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THE AMERICAS**Religion in Latin America****Lighting on new faiths or none**

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**In his first Latin American visit, Pope Benedict XVI will find a less divided church facing stronger rivals****[Get article background](#)**

EVEN on an ordinary Sunday, the vast basilica of Nossa Senhora Aparecida is barely big enough to contain the worshippers who gather for morning mass. Votive candles, in a separate room, produce the heat of a bonfire. The "hall of promises" is stuffed with offerings to the Virgin, whose image was found nearby by three fishermen in 1717 and who has been performing miracles ever since: plastic limbs acknowledge healing, a model aeroplane a job gained with an airline.

Aparecida, in São Paulo state, is Brazil's version of Lourdes or Fátima. Pope Benedict XVI chose it as the site of the fifth conference of bishops from Latin America and the Caribbean, which is meant to set the course for 450m or so of the world's 1.1 billion Catholics. The inaugural mass on May 13th will crown Benedict's four-day trip to Brazil, his first long-haul journey since becoming pope two years ago. He will also canonise the country's first native-born saint and hold a stadium-sized "encounter with youth".

Benedict's choice of Aparecida for the conference suggests a desire to guide Latin America's Catholics back to traditional spirituality after decades of strife between progressive and conservative wings of the church. "Our great mission is to reach people who belong to the church but have lost a sense of living in accordance with the faith," says Raymundo Damasceno Assis, the archbishop of Aparecida.

Belief in God is as widespread in Brazil as in the United States, says Antônio Flávio Pierucci, a sociologist at the

University of São Paulo, but religious practice is close to Europe's waning levels. The numbers saying they are of no religion is small but growing. Some in the Catholic church fear that it is losing its grip over public morality. Local governments in Buenos Aires and Mexico City have recently legalised gay unions; the latter legalised abortion last month. Brazil's health minister has called for a plebiscite on the issue.

The more familiar threat to Catholic hegemony in Latin America comes from Pentecostal Protestantism. Born in the United States, this began to spread south a century ago but it has taken off since the restoration of democracy in the 1980s. According to the World Christian Database, a statistical service based in Massachusetts, more than 80% of Latin Americans are still Catholic. But that figure has been falling swiftly.

In Brazil, the world's largest Catholic country, the church has lost adherents at a rate of 1% a year since 1991, mainly to Pentecostal churches. Fewer than three-quarters of Brazilians are now Catholics while 15% are Protestants (known locally as "evangelicals"). In Mexico, 7.3% were Protestants according to the 2000 census; the figure may be almost 20% today. In Guatemala, some 30% are Protestant.

Traditional varieties of Pentecostalism emphasise a strict moral code of personal behaviour, including teetotalism and marital fidelity. Newer groups have added a gospel of self-enrichment. They offer a customer-friendly faith, telling the poor and uprooted that Christ can improve their lives and that He can be approached through ecstasy rather than ritual.

The Pentecostals spread the word through television networks, CD releases and pastors who require only a pulpit and a Bible rather than an elaborate seminary education. In Brazil the ratio of Protestant pastors to worshippers is 18 times higher than that of priests to Catholics, according to a new study by the Fundação Getulio Vargas, a business school. The business model works: 44% of church donations in Brazil come from Pentecostals, and only 31% from far more numerous Catholics.

By all these methods, Pentecostal Protestantism has acquired a large presence among the poor and the lower-middle class. In Brazil Pentecostalism goes along with migration to both the agricultural frontier and the cities. Cidade Tiradentes, a poor neighbourhood in São Paulo, is 30% Protestant and 40% Catholic (and 22% "without religion", triple the national average), notes Cesar Romero Jacob of Rio de Janeiro's Catholic University. Rich Jardim Paulista, in the city's centre, remains 83% Catholic. Pentecostalism is now making similar inroads in the poorer fringes of cities in the Andean countries, such as Lima.

While the Catholic church sticks to Spanish, in Mexico Protestants use indigenous languages to spread the word and have converted half of the country's indigenous people, claims Arturo Fabela, who heads an organisation of Protestant churches. Much the same goes for the highlands of Guatemala.

Paradoxically, these are the constituencies that not long ago the Catholic church in Latin America made most effort to represent. At their second regional conference, held at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, the bishops declared a "preferential option for the poor" and embraced many of the tenets of "liberation theology" (a kind of Christian socialism). This effort placed many priests in brave opposition to military dictatorships and spawned innumerable "base communities", grassroots groups that tried to spread faith and social justice at the same time.

The influence of liberation theology proved to be greater in politics than in the pulpit. It contributed to the rise of Brazil's ruling Workers' Party, and ushered priests into Nicaragua's Sandinista government in the 1980s. The seeming marriage of Catholicism and Marxism alarmed Pope John Paul II, whose native Poland was rebelling against communism. He appointed more conservative bishops. As the Vatican's chief theologian, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—who became Pope Benedict in 2005—silenced liberation theologians such as Brazil's Leonardo Boff. Just as significantly, the base communities failed to win over the poor. "If your husband beats you, you can't wait for Brazil to become a Christian utopia," points out Andrew Chesnut of the University of Houston.

## The church turns to charisma

Nowadays the Catholic response to the Pentecostal challenge is to imitate it. The "Charismatic" movement, also an American import, rouses the faithful with spirit-filled worship, Christian pop music and slick television. Brazil's most famous churchman is no longer Mr Boff but Marcelo Rossi, a physical-education teacher turned priest who has been known to perform aerobics during his services.

"What we see today is the pentecostalisation of Latin American Christianity," says Mr Chesnut. He estimates that 75-80% of Protestants in the region are Pentecostals and that in Brazil at least half of active Catholics have gravitated towards the Charismatic movement.

The Catholic church has strengths besides the ever-popular Virgin and saints. It remains the region's most respected institution, according to polls. Priestly vocations, after decades of decline, have been rising since the 1970s, although they lag population growth. Brazil is sending missionaries to the United States, Africa and Europe, a reversal of the historic flow.

Reuters



**The Pentecostals prefer ecstasy to agony**

That manpower is supplemented by more than 1m lay "catechists", says Edward Cleary, a priest who teaches at Providence College in Rhode Island. Bishops are reviving parishes and the tradition of tithing. The Catholic church has not escaped paedophile scandals. But it has largely avoided the money scams that dog some Pentecostal churches. The Getulio Vargas study found that in Brazil defections from Catholic ranks have stopped. The number of Pentecostals continues to grow but at the expense of the irreligious.

The bishops' conference may be less disputatious than its predecessors. Democracy and the end of the cold war have drawn some of the sting from the arguments between conservatives and progressives. Dom Raymundo says the bishops will reaffirm the church's preference for the poor, but he insists that social change begins with the transformation of the individual believer. In the coming fights against abortion and the use of embryonic stem cells, the Latin church is probably more united than its North American counterpart. According to a recent poll, just 16% of Brazilians want to change a law that makes abortion illegal unless the mother has been raped or her life is endangered.

That does not put to rest nagging questions about the shape of a church with too few priests to sustain its traditional structure. Benedict will arrive in Brazil fresh from having censured Jon Sobrino, a liberation theologian in El Salvador, for over-emphasising Christ's humanity. The original draft of the conference guidelines was modified after pressure from the many in Latin America who take a less hierarchical view of the church and want a greater role for the laity. "For us the pope is father and pastor" rather than an "authority figure", says Carlos Francisco Signorelli, who heads the National Council of Brazilian Laity. In Aparecida, Benedict may reveal how he sees himself.

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