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Pope Francis isn't a liberationist, but he could be

Mario T. García | Jul. 29, 2013 NCR Today

In his visit to Brazil, Pope Francis sounded like a proponent of liberation theology, even if he didn't call it such. Like liberationists, the pope called attention to the church's priority to work with the poor and dispossessed that include especially the elderly, who in Third World countries such as Brazil often live with little or no safety net as they age, and the young, who, lacking education and employment opportunities, begin to despair and turn to drugs and crime.

Of course, the church has always spoken of its mission among the poor and dispossessed, but the power of liberation theology when it surfaced in Latin America in the late 1960s as a response to the Second Vatican Council's call for the church to address the issues of the contemporary world went further and called for the church to assist in the empowerment of the poor and oppressed. It called on the church in Latin America to not only reverse its long partnership with the rich and powerful, including dictators, but to openly oppose such inequalities of wealth and concentration of power.

It reminded the church of its roots. Jesus was born a poor man, and he ministered to the poor and oppressed. This is the origins of the church, and the attraction of liberation theology, as theologian Fr. Virgilio Elizondo has written, is that it was new and innovative because it was old and traditional. It was new only in the sense that, as noted, it called for the church to return to the old, to its roots as a sanctuary for those on the margins of society.

So is Pope Francis a liberationist? As Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Argentina, he expressed his concerns about the poor but was not openly critical of the military junta that tortured and killed thousands. Perhaps now as pope and thinking of what legacy he might leave, he might be beginning to combine his earlier voice for the poor with a liberationist stress on calling attention to governments that are not adequately addressing the needs of those who live in the margins of society.

I don't believe that one can yet call Pope Francis a liberationist, but perhaps he, in his own way, is moving to resuscitate liberation theology as a central movement in the church as opposed to the trashing it received from his two previous predecessors. Let's hope so, if the church is to be seen as relevant in the modern world to those Catholics in countries such as Brazil, who are turning to other religious alternatives because they don't believe that the Catholic church feels their pain.

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