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Behind Brazil's Catholic Resurgence

By ANDREW DOWNIE/RIO DE JANEIRO

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Father Marcelo Rossi,
during a Mass in Sao Paulo,
Brazil

MAURICIO LIMA / AFP / GETTY

Pope John Paul II was the first pontiff ever to visit Brazil, and he was hugely popular here. But each time he visited his adoring flock, he came in the knowledge that his Church was losing followers and influence at a frightening rate. Between 1980 and 2000, the proportion of Catholics in the world's largest Catholic country fell from 89% to 73.9%.

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Still, on the eve of his successor's first trip to Brazil — Benedict XVI touches down in Sao Paulo on Wednesday for a five-day visit — there is some encouraging news for the Holy See. New figures show that the exodus of worshipers to Protestantism has stopped. Government census data show that in 2003 73.8% of Brazilians declared themselves Catholics, almost exactly the same number (73.9%) as three years earlier. The number of Protestants did rise to 17.9% from 16.2%, but those joining Protestant denominations, rather than disaffected Catholics, were unhappy followers of other religions or people who had previously declared themselves to have

no religious faith.

The stanching of the flow of believers out of the Catholic Church is great news for the new Pontiff — and an unexpected one, given that the decline has been going on since records began in 1872. "The surprise is the stabilization of the number of Catholics," said Marcelo Neri, an economist at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a top Rio business school who helped author a study based on the government data. "Catholics haven't attracted more faithful, but they are no longer losing their flock."

Neri identified two factors behind the slowdown: The stabilization of Brazil's economy after decades of boom and bust; and the adoption by local Catholic diocese of some of the methods that brought success to the Protestant denominations.

Protestantism, says Neri, takes root quickest in impoverished urban areas where the state is absent. But significant income gains among the poorest sectors of society, combined with a far-reaching government assistance program, have given hope to people who once turned to Protestant Pentecostalism for financial and social aid.

After decades of losing ground to the Protestants, the local Catholic clergy had also noted that these rival churches lured believers not just with promises of rewards more immediate than a place in heaven, but also by offering services that are more joyful, happier, friendlier and more down-to-earth. By comparison with the Protestants' approachable pastor next door, the rock and roll liturgy and the 24-hour service, the Catholic Church could look cold and distant.

In recent years, however, the Vatican has loosened the shackles on Brazilian priests and given its blessing to singers, actors and writers to go after the young and trendy crowd that were flocking to Pentecostalism. Under the title Charismatic Renewal, the Church has accepted, if not wholly embraced, priests who evangelize in song, on surfboards and skateboards, through self-help books and TV shows and on the Internet.

The best example of the trend is Father Marcelo Rossi, a charismatic and media-savvy priest who has sold millions of CDs featuring songs like "Clapping for Jesus," "Raise Your Hands" and the "Jesus Twist." Rossi has a daily radio show, two weekly TV shows and a busy web portal, and he hosts regular concerts-cum-shows at which thousands of young fans dance to his catchy gospel pop. He once attracted 2.4 million fans to an appearance in Sao Paulo, and his draw is such that he has been invited to give a live performance immediately after Benedict XVI says mass in Sao

Paulo on May 11.

"Father Marcelo is one of those people most responsible for halting the loss of followers," said Antonio Miguel Kater Filho, Director of the Brazilian Institute of Catholic Marketing. "He communicates something that might be difficult to communicate in other ways and he attracts people to him. He has charisma."

In the past, the Vatican frowned upon such figures and anything resembling a commercial show of faith, but the success of these methods in fighting the Protestant encroachment has prompted Rome to adopt a more convenient silence on the issue, both in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America. The question now is whether that high-energy devotion to Jesus, Mary and Benedict can prevent further erosion of Roman Catholicism in a region that boasts almost half the world's devotees.

Even in Guatemala, Latin America's most Protestant nation, there are signs that the more charismatic approach of the Catholic Church can reverse the trend. The number of Guatemalan Protestants stopped growing at the start of the decade and now numbers between 33% and 40%, according to Dr. Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Interim Director of the Religious Studies Program at the University of Texas. Every nation in this once homogenously Catholic continent has a bedrock of Catholic support that will never be eroded, and the numbers presented in Brazil last week may be a sign that those willing to choose an alternative have already done so. "It doesn't surprise me," Garrard-Burnett said of the study's findings. "You just see Protestant growth plateau and I think that may be true in Brazil."

No one knows whether the plateau means the Vatican's prayers have been answered or whether the numbers will continue to fall again later. But the Pope can be expected to welcome signs of a Catholic resurgence with open arms. Father Rossi might not be able to get Benedict dancing at the altar, but the numbers he has helped produce just might.

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