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HEADLINE: Pope faces demoralised church in Brazil

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BODY:

BRAZIL: When Pope Benedict XVI starts a five-day visit to Brazil tomorrow he will find a church under severe pressure from new evangelical Protestant rivals and face criticism that he himself is at least partly responsible for the haemorrhaging of Catholic faithful in what is the world's most populous Catholic country.

The new evangelical groups have, in just a few decades, ended centuries of a near monopoly that Roman Catholicism maintained over the spiritual lives of Brazilians. When Pope John Paul II first visited Brazil in 1980 almost 90 per cent of Brazilians declared themselves Catholic. But by the 2000 census this had fallen to about 73 per cent, while the number of people declaring themselves "evangelicos" tripled as the new home-grown Protestant churches experienced explosive growth.

Most of these new groups are charismatic Pentecostals which use a far more dynamic and participative form of worship that emphasises the daily, decisive role Jesus plays in the lives of believers. Services in huge, modern downtown churches or tiny halls in city slums mix miracles and music with aggressive fundraising.

The growth in the evangelical movement is particularly strong among Brazil's poorer urban classes, battered by poverty and violence and feeling abandoned by the state and a Catholic Church struggling with a lack of vocations.

A recent study by two of Brazil's federal universities reported that evangelicals today account for 24 per cent of a population of 187 million, with between 66 and 70 per cent declaring themselves Catholic.

In recent years the evangelical movement has gained influence, buying up national television and radio networks and moving aggressively into politics. About 10 per cent of Brazil's Congress is made up of evangelicals.

Progressive Catholic activists argue that it was the Vatican's own campaign against liberation theology - headed up by the then Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict - that partly explains the rise of the evangelicals in Brazil.

Liberation theology was a movement influential in the Latin American Church from the 1960s to the 1980s that viewed Jesus as the liberator of the poor and argued that the church should actively involve itself in the struggle for social

justice.

It led to a whole generation of Catholic activism in Brazil, with so-called ecclesiastical base communities set up by Catholic activists to work for justice with slum dwellers, landless peasants and Indian peoples. The Brazilian church also became a centre of resistance to the country's military dictatorship.

But Pope John Paul II and the then Cardinal Ratzinger saw liberation theology as a movement dangerously influenced by atheistic Marxism. In his role as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger led the campaign against it and in the 1980s silenced Brazil's leading liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff, eventually leading him to quit the church.

Boff remains today one of Brazil's most influential religious and social thinkers and says Cardinal Ratzinger's counterattack left the Brazilian church inward-looking and isolated from the faithful.

"The institutional church is hugely fossilised. This means the people no longer feel it as their spiritual home, nor understand well its message," says Boff. "The institutional church is in no condition to meet the religious demands of the people and so they go to these [evangelical] churches which use popular language and know how to meet the spiritual demands of the poorest."

For Boff, Ratzinger's error was to identify Marxism as the great enemy in Latin America when "here the problem was always savage capitalism which creates millions of poor. These poor shout for social change and justice. Liberation theology was born hearing those cries. It sought to be a social force to lift a crucified people out of their misery. Condemning this theology, the Vatican weakened the fight of the oppressed and played the game of the perverse elites. This left the people sad, because they said: how could the pope be on the side of our oppressors and not join our fight for liberation?"

In Brazil, Archbishop Geraldo Lyrio Rocha, the newly elected president of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, said in a recent interview that liberation theology was a movement whose time had passed in Brazil. Elsewhere in the region the Vatican's campaign against it continues. Father Jon Sobrino, a Basque Jesuit long resident in El Salvador and a well-known liberation theologian, was recently disciplined for his teachings.

But Boff insists that liberation theology is still alive and well in Brazil and one of its greatest achievements will be on show when President Lula da Silva welcomes Pope Benedict to Brazil.

Lula is an open admirer and friend of many liberation theologians. Catholic activists influenced by liberation theology played a fundamental role in setting up the ruling Workers' Party and many are now responsible for implementing the government's social plans.

Ironically, these liberation theology-inspired social policies might now be helping halt the decline of the Catholic majority in Brazil.

The country's Getúlio **Vargas** Foundation said in a recent report that the percentage of people declaring themselves Catholic had stabilised in recent years. The report's authors said improving social conditions and rising income among Brazil's urban poor - a feature of the Workers' Party's years in power - made people less likely to change religion.

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