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Gustavo Gutiérrez, Peruvian priest and ‘father of liberation theology’, dies at 96

Monday 28 October 2024, by [JONES Sam](#) (Date first published: 23 October 2024).

Dominican friar hailed as ‘prophet of the poor’ for belief that the church had political duty to end poverty

Gustavo Gutiérrez, the influential Peruvian priest known as “the father of liberation theology” and hailed as a “prophet of the poor”, has died in Lima at the age of 96.

Gutiérrez, a theologian and Dominican friar, was a celebrated – and sometimes controversial – proponent of the idea that [the church needed to side with the poor](#) and to fight to improve their lot.

Liberation theology, which emerged in the turbulent Latin America of the 1960s and 1970s, argued that the church had a duty to push for fundamental political and structural changes that would end poverty.

“Only authentic solidarity with the poor and a real protest against the poverty of our time can provide the concrete, vital context necessary for a theological discussion of poverty,” Gutiérrez wrote in his landmark 1971 book *A Theology of Liberation*. But the movement also led some in the church to move well beyond their traditional, pastoral roles.

Priests inspired by liberation theology took an active part in the 1979 Sandinista revolution against Anastasio Somoza’s rightwing dictatorship in Nicaragua. The philosophy also influenced leftist rebels in Mexico and [Colombia](#), where one of the main guerrilla factions was led for nearly 30 years by a defrocked Spanish priest, Manuel Pérez.

Gutiérrez’s death was announced by the Dominican Province of St John the Baptist of Peru, which said in a statement that “our beloved brother went to Our Father’s house” on Tuesday, adding that the priest’s body would be laid out at the Santo Domingo convent in Lima.

The Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas, which Gutiérrez established in 1974, paid tribute to its founder, saying: “His writings and work on behalf of the poor and the most forgotten in society will continue to light the church’s way as it searches for a fairer and more brotherly world.”

In a post on X, Austen Ivereigh, a Catholic journalist and biographer of Pope Francis, [wrote](#): “RIP Fr Gustavo Gutiérrez, Peruvian shanty town priest and later Dominican friar, prophet of the poor, whose *Theology of Liberation* in 1971 reshaped contemporary theology.”

Although Gutiérrez’s work has been described as “a pioneering and prophetic approach which ... [placed] the exploited and the economically downtrodden at the centre of a programme to redeem God’s people from bondage”, it was not universally admired by his fellow priests.

Its conclusions – not least its contention that the theology of the time could learn from a “direct and

fruitful confrontation with Marxism” - did not endear its author to some in Rome.

While the Vatican never condemned either Gutiérrez or his works, there were rumours that he was being investigated by Pope John Paul II's head of doctrine and discipline - a German cardinal named Joseph Ratzinger who would go on to be elected Pope Benedict in 2005.

Such differences, however, were forgotten by Benedict's successor, Francis. Although Francis - known then as Jorge Mario Bergoglio - had been [opposed to liberation theology](#) while head of the Jesuits in Argentina in the 1970s, Gutiérrez was welcomed as a [key speaker at a Vatican event](#) in 2015.

And, in a [birthday greeting to Gutiérrez](#) in 2018, Francis said he thanked God for the Peruvian priest's "theological service and ... preferential love for the poor and discarded in society". The pope added: "Thank you for your efforts and for your way of challenging the conscience of each person, so that no one can be indifferent faced with the drama of poverty and exclusion."

Sam Jones

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