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A MEDIAÇÃO ECLESIAL DIANTE DE DESAFIOS SOCIAIS: UMA INVESTIGAÇÃO MULTIDISCIPLINAR SOBRE O PAPEL DA IGREJA COMO AGENTE DE ACOLHIMENTO

ECCLESIAL MEDIATION IN SOCIAL CHALLENGES: a multidisciplinary inquiry into the church's role as an agent of welcome and support

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RESUMO: Em meio às crises contemporâneas, especialmente a pandemia da COVID-19, a Igreja reafirma seu papel como agente de assistência e humanização. Além de ser um bastião de esperança, ela fornece suporte tangível, incluindo assistência alimentar, psicológica, jurídica e trabalhista. Este estudo adota uma abordagem histórica e multidisciplinar ao papel diaconal e assistencial da Igreja, examinando suas respostas às necessidades sociais da Antiguidade à era digital. A pesquisa destaca a influência da Igreja na promoção da saúde, educação, trabalho e desenvolvimento humano ao longo dos séculos, fomentando o engajamento social e a transformação.

Palavras-chave: Igreja; diaconia; história da igreja; comunidade cristã.

ABSTRACT: Amid contemporary crises, especially the COVID-19 pandemic, the Church reaffirms its role as an agent of assistance and humanization. Beyond being a bastion of hope, it provides tangible support, including food, psychological, legal, and labor aid. This study takes a historical, multidisciplinary approach to the Church's diaconal and welfare role, examining its responses to social needs from Antiquity to the digital era. The research highlights the Church's influence in promoting health, education, labor, and human development across centuries, fostering social engagement and transformation.

Keywords: Church; diakonia; history of the church; christian community.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout its two-millennia trajectory, the Christian Church has understood itself not only as bearer of a transcendent message but also as an active agent of compassion, solidarity, and social transformation. From the earliest Jerusalem community to contemporary global networks of faith, the praxis of diakonia—rooted in the Greek term for "service"—has animated ecclesial engagement with society's most vulnerable members (Starnitzke 2013; Júnior 2018). Far from being an incidental by-product of spiritual devotion, Christian service emerges as a core theological imperative: Jesus' own self-identification as "servant" (Mark 10:45) and His multiplication of loaves and fishes (Mark 6:31–44) provide paradigmatic models for a faith that takes concrete human need seriously.

In this light, diaconal theology systematically explores the intertwining of Gospel proclamation, ethical responsibility, and socio-political solidarity (Gutiérrez 1988; Ricoeur 2000), underscoring the Church's vocation to redress structural injustices and cultivate communities of mutual care.

Embedded within imperial and ecclesiastical tensions – from Roman persecution to the ecclesiastical reforms of the Reformation – this service-centered identity has both shaped and been shaped by historical contexts. Patristic witness celebrated the "blood of the martyrs" as seed for new believers (Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 50), while monastic orders of the Middle Ages institutionalized hospitals and orphanages that humanized medieval social welfare (Georg 1999; Gaede Neto 2001). The Protestant Reformation and modernity further reshaped diaconal praxis, giving rise to charitable societies, schools, and relief agencies that addressed the needs of the poor and marginalized (Júnior 2018). In the digital age, globalization and secularization pose fresh challenges, prompting theological

reflection on how traditional forms of assistance can adapt to refugee crises, widening economic disparities, and the fragmentation of communal bonds.

Scriptural foundations for diakonia continue to inform contemporary ecclesial praxis. The Epistle of James insists that “pure religion” manifests through tangible acts of mercy (James 1:27), while Pauline exhortations – “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35) and “Look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4) – codify service as intrinsic to Christian identity. Johannine theology further probes the ethical dimensions of charity: one who possesses material resources yet refuses compassion “does not love God” (1 John 3:17). These New Testament imperatives established a paradigm of assistance and solidarity that has endured across epochs, continually rearticulated to address evolving social and political realities.

In recent decades, diaconal theology has expanded beyond ecclesial boundaries to engage public policy and interfaith collaboration. Scholars such as Schwartzman (2004) and Russell (2009) have argued that faith-based actors play a pivotal role in shaping welfare regimes and influencing legislative frameworks on poverty alleviation. At the same time, interreligious partnerships—particularly in contexts of refugee relief and environmental stewardship—demonstrate the potential of diakonia to foster broad coalitions for the common good. This public-theological turn situates the Church as both prophetic interlocutor and pragmatic collaborator in the pursuit of human rights, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Methodologically speaking, this study adopts a critical-historical approach, combining rigorous exegesis of primary sources (Scripture, patristic and reformational texts) with sociological analysis of institutional records and contemporary case studies. Archival research in ecclesiastical and charitable archives will trace the evolution of diaconal institutions, while semi-structured interviews with ministry

leaders and beneficiaries will illuminate lived experiences of service. Comparative analysis across four historical periods – Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Modern Era, and the digital age – will allow for both diachronic and thematic insights into the Church's adaptive strategies of social engagement.

By weaving together theological reflection, historical data, and sociopolitical critique, this dissertation aims to articulate a robust framework for understanding Christian diakonia as an enduring resource for human development in its economic, social, academic, and spiritual dimensions. In so doing, it will offer policymakers, ecclesial leaders, and scholars of religion a nuanced account of how service-centered faith communities can contribute to more just and compassionate societies, while also highlighting potential tensions and blind spots in past and present ecclesial interventions.

Ultimately, this research aspires to demonstrate that, even in an age marked by individualism and technological change, the ancient imperative "to serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13) remains profoundly relevant. By critically engaging with the Church's historical witness and contemporary practice, the study seeks not only to honor the legacy of diakonia but also to inspire renewed creativity in fostering communities where justice, mercy, and solidarity are lived realities.

DIAKONIA AS PRAXIS: TRACING CHRISTIAN SERVICE FROM APOSTOLIC CARE TO CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL JUSTICE

The concern for the ecclesiastical community, vulnerable populations, and society in its structural and axiological complexity has been a fundamental aspect of ecclesial praxis throughout history (Schwartzman, 2004). Since the early days of Christianity, the Church has functioned not merely as a locus for the proclamation of faith but also as an active agent in the development of networks of care, solidarity, and social justice, positioning itself as a site of welcome and transformation

(Boff, 1999; Moltmann, 2012). Within this framework, diaconal theology emerges as a critical field of theological reflection, systematically analyzing the multifaceted dimensions of the Church's pastoral and assistential engagement, along with its socio-political implications (Starnitzke, 2013; Júnior, 2018).

This tradition, deeply rooted in the concept of Christian service (diakonia), not only embodies faith in practice but also underscores the Church's ethical responsibility in addressing the structural inequalities that permeate society (Gutiérrez, 1988; Ricoeur, 2000). Consequently, contemporary theological scholarship not only delineates diakonia as a gospel imperative but also conceptualizes it as a central component in the intersection of faith and social justice, thereby reinforcing its significance in redefining ecclesial engagement in the contemporary world (Schwartzman, 2004; Júnior, 2018; Russell, 2009).

The emphasis on diakonia as a foundational principle of Christ's mission is evident in His self-identification as a Master who serves, eschewing hierarchical privilege in favor of an ethic of humility and care for those most in need (Matthew 20:28). Within the framework of the Kingdom of God, greatness is not measured by dominion over others but by selfless service, a principle explicitly articulated in Jesus' exhortation: "whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:32-45). The multiplication of the loaves and fishes further exemplifies Christ's concern for human well-being, demonstrating a commitment not only to spiritual edification but also to the tangible sustenance of the multitude that followed Him (Mark 6:31-44).

Following the resurrection, the early Christian community sustained this commitment to diaconal service, as illustrated in the Epistle of James, which insists that authentic faith is not confined to verbal affirmation but must be embodied through concrete acts of mercy and care for the vulnerable (James 1:27). Pauline literature similarly affirms this imperative, as seen in Acts of the Apostles (20:35-

38), where Paul recalls Jesus' maxim: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." This ethos is further reinforced in Philippians 2:4 and Romans 12:13, where believers are urged to prioritize the needs of others alongside their own. Johannine theology also underscores this ethical mandate, asserting that one who possesses material resources yet fails to demonstrate compassion for the needy cannot genuinely claim to be indwelt by the love of God (1 John 3:17). These scriptural foundations collectively established a paradigm of assistance and solidarity that has informed the Church's social action across historical epochs.

The establishment of the Church, instituted by Christ and grounded in the apostolic foundation in Jerusalem, was intrinsically linked to its mission of disseminating the gospel to the ends of the known world. This evangelistic imperative was set within a sociopolitical context deeply shaped by Roman imperial hegemony. Rome, as the preeminent power of antiquity, posed a dual challenge to early Christianity—both in terms of the missiological endeavor to reach its populace and the adversities imposed by imperial opposition. The Roman Empire, perceiving Christianity as a subversive force, systematically sought to suppress the nascent faith through persecution and institutionalized violence (Collins, 1990).

The anti-Christian persecutions, which intensified between the first and third centuries, were primarily driven by the refusal of Christians to participate in the imperial cult, a practice deemed essential for maintaining the political and religious cohesion of Roman society. Furthermore, Christian ethical principles—grounded in justice, equality, and solidarity—stood in stark contrast to the hierarchical structures of power and domination that underpinned the Empire, thereby challenging its ideological and social foundations (Júnior, 2018). Paradoxically, these acts of repression did not lead to the eradication of Christianity; rather, they catalyzed its expansion. As patristic tradition aptly articulates, "the blood of the martyrs became the seed of new Christians" (Tertullian, Apologeticum, 50), illustrating that

persecution functioned as a mechanism for reinforcing Christian identity and consolidating its legitimacy within the ancient world.

Building upon this theoretical foundation, the present study seeks to analyze the principal modalities of ecclesial social intervention, elucidating the Church's enduring role as an agent of both social and spiritual transformation throughout history. Furthermore, this investigation aims to contribute to the ongoing academic discourse on the relationship between religion and society, fostering critical engagement with the Church's function in promoting social justice and cultivating a sense of community in an era characterized by fragmentation and individualism. By synthesizing theological, historical, and socio-political perspectives, this research aspires to provide a robust framework for future studies exploring the multifaceted dimensions of Christian diakonia and its continued relevance in contemporary contexts, particularly in relation to the construction of a more just and compassionate global society.

According to Martin Luther (Wachholz, 2020), human existence unfolds within two distinct realms: the horizontal and the vertical. The former pertains to the earthly domain, in which individuals are born, grow, engage socially, confront challenges, age, and ultimately pass away. This realm is characterized by the complexity of interpersonal relationships and the persistent presence of evil and structural inequalities, necessitating continuous efforts from individuals and society to mitigate injustices and uphold human dignity. The vertical plane, in contrast, pertains to the transcendent reality, wherein the Church plays a pivotal role in mediating the relationship between humanity and God within the framework of history. For Luther, by living in accordance with Christ's teachings, individuals align themselves with the values of the Kingdom of God, thereby fulfilling their ultimate vocation in divine eternity.

DIACONAL CONTINUITIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS: ECCLESIAL CARE FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE DIGITAL ERA"

From this perspective, it becomes evident that throughout the centuries, the Church has not only fulfilled a spiritual role in shaping the faith of its adherents but has also assumed a crucial function in social assistance, responding to the concrete demands of society in various historical contexts (Nordstokke, 2003). Since its inception, the Christian tradition has exhibited an ethical and social concern that transcends mere doctrinal proclamation, manifesting in tangible acts of charity, hospitality, and social justice.

In this context, the present study adopts an analytical framework that examines the Church's role in social assistance across different historical periods, including Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Modern Era, and contemporary society. The research seeks to address the following central question: "In what ways can the contribution of the Christian Church to human development in its economic, social, academic, and spiritual dimensions be observed throughout history?"

Through this approach, the study aims to investigate how the Church has exercised its diaconal vocation over time, fostering assistance for marginalized groups and reinforcing the Christian ideal of fraternity in a world marked by structural inequalities. From its earliest days, the Christian community understood faith not merely as a spiritual exercise but as a concrete practice of love for one's neighbor, embodied in solidarity with society's most vulnerable members. Biblical narratives and early patristic writings underscore this commitment to aiding those in need, which later crystallized into the Church's social doctrine, structuring diverse forms of assistance throughout the centuries.

The interrelation between faith and social commitment thus became a cornerstone of Christianity, directly influencing the Church's stance in response to historical challenges, whether political, economic, or cultural. Consequently, eccle-

siastical assistance has not only alleviated the effects of crises and social adversities but has also contributed to the construction of a reality grounded in compassion, mercy, justice, and solidarity, particularly in relation to those marginalized within the social fabric (César, 2004).

During the Middle Ages, this mission expanded with the emergence of monastic orders, which played a fundamental role in preserving knowledge and assisting impoverished populations during periods of instability, famine, and war (Georg, 1999). With the Protestant Reformation and the advent of modernity, new theological perspectives emerged, reshaping the relationship between faith and social action and driving the establishment of charitable institutions, schools, and initiatives geared toward the common good (Júnior, 2018).

In the contemporary context, the Church faces increasing challenges in its social engagement due to technological transformations, globalization, and the crisis of traditional values. The digital era imposes new dynamics on diaconal practice, expanding the possibilities for ecclesial engagement while simultaneously raising questions about the effectiveness of traditional social assistance initiatives in addressing increasingly complex social issues such as economic inequality, the refugee crisis, and the rise of secularism. In this regard, the Church must continuously reassess its strategies for social intervention, seeking new forms of dialogue and collaboration with various societal sectors.

To better understand these changes and their impact on ecclesiastical mission, this research adopts a bibliographic approach, engaging with the academic works of scholars who analyze the historical trajectory of the Christian Church and its commitment to social action. The theoretical framework of this study incorporates contributions from Gaede Neto (2001), Georg (1999), Júnior (2018), and Boff (1999), whose insights provide a comprehensive understanding of how the

Church has developed and adapted its social assistance mission over different historical periods.

Expanding upon these discussions, this study also seeks to explore the theological tensions that have historically shaped the Church's approach to social assistance. Throughout history, debates have emerged concerning the balance between evangelization and social action, with some theological traditions emphasizing the primacy of faith and others advocating a more integrated model that directly engages with structural injustices. Liberation theology, for instance, has profoundly influenced contemporary discourse by positioning social justice as an intrinsic element of Christian faith, arguing that the Church's mission cannot be divorced from efforts to transform oppressive social structures (Gutiérrez, 1988). These theological debates continue to shape the Church's evolving role in a rapidly changing global landscape.

Furthermore, this research highlights the implications of ecclesiastical social action for public policy and interfaith collaboration. As religious institutions increasingly participate in global humanitarian efforts, their role in influencing policy decisions and fostering cooperative initiatives with secular organizations has become more pronounced. The Church's involvement in refugee aid, poverty alleviation, and environmental advocacy demonstrates the continued relevance of its diaconal mission beyond traditional religious spheres, contributing to a broader ethical discourse on human rights and social responsibility.

Building upon this theoretical foundation, this study aims to compile and synthesize the primary forms of social intervention and ecclesial engagement, highlighting the Church's significance as an agent of social and spiritual transformation throughout human history. Additionally, this investigation aspires to contribute to the academic discourse on the relationship between religion and society, fostering reflections on the Church's role in promoting social justice and reinforcing

communal bonds in a world increasingly characterized by fragmentation and individualism. In this manner, the study is expected to provide a foundation for further research that explores the multifaceted dimensions of Christian diakonia and its relevance in contemporary society, particularly concerning the construction of a more compassionate and humane world.

METHODOLOGICAL SECTION

The present research is grounded in a bibliographic approach, anchored in qualitative methodology, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Church's diaconal and assistance role throughout history (Castells, 2005; Martin & Gaskell, 2008). According to Gil (2008), bibliographic research enables a critical examination of existing academic production on a given topic, offering a panoramic view of theoretical contributions already developed and allowing for new inferences through the systematization of this information. In this sense, the proposed investigation falls within the field of explanatory research, as it seeks not only to describe the Church's actions in diverse historical contexts but also to interpret the factors that have motivated and shaped its social engagement over time (Marconi; Lakatos, 2011). Additionally, this study is characterized as a literature review, a fundamental technical procedure for constructing solid and well-founded theoretical frameworks (Johnson; Christensen, 2013).

The data analysis was conducted through an interpretivist and qualitative lens, an approach particularly suited for studies that involve the historicity of religious institutions and their interface with society (Denzin; Lincoln, 2018). The qualitative method allows for an understanding not only of the historical evolution of the Church's assistance practices but also of the representations and meanings attributed to such actions in different cultural and political contexts (Bogdan; Biklen, 1994). Thus, the research is not limited to mere data collection but aims to critically

interpret the meanings and implications of the analyzed information, acknowledging the historicity of the concepts and practices of Church diakonia over the centuries (Flick, 2009).

From an initial bibliographic corpus of approximately 1,890 publications retrieved via Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, ResearchGate, Elsevier, and SciELO (Morin, 2014), we applied a three-stage screening process adapted from Moher et al. (2009) and Sampieri, Collado & Lucio (2013). First, titles and abstracts were reviewed for relevance to Christian social assistance and diaconal theology, yielding 312 potentially pertinent works. Second, full-text screening against inclusion criteria – historical scope (Antiquity to present), methodological rigor, and explicit focus on ecclesial care – reduced the pool to 48.

Finally, purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) selected the 15 most methodologically robust and thematically rich studies, ensuring comprehensive coverage of key epochs (e.g., patristic era, Middle Ages, Reformation, digital age) and diverse disciplinary perspectives (theology, sociology, history, political science). This selective approach balanced breadth and depth, guaranteeing that our analysis was grounded in the highest-quality scholarship while remaining focused on works of greatest theoretical and historical significance.

To systematically interpret the thematic content of our selected literature, we conducted a qualitative content analysis following the guidelines of Bardin (2011) and Flick (2009). Using an iterative, inductive–deductive coding process, each of the 15 core studies was examined for recurring categories related to diaconal praxis, historical context, and socio-political implications. Codes were generated both from theory (e.g., “solidarity networks,” “institutional adaptation”) and from the data itself (e.g., “refugee response,” “digital outreach”), then organized into a thematic framework. *NVivo*® software facilitated the organization and retrieval of coded segments, ensuring transparency and auditability of interpretive decisions

(Gioia et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2021). Memos were written throughout to capture analytic insights and reflexive notes, grounding our interpretations in both the historicity of the sources and the contemporary research questions (Denzin; Lincoln, 2018).

Furthermore, a multidisciplinary approach was adopted to enrich the theoretical framework, incorporating insights from theology, sociology, history, and political science. This interdisciplinary perspective allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how the Church's diaconal mission has evolved in response to historical contingencies and social transformations. By considering sociopolitical and economic factors, this research situates the Church's assistance practices within broader structural dynamics, demonstrating the interplay between faith, institutional action, and societal needs (Habermas, 1981; Ricoeur, 2000).

Additionally, the study critically examines the tensions between tradition and innovation in ecclesiastical social engagement. While historical records highlight the Church's pioneering role in establishing hospitals, orphanages, and charitable institutions, contemporary challenges such as secularization, digitalization, and shifting sociopolitical landscapes demand adaptive strategies. This analysis underscores the necessity for theological reflection that reconciles the Church's historical commitment to social justice with emerging paradigms of global interconnectedness and technological mediation in social outreach (Giddens, 1991; Castells, 2005).

Through this rigorous selection of sources and the adoption of a well-founded theoretical approach, this research aspires to contribute significantly to the academic discourse on the Church's role in promoting social justice, solidarity, and human dignity. By emphasizing its historical and contemporary engagements in constructing a more inclusive and compassionate society, this study also seeks

to lay the groundwork for further research exploring the multifaceted dimensions of Christian diakonia and its enduring relevance in the modern world.

In the next section, I present a slightly broad analysis of the accounts of these research studies on various historians and scholars of Church history, emphasizing its transformative role in the face of social adversities and the dynamics of everyday life. Different historiographical interpretations will be explored, highlighting the Church's influence in mitigating inequalities, strengthening solidarity networks, and developing assistance initiatives over the centuries. Furthermore, the key findings of this research will be discussed, underscoring the theoretical and practical implications of the discoveries made, as well as their contributions to the field of historical and theological studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section of the thesis begins by reflecting on the significant role of Jesus in the history of Christian mercy and social care. As Boff (2002) notes, Jesus not only proclaimed the boundless love and goodness of God-the-Father-and-Mother, but also embodied these divine attributes through His actions. His unwavering empathy for the marginalized, His healing of the sick, and His willingness to associate with sinners present a radical model of compassion and service. This model, emphasizing inclusivity, was not merely a moral teaching but a lived example that became the foundation of the Christian ethos. The early Christians, following the example of Christ, adopted a communal lifestyle marked by solidarity, where they pooled their resources, cared for one another's needs, and cultivated a spirit of mutual assistance. The Book of Acts underscores this transformative social order, narrating how believers sold their possessions and shared their wealth to ensure the well-being of the community (Acts 2:44-45). As Silva (2016) asserts, the concept of κοινωνία (koinonia), representing fellowship and unity in thought and action,

was not just a theological ideal but a concrete, lived reality that defined the early Church's social fabric.

While the Christian practice of solidarity found its ultimate expression in the teachings of Jesus, the concept of social care for the marginalized is not exclusive to Christianity. Matos (2014) observes that the Old Testament also prioritizes the care of the poor, orphans, and widows, communities that were often marginalized in the ancient sociopolitical structure. The story of Mephibosheth in II Samuel provides a poignant illustration of such compassion.

After the death of Jonathan, David's covenantal loyalty to his friend extended to Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, whom he welcomed into his palace and provided for, demonstrating a profound commitment to care and protection for the vulnerable. This act of compassion encapsulates a broader ethical mandate within the Judeo-Christian tradition, reinforcing the idea that societal structures must uphold the dignity of those most in need. The royal gesture of inclusion and protection given to Mephibosheth serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring biblical call to offer mercy, irrespective of social standing or historical circumstance.

The imperative of solidarity and care for the marginalized continued to resonate in the apostolic epistles, where the early Christian community reaffirmed the necessity of social responsibility. James, in his epistle, poignantly stresses that faith devoid of works is inherently deficient (James 2:15-16), emphasizing that genuine Christian faith is necessarily demonstrated through tangible acts of charity and service. Similarly, the Epistle to the Hebrews advocates for a profound empathy with the suffering of others, urging believers to remember those in prison and those enduring mistreatment as if they themselves were experiencing the same plight (Hebrews 13:3).

Moreover, this Christian ethic of solidarity finds resonance in contemporary social justice movements, where the foundational principles of mercy, equality, and service to the oppressed continue to shape theological and sociological discourse. Scholars such as Gutierrez (2009) argue that liberation theology draws heavily on the scriptural commitment to caring for the disenfranchised, providing a framework that not only critiques socioeconomic structures but also calls for an active transformation of society in line with Christian ideals of justice and mercy.

This theological perspective challenges Christians to move beyond mere charity and to engage in systemic efforts that address the root causes of poverty and social exclusion. Thus, the biblical commitment to solidarity can be seen as a precursor to modern conceptions of social justice, making the scriptural call for mercy and care a timeless guide for both individual and collective action. As this thesis argues, the foundational Christian principles of mercy, koinonia, and solidarity continue to provide a moral compass for ethical engagement in contemporary societal issues, illustrating the enduring relevance of early Christian teachings in modern contexts.

In addition to theological and ethical considerations, the Christian practice of social care also plays a significant role in shaping Christian communal identity. As noted by scholars such as Hauerwas (2018), the communal aspect of Christian living, as exemplified in the Book of Acts, challenges individuals to reconsider the nature of personal success and fulfillment. The early Christian community did not define its success by wealth or individual achievement but by the collective well-being of its members. This radical redefinition of community, centered around the care of the most vulnerable, invites a reevaluation of contemporary Christian practices and calls for a more inclusive and compassionate approach to community life.

During the Middle Ages, the Church played an increasingly institutionalized role in social assistance. Many historians classify this period as the “Dark Ages”, emphasizing the conflicts and difficulties resulting from political and social instabilities (Jacques, 2006). However, this simplified view overlooks the significant contributions of the Church to social organization and the preservation of knowledge. Pernoud (1979) argues that although there were episodes of obscurity and intolerance, the Middle Ages was also a period of great cultural and social development driven by the Church. During this time, the ecclesiastical institution was one of the main agents in maintaining social order, especially after the fall of the Roman Empire.

With the fragmentation of political power, the Church became the only institution capable of offering some degree of stability and cultural continuity (Hurlbut, 1979). Monasteries and cathedrals became not only centers of spirituality but also hubs of education, medicine, and assistance to the poor. According to Woods (2010), Benedictine monks, for example, were responsible for creating hospitals, schools, and centers of refuge, contributing significantly to the structuring of feudal society. Additionally, the medieval Church played a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of knowledge. Monasteries served as living libraries, where monastic scribes transcribed and commented on classical texts, ensuring that the intellectual legacy of Antiquity was passed on to future generations (González, 2011).

The intellectual production of the medieval era also reflects this concern with society. Priests and theologians dedicated themselves to studying and reflecting on the social and philosophical issues of their time, often reinterpreting ancient works in light of contemporary challenges (Ribeiro; Oliveira, 2009). Without the efforts of medieval scholars, many of the foundational texts of Western culture would have been lost. The work of translating, copying, and commenting carried

out in the monasteries ensured that works of Aristotle, Plato, and other ancient thinkers were preserved and reinterpreted in a Christian context.

Thus, contrary to the reductive view that sees the Middle Age only as a period of stagnation, historical research reveals that the Church was one of the main agents of social assistance and development throughout this period. Its actions not only supported the needy but also helped structure society and keep the intellectual tradition of the West alive. This demonstrates that, from ancient times to the Middle Ages, the Church's actions in favor of the marginalized were not limited to religious discourse but translated into concrete efforts to transform social conditions, consolidating its diaconal vocation throughout history.

As feudalism expanded throughout Europe, the Church also accompanied this exponential growth, consolidating itself as one of the most powerful and influential institutions of the time. The territorial expansion of ecclesiastical administration, combined with its economic prosperity and sociopolitical relevance, ensured the Church's central role in medieval organization. However, despite this material strengthening, the Church did not neglect its primary vocation of assistance and charity. Even in the face of recurring power struggles and the political instability that characterized the feudal period, there were religious leaders committed to maintaining the common good and promoting aid to those in need (Pernoud, 1979).

In addition to its role in education and charity, the medieval Church also significantly influenced the development of early social welfare systems. The Church's provision of healthcare, for example, was integral to the survival of many communities, particularly in times of plague and famine. Monasteries and convents became centers for the sick and the dying, with monks and nuns administering rudimentary medical care. This form of social support was not limited to physical health, but also addressed the spiritual needs of suffering, providing a holistic

approach to care that was unique to the medieval period. The Church's involvement in healthcare laid the groundwork for the eventual establishment of more formalized healthcare institutions in later centuries.

Furthermore, the Church's social engagement during the Middle Ages was not confined to the Christian population. It often extended to non-Christians and marginalized groups, including Jews and Muslims, reflecting a complex, sometimes contradictory, but largely charitable stance toward the diverse populations of medieval Europe. Although there were periods of persecution, particularly in the later Middle Ages, the Church also played a significant role in protecting Jewish communities from hostile rulers or local populations. Religious leaders advocated for the fair treatment of minorities and often intervened to prevent injustices, illustrating the Church's broader commitment to social justice, even when it was challenged by internal and external pressures.

The Church's medieval charitable efforts were also foundational to the development of the modern concept of social justice. As the medieval period progressed, the Church's influence began to intersect with emerging concepts of human rights and social equality. Church councils and leaders advocated for the protection of the weak and vulnerable, not only as a religious obligation but as an ethical imperative for all of society. The Church's role in creating early forms of social care systems thus paved the way for later secular and religious movements that would expand the scope of social welfare, laying the intellectual and practical groundwork for contemporary understandings of social justice. This evolution is an essential aspect of the Church's historical diaconal vocation, which continues to inform modern Christian engagement in social issues.

A notable example of this commitment was Pope Gregory the Great (590-604), whose leadership was distinguished not only by his administrative capacity but also by his concern for the well-being of the population. Gregory the Great dedi-

cated himself intensely to the administration of the Church's assets, employing its resources to feed the poor, care for the sick, and provide social assistance in Rome, a city still suffering from the aftermath of the decline of the Roman Empire (González, 2011). His papacy is remembered as a turning point in the relationship between the Church and marginalized communities, highlighting a concrete effort to alleviate the difficulties faced by the lower classes.

Beyond its religious, political, and charitable role, the medieval Church played an essential function in the educational and cultural fields. With the fall of the Roman Empire and the disintegration of secular educational institutions, monasteries became the primary centers of learning in medieval Europe. Within these religious complexes, schools and libraries emerged that preserved both classical and Christian knowledge. Zilles (1996) highlights that monasteries and abbeys were the only places where formal education was provided, as the majority of the medieval population was illiterate. Education in monastic schools was primarily geared toward the training of new clergy members but also played a role in transmitting philosophical, scientific, and literary knowledge from Antiquity.

The Church, therefore, was primarily responsible for preserving Greco-Roman culture during the Middle Ages. Monastic scribes dedicated themselves to transcribing and restoring ancient texts, ensuring the perpetuation of foundational works in literature, philosophy, and theology. Furthermore, many monasteries developed their own literary tradition, writing chronicles, theological treatises, and commentaries on biblical texts in Latin, the official language of the Church during that period. This intellectual preservation effort was crucial in the formation of the first European universities, which would emerge in the following centuries from monastic and cathedral schools.

Thus, the medieval Church was not only an institution of political power and influence but also played a fundamental role in social assistance, knowledge pre-

servation, and educational development in feudal society. Its involvement in various spheres of medieval life demonstrates the complexity of its actions and the importance of its contribution to the formation of Western civilization (Zilles, 1996; Gilson, 1998). As Le Goff (1996) points out, the tension between faith and reason was one of the central intellectual debates of the Middle Ages, influencing both the structure of education and the development of scholastic philosophy.

It was within this context of challenges and restrictions that the first university in Western history emerged: the University of Bologna, founded in 1088. Initially created as a center for legal studies, the institution became a space for the exchange of knowledge in various fields, including philosophy, medicine, and theology. Unlike monastic and episcopal schools, the University of Bologna developed a more autonomous teaching model, where students and professors organized themselves into corporations and had greater freedom to debate ideas and develop new academic approaches (Verger, 1999).

Over the centuries, the University of Bologna became a reference point for higher education, influencing the creation of other European universities, such as those of Paris and Oxford. Today, the institution remains among the most prestigious in the world, ranking among the top 200 global universities, as noted by the Italian website L'Adige. Its legacy not only revolutionized medieval education but also established the foundations of the modern university model, which continues to be followed by academic institutions worldwide.

For González (2011), although the Church imposed certain limitations on free access to knowledge, especially due to its prerogative of preserving doctrinal orthodoxy, these restrictions were not enough to inhibit the emergence of autonomous academic thought in the West. On the contrary, the foundation of the *universitas* — corporations of students and masters dedicated to the production and transmission of knowledge — highlights a process of institutionalizing higher

education that occurred in close relation with the Church but without being limited to a purely clerical apparatus. These associations, which would later give rise to the modern concept of *university*, emerged as a response to the need to systematize knowledge in a context where oral transmission and empirical learning were beginning to shift to curricular formalization and writing as a fundamental tool for teaching and research (Le Goff, 1996).

In the context of medieval academic organization, a clear epistemological stratification is observed, in which knowledge was categorized into four main institutional domains. The Faculty of Arts served as the preparatory stage, structured around the disciplines of the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music), outlining a pedagogical model inherited from the Greco-Roman legacy and preserved by Christian monasticism (Verger, 1999). The faculties of Law, Theology, and Medicine assumed a more specialized character, reflecting not only the professional formation demands of medieval society but also the philosophical and theological debates of the period, especially those influenced by scholastic thought and the rediscovery of Aristotelian texts starting in the 12th century (Gilson, 1998; Chenu, 2009).

Thus, contrary to the reductive view that sees the Middle Ages solely as a period of intellectual regression – an interpretation excessively influenced by Enlightenment rationalism and the notion of the "Dark Ages" (Pernoud, 1979) – it becomes evident that the Church played a dual role: while seeking to preserve its doctrinal hegemony, it paradoxically fostered the establishment of an academic model that served as the foundation for the flourishing of critical thought in modernity. As Jacques (2006) and Haskins (1923) argue, the emergence of medieval universities should be understood as a complex phenomenon, in which the relationship between faith and reason was not expressed in dichotomous terms but rather in

a dialectic of conflict and cooperation, resulting in an academic legacy whose influence persists in contemporary conceptions of teaching and research.

Regarding the Modern Age, I particularly highlight the moment of the bubonic plague, which had its different cycles in Europe from the 7th to the 18th century. As pointed out by Bombini (2020), when the bubonic plague arrived in Ireland, it was known as “plaidh mor” or “the great plague,” a name given due to the great misfortune it brought to the island. According to the author (Bombini, 2020, p.303), based on documents from Clyn (1809) and Gwynn (1935), these sources indicate that, for example, in Dublin, the devastating effects of the plague on Europe were not only biological but also socio-economic, as cities struggled with the loss of a significant portion of their population. The mass deaths resulted in economic decline, with labor shortages, disrupted trade, and the collapse of local economies. However, this period also marked an era of significant social and institutional change. The response to the plague required the mobilization of both religious and secular authorities, highlighting the complex interplay between faith, governance, and public health.

The Church’s role in providing care, both spiritually and materially, in the aftermath of the plague reinforced its central role in the welfare of society, while also prompting the development of early forms of public health systems. This intersection of religious duty and governance would lay the groundwork for future societal developments in Europe, with lasting implications for both the organization of healthcare and the relationship between church and state.

The clinical manifestations of the Black Death, as documented by various historical accounts and epidemiological studies, included boils, ulcers, and necrotic lesions that predominantly appeared in lymphatic regions, such as the armpits and groin, as well as severe systemic symptoms such as intense headaches, high fever, and delirium (Gottfried, 1983; Carmichael, 1998). Contemporary reports

also describe cases of hemoptysis, indicative of the pneumonic form of the disease, characterized by its high lethality and devastating epidemic potential (Bombini, 2020).

The theological interpretation of the plague as a divine punishment was also widely propagated, and this perspective influenced the social and religious responses to the pandemic. In medieval tradition, the disease was often seen as a collective punishment for humanity's sins, and, in response, various therapeutic practices and rituals were developed based on faith and Christian symbolism (Abernethy, 2019). The use of emeralds as a universal antidote against poisons and diseases is an example of how alchemical and religious beliefs permeated medieval medicine, grounded in the idea that certain materials had purifying properties (Michon, 1860). In the Irish context, for example, specific prayers were recited for the cure of the plague, with the Prayer of St. Sebastian being the most well-known, venerated as a protector against epidemics and widely invoked during outbreaks of the bubonic plague (Skemer, 2006, p. 181).

During the Protestant Reformation, the religious conception of the disease remained central but was viewed from a new theological perspective. For Martin Luther, the pandemic that had plagued Europe since the 13th century and continued into the subsequent centuries was both a proof of human frailty and an opportunity for practicing Christian charity (Wachholz, 2020). Luther, a staunch critic of indulgences and ecclesiastical practices he considered corrupt, emphasized that the Christian response to the plague should manifest in concrete acts of mercy and assistance to the needy, rather than in superstitious or merely liturgical practices (César, 2004). In line with this view, the Community Fund (Gemeinekasten) was established, a relief fund for the poor, illustrating a shift from a predominantly theological response to the epidemic to a structured, assistential approach (César, 2004, p. 20).

The analysis of these responses to the Black Death shows that, although the medieval period and the early modern era were marked by an interrelationship between medicine, religion, and superstition, the disease also stimulated the development of new ethical and social conceptions regarding solidarity and the Church's role in assisting the sick. This evolution, in turn, contributed to the formulation of social welfare policies that, to varying degrees, influenced later models of public health organization. In Luther's time, as the theologian Wilhelm Wachholz (2020) points out, the pandemic that began in the 13th century continued into the later centuries, reaching the time of the German reformer. For Luther, a fierce critic of the absurdities arising from the irregular use of indulgences, works of salvation should be the sign of those redeemed by God, with an emphasis on the application of Christian charity (César, 2004). In Luther's time, the Community Fund was in place, which served the needs of the poor and the destitute. As the aforementioned author (César, 2004) points out, Luther showed great concern for the poor, the elderly, widows, orphans, indebted citizens, and strangers wishing to settle in Wittenberg.

The theologian Wachholz (2020) points out that Luther, in addition to his concern for the Christian community as a whole, showed deep compassion for the sick due to the 16th-century epidemic, as he hosted the ill in his home, in separate accommodations, where the sick were cared for. In his well-known letter Ob man vor dem Sterben fliehen möge, Luther shows that his own home had become a hospital for those affected by the epidemic. According to Wachholz (2020), Luther argued that those who had not lived Christian lives should be prepared for the possible moment of death they would face, with confession, communion, reconciliation, and the writing of wills, so that descendants could also receive what was rightfully theirs.

As Brecht (1987) points out, Martin Luther interpreted the plague not only as a divine punishment imposed on sinful humanity but also as an opportunity for repentance and spiritual renewal. For the reformer, the Christian response to calamity should transcend fear and superstition, manifesting in concrete acts of love for others. In this sense, Wachholz (2020, p. 387) highlights that "amid the reality of death, through faith, the human being is liberated from selfishness to become a little Christ to their neighbor. In the sick person, Christ is found. In the sick person, Christ is served." The Lutheran view, therefore, not only reaffirmed the centrality of faith in times of crisis but also encouraged a diaconal practice that materialized in care for both the sick and life itself, reaffirming the sanctity of human existence within the Reformed perspective.

In contemporary times, there has been a reconfiguration of the Church's role in addressing social and sanitary challenges, notably through the incorporation of digital media as tools for assistance and evangelization, a phenomenon amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Rio, 2021). Authors such as Tavares (2020) and Oliveira (2020) indicate that there has been an intensification of the use of digital platforms for worship, celebrations, and pastoral activities, demonstrating the adaptation of religious institutions to the social distancing context imposed by the health crisis. This phenomenon fits into a broader process of reconfiguring religious experience in what Spadaro (2012) calls the "theological cyberspace," a new realm of ecclesiastical existence and activity that reflects the transformations in the ways faith is lived and practiced in the digital age.

In addition to technological transformations in contemporary religiosity, there is also the continuity of social actions promoted by various religious institutions, especially in contexts of social vulnerability. Borré (2014) describes a series of projects developed by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD), such as Força Jovem, Projeto Nordeste, the Association of Christian Women, the Edu-

cational Organization Read and Write, A Gente da Comunidade, the Moment of the Prisoner, and the Casa Foundation. Although the author critiques aspects related to the essence and underlying motivations of these initiatives, he acknowledges that such programs play a significant role in promoting citizenship and mitigating the effects of social exclusion. Unlike the exclusion generated by pandemic isolation, these projects seek to address structural inequalities that perpetuate the marginalization of certain communities.

Alternative perspectives enrich traditional frameworks of diaconal theology by juxtaposing Liberation Theology's socio-political critique and the preferential option for the poor (Gutiérrez, 1988) with Pentecostal Christianity's emphasis on pneumatological renewal, spiritual gifting, and experiential faith (Boff, 2005). Clodovis Boff observes that Pentecostal communities often excel in mobilizing lay participation and fostering vibrant networks of mutual support, even as they underemphasize structural analyses of injustice (Boff, 2005). Points of convergence emerge around a shared concern for human flourishing, while divergences appear in methodologies for addressing systemic oppression and facilitating spiritual transformation.

Pentecostal-inspired ministries innovate models of care through prayer, healing, and community-based microenterprises. Ethnographic case studies reveal that, in various contexts, charismatic practices empower marginalized groups by fostering emotional resilience and generating economic initiatives (Freston, 2006; Boff, 2005). Yet the absence of a sustained critique of root-cause inequalities—central to Liberation Theology's approach—highlights a tension between immediate spiritual care and long-term structural reform (BOFF, 2005; Gutiérrez, 1988).

A synthetic model of diakonia emerges by integrating critical hermeneutics from Liberation Theology with the dynamic pneumatology characteristic of Pentecostal Christianity. Liberation Theology contributes a framework for situating ser-

vice within broader struggles for systemic change, while Pentecostal praxis enlivens community solidarity and personal empowerment. Clodovis Boff's call for theological pluralism (Boff, 2005) finds embodiment in holistic assistance programs that simultaneously address spiritual and material needs and advocate for social justice reform.

Thus, it is evident that throughout history, the role of the Church in social assistance has been redefined and adapted to different contexts. From Luther's diaconal approach, through the development of welfare policies in the modern world, to the new digital configurations of contemporary religious praxis, ecclesiastical action has been shaped by emerging demands, while maintaining its central commitment to care for others and promoting collective well-being.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Returning to the central question of this research – "how has the Christian Church positively assisted human beings in their development in various aspects (economic, social, academic, among others) throughout different periods of human history?" – we can now make some more secure and grounded considerations. The historical analysis allows us to identify that the Church's social and charitable work has been present since the early days of Christianity, even before its formal institutionalization.

The ministry of Jesus Christ itself was characterized by a remarkable charitable practice, marked by the acceptance of the marginalized, the promotion of human dignity, and the teaching of altruistic and universal love. In the apostolic period, this practice continued to be structured in the life of the first Christian communities, as evidenced in the book of Acts of the Apostles, which recounts how the followers of Christ shared bread, goods, and everything they had for the benefit of the poor and needy. This communal model of solidarity not only met the

material needs of the disadvantaged but also established a paradigm of assistance that would influence centuries of ecclesiastical activity in the social sphere.

In the Middle Ages, the Church consolidated itself as a central institution in the organization and stabilization of European society, especially after the collapse of the Roman Empire. In addition to preserving knowledge and fostering intellectual development through monasteries, it was also the main responsible for the creation of the first educational and charitable institutions, such as hospitals, orphanages, and centers for widows and the poor. The founding of the first university in Bologna in the 11th century illustrates the Church's pioneering role in promoting knowledge and the formation of an intellectual elite that would influence the political and cultural structures of the West. At the same time, the Church's diaconal action extended to the Hospital Crusades, assistance to pilgrims, and support for lepers, demonstrating that its mission transcended the purely spiritual sphere, reaching concrete humanitarian dimensions (Gaede Neto, 2001; Georg, 1999).

In the modern period, the advent of the Protestant Reformation introduced new perspectives on the relationship between faith and social action. Martin Luther, for example, not only reformulated the doctrinal foundations of Western Christianity but also stood out for his engagement with the challenges of his time. Amid the bubonic plague that devastated Europe, Luther not only advised Christians on how they should act in the face of the epidemic but also personally dedicated himself to caring for the sick and alleviating human suffering. His writings reflect a deep commitment to the ethical responsibility of Christians in the midst of life's adversities, emphasizing that genuine faith is manifested in concrete acts of service to others (Wachholz, 2020). This reformist thought had important developments in modern times, encouraging the creation of social assistance networks, schools,

and hospitals linked to religious communities, many of which remain active to this day.

In contemporary times, we see a phenomenon of the Church's adaptation to new social and technological demands. The digitalization of faith, driven by advances in information technologies, has transformed the way the Church communicates and extends its pastoral and charitable action (Spadaro, 2014; RIO, 2020). Moreover, social projects developed by different Christian branches, such as those of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD), illustrate how Christianity continues to play a relevant role in welcoming vulnerable populations, whether through resocialization programs, educational initiatives, or professional reintegration projects (Borré, 2014). These efforts demonstrate that, although society has undergone profound transformations, the Church's charitable mission remains a structural element of its identity and its commitment to the common good.

Aligning theoretical and practical aspects of this investigation, it becomes evident that the Church has not been restricted solely to the religious domain throughout human history. Its actions have transcended the limits of temples and penetrated the public sphere, promoting significant changes in the social, educational, and economic fields. The main direction of its mission points to conflict resolution and the confrontation of structural inequalities, engaging in the fight against exclusion, poverty, illiteracy, and lack of basic assistance at different times in human history (Boff, 1999).

Above all, it is essential to recognize that, despite the challenges and contradictions present in its historical trajectory, the Church has concretely demonstrated its vocation for love and social justice. By feeding the hungry, welcoming the marginalized, and promoting human development, it has not only followed the precepts of the Gospel but has also served as a transformative agent of social

structures. In reference to the words of Jesus – “No one has greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13) – it can be affirmed that true Christianity is manifested in the act of self-giving for the other, whether through material resources, time, skills, or compassion. Thus, throughout history, the Church has demonstrated this greater love in a concrete and positive manner towards those who have been excluded or silenced, highlighting that its charitable role continues to be an essential response to emerging needs across different social layers and historical contexts.

An important addition to this article would be a critical exploration of the *theological and ethical underpinnings* that shaped the Church’s humanitarian efforts throughout history. The Church's charitable actions were not simply motivated by altruism but were deeply rooted in theological principles, such as the imago Dei (the belief that all humans are created in the image of God), which reinforced the inherent dignity of every individual. Additionally, examining the *ecclesial response to global crises* (e.g., the Church’s role during pandemics, wars, and social upheavals) could provide further insight into the evolving nature of its social responsibility. Finally, a comparative study of *Christian and non-Christian charitable organizations* would allow for a nuanced understanding of the Church’s unique contributions to social justice, ethics, and human development across different historical and cultural contexts. This would also include an evaluation of how the Church has engaged with secular institutions in the development of modern social welfare systems, education, and healthcare.

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