

Pope's Focus on Poor Revives Scorned Theology

By JIM YARDLEY and SIMON ROMEROMAY 23, 2015

Archbishop Óscar Romero, assassinated in 1980, was beatified on Saturday in San Salvador after many years of stalling by conservative Catholic officials. Credit Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

VATICAN CITY — Six months after becoming the first Latin American pontiff, Pope Francis invited an octogenarian priest from Peru for a private chat at his Vatican residence. Not listed on the pope's schedule, the September 2013 meeting with the priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez, soon became public — and was just as quickly interpreted as a defining shift in the Roman Catholic Church.

Father Gutiérrez is a founder of liberation theology, the Latin American movement embracing the poor and calling for social change, which conservatives once scorned as overtly Marxist and the Vatican treated with hostility. Now, Father Gutiérrez is a respected Vatican visitor, and his writings have been praised in the official Vatican newspaper. Francis has brought other Latin American priests back into favor and often uses language about the poor that has echoes of liberation theology.

And then came Saturday, when throngs packed San Salvador for the beatification ceremony of the murdered Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero, leaving him one step from sainthood.

The first pope from the developing world, Francis has placed the poor at the center of his papacy. In doing so, he is directly engaging with a theological movement that once sharply divided Catholics and was distrusted by his predecessors, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. Even Francis, as a young Jesuit leader in Argentina, had qualms.

Now, Francis speaks of creating “a poor church for the poor” and is seeking to position Catholicism closer to the masses — a spiritual mission that comes as he is also trying to revive the church in Latin America, where it has steadily lost ground to evangelical congregations.

For years, Vatican critics of liberation theology and conservative Latin American bishops helped stall the canonization process for Archbishop Romero, even though many Catholics in the region regard him as a towering moral figure: an outspoken critic of social injustice and political repression who was assassinated during Mass in 1980. Francis broke the stalemate.

“It is very important,” Father Gutiérrez said. “Somebody who is assassinated for this commitment to his people will illuminate many things in Latin America.”

The beatification is the prelude to what is likely to be a defining period of Francis' papacy, with trips to South America, Cuba and the United States; the release of a much-awaited encyclical on environmental degradation and the poor; and a meeting in Rome to determine whether and how the church will change its approach to issues like homosexuality, contraception and divorce.

By advancing the campaign for Archbishop Romero's sainthood, Francis is sending a signal that the allegiance of his church is to the poor, who once saw some bishops as more aligned with discredited governments, many analysts say. Indeed, Archbishop Romero was regarded as a popular saint in El Salvador even as the Vatican blocked his canonization process.

“It is not liberation theology that is being rehabilitated,” said Michael E. Lee, an associate professor of theology at Fordham University who has written extensively about liberation theology. “It is the church that is being rehabilitated.”

Liberation theory includes a critique of the structural causes of poverty and a call for the church and the poor to organize for social change. Mr. Lee said it was a broad school of thought: Movements differed in different countries, with some more political in nature and others less so. The broader movement emerged after a major meeting of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 and was rooted in the belief that the plight of the poor should be central to interpreting the Bible and to the Christian mission.

But with the Cold War in full force, some critics denounced liberation theology as Marxist, and a conservative backlash quickly followed. At the Vatican, John Paul II, the Polish pope who would later be credited for helping topple the Soviet Union, became suspicious of the political elements of the new Latin American movements.

“All that rhetoric made the Vatican very nervous,” said Ivan Petrella, an Argentine lawmaker and scholar of liberation theology. “If you were coming from behind the Iron Curtain, you could smell some communism in there.”

John Paul reacted by appointing conservative bishops in Latin America and by supporting conservative Catholic groups such as Opus Dei and the Legionaries of Christ, which opposed liberation theology. In the 1980s, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger — later to become Pope Benedict XVI, but then the Vatican’s enforcer of doctrine — issued two statements on liberation theology. The first was very critical, but the second was milder, leading some analysts to wonder if the Vatican was easing up.

From his 1973 appointment as head of the Jesuits in Argentina, Francis, then 36 and known as Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was viewed as deeply concerned with the poor. But religious figures who knew him then say Francis, like much of Argentina’s Catholic establishment, thought liberation theology was too political. Critics also blamed him for failing to prevent the kidnapping and torture of two priests sympathetic to liberation theology.

Some in the church hierarchy considered Francis divisive and autocratic in his 15 years leading the Jesuits. The church authorities sent him into what amounted to stretches of exile, first in Germany and then in Córdoba, Argentina, a period in which he later described having “a time of great interior crisis.”

He practiced spiritual exercises and changed his leadership style to involve greater dialogue. When he was named archbishop of Buenos Aires, his focus became those left behind by Argentina’s economic upheaval.

“With the end of the Cold War, he began to see that liberation theology was not synonymous with Marxism, as many conservatives had claimed,” said Paul Vallely, author of “Pope Francis: Untying the Knots.” Argentina’s financial crisis in the early years of the 21st century also shaped his views, as he “began to see that economic systems, not just individuals, could be sinful,” Mr. Vallely added.

Since becoming pope, Francis has expressed strong criticism of capitalism, acknowledging that globalization has lifted many people from poverty but saying it has also created great disparities and “condemned many others to hunger.” He has warned, “Without a solution to the problems of the poor, we cannot resolve the problems of the world.”

In Argentina, some critics are unconvinced that Francis’ outspokenness about the poor represents an embrace of liberation theology. “He never took the reins of liberation theology because it’s radical,” said Rubén Rufino Dri, who worked in the late 1960s and 1970s with a group of priests active in the slums of Buenos Aires.

To him, Francis’ decision to expedite Archbishop Romero’s beatification was a political one, part of what Mr. Rufino Dri views as a “superficial transformation” of the Catholic Church as it competes in Latin America with secularism as well as other branches of Christianity.

Others offered a more nuanced view. José María di Paola, 53, a priest who is close to Francis and once worked with him among the poor of Buenos Aires, said the beatification reflected a broader push by Francis to reduce the Vatican’s focus on Europe. “It’s part of a process to bring an end to the church’s Eurocentric interpretation of the world and have a more Latin American viewpoint,” he said.

Father di Paola added that while Francis had never proposed evangelizing under the banner of liberation theology during his time in Argentina, his commitment to the poor should not be questioned. “Francis’ passage through the slums of the capital influenced him later as a bishop and pope,” he said. “Experiencing the life values of the poor transformed his heart.”

As pope, Francis has expanded the roles of centrists sympathetic to liberation theology, such as Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga of Honduras, in contrast to the clout once wielded in Latin America by conservative cardinals like Alfonso López Trujillo of Colombia, who died in 2008.

“Trujillo represented the thinking that liberation theology was a Trojan horse in which communism would enter the church, something that is finally coming undone with Pope Francis,” said Leonardo Boff, 76, a prominent Brazilian theologian who has written on liberation theology.

Many analysts note that John Paul and Benedict never outright denounced liberation theology and slowly started to pivot in their views. In 2012, Benedict reopened Archbishop Romero’s beatification case. Cardinal Gerhard Müller, a staunch conservative who heads the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican’s enforcer of doctrine, became a proponent of liberation theology after working in Peru, where he met Father Gutiérrez. The two men have since written books together.

“There was no rehabilitation because there was never a ‘dehabilitation,’ ” Father Gutiérrez said, contesting the idea that liberation theology was ever cast out of the church. “In past years, there was talk of condemnation, and people believed it. What there was was a critical dialogue, which had difficult moments but which really was clarified over time.”

Francis often urges believers to act on behalf of the poor, saying if they do, they will be transformed. For those who knew Archbishop Romero in El Salvador, this transformation was notable. Once considered a conservative, he began to change in the mid-1970s, when he was the bishop of a rural diocese where government soldiers had massacred peasants. Shortly after he became archbishop of San Salvador, he was horrified when a close friend, a Jesuit priest, was murdered, and he soon began to speak out against government terror and repression.

“He began to surprise people,” said Jon Sobrino, a prominent liberation theologian who became close to Archbishop Romero and credited his transformation to his embrace of the poor.

“They made him be different, be more radical, like Jesus,” Father Sobrino said. “He drew near to them, and they approached him, asking for help in their suffering. That was what changed him.”

In 2007, Father Sobrino had his own clash with the Vatican when the doctrinal office disputed some of his writings. He refused to alter them and attributed the freeze on Archbishop Romero’s beatification partly to Vatican hostility.

“It has taken a new pope to change the situation,” he said.

Jim Yardley reported from Vatican City, and Simon Romero from Rio de Janeiro. Elisabeth Malkin and Gene Palumbo contributed reporting from San Salvador, and Jonathan Gilbert from Buenos Aires.

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