

An 'isolated' Vatican seeks to stem a Latin exodus

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Agda Conceição Silva says that she needed all the help she could get when her newly born son started to have breathing difficulties. A recently arrived migrant from the poor north-eastern Brazilian state of Bahia, Ms Silva had few friends or relatives to turn to for help in Santo Amaro, a down-at-heel working class suburb on the southern edge of São Paulo, Latin America's biggest city.

But a neighbour - a member of the rapidly growing Universal Church of the Reign of God - provided comfort and advice and within weeks Ms Silva had become the latest recruit of Brazil's most rapidly growing Pentecostal churches. Twenty years on, Ms Silva, now 49, is one of the church's most active members and donates 10 per cent of her \$600 (£300, €440) salary to it each month. "They helped me sort myself out and now I feel the presence of God," says Ms Silva, displaying all the fervency of a more recent convert.

Ms Silva's abandonment of her traditional Catholicism in favour of evangelical Protestantism is symptomatic of a much broader trend in the world's most Catholic region, as Pope Benedict XVI begins his first visit to Latin America since his election in 2005. Protestantism is on the march, especially in Brazil and Central America. According to a recent study by the Fundação Getúlio Vargas, a Brazilian university, nine out of 10 Brazilians were Catholics in 1970. Today the figure is nearer seven out of 10. Over the same 37-year period the number of evangelicals and pentecostals has mushroomed, rising from only 4.8m to an estimated 43.6m today.

In poorer urban areas of Brazil - such as Santo Amaro, where Ms Silva lives - evangelicals have made even greater inroads. For example, 37 per cent of inhabitants of the Baixada Fluminense, a thickly populated string of low income areas in the state of Rio de Janeiro, are evangelicals, while the percentage of Catholics has fallen to 41 per cent. Of the 30 churches in one 2.5 mile stretch of the area, only one is Catholic.

Economics is one of the main reasons. For one thing, the evangelical emphasis on temperance and sober living helps poor families organise limited resources more effectively, suggest sociologists. For another, evangelicals usually pay a tenth of their wages to their church, creating a resource base that allows for a much denser network of churches and clerics than is the case in the Catholic Church.

According to the Fundação survey, there are nearly 18 times more clerics per believer in the evangelical and pentecostal churches than in the Catholic church. As a result, the sects can develop closer connections with their members and provide more active support to those who lose jobs or encounter other difficulties, such as offering food baskets. That can be a powerful attraction, especially because public services can be either poor or non-existent in such areas.

But it is by no means the only dilemma that the church faces. Like their counterparts in the developed world, Latin American Catholics are increasingly ignoring the church's conservative teaching on contraception and sex-before-marriage and are critical of its hard-line prohibition of abortion and stem-cell research.

The current Pope's stern posture on such issues seems to be bringing him into open conflict with mainstream opinion. Brazilian Catholics widely disregard the official prohibition on contraception, with 96 per cent of Catholic respondents in one survey of young Brazilians arguing in favour of condom use. "Can anyone be so isolated from the world as Pope Bento [the Brazilian abbreviation of Benedict] XVI?" asked an opinion piece in Super Interessante, a popular Brazilian magazine.

Data from Latinobarómetro, the Santiago-based polling organisation, shows a steady rise in the number of people favouring the decriminalisation of abortion, until recently illegal across the region outside socialist Cuba and Puerto Rico, where US laws apply. A taboo subject not long ago, abortion is now the subject of open political debate in a number of countries. Last month, the Mexico City municipal government legalised abortion and Brazil's health minister said recently that he favoured a referendum on the issue.

If that were not enough, Pope Benedict faces an additional problem in Latin America. He has been a fierce opponent of liberation theology, a body of ideas developed in the 1960s that linked the church to grassroots movements of the left. Liberation theology has been on the wane - a fact likely to be confirmed at the Latin

American bishops' conference, which the Pope will open on Sunday. But it is still popular among many clerics in the region, especially in Brazil.

Despite this generally gloomy picture for the church, there are one or two positive signs for the Pope. The Fundação study, for example, suggests that the Catholic church in Brazil recovered slightly at the beginning of this decade, with its numbers increasing by about 4m to 129.8m between 2000 and 2003, the last date for which the census data on which the study was based was collected. One of the reasons could be the success of charismatic Catholic evangelist movements such as Charismatic Renovation which, like evangelical Protestants, seek to establish a more active and emotional connection between the priest and his congregation.

"Singing priests" such as Brazil's Father Marcelo Rossi have become rock stars, playing concerts in front of thousands of people and selling best-selling CDs. Perhaps as many as 10 per cent of Brazilian Catholics are active in such groups, and many more are influenced by their activities.

Antônio Kater Filho, an organiser in Charismatic Renovation, who runs an organisation called the Brazilian Association of Catholic Marketing, wants the church to build on that success by modernising its language and image. He talks about helping young people "manage their sexuality" and says confessions "are for bad guys" and should be re-labelled as "reconciliation with God" sessions. He also wants to introduce soft seats and cafes in churches. "The Church has the best marketing symbol - the cross; the best outdoor advertisements - church towers; and the best product - salvation," he says.

Getting that message across, however, could well be an uphill struggle if more recent polling data in Brazil is any indication. Surveys conducted in recent weeks all show continuing decline, with only 64 per cent of Brazilians declaring themselves Catholics according to a survey by Datfolha. Pope Benedict's insistence on a return to traditional rituals, such as masses conducted in Latin, does not fit easily with the call to modernity. Nor, in an increasingly mobile society where traditional patriarchal attitudes are being challenged, will the church's message on sexuality win too many adherents. And for Latin America's urban poor - such as Ms Silva - the evangelical church's message of self-help and network of social support will continue to hold a powerful appeal.

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