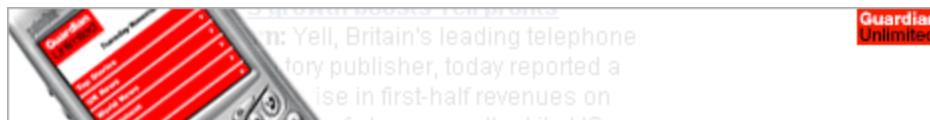


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**Breaking
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International**

Catholic Decline Stabilizing in Brazil

Friday May 4, 2007 5:46 AM

By TALES AZZONI

Associated Press Writer

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SAO PAULO, Brazil (AP) - A steep decline in the number of Brazilian Catholics may be stabilizing after decades of losses, according to a survey released just days before Pope Benedict XVI's arrival in the world's largest Roman Catholic country.

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The percentage of Catholics stayed about the same from 2000 to 2003, reversing a trend in which millions of Brazilians abandoned the faith, according to an analysis of government statistics released Wednesday by the Getulio Vargas Foundation.

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Brazilians claiming to be Catholic dropped to 73.9 percent in 2000, from 88.9 percent in 1980, census figures show. The South American country has a population of 187 million.

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While in 2003, the number fell only a fraction to 73.8 percent, said the foundation, an academic institution that also conducts surveys.

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The study's coordinator, Marcelo Neri, said the number may be stabilizing due to the country's improved economy, adding people may be more likely to change religions during hard times.

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But Silvia Fernandes, a sociologist with Rio de Janeiro's Federal Rural University, said it will be impossible to verify the foundation's numbers until the results of Brazil's 2010 census are available.

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"We have had the same trend for the past 40 years," Fernandes said. "It's unlikely we would see such a sudden

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change."

The pope arrives in Brazil next Wednesday.

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