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## Pope wants Brazilians back in the fold

By **Malcolm Moore in Rome and Andrew Downie in Rio de Janeiro**

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Pope Benedict XVI will fly to Brazil next week to try to shore up flagging support for the Roman Catholic Church against a wave of evangelical Protestantism.

About 40 new Pentecostal churches open in Rio de Janeiro every week - it is possible to register a new church with the government for only £12.30.

During his five-day visit to the world's largest Catholic country, the Pope will gather together 160 of Latin America's most senior bishops for the first time in a decade.

The Vatican has also planned a series of showy events to draw Brazilians back into the Catholic fold.

In Sao Paolo, the Pope will preside over a Mass in front of a million worshippers at which he will canonise Brazil's first saint, Frei Galvao, an 18th-century friar. The crowd will be able to watch on 15 giant video screens. Afterwards, he will meet 40,000 youths at a football stadium.

advertisement The trip has been carefully planned to win back the hearts of Latin Americans who are being increasingly drawn to evangelical churches, particularly Pentecostalism.

Cardinal Claudio Hummes, the only senior Brazilian prelate to head a department of the Vatican, described the exodus of worshippers as a "haemorrhage", asking: "How much longer will Latin America be a Catholic continent?"

However, the Pope has received a boost in advance of his trip. Between 1990 and 2000, the



The final touches are made to statues of Friar Galvao, who the Pope will canonise in Sao Paolo

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proportion of Brazilians who described themselves as Catholic fell from 84 per cent to 74 per cent, according to government figures. But the figure stayed at 74 per cent between 2000 and 2003, according to the latest survey, released earlier this week. Eighteen per cent of Brazilians said they belonged to a Pentecostal church.

Marco Neri, an economist who compiled the report, said he was "surprised" that the number of Catholics had not fallen.

"The Church has not attracted more faithful, but they are no longer losing their flock," he said.

Mr Neri suggested that the improving Brazilian economy had helped, as evangelical churches are most popular in poorer areas, and that the Catholic Church had decided to be "more flexible, more modern" in order to compete.

The major disadvantage facing the Vatican is that there are almost 18 times as many Pentecostal pastors per worshipper than Catholic priests.

Pastors can be ordained after only three months' training, compared with nine years for a priest, and do not need to take vows of poverty and celibacy. There are 140 million Catholics in Brazil.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, the head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, admitted that Catholics who left the church did so in order to find "a sense of Christian community and direct spiritual experience".

"We have to face this reality," he said. "These churches take away many Catholic faithful."

Yet it is not clear that the flexible and modern version of Catholicism is to the present pope's taste. In March, he publicly censured Jon Sobrino, one of the leading exponents of liberation theology, which portrayed Jesus as a Marxist revolutionary.

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