

Pope arrives in Brazil

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Pope Benedict XVI landed in Brazil today on his first Latin America trip as pontiff, determined to lay down church law on abortion and answer a "thirst for God" in the region.

Earlier, Pope Benedict said he supported excommunication for politicians who backed Mexico City's decision to legalize abortion, giving a strong message about core church teachings at the start of his first trip to Latin America as pontiff.

Church teaching calls for automatic excommunication for anyone who has an abortion. In Mexico City, where abortion was legalized during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, church officials have said that doctors and nurses who performed the procedure, as well as lawmakers who supported its legalization, would also be excommunicated.

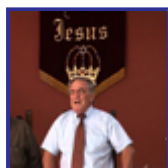
"It's nothing new, it's normal, it wasn't arbitrary. It is what is foreseen by the church's doctrine," the Pope told reporters aboard a plane to Brazil.



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A worshipper holds a flyer promoting Pope Benedict XVI's upcoming visit to Brazil.

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In his first full-fledged news conference as pope, he also said the exodus Catholics for evangelical Protestant churches in Latin America was "our biggest worry."

But he said the spread of Protestantism showed that there was a "thirst for God" in the region and that he intended to lay down a strategy to answer that call when he meets with bishops from throughout Latin America in a once-a-decade meeting in the shrine city of Aparecida near Sao Paulo.

"We have to become more dynamic," he said. Evangelical churches, which the Vatican considers "sects," have attracted millions of Latin American Catholics in recent years.

The Vatican has promised that during his five-day visit to Brazil — the world's most populous Roman Catholic country — the Pope will deliver a tough message on poverty and crime.

The Pope has previously told Catholic politicians that the Vatican's stance against abortion was "not negotiable." However, he hasn't explicitly said excommunication would be the penalty for any lawmaker who supported it. In fact, the Vatican has sidestepped the issue of whether Communion can be denied to a Catholic politician who has supported abortion rights legislation.

The Pope's predecessor, John Paul II, visited Mexico and addressed Latin American bishops just three months after assuming the papacy. The Pope has waited two years for his first trip to a region where nearly half the world's 1.1 billion Catholics live.

He defended himself against criticism that he was "Eurocentric" and less concerned about poverty in the developing world as his predecessors.

"I love Latin America. I have travelled there a lot," he told reporters, adding that he was happy that the time had come for the trip. He said if he hasn't focused on the region enough it was because there have been more urgent problems in the Middle East and Africa.

The Pope, who visited Brazil as then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 1990, will celebrate several open-air Masses, including a canonization ceremony for Brazil's first native-born saint, and visit a church-run drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre.

In Brazil, many are torn between the church's traditional teachings and the pressures of the modern world — with

abortion at the forefront. The procedure is illegal in Brazil except in cases of rape or when the mother's life is in danger.

On Tuesday, some 5,000 people — both Catholics and Protestants — held an anti-abortion march in the capital of Brasilia ahead of the pope's visit.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva will meet with the pope in Sao Paulo, but a spokesman said the centre-left leader does not plan to bring up abortion or other sensitive issues, such as a government anti-AIDS program that distributes millions of condoms each year.

The pope will also face some opposition from within the Brazilian church, where liberation theology — which links spiritual growth to human rights — is still active among thousands of groups working with poor and landless communities.

The Pope said those who follow liberation theology were "mistakenly mixing faith and politics." But he stressed there hasn't been any easing of the church's commitment to social justice.

As John Paul's close aide, he led a campaign against what the Vatican considers a Marxist-inspired movement. The Vatican set the tone for the Pope's trip by censuring the Rev. Jon Sobrino, a prominent champion of liberation theology in the region, and condemning some of his works as "erroneous or dangerous."

On another topic dear to the region, the Pope said he believed the beatification process for slain El Salvador Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was moving ahead. Bishop Romero was gunned down on March 24, 1980, a day after calling on the Salvadoran military to halt its repressive tactics.

The Pope called Bishop Romero a "great witness to the Catholic faith" and praised him for standing up to dictatorship.

Despite inroads by evangelical groups and the legalization of abortion in Mexico's capital, Vatican officials say the church's scorecard in Latin America is not entirely bleak.

A study released in Brazil this week indicated the flight from the Catholic church stabilized from 2000 to 2003, even though the ranks of Protestants continued to grow.

On abortion, the Vatican points to countries such as Nicaragua which last year banned the procedure in all cases.

The May 9-14 pilgrimage will be the Pope's first lengthy trip as pope.

Although he appears healthy and has never missed a scheduled event, he said in an interview last year that "I've never felt strong enough to plan many long trips."

Except for a stop in Turkey, the Pope's travels have been confined to Europe. The only other trip scheduled this year is to nearby Austria.

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