

Liberation Theology Gets New Life in Brazil and Latin America

Contributed by Nikolas Kozloff
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The recent election of former Bishop Fernando Lugo as President of Paraguay poses a sticky dilemma for the Vatican and underscores the hostile political environment facing incoming Pope Benedict XVI in South America. Lugo, who was known to his constituents as the "Bishop of the Poor" for his support of landless peasants, advocates so-called Liberation Theology, a school of thought which took shape in Latin America in the 1960s.

Recognizing the pressing need for social justice, Liberation Theology was minted by Pope John XXIII to challenge the Church to defend the oppressed and the poor. Since its emergence, Liberation Theology has consistently mixed politics and religion.

Its adherents have often been active in labor unions and left-wing political parties. Followers of Liberation Theology take inspiration from fallen martyrs like Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador and Dorothy Mae Stang, an American-born nun who was murdered by ranching interests in Brazil.

Romero, an outspoken voice for social change, was gunned down in 1980 by a right wing death squad during a Mass in the chapel of San Salvador's Divine Providence hospital. Stang, an advocate of the poor and the environment, was shot to death in the Brazilian Amazon in February 2005; her assailants were later linked to a powerful local landlord.

Joseph Ratzinger: Doctrinal Czar

During the 1980s and 1990s Benedict, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, acted as John Paul II's doctrinal czar. At the time, John Paul was in the midst of a fierce battle to silence prominent Church liberals. "This conception of Christ as a political figure, a revolutionary, as the subversive of Nazareth," the Pontiff once said, "does not tally with the church's catechism."

In 1983 the Pope wagged his finger at Sandinista government minister and Nicaraguan priest, Ernesto Cardenal on a trip to Managua, warning the latter to "straighten out the situation in your church." Cardenal was one of the most prominent Liberation Theologians of the Sandinista era.

Originally a liberal reformer, Ratzinger changed his tune once he became an integrant in the Vatican hierarchy. As prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's doctrinal watchdog agency, Cardinal Ratzinger warned against the temptation to view Christianity in an exclusively political light. Liberation Theology, he once said, was dangerous as it fused "the Bible's view of history with Marxist dialectics."

Calling Liberation Theology a "singular heresy," Ratzinger went on the offensive. He blasted the new movement as a "fundamental threat" to the church and prohibited some of its leading proponents from speaking publicly. In an effort to clean house, Ratzinger even summoned outspoken priests to Rome and censured them on grounds that they were abandoning the church's spiritual role for inappropriate socioeconomic activism.

As Pope, Ratzinger has not sought to hide his lack of esteem for Liberation Theology. During a recent trip to Brazil, he was pressed by reporters to comment on Oscar Romero's tragic murder in El Salvador. The Pope complained that Romero's cause had been hijacked by supporters of liberation theology.

Commenting on a new book about the slain archbishop, the Pope said that Romero should not be seen simply as a political figure. Hoping to avoid any meaningful political discussion on the matter, Benedict said "He was killed during the consecration of the Eucharist. Therefore, his death is testimony of the faith."

How to Handle Lugo?

Despite his best efforts however, Benedict has not been able to impede the rise of the Bishop of the Poor in Paraguay. Lugo has had long time differences with the Vatican, which could now create some political friction between Paraguay and the Papal See.

When Lugo left the priesthood to pursue politics, the Vatican refused to accept his resignation, arguing that the Bishop already made a "lifetime commitment." Defying the Pope, Lugo formed the center left Patriotic Alliance, which brought together leftist unions, indigenous people and poor farmers.

When Lugo announced his intention to run in what turned out to be his victorious presidential race, the Vatican sent him a letter declaring that the Holy See had "learned with surprise" that some political parties "have the intention of presenting him as a candidate in the coming Presidential election in Paraguay."

It added: "The acceptance of that offer would be clearly against the serious responsibility of a bishop ... Canon Law prohibits priests from participating in political parties or labor unions." The letter asked Lugo "in the name of Jesus Christ" to "seriously reflect on his behavior".

Lugo replied tartly, "The Pope can either accept my decision or punish me. But I am in politics already." Hardly amused, the Vatican suspended Lugo from his duties "a divinis," meaning that he could no longer say Mass or carry out other priestly functions such as administering the sacraments.

This was enough to enable Lugo to stand in the Presidential elections, but his victory now presents the Vatican with a dilemma over whether to "reduce him to lay status." Vatican officials said it was up to the Pope to decide, and that Benedict would "take time to study the situation".

Brazilian Challenge

Though Benedict has long opposed Liberation Theology, it's unclear what he might do at this point to halt its spread. Unlike the 1980s when South America was in the midst of right-wing military rule, the region has now undergone a decided shift to the left which is confounding the Papacy.

In Brazil, the world's most populous Roman Catholic nation, some 80,000 "base communities," as the grass-roots building blocks of liberation theology are called, are flourishing. What's more, nearly one million "Bible circles" meet regularly to read and discuss scripture from the viewpoint of the theology of liberation.

Liberation Theology advocates have strong links to the labor movement which helped propel the current regime into power; this history turned President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva into being a long time ally.

The movement has been particularly strong in poorer areas of the country such as the Amazon, the hinterlands of northeast Brazil and the outskirts of large urban centers like São Paulo, which has a population of 20 million people.

In the latter city, the followers of liberation theology prominently display their politics. For example, during last year's May Day celebration, liberation theologians draped a wooden cross with black banners labeled "imperialism" and "privatization" and applauded when the homily criticized the government's "neoliberal" economic policies, the kind backed by Washington.

Chávez and Pope Benedict

Try as he might, Benedict has been unable to halt the re-emergence of Liberation Theology, and Paraguay and Brazil are just the tip of the iceberg. For years Venezuela has been a religious battleground, with President Chávez pursuing a combative relationship with the Catholic Church. Unlike some other Latin American countries which had a stronger liberation theology movement, the Venezuelan Church never had a leftist tendency except among diocesan priests.

A clash between the government and the Church was probably inevitable, and shortly after taking office Chávez started to chastise Venezuelan bishops, accusing them of complicity with the corrupt administrations that preceded his rule. The Venezuelan leader accused the Vatican's former representative in Venezuela, Cardinal Rosalio Castillo Lara, of allying himself with the country's "rancid oligarchy."

Memorably, Chávez suggested that priests such as Castillo Lara ought to subject themselves to an exorcism because

"the devil has snuck into their clerical robes." Incensed, the cardinal compared Chávez to Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

During the April 2002 coup, prominent Catholics such as Cardinal Ignacio Velasco sided with the opposition against the president. Velasco was even accused of offering his residence as a meeting place for the coup plotters. What is more, he signed the "Carmona decree" that swept away Venezuela's democratic institutions. Senior Catholic bishops themselves attended the inauguration ceremony for Pedro Carmona, Venezuela's Dictator-For-a-Day.

But when Chávez was able to quickly overturn the coup and return to power, the hard line Church establishment was humiliated. Relishing his triumph Chávez launched a rhetorical broadside on the Vatican, calling on the Pope to apologize, on behalf of the Catholic Church, for the "holocaust" of the indigenous peoples of Latin America during the colonial era, and for the imposition of Christianity. The Pope, who is close to Castillo Lara, is reportedly anti-Chávez but has met with the Venezuelan leader at the Vatican.

Hoping to neutralize the power of the Catholic Church, Chávez frequently quotes from the Bible. Puckishly, he also tells his supporters in his public addresses that Christ was an anti-imperialist.

Even as Chávez spars with the Church, Protestants have provided a key pillar of the president's political support. Over the last few years, Chávez has done his utmost to cultivate the support of Protestants, which make up 29% of the population. He even declared that he was no longer a Catholic, but a member of the Christian Evangelical Council.

Hostile Environment

In the Andes, the situation is not much more promising for Pope Benedict. Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa is a Catholic Socialist and has called for a "new Catholicism" in the 21st century which would challenge globalized capitalism.

The President has said that his real education came from working as a lay Salesian missionary in the mid-1980s in the largely indigenous province of Cotopaxi. During his speeches, Correa invokes the words of Leonidas Proaño, probably Ecuador's most famous liberation theologian.

Bolivia's Evo Morales has never been a fan of ecclesiastical authority and has said that Catholic bishops "historically damaged the country" by functioning as "an instrument of the oligarchs." What's more, Morales tapped Rafael Puente Calvo, an ex-Jesuit and a staunch liberation theologian, to be his Deputy Minister of the Interior.

In Paraguay, Brazil, Venezuela, and up and down the Andes Pope Benedict faces a very changed political climate from the 1980s. A new generation of leaders, allied to the Pope's ideological foes, has to be making life difficult for the conservative church hierarchy.

If he wants the Vatican to maintain its influence in the region, Pope Benedict is going to have to be creative, diplomatic and extremely cautious in his regional initiatives.

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