

World

Workers give the final touches to the shape of dove of peace on the stage that will be used by Pope Benedict XVI to celebrate a Mass in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Pope Benedict XVI will arrive in Brazil Wednesday as part of his first trip through Latin America countries.

MAURICIO LIMA: AFP/GETTY IMAGES



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Pope's mission is to gain ground in Brazil

During his first visit, Benedict will canonize a saint and try to attract millions to Masses

By ALAN CLENDENNING
 Associated Press

SAO PAULO, BRAZIL — Pope Benedict XVI is heading to the world's most populous Roman Catholic country at a time when evangelical Christians are packing converted storefronts and cavernous churches, thrusting their Bibles in the air.

Benedict will try to halt that wave of Protestant fervor during his first trip to Brazil. Aiming to energize its more than 120 million Catholics, Benedict will canonize the country's first native saint, hold Masses that could attract millions and open a conference of Latin American bishops in the holy shrine of Aparecida.

Few believe the five-day papal visit, which begins Wednesday, will reverse the flight of Catholics who have abandoned the church to become Protestants — or who simply stopped attending Mass amid profound societal change.

Nearly half the world's 1 billion Catholics live in Latin America, but Pentecostal churches are enjoying explosive growth, promising divine intervention to lift parishioners from misery in a region where the divide between rich and poor is among the worst on the planet.

Brazil's census shows the percentage of citizens characterizing themselves as Catholics plunged from 89 percent in 1980 to 74 percent in 2000, while those calling themselves evangelical Protestants rose from 7 percent to 15 percent.

Protestant sects growing

A study released last week by Brazil's respected Getulio Vargas Foundation indicated the Catholic decline stabilized from 2000 to 2003, but also showed the percentage of Protestants continued to rise.

Sao Paulo's former Catholic archbishop, Claudio Hummes, said the losses are "a hemorrhage, and it's not over."

"It is due to the expansionism of Protestant sects that attract an ever-larger number of baptized Catholics, but also to moral relativism, imported from Europe and introduced on the continent above all by the local ruling classes, the mass media and the intellectuals," said Hummes, of the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy.

The Vatican's Latin American leaders also struggle with a host of secular issues, including Brazil's free distribution of condoms to combat AIDS, a rise in second marriages not recognized by the church and Mexico City's move to legalize abortion.

"The Catholic Church faces not only competition, but losses in Latin America," said Fernando Segovia, professor of theology at Vanderbilt University's Divinity School. "This has to be foremost in Benedict's mind, combined with a severe shortage of clergy."

Many wonder whether Benedict will be able to make a difference, especially since the church's situation worsened in Latin America despite frequent visits by his beloved predecessor, John Paul II.

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