5-3-2013

Brazil's Catholic Church Waits to See How Pope Francis Addresses Multiple Challenges

José Pedro Martins

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Brazil's Catholic Church Waits to See How Pope Francis Addresses Multiple Challenges

by José Pedro Martins
Category/Department: Brazil
Published: 2013-05-03

Pope Francis will have to confront many challenges and the need for firmness to give the answers that the Catholic community and the world expect. This expectation has been widespread within the Brazilian Catholic Church since Argentina's Jorge Mario Cardinal Bergoglio was chosen to succeed Pope Benedict XVI.

Despite the decline in the number of Catholics in recent decades, many of whom joined Protestant or evangelical churches, Brazil still has the largest Catholic population in the world. The 2010 census showed that 64.6% of Brazilians, more than 120 million persons, self-identified as Catholic, compared with 73.8% in 2000. The percentage of Protestants in Brazil has increased from 15.4% in 2000 to 22.2% in 2010.

Brazil's Catholic community closely followed the papal conclave to choose Benedict's successor. Until the last moment, the hope was that a Brazilian cardinal would be chosen to succeed Pope Benedict, the former Josef Cardinal Ratzinger (NotiSur, March 8, 2013). The name mentioned most often was Odilo Cardinal Scherer, archbishop of São Paulo.

Hope that Latin American pope will stem exodus of faithful

In some ways, the conclave's selection of Bergoglio frustrated many Brazilians. Nevertheless, the unprecedented choice of a Latin American to head the Catholic Church has been well-received. One hope is that this could mean a greater impetus for the Catholic Church to reduce the number of those leaving the church.

The Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB), the organization that represents the country's Catholic hierarchy, welcomed the news. "Born on the continent of hope, His Holiness brings his evangelizing experience of the church in Latin America and the Caribbean to his Petrine ministry," said the CNBB secretary general Leonardo Ulrich Steiner, auxiliary bishop of Brasília, in the official greeting of the CNBB to the new pope.

"The expectation with which the world followed the election of Peter's successor reveals how the church can cooperate with nations in consolidating peace, justice, equality, and solidarity," said the bishop.

Among progressive sectors of the Catholic Church, influenced historically by liberation theology, Bergoglio's election was received with certain anticipation about what positions Pope Francis would take on the many challenges that the church faces in the world today.

One of the great names in the progressive church in Brazil, Tomás Balduino, bishop emeritus of Goiás Velho, emphasized that respect for the principles of Vatican II, especially episcopal collegiality and consultation with Catholic communities in general, will be the new pope's great goal. "The challenges of today's world require the pope's willingness to dialogue, to listen to the people," said Balduino.
**Progressives say pope must focus on social ills**

The seriousness of the social situation in countries like Brazil requires a more forceful Catholic Church, say the bishop and other representatives of progressive Catholic sectors. As an example, Balduino cites the plight of landless campesinos who continue being victims of violence in rural areas.

In April, a few weeks after Pope Francis' election, the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT) published a report on land conflicts in Brazil in 2012. The CPT, an agency of the CNBB, works with and advocates for rural workers and supports the struggle for agrarian reform and peace in the country (NotiSur, June 11, 2010).

The report said that 36 murders related to land conflicts were recorded in 2012, a 24% increase over the 29 murders in 2011. A significant increase in attempted murders also occurred, from 38 in 2011 to 77 in 2012, said the report. The vast majority of murder or attempted-murder victims were landless campesinos.

Amazônia remains the region most affected by the rural conflict. The report said that 489 of the 1067 rural conflicts were in the Amazônia in 2012, and 97% of Amazônia communities were caught up in these conflicts. Amazônia is the site of 58.3% of rural murders (21 of 36), 84.4% of attempted murders (65 of 77), and 77.4% of death threats.

The February 2005 murder of US missioner Sister Dorothy Stang remains a symbol of the ongoing tension in rural Brazil, affecting even the Catholic Church (NotiSur, Feb. 25, 2005, and June 6, 2008). Stang was killed in the state of Pará because of her support for the struggles of the campesinos and indigenous peoples of Amazônia. In August 2012, the Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF) released one of the men convicted of killing the missioner, after he filed a writ of habeas corpus, pending the outcome of his appeal.

The violence rages on in Brazil's traditional and indigenous communities. Of the total rural conflicts in 2012, 15% involved indigenous and 12% involved Quilombola (descendants of former slaves) communities, while 9% occurred in other traditional communities.

"Brazil and its pastoral commissions want Pope Francis, like his patron from Assisi in embracing lepers, who today are found not only in the Roman Curia but throughout the world, to find his deeply held mission and continued conversion," wrote Paulo Suess, theological advisor with the Conselho Indigenista Missionário (CIMI), an CNBB agency responsible for defending the rights of Brazil's indigenous peoples.

Regarding the revitalization of the Catholic community in Brazil, a huge expectation centers on Pope Francis' participation in the XXVIII World Youth Day, to be celebrated in Rio de Janeiro July 23-28.

Thousands of young people from around the world will attend the event, considered crucial for strengthening Catholicism. What Pope Francis will say to the youth at a time when the church is facing huge challenges, including those related to ethics, gender, and sexuality, is one of the major questions concerning his appearance at World Youth Day, begun by Pope John Paul II.

-- End --