Former liberation theologian says movement fueled decline of Catholicism in Brazil

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By Marcelo Musa Cavallari

The long dominance of liberation theology is at the root of the decline of Catholicism in Brazil, according to Friar Clodovis Boff.

Until 2007, the religious was an important theologian of liberation theology, although not as famous as his brother Leonardo, a former Catholic priest who is one of the founders of the movement, which gained popularity in the 1970s and emphasized freedom from poverty and oppression as the key to salvation.

Then, in a move that alienated him from his famous brother, Clodovis Boff published the article "Liberation Theology and Return to Fundamentals," in which he accused liberation theologians

of making the poor the center of theology instead of Jesus Christ.

Now, Boff has written a book calling for a re-centering of the Latin American Catholic Church in Christ.

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“It is necessary for the Church to once again emphasize Christ as priest, as master and Lord, and not just the fight against poverty and the climate crisis,” he said at the launch of the book “The Crisis in the Catholic Church and Liberation Theology,” written in collaboration with Father Leonardo Rasera and recently released by Ecclesiae.

“These are important questions, but without drinking from Christ, who is the source, everything dries up, everything dies,” Boff said.

In the late 1960s, when liberation theology began its long dominion of religious thought in Brazil, more than 90% of Brazilians were Catholics.

Since then, the percentage of Catholics in the Brazilian population has decreased and now stands at 51%.

Moreover, Brazilian Catholics have a very low rate of church attendance. A **survey** conducted by Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) in 36 countries last year showed that only 8% of Brazilian Catholics go to Mass on Sunday. The rate was the third lowest among the analyzed countries.

For Boff and Rasera, the decline in church attendance is due to the deposit of faith not being

passed on.

With liberation theology, “faith is instrumentalized in terms of the poor,” Boff writes in the book. “One falls into utilitarianism or functionalism in relation to the Word of God and to theology in general,” he continues.

He says liberation theology “appeals to ideas such as ‘margins of gratuity’ and ‘eschatological reserve’ to assert its respect for the transcendence of faith. In fact, the part of transcendence is, in this theology, the smallest and least relevant part, the ‘lion’s share’ falling, as always, to the ‘liberating reading’ of faith.”

According to the friar, this is leading many Catholics to Protestantism, esotericism, neopaganism, and even Satanism.

“Far from having disappeared, it would be absurd to say so, faith in Christ continues to be a reference for the Church,” the friar said in a launch of his book in which he spoke on the theme “The Crisis in the Catholic Church: Lack of Faith, Ideologies, and Worldliness.”

“But the decisive question is whether faith in Christ is your central, main, determining reference,” he said. “It is not a question of the Church affirming the centrality of Christ only in formal and theoretical terms but of affirming it existentially and operationally, as being the beating heart of all its life and action,” the friar said.

“Doctrinally affirming the primacy of Christ in the Church costs little,” he said.

“Affirming, however, in an existential way, that Christ is the absolute center of the Church, costs, and a lot: It costs the heart and the soul, when it does not cost tears and perhaps blood,” he said.

In his book, Clodovis talks about how he collaborated with proponents of liberation theology

during the pontificates of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.

For him, it is necessary that liberation theology be rethought with Christ at the center, not the poor, in order to be “timely, useful, and necessary,” as St. John Paul II said in his letter to the Brazilian bishops in 1986.

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