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A look ahead to Benedict in Brazil

John L. Allen Jr. | May. 3, 2007 All Things Catholic

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For a pope often styled as "Euro-centric," the Brazil trip offers a vital opportunity for Benedict XVI to convince the people of the southern hemisphere, which includes two-thirds of the 1.1 billion Catholics in the world today, that they, too, stand at the center of his pastoral concern.

The purpose of the trip is for Benedict XVI to open the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAM). Given that roughly half the Catholics in the world live in the region, the CELAM gathering, designed to craft strategy for the church for the next decade or so, amounts to a critically important crossroads for Roman Catholicism. It's also of direct importance for the United States, given the growing Hispanic presence in the U.S. church. Already, 39 percent of Catholics in the United States are Hispanic, many recent immigrants from Latin America.

Though CELAM organizers would not phrase it quite this way, the issues that are likely to loom largest in Aparecida can be expressed in terms of four "P's": Poverty, Pentecostals, Priests, and Politics.

Poverty: According to the United Nations Human Development Report, Latin America has the most dramatic gap between rich and poor in the world, and Brazil has the widest such gap in Latin America. In turn, these disparities generate crime, corruption, alcohol and drug addiction, and violence. The northeastern city of Recife in Brazil, for example, has a murder rate twice that of the most violent cities in the United States, with roughly 80 homicides per year for every 100,000 people. Honduras has a murder rate five times the global average, mostly due to the growth of maras, or youth gangs linked to the drug trade. This situation is of obvious concern to the church, since poverty and its discontents shape its daily pastoral experience.

The Catholic church has long been on the front lines of efforts to promote justice. For the past 12 years, for example, the Brazilian bishops have sponsored an annual march called the Gritos dos Excluidos, or "Cry of the Excluded," in major cities to draw attention to the plight of the poor. Some priests, religious and pastoral workers have died to defend the poor. One prominent case in point is Notre Dame de Namur Sr. Dorothy Stang, an American missionary in Brazil, shot to death in 2005 by two armed men allegedly working on behalf of

wealthy ranchers, who resented Stang's defense of the Amazon and of poor farmers. Stang was executed at point-blank range; one of the killers later said that as she was shot, she was reading aloud to them from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Many Latin American Catholics will be looking to Benedict XVI for encouragement in these efforts. It's an especially important hurdle for the pope to clear, given that as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, he led the Vatican's crackdown on the liberation theology movement. Though Ratzinger insisted that his concern was with faulty theology, not with the church's commitment to the poor, those experiences nevertheless made him an ambiguous figure in some circles in Latin America. In that light, the Brazil trip affords Benedict a crucial opportunity to exhibit his social concern.

There's certainly a track record to build on.

On April 23, for example, Benedict wrote to Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, current president of the G-8, demanding the "the rapid, total and unconditional cancellation" of the external debt of poor countries, describing it as a "grave and unconditional moral responsibility, founded on the unity of the human race, and on the common dignity and shared destiny of rich and poor alike." In a recent message to the Pontifical Academy for Social Sciences, Benedict highlighted three key challenges: 1) the environment and sustainable development, 2) respect for the rights and dignity of persons, and 3) the danger of losing spiritual values in a technical world. If he can weave these themes into his remarks in Brazil, observers believe he will go a long way towards winning hearts and minds.

Pentecostals: While Latin America is home to almost half the world's Catholic population, in some sense the Catholic church is under siege. Belgian Passionist Fr. Franz Damen, a veteran staffer for the Bolivian bishops, found that the number of conversions from Catholicism to Protestantism in Latin America during the 20th century actually surpassed the Protestant Reformation in Europe in the 16th century. In 1930, Protestants amounted to one percent of the Latin American population; today it's between 12 and 15 percent. A study commissioned in the late 1990s by CELAM found that 8,000 Latin Americans were deserting the Catholic church for Evangelical Protestantism every day. Some religious demographers believe that Guatemala has already become the first majority Protestant nation in Latin America.

Theories to explain the attrition abound. Some conservatives blame liberation theology for politicizing the church, while liberals fault the hierarchical and clerical nature of Catholicism. Conspiracy theorists point to heavy funding and logistical support from Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in the United States. In the end, however, most observers seem to believe that the key factor is the failure of the Catholic church to deliver even rudimentary pastoral care to a large segment of the population, leaving millions of nominal Catholics without any real catechesis, spiritual formation or regular access to the sacraments. That created a vacuum which the Pentecostals have exploited. In turn, this failure is attributed to a severe priest shortage. (That point will be addressed below.)

One response to the Pentecostal challenge has been the growth of the Catholic charismatic movement, an enthusiastic and spontaneous form of spirituality focused on the gifts of the Holy Spirit: prophecy, speaking in tongues, miraculous healings, and inspired preaching. A recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that 62 percent of Guatemalan Catholics call themselves “charismatic,” the highest percentage in the world, followed closely by Brazil at 57 percent. Overall, charismatics now account for roughly half the entire Catholic population of Latin America.

Some observers believe the growth of the charismatic movement is helping to stem the Pentecostal tide, because it offers most of what Latin Americans find attractive about Pentecostalism within the Catholic church. Others, however, worry that it too closely mimics the Pentecostals, especially when it comes to the “prosperity gospel” and an emphasis on immediate emotional gratification.

In that light, two challenges await Benedict XVI.

First, can this notoriously cerebral pope, famous for generating more light than heat, wear enough of his heart on his sleeve to win over audiences steeped in the charismatic style? Second, can Benedict affirm the enthusiasm and deep faith of the charismatics, while at the same time ensuring that they remain rooted in the broader pastoral concerns of the church?

Priests: By universal consensus, the shortage of priests throughout most of Latin American has created enormous holes in the church’s network of pastoral care. While the priest-to-person ratio in the United States is 1 to 1,229, in Brazil it’s 1 to 8,604, and in Honduras it’s 1 to 14,462. The experience of Fr. Ricardo Flores, pastor of San Jose Obrero parish in a residential neighborhood of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, is typical: he’s responsible for his large urban parish, as well as 14 other churches in the area that have no resident priest; he’s a professor at the seminary, teaching a full load of four courses each semester for around 60 students; and he’s the ecclesiastical moderator for two large national movements.

Though there are upticks in vocations in some countries, there’s no foreseeable future in which there will be a sufficient number of priests to staff all the parishes in Latin America, to say nothing of comforting the sick, teaching the young, and conducting the other ministries of the church. For many Latin American Catholic leaders, the answer is obvious: lay empowerment.

“Our current pastoral model is exhausted,” said Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras. He favors an aggressive program of forming laity to fill the gaps, learning from the success of the Pentecostals in fielding small armies of lay preachers and evangelists.

Given that liberation theology also promoted lay empowerment, however, in a way that critics saw as forming a kind of “church from below” in opposition to the hierarchy, other Latin Americans remain wary. In that light, if

Benedict XVI chooses to speak positively about lay collaboration, it could have decisive significance for which way CELAM chooses to move.

Politics: Across much of Latin America, leftist governments have risen to power. These governments, to be sure, are hardly homogenous. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador represent, to different degrees, classic leftist populism, while Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil and Michelle Bachelet of Chile are more akin to European Social Democrats. In many cases, these governments came to power with support from the Catholic church, motivated by its concern for social justice. (Such was the case in Brazil, for example). In fact, the leftist candidate in Paraguay's next presidential election may well be an ex-Catholic bishop: Fernando Lugo of the San Pedro diocese.

Yet the ascent of these leftist governments has also spelled trouble for the Catholic church. The Venezuelan bishops, for example, have repeatedly criticized what they see as an authoritarian crackdown under Chavez. In a television interview last July, Morales of Bolivia said the bishops had "historically damaged the country" by functioning as "an instrument of the oligarchs."

Even when church/state relations are formally polite, the leftist tide poses challenges to what church leaders regard as the Catholic identity of Latin America, especially on issues of sexuality and the family. Governments in Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador and Chile have already adopted legislation loosening legal restrictions on abortion, and a similar bill is making its way through the process in Brazil. In March, Mexico City legalized same-sex unions, following the lead of other Latin American cities such as Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paolo.

Some observers see these trends as the first stirrings of Western-style secularism in Latin America.

"For the first time, some in Latin America are turning away from religion altogether, which is new," said Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the emeritus archbishop of Washington, D.C., in an April 21 interview. (See **McCarrick: Pope will be a hit in Brazil** **[2]**.)

In that regard, Benedict XVI will no doubt want to bring his struggle against the "dictatorship of relativism" to Latin America. The question is how to rally his troops without inadvertently feeding a form of public expression which the pope has said he regrets in the West -- a church that's better at explaining what it's against rather than what it's for, better at saying "no" than "yes." The tone Benedict sets in engaging these questions could help shape the approach the Latin American bishops adopt.

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I’ll offer four brief sidebars to the Brazil trip.

The day after Benedict returns to Rome, a trial will begin in Brazil’s Amazon region of a rancher charged with being one of the “intellectual authors” of the murder of Sr. Dorothy Stang, the 73-year-old American missionary killed in 2005.

Stang spent 30 years in Brazil, striving to protect the Amazon rainforest and to defend the rights of poor farmers. She was legendary for her perspicacity, sometimes camping out overnight in the offices of local politicians and police officials until they agreed to enforce environmental and land-use laws.

Observers say the trial is a landmark case, since the wealthy landowners who order such killings are almost never brought to justice.

Reached by phone at his home in Palmer Lake, Colorado, on May 1, David Stang -- Dorothy’s brother and a former Maryknoll priest -- said he’s “optimistic” about the outcome, especially since one of the shooters already convicted for Stang’s murder named the rancher, Vitalmiro Bastos de Moura, as one of the men behind the attack. David Stang plans to travel to Brazil to attend the trial.

On the other hand, Bastos himself does not appear to be especially concerned. Two government agencies recently had to compel him to remove 1,500 head of cattle which he had illegally allowed to graze on the very plot of land where Stang was shot to death in 2005. She had sought to have that plot of land protected for use as a sustainable development project.

David Stang said he’s a bit concerned that Pope Benedict’s presence in Brazil may “overshadow” the trial, distracting media attention from the case and thereby reducing some of the public pressure on a notoriously recalcitrant judicial system in Para state. Stang said the “gossip” in Brazil was that the court waited until the dates for the pope’s trip were announced in order to schedule the trial, hoping for precisely this effect.

Yet Stang said the pope’s presence could also prove to be helpful, especially if he were to mention his sister by name. Even in the absence of such a reference, however, a more general appeal for justice for the poor, and those who speak in their name, would also be welcome.

Stang said he would sum up his sister's legacy as "a deep love for the poor in Brazil, a deep love for the environment, and an understanding of the connection between the two." He said he has "no doubt" that she's a saint.

"She represented the best of the Sermon on the Mount, and she died for it," he said. "Such martyrs are saints."

* * *

Speaking of saints, Benedict XVI will canonize the first Brazilian-born saint in church history during his five-day trip, on May 11: an 18th century Franciscan named Antonio de Sant'Anna Galvao, or "Frei Galvao," whose claim to fame is that he developed a paper "pill" inscribed with a prayer to the Virgin Mary, which devotees ingest in hopes of a miracle. The pills are reputed to have cured everything from depression to hepatitis.

The pills are made by religious sisters at the Convent of Light in São Paolo, where Galvao died in 1832 at the age of 83. They contain the following prayer: "After the birth, the Virgin remained intact / Mother of God, intercede on our behalf." Devotees swallow three pills over nine days while reciting the prayer.

In 2006, devotees consumed an average of 90,000 pills a month, according to Brazilian press reports. Since Galvao's canonization was announced, that number jumped to 140,000.

The miracle which cleared the way for the canonization was reported by a Brazilian woman, who had a deformity in her uterus which doctors said would make it impossible for her to carry a baby to term. After ingesting Galvao's pills, however, she said she was able to carry her child for seven and a half months until he was delivered by Caesarean section.

The pills are not the only sign of supernatural accomplishment attributed to Galvao. He is also said to have levitated while praying, and to have had the ability to read minds and to witness events even when he wasn't physically present. Pregnant women sometimes borrow a frayed piece of rope believed to have been Galvao's belt, and wear it around their mid-section in hopes of a smooth birth. Devotees even hammer off tiny chunks of the wall from Galvao's monastery and brew them in a tea, which they drink as a sort of elixir thought to promote good health.

Auxiliary Bishop Edgar Moreira da Cunha of Newark, New Jersey, the only Brazilian-born bishop in the United States, said in an April 30 interview that until the canonization was announced, Galvao was not a well-known figure.

"Frankly, I didn't know about this thing with the pill until recently," he said. "It wasn't known in Brazil. It's a

very localized thing in São Paolo.”

Devotion to Galvao has not always played to positive reviews. Some see it as superstitious and tinged with elements of folk magic. Cardinal Aloísio Leo Arlindo Lorscheider, now retired from the Aparecida diocese, said in 1998 that he considered the devotion “ridiculous,” and prohibited local nuns from making the pills. (They kept doing it anyway.)

Da Cunha said he doubted the canonization would stir much controversy. For most people, he said, the only thing that matters is that a Brazilian is being honored.

“In Brazilian culture, and this is probably true of all Latin America, rituals and external forms of piety, the statues and all these things, are very, very popular, it’s embedded in the culture,” he said. “People like that and they go to these places. Our church is diversified enough to have room for all these options.”

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The CELAM conference is taking place in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Aparecida, one of the most popular Marian shrines in the world. Its annual traffic of pilgrims is rivaled only by Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, Lourdes in France, and Fatima in Portugal.

The devotion to Our Lady of Aparecida dates to 1717, when three local men were fishing in the Paraíba River with little success. At one point, their nets brought in a statue of the Virgin Mary which was missing its head. They cast the nets again, and this time found the head of the statue. Thus the image, which is roughly three feet tall, received its name: “she who appeared,” or aparecida. After that, the story goes, the fishermen’s luck changed, and they brought in a large haul of fish.

Devotion to the statue slowly began to build, especially as reports of miracles began to circulate. Our Lady of Aparecida, regarded as a “black Madonna” because of the dark color of the Virgin’s skin, was eventually named the Patroness of Brazil in 1929 by Pope Pius XI. The basilica built in her honor rivals St. Peter’s in size, and is thought to be the largest Marian temple in the world. It attracts six to eight million pilgrims each year, with especially large crowds around Oct. 12, the Feast of Our Lady of Aparecida.

In one sign of its cultural importance, a Brazilian television network produced a soap opera in 2001 that told the story of the beginnings of the Aparecida devotion, which was called “The Patroness.” There’s also a $70 million theme park connected to the shrine, called the “Aparecida Magic, Cultural, Religious and Recreational Park.” One unusual feature, dubbed “the world’s only moving Nativity,” features 84 life-size, computer-controlled puppets showing three stages of the birth of Jesus.

John Paul II consecrated the shrine in Aparecida on July 4, 1980. A few days before the pope's visit, someone grabbed the image and shattered it into several pieces, but artists painstakingly put it back together.

However relaxed their Catholicism may be at times, Brazilians are nevertheless protective of the Virgin of Aparecida. On Oct. 12, 1995, a pastor from the Pentecostal movement Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, named Sergio von Helde, kicked a miniature clay version of the statue on Brazilian television, trying to make a point about the emptiness of icons. Reaction was so ferocious that von Helde had to flee Brazil for Africa until the controversy died down.

In conjunction with Pope Benedict's trip, the shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida recently registered trademarks for a new line of products, including images, candles, books, rosaries, games made of stone and porcelain, and bedding and t-shirts for children with the Virgin's image.

"The church is not a corporation, but the sanctuary needs to generate income to pay the salaries of almost 1,000 employees and to pay its bills," a spokesperson said.

One improbable fruit of the pope's visit will be a spurt in the number of local businesses in Aparecida equipped to handle credit cards. It has long been a source of frustration for some pilgrims that only about half of the shops, restaurants and hotels can take a charge. By May 9, however, that number should be 80 percent, thanks to an assist from the local government. The state is also investing in improvements in roads and sidewalks, as well as construction of six new hotels.

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After historic gatherings of CELAM in Rio de Janeiro (1955), Medellin (1968), Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992), which confronted the military dictatorships that once dotted Latin America and wrestled with internal tensions over liberation theology, most observers expect the 2007 edition to be a more practical and pastoral affair. Though Benedict XVI goes home on May 13 after the formal opening of the general conference, the meeting itself does not conclude until May 31.

A total of 265 people will take part in the general conference, which includes 162 voting members, 81 invited guests (such as bishops from other parts of the world, including four from the United States), eight observers and 15 periti, or theological advisors. The three co-presidents of the general conference are Cardinals Francisco Javier Errázuriz of Santiago, Chile, the President of CELAM; Geraldo Majella Agnelo of São Salvador de Bahía in Brazil; and Giovanni Battista Re, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops in Rome.

Among the 162 members of the General Conference are 15 nominated directly by the pope. This group is dominated by 11 current or former Vatican officials, including American Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Much like a Synod of Bishops in Rome, preparations for a CELAM general conference unfold over several years. In 2005, the secretariat of CELAM issued a “preparatory document,” intended to guide discussions within bishops’ conferences, priests’ councils, religious communities and lay groups. In 2007, CELAM put out a “synthesis” of the results, which will serve as the point of departure for the discussions in Aparecida.

In broad terms, the document identifies “evangelization” as the theme uniting all five General Conferences of CELAM. It then lays out the main challenges facing the church in Latin America, based on the feedback to the 2005 preparatory document. The challenges are phrased in terms of “faces that are looking to us.”

Among them:

- The marginalization of indigenous populations and groups of African descent;
- A double exclusion of women, on account of both their socio-economic situation and their sex, which, the report says, is compounded today by “ideological feminism” and by a culture of “consumerism and spectacle,” which threatens to “subject women to new forms of slavery”;
- The hardships experienced by “the poor, the excluded, the unemployed, migrants, displaced persons, farmers without land, those looking to survive in the networks of the informal economy, and all those deprived of a dignified life”;
- “The sick, drug addicts, the disabled and the elderly who suffer in solitude and do not enjoy the right to a dignified life and the care they deserve. We also remember the victims of violence within families ...”;
- Victims of kidnapping and of armed conflicts;
- Crime, corruption, drugs, terrorism, and those who “abuse power and engage in ideological manipulation”;
- The need for dialogue with members of other Christian confessions, other religions, agnostics, atheists, and the indifferent;
- The need for a pastoral response to those who have left the priesthood, those who are divorced and remarried without an annulment, homosexuals, and all those who “lead a double life, adding to the pain of the disorder a sinking fear of being discovered”;
- Pluralism and the emergence of subjectivity;
- The impact of globalization;
- The “hegemony of economics and technical-scientific” thought, including a “colonization” of political and scientific life by the market;
- The post-modern search for meaning;
- A crisis of the family;
- Urban culture;
- The exercise of power in Latin America.

The document surveys strengths that the church brings to addressing these challenges, including:

- Its consistent defense of the poor;
- A dense network of institutions and programs in the areas of education, health, social welfare, culture, and the promotion of workers and families;
- The willingness of church members to defend the vulnerable with their lives, if necessary;
- A post-Vatican II emphasis on the biblical and patristic roots of the church, which has led to a renewed appreciation for the Word of God;
- The growth of lay activity, such as lay catechists, the flowering of popular religiosity, base communities, and new lay movements;
- Liturgical renewal;
- A post-Vatican II opening to culture, to history, and to the world.

Finally, the document adds a "confession" of certain deficiencies that need to be corrected in the church.

"Consistent social transformation is accomplished only slowly and gradually, and the church is no exception," it says. "The ecclesiology of the council, without a doubt, renewed ecclesial life, but it must continue to challenge us. Here it's not only the socio-cultural aspects that weigh upon us, but mainly the reality of sin in us, the members of the church, which demand sincere repentance and personal conversion, as well as a more evangelical stance. Only thus can our errors and deficiencies be pardoned and corrected."

"We discussed, to mention some examples, clericalism, attempts to return to the past, secularized readings and applications of the council's renewal, a lack of self-criticism, the need for authentic obedience and an evangelical exercise of authority, an overly moralistic approach that weakens the centrality of Jesus Christ, acts of infidelity to doctrine and to ecclesial communion, the weakness of our preferential option for the poor, discrimination against so many women and groups of people, the scant support given to laity involved in public service, an approach to evangelization with little zeal and without new methods and modes of expression, an individualistic spirituality, an over-emphasis on the sacraments while neglecting other pastoral tasks, a certain slowness in the commitment to democracy, a lack of creative application of the rich patrimony that constitutes the social doctrine of the church, and the use of a language that has little significance for contemporary culture and which sometimes does not respect the pluralistic character of our society and culture. We have to ask forgiveness for having departed from the Gospel, which asks of us a style of life more faithful to the truth and to charity -- simpler, more austere and more rooted in solidarity. We ask for courage, persistence and docility to grace in order to continue the renewal initiated by the Second Vatican Council."

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The full text of my interview with Auxiliary Bishop Edgar Moreira da Cunha of Newark, New Jersey, the only Brazilian-born bishop in the United States, can be found in the Special Documents section of NCRonline.org: **Da Cunha Interview** **[3]**.

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