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Church hopes for boost with pope visit to Latin America

AFP
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Latin America: The Catholic Church hopes a visit by Pope Benedict XVI will rouse the faithful in Latin America amid challenges from other faiths, pedophile priest scandals and changing views on issues such as abortion.

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Benedict visits Mexico and then Cuba from March 23-28 in only his second visit to Latin America, where around a third of the world's Roman Catholics live.

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A major challenge to Catholicism in the region has been the rise in Protestant evangelist churches, which have doubled in the past decade, particularly in Central America and Brazil, as Catholic numbers have fallen.

In Mexico, the first country the pope will visit, the number of Catholics dropped from 88 to 83 percent in the past decade, according to the 2010 census.

"The pope will visit a country which has been a reference for the Catholic faith ... however he will find a reality which is rapidly changing its religious appearance since numerous Protestant groups and communities have appeared in the last 30 years," read an editorial in the magazine of the Mexican Archdiocese.

Benedict in 2007 took part in the Fifth General Bishop's Conference in Brazil, launching a campaign to boost the Roman Catholic faith in the region, home to some 28.5 percent of the world's 1.196 billion Catholics.

Brazil still has the greatest number of Catholics for a country but it is also losing ground as a stronghold.

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"It's a rhythm of rapid transformation. Changes which used to take 100 years now take only 10," said economist Marcelo Neri, who presented a study for the Getulio Vargas Foundation last year showing that Brazil's Catholics had dropped from 73 percent to 68 percent between 2003 and 2009.

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"The so-called 'continent of hope' for the Catholic Church is falling to pieces," said Bernardo Barranco, director of the Center of Religious Studies of Mexico. The fall in numbers adds to a loss of influence in public debates, where positions are moving away from catholic hierarchies.

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Laws to decriminalize abortion or legalize gay marriage are increasingly being discussed across the region, despite opposition from the Church.

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Most recently in Chile a debate on renewing the possibility of therapeutic abortions -- banned by the 1973-1990 dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet -- was postponed by the Congress.

"Traditional values defended by the Church are encountering a serious challenge because on issues such as abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality, the religious position is being overtaken by new logic," said Barranco.

Mexico City's leftist government decriminalized abortion in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy in a law voted in April 2007 and later upheld by the Supreme Court.

That law provoked a strong pro-life campaign, backed by the Catholic Church, which led to more than half of Mexico's 31 states now criminalizing abortion.

Mexico is also reeling from its own pedophile scandal. The late Marcial Maciel, founder of the worldwide Legion of Christ movement, was accused of having molested seminarians and fathering children in a Vatican probe completed in 2010.

Joseph Ratzinger will visit Mexico from March 23-26 before going on to Cuba to celebrate mass in the same square visited in 1998 by John Paul II -- who played a part in persuading the communist Cuban regime to open up to the world.

Only around 10 percent of Cubans identify themselves as practicing Roman Catholics while 70-80 percent, in a country of more than 11 million, identify themselves most with Afro-Cuban santeria beliefs.

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