

## Vatican readmits leftist thinking

**THE Vatican has begun a historic move to rehabilitate the leftist Catholic movement known as "liberation theology" as the Pope refocuses the church on the poor.**

L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican's official newspaper, devoted its centre spread to defending the virtues of liberation theology, which had been anathema since the Cold War.

"With a Latin American Pope, liberation theology could not remain for long in the shadows to which it has been relegated for some years, at least in Europe," wrote Ugo Sartorio, a priest and editor of a Catholic magazine.

Father Sartorio even argued in his piece yesterday that, while serving as archbishop of Buenos Aires, the Pope had been an exponent of the Argentine version of liberation theology.

For decades, liberation theologians in Latin America, deeply critical of the church hierarchy's ties to military dictatorships, were denounced as Marxist by the vehemently anti-communist Polish pope, John Paul II.

He was succeeded by his conservative doctrinal enforcer, the German cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who was nicknamed "God's rottweiler".

Under its first Latin American pope, however, the Vatican is recognising the strengths of the movement that gave priority to the poor. Francis has eschewed the pomp of the papacy -- refusing to wear red papal slippers and insisting on living in the Vatican guesthouse rather than the luxurious papal apartment overlooking St Peter's Square.

The first pope to take the name of St Francis of Assisi has proclaimed that he wants "a poor church for the poor". This outreach comes as the Catholic Church is confronting sex and money scandals and suffering a loss of many faithful to evangelical churches.

Francis is understood to be writing a new encyclical on poverty, to be titled *Beati Pauperes*, or *Blessed are the Poor*.

A new biography, by Paul Vallely, reports that the Pope has secretly been taking advice from the left-wing Brazilian theorist Leonardo Boff, a leading proponent of liberation theology.

Francis has also unblocked moves to canonise Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador who was shot dead at the altar after condemning violence by the military in El Salvador. He is considered a hero by liberation theologians.

Francis has just appointed the Papal Nuncio in Venezuela, Pietro Parolin, as his new Secretary of State, the Vatican's equivalent of prime minister.

In an interview with the pro-government Venezuelan newspaper Ultimas Noticias, before he was named, Archbishop Parolin gave a careful endorsement of liberation theology. "On liberation theology, and I say this with all my heart . . . things are much clearer now," he said.

"The church has a preferential option for the poor . . . But it's also always clarified that it's not an exclusive option, or one that excludes anyone. The church must not assume Marxist categories, or class struggle."

The occasion of this week's double-page spread in the official Vatican newspaper was the publication of an Italian translation of a 2004 book co-written by the father of liberation theology and a German theologian who is now the Vatican's doctrinal chief.

Gerhard Ludwig Muller was appointed by Benedict XVI last year to his former post as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's chief ideologist. The German bishop and professor was not only close to the German pope, but also a lifelong friend of the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, who coined the term "liberation theology".

The two will present their book, *On the Side of the Poor*, at a festival in Mantua, Italy.

"This new Pope is supporting a fresh look at the situation of the poor all over the world," said Marco Politi, an author of books on the Vatican. "What is coming is this 'people's theology', which seems very much about the poor and the rift between the poor and the rich."

# *The Times*