

# The paradox of world's most Catholic continent

LIMA, Peru – When church leaders from throughout Latin America gather in Brazil in May for the fifth general conference of the Latin American bishops' council, they will be grappling with the contradictions of life on the world's most Catholic continent.

While more than 450 million of the region's 551 million people are considered Catholic, "the practice of the Christian faith is in profound crisis, which is reflected in the type of societies we have," Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini Imeri of San Marcos, Guatemala, president of the Guatemalan bishops' conference, told Catholic News Service. "They are societies in which there is a great deal of violence, societies that try to follow lifestyles in which consumerism and hedonism predominate, societies that lack social justice."

Economic justice, corruption, migration, education and civic participation are among the issues that bishops in the region will discuss at the conference, which is expected to draw more than 160 voting bishops and 80 other participants to Aparecida, Brazil, outside Sao Paulo, May 13-31.

Pope Benedict XVI, who will travel to Brazil for a five-day visit May 9-13, will officially open the conference.

In a meeting with papal nuncios from Latin America in Rome Feb. 17, the pope outlined some of the issues church leaders face in Latin America, including the growth of evangelical churches – still generally referred to as "sects" in this majority-Catholic region – and "the growing influence of postmodern hedonistic secularism."

In examining the reasons for the lure of Pentecostalism, the bishops will have to take a critical look at the Catholic Church's own practices.

Part of the attraction of other churches lies in "a failure to awaken a missionary commitment in Catholics and a lack of priests and religious," said Cardinal Javier

Errazuriz Ossa of Santiago, Chile, who is president of the Latin American bishops' council, or CELAM.

"It's not that people leave the Catholic Church because they oppose it, but in seeking a relationship with God and seeking the Gospel, and having lost a livelier contact with Catholic communities, they go to other pastors who are talking about Jesus Christ," Cardinal Errazuriz said.

The conference's dual emphasis on discipleship and missionary commitment is meant to spur an awakening so that "every Catholic feels called by Jesus Christ to be a disciple and to be sent out to change the world in accordance with the Gospel," he said.

The bishops must grapple with how to educate Catholics to take on that task, he said.

Although Pope John Paul II once called Latin America "the continent of hope," a brighter future remains elusive for nearly half the region's people. More than 40 percent live in poverty, and income distribution is the most unequal in the world. In countries such as Chile, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, El Salvador and Guatemala, the wealthiest one-fifth of the population receives half the country's income, while the poorest one-fifth take home a scant 3 percent.

"This is poverty born of social and economic inequality, poverty that affects human life and dignity, and poverty that is a form of violence," Bishop Ramazzini said.

Archbishop Pedro Barreto Jimeno of Huancayo, Peru, who will be a delegate to the conference, told CNS that the bishops must also address environmental issues. Andean glaciers are in rapid retreat and may disappear within two decades, leaving farmers without water. In South America, one-fifth of the Amazon rain forest has been cleared, and destruction continues at a rate of as much as 20,000 square miles a year.

The region's "wealth of natural resources and the variety of its cultures" contrast sharply with the extreme poverty in which many people live in urban shantytowns, highland villages and remote Amazonian communities, Archbishop Barreto said.

“When the environment deteriorates, there is also serious deterioration of human coexistence,” he said.

The fifth general conference follows earlier CELAM gatherings in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1955; Medellin, Colombia, in 1969; Puebla, Mexico, in 1979; and Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, in 1992. The special Synod of Bishops for America brought together bishops from both hemispheres in 1997.

The meeting in Brazil will build on the issues raised at those meetings, including the need for a new evangelization, human development, a Christian culture and ways of overcoming extreme poverty, as well as solidarity between the church in the United States and Canada and the church in Latin America, said Cardinal Errazuriz.

Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has been invited to attend the conference as a voting delegate. Other USCCB representatives are expected to participate as observers.

Follow-up to the conference will be as important as the event itself, the bishops said. Several years ago, the region’s prelates envisioned a great continental mission to reinvigorate the region’s Catholics and spread the good news. Conference preparatory documents include guidelines for visiting people’s homes and talking to them about the Catholic faith, but Cardinal Errazuriz told CNS that the bishops have not yet decided what form the “great mission” will take.

“I don’t think it’s just a matter of trying to get people who have left to come back or simply putting the brakes on evangelical proselytism,” Bishop Ramazzini said. “The most important thing is to ensure that church communities are communities of disciples, that we live consistently with the Gospel. Everything else will follow.”