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Pope visits waning Latin American flock

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Outside the Sao Bento monastery in Sao Paulo, where Pope Benedict XVI is expected to give a public blessing Wednesday night after arriving in Brazil, florists bustled about creating their arrangements, sparks flew as welders finished a new archway to cover the church entrance, and residents spoke excitedly about the pope's first visit to Latin America.

But his mission is nothing if not formidable - even in the so-called "continent of hope," where nearly half the world's Roman Catholics live. The Catholic Church seeks to regain influence in a region where the people, while still electrified by the visit of a pope, are no longer necessarily Catholic nor adherents of the moral code of Rome.

Brazil is the largest Catholic country in the world. Still, the influence of the church has been waning as Catholics here have left the fold for Protestant, predominantly Pentecostal, churches. At the same time the number of those considering themselves to be secular has grown - driving a wedge between the strictures of the church and mainstream mores.

Already, Brazil's politicians and Catholic leaders have butted heads over condom distribution. That dispute comes as the "culture wars" have found their way to Latin America - with nations moving to relax rules on abortion and strengthen legal rights for same-sex couples. For a pope seen as a methodical academic - lacking the charisma of his predecessor, John Paul II, but sharing his conservative vision - the trip could be a preview of how wide the gulf has become.

"It's a different Latin America," says Hannah Stewart-Gambino, an expert on religion in Latin America at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. And while it is far more conservative than the US or Europe, its recent moves have put the church on notice. "The view of the Catholic Church, and particularly of this pope, is that the slippery slope of secularism is a rapid downhill slide into godlessness. ... In Latin America, [Catholic leaders] feel they have to be very vigilant to end the downhill slide so that it doesn't end up like Europe."

On his first visit outside Europe, Pope Benedict XVI will open a conference of Latin American bishops from May 13 through May 31 in Aparecida, near Sao Paulo. He will hold an open-air mass for more than a million in Sao Paulo Friday and canonize the country's first saint, Antonio de Sant'Anna Galvao, an 18th-century Franciscan monk.

Many people hope his trip energizes the Catholic community of Brazil. "We Brazilians are ecstatic about this visit," said Eduardo Santos, as he left the church at Sao Bento, which he visits two or three times a week. "He is giving us the drive to overcome our problems, and give new hope to life and Catholicism."

But the hurdles are high. When the late John Paul II made his first trip to Brazil in 1980, 89 percent of Brazilians considered themselves Catholic, according to a national census. By 2000, that number had fallen to 74 percent. At that time, Rome had begun to worry about the number of Latin Americans converting to Protestantism: their numbers soared from just 6.6 percent of the population in 1980 to 15.4 percent 20 years later. The majority have joined Pentecostal churches such as Assemblies of God or the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

Today, an equally large concern for the Catholic Church is the number of those unaffiliated with any religion: that number jumped from 1.6 percent in 1980 to 7.4 percent in 2000, according to the census.

Sao Paulo's former archbishop, Claudio Hummes, told reporters the losses are "a hemorrhage, and it's not over."

"It is due to the expansionism of Protestant sects that attract an ever-larger number of baptized Catholics, but also to moral relativism, imported from Europe and introduced on the continent above all by the local ruling classes, the mass media and the intellectuals," said Mr. Hummes, now prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy.

Changing morals

The changing landscape has been reflected in social-values debates across Latin America, where most aspects of public life used to be dominated by Rome. "Regarding sexual morals, the tension between the church and the government is considerably greater," says Faustino Teixeira, a religion professor at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora in Minas Gerais.

Just recently, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva confronted the church in reiterating his stance that sex education, including contraception, is the best way to combat AIDS and teenage pregnancy. His words echoed the views of the public: A UNESCO survey released recently in Brazil showed that two-thirds of parents approve of schools distributing condoms.

The president of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, Cardinal Geraldo Majella Agnelo, shot back on TV: "We cannot agree with the use of the condom," he said.

Manuel Vasquez, an expert at the University of Florida in Gainesville, says that Pope Benedict XVI can regenerate a region that the church feels has lost its moral compass. One of the pope's few side visits includes a trip to a drug rehabilitation center, where he says he will address the anomic behavior of today's society. "They see part of the crisis of Latin American society as the breakdown of the family," he says. "The pope comes in with a message of moral regeneration with the centerpiece [being] the role of the Catholic family."

But the tide, at least on social issues, might be hard to control - and not just in Brazil. Colombia recently relaxed its abortion laws. Mexico City's legislature recently approved on-demand abortions in the first trimester - which was a contentious battle prompting the auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Mexico to warn legislators that if they voted to legalize abortion they would be excommunicated upon the first procedure under law. Mexico City also began performing same-sex unions this year, in the footsteps of Coahuila, a state in the north.

"There is increasing concern in the Latin American church with the spread of progressive secular values, on issues like abortion and homosexuality," says Luis Lugo, the director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in Washington.

At the same time there is concern by the laity that their battles will be silenced by a pope many view as too conservative. Dulcelina Vasconcelos, a project coordinator at Catholics for The Right to Decide in Sao Paulo, says her organization is planning to hold up banners in favor of reproductive rights across the country on Thursday to send the pope a message.

"This pope is worried about the advances we've made as a society," she says.

Ms. Vasconcelos is part of Latin America's liberation theology movement, which rose to prominence in the 1980s as church leaders advocated a more direct role in addressing the needs of the poor. The movement was particularly strong in Brazil, and one of its harshest critics was then Cardinal Ratzinger, the current pope. To the backdrop of the rise of left-leaning governments throughout Latin America today, some wonder how the movement, while not as publicly active as before, will fare.

"It is commonplace to say liberation theology is dead, but it's not true," says Ms. Stewart-Gambino, of LeHigh. "And this is a pope who was the hatchet man for liberation theology."

Obstacles for pope's visit

Even for those who agree with the Church on its moral stances, the pope faces other obstacles. Fabricio Vicente dos Santos is a young pharmacist in Sao Paulo who agrees with the Catholic Church's stances on homosexuality and abortion but converted to Pentecostalism two years ago. "He is coming here because they are losing so many people," he says, "but it is not going to work."

Even strict Catholic adherents were devastated that the new pope did not hail from their region - since Latin Americans make up half the world's church membership.

And while Pope Benedict XVI shares conservative moorings with his predecessor, he lacks his easy charm, many say. Where Pope John Paul II would go to the smallest towns to hold the smallest babies in countries he visited, Pope Benedict XVI will not veer from the wealthy state of Sao Paulo.

He is a theologian, an academic, a believer in hierarchy, analysts say. In composure, he could not differ more from the Latin America he will visit. Cecilia Mariz, a religious scholar at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, says she remembers the first visit of Pope John Paul II in 1980. Everyone was talking about it, she says. "This time the pope is not traveling through the country, he doesn't have the charisma of the previous pope, and the country is less Catholic, too. It just doesn't have the same appeal," Ms. Mariz says.

But it is still a historic moment for the country. Tanus Saab, whose family owns Keka Flowers and is decorating Sao Bento for the pope's visit, holds a bright pink Heliconia in his arm. They are using more than 3,000 tropical flowers including 150 orchids to adorn entranceways, the pope's room in the Sao Bento monastery, and the church. A young 20-something, he doesn't believe in all of Rome's views - his own father was a priest who left the church to marry his mother - but he says it's still a once-in-a-lifetime event. "This is important," he says, "and is bringing energy to Brazil."

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