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Brazil's Roman Catholics shrink as secular rise

By BRADLEY BROOKS
Associated Press



Silvia Izquierdo / AP Photo

In this photo taken Sept. 7, 2011, Catholics attend an open air Mass at Ipanema beach in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At the start of the last decade, millions of Brazilian Catholics joined flashy Pentecostal congregations expanding in the world's biggest Catholic country. Now, a new study by Brazil's top research institute, finds the country's Catholics are still leaving the church and at a higher rate than ever, but many younger parishioners are simply becoming nonreligious.

Bruno Maragato went through the Roman Catholic Church's rites like so many others before him in this most Catholic of nations: baptism, first communion, confirmation.

But his next step was not part of the Vatican plan and, in fact, feeds a worrying trend for Catholics leaders. At age 16, Maragato left Christianity altogether.

"The religion didn't stick with me," said Maragato, now a 24-year-old journalism student. "In the past, the church was much more a part of Brazilians' daily lives. Today, young people can easily seek out other ways of thinking."

A new study by Brazil's top research institute finds Magarato's views represent a sea change among a younger generation of Brazilians and present a fresh challenge for

church leaders already struggling to hold on to parishioners across Latin America.

At the start of the last decade, millions of Brazilian Catholics joined flashy Pentecostal congregations expanding in the world's biggest Catholic country. Now, Brazil's Getulio Vargas Foundation finds, the country's Catholics are still leaving the church and at a higher rate than ever, but many younger parishioners, like Maragato, are simply becoming nonreligious.

Experts say this new twist poses a more potent threat to Catholic leaders than earlier losses. Now, the church isn't just competing against the Pentecostals, but courting people who have decided organized religion has no part in their lives.

"It's the most important phenomenon in this study, the abandonment of religion and the Catholics," said Fernando Altemeyer, a theologian at the Catholic University of Sao Paulo. "A considerable part of the Brazilian youth today are agnostic."

What raises the stakes for the Vatican is that church leaders have been viewing Brazil and other Latin American nations as bulwarks against losses in Europe and the U.S., where

sex abuse scandals have inspired many to leave the church. About half of the world's Catholics reside in Latin America.

The loss of young Catholics, in particular, means the church is giving up its chance for rejuvenation in the region.

The number of people under the age of 20 in Brazil who say they follow no religion is growing three times more quickly than those 50 and older, with 9 percent of young Brazilians saying they belong to no religion, according to the study. That mirrors a similar trend in the number of people leaving the Catholic Church.

The study, based on 200,000 interviews conducted for Brazil's 2010 census, shows the Catholic share of the population hit its lowest level since census figures tracked religion beginning in 1872, bottoming out at 68 percent last year.

Understanding exactly why Brazil is losing Catholics at such a high rate is a topic that still needs more study, Altemeyer said. But one reason could be that in recent years the country's seen an economic boom like no other nation has in Latin America. Since 2003, more than 40 million Brazilians have joined the middle class.

The study finds that Catholics make up the greatest share of Brazil's lowest and highest economic classes, but lose ground in the middle. In 2003, before Brazil's middle-class boom, 72.5 percent of the people in that income bracket were Catholic. By 2009, the Catholic share had fallen to 67.4 percent of the middle class.

"As the economy has improved, people have more access to cinema, theater, to just take a trip," said Silvia Fernandes, a sociologist at the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro who focuses on those who switch religions. "So we're seeing that people no longer need to go to church for social reasons if they have these other options."

Altemeyer said the ability of the previously impoverished to acquire goods like TVs and computers means even more distraction.

"The improvement of people's life conditions is adding to this phenomenon of secularization and the rejection of religious institutions," Altemeyer said.

Marcelo Neri, the author of the study, also said he thinks the Catholic decline was sparked by a "female revolution."

The foundation study discovered that Catholic women, instead of giving up entirely on religion, are largely going to traditional Protestant denominations such as the Presbyterians or Methodists, which are viewed by many as less patriarchal.

Experts say the changes have accelerated as many women turn away from the Vatican's prohibitive views on contraception and abortion, which remains illegal in nearly all cases in Brazil.

"The Catholic Church is literally losing its future, and the loss of women and young people is the most important driver of the fall," Neri said.

The decline marks a massive change from just 30 years ago, when nearly 90 percent of Brazilians called themselves Catholic, according to census figures.

Mexico is poised to take Brazil's place as the world's top Catholic nation, although the church is also losing members there. According to Mexico's census, 84 percent of the population was Catholic in 2010, with the number dropping at a rate less than half of that in Brazil.

An explosion of Pentecostal churches, many of them founded by U.S. evangelicals, triggered the losses in Brazil in the 1990s, with their portion doubling to hit more than 12 percent of the country's population. About half of Brazilian Pentecostals are estimated to have come from the Catholic Church.

As the country's economy suffered from hyperinflation and other woes, Pentecostal churches aggressively recruited in the slums and poor outskirts of Brazil's cities, offering nuts-and-bolts self-improvement advice as well as ministry.

Since 2003, however, the Pentecostal growth has barely ticked up, from 12.5 percent to 12.8 percent of the population, the study found. Yet the Catholic Church has continued to lose parishioners.

Church leaders have pulled out all the stops to reverse the trend, with little success so far. Repeated requests for comment from the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops went unanswered.

Brazil was the first nation outside of Europe that Pope Benedict XVI visited, during a five-day tour in 2007 largely aimed at stopping losses in Latin America. During the trip, the pope canonized Brazil's first native-born saint.

Pope Benedict also announced in August during the church's World Youth Day, which drew 1.5 million people to Spain, that the next version of the summit would be held in Rio de Janeiro in 2013. The pope is expected to attend.

For lifelong Catholic Leila Ribeiro, the church's misfortunes mark a break from generations of church tradition.

The 32-year-old was leaving a recent, half-empty Sunday Mass in Sao Paulo's cavernous Metropolitan Cathedral, where she was one of the few younger people attending. All around her, elderly women chatted and caught up.

"I was brought up with the notion that religion is passed from mother to child, but I fear for what will happen to the church in his generation," she said, looking toward her son. "If the Catholic faith isn't spread within the family, how will it grow?"