

Peru's Catholics Brace for Fissures in Their Church

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LIMA, Peru - This is the country where a radical, left-leaning "theology of liberation" first emerged 35 years ago. But it is also the place where, four years ago, a member of the Roman Catholic Church's profoundly conservative Opus Dei movement was for the first time elevated to cardinal.

Now, with the ascension of Pope Benedict XVI, the longstanding divide between conservatives, emboldened by the choice of a kindred spirit, and liberal clergy here and throughout Latin America could intensify. If Peru's recent past is any measure, such a competition, even if the two sides are not evenly matched, is certain to be fierce.

Today, the priest who coined the term "liberation theology," the Rev. Gustavo Gutiérrez, spends much of his time teaching in the United States, in what some of his admirers describe as a kind of exile. The bishop who was elevated to cardinal, Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne, now archbishop of Lima, has accused fellow bishops of a smear campaign of forged letters to undermine him.

How the tensions between those camps play out could affect not only issues of theology, but also how the church addresses related matters like the centralization of authority, the role of lay people, the decline in priestly vocations and the mounting challenge of evangelical Protestant groups in a region where nearly half the world's 1.1 billion Catholics live.

"The church is struggling to find ways to broaden its space and make itself present beyond the Mass, beyond ceremony and ritual," said Catalina Romero, a political scientist specializing in religion who teaches at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru. "Everyone agrees that space needs to be occupied. What they cannot agree on is how it should be done."

With the new pope, the upper hand rests with conservative forces like Opus Dei, or Work of God, which preaches strict obedience to established church doctrine among its nearly 100,000 clergy and lay members worldwide. Not all theological conservatives belong to Opus Dei, of course, and liberation theology is only one of the doctrines it criticizes.

Opponents say Opus Dei's close ties with governing elites and the military in Peru and elsewhere have left the church hierarchy on the wrong side of issues of poverty and human rights, and vulnerable to the Protestant sects that have made deep inroads throughout the region.

The divisions are so fierce that Cardinal Cipriani, 61, has accused his rivals of forging letters that link him to political corruption and to accusations of immorality against fellow clergy.

A press spokesman, Alfredo Castillo, said the cardinal would be too busy to spare time for an immediate interview.

But in an interview last July with John L. Allen Jr. of The National Catholic Reporter, the cardinal said he was "completely convinced" that "there are bishops involved" in a smear attempt. The matter has ended up in court.

"I would have preferred another course, that of an internal investigation," Msgr. Luis Bambarén, a former president of the National Conference of Peruvian Bishops and a patron of Father Gutiérrez, said in an interview.

"This has done us great damage as a church," added Monsignor Bambarén, who was himself summoned to testify before prosecutors and cleared.

The accusations and investigation, which continues, underline the intensity of the feelings surrounding Cardinal Cipriani.

His role in Peru's violent past has recently drawn a stern rebuke. A Truth Commission appointed to look into human rights abuses during the campaign against Maoist Shining Path insurgents in the 1980's and 1990's concluded that he had done little to protect vulnerable parishioners. It also sharply criticized him for associating so closely with the military and President Alberto K. Fujimori, who was deposed in 2000 after a decade of increasingly authoritarian and corrupt rule.

In the Ayacucho region where he served as a bishop for a decade until the late 1990's, the report concluded, he "did nothing to improve the human rights situation."

Rafael Rey, a member of Congress who belongs to the Opus Dei movement and is a friend and former student of Cardinal Cipriani's, said the commission's report was "unjust, inaccurate and politically biased." He said the cardinal correctly believed "that the proper role of the church as an institution is to cultivate souls and strengthen the dignity of the human person, not to try to solve all the problems of the world."

Sofía Macher, a member of the commission and a former secretary general of the National Human Rights Coordinator, said in an interview here: "Cipriani's main relationship was with the political and military power structure, not the citizenry. He consistently downplayed the seriousness of the abuses and even refused to see relatives of the dead and disappeared."

In contrast, progressive priests and bishops, many associated with liberation theology, criticized abuses by both rebels and government forces and helped peasants file complaints about killings and disappearances. The cardinal's critics say the commission's criticisms are consistent with their view of Opus Dei as elitist and remote from the concerns of the poor.

The Rev. Joaquín Díez, a Spanish-born priest and an Opus Dei member who is a professor of theology and a newspaper columnist here, said: "We do not believe in class struggle. Only a ruling class that has a social vision can lead countries like this out of poverty."

Opus Dei, founded in 1928 by a Spanish priest, Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, was originally regarded as a fringe, cultlike movement because some members, even among lay people, live together in single-sex centers, hand their paychecks over to an administrator, pledge celibacy and flagellate themselves.

Still, during the quarter-century papacy of John Paul II, Opus Dei rose in status with promotions like Cardinal Cipriani's and the beatification of Father Escrivá in 2002.

In contrast, advocates of liberation theology, which preaches what has come to be known as a "preferential option for the poor," were steadily weeded from the church hierarchy, a process that some fear Pope Benedict may continue.

Liberation theology, too, advocates greater involvement by the church in the daily routines of the faithful, but with a more active - some say activist - role at the side of the poor and the oppressed as they seek to fight inequality and overturn unjust political, social and economic structures.

To guardians of the faith in Rome, liberation theology smacked of Marxism. While a few priests did join guerrillas or accept posts in revolutionary governments, like that of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, most priests affiliated with the movement operated within the rules of the church, through what they called "ecclesiastical base communities," many of which are still functioning.

Advocates of liberation theology acknowledge that they are now in the minority here and are trying to avoid further conflict. But they also emphasize that they have not abandoned their beliefs or their mission.

"The church is not an army; it's a community with various tendencies and points of view," said Cecilia Tovar, a member of the board of the Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas, a religious training center set up by Father Gutiérrez. "We hear a lot that liberation theology no longer exists. But we are still here, the base communities are still active and we are still working."

"They have been attacking us ever since John Paul II died, but that is just proof that we still worry them," Ms. Tovar said.

The rise of Opus Dei is also a challenge to some groups within the church not directly associated with liberation theology.

Education, for instance, is a domain in which the Jesuit order has excelled for centuries. But Opus Dei operates a provincial university with a branch here and elite high schools that are seen as fertile recruiting grounds for conservative clergy and lay workers. As bishop in Ayacucho, Cardinal Cipriani earlier ordered Jesuits withdrawn from teaching posts at some universities there.

Beyond differences of theology, there are strong opinions about the personal style of Cardinal Cipriani, a former engineer for an American mining company and a former basketball player and coach.

"He's tough and demanding, but also agile and intelligent," said Mr. Rey, who played on one of the teams.

But some subordinates, who asked that their names not be used, described Cardinal Cipriani as abrasive and headstrong. Since the Vatican named him archbishop of Lima in 1999 and then cardinal two years later, analysts in academia and the press have detected what they describe as signs of less than unanimous enthusiasm among both lay people and clergy.

Traditionally, to mention one much-cited example, the cardinal of Lima, as the archbishop of this nation of 27 million, serves as president of the Bishop's Conference, which has more than 50 members. One of Cardinal Cipriani's predecessors, Cardinal Juan Landázuri Ricketts, for instance, was repeatedly elected by his peers to that post during three decades. Thus far, however, that honor has eluded Cardinal Cipriani, who serves as one of two vice presidents.

Not long after his transfer to Lima, the first spurious letters written in his name were sent to Rome, charging Cardinal Landázuri Ricketts and an auxiliary bishop with immorality. Cardinal Cipriani's supporters suggest that the documents were intended to discredit him and force his removal.

A more recent set of letters said to be from the cardinal and the papal nuncio here thanked Mr. Fujimori's intelligence chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, for a donation of \$120,000 and asked that incriminating videotapes be destroyed.

When it became clear that the letters were not genuine, government prosecutors began their investigation. "This was an evil, reprehensible act from both the moral and legal point of view, and the government has an obligation to continue until it determines who those responsible are," Mr. Rey said.

Also around the time of Cardinal Cipriani's return to Lima, Father Gutiérrez, the founder of liberation theology who had been criticized both by the Vatican and by the future Pope Benedict himself, abandoned his role as a diocesan priest and joined the Dominican order.

Father Gutiérrez's supporters said he had long been considering such a move. But the effect of his action was to remove him from the immediate supervision of whoever became cardinal and give him a degree of protection from being silenced.

Now 76, he has been spending more time out of Peru. He teaches at Notre Dame in the United States and lectures frequently at European universities, where his role as the primary theoretician of liberation theology gives him enormous prestige.

"It's an exaggeration to say that he is exiled," contended Monsignor Bambarén, Father Gutiérrez's friend. "He just wants to maintain a low profile."

But Father Díez, the Opus Dei member, said, "He knew that conditions here were not going to be very favorable to him."