

HIGHLIGHTING THE MATERIALIZATION OF MIRACLES THROUGH EX-VOTOS AT THE SÃO FRANCISCO CULTURAL CENTER.

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this internship was the dissemination of knowledge about the symbolism inherent in ex-votos. I had the opportunity to participate in guided research on the significance of ex-votos for the faithful who attend the pilgrimage of Penha, held annually in the city of João Pessoa - PB. This pilgrimage is a manifestation where numerous religious individuals come together to praise "Nossa Senhora da Penha". The creation and offering of ex-votos are part of this ritual, and these pieces aim to represent, in a material form, the graces and miracles they have obtained. Therefore, at the end of this internship period, within the field of the São Francisco Cultural Center, my classmates and I had the opportunity to participate in the creation of an exhibition open to the public, featuring selected ex-voto pieces from the Miracles Chapel, located in the sanctuary of "Nossa Senhora da Penha". We shared with visitors the history of these pieces and their connections to the materialization of a miracle, making this cultural practice known to the entire population to prevent its loss over time.

Keywords: Ex-votos; symbolism; miracles.

INTRODUCTION

The central idea of this work is associated with the goal of disseminating all the information and knowledge acquired during this internship period, during which I had the opportunity to deepen my understanding of ex-votos. This cultural practice has been and continues to be highly prevalent in our society, especially in the northeastern region of the country.

Therefore, my role within this internship was to highlight the materialization of miracles achieved by the faithful who, annually, participate in the pilgrimage of Our Lady of Penha. After the graces attributed to the saint are obtained, as a form of gratitude and representation of the miracle, they leave ex-votos in the Miracles Chapel, in the sanctuary of Nossa Senhora da Penha, located in João Pessoa, Paraíba.

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In this sense, I highlight my experience in supervised internship, a pioneering one in the Bachelor's degree in Religious Sciences at UFPB. It made me reflect on the insertion of the Scientist of Religion into the job market, as well as the various fields of action not yet reached but envisioned by our group.

Methodologically, we emphasize the qualitative approach with in-depth bibliographic exploration, supported by documentary evidence. However, the experiential account is our focus at this moment. We emphasize that this experience is a celebration of this important moment that has repercussions on job prospects and the increased capacity of professionals, ultimately enabling them to work with organizational specificities that involve religion and/or spirituality in some interpersonal context.

THE MATERIALIZATION OF MIRACLES THROUGH EX-VOTOS AT THE SÃO FRANCISCO CULTURAL CENTER

My class's internship period began on August 22, 2023, and we were welcomed and guided at the São Francisco Cultural Center by Professor Maria Helena and the local team, who served as our supervisors. On this occasion, we had the initial contact with all those involved, as well as with the structure of the Cultural Center. Additionally, we became acquainted with the activities we would undertake during the internship.

My experience in the internship itself provided me with numerous opportunities to put into practice all the academic knowledge, bringing the theory taught in the classroom into practical application. During the internship experience, we visited the exhibition of the renowned artist Wilson Figueiredo¹ and had the opportunity to learn about how we would approach the theme of our internship, which is through curation and, consequently, the cultural production related to ex-votos.

This experience was extremely important for us to have theoretical grounding on how to plan and conduct curation, as it was one of our activities during the internship. In this way, we were tasked with applying the

knowledge acquired in these early moments during the planning and setup of an ex-votos exhibition.

Therefore, throughout our in-person meetings, which occurred weekly, we continued the discussions regarding the exhibition we were responsible for, and part of this was associated with naming the ex-votos exhibition. Guided by the supervisors, each student thought and presented ideas for themes that could name the ex-votos exhibition, including:

- Ex-votos: Profound manifestation of devotional gratitude
- Profound manifestation of communion with the divine
- Ex-votos: The materialization of a miracle
- Ex-votos: Highlighting the power of a promise
- Ex-votos: Art, faith, and health in popular religiosity
- Ex-votos: A narrative of gratitude through art, faith, and devotion

After proper discussions among the internship participants, we concluded that the exhibition would be named: *Ex-votos: Faith, promise, and gratitude*. We also defined the approach model we would use during the presentation of the pieces.

In light of the above, it is important to highlight that all the theoretical groundwork associated with the exhibition, including the process of gathering information, naming the exhibition, selecting the pieces, etc., is part of the curation of the work and is essential to ensure that visitors could understand what was actually being proposed to be discussed.

That being said, in our initial meetings at Espaço Cultural São Francisco, we did not have direct contact with the ex-voto pieces in the space's collection. This was because, in this first moment, we were focused on conducting other surveys to ensure a solid foundation for our presentation



and, consequently, to be prepared for any type of question, whether from the general public or Espaço Cultural's staff.

Our contact with the ex-votos initially occurred through the technical cataloging sheets, which further expanded our knowledge of the subject. We only had a superficial knowledge of the physical pieces, and not their "technical" definitions. Throughout the subsequent meetings, we had the opportunity to discuss the pieces featured in the exhibition. We began filling out the document that addresses the "technical" characteristics of this project, such as the title, colors of the displays, the creation of the curatorial text, and we reached a conclusion about the target audience for this work. Finally, we defined the general objective of our project, which is, in summary, the dissemination of this culture, bringing knowledge of this subject to the entire population.

Our meetings were always very productive, and in each of them, we had various opportunities to delve into our research, whether through the analysis of the pieces for the exhibition selection or through guidance on how to write the exhibition texts. We were advised to seek definitions of other concepts associated with the culture of ex-votos, such as pilgrimage, procession, or pilgrimage, so that we could define the differences in each of these movements. It was through this idea, suggested by our supervisor, that we agreed to highlight the main points where the stops usually occur in the route of the Penha procession. This helped us establish the connection between the pilgrimage and the ex-votos of the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora da Penha.

Based on the guidance mentioned above, I created the following curatorial narrative text: "CURATING AN EXHIBITION OF EX-VOTOS: ART AND POPULAR RELIGIOSITY," and I could conclude that the line between religiosity and popular art, concerning ex-votos, is very subtle. These two aspects meet and blend very naturally, especially in the Northeastern regional context, where this symbolism holds great strength and devotion.

Thus, ex-votos are the representations and aspirations of the religious individuals who see in the figures of certain saints, such as Nossa Senhora da Penha, Frei Damião, and Padre Cicero, for example, the possibility of attaining healing for specific illnesses, owning a home, or even succeeding in exams.

Moreover, we can observe that this statement gains strength through the comparison we can make between the concepts of popular religiosity and ex-votos since these definitions do not have many distinctions between them. After all, the ex-voto is nothing more than the materialization of a miracle achieved and symbolizes, above all, the payment of a debt acquired by a faithful individual with their deities. In other words, it is the representation of a symbolic exchange mediated through religiosity and the fulfillment of a vow in exchange for a grace attained, as we can see in the definition of the practice by the Thesaurus of Folklore and Brazilian Popular Culture of the CNFCP (2006):

(...) Ritual activity through which individuals express symbolically, through their conduct, the relationship with the sacred world. Religious practice follows collective representations, adheres to codes of behavior, and organizes itself collectively and standardized."

Therefore, it is important to highlight that ex-votos, for the most part, are pieces crafted by the hands of the faithful who are expressing gratitude to the saint to whom the piece will be offered, whether it be a representation of a body part or a model of a house. The ritual of crafting one's own ex-voto is crucial for the religious individuals because it signifies to the deity that the gratitude of the faithful for the miracle is so immense that they produce the gift that will be offered.

In addition to all the support received from the staff members of the São Francisco Cultural Space and also from the teachers responsible for our supervision and guidance, we also had the opportunity to receive assistance from a museologist, particularly in terms of arranging the pieces that were present in the exhibition space. She guided us on the best way to position them, the lighting to be used, and the colors of the displays, for example, so that the ex-voto itself would be the main element of the exhibition.

As our objectives aligned with the reality of completing the internship and the exhibition, we needed to adapt some aspects regarding this subject to facilitate visitors' understanding of ex-votos themselves and also the dimension that the exhibition could take.

For this reason, we changed the name of our curation from *"Ex-votos: Faith, Promise, and Gratitude"* to *"Ex-votos: Promise, Faith, and Gratitude."* At first, the change may not seem necessary, but we concluded that stating the exhibition title chronologically in terms of fulfilling the promise was more appropriate. From the devotee's perspective, there is faith that they will achieve such grace, and the gratitude expressed through the ex-voto, which can range from a miniature model to a body part, is defined by the devotee and refers to the miracle achieved through their promise.

Finally, in the final stretch of our internship, which concluded on November 3, 2023, during the final discussions about our internship and the exhibition, I took the initiative to propose to my colleagues the idea of creating a form containing the questions we would direct to visitors, but in an online format. We considered distributing QR codes along the exhibition route and instructing guests to scan them to answer questions related to the exhibition. While the idea of the form was accepted, after some discussion, we decided to conduct the evaluation questions manually, with each of the present visitors.

Therefore, I would like to note that the theoretical and methodological foundation of this work is based on an ethnographic research approach, aiming to study customs and behaviors associated with a specific group of people, the participants of the Penha pilgrimage. Additionally, within this field of study, we had the opportunity to apply qualitative methodology, conducting research related to the culture of ex-votos in various settings, as mentioned throughout this report. Furthermore, we selected pieces from the Chapel of Miracles, located in the sanctuary of Nossa Senhora da Penha, to assemble an exhibition open to the public.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In view of all that has been said so far, I could not fail to thank everyone who has been with me on this journey, especially my classmates: Maria de Fátima, Elton Andrade, Bruna Sales, Gilson Simas, and Eleci de Lourdes. Special thanks to our supervisor, Maria Helena, and our professor Dr. Kelly Thaysy. I would also like to express a special thank you to my mother, Vera Lucia do Nascimento, who has been and continues to be present with me since the beginning of this journey. Additionally, I would like to show my gratitude to Espaço Cultural São Francisco, which opened its doors to us and welcomed us with open arms, giving us the opportunity to engage with a culture so rich and representative for thousands of believers.

In light of this, I would like to affirm that this internship experience at Espaço Cultural São Francisco was of great importance to our graduation, allowing us to work towards the perpetuation of an extremely important culture—ex-votos. They carry a significant heritage, especially concerning the rituals and customs of pilgrims in a specific environment, such as the Sanctuary of Nossa Senhora da Penha, located in João Pessoa, Paraíba. The main goal is to prevent this culture from fading away over time.

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