

Gustavo Gutierrez, champion of Christian liberation theology, dies at 96 in Lima

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Peruvian Christian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez focused on supporting the poor and exploited [File: Alessandra Tarantino/AP]

An advocate for the world's 'poor and exploited', Gutierrez promoted ideals that revolutionised

the Latin American church.

Lima, October 24 (RHC)-- Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez, regarded as the father of Latin American liberation theology, has died aged 96. He passed away on Tuesday night in Lima, said the Dominican Order of Peru, without giving a cause.

Gutierrez was an eminent Catholic theologian and philosopher, whose 1971 book – titled A Theology of Liberation – deeply influenced church doctrine and practice in Latin America.

It holds that Christian salvation goes beyond spiritual matters, also demanding that people be freed from material or political oppression. He famously wrote: “The future of history belongs to the poor and exploited.”

Archbishop Carlos Castillo, Lima's cardinal-designate, remembered Gutierrez, who in his younger years served as a local parish priest in Lima, as a “a faithful theologian priest who never thought about money, or luxuries, or anything that seemed to make him superior.”

“Small as he was, he knew how to announce the Gospel to us with strength and courage in his smallness,” said Castillo.

Gutierrez's thinking attracted many who were outraged by the inequality and dictatorships in several Latin American countries in the 1960s and 1970s. He inspired figures like Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated in 1980 after taking a stand against rights abuses in his country's civil conflict.

Initially, the Vatican harshly denounced liberation theology, claiming it held Marxist undercurrents, and spent decades disciplining some of its advocates.

Gutierrez, who himself was never disciplined, told reporters in 2015 that liberation theology as a whole was never condemned, but he acknowledged that the Holy See had engaged in “very critical dialogue” with its proponents and that there were “difficult moments.”

The arrival of the first Latin American pope, Pope Francis, focused the Vatican's attention on social justice and the poor and led to something of a rehabilitation of liberation theology.

When Gutierrez turned 90 in 2018, Pope Francis wrote him a letter thanking him for his contributions to “the Church and to humanity, through your theological service and your preferential love for the poor and the discarded of society.”

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