

Mass appeal in Brazil: Catching up with the Pentecostals

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue

At first glimpse, Marcelo Rossi is a textbook example of the pastor as showman. A handsome, stylish man in his early forties, he leads a flourishing São Paulo congregation legendary for its music. He dances during worship, performing “the Lord’s aerobics.” And people respond. One of his stadium revivals attracted 70,000 believers. He reaches out to the world through his best-selling music recordings and through television and radio shows, and he has acted in feature films. He epitomizes the kind of rock-star televangelist that has emerged around the globe in recent years.

In fact, he is something rather different: he is a Catholic priest and a key figure in the Catholic charismatic revival. His ecclesiastical superiors raise surprisingly few objections to his running what looks like a Pentecostal megachurch. And he is not the only example of his kind. In Brazil, men like Father Rossi are in the front line of a denominational war that will have enormous consequences for the fate of Christianity worldwide. The core question is: Can the Catholic Church save its historic role as the dominant religious institution in Latin America?

A huge country, not much smaller in area than the U.S., Brazil does everything on a mega scale. According to Vatican statistics, it is the country with the largest Catholic population—Catholics make up 85 percent of Brazil’s 190 million people.

But these days Brazil supplies some other statistics that suggest a rather different picture of faith. Every June, for instance, São Paulo is the setting for a March for Jesus, which attracts 2 or 3 million Protestants. Brazil’s Protestant population has surged in recent years, growing from perhaps 1 or 2 percent in the 1960s to at least 15 percent today, and there is no end in sight to the boom. Nobody scoffs at predictions that by 2050 Brazil will have a Protestant majority.

Protestantism in Brazil is dominated by Pentecostal churches, which focus on promises of healing, miracle and transformation.

In sociological terms, Pentecostals offer the attractions of a classic sect. They demand high involvement and participation by members, who in return receive significant rewards of emotional satisfaction and intimate fellowship. Believers join a tight-knit new family, in which members strive to help each other confront and overcome the multiple deprivations.

Catholics themselves grudgingly admit that Protestant believers are much more active and enthusiastic in their faith than their neighbors, keener about reading the Bible and trying to reshape their lives according to its teachings. The Brazilian Bible Society produces over 4 million Bibles annually, making that country one of the largest producers and consumers of the book worldwide.

No Catholic leader can afford to ignore such a challenge. Not long ago, Brazilian Cardinal Cláudio Hummes—long mentioned as a potential pope—raised the alarm. “How much longer will Brazil be a Catholic country?” he asked. “How long will Latin America be a Catholic continent?” Recent surveys suggest that Brazil’s Catholic population is really closer to 65 percent of the people rather than the purported 85 percent.

But what can Brazilian Catholics do? According to church statistics, the nation’s Catholics have 10,000 parishes, with an average of 16,000 members per parish. Some urban parishes in theory serve 40,000 to 50,000 members—making it impossible to offer any kind of pastoral care. U.S. Catholics may believe they are suffering from a dreadful priest shortage, but they are blessed with a ratio of priests to laity that is six times better than that of their Brazilian counterparts. While Brazilian Catholics have little access to either priests or churches, Pentecostal believers can turn to a strictly local church with a few hundred members, where the pastor is familiar and accessible.

The only option for the Catholic Church is to play catch-up with the Pentecostals, and that is where priests like Father Rossi come in. They present the Christian message in a style that has become the standard expectation in Brazilian life, with all the elements that the Pentecostals have made familiar—powerful contemporary music, emotional charismatic worship and, above all, a sense of excitement.

The Catholic revivalists are enjoying some success: mass attendance figures show signs of growth. But if the Catholic Church survives by this strategy, it will do so by becoming a radically different institution from what anyone would have contemplated only a few decades ago.