

“IT IS AGAINST THIS GOD WHO KILLS THAT WE ARE FIGHTING AND RESISTING”

• *Interview with Alexya Salvador* •

By Maryuri Grisales and Renato Barreto

Alexya Salvador, 38, was born in Mairiporã, a rural municipality on the outskirts of São Paulo. She is a public school teacher, vice president of Brazilian Association of Homotransaffective Families (ABRAFH, in Portuguese) and a mother. In 2015, she was appointed assistant pastor at the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in São Paulo, making her the first transgender pastor in Brazil. This year, she will be ordained as a cleric and become the first transgender reverend in Latin America. She was also the first transgender woman in Brazil to adopt a child and, later, the first to adopt two trans children.

As a public figure, she ran for the office of state representative in 2018 campaigning on LGBTI rights, education and adoption, issues present in her own life. In her speeches, Alexya says that her body is a trespasser and that her very existence is political, particularly in the country that most kills LGBTI people anywhere in the world. As far as she is concerned, the problem lies in the education that people receive, which is underpinned by prejudices that violate the human rights of the LGBTI population, and which is why she advocates strongly for the transformative role of education.

Whether it's in school or in church, she believes that her presence can inspire other people. The same goes for her family. In interviews, as vice president of the Brazilian Association

of Homotransaffective Families (ABRAFH), she promotes dialogue on respect for different family formations. In her church, she also talks about the need for a political presence by LGBTI people as a way of expanding areas of acceptance and inclusion.

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Sur Journal • A number of phrases and credentials are often attributed to you, such as “the first transgender pastor in Latin America”, “the first trans woman to adopt a child in Brazil” and “the first Brazilian trans woman to adopt a child who is also trans”. What does this pioneerism mean to you as a black trans woman in a country that is structurally racist, majority Christian and one that most kills LGBTI people anywhere in the world?

Alexya Salvador • I like to quote Paulo Freire when he said that “the world is not; the world is being”. In this revolution that we have lived through in recent times, being the first trans woman to adopt a child in the country that most kills transvestites is the greatest political act of existence that I could have done. And today I can say that times are changing, that the world is no longer the same and that we are not here to steal anything from anyone, to break any law or to attack anyone. Every day, people will do anything to discredit me as a mother. First, because they don’t consider me a woman and so I can’t possibly be a mother. By contrast, I am proof that it is indeed possible to be a trans mother. I hate having to talk about motherhood and use an adjective. But, at this point in history, unfortunately we have to label some things educationally so we can teach people what is possible. And my family is there to prove that the trans-affective family exists, that there are various types of different families in the world, not only the homoaffective family like everyone says.

Sur • How important is it, these days, for there to be a public figure like you, a pastor occupying a position in ecclesiastical circles and even in institutional policy? How much weight do these credentials carry for you in your own church?

AS • It all happened in a way that not even I had planned or intended. Things happened one day at a time, one month at a time, and today I am in this position being the first trans pastor in Brazil – and soon I’ll be ordained as a cleric, making me the first transgender reverend in Latin America. This shows that it is possible to practice a genuine Christianity like in the early Christian communities, in which these issues were not the ones that mattered, they were not the types of issues that separated and segregated people. However, in the world’s largest Christian country, because I go against the flow I have become a symbol of disgust for lots of people, because they believe that I am perverting a Christianity that they claim belongs to them. There’s nothing that binds Christ to any church or to any person. When I talk about Christ, I like to think about the Jesus of the people, the Jesus who walked with those who nobody wanted to walk with. And this Christ also wanted to walk with me.

Sur • Tell us a bit about the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) and its role in the current Brazilian religious landscape.

AS • The Metropolitan Community Church was founded in Los Angeles in the late 1960s by the Reverend Troy Perry, a Baptist pastor who would minister, in the living room of his own house, to a group of a dozen or so people who religion at that time also did not accept in their congregations: divorced women, blacks and LGBTIs. At the end of that decade in the United States, blacks could not attend the same churches as whites. The MCC emerged out of this resistance, this empowerment of so-called minorities, when in fact we are not a minority. Today, the MCC is present in more than 50 countries worldwide, not just as an inclusive church, but also as a church affirming our sexualities and our gender identities. However, our most basic agenda is the struggle for human rights. MCC exists not only to bring people together in one place and call it a church. We believe that Christianity empowers us to struggle against all forms of oppression, injustice and for the recovery of our rights. And, right now in Brazil, with the Bolsonaro government, we are taking a stand against any attempt to erode our rights. We have a government of death; unfortunately. A government that persecutes and a government that does anything to silence so-called minorities. As members of the Metropolitan Community Church, we are going to continue resisting and fighting against all death systems, because we believe that this is indeed an evil system. Everything that doesn't generate life generates death. And, if it generates death, then it's God's enemy.

Sur • Besides being a pastor, you are also a human rights defender. Considering that Christianity has historically been a tradition that has harnessed its power through the control of bodies – celibate bodies of priests, bodies of women for reproduction and bodies sexually controlled by a restricted idea of nature and divine order, how do you interpret your religious inspiration for reclaiming rights, specifically sexual rights.

AS • My ministry calls on me to fight against any type of oppression, in particular the colonization of bodies. Religious fundamentalism teaches that, if our sexual desires and practices are not in keeping with biblical parameters, then we are in sin. I believe that sex is a gift of God and should be exercised with responsibility. Sin is not the sexual act, but instead the failure to guard against sexually transmitted diseases. In this regard, I believe that we should take care of our body that is God's temple. We cannot fight against our own nature, repressing who we are in the name of a religious practice that views sex as something to be combated. Control and colonization of bodies is still key to the church's manipulation of people, because our sexual orientations and gender identities also exist in this reality. Being LGBTI+ and living according to the fluidity that radiates from our human perception is what drives me to fight for every human being's right to be.

Sur • This year Brazil criminalized homophobia – a controversial issue particularly in religious circles, since according to some opposing views this compromises religious freedom and freedom of expression. Do you consider this criminalization a breakthrough in terms of human rights?

AS • When the Supreme Court criminalizes LGBTphobia, this sends a message to us that new times are here. We know, for example, that the Maria da Penha Law [on domestic violence] has not stopped women from being killed. Similarly, this law will not prevent cases of LGBTphobia from occurring, but people will start to think twice before doing certain things. Obviously it will take a while for society to understand that it's a crime, that we now have recourse to higher courts to defend ourselves. Our church has always fought for LGBTphobia to be criminalized, because we believe that the State has to protect these people, that the State has to guarantee people's freedom of movement and their right to exist. So criminalization is a step in the right direction, but we also need to create public policies to enforce the law, so people understand that all hate, all violence perpetrated against gays, lesbians, transvestites, trans men and trans women is now punishable.

Sur • Education is an important part of your work, both as a pastor and educator in your community work and as a mother in the family environment. How do you envision an education for democracy and respect for differences in today's Brazil? How can religion contribute in this regard?

AS • I've been a public school teacher for just over 15 years. In my classes, for example, I always try to seize the opportunity caused by conflicts between students, those moments of tension, to teach something that isn't in the textbook. I'm talking about civic awareness, respect for people who are different from us and the fact that we are human beings and, as human beings endowed with consciousness, we should respect others. As a pastor, I try to teach people that differences are not a threat, because people often believe that anything that is not in their own vocabulary, that is not part of their reality, should be seen as a threat and, therefore, combated. No, human beings should not wage war against one another. Not for any reason. All the world's major wars were caused by pride, by arrogance, by the desire to dominate cultures and peoples. Christianity has a long history of invasions in which whole peoples were decimated, people considered witches were burned alive, entire indigenous tribes were looted and burned, empires were overthrown in the name of a God that it seems only knows how to wage war. This Old Testament God did indeed exist. But he also exists when he smiles beautifully in Jesus conveying love, conveying acceptance of those who are different. In fact, I don't see people as different; different for me is an invitation to learn something that I didn't know existed. And when I get to know this something, I see that I'm not really any different. So for me, God inhabits the Candomblé shrine, God inhabits the Buddhist temple, God inhabits the Catholic temple, God inhabits the Evangelical temple. And so many other forms of faith. God has different colors, flavors, smells and tastes. If what's right for me is not found in these places, then it's because God is calling on me to see His presence elsewhere. So this God that kills and wages war cannot be the God of love that is revealed through Jesus. It cannot be. This is the God of Bolsonaro, this is the God of the evangelical caucus in Congress. So, it is against this God who kills that we are fighting and resisting.

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*Interview conducted in July 2019 by Maryuri Grisales and Renato Barreto.
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