

Ex-Priest's 'Sainthood' Irks Catholics in Brazil

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— Padre Cicero — an unfrocked priest who is said to have worked miracles, led an armed insurrection and protected bandits in the destitute backlands of northeastern Brazil at the turn of the century—is the center of a new controversy.

The Brazilian Catholic Apostolic Church, a nationalistic sect founded in 1945 by an excommunicated Roman Catholic bishop, has proclaimed the popular Padre Cicero a saint.

The canonization, which took place with patriotic pomp in Brasilia earlier this month, has brought angry denunciations from the Roman Catholic Church.

The National Conference of Brazilian Bishops declared the canonization "a farce" and accused the Brazilian Catholic Apostolic Church of "mystification" in trying to imitate the Roman Catholic Church, going even so far as to name saints.

Roman Catholic sources here termed the sect an anti-church and said that it was a major preoccupation of the Catholic Church because of the confusion it was promoting in this largely Catholic country.

18 More Considered

The Brazilian church, which adheres to Roman Catholic rites, liturgy and sacraments, does not recognize the authority of the Pope, opposes the celibacy of the priesthood and accepts divorce.

Leaders of the Brazilian church appear undaunted by criticism and have announced they have 18 more cases of canonization under study. These include: Tiradentes, an 18th-century army officer, dentist and martyr for independence; José de Anchieta, the Jesuit priest who founded the city of São Paulo, and Padre Donizetti Tavares de Lima, a popular healer of about 15 years ago.

The Archdiocese of São Paulo accused the Brazilian church of "demagoguery," pointing out that the process of beatification for Pope John XXIII is still under study and that canonization can take centuries.

"Padre Cicero is already widely venerated as a saint in northeast Brazil and so we have merely ratified the people's decision," a representative of the Brazilian church said.

Roman Catholics insist that although Padre Cicero was suspended from his priestly functions, he remained faithful to the Roman Church throughout his turbulent life. In his final testament, the priest urged his followers to obey and respect the laws of the church "for only there is found happiness and salvation."

Cicero Romão Batista was born in 1844, the son of a small tradesman, at Crato in the drought-ridden state of Ceará in northeastern Brazil. His eyes and voice were penetrating, and he reportedly showed early signs of mystic and visionary powers.

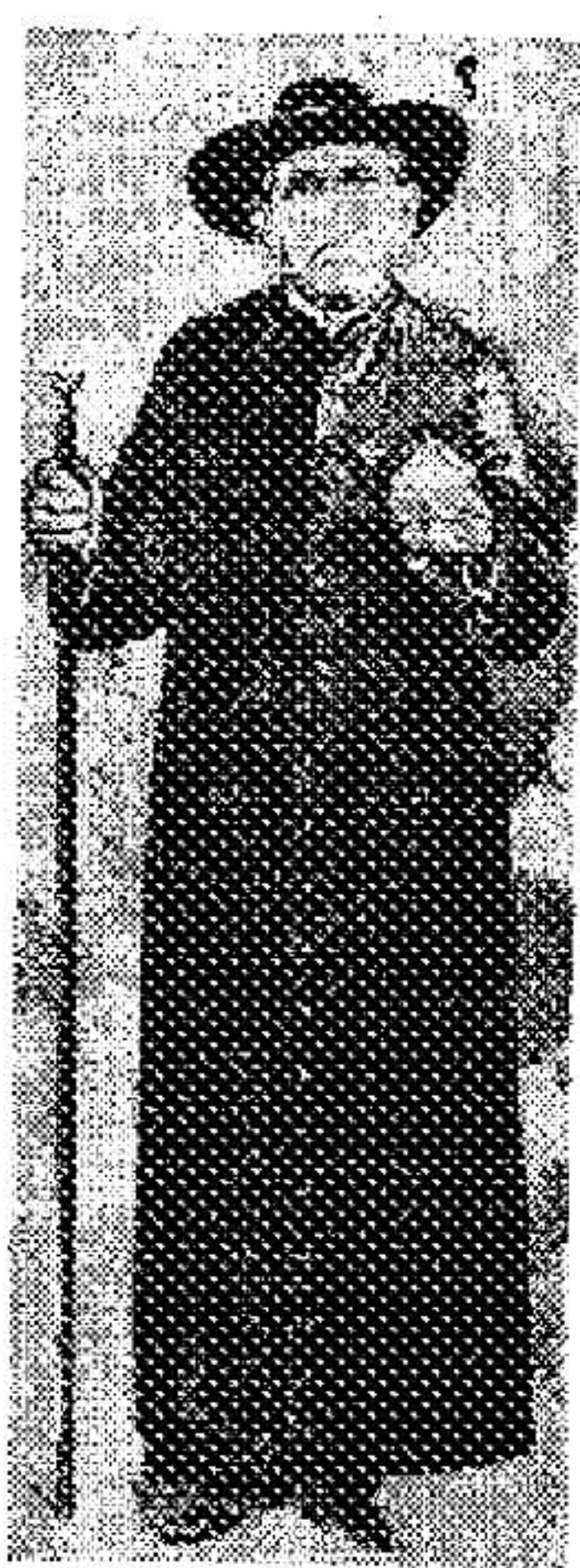
Condemned by Vatican

Padre Cicero's parish was the hamlet of Juazeiro, which had a population of 300 when he arrived in 1872. Reports of the priest's miracles and magic healing powers spread rapidly in the superstitious land and thousands of pilgrims came to settle at Juazeiro.

The Bishop of Fortaleza, capital of Ceará, tried vainly to bring Padre Cicero to order. Finally, in 1898 the Vatican condemned his "false miracles" and ruled that Padre Cicero could no longer say mass or hear confessions.

Padre Cicero was allowed to remain in Juazeiro, where his cult continued to grow. By 1912, the population was 30,000, mostly religious fanatics or outlaws pursued in other states.

"Here, I am mayor, town



Padre Cicero in a popular portrait that thousands in northeastern Brazil keep in their homes.

council, judge, military commander, police chief, police, jailer," Padre Cicero is reported to have said, openly showing his political ambitions. He intervened actively in the presidential elections and fought for and won municipal autonomy for Juazeiro. Later he raised an army of local brigands and worshippers to overthrow the state governor, and persuade Lampião, king of the outlaws, to join an anti-Communist crusade.

Padre Cicero died in 1934, rehabilitated by the church and leaving his fortune to the Salesian Congregation for Educational Works in the northeast.

It is too early to determine the impact of the proclamation of Padre Cicero as saint. Roman Catholics are fighting the measure in the press and on television. In the Roman Catholic churches of the northeast, priests have asked their faithful to repudiate the action of the Brazilian church.

However, the Brazilian church, which is engaged in an aggressive proselytizing campaign, hopes to win Padre Cicero's large following in the northeast. The church leadership has announced plans to build a church in Juazeiro in honor of "St. Cicero."

20,000 Members Claimed

The young Brazilian Catholic Apostolic Church is said to have a total of 20,000 believers, 34 bishops and 300 priests. The church is growing rapidly in the São Paulo area and in Brasilia and has branches in most of the country. But until now it has been weak in the northeast.

"What they hope to do is to replace the Roman Catholic hierarchy with a national hierarchy, taking advantage of the current trend of nationalism in Latin America," a Roman Catholic sociologist said in an interview.

The Roman Catholic Church does not recognize the Brazilian church because it was founded by Carlos Duarte Costa, former Bishop of Botucatu, São Paulo, who had been excommunicated for his pro-Communist views.

A revolutionary, he favored agrarian reform and state control of the oil industry, and he disputed the Vatican's set ideas on priestly celibacy, divorce, the taxation of sacraments and traditional dress and rituals. He was canonized by the Brazilian church in 1970.

The Brazilian church adopted a much more conservative line after Mr. Duarte Costa's death in 1961. Today it is ardently anti-Communist and accuses the Roman Catholics of leftist leanings.