

Pope's Brazil Visit Will Try to Stanch Loss of Faithful to Evangelicals

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Pope Benedict XVI urged prayers of support for his trip to Brazil next week, his first pilgrimage to Latin America and an effort to strengthen a church battling to retain its predominant role in the region. Benedict plans to lay out his strategy when he opens a once-a-decade meeting of bishops from throughout Latin America in the shrine city of Aparecida, near São Paulo, Brazil.

Speaking in Portuguese and Spanish at his weekly public audience in St. Peter's Square, the German-born pope said he hoped the meeting would serve as a "stimulus to the disciples of Christ" and that it be would blessed with "abundant fruits."

While the pope is expected to draw hundreds of thousands of people at several open-air masses, including the canonization ceremony for Brazil's first native saint, the focus will be on his directions for countering the growing influence of evangelical Protestants as well as what the Vatican denounces as such secular trends as the recent legalization of abortion in Mexico City.

Nearly half the world's 1.2 billion Catholics live in Latin America, but millions have defected in recent years in what the Vatican-based Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes recently referred to as a "hemorrhage". Vatican opposition to Marxist-based liberation theology - which views Christ as a mere social liberator - is another issue.

The Vatican set the stage for the trip with its censure of a prominent champion of liberation theology in the region, the Rev. Jon Sobrino, condemning some of his works as "erroneous or dangerous." The May 9-14 pilgrimage will be the first lengthy trip as pope for Benedict, who turned 80 last month.

Although he appears healthy and robust and has never missed a scheduled event, he said in an interview last year that "I have to say that I've never felt strong enough to plan many long trips." Except for a stop in Ankara, Turkey, Benedict's travels have been confined to Europe.

The Vatican recently defended the pope, saying he was as concerned about poverty in the developing world as much as his predecessors. "It's not true that he's 'Eurocentric' as some claim," Vatican spokesman the Rev. Federico Lombardi said.

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