

Vatican criticism tries to end liberation theology

UPDATED

WASHINGTON - In a sharply worded letter to his religious superior, Jesuit Father Jon Sobrino said that a Vatican document criticizing his work is an effort "to put an end to the theology of liberation."

Father Sobrino defended his theology and said that there is an a priori attitude among many Vatican officials and Latin American bishops against him and other liberation theologians.

The letter was sent to Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, superior general of the Society of Jesus, after Father Kolvenbach had sent Father Sobrino a notification by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith strongly criticizing theological aspects of two of Father Sobrino's books.

The notification was dated Nov. 26 and made public at the Vatican March 14. Father Sobrino wrote the letter in early December. His letter was posted March 13 on the Web site Atrio which posts documents on Catholicism and other religions. Jesuit sources said the letter was authentic.

In the letter, Father Sobrino said that the Vatican document misrepresents his theology.

"I do not feel represented in any way by the overall judgment of this notification," he said.

For more than 30 years liberation theologians have been under constant attack by high-ranking church leaders, he said.

“There is here, to a good measure, ignorance, prejudice and an obsession to put an end to the theology of liberation,” he said.

Specifically named as an influential critic is Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, who headed the doctrinal congregation before being elected pope.

Father Sobrino criticized a 1984 article on liberation theology by Cardinal Ratzinger that appeared in several Italian Catholic publications. The letter cited sections of Cardinal Ratzinger’s article, followed by commentary by Father Sobrino. This style is similar to that used by the doctrinal congregation in criticizing works.

“I believe that Cardinal Ratzinger, in 1984, did not understand the theology of liberation in its totality,” he said.

Liberation theology originated in Latin American in the 1960s and 1970s. It finds in Scripture the principles and inspiration for working to free people from unjust social patterns and structures. Its starting point often is the concrete situation of Latin America’s predominantly poor people and how they understand the Scriptures as relating to them in their struggles for freedom from sin and from unjust social structures.

This bottom-up approach, starting with a “church of the poor” and its understanding of faith and the role of Christ, was among the Vatican criticisms of Father Sobrino.

The notification praised the concern for the poor, but said that “the ‘church of the poor’ assumes the fundamental position which properly belongs to the faith of the church. It is only in this ecclesial faith that all other theological foundations find their correct epistemological setting.”

Father Sobrino, in his letter, discussed “the poor as the setting for developing theology.”

“It is a question of theological epistemology demanded, or at least suggested, by Scripture. Personally, I have no doubt that from the perspective of the poor you have a better view of reality and better understand the revelation of God,” said Father Sobrino.