

Pope's visit revives faith of Brazil's icon makers

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There was still a day to go before Pope Benedict XVI declared Brazil's Friar Antonio Galvão to be the Catholic Church's latest saint but the Loyola bookshop had already sold its stock of statuettes of the 18th-century Franciscan priest famous for his miracle cure pills.

"We have sold everything," said Antônio De Castro, an assistant at the shop in the run-down centre of São Paulo.

Brazil's largest city is hosting a visit this week by the Pope, whom Brazilians refer to as Papa Bento. "People seem to be becoming a lot more spiritual these days. One man came in from Blumenau [in southern Brazil] and bought 150 statues," said Mr De Castro on Thursday.

Wilson Tristão, who runs a chain of shops that sell statues, medallions, prayer cards and religious compact discs in the city, has seen a similar run on his stock of Friar Galvão images.

Mr Tristao's factory in the poor southern suburb of Diadema is making new plastic-resin images of Friar Galvão as fast it can but it is still not quick enough to meet demand. "The Pope's visit has definitely heightened awareness generally," he says.

Indeed, shops such as Loyola and Tristão both appear to be beneficiaries of a recent revival in popularity of Brazil's traditional Cath-olicism. After years of steady decline in the face of the relentless advance of Protestant sects, the number of Catholics unexpectedly increased by 4m in the first three years of this decade, according to a recent survey by the Fundação Getúlio Vargas, a Brazilian university.

In part at least this is due to the success of charismatic evangelical movements that aim to create a more direct and emotional relationship between priests and their congregations, in much the same way as the evangelical and Pentecostal churches. "They are aiming to make the church more *alegre* [happier] and it is working," says Mr Tristão.

The surge in Catholic religiosity has been accompanied by a surge in demand in items ranging from ear-rings and medallions to prayer cards and underwear carrying the image of favourite saints.

The boom is even helping more traditional artisanal businesses that make statues in plaster. At Imagens Bove, a small factory in the Aclimação district of the city, a dozen workers are hard at work completing an order of plaster statues for a full Christmas crib and 80 accompanying angels, destined for delivery to a church sanctuary in Jacaré.

"There are always new churches, schools and other organisations wanting statues," says Aldo Bove, the company's owner, who keeps the models and moulds for several hundred saints - including a sad-looking Santa Rita, the saint of impossible causes - in a warren of sheds leading off from his central workshop.

Mr Bove and Mr Tristão both stick to the official Catholic market, although there is additional demand for imagery from African- and indigenous-influenced religions such as Candomblé and Umbanda.

And although Protestant sects officially frown on idolatry, many adherents of the evangelical movement keep faith with traditional saints.

Underneath the surface, though, all is not entirely well in the business. Growing competition from Chinese imports, which often enter the country illegally through neighbouring Paraguay, and small workshops that operate clandestinely in order to avoid tax are making life difficult, especially for traditional businesses such as Mr Bove's.

"There are just so many people in the business," says Zely Jeha, owner of another long-established factory who, like Mr Bove, still makes items in the traditional plaster in Guaratinguetá, a town in São Paulo state that is the birthplace of Friar Galvão.

The Chinese competition is fierce. Chinese merchants are selling a full range of popular images, mainly made from resin, at as low as half the price that Brazilian producers can offer.

"This can be made for just 50 cents and sold here for a dollar and we can't make it for less than \$1.35 [€1, £0.68]," says Mr Tristão, pointing to a three-inch high image of Our Lady of Aparecida - Brazil's patron saint - that he holds.

Mr Tristão says that more advanced businesses are gradually bringing down their costs, reducing their prices and improving the quality of items. His own network of shops provides a captive market for the Diadema factory and he says he would not be able to survive without them. But the traditionalists are struggling. Mr Bove has withdrawn entirely from the market for smaller items up to 60 centimetres in height.

Ms Jeha says that she has been forced to cut back production and now employs only about 25 workers, compared with 45 six years ago. "It is a delicate subject because there is just so much stuff smuggled in from Paraguay. I think they control more than 98 per cent of the market in Aparecida [the religious centre in the state of São Paulo where the Pope opens the Latin American Bishops' Conference tomorrow]. The competition is brutal."

Papal plea

Pope Benedict emphasised the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion and called for a return to traditional family values during his visit to Brazil.

At an open air mass yesterday, he urged followers to spurn media portrayals of life that glamorise pre-marital sex and ridicule marriage.

Polls show many in Brazil feel that the church is out of touch with the realities of modern life.

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