

Pope to Condemn Abortion and Brazil's Free Condom Policy

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Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva said Monday, May 7, he would discuss social policies with Pope Benedict on his visit to Brazil this week and urge the Catholic Church to work more closely with the government to fight poverty.

The Pope will arrive in Brazil on Wednesday for a five-day visit, the first trip of his papacy to Latin America, a region that is home to nearly half the world's Catholics and is described by the Vatican as "the continent of hope."

Pope Benedict XVI has changed his schedule in the last few days so he might have more time to prepare the speeches he will make in Brazil. The Brazilian government seems impatient to know what are the themes the pontiff wishes to discuss with Lula, in the meeting they are going to have on Thursday, May 10.

The Vatican has already made it clear that the guest country doesn't decide the themes to be discussed by the pope and that Brazil, at most, can give suggestions of what it would like to talk about. The Church has hinted, however, that Benedict XVI will have a strong message against abortion. He should also discuss the flight of Catholics to evangelical churches.

Lula dedicated his whole Monday morning radio program, "Breakfast with the President" to the visit. The Brazilian president is scheduled to meet with the Pontiff twice in São Paulo.

"I'm interested in discussing the social policies that we're implementing in Brazil so that (the Pope), as the most important person in the Catholic Church, can help disseminate these good policies around the world," Lula said in his weekly radio address.

Though Catholic Church leaders in Brazil are sympathetic to the Lula administration's social programs, they have criticized it for not doing more to narrow the gap between rich and poor. They have also condemned the government's policy of handing out free condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Lula said he would invite Pope Benedict and the Church to work more closely with the government in the fight against poverty. He said Cardinal Claudio Hummes, the former archbishop of São Paulo and an old friend of Lula's, would be an ideal partner for the task.

"He's someone who understands Brazil's social problems very well," Lula said of Hummes, a Brazilian who now heads the Vatican's Congregation for the Clergy. "He was bishop of the ABC belt (São Paulo's industrial heart) and participated actively in the fight for people's housing and showed great solidarity with the Landless Movement".

"During most of my union leader life I was closely linked to Church movements working for a Brazil with more justice. Since taking office I've put into practice several of those policies which are the result of my experience of close links with social groups from the Church. We have a very good relation", underlined Lula.

During his visit, Pope Benedict is also scheduled to canonize the first Brazilian saint, hold masses, visit a drug treatment center and address the opening session of a conference of Latin American bishops.

"Having our first Saint is very important and will strengthen faith among Brazilians. The Brazilian people have a very close link with religion, and our first saint is going to reinforce the strength of the Brazilian Catholic people," emphasized Lula.

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