

# Popes, Saints, and Religious Competition

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CAMBRIDGE – The election of the first non-European pope is long overdue. After all, Pope Francis’s native region, Latin America, is currently home to nearly half (44%) of the world’s Catholics. But the Catholic Church is increasingly losing out to Protestant competition there and elsewhere.

Just look at the statistics. Evangelicalism is the fastest-growing world religion by conversion – a trend that underlies the strong expansion of Protestantism in traditionally Roman Catholic Latin America. Protestants in Latin America accounted for only 2.2% of the population in 1900, but 16.4% in 2010, with growth coming mainly at the expense of Catholics, whose population share fell from 90.4% to 82.3%.

The Catholic Church understands this competition, but it confronts a chronic shortage of priests. As a result, the creation of saints is becoming an important way of retaining the faithful.

Indeed, the choice of a Latin American pope echoes a prior shift in the geographical distribution of new saints. Since the early part of the twentieth century – and, most clearly, since John Paul II’s papacy (1978-2005) – the traditional dominance of Italy and other European countries in the locations of blessed persons has waned. This is reflected in the two stages of saint-making: beatification (the first stage of the process and currently the status of John Paul II) and canonization.

The rationale for this shift is to use national saints to inspire Catholics – and thereby counter the competition from Protestants, especially Evangelicals. This phenomenon is most clear in Latin America, but it applies to North America, Asia, and Africa as well. And we think that the naming of a Latin American pope has the same underlying motivation – to compete with the growing threat of Protestantism in this region.

The idea of using saints to compete with evangelicals in Latin America goes back a long way – the friars accompanying conquering Spanish troops introduced patron saints in every nucleated community. Coupled with persistent shortages of priests, the worship of saints in Latin America became more embedded in the region’s culture than in that of Europe.

In 1992, John Paul II referred to evangelical groups in Latin America as “rapacious wolves” who were “luring Latin American Catholics away from the Church of Rome,” and he decried the “[h]uge sums of money...spent on evangelical proselytizing campaigns aimed specifically at Catholics.” His concerns with Protestant competition in Latin America were – and remain – understandable, particularly in Brazil, Chile, and Guatemala, which have seen sharp increases in Evangelical adherence.

John Paul II changed the process of saint-making dramatically. He personally beatified 319 people (non-martyrs), compared to a total of only 259 by the 37 previous popes since 1585. He also made 80 saints, compared to a prior total of 165. Pope Benedict XVI's (2005-2013) large number of saints (44) reflects mainly the large stock of beatified people left behind by John Paul II.

As part of this process, Benedict XVI dramatically shortened the number of years that blessed persons had to wait to graduate from beatification to sainthood. For example, John Paul II became a blessed person a mere six years after his death.

With respect to competition with Protestants, the key feature of the last two popes is the shift in the geographical distribution of blessed persons away from the traditional dominance of Europe. Under John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the share of (non-martyr) beatifications from Latin America was 10.5%, along with 4.6% for North America, 3.9% for Asia, and 1.9% for Africa. Similarly, Latin America accounted for 9.8% of (non-martyr) canonizations, along with 6.6% for North America, 4.1% for Asia, and 0.8% for Africa. These shares compare with the mere handfuls of blessed persons from these regions who were named by previous popes.

Francis will visit Brazil in July to attend World Youth Day. There have been suggestions that he will visit other Latin American countries this year, including his homeland, Argentina.

According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Brazil has the [largest Catholic population in the world](#). Combined, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina account for 26% of the world's Catholics. Yet Latin America's Catholic population appears to be leveling off, due to falling birth rates and conversions out of Catholicism.

The combination of the highest share of Catholics in the world with a decline in the share of religious adherents means that Francis is facing a strategic dilemma. Either he can focus on regaining Latin America for the Catholic Church, or he can place longer-term bets on Sub-Saharan Africa, where the population growth rate has been outpacing that in the rest of the world and Catholicism is now growing the fastest. Where will the next saints come from?