

Pope Gives Brazil Its Own Saint. It Might Help Keep Faithful

Contributed by Sabina Castelfranco
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Pope Benedict XVI begins his first trip to Latin America, today, traveling to Brazil. The pope will spend five days in Brazil, the world's largest Roman Catholic country, where the church faces an uncertain future and falling numbers. He has asked the faithful to pray for the success of his visit, his sixth trip abroad since his election.

The pontiff reminded that this is his first pastoral visit to Latin America, where almost half of the world's Catholics live, many of them young people. He says this is why it is called the continent of hope, a hope that concerns not only the church, but all America and the whole world.

During his trip, Pope Benedict will visit Brazil's largest city, São Paulo, to open a conference of Latin American bishops, who will discuss strategy for the church. The pope has said he hopes the conference will help Latin American Christians become more aware of their identity as disciples and missionaries of Christ.

The pope says the challenges of the present moment are many and varied, and that is why it is important that Christians be formed to carry a light of holiness.

He will meet with young people and canonize the first Brazilian-born saint, Franciscan Friar Galvão, who lived between 1739 and 1822. He was the founder of the Monastery of Light, now a United Nations heritage location. About one and a half million people are expected to attend the canonization mass on Friday.

In Latin America, Pope Benedict is best known for his actions as cardinal several years ago, when he disciplined several so-called liberation theologians - clergy and lay people who pursued political and social activism.

But this is not expected to be a main topic during this visit. Instead the pope is likely to speak about the need to revitalize the faith and discuss why thousands of Catholics are abandoning the church and converting to other Christian denominations.

He may also discuss how the church will deal with growing secularization in the world and the increasing shortage of priests. Economic injustices and the fight against poverty as well as the importance of marriage and the family also are expected to be on his agenda.

This is the fourth visit by a pope to Brazil, where more than 70 percent of the population is Catholic. But church officials say the number of Catholics is declining by about one percent every year, as many convert to other faiths.

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