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**HEADLINE:** Pope's visit to Brazil designed to halt Catholic exodus

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SAO PAULO, Brazil \_ When Pope Benedict XVI arrives in this sprawling city Wednesday for a five-day visit to the world's most populous Roman Catholic country, he'll encounter a society in the midst of religious upheaval.

Not far from the St. Benedict monastery, where the pope will stay, cavernous churches built by booming Pentecostal congregations draw thousands every night for services that feature rock bands and sequined dancers. On TV channel after channel, Pentecostal ministers preach to millions of faithful. Evangelical Christian programming fills the radio airwaves.

The Catholic Church is declining in a country it long dominated, and that, Vatican officials say, is why Benedict is coming here on his first papal trip outside Europe.

His goal is to stop a religious tide that's turning millions of Brazilian \_ and other Latin American \_ Catholics into Pentecostal Christians. The stakes are high: Nearly half the world's Catholics live in Latin America.

"Those are the big questions of this visit: How can the Catholic Church hold on to its faithful and how can we reflect the changes that are happening in society so that we can better talk to our faithful?" said the Rev. David Gutierrez of the Latin American Episcopal Council, the church's coordinating branch in the region.

More than 160 bishops from around the hemisphere will meet with the pope in the southeastern Brazilian town of Aparecida to try to answer those questions.

In one of four public events, the pope will canonize Brazil's first native-born saint, an 18th-century monk named Antonio de Sant'Anna Galvao, in a ceremony next Friday. Many Brazilian clergy hope that the canonization will

energize the country's Catholics.

Religious scholars, however, doubt that the pope can reverse a trend that started more than two decades ago, when Pentecostal churches such as Brazil's Assembly of God, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and the Reborn in Christ Church began drawing longtime Catholics with their mix of show-business flash and direct, one-on-one ministry.

"When the pope visits, it has quite an impact," said Luis Lugo, the director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, a research center in Washington. "I have no doubt you'll see significant manifestations of zeal and excitement on the part of Catholics in Brazil.

"But the hard work will have to be done by the Latin American bishops. They're the ones who will have to turn around this historic change."

South American countries excluding Colombia saw Catholic populations shrink by an average of 8 percent from 1995 to 2004 while evangelical Protestants — the majority of them Pentecostals — grew by 5 percent, according to the Chile-based research group Latinobarometro. (In Colombia, both Catholic and evangelical populations shrank during that period.)

The trend has been most dramatic in Brazil, where Catholics dropped from 89 percent of the population in 1980 to 74 percent in 2000, or about 126 million people, according to Brazilian census data.

Protestants jumped from 6.6 percent of the population in 1980 to 15.4 percent in 2000, or about 26 million people. Pentecostals made up about two-thirds of that number.

Other estimates show even greater numeric strength among Brazilian Pentecostals. According to the World Christian Database, a branch of the Massachusetts-based Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 24 million Brazilians belonged to Pentecostal churches in 2005, making Brazil by far the world's biggest Pentecostal country.

Even more worrying for Catholic leaders, 45 percent of Brazilian Pentecostals said they'd switched from Catholicism, a 2006 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found.

Explaining why the Catholic Church is losing members will be a central topic in the bishops' conference, which will run from May 13 to 31.

Gilson Luiz Maia, who coordinates with Latin American and Caribbean ministries for the Episcopal council, said Catholics didn't know enough about their religion. He favors more education. "The more you know about something, the more you love it, and the more you love it, you don't leave it," he said.

Aparecida Archbishop Raymundo Damasceno Assis blamed a shortage of priests and other church officials, especially in remote areas such as the Brazilian Amazon. A study released Wednesday by the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a law and business school in Rio de Janeiro, found that there were four Protestant ministers in Brazil for every Catholic priest, even though Catholics far outnumber Protestants.

"That exposes them to whatever other kind of preaching" Protestant denominations offer, Assis said.

Pentecostal leaders see a different problem: The Catholic Church has lost touch with millions of Brazilians looking for a more intimate connection with God.

Pentecostal churches take pains to relate Scripture to worshippers' daily lives, while emphasizing the power of miracles and divine healing, said Marcos Muniz, a pastor from Brazil's biggest Pentecostal church, the Assembly of God, which claimed 8.4 million members in 2000.

"The difference is the Catholic Church doesn't present immediate relief to its people," Muniz said. "They present idols and saints, things that aren't in the Bible, whereas we are a social church. Our God is a living God that can help cure the stresses, illnesses and physical problems of our people."

Many of the Pentecostal churches also celebrate the material rewards of faith. Bishop Jose Antonio Bruno started a recent Sunday service at Reborn in Christ's main temple in Sao Paulo by celebrating pay raises, new jobs and other perks that church members had received after prayer.

Bruno said such rhetoric helped place religion within the modern context of the church's worshippers. Since its start two decades ago, the church claims a thousand branches around the Western Hemisphere.

Reborn in Christ was hit by controversy in January when founders Estevam Hernandes Filho and Sonia Moraes Hernandes were arrested, accused of trying to smuggle \$56,467 in cash into the United States. They're under house arrest in Boca Raton, Fla.

But such scandal hasn't shaken church members' faith. Elani Oliveira Leal, who was raised Catholic, said she switched to Reborn in Christ 14 years ago after its members helped her deal with what she called "the demons" that were torturing her.

"I was living with demons before that were ruining my life, but this church helped me get rid of them," Leal said. "They worked with me very closely, and then the miracles came."

Whether Pope Benedict XVI will spark similar expressions of faith is yet to be seen. Even as the church is under pressure to introduce more popular music, divine healing and other features of Pentecostal ceremonies, the pope has resisted. He's tried to revive traditional practices such as the use of Latin in church ceremonies and has cracked down on Latin American followers of liberation theology, which emphasizes religion's role in social change.

Maia said he was optimistic that the Catholic Church would weather this latest storm by sticking to its roots.

"It's an illusion to think the pope will come and negotiate with the evangelicals," Maia said. "The pope comes to inspire and stimulate, so that all the Catholic people with their priests and bishops can embrace the church with more faith and more love and go forward despite all the problems and difficulties."

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