



Liberal an ans

By Bert Brookes

ROMAN CATHOLIC priests in Central and South America are living dangerously.

Declining to bind themselves merely to the spiritual uplift of their flocks, they have progressively, and belligerently, taken up the cause of the down-trodden poor. They are supporting, and sometimes leading, the struggle for liberation from appalling living conditions and from the cruelty and oppression of tyrannical dictatorships.

Driven to desperation by their inability to improve, by persuasion and pleading, the sub-human condition of their peoples, many are throwing in their lot with revolutionary groups — usually Marxist — and openly opposing the governments in power.

In Latin America today, such action invites reprisal and many priests have paid with long jail sentences, and even death.

The growing incursion by men of the church into the front line of political action is inspired by the tenets of "Liberation Theology", a movement which has taken firm root in Latin America — especially in Brazil, Chile and Nicaragua — and in the Philippines. It seems to have reached an advanced stage in Nicaragua where four priests, having been active in the overthrow of the dictator Somoza, are now holding office in the Marxist Santanista government.

But the Pope is not amused.

To John Paul II — left — whilst the living conditions of his Third World congregation are accepted as a matter of legitimate concern to the Catholic clergy, the purity of the Catholic faith must not be compromised. The involvement of priests in the "class struggle", for example, has to be avoided at all costs. And above all, the embracing by priests of fundamentally atheist concepts such as Marxism is flirting with the Devil himself.

tion Theology: swer to prayers

TO ITS CRITICS, the role of the Church in social affairs has often seemed vague and equivocal. Whenever it has not been openly hostile to the interests of the common people, the Church has frequently appeared detached and complacent to the harsh realities of life.

- Where there has been cruelty, tyranny and inhumanity, the Church commonly counsels patience, passivity and submission to the forces that oppress.

- Where there has been injustice and enslavement, the Church has offered platitudes about forbearance, goodwill and the sanctity of private property.

accepted it in the first place. The Church's reluctance to embroil itself in matters of detailed politics is understandable; no one expects the Church to mount its soap box over nationalisation or privatisation, the levels of taxation or the scope of the Welfare State.

Its congregations would be split down the middle if it did.

But should not the voice of the Church ring out loud and clear when, on an immense scale, the basic dignities of mankind are violated? Should not the Church stand up and be counted when, through a widespread denial of natural justice, human beings are forced to live in

enslave the common people that have, for so long, been swamped by the comfortless creed of Catholic Rome.

In the eyes of Father Boff and his sympathisers – among whom are many bishops, nuns and lay church-workers – liberation theology means the end of charity and patronising the poor and the start of organising them for action. They look to Marxism, not because of any deep ideological affection for it but because, unlike the Pope's theology, Marxism offers a light at the end of the tunnel.

Boff knows – and if he did not, the Polish Pope would have enlightened him – that the jackboots of Marxism are, in the end, just as likely to trample on the rights of the individual as those of the tyrants he abhors.

But what is the alternative? The only effective answer to total repression is surely total revolution? Yet there is evidence that a pendulum-swing from dictatorship by right wing land owning elites to that of Marxist proletariats does not have universal acclaim.

The bishop of a large community in Brazil recently set out the principal aims of the "grass roots church" as "land reform, better income distribution and free elections." The clergy, according to that bishop, rejected communism, but they also rejected capitalism. Some, he said, talk of a third way – a sort of idealistic socialism.

That bishop is feeling his way in the right general direction, and we must hope that he is aware that, of his three principal aims, the first – land reform – is the key to all the others.

- Without land reform, no improvement in income distribution (which presumably means the removal of the colossal difference between the incomes of rich and poor) can be meaningful and long-lasting.

- Without land reform, no elections, however politically free, can provide governments capable of improving, to any significant extent, the social conditions of the masses.

But it must be the right kind of land reform; a kind that will not only provide relief for the poverty-stricken

Father Boff: man of action

Father Leonardo Boff, 46-year-old Brazilian professor and Franciscan friar, is emerging as a leading exponent of liberation theology. With the publication of his book, *Church, Charisma and Power*, he has incurred the strong displeasure of the Vatican.

Last September, he flew to Rome to face interrogation by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Cardinal's task was to determine whether Boff's activities as a liberation theologian had involved him in "doctrinal error".

Boff emerged from the questioning in confident mood, but no official word about the exchanges has been issued. It is certain, however, that he faced a "third degree" about his leanings towards Marxism which the Pope condemns as an atheist doctrine, liable to undermine and poison the

teaching of the church.

In addition, Boff's writings are seen by the Vatican as subversive and directly questioning the Pope's authority as head of the Roman Catholic Church.

Boff's view is that the authorities in Rome are out of touch with the realities of life in Latin America. He believes that the local clergy must concern itself directly with the problems of the poor, especially where their basic human rights are threatened, and give active support to any movement – even if Marxist-inspired – which opposes evil, repressive regimes.

In his own country, Brazil, during the ten years 1968-78, over 120 bishops, priests and nuns were thrown into jail for opposing the government over its treatment of the poor, especially in connection with disputes over land rights.

conditions that are a blot on the face of civilisation?

TO THE NEW generation of involved priests, among whom Father Leonardo Boff of Brazil is emerging as a leading spokesman, a faith that offers only sympathy to those who desperately need its active and physical support, stands to be condemned as a humbug. Certainly, the Theology of Liberation has finally brought to the surface that yearning for earthly social justice and that resentment against the forces that

The Church claims to seek revolution – but only of the spirit.

Its conviction is, apparently, that the world will not change until there is a spiritual miracle in the minds of men. Until that day dawns, the unfortunate underdog must accept his lot with stoicism and understanding.

In short, the pathetic victims of social and economic injustice must accept the status quo in this world and hope for salvation in the next.

The wonder is not that so many priests, knee-deep in the suffering of their flocks, are rebelling against this desolate teaching but that they ever

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landless labourer but one that will recognise the right of the whole population to share in the bounty of their country's natural resources.

The take over of all land by the State – with all forms of capital, as well, if Marxism wins the reins of power – would not be the right kind. It would boot out the private landowner but it would also strangle personal freedom, personal choice and personal enterprise. And the acceptance of absolute rule by a small communist clique, who would dictate the use of all land and capital, regulate all wages and fix all prices, would be a heavy penalty to pay for flinging off the yoke of the landlords.

Nor is the general distribution of land among the population a feasible alternative. While the allotment of farming land to peasants might bring a new era to the countryside, there is no equivalent benefaction for the tattered dweller of the shanty town. In

this late twentieth century, with growing cities and advancing technology, the fragmentation of land is a non-starter.

THE ONLY WAY to obtain the best of all worlds – and the tragic poor of the Third World surely deserve it most – is to adopt a system of land reform that does *not* involve a physical re-distribution, will *not* restrict the freedom of the individual, will *not* involve the State in usurping the daily decisions of the ordinary people and will *not* throttle the natural enterprise of man.

The key is to nationalise, not the land but its *economic rent*; to take into the public treasury the value that is acquired by land whenever it will yield to the possessor a larger return than would be due to any labour and capital employed on it; the value that flows from increasing population and social and technological progress.

Such a measure, by making the holding of land unprofitable to anyone but the user, would destroy the iron hold that, in the Third World, the land-owning upper classes exert over the landless millions. No one would be able to live in affluence and luxury merely by owning land. No land would be the playground of the rich while the poor starved for want of a modest cornfield.

The theologians of liberation, before they cross the Marxist Rubicon, owe it to their communities to explore the merits of this most practicable method of land reform, a method which, in its supreme equity, surely accords with the principles of Christianity and social justice on which their philosophy is based.

Such a reform, in the tormented countries of the Third World, would give new hope to the millions for whom life at present is nothing but an endless struggle to stay alive.

*Reported in BBC's International Assignment programme, 14 Sept. '84.

Defiant priests say: we fight for justice

POPE John Paul II's guidance to Roman Catholic priests on their attitude to liberation theology brings to mind an instruction by an earlier Pope – Leo XIII – who, in 1891, issued an Encyclical Letter on the subject of *The Condition of Labour*. In this, the Pope sought to instruct the clergy on the "relative rights and mutual duties of the wealthy and of the poor, of capital and labour."

The present Pope is disturbed at the prospect of Catholic theology being tainted by Marxism. For his predecessor in 1891, the taint was socialism and those who "working on the poor man's envy of the rich, endeavour to destroy private property and maintain that individual possessions should become the common property of all..."

It is clear from his text that Leo XIII bracketed with socialists those reformers such as Henry George who were campaigning against one specific social injustice – the private monopoly of land.

"It is surely undeniable", wrote the Pope, "that when a man engages in remunerative labour, the very reason... is to obtain property and hold it as his own private possession." Thus, he went on, if the man invests his savings in land, "the land in such a case is only his wages in another form..."

He argued in similar vein when referring to man's work in bringing land into cultivation, having "lavished upon it his care and skill".

"Now, when man thus spends the industry of his mind and the strength of his body in procuring the fruits of nature, by that act he makes his own that portion of nature's field which he cultivates – that portion on which he leaves, as it were, the impress of his own personality".

To Pope Leo XIII, "the inviolability of private property" was "our first and most fundamental principle."

HAVING exonerated private land ownership from any blame for the "misery and wretchedness which press so heavily on the large majority of the very poor", Leo XIII was forced to look for scapegoats. He cited the passing of the ancient Workmen's Guilds, the callousness of employers, the greed of unrestrained competition, rapacious Usury (as "still practised by avaricious and grasping men") and the custom of working by contract.

To Pope Leo XIII, the social order in the world was fixed and immutable ("let it be laid down, in the first place, that humanity must remain as it is") which, to him, meant that society was permanently divided into classes – the rich and the poor, capital and labour.

Since there are innumerable differences between individual human beings, it was inevitable, in his eyes, that some should be rich and some poor: "unequal fortune is a necessary result of inequality of condition". The poor – those "who do not possess the

gifts of fortune" – "are by far the majority".

But he reassured them that "poverty is no disgrace" and called on the rich to support the poor with alms and Christian charity.

It did not occur to His Holiness, apparently, to question why, in "the bounteous world provided by the Creator, there should be any "poor class" at all, especially when, by his own recognition, "poor" was synonymous with "poverty" and embraced the majority of the human race.

IN HIS book *The Condition of Labour*,¹

Henry George gave his reply to the Pope, attacking strongly the assertion that the private ownership of land was "according to nature's law".

If, he argued, anything that a man buys with his rightful wages becomes his rightful property, then the purchase and holding of slaves would once again acquire moral sanction.

The fact was, he pointed out, that purchase or sale cannot give rightful ownership where such ownership did not exist before. Property-owning that had no moral sanction before, does not acquire it by passing that property from seller to buyer.

The Pope's proposition that man legitimately acquires ownership of land by working on it was demolished by several separate arguments, in-