

Vatican criticizes Jesuit liberation theologian

VATICAN CITY - The Vatican strongly criticized the work of Jesuit Father Jon Sobrino, a leading proponent of liberation theology, saying some of his writings relating to the divinity of Christ were “not in conformity with the doctrine of the church.”

In publishing a detailed notification March 14, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said it wanted to warn pastors and ordinary Catholics of the “erroneous or dangerous propositions” in Father Sobrino’s work.

The notification did not, however, impose any disciplinary measures on Father Sobrino, such as limiting his right to teach or publish as a Catholic theologian. Father Sobrino, 69, was born in Spain and has taught for many years at the Jesuit-run Central American University in El Salvador.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said that while the Vatican has not imposed sanctions on Father Sobrino “this does not mean other authorities, for example a bishop, cannot decide that in light of this notification Father Sobrino cannot teach or give conferences” in a specific diocese or institution.

Archbishop Fernando Saenz Lacalle of San Salvador, where Father Sobrino resides, told reporters March 11 that Father Sobrino would not be able to teach theology unless he revised his positions in light of the Vatican critique.

The Vatican notification came after six years of study by the doctrinal congregation, which focused on Father Sobrino’s widely read books, “Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View” and “Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims.”

In 2004, Father Sobrino was sent a list of Vatican objections to his works; he responded in 2005 in a way that indicated modification of his thought, but which the Vatican still deemed unsatisfactory.

In October 2006 Pope Benedict XVI approved the notification in an audience with

U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada, prefect of the doctrinal congregation. It was the first public declaration against a theologian's work under Pope Benedict, who headed the doctrinal congregation until his election as pope in 2005.

The doctrinal congregation said its objections fell into six categories:

- Father Sobrino's "methodological presupposition," it said, identifies the ecclesial foundation of Christology with "the church of the poor" instead of the apostolic faith as transmitted through the church for generations.
- It said Father Sobrino's proposal that the divinity of Christ is found in the New Testament only "in seed" and was formulated dogmatically after later reflection, although not denying the divinity of Jesus, fails to affirm it with "sufficient clarity."
- Because of the way Father Sobrino treats the divine and human natures of Christ, "the unity of the person of Jesus is not clear," it said.
- Father Sobrino distinguishes between Jesus as mediator and the kingdom of God in a way that obscures the universal and absolute nature of Christ's salvation, it said.
- By emphasizing Christ's humanity, the congregation said, Father Sobrino downplays Christ's awareness of his own divinity and the divine plan of salvation.
- In some of Father Sobrino's texts, it said, he appears to presume that Jesus did not attribute a salvific value to his own death, but only saw it as having exemplary value for others.

In an accompanying explanatory note, the doctrinal congregation said its issues were not with Father Sobrino's concern for the poor but with his Christological conclusions.

"Father Sobrino manifests a preoccupation for the poor and the oppressed, particularly in Latin America. This preoccupation certainly is shared by the whole church," it said.

But the church cannot express its preferential option for the poor through "reductive sociological and ideological categories," it said.

Father Jose de Vera, a spokesman for the Jesuits in Rome, said the order naturally accepted the congregation's notification, but would make no formal statement on it. Whether there is any action taken by the Jesuit order will depend on Father Sobrino's local superior, he said.

"Father Sobrino is ready to obey his superiors, as he has always done," Father de Vera said.

The Jesuit spokesman pointed out, however, that the notification carried no penalties or sanctions, and was a theological critique rather than an outright condemnation.

"Father Sobrino is not a rebel. He does not have heretical opinions. His faith is the faith of the Catholic Church - he says that. The only thing is that he is presenting it in a different way," Father de Vera said.

He said the Jesuit superior general, Father Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, had presented his views on Father Sobrino's works to the doctrinal congregation.