

# Liberation theology gaining in Brazil

## Leader of 'popular church' finds calling

By Peter Muello  
Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil — Leonardo Boff sipped a draft beer and explained why he still celebrates Mass 17 months after quitting the priesthood.

"There are two churches," the father of Liberation Theology said. "I resigned from the official church, with priests and parishes, but not from the 'popular church.' When the people ask, I celebrate."

He paused. "And I've done a lot," he said softly.

Boff, 54, has found his calling. His "popular church" is winning followers in poor communities across Brazil, while the traditional Roman Catholic Church is losing them.

More than ever, the former Franciscan friar is in demand as a spiritual leader, speaker, professor, lay theologian, author and even political candidate.

"I promoted myself to layman," he said with a big laugh.

It fits perfectly with his idea of a democratic church. The word layman, he recalls, comes from Greek

and means "member of the people."

"Jesus was a layman," he said. "The biggest disgrace of a bishop or a pope is that he forgets he's one of the people. He thinks he was born a boss."

Boff laughed easily behind a bushy gray beard. In tan chinos, polo shirt and tennis shoes, he looked like a university professor, which he is. Once a week he teaches ethics and philosophy at the State University of Rio de Janeiro.

But a brown wooden ring identified him as a defender of Liberation Theology, which angered the Vatican and divided Christians here in the world's largest Catholic country.

John Paul II took a dim view of the doctrine, which urges the poor to demand social and political rights. It smacked of Marxism, and Boff didn't deny its socialist influence.

In 1985, the Vatican slapped Boff with 11 months of "obsequious silence" for his book "Church: Charisma and Power." The pope especially didn't like the part where he called the church "feudal" and "elitist."

Boff did his penance but didn't change his mind. A split was inevitable.

"Until the 1980s, I was confident the church could be reformed and become more open to women, laymen and the poor," he said. "I don't believe that anymore. This type of clerical, authoritarian, sexist, centralizing church has no salvation."

The pope's latest encyclical proves it, he says. "Veritatis Splendor" (Splendor of the Truth), released last month, says only the pontiff can decide questions of moral doctrine.

"The message is the power of the church. The encyclical uses the word 'authority' more than 70 times," said Boff.

By contrast, he said, a "popular church" Mass in Rio's notorious Borel shantytown is more like a block party.

"I read and everyone comments and discusses," Boff said. "We don't just consecrate the host, but bread, cake, everyone brings something and shares it. Then we all consecrate together."

At other times, Mass takes on the trappings and music of Brazil's popular African-based spirit religions, such as Candomble.

Behind the "popular" church are

some 100,000 Ecclesiastic Base Communities, social centers in poor districts where people get together to discuss religion, politics and local affairs. An estimated 6 million to 7 million Catholics belong to the communities.

That's disturbing news for the Vatican. Although about 80 percent of Brazil's 150 million people are Catholics, studies show 900,000 leave the church each year, often for evangelist sects.

"There's a religious marketplace out there," said Boff. "And the Catholic Church is losing out because it offers a very bad product: doctrinaire and formal."

Since leaving his seminary in Petropolis, near Rio, Boff can hardly keep up with the demand for his services.

He gets two or three speaking invitations a week from Brazil and abroad. A recent debate in Germany drew 3,000 people to a soccer stadium — with 6,000 more trying in vain to get in.

With his brother, Waldemar, he runs a center for 600 street kids in Petropolis and presides over two human-rights organizations.

In November, he published his 57th book, "Ecology, Globalization and Spirituality" deals with the poor and outcast as "endangered species."

His home is a small apartment near Rio's Tijuca Forest. He shares it with his longtime secretary Marcia Miranda, a mother of six with whom he has what he calls a "permanent relationship."

Boff considers living with a companion "more virtuous" than priestly celibacy.

"You have to share, listen, learn, have patience," he said. "Women are different from men. I knew that theoretically — now I'm finding it out."

Boff says he doesn't miss any-



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Leonardo Boff  
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thing from his years as a priest. The impression he gives is that the church simply got too confining.

His next book, due next year, will deal with "spirituality, quantum physics, cosmology, the origin of the universe and the new image of God."

"It's all one immense process... with an entire cosmic articulation behind it," he said, his voice rising in enthusiasm. "Everything fits in: God, people, liberty, too."

He summed up why he was driven to leave the church.

"It's not the medieval world anymore."