

## Key Vatican bishop signals detente on disputed theology

Joshua J. McElwee | Sep. 5, 2013 NCR Today

One of the Vatican's traditionally most powerful bishops may be signaling a relaxation in a half century of tensions between the church's hierarchy and theologians around the world -- on one issue, at least.

Over a period of decades, Catholic prelates in Rome and in many nations have sharply critiqued scores of theologians on a range of issues, from their writings on the church's sexual teachings to how they understand the nature of the person or mission of Jesus Christ.

Some of the theologians, like Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley, have received [official critiques](#) [1] from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican congregation responsible for enforcing church doctrine. Others, like St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, have received critiques from their [national bishops' conferences](#) [2].

But now Archbishop Gerhard Müller, the German prelate who leads the Vatican doctrinal congregation, seems to be signaling that at least one common point of contention between the Vatican and theologians is no longer so much a point of contention.

The point in question is liberation theology, a strain of theology first named in the 1970s by Peruvian Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez and marked by its concern for liberation of the world's people from unjust economic or social conditions.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, as head of Müller's office from 1981-2005 before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, issued official critiques of liberation theology in 1984 and 1986. While Gutiérrez was never officially sanctioned by Ratzinger during his time at the CDF, other theologians who followed the Peruvian's strain of thought, like Brazilian Leonardo Boff and Sri Lankan Tissa Balasuriya, were.

According to the Italian journalist Sandro Magister, Müller is now [planning to appear](#) [3] with Gutiérrez in northern Italy on Sunday where the two will officially present a book they have co-authored together.

The book, named *On the side of the poor: Liberation theology, theology of the church*, is a new Italian edition of a book the two co-authored in German in 2004.

"The ecclesial and theological movement of Latin America, known as 'liberation theology' and which after Vatican II found a worldwide echo, is to be numbered, in my judgment, among the most significant currents of Catholic theology of the 20th century," Müller states among the book's first pages, according to a preview provided by Magister Thursday.

Contrast that with Ratzinger's assertion in a [1984 Vatican "instruction"](#) [4] that liberation theologians "accept a series of positions which are incompatible with the Christian vision of humanity."

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