The humble Peruvian

Is it time for the man known as the 'Father of Liberation Theology', author of one of the most influential and most vilified theological books of the last fifty years, to be added to the 38 Doctors of the Church? / **By MARGARET HEBBLETHWAITE**

The 'Father of Liberation Theology', priest and philosopher Gustavo Gutiérrez, coined the term in 1971

IF WE WERE to ask who is the most famous liberation theologian of all, answers might be divided between Gustavo Gutiérrez – the humble Peruvian of Indigenous descent who struggled under a conservative archbishop, then found freedom in the Dominican Order, and died last year at the age of 96 – and Leonardo Boff, the Brazilian firebrand of *Church: Charism and Power* who was censored by the Vatican, eventually married and is still alive at the age of 87. Nothing could have been more appropriate, then, at the recent congress of liberation theologians in Lima, Peru, for the chief homage to Gustavo (customarily referred to just by his first name) to be given by Boff (often referred to just by his surname), through a live video link from Brazil.

Gustavo was born on 8 June 1928 and grew up in the poorer districts of Lima, including Rímac, where he would later return as a priest. He was a small, brown-skinned man with Indigenous blood, his face wreathed in smiles, and all his life walked with a limp, having spent six years from the age of 12 in a wheelchair, with the serious bone infection osteomyelitis. He is known as the "Father of Liberation Theology", partly because he coined the term, most notably in his seminal work *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (first published in 1971, or 1973 in English, and translated into 14 languages so far), and partly because he was such a leading thinker of the movement. A theology faithful to Jesus of Nazareth, he taught, must centre on liberation for the poor and oppressed, for Jesus had defined his mission as "good news to the poor", in the synagogue in Nazareth, with "release to the captives" and freedom for "those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18). Boff concluded his eulogy by saying that Gustavo should be declared a Doctor of the Church and a saint, but a Doctor of the Church first. The more we heard about Gustavo, the more was that judgement vindicated.

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And we heard plenty about him in Lima, with every evening devoted to his memory. There was a dramatisation of Quechuan songs by the poet José María Arguedas who had influenced him, a bookstall predominantly selling Gustavo's books, his photo overlooking the closing Mass, and a pilgrimage to his parish organised for the day after the congress. The meeting was taking place, after all, in the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú where he had worked as a chaplain and teacher since 1960; it was co-organised by the Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas which he had founded in 1974, and the first day of the meeting fell on the first anniversary of his death, 22 October 2024.

THERE ARE ONLY 38 Doctors of the Church so far (including Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen and John Henry Newman); so to add Gustavo's name would be a more exclusive honour than being made a saint, of which there are more than 10,000. But would it be a step too far? I do not think so. In his last, posthumously published book, *Vivir y pensar el Dios de los pobres* ("Living and Thinking the God of the Poor"), Pope Francis writes a preface. I translate: "Gustavo's theological method has marked the way theological work is done in our times. Gustavo knew that, at their core, pastoral questions are theological questions, and that the vocation of true theology is to delve into the depths of its historical present ... And the more we delve into the density of the historical present, the more theological work demands great academic and transdisciplinary rigour."

But does Gustavo have this academic and transdisciplinary rigour? He does indeed. He studied medicine for four years in Lima and psychology for another four years in Louvain, before turning to theology, studying at the Gregorian University Rome, in Paris, and in Lyon. His latest book reveals extensive knowledge of Scripture studies of both Old and New Testaments – but he is up to date with recent scholarly preference in calling them the First and the Second Testaments. Hebrew has seven words for the "poor", while Greek has four, he tells us, giving extensive details. He refers to the thought of "the great bishops and theologians of the early centuries" including Ambrose and John Chrysostom; to the leading medieval scholastic Thomas Aquinas; to twentieth-century Protestant theologians such as Karl Barth and Joachim Jeremias; to Jewish scholars such as Martin Buber; and on more than one occasion to Benedict XVI (whom many would consider a conservative).

If anyone were to assume that the thinking of a liberation theologian like Gustavo was theology-lite, they could not be more mistaken. Boff had to argue the case for Gustavo being admitted to the editorial board of the academic journal *Concilium* when European scholars still held the prejudice that the work of Latin Americans was essentially pastoral rather than theological. No, this is a different way of doing theology, Boff maintained.

In the introduction to the fiftieth anniver-

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sary edition of Gustavo's *A Theology of Liberation* (Orbis, 2023), Michael Lee writes: "It would be difficult to name another theological book these past five decades that has been more influential, has inspired more believers and non-believers alike to think differently about the Christian faith, and has engendered so much controversy." He was a visiting professor in New York, Boston, Texas, Michigan, Berkeley and Montreal, as well as in Cambridge, England.

Homage was given also by Gustavo's colleagues in Lima. The historian Jesús Cosamalón told us that he enjoyed playing with children, loved cinema, especially Westerns, and that his theology was convincing because he avoided fake, easy answers: when a woman lost her only son in a senseless swimming pool accident and cried out to know "Why?", Gustavo simply answered, "I don't know." The psychologist Carmen Lora revealed that he did not like having his photo taken. The social scientist Edmundo Alarcón said Gustavo had advised him to work with the poor, to share in their joys and sorrows, but also to work in a university, where the students would not put you on a pedestal as your parishioners did, but would test you with their questions. A colleague of Leo XIV from Chiclayo, Peru, Yolanda Díaz, said Gustavo had helped her grow in faith because of his deep knowledge of God in his own life.

And we understood more about him when we visited the very basic Chapel of Cristo Redentor in the poor *barrio* of Rímac, where he worked from 1980 onwards. We were welcomed by the large and impressive pastoral team he had trained, who showed us the simple couple of rooms upstairs where he lived right up until the pandemic. His wardrobe was small as he had few clothes, but he had a good selection of some 15 artisanal stoles donated to him from various countries. We were taken around the medical centre, entirely equipped with donated medicines; around the educational room, where catechesis took place along with games, including chess which Gustavo was passionate about; and around the dining room, which served an average of 40 children at a time and where Gustavo would enjoy joining them for breakfast. Considering the extensive university and international work he had taken on, he must have been brilliant in delegating work, for he never felt the need to leave his pastoral base in Cristo Redentor.

BOFF SAID THAT Gustavo had been "persecuted, insulted and calumniated in Rome", and that his eventual incorporation into the Dominicans in 2001 had given him more freedom. Gustavo's great hero of the past, Bartolomé de las Casas, had after all been a Dominican. The Dominican master at the time, Timothy Radcliffe, told me that Gustavo had been close to the order ever since he did his doctorate with the French Dominicans, and was frequently invited to meetings of Latin American provinces, so the idea of him joining had been in the air for some time. But it was brought to a head when the Opus Dei Archbishop of Lima, Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne, recently appointed in 1999 (but later dismissed in 2019 following allegations of historic sexual abuse), was making it difficult for him to operate as a priest. Gustavo met Radcliffe to request admission, and together they decided that a suitable home for him would be the province of Paris (also known as the province of France), which he had always particularly loved, especially because it was the province of Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu, whose thought, once controversial, became influential at the Second Vatican Council. He then spent a term a year teaching young Dominicans in Lille, where the Paris province had a house of formation.

Pope Francis never doubted Gustavo's orthodoxy and fidelity to Catholic teaching, declaring on his death that he had been "a great man, a man of the Church, who knew how to stay silent when he needed to be silent, to suffer when it was his turn to suffer, to bring forth so much apostolic fruit and such a rich theology".

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