

## DOSSIÊ DEVOÇÕES NA CONTEMPORANEIDADE

doi: [10.25247/paralellus.2024.v15n36.p315-317](https://doi.org/10.25247/paralellus.2024.v15n36.p315-317)

## RESENHA/RECENSÃO - BOOK REVIEWS

SWARNS, Rachel L. **The 272**: The families who were enslaved and sold to build the American Catholic Church. New York: Random House, 2023. 352p.

*Faustino dos Santos\**

An article entitled *272: Slaves Were Sold to Save Georgetown. What Does It owe Their Descendants?* was published in 2016 in the New York Times. With that article, the author, Rachel L. Swarns, a black Catholic journalist, author and associate professor at New York University, opened the controversial door to the past of the Catholic Church in the United States of America (USA) and, at the same time, opened the possibility for many people of African descent in the USA to get to know a part of the unknown chapter of their past through the history of their ancestors.

In 2023, almost ten years later, *The 272: The families who were enslaved and sold to build the American Catholic Church*, a book written by Swarns, was released. After years of research, *The 272* reveals what we can consider an embarrassing face of American Catholic history. This book is a work that challenges and asks Catholic heritage what it has done to repair the historical scandals involving the use and sale of enslaved people for private and institutional benefits.

In a book that contains fourteen chapters and a total of 352 pages, Swarns tells the story that happened in 1838 involving the 272 people enslaved who were sold by the Jesuits in Maryland for the creation and upbuilding of Georgetown University, the

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oldest Catholic University in the USA. Acknowledging how complex it was to describe and narrate the stories of thousands of black people who had their lives relegated to the vulnerable situation of slavery, the author sews her work around the Mahoney family, whose sisters, Anna and Louisa, were separated in the sale that year and sent to the South of the USA.

The Mahoney family is one of thousands of others who were affected by this inhumane situation in which people in conditions of slavery were considered property that could be traded and sold. Behind the narrative of the Mahoney family, Swarns makes us imagine the extensive and complex picture of the logic of slavery played out by religious and civil institutions.

With her work, the author has awakened today's hereditary relatives, such as Jeremy Alexander and Melissa Kemp, cited by the Swarns, to look for ways to make amends with the Jesuit university and the Jesuits with the descendants of the people sold.

As the author herself states in her book, "Without the enslaved, the Catholic Church in the United States, as we know it today, would not exist". It was through the maintenance and sale of enslaved people that the United States saw the emergence of the first Catholic College (Georgetown College, later Georgetown University), the first Archdiocese, previously the Diocese of Baltimore, 1789, and the first Catholic Cathedral (Baltimore, 1821).

As her work is intended to be a public memory, the author recalls that since there is a moral implication in history itself, institutions have embarked on paths of reparation. The university in question, for instance, since 2016 has drawn up a "preferential status in the admissions process for descendants", as well as the formal request for forgiveness in 2017 and the willingness in 2019 to raise \$400,000 a year to benefit the descendants of the 272 sold, or the willingness in 2021 to raise \$100 million to promote reconciliation initiatives. Once the situation has been presented, the question arises regarding how to atone for the injuries passed down through the generations.

Aware that many contemporary US institutions are linked to slavery, the author believes that sharing the stories of individuals or family groups, such as the Mahoney

family, and their connection to these organizations could be a possible way of making these stories more human, despite the dehumanizing process they have suffered. She points out that those who have been sold are people with names whose present time is linked to them.

As the book reveals the reality of the United States and the Catholic Church after more than 180 years, it dialogues with and triggers the unheard cries of those who have been forgotten in history. It's still sad and painful to know that slavery did everything it could to relegate people's memory and history to oblivion, to the point where they didn't know where they came from or who their people were. Similarly, the book serves as an appeal for institutions, whether religious or not, to seek ways of making amends with those who inherit/are forced to live under the legacy of the slavery past that still insists on permeating the countless means of institutionalized racism in different places.

Applying the appeal of the book concerning the United States to the reality of Brazil, it is possible to say that both the country and the Catholic Church that stood on the shoulders of enslaved people still have a lot to do. Given that Brazil is the country that received the most enslaved people (around 5.5 million out of the 12 million brought to the "New World") and was the last country to abolish slavery (1888), it is inevitable not to wonder how many of the black ancestors were also sold and plundered to maintain structures and save institutions that could be suffered any threaten. Given the length of slavery, the size of the country, and the structure of the Catholic Church, there are still many "Mahoney families" to be discovered, many stories to be told, and, above all, much reparation to be made.