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Pope looks to halt Protestant growth

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SAO PAULO, Brazil - Pope Benedict XVI heads to the world's most populous Roman Catholic country as evangelical Christians are packing converted storefronts and cavernous churches every Sunday, thrusting their Bibles in the air.

Pope 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, he 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, starting tomorrow, 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 lives of 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.

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.

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

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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 Pope Benedict's mind, combined with a severe shortage of clergy. "

Many Brazilians still follow the liberation theology movement Pope Benedict moved to crush when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, and they remember well his labeling their work a Marxist heresy. While the church's hierarchy in Rome has pressured Catholic priests to stay out of politics, these Brazilians remain defiant: more than 60,000 ecclesiastic base communities have been instrumental in educating poor people, union organizers and most of the leaders of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement, Brazil's most radical squatter group.

In the lawless Amazon rain forest, Catholic priests, nuns and lay people work tirelessly to organize poor settlers to stand up for their rights. The most prominent was Dorothy Stang, an American nun killed in 2005 while trying to settle poor farmers on an area ranchers wanted for development.

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