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Francis smiles and puts his hand on Gutiérrez's shoulder. Gutiérrez is seated.

Pope Francis meets Father Gustavo Gutiérrez, "the father of liberation theology," on an undated photo. Pope Francis has sent a video message to the Archdioceses of Lima for the funeral of Father Gutiérrez Oct. 24. "Today I am thinking of Gustavo," the pope said, calling him "a great man, a man of the church." (OSV News/courtesy Archdiocese of Lima)

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Pope Francis sent a video message to the Archdioceses of Lima for the Oct. 24 funeral of Father Gustavo Gutiérrez. "Today I am thinking of Gustavo," the pope said, calling him "a great man, a man of the church."

Known as the "father of liberation theology," which rose to prominence in South America in the 1960s and 1970s as a way of responding to the needs of Latin America's poor, Gutiérrez died Oct. 22 at age 96.

Francis said he was a man who "knew how to stay silent when he needed to be silent, who knew how to suffer when he had to suffer, and who managed to bring forward so much apostolic fruit and such rich theology."

The pontiff's message, which was recorded amid the final days of the Synod on Synodality in Rome, was posted on the YouTube channel of the Archdioceses of Lima Oct. 24.

During his homily in the Basilica of the Most Holy Rosary of the Santo Domingo Convent in Lima, celebrated by Cardinal-designate Carlos Castillo Mattasoglio, the archbishop of Lima said that "we owe Gustavo phrases that helped us understand how to move with the people. One of them is: 'How well we would be if it weren't for reality.' This phrase disconcerts us and reminds us that reality calls us constantly."

Thousands of worshippers participated in the funeral, according to Spanish Catholic news outlet Religión Digital.

Castillo used the words of Gutiérrez during the homily that "if we are not loved freely, life has no meaning," which meant for him that God's love is free and recognized in the lives of others, especially those who suffer. For the archbishop, Gutiérrez's testament is his unconditional love for others.

"Gustavo, with his delicacy and humanity, brought the preferential option for the poor to a universal dimension, although this earned him many attacks," the archbishop said, explaining that for him liberation theology was "'pure Gospel,' a theology rooted in the life of the poor and in the understanding of God's free love."

Despite the criticism, the cardinal-designate said, Gutiérrez "continued on his path with humility and courage, a testimony that has left a profound legacy in the Church and society."

Born in Lima on June 8, 1928, Gutiérrez completed his philosophy studies at the University of Louvain in Belgium and his theological studies in Lyon, France, and at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University before returning to Peru, where he taught at the Catholic university in Lima.

However, it was his pastoral work at a parish in Lima and as a theological consultant at the 1968 gathering of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia — a regional meeting that aimed to adapt the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council to the Latin American context — that led to the development of his 1971 book, "A Theology of Liberation."

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While liberation theology's call for a preferential option for the poor and freedom from unjust social structures resonated with many Catholics in Latin America, its politicization — particularly among those sympathetic with Marxist ideology — was at odds with the church, particularly during St. John Paul II's pontificate.

Gutiérrez was ordained a priest in the Diocese of Lima in 1959, but in 2001, he entered the Dominican order, and soon after began teaching at the University of Notre Dame, where he held the title of John Cardinal O'Hara Professor of Theology. He lived in Lima for the last several years of his life.

"Father Gustavo was a beloved member of the Notre Dame community, and we join with his family and fellow Dominicans in giving thanks to God for his extraordinary life," said University President Father Robert A. Dowd.

"His invaluable contributions as a scholar and theologian and his commitment as a priest to living out the Gospel Call are an inspiration to us all," Dowd added.

In an Oct. 23 press release, the university said that Gutiérrez "called on Christians to accompany and learn from the impoverished among us, significantly advancing the concept known as the preferential option for the poor."

Michael E. Lee, who earned Notre Dame graduate degrees under Gutiérrez and is now a professor of theology at Fordham University, was quoted by Notre Dame as saying: "In the way that it offers both a diagnosis of our world's ills and a vision for the way that the church can help transform them, 'A Theology of Liberation' remains as relevant today as it was half a century ago."

Father Rómulo Vásquez Gavidia, provincial superior of the Dominicans of Peru, said during the Oct. 24 funeral that after joining the Dominican order, he "always remained close to his religious community, visiting the convent and sharing moments of fraternity with his brothers."

Yolanda Díaz, a lay follower and friend of Gutiérrez, said that he was a "man of active hope," who taught the faithful how to observe reality "with eyes of faith," even in times of difficulty.

Díaz said that Gutiérrez urged the laity to live with "one foot in the Church, listening to God who calls us from his people," and the other foot "in reality," of their lives. This duality between spirituality and social reality was key in the formation that Díaz

and others received from Gutiérrez, she said, according to Religión Digital.

Among those who mourned the late theologian's death was his longtime friend German Cardinal Gerhard Müller, former prefect of the then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, whose 2014 book "Poor for the Poor: The Mission of the Church," featured two chapters written by Gutiérrez, who he called "one of the great theologians and Catholic personalities of our time."

"We can learn from him. And also, we are aware that he is not dead, but he is living in heaven with God, in the communion of saints, and he is praying for us and giving us a good example with his life and work," Müller said in a telephone interview with OSV News Oct. 23.

Gutiérrez's remains were laid to rest at the 16th-century Monastery of Santo Domingo in Lima.