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Boff and Betto on Castro

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 18, 2006 All Things Catholic

Speaking of liberation theology, the big news in Latin America in recent days has been the health of Fidel Castro. For Catholics, it will hardly be a surprise that Leonardo Boff and Frei Betto -- both progressive Brazilians, the one a former Franciscan and the other a Dominican -- have rallied to Castro's side.

As ironic as it may seem, the world's most enduring Communist icon has long has what amount to "court theologians" in Betto and Boff. Castro once presented them a poster from Cuba's revolution, with the inscription: "If I ever recover the faith of my infancy, it will be the merit of you two."

Betto travelled to Havana after news of Castro's illness broke, and met with his brother Raoul. Speaking with *Corriere della Sera* Aug. 15, Betto said of Castro: "Certainly in recent years, his openness to religion has increased. Whether he's undergone a personal conversion, frankly, I couldn't say."

Boff circulated an essay in mid-August, saying of Castro: "He is larger than the Island."

"His Marxism is more ethical than political: how to do justice to the poor?" Boff wrote. "He has read a mountain of books, all of them with notes ? I once told him, 'If Cardinal Ratzinger understood half of what you understand of the theology of Liberation, my personal destiny and the future of this theology would be very different.'"

Boff said he once planned to write a book about his conversations with Castro in Cuba, which often began at dinner and stretched until 6:00 am, but that four volumes of notes were robbed from his car in Rio de Janeiro.

In *Corriere della Sera*, Boff said in typically provocative fashion that Castro got on well with John Paul II, in part because they were both "authoritarian personalities ?dictators, if you like."

Neither Betto nor Boff said much about the rocky relationship between Castro and the Cuban church. (In a gesture of reconciliation, the Cuban church has organized prayer vigils for Castro's health).

Boff said only: "It obviously would be a scandal if Fidel openly said he's a believer, but he's never proclaimed himself an atheist. In my opinion, he's not."

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