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Catholicism is declining, pope will find in Brazil

Pope Benedict will arrive in the world's largest Roman Catholic country on Wednesday for a historic five-day visit designed to halt the migration of millions of Catholics to Pentecostal churches. Experts are skeptical that this two-decade trend can be reversed.

By **Jack Chang**, McClatchy News Service

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SAO PAULO, BRAZIL - When Pope Benedict arrives in this 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, and 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.

A turning tide

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 onto 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 Friday. Many Brazilian clergymen 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.

8 percent shrinkage

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 Chilean 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 next Sunday to May 31.

Gilson Luiz Maia, who coordinates with Latin American and Caribbean ministries for the Episcopal Council, said Catholics don'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 are 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. They say 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 worshipers' 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.

Immediate relief

"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.

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