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HEADLINE: Pope Benedict heads to Brazil to stem Catholics' loss of faith

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BODY:

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 every Sunday, 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 that the five-day papal visit, which begins tomorrow, will reverse the flight of Catholics who have abandoned the church to become Protestants - or who have 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 that the percentage of Protestants continued to rise.

Sao Paulo's former Catholic archbishop, Claudio Hummes, told reporters that 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, now prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops.

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. You put those two things together and you have a rather difficult situation for Rome to handle."

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.

Some also see the German-born Benedict as out of touch with the developing world, an image that Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi has tried to counter by emphasizing the pope's concern for problems ranging from poverty and debt to the fight against arms trafficking. "It's not true that he's 'Eurocentric' as some claim," Lombardi said.

GRAPHIC: 1. Workers prepare the giant stage where Pope Benedict XVI will hold a Mass at the Pacaembu soccer stadium in Sao Paulo, Brazil, yesterday. The pontiff will visit the country for five days, starting tomorrow.

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