

Pope to name liberation theology ally to key Vatican post, report says

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 29, 2006

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Pope Benedict XVI is set to name a Brazilian cardinal known as a longtime supporter of the liberation theology movement to a senior Vatican post, according to an Italian news report today.

Writing in the Italian daily *La Stampa*, veteran Vatican writer Marco Tosatti reported that Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, 72, of São Paulo, Brazil, will become the new prefect of the Congregation for Clergy, replacing Cardinal Darío Castrillón Hoyos, a 77-year-old Colombian.

If confirmed, the report would mean that Benedict has tapped a theological moderate and a man long identified as one of liberation theology's friends in the Latin American hierarchy. Hummes is a close personal friend and longtime supporter of Brazil's leftist president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

The irony would not be lost on the Latin American church, where then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, while still Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was known as the author of a 1984 Vatican document highly critical of liberation theology — judged to be excessively politicized, and to shade off at times into Marxist-inspired terrorism.

Since Castrillón is also President of the Ecclesia Dei Commission, which is responsible for relations with Catholic traditionalists attached to the pre-Vatican II Mass, the nomination of Hummes could mean that a cardinal not known to be as friendly as Castrillón to the traditionalists will now be handling their affairs. What implications that might have for a document rumored to be forthcoming on wider use of the pre-Vatican II Mass remains to be seen.

The appointment would also remedy what has long been perceived as a slight to the Brazilian church, the largest Catholic community in the world at 144 million. At present, no Brazilian occupies a senior Vatican position.

The Vatican has had no immediate comment on the *La Stampa* report.

If Hummes does land a senior Vatican position, the nomination would be taken in church circles as confirmation of two points about this pontificate: First, that Benedict XVI wants to govern from the center rather than from an ideologically driven position; and second, as a sign of respect for the developing world. The latter point is reinforced by Benedict's recent appointment of Cardinal Ivan Dias of Bombay as Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

Hummes is a member of the Franciscan order, like the legendary Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns whom he replaced in Sao Paolo. In a typical Franciscan touch, Hummes' episcopal motto is "We Are All Brothers".

Like Arns, Hummes was born in southern Brazil from German immigrant parents. As a young bishop, he had a reputation as a progressive, opposing Brazil's military regime and backing workers strikes. Hummes also Lula, now Brazil's president, to make political speeches during Masses.

Under John Paul II, Hummes moved to the center, adopting a more traditional theological stance and distancing himself from direct political action. In July 2000, when a Brazilian priest suggested that condoms could be justified to fight AIDS, Hummes threatened disciplinary action. Hummes is well-respected in Rome, and was invited to preach the 2002 Lenten Retreat for the papal household.

Yet he defends the *Movimento dos Sem Terra* (landless movement), arguing that people should be encouraged to organize themselves to defend their rights. He reminds government leaders that the Church defends private property, but "with social responsibility."

Frei Betto, the famous Brazilian Dominican and liberation theologian, told NCR in 2002 that Hummes would be a "great pope." His lone flaw, according to Betto: "He works too much."

At last year's Synod on the Eucharist, took up the issue of the impact of the Protestant "sects" in the developing world, noting that 83 percent of Brazilians called themselves Catholic in 1991, while today the number is 67 percent. Roughly one percent of Brazilian Catholics a year, Hummes said, are leaving the Catholic church, many to enter charismatic and Pentecostal groups.

"How long will Latin America be a Catholic continent?" Hummes asked.

In response, he called for a new level of missionary energy in the Catholic church, fueled by deep Eucharistic faith.

In a March 2005 Rome conference on the 40th anniversary of *Gaudium et Spes*, Hummes outlined a vision of the church based on that document's inspiration that many took as a statement of Hummes' own theological platform.

Hummes noted that the document expressed an optimistic reading of the world, and affirmed "the autonomy of earthly affairs." Hummes called that recognition "a great step of the Council, and one that synthesized it with modernity."

Hummes praised *Gaudium et Spes* for embracing the human rights tradition of modernity, including "liberty/autonomy, equality, fraternity, dignity and the inviolable authority of the intimacy of the moral conscience."

Hummes then turned to the call of *Gaudium et Spes* for the church to be "inserted in the world."

"*Gaudium et Spes*, inspired by all the reflection of the council, emphasizes that the church is at the service of the human person and all human beings "and does not seek to dominate humanity. In this, it follows the example of Christ, who presented himself as a servant," Hummes said.

That observation led Hummes to reflect on the church's engagement with other social forces.

"In this context, the church supports and favors every effort today to seek the full development of the personality of all human beings, and to promote their fundamental rights, their dignity and liberty," he said.

Yet Hummes emphasized that passion for social justice does not have to come at the expense of Christian identity. Concern for development, he said, must not neglect efforts "to help people to encounter the full truth

about human beings and their vocation in this world, meaning Jesus Christ, in whom this full truth is met.

Hummes returned repeatedly to the idea of the church as servant.

A servant church must have as its priority solidarity with the poor, he said. The faith must express itself in charity and in solidarity, which is the civil form of charity, Hummes said.

Today more than ever, the church faces this challenge. In fact, effective solidarity with the poor, both individual persons and entire nations, is indispensable for the construction of peace. Solidarity corrects injustices, reestablishes the fundamental rights of persons and of nations, overcomes poverty and even resists the revolt that injustice provokes, eliminating the violence that is born with revolt and constructing peace.

Hummes then asked a rhetorical question arising from these reflections.

Does not today's terrorism, Hummes asked, have as one of its ingredients a revolt against an imposed poverty, experienced as practically irreversible in the short and medium term?

Hummes emphasized that in its social engagement, the church does not seek to impose solutions but to engage in dialogue.

The church, inserted and active in human society and in history, does not exist in order to exercise political power or to govern the society, he said, but to organize and promote the common good.

The church must constantly promote dialogue, Hummes said. Perhaps it is among the most important methods today for positive and constructive relations with society.

Hummes said this must be a dialogue with courage -- open, frank, sensible and humble. A dialogue with the contemporary person, with the human race, science, the advances in biotechnology, with philosophy and the cultures, with politics and economics, with everything that has to do with social justice, with human rights, and with solidarity with the poor.

A dialogue with the religions, Hummes added. A constant dialogue, systematic, with professionalism, constructive. A dialogue that knows how to listen, to debate, to discern and to assimilate whatever is good and true, just and consistent with human dignity, proposed by the interlocutor. A dialogue that at the same time knows how to proclaim the truth of which the church is the depository, and to which it must remain permanently faithful. However, it must always remain a dialogue, and never an imposition of the church's own convictions and methods. Propose, not impose. To serve, and not to dominate.

A church of dialogue in the contemporary world? a church, taking on the mission of Jesus, which is in the world not to judge humanity, but to love it and to save it.

Tosatti reported that Hummes' nomination would be announced by the Vatican early this week, perhaps on Tuesday, Oct. 31, in tandem with other curial appointments.

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