "The Mother of the Church" was revered for two weeks, the Pacha Mama or Abya Yala (lit. "Mother Earth"), as our ancestors called her, was contaminated. The image of one of them was decorated with a luxurious cloak and some 15,000 flowers she does not need^[15] while the other was contaminated with waste. Once the main processions were completed, the streets of Belém were cleaned in record time. This is noteworthy and something to be thankful for. The problem is that we do not see the same efforts to clean and beautify the Pacha Mama for the rest of the year. Unfortunately, the non-recyclable water bottles used to quench the romeros' thirst and alleviate their painful pilgrimage, in addition to other waste, polluted the environment, thus contributing to global warming.

As we reflect on this situation and think about ways to prolong the life of Mother Nature, we should ask the questions like the following: When was the last time the entire population came together to celebrate and dignify her? After all, hasn't she done more for us than Mary herself and for much longer? What needs to happen for Paraense Christians along with the rest of the population to become aware of this unfortunate situation and so something significant to preserve the Amazon for the future before it is too late for our sons and daughters and their descendants? It is not enough to preach against these regrettable practices during Mass. We have to be consistent with our beliefs.

6. *Christian Nominalism and True Identity.* To assume that the great participation of the people during the festivities of the Círio is proof that Belém is overwhelmingly and undeniably Roman Catholic, would be a hasty and naive conclusion; or worse, to conclude that the people involved are true and Christian faithful.

Not all members of the religions of the world are genuine followers or believers. There is such a thing as individuals with questionable faith and commitment. Some even adopt the use of religious labels to self-designate as a habit or because of cultural influence, but nothing more. In Christianity, we have a wide spectrum of possibilities among which we sadly find "wolves dressed as sheep" and also those who might be relatively "good people" (at least they are not criminals and do good deeds from time to time), but they never set foot in the church, for example, except on special occasions, when they did something wrong and feel guilty, or when they need favors from God because they cannot solve their problems by other means.

Among the millions of people that the Círio attracts annually, we have a mixture of “wheat and tares”. It is so easy for many people to let themselves be swept away by the overwhelming power of the mysticism and impulses of the moment, but do not let the numbers deceive you. Claiming to be a devotee of Our Lady of Nazareth or even participate in ceremonials does not make anyone a true disciple. In a healthy and growing relationship seasoned by faith, actions speak louder than words, but consistency speaks even louder. As Jesus once said, “You shall know them by their fruits.”

7. *A Better Use of Resources.* Each year the Círio is made possible thanks to the generous economic and material contributions of private and public organizations and a huge and kind army of volunteers of all ages, races, occupations, and social classes. This, in itself, is a gesture worthy of emulation, promotion, and gratitude. The generosity among us must always be initiated, encouraged and received with open arms and hearts.

But as with anything else in life, one wonders if there are other, more important areas of the Paraense society the needs of which are more pressing than to parade religious symbols. Why pay thousands of dollars to give Our Lady of Nazareth a luxurious cloak and pay high sums of money to popular artists to venerate the Saint and entertain people, when these funds could well be used to solve some of the problems that afflict the life of Mary’s sons and daughters, “the little ones,” as Jesus used to call them? If they had the opportunity, what would God, Jesus, or even Mary herself think and say about the current use of funds?

8. *Monarchical Aura.* Religions are always created in the image and likeness of their historical and social environment. This means that they constantly assimilate and reproduce the views, values, and patterns of behavior of dominant cultures to mediate the way they conceptualize and develop their relationships with the holy and transcendental Enigma.

In the case of the Círio, the influence of images of imperial Europe is remarkable as well as some of its colonialist terms, concepts, and practices. For example, while Mary was not literally a “queen” in any sense of the word, did not think that of herself, or even demanded the corresponding protocol to honor her in this way, she has been called and treated as such in Brazil since the Portuguese came to this land and imposed their religious worldview. Considered “The Queen of the Amazon,” she is exhibited and honored through the streets of Belém and its vicinity in processions in which the highest honors are given as the European subjects used to do with royalty in medieval times. And while this could be taken as a metaphor for underlining some of her virtues (real or projected), one wonders if there are no other qualifiers more precise to represent her, more in tune with what we know about the gospel traditions, and not associated with any political imagery and its negative, hierarchical values. After all, Mary, Jesus, and the rest of his family were peasants from Galilee. The challenge of articulating a profile that is more accurate remains in place. I suppose there are better ways to honor the memory of someone we love, admire, and want to emulate but not through hyperboles or ideal, made-up traits.

Perhaps the Greatest Lesson.

For people of faith and high moral standards, it is impossible to walk through life without seeking lessons to learn. Any way you look at O Círio de Nossa Senhora de Nazaré, I am sure that the morals would be as diverse as the crowds it gathers every October.

For me, the lessons that mainly cross my mind come in the form of two rhetorical questions. Thinking of the intense and numerous expressions of devotion to the Virgin of Nazareth, and motivated by faith, love, respect, and gratitude, what are we willing to sacrifice or even do out of the ordinary to please what I call “the Great Mystery”? And echoing this feeling and taking into account everlasting values, what does it mean to live a life that really matters in this time and era, namely a life defined by noble and excellent purposes and deep meanings, a life that transcends a mere existence full of routines but without soul?

It is so easy to accept the idea that it is up to each person to decide for themselves how to live their life and that, in this light, each response will be different; after all, we’re not the same. But at the same time, these questions require serious analysis, especially when too many people devote time, energy, and resources today to what is superficial and empty. Why is it that large crowds are willing to be in kilometer rows for days to buy the latest version of an I-Phone and get an autograph or a photo of a Hollywood “celebrity,” or spend a lot of money to attend football games or concerts when we don’t even do anything similar to God, much less for the less fortunate? Why do we sacrifice ourselves for frivolities that contribute little or nothing to improving our world? Where is volunteering, especially the one of the new generation that wants to be involved in social change, but only in theory and to respond to surveys? Why not walk the extra mile for what is really significant and objectively can make a difference in others? And what would our choices reveal about the essence of who we are and the values that reveal our identity?

In a global age that is connected and at the same time disconnected, in which many people feel more alone than ever, depressed, alienated from themselves, God and their neighbors, trapped in dry, cold, and boring-business-as-usual routines, centered on a life of entertainment, devoid of compassion and whose priorities are confused, the light of the O Círio de Nossa Senhora de Nazaré, as reflected in the brown faces of so many sincere pilgrims, somehow invites us to re-examine our lives to embark on a quest (individual and collective) that should restore the true meaning of life, one that goes beyond mere symbols, rituals, and ceremonies but at the same time uses all of them for its celebration. With this feeling and the candles of the heart lit to illuminate the steps of this quest, to all of you, I wish you a Happy Círio!

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NOTES

[1] Opening Círio Mass (Oct 8), opening vigil /prayer and taking the sacred floats to the Companhia das Docas de Pará to be stored (Oct 9) , presentation of a hand-made-cloak to the

statue of the Virgin (Oct 10), and closing vigil/prayer (Oct 11). On this last day, there is also the celebration of the O Auto do Círio, which is a non-official parade of allegorical vehicles organized by Escola de Teatro e Dança da UFPA in honor of Our Lady of Nazareth. It is some kind of “spiritual carnival” festivity.

[2] A replica of the original one that appeared to Plácido José de Souza on October of 1700 as I will explain later.

[3] In the Roman-Catholic tradition, *romaria* is the name given to a religious pilgrimage, journey or voyage. By extension, a *romero* today is a pilgrim. The name was originally applied to a person who traveled to Rome, but its meaning was broadened to refer to journeys to many religious sites on different religious occasions. While it is true that traditional a *romeria* was done on foot or knees, a pilgrimage may done in different ways, bring different kinds of groups together, and is carried out through the use of diverse means of transportation; for example, wheel-chairs, running, clutches, ships and boats, cars, busses, trucks, bicycles, clutches, motorcycles, floats, horses, etc. The motivation and goal are always to praise, fulfill vows and/or to thank God, Jesus, or the Virgin Mary, in exchange for favors and miracles granted. They may also be carried out to strengthen the faith and to make promises to these expressions of the Mystery.

[4] The rope was used in 1885 for the first time to pull out the Berlinda from a place where it had been stuck during a procession. Ever since it has been used as part of the religious rituals and symbols used during the Círio.

[5] Which are used to carry objects of wax to symbolize parts of the bodies that were healed or objects of graces that have been received thanks to the Virgin’s intervention.

[6] The most interesting events are the realization of a Mass for the sick, other types of romarias (for bicycles, young people, children, and runners), and the O Recírio, which is procession that occurs two weeks after the Círio proper has ended. During this last event, after a closing Mass, the archbishop of Belém takes the Saint from the Berlinda and lifts her up to bless the people. After that, the original statue is placed back on “the Sanctuary of Glory” at the Basilica until next year. The Pilgrim Statue is also taking back to the Gentil Bittencourt School.

[7] Because of the similarities between these two. For example, prayers are held at homes; buildings, houses, airports, houses, and streets are decorated; devotees proudly wear T-shirts with images of Our Lady of Nazareth; religious symbols are out for sale; visitors can taste the extraordinary, Paraense culinary arts; families come together for fellowship; the use of colorful ribbons to petition for favors and make promises are worn until they disappear with wear and tear; and people buy and offer wax objects with the shape of human parts or organs that have been healed or that need healing. These objects are put in specially designated places in the sanctuaries and later on “The Cars of Promises” or “Miracles.”

[8] On these and related issues, see my recent book *Encounters with the Mystery: An Understanding of Religion* (Marietta, GA: kdp.amazon.com, 2019).

[9] This is a word I am using to refer to out of the ordinary, spiritual experiences or encounters with esoteric realities that usually come in the form of visions, dreams, trances, revelations, and miracles, etc.

[10] Coming from the Tupi Kareuóka language, *cabloco* is a term that literally means “cooper like.” As an original reference to the color of the skin of many Brazilians after the Portuguese invasion and colonization, this word is usually applied to a person who is a mix of indigenous Brazilian roots with European ancestry. It is a term relatively equivalent to someone who in Spanish-speaking countries is characterized as a *mestizo*.

[11] Presumably on a Taperebá tree or a natural niche amid creepers. Supposedly this image was sculpted in Nazareth (Galilee, Palestine) and was also believed to have performed miracles in medieval Portugal before getting lost in Brazil until Plácido discovered it. However, there is disagreement regarding its true historical origin. The original statue is kept in the upper section of the altar at the Basilica where there is a marble place called “The Glory.”

[12] According to the O Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, the word “Círio” comes from the Latin word *cereus* and originally referred to “a large wax candle.” In Portugal, the candles represented a gathering of people organizing themselves in a pilgrimage headed to the Shrines of Our Lady of Nazareth. Subsequently, once Christianity was brought to Brazil, Christian believers devoted to the Virgin Mary, who in turned assimilated to the Roman-Catholic ways, ended up repeating the same ritual of holding wax candles or círios to honor Virgin Mary, and processing to and from her sanctuary. In time, as the religious holiday developed and became more institutionalized, the term “círio,” for unknown and practical reasons, was extended to encompass the entire celebration, not just the holding of candles. Although many terms give us clues about their history and original meanings, they do not stay still and experience changes.

[13] For more details on this story and the implementation of some of its ritualistic aspects, read <https://ciriodenazare.com.br/site/>; <https://www.essemundoenosso.com.br/cirio-de-nazare-como-e-a-festa/>; and <https://www.todamateria.com.br/cirio-nazare/>; <https://g1.globo.com/pa/para/noticia/2019/10/13/domingo-de-cirio-teve-multidao-de-cerca-de-2-milhoes-de-pessoas-em-belem-do-para.ghtml>

[14] Especially *maniçoba*. (a dish made of the leaves of the yuca that takes 7 days to cook to get rid of its poison) and *pato no tucupi* (which is duck cooked with special Amazonian spices and leaves), which are dishes prepared this time of the year

[15] Every year the cloak is donated. It is handmade of fine fabric, embroidered with gold threads and decorated with precious stones.