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As Pentecostal sects gain in Latin America, Catholics try to retain the faithful.

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BODY:

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 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 May 11. 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.

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.

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

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.

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GRAPHIC: McClatchy Tribune / Jack Chang

The Reborn in Christ Church of Sao Paulo, Brazil, fills with Pentecostals. Pope Benedict XVI aims to inspire Catholics in a five-day visit next week.

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