Tense Theology in a Holy Hierarchy: Liberation Theology Versus the Vatican

Sarah Fisher

Follow this and additional works at: https://louis.uah.edu/honors-capstones

Recommended Citation
Honors Capstone Projects and Theses. 336.
https://louis.uah.edu/honors-capstones/336

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Capstone Projects and Theses by an authorized administrator of LOUIS.
Tense Theology in a Holy Hierarchy:

Liberation Theology Versus the Vatican

Sarah Fisher
Department of History
Project Advisor: Dr. Dunar
Spring 2009
Honors Research Project
Approval

Form 3 – Submit with completed thesis. All signatures must be obtained.

Name of candidate: Sarah Fisher

Department: History

Degree: History / Political Science

Full title of project: Tense Theology in a Holy Hierarchy
Liberation Theology Versus the Vatican

Approved by:

[Signature]
Project Advisor
Date: 4/21/09

[Signature]
Department Chair
Date: 4/21/09

[Signature]
Honors Program Director for Honors Council
Date: 3/21/09
Tense Theology in a Holy Hierarchy: Liberation Theology Versus The Vatican
by Sarah Fisher

“We can be Christians, authentic Christians,” said Leonardo Boff, “only by living our faith in a liberating way.”¹ In the late 1960s and 1970s in Latin America, liberation theology synthesized Catholicism and Marxism and emerged as a response to widespread poverty and social injustice. Including works such as A Theology of Liberation by Gustavo Gutiérrez in 1972 and Salvation and Liberation by Leonardo Boff in 1979, many educated Latin American Catholic priests embraced liberation theology as a systematic response to social ills in Latin America. People of faith, in their opinion, liberated the poor through political reform or social revolution. Liberation theologians saw themselves as an outgrowth of orthodox Catholicism and a fulfillment of Jesus’s teaching. They reassured readers that Marxist analysis did not taint their theological works and linked their writing with Vatican documents and Biblical passages. These careful citations legitimized the movement and anticipated objections from conservative clerics. Although the Vatican had theological reasons for opposing liberation theology, liberation theologians used Church documents so effectively that the Church adopted a new, distinctly political, strategy. The Church, specifically Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger,² denounced liberation theology as Marxist, and therefore incompatible with Christianity. This denunciation illustrated the hierarchy’s deeply rooted political conflicts within the Church as well as the desire to maintain the power of the Magisterium, both within Vatican walls and in Latin America.³

While the majority of liberation theologians saw counter violence as an acceptable, even necessary, means of social change, the justification of violence remained a contentious issue among liberation theologians. The Catholic Church, like liberation theology, had a conflicting stance on violence, ranging from complete pacifism to Just War Theory. Just War Theory condoned warfare under certain conditions, which the liberation theologians felt were “too confining.”⁴ Most liberation theologians justified violence in terms of self-defense. Like the Vatican, the Latin American Church displayed varying degrees of violence. In 1980, an assassin killed Salvadorian Archbishop Óscar Arnomlo Romero, a pacifist, as the Archbishop celebrated Mass. Romero believed that any form of violence led to more killing. On the opposite side of

² In 2005, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI. I will refer to him as “Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger” when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. I will refer to him as “Pope Benedict XVI” when he became Pope Benedict XVI.
⁴ Pottenger, The Political Theory of Liberation Theology, 143.
the continuum, in 1967, Camilo Torres, a Catholic priest, died fighting with rebels in Columbia. While Romero and Torres represented extremes, most liberation theologians approved of some form of violence against oppression.5

Critics of liberation theology said that the Church should not be concerned with political matters, but, historically, the Catholic Church constantly intervened in Latin America. Beginning in colonial times and continuing through Latin American independence movements, the Church largely supported conservative political leaders, often blessing efforts to subdue the masses. Liberation theologians swapped sides. Rather than side with the rich and powerful, liberation theologians sided with the poor and oppressed. Some argue that the greatest, perhaps the only, difference between liberation theologians and the Vatican was their choice of allies. The liberation theologians sided with the poor, and the Vatican sided with the elite.6

Catholic Social Thought

Seminary educated liberation theologians such as Leonardo Boff and Juan Luis Segundo constantly cited Catholic doctrine, and in order to understand liberation theology, one must examine Catholic social thought. The debate between liberation theologians and the Vatican was a small piece of a broader theological debate. Saints, popes, and theologians struggled with one question, the extent to which Christians should be involved in the temporal world, if eternal life is Christianity's ultimate goal. St. Augustine said that Christians should “Fix your hope in God, desire the things eternal, [and] wait for the things eternal”7 rather than become too involved in “this hell upon earth.”8 Christians, according to Augustine, should not “attempt to fabricate for themselves a happiness in this life” because the ultimate goal of human life was salvation.9 On the other hand, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “law is ordained for the common good.”10 Both individuals and governments, Aquinas noted, had an obligation to work for the common good.11

Later Church writings exemplified the struggle between Augustine and Aquinas; the ideas in these documents allowed liberation theologians and their critics to cite papal encyclicals to support their argument and rebut their opponents' claims. An encyclical was a papal letter for either the bishops or the Church as a whole. Catholics did not view these as infallible, but they contained important directives. Liberation theologians emphasized the need to liberate people from temporal oppression, whereas the Vatican urged people to focus on heavenly salvation rather than temporal comfort. Liberation theologians and their opponents used Church documents, including encyclicals, as a basis for their theological treatises. Liberation theology was an internal development within the Catholic Church and created a conflict between theology, social systems, and social

5Berryman, 1-4, 17-19; Pottenger, The Political Theory of Liberation Theology, 143-180. Notice that this split was similar to African American liberation movements in the United States.
6Foroohar, 37-42, 53-4; Lynch 20-21; Berryman, 9-12.
8Augustine, 5.
9Augustine, 133.
11Aquinas, 4-5.
analysis. As evident in Church documents, the conflict between earthly and temporal existence served as the starting point for papal encyclicals.12

Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, “Rerum Novarum,” critiqued both capitalism and socialism while providing papal commentary on workers’ rights and private property. The expressed goal of this encyclical was to “speak on the condition of the working class” and support formation of security nets for those in need, such as unions or government programs.13 Workers, according to Leo XIII, must be able to call upon the state in times of need because “civil society exists for the common good,” an Aquinian notion.14 The encyclical reaffirmed the right to private property, if the government could intervene to avert crisis. Private property encouraged productivity, but the Earth was ultimately “a community of goods.”15 For the pope, there were moral limits on private wealth. “Rerum Novarum” affirmed spiritual importance of the poor and said that the “rich should tremble at the threatenings of Jesus Christ.”16 The pope warned about the evils of excessive profit and told managers to protect workers’ rights. Christians give to the poor as a solemn obligation, but in order to preserve the virtue in charity, the government should not force charitable giving.17

The pope continued “Rerum Novarum” and reminded both the rich and the poor that “this world is a place of exile”18 and that God will reward temporal trials in heaven. But, the Church, Leo said, should feed people spiritually and physically. These two aspects of the human person were inseparable. The pope urged the masses not to undertake violent means to restructure the social system because no government “will ever succeed in vanishing from human life the ills and troubles which beset it.”19 But the pope said, Christians must find “some opportune remedy” to relieve the working class, who’s condition was “little better than slavery itself.”20 The pope did not provide a solution to the world’s problems, but “Rerum Novarum” reflected a need for social change. However, socialism was not a just system of government. The pope thought that socialism took away man’s rightful monetary possessions, making socialism unacceptable. Socialists, according to Leo, placed too much trust in the state. Leo believed that people should not trust the state entirely, but Catholics should ensure that the state provided for the common good.21

Through Vatican II (1962-1965) and his encyclicals, John XXIII’s papacy signaled the beginning of a shift toward a more active church that cared for the entire person, body and soul, as well as a critical assessment of capitalism. Though Vatican II contained numerous documents from which liberation theologians drew, John XXIII’s

14 Leo XIII, 51.
15 Leo XIII, 15.
16 Leo XIII, 22.
17 Leo XIII, 22, 20; Pottenger, The Political Theory of Liberation Theology, 27.
18 Leo XIII, 21.
19 Leo XIII, 18.
20 Leo XIII, 3.
21 Leo XIII, 4, 5.
encyclicals reflected the spirit of Vatican II. While rampant capitalism proved unjust, neither did the Pope endorse socialism in “Mater et Magistra.” “Mater et Magistra” explicitly called for the Catholic clergy and laity to “look, judge, [and then] act” to alleviate social problems.22 The pope wrote that even though the ultimate goal of a Christian life is eternal salvation, Christians “must not suppose that they would be acting prudently to lessen their personal Christian commitment in this passing world.”23 Even though this world was secondary, John XXIII said that Christians worked for the salvation of men’s soul and for social justice on a temporal level. This document reminded readers of the importance of human souls as well as physical wellbeing.24

In “Mater et Magistra,” John XXIII suggested that the unrestrained capitalist system “was thus gaining a stranglehold on the entire world,”25 but the pope affirmed the right to private property which “naturally entails as social obligation.”26 The document did not describe what a Christian’s “social obligation” might include, but John XXIII felt that private property, while Church sanctioned, should benefit the common good. If a government failed to respect the rights of its people, it did not fulfill its social obligations and was no longer legitimate. Governments, the pope suggested, must be conscious of its people’s needs and regulate the economy. In addition, Catholics had a “right to take an active part in government” in order to further the common good.27

Building upon John XXIII, in the 1967 encyclical “Popularum Progresso,” Pope Paul VI expressed concern over the growing inequities of wealth and provided possible social remedies, including expropriation. The pope said all people should address economic inequality in all areas of life, “social, economic, cultural, and spiritual.”28 The pope said that people should guard against “oppressive political structures”29 that arose “from the exploitation of the worker or unjust transactions.”30 The pope did not explicitly identify any sinful systems, but he gave permission to expropriate land for the common good “If certain landed estates impede the general prosperity because they are extensive, unused or poorly used . . . or are detrimental to the interests of the country.”31 Like John XXIII, Paul VI stressed the social obligations connected to private property, but Paul VI expounded upon this message. “Popularum Progresso” limited private property and endorsed expropriation of land for the common good under particular circumstances.32

Although “Popularum Progresso” did not completely condemn revolution, the pope remained cautious of revolution because, according to the pope, violent overthrow normally led to more bloodshed. Nevertheless, the pope ardently supported reforming

27 John XXIII, “Pacem in Terris,” 73.
29 Paul VI, “Popularum Progresso,” 2.
30 Paul VI, 21.
31 Paul VI, 24.
32 Paul VI.
the general social structure. “Popularum Progresso” called the hierarchy and the Catholic laity to prayer and action. The pope specifically told the laity not to sit “waiting passively for directives and precepts from others.” But the “atheistic philosophy” of Marxism, according to the pope, should not tempt Catholics into sinfulness.

John Paul II continued Paul VI’s call to “prayer and action,” but John Paul II placed a greater emphasis on eternal salvation. Pope John Paul II said that Christians have a “moral obligation” to help the poor and that “impersonal decisions and decisions of the government” must remedy injustice. The pope said that refusing to work for justice was unacceptable; “Anyone wishing to renounce the difficult yet noble task of improving the lot of man in his totality . . . would be betraying the will of God the creator.” However, the Church combated sin on an individual level. Christians, the pope emphasized, must keep their eyes fixed on Christ because the ultimate goal of human existence is eternal salvation. In one address, the pope said, “liberation theologians must not forget that liberation from sin lies at the heart of the Gospel.” In addition, John Paul II virtually excluded violence as an acceptable means of change and said that the Church should not “analyze scientifically” social situations.

Marxism in Liberation Theology

Given the Cold War context, the relationship between liberation theology and Marxism became the source of heated debate between liberation theology’s critics and supporters. Historians, politicians, and theologians disagreed about the extent to which violence was crucial to Marxism and the extent to which liberation theology related to Marxism. Liberation theologians needed Marxist analysis in order to liberate their congregations from oppression, but many who were critical of liberation theology considered Marxism as liberation theologians’ unforgivable sin. According to these critics, liberation theologians’ Marxist beliefs, such as violent uprising and atheism, were contrary to Catholicism’s basic tenets, and therefore liberation theologians were not really Catholic, or even Christian.

Though liberation theology relied on Marxist analysis, supporters contended that liberation theologians were not “slavish devotees of Marx.” Instead, they argued that

---

33 Paul VI, 81.
34 Paul VI, 39.
35 Paul VI, 42.
37 John Paul II, “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis.”
38 John Paul II, “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,” V-VI.
40 John Paul II, “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,” II.
liberation theologians used Marxist language while remaining orthodox. Many supporters thought that critics labeled liberation theologians as Marxist in “a political attempt to weaken the revolutionary struggle . . . [rather] than an honest attempt to purify religious doctrine”; supporters argued that irrational fear of Marxism blinded critics’ assessments.44

Liberation Theologians

The works of the Brazilian Franciscan Leonardo Boff, specifically his book *Salvation and Liberation*, highlighted liberation theology’s key views. Boff clearly viewed liberation theologians as orthodox Catholics, as outgrowths of Catholicism, and as active disciples of Christ’s Gospel message. Boff defended his use of Marxist analysis, stressed the importance of humanity’s physical wellbeing, and endorsed political action. Leonardo Boff claimed that liberation theologians could employ social science’s empiricism, including Marxist analysis, without compromising theology.45

For Boff, and other liberation theologians, commenting on political situations was within the scope of theology because “the Kingdom of God comprises all realities.”46 Christians, according to Boff, have a papal mandate to “protest” the conditions of their brothers and sisters living in extreme poverty in order to work toward an “integral liberation.”47 Boff echoed John XXIII’s claim that the spiritual and physical aspects of humanity were central to salvation, both of which Christians, governments, and individuals must respect.48

Consequently, Boff studied the social conditions in Latin America in a moral light and saw Latin America as an example of injustice stemming from “dependent capitalism.”49 Boff thought that the Latin American economic system relied too heavily on exports and was therefore dependent on world markets. According to Boff, the poor masses of Latin America illustrated the capitalist system’s injustice. Faith, Boff said, was a catalyst for political action. Christians, Boff ordered, “may and must . . . act directly on the political and infrastructural level.” 50 Like John XXIII and Paul VI’s encyclicals, Boff urged Catholics to be actively involved in social change. Boff called the political system in Latin America “terminally ill”51 and claimed that Christianity was closer to socialism than capitalism. He wanted Christian solidarity with the poor, through political reform or violent revolution.52

Brazilian Base Communities and the Nicaraguan Revolution

Base communities in Brazil and the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution were the quintessential examples of liberation theology in practice and perfect illustrations of the

---

44 Foroonar, 50, 51-2.
45 Boff, 65.
46 Boff, 50-57.
47 Boff, 1-3, 33-47.
48 Boff, 58-63; John XXIII, “Mater et Magistra.”
49 Boff, 1-3.
50 Boff, 10-21.
51 Boff, 6; John XXIII, “Mater et Magistra;” Paul VI.
52 Boff, 3, 9-11.
Vatican’s fears. Base communities were grassroots movements of the poor rural masses, who felt out of place in urban churches filled with middle and upper class Catholics. In 1987, 2.5 million people belonged to some 70,000 Brazilian base communities.

Responding to the constant shortage of priests in Latin America, these groups began as bible study groups but often morphed into community organizing committees or social support systems. Although these base communities often associated with communism, one observer noted that base communities served as a “training ground for democratic politics” and claimed that these base communities contributed to the 1982 democratic shift in Brazil. In addition to base communities, the Catholic Church distrusted the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution’s Marxist elements. Base communities, whether or not they were Marxist, and the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution acquired a dangerous politicized reputation during the Cold War.

In addition to being associated with Marxism, these movements threatened the Church as a cohesive institution. Members of base communities read passages from Exodus, Isaiah, and the Gospels and made scripture relevant, which often encouraged social awareness. For example, some saw Exodus as a message of political and spiritual liberation through the God’s hands, and they felt a personal connection to the biblical passages. Base communities were part of a broader movement called concientización, where Latin Americans became more aware of their social and economic situations. As the best-known literacy advocate in Brazil, Paulo Freire used words like “oppression” in order to teach adults basic literacy skills. Using similar methods, base communities used scripture to encourage social awareness. The Vatican saw base communities’ scriptural hermeneutics as a threat to their ‘authentic’ interpretation of scripture.

Like base communities, priest and laity’s activities in Nicaragua threatened internal Church structure and embraced Marxism as an ideology. Not only did much of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua ignore the Vatican’s authority, but many Catholic clerics were deeply engrained in Marxist politics. In 1979, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) revolted against the Somoza government in Nicaragua. Liberation theology played an important role during the revolution and in the revolutionary government. Before the revolution, the Catholic hierarchy in Nicaragua criticized the Somoza regime, even advocating revolution. Two bishops said that they wanted a revolution rather than a compromise.

When the Sardinistas took control of the government in 1979, they employed some prominent Catholic priests within their ranks such as Ernesto Cardenal, Fernando Cardenal, and Miguel D’Escoto Brockmann. In particular, Fernando Cardenal claimed that he could be a Marxist without losing his Catholic faith. And his brother, Ernesto Cardenal, said “For us Christians, participation in this [Marxist] revolution has meant faith in Jesus Christ”; from the Vatican’s perspective, these priests challenged the authority of the Church and associated with Marxism, a violent, atheistic philosophy.

---

54 Berryman, 36-75.
"Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’"


Ratzinger reiterated an Augustinian argument that liberation theologians were “conforming to the things of this world” rather than focusing on the more pressing spiritual needs of their congregations.

In addition to this theological argument, Ratzinger, borrowing from Leo XIII’s encyclical “Rerum Novarum,” claimed that if governments or other authority forced people to give to the poor, good deeds had no virtue. Social and political reform was necessary, but true evil, according to Ratzinger, was in human hearts. Revolution and reform could not root out this sort of sin, Ratzinger stressed, and the Church must not forget her primary, God-given dominion over people’s souls.

Ratzinger said that confusing the Bible’s poor with Marx’s proletariat “pervert[ed] the Christian meaning of the poor” because Marx politicized the poor. Liberation theologians, according to Ratzinger, warped the meaning of the “Church of the People” to Church of the Proletariat. The proletariat, for Ratzinger, was a politicized class distinction of which God, who loves both the rich and poor, did not approve. Liberation theologians interpreted the Gospel so that the holy scripture was “a celebration of the people in their struggle.” This, according to Ratzinger, turned the Gospel’s message into a political treatise that replaced the true Jesus Christ with a political figure who represented the oppressed. This practice, Ratzinger claimed, was disingenuous and unorthodox. Liberation theologians, according to the Prefect, used Exodus passages, baptism, and Christ’s story for their political purposes. Specifically, he said that Exodus must not be “a liberation which is principally or exclusively political in nature.”

Ratzinger thought that liberation theologians biblical hermeneutics created a political message not present in the scripture. In order to accept Christ, Ratzinger maintained,

---

one's social and political positions did not have to change, though true conversion “should” influence political action.  

According to Ratzinger, liberation theologians sacrificed Catholicism for the sake of Marxist politics. Ratzinger accused liberation theologians of using Catholicism as a means to a political end, a Marxist revolution. Boff and others, in Ratzinger's opinion, borrowed too freely from Marxism. For Ratzinger, accepting pieces of Marxist analysis discredited liberation theology because adopting any Marxist analysis carried with it the ideological implications of Marxism, among which included atheism and “the denial of the human person, his liberty and rights.”[66] Therefore, Marxist elements in liberation theology negated “whatever was authentic in the generous initial commitment on behalf of the poor.”[67] Liberation theologians ignored the basic tenets of Christianity in order to build Marxist “projects of the revolution.”[68] Social justice, Ratzinger emphasized, was a “captive of [Marxist] ideologies which hide or pervert its meaning.”[69]

Most importantly, liberation theology represented “a challenge to the ‘sacramental and hierarchical structure’ of the Church, which was willed by the Lord Himself.”[70] The integrity of the Magisterium preoccupied Ratzinger. The author titled an entire section “The Voice of the Magisterium.”[71] The document does not allow for Church members, a base community member or liberation theologian, to act on their own. All Church members who help the poor “will do so in communion with their bishops and with the Church.”[72] For example, those who wish to take up the holy duty of working with the poor, urged Ratzinger, “will be able to recognize in the Magisterium a gift of Christ to His Church and will welcome its word and its directives with filial respect.”[73] This document portrayed liberation theologians as children who the Magisterium reprimanded. Ratzinger wanted to stop perceived irreverence and deviation among the liberation theologians that threatened the hierarchy’s power and teaching authority. Liberation theology, according to Ratzinger, was an attack on the Church as an institution.[74]

---

71 Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation,’” V.
The Rebuttal

Liberation theologians confronted the Vatican, and in 1985, Juan Luis Segundo, a prominent liberation theologian, published a systematic rebuttal of “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation.’” Segundo “believe[d] that the Magisterium of the Church cannot gain the respect it deserves when it loses its composure in so blatant a fashion.” Segundo felt that Cardinal Ratzinger’s document did not show that liberation theology was incompatible with Catholicism. The document was an embarrassment to the Catholic Church, and a misrepresentation of Catholic doctrine.

Segundo said that Ratzinger did not differentiate theologically between poverty and detachment. Poverty, according to Segundo, was inhumane, whereas detachment was what Jesus preached in the Gospels. Poverty “for the sake of the kingdom” did not include poverty that “results from injustice and oppression.” When the Bible said, “blessed are the poor,” the authors did not intend Christians to see poverty “as a marvelous quality” or as something Christians can ignore. Segundo thought that contemplating poverty, what Ratzinger’s document advocated, included class analysis, specifically Marxist analysis, of the root of unjust social structures. According to Segundo, Christians, especially those in Latin America, must recognize that they are complicit, if not actively involved, in a social system that killed millions of innocent people.

Segundo thought that the Cardinal invoked Marxism for political reasons. Segundo found it “difficult to determine what is political and what is epistemological in the conception of Marxism held by the document.” Other social theorists, Segundo contended, borrowed freely from Marxism, and the Church did not condemn these theories as atheist. Ratzinger, Segundo suggested, intentionally labeled liberation theologians as Marxist because it was politically expedient. According to Segundo, Church intellectuals held a Western view of Marxism and did not understand the dire situation in Latin America.

Segundo saw that in addition to fear of Marxism, Ratzinger thought that liberation theology threatened the Church hierarchy. “Certainly,” Segundo commented sarcastically, “it was not merely out of fear of communism that the Magisterium issued such harsh words.” While the world’s fixation on Marxism provided a particularly political problem for liberation theologians, part of the Church’s condemnation, Segundo claimed, derived from fear of losing control of the hierarchy in Nicaragua and Brazil. In

---

75 Juan Luis Segundo, *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 100.
76 Segundo, 100.
77 Segundo, 53-57.
78 Segundo, 58.
79 Segundo, 59-65.
80 Segundo, 100-104.
81 Note that from an United States perspective, both the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations saw liberation theology as a “political doctrine in the guise of a religious belief.” Lowy Pompan 29-30; Berryman 1-4.
82 Segundo, 9.
addition, Segundo thought that Ratzinger feared the shift in Church activity from a "small active minority" to "considerable popular mobilization within its own walls," which included base communities, liberation theologians, and other movements within the Catholic Church.  

The Victors?

In 1984, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, headed by Cardinal Ratzinger, called Leonardo Boff to Rome. The Franciscan met with Cardinal Ratzinger and others to discuss liberation theology. Ratzinger said that liberation theologians, "use Marxist analysis to interpret not only history and the life of society but the Bible and the Christian message." When reporter asked Cardinal Ratzinger about liberation theologians use of the Bible, he simply said,

I cannot deduce from the Gospel of Mark or the letters to the Galatians what I should do in South America. It is simply nonsense. Two levels get mixed up in each other, one Christian and the other socio-ethical. And this cannot be.

Ratzinger and liberation theologians disagreed over hermeneutics; liberation theologians believed the scripture possessed a political message. In Ratzinger's eyes, Marxism hijacked Catholicism and threatened to break the integrity of Church doctrine, which according to the Cardinal, had "no fractures" or "break in continuity.

Despite Ratzinger's animosity, liberation theologians continued their work. Boff noted that the Vatican's perspective was "too Western" and failed to understand the social conditions in Latin America. The Vatican censored Boff, and Boff later left the priesthood to continue his work.

Throughout the 1980s, the Vatican sought to control the Latin American hierarchy. The 1985 Synod of Bishops presented another venue for Ratzinger to guard against unorthodoxy. During the conference, Ratzinger said that many of Vatican II's reforms were "unfavorable" and he feared that "progressives" usurped the power of the Church hierarchy. One reporter noted that liberal bishops and priests entered the meeting with heads down and mouths shut. Throughout the meetings, Ratzinger urged all of the bishops to respect the Magisterium's authority. But the hierarchy in Latin America failed to cooperate. When the Vatican asked Peruvian bishops to denounce Gustavo Gutiérrez's writings on liberation theology, the bishops refused. During the

---

early 1980s, 48 of 52 Peruvian bishops wanted to confront Cardinal Ratzinger about liberation theology.\textsuperscript{90}

Initially Ratzinger’s efforts did little to stifle liberation theology, and as a response, the Vatican appointed conservative bishops to Latin America and closed several progressive seminaries in Brazil. Yet it seemed as though the liberation theologians’ work was irreversible.\textsuperscript{91} Rome only “limit[ed] the impact of liberation theology” because the foundation of liberation theology, the poor masses in Latin American, remained.\textsuperscript{92}

In another attempt to stem liberation theology, Ratzinger’s office issued the “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation” in 1986. The Congregation aimed this document at liberation theologians who were “not always in conformity with the truth.”\textsuperscript{93} Ratzinger stressed that the core of Christianity was heavenly salvation through Jesus Christ. The Cardinal, with the pope’s blessing, urged all people to focus on the “life-giving fruits through the sacraments,” which the Church strictly controlled.\textsuperscript{94} After the 1986 publication, a member of Ratzinger’s staff said that the goal of the document was to prevent Christianity from becoming “a primarily political message.”\textsuperscript{95} In a 1987 encyclical, Pope John Paul II approved of Ratzinger’s efforts and said the “Church’s Magisterium” justly addressed the liberation theologians’ faults.\textsuperscript{96}

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, numerous factors, including Vatican action, contributed to liberation theory’s dwindling influence. With the end of much political strife in Latin America and the fall of the USSR, liberation theology declined in popularity. The appointment of conservative bishops, the growth of Protestantism, and, perhaps most importantly, most liberation theologians desire to remain in the Church, influenced liberation theory’s decline.\textsuperscript{97}

A Holy Hierarchy

But liberation theology was far from dead. The Vatican, with Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, at its head, still expressed anxiety. Upon the 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} CELAM (Council of Latin American Bishops) conference, Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo stressed that Benedict does not approve of “‘re-readings’ of the Gospel,” referring to liberation theologians’ biblical hermeneutics.\textsuperscript{98} More

\textsuperscript{91} Lowy and Pompan, 40-41.
\textsuperscript{92} Berryman, 203.
\textsuperscript{96} John Paul II, “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,” VII, 46.
specifically, the Church condemned "the secular interpretation of the Kingdom that would derive from a socio-political structural change and the replacement of the 'institutional' or 'official' Church with the 'Church of the people.'" For Trujillo, the Catholic Church was primarily an institution, and liberation theologians threatened the institutional integrity of the Church.

In 2007, reporters interviewed Pope Benedict XVI while on his way to Brazil, and Benedict expressed grave concern for the Church as an institution. In 2002, Brazilians elected Luís Inácio "Lula" da Silva; Leonardo Boff and Frei Betto, a progressive friar and advocate for the poor, were two of the left-leaning leader's advisors. Conscious of these recent developments, Benedict noted that the "The Church as such is not involved in politics- we respect secularism." One reporter asked Benedict about liberation theology, and the pope said that liberation theologians contorted the Church's role in the world. Benedict replied, "we tried [as Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith] to rid ourselves of false millenarianisms and of an erroneous combination of Church and politics." In 2009, Benedict reappointed four bishops who oppose Vatican II and illustrated a reoccurring theme. Media outlets, Catholics, and other observers expressed grave concern because one former priest, Richard Williamson, denies the validity of the Holocaust. The former bishops' stance created a public relations nightmare for the Vatican. Pope Benedict XVI wanted to welcome these priests back into the Catholic Church precisely because they oppose Vatican II reforms that increased the role of the laity and stressed the importance of the Church as a people rather than an institution.

In 1985, Segundo observed that the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith displayed a "negative evaluation of Vatican II" and an inability to "recognize our [Latin American] reality." In 2009, one leftist priest noted, "He [Benedict XVI] doesn't see the real world. He only sees the Vatican world." For Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, liberation theology, in both theology and practice, threatened the power of the Magisterium and the Church as an institution, and for Benedict XVI, the Church as an institution, rather than as a people, remains his most closely guarded jewel.
I Primary Sources


John Paul II. “General Audience: 21 February 1979.”


---. “Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation.”


**II Secondary Sources**


Lowy, Michael, and Claudia Pompan. “Marxism and Christianity in Latin America


