

Pope to Visit Brazil While Evangelicals Keep on Growing

Contributed by Elma Lia Nascimento
Thursday, 03 May 2007

One week before arriving in Brazil for what is his first long trip since he became pope, Benedict XVI sent a special greeting to Brazilians during his weekly meeting with the faithful in Saint Peter's square in the Vatican.

The supreme pontiff spoke in Portuguese and said that Brazil is a "great nation". The pope was twice interrupted by applause of Brazilians who were visiting the Vatican.

The Brazilians also sang "Bento, bendito o que vem em nome do Senhor" (Benedict, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord) a song composed especially for the pope's visit.

The lyrics also say in part: "Our people receive you with love./ You who reminded people that God is love/ You come to once again announce God is love/ With Our Lady Mother Aparecida you confirm: God is love./ You proclaim to Latin America: God is Love."

The pope received as well for a meeting parishioners from São José de Cerquilha, in São Paulo state, and a group linked to the Franciscan order in Brazil. They told reporters that the pontiff talked in a strongly-accented Portuguese and was smiling during all the time they were together.

Benedict XVI will be from May 9 to May 13 in Brazil, where he will open a meeting of Latin American bishops in the shrine city of Aparecida, a town between Rio and São Paulo. The pontiff will also canonize the first Brazilian-born saint, Antônio Galvão, who died in 1832 at 83.

In Rome, the pope asked for the protection of Our Lady so that the bishops conference may be successful and added: "Besides the encounters with the Latin-American youth and with the bishops of that continent, I hope to preside at Friar Antônio de Sant'Ana Galvão's canonization and to open, in Aparecida, the 5th General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin-America and the Caribbean."

Higher Religiosity

The pope's visit happens in a time of growing religiosity among Brazilian even though the number of evangelicals continue to grow in the country.

A just-released research conducted by FGV (Getúlio Vargas Foundation) shows that for the first time in more than a century the rate of Brazilian catholics stopped to fall.

That number has kept stable at 73.9% from 2000 to 2003. During the same period, the percentage of evangelicals grew from 16.2% to 17.9%, while the amount of people without a religion fell from 7.4% to 5.1%.

For Marcelo Nery, who coordinated the study, Lula and his Bolsa Família (Family Grant) may have contributed to this good news for the Catholic church. According to Nery, when economic conditions improve poor people are less prone to look for a new religion.

Evangelicals from churches like Assembly of God and the Brazilian-based Universal Church of the Kingdom of God grew mostly in the big cities in response to the worsening of violence and living conditions in metropolitan areas.

Faced with this "new poverty" people "look for religions that offer more intense practices, as the Pentecostals do, or they lose all hope and choose to have no religion," Nery said.

"Bento, Bendito," the Pope's Song

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