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HEADLINE: Catholic Decline Stabilizing in Brazil

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BODY:

A steep decline in the number of Brazilian Catholics may be stabilizing after decades of losses, according to a survey released just days before Pope Benedict XVI's arrival in the world's largest Roman Catholic country.

The percentage of Catholics stayed about the same from 2000 to 2003, reversing a trend in which millions of Brazilians abandoned the faith, according to an analysis of government statistics released Wednesday by the Getulio Vargas Foundation.

Brazilians claiming to be Catholic dropped to 73.9 percent in 2000, from 88.9 percent in 1980, census figures show. The South American country has a population of 187 million.

While in 2003, the number fell only a fraction to 73.8 percent, said the foundation, an academic institution that also conducts surveys.

The study's coordinator, Marcelo Neri, said the number may be stabilizing due to the country's improved economy, adding people may be more likely to change religions during hard times.

But Silvia Fernandes, a sociologist with Rio de Janeiro's Federal Rural University, said it will be impossible to verify the foundation's numbers until the results of Brazil's 2010 census are available.

"We have had the same trend for the past 40 years," Fernandes said. "It's unlikely we would see such a sudden change."

The pope arrives in Brazil next Wednesday.

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