

POPE SETS SIGHTS ON RENEWAL FOR MEXICO, CENTRAL & SOUTH AMERICA

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PINE BLUFFS — Pope Benedict's 5-day Brazilian trip in May 2007, his first pilgrimage to Latin America as Pontiff, signaled the Vatican's initial move in bringing renewal to Mexico, Central and South America, home to roughly a quarter of the world's Catholics.

His official purpose for the journey? To kick off the 5th General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM); unofficially it was to address the Church's challenges in that part of the world; the steady secularization of Mexico and Central and South American nations, and massive inroads into Roman Catholic ranks by Evangelical Protestant churches. Benedict is no stranger to Brazil. He visited there in 1990 as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

POPE PULLS NO PUNCHES

Prior to leaving Rome, Benedict reportedly said that the exodus of Catholics for Evangelical Protestant Churches was "our biggest worry," because they have enticed millions away from Catholicism recently. Believing that this exodus shows "a thirst for God," he said he expects to develop a strategy to answer that call; guidelines for the faithful in combating this trend.

In a press conference high above the African continent 4,500 miles from Sao Paulo, he fired an opening salvo, laying down church law on abortion and suggesting he agreed with Mexican Cardinal Norberto Rivera's recent pronouncement that Catholic

politicians in Mexico City excommunicated themselves by legalizing abortion there.

Addressing an enthusiastic throng of Brazilian youth the day after his arrival, he challenged them to forego premarital sex and instead adopt a celibate lifestyle until marriage, and to remain faithful to their spouses thereafter. The next day, he called for a more forceful evangelization throughout Latin America to counter defections from Catholic ranks, punctuating that call by canonizing Brazil's first native born saint, Antonio de Sant'Anna Galvao, an 18th-Century Franciscan monk credited with 5,000 miracle cures. Later, while visiting a drug rehab center, he spoke about poverty and other social problems, and warned drug dealers that God will punish them.

THE APARECIDO CONFERENCE

Opening the conference in Aparecida, Benedict set a torrid schedule for the Bishops while noting his "affection for your beloved people and my shared concern to help them be disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ, so they might have life in him."

In July 2007, The Vatican released a 130-page summary of the Bishop's Conference, which Pope Benedict said "contained numerous pastoral indications, motivated by thoughtful reflections in light of the faith and current social context." He expressed pleasure at "the priority given, in pastoral programs, to the Eucharist and the sanctification of the day of the Lord," and to "Christian formation of the faithful in general and of pastoral workers in particular."

Also in July 2007, as a happy follow-up, Archbishop Raymundo Assis, newly-elected president of the Latin American Bishop's Council, stated that during his term he'll concentrate the Council's efforts on implementing the Aparecida Conference

directives.

VACATION ENERGIZES BENEDICT

Pope Benedict XVI has just returned from a much-needed 17-day vacation at a cottage in Lorenzo Di Cadore, Italy, where he spent much time in prayer, study and contemplation. Although his straight talk is disliked by a secular media and tends to make certain elements uneasy, he is immensely popular with the laity worldwide. On July 11, the Feast of his namesake, Saint Benedict, the Alpine population of the Veneto region of northern Italy hosted a concert in his honor.

Refreshed, the Pope has thrown himself into his work on numerous thorny issues. He's addressing the breach of Eucharistic communion between Eastern and Western Catholics, which, an Eastern orthodox bishop recently said, "is a common tragedy and the quest for unity should be of equal importance to both."

He's also focusing on the Vatican's emerging relationship with China. Earlier this year, he named Hong Kong Bishop Joseph Zen, outspoken advocate for the needs of Chinese Roman Catholics, as one of 15 new Cardinals. In May, he signed a letter to Chinese Catholics, part of which addressed Chinese authorities in a non-accusatory tone, citing a future reciprocal understanding that distinguishes political and religious responsibilities.

Amid all this, the Vatican will finalize plans for World Youth Day 2008 in Sydney, Australia, where 5 million turned-on-to-their-faith youth will congregate next year.

Whether Benedict's Brazil visit had the desired affect – lighting a fire under the Episcopate as they attempt to end the slide away from God by Mexico, Central and

South American nations – remains to be seen. But one thing is crystal clear; if it does not, the countries of that region may follow France and Spain into a vortex of relativism and secularization in which the voice of the Roman Catholic Church cannot be heard.

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