

# RELIGION IN PARAGUAY

## RELIGIONS AS A PERCENT OF POPULATION

Roman Catholicism 80.0 percent  
Protestantism 6.0 percent  
Other 11.0 percent  
None 3.0 percent  
(2002 estimate by PROLADES)

## COUNTRY OVERVIEW

Paraguay, located in South America, is a land-locked country of 406,750 sq km or about the size of the state of California. It is bordered by three larger countries: Bolivia to the northwest, Argentina to the southwest and Brazil to the east. The county's climate is subtropical to temperate, with substantial rainfall in the eastern area and becoming semiarid in the far west. Geographically, Paraguay is divided into two regions by the Paraguay River, which flows from north to south. East of the Paraguay River the countryside is mainly composed of grassy plains and wooded hills, but the Gran Chaco region west of the Paraguay River is mostly marshy plain near the river and dry forest and thorny scrub elsewhere. Its main agricultural products are cotton, sugarcane, soybeans, corn, wheat, tobacco, cassava (tapioca), fruits, vegetables, beef, pork, eggs, milk and timber. The population today is estimated at 5,884,500 (July 2002).

The country was discovered in 1515 by Spanish explorer Juan Diaz de Solis and was gradually conquered in a series of bloody battles that devastated the various Indian tribes that inhabited the region. By 1590 the Spaniards had founded ten cities and forty colonies in the Province of Paraguay.

The Spanish conquistador Juan de Salazar and his company founded a fort at Asunción in 1537, as part of a campaign to colonize and subdue an estimated 200,000 Native American Indians, principally of the Tupi-Guaraní linguistic group. Within 20 years of its founding, Asunción—now the nation's capital—boasted a Spanish population of 1,500, a Roman Catholic cathedral, a textile mill and the beginning of the livestock industry.

For more than two centuries, Asunción was a principal center of Spanish power in the Río de la Plata basin, and from there the conquistadors launched expeditions to dominate and colonize the surrounding territories, such as Santa Fe, Corrientes and Buenos Aires that are now part of Argentina.

The creation of the Viceroyalty of La Plata in 1776 reduced the territory of Paraguay to an unimportant outpost of Buenos Aires. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Asunción was a struggling town of less than 10,000 people. Today, Asunción, the nation's capital and its largest city, is built on unassuming hills above the east bank of the Paraguay River.

In 1811, the citizens of Paraguay declared their independence from Spanish rule and from the control of the newly-independent government in Buenos Aires. However, the country's first president, Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, established a cruel dictatorship that lasted from 1811 to 1840, in which he was the undisputed master of the nation. Many Spaniards who were the owners of the best lands and businesses were jailed, murdered or exiled, along with others who criticized his rule. Nevertheless, during this period, the nation prospered due to the hard work of its people and improved methods of agricultural and livestock production.

When Rodríguez de Francia died in 1840, the nation experienced six-months of disorder until Carlos Antonio López came to power and ruled from 1841 to 1862. Although equally despotic, President López was less cruel and more intelligent than his predecessor. Rather than maintaining the previous policy of isolationism, López opened river trade with Buenos Aires and Europe, resumed normal relations with the Vatican, and welcomed immigrants. In 1844, López approved a new Constitution that allowed the president to control the clergy and the churches, to appoint bishops and to require priests to submit to his authority as head of the Church in Paraguay, in much the same fashion as did King Henry VIII of England.

Carlos Antonio López died in 1862 and was followed in power by his 35-year-old son, Francisco Solano López, who inherited the presidency and ruled until 1870. The second López was responsible for plunging his weak nation into a savage and bloody war with the combined military forces of Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. In the disastrous War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870), about two-thirds of Paraguay's adult males were killed and much of its territory (160,000 sq km) was lost to the victors. The country was politically and economically crippled for the next half century.

The peace that came to Paraguay between 1870 and 1928 was that of a graveyard: most of the women were widows and the children were orphans; the men who survived the war were mutilated, old and tired. Brazilian soldiers occupied the land until 1876 and fathered a new generation of Paraguayans who were broken and defenseless. Foreign adventurers acquired rich farm and grazing land by legal trickery or by marriage to Paraguayan women, while Conservative and Liberal political parties took turns naming presidents. Between 1870 and 1967, there were 40 presidents, most of whom were jailed, exiled or murdered before they completed their terms of office. However, there was some progress, mainly because of the arrival of a new wave of immigrants (about 40,000) from Italy, Spain, Germany and Argentina who developed the livestock, agriculture and forestry industries. The immigrants included about 5,000 Mennonites from Europe and North America (the USA and Canada) who created agricultural colonies, schools and small businesses.

The Chaco War of 1932-1935, between Paraguay and Bolivia, turned out well for Paraguay because it won large and economically important territories from Bolivia. By the end of the war, Paraguay had taken possession of 20,000 square miles of the Chaco Boreal wilderness, which contained scrub land, dense forests and swamps, at the reported cost of three Bolivians and two Paraguayans for each square mile.

After a series of brief and ineffective dictatorships, Gen. Alfredo Stroessner Mattiauda came to power in 1954 and ruled ruthlessly until overthrown by a military coup in 1989, which provided an opening for democracy. Despite a marked increase in political infighting since then, the nation has held relatively free and regular presidential elections until the present.

Paraguayans are a homogeneous people of mestizos (about 95 percent), a result of the interbreeding of Spaniards and the Guaraní and other Indians, immigrants from Argentina and Brazil, and a few thousand European immigrants: mainly Swiss-Italians and Germans. Spanish and Guaraní are the national languages, with the latter being dominant. According to SIL in 1992, 52 percent of rural Paraguayans are monolingual in Guaraní. There are 21 living languages spoken in Paraguay, 19 of which are Amerindian dialects. Other sources indicate that about 75 percent of Paraguayans speak Spanish and that 90 percent speak Guaraní, with Spanish being the dominant language in the metropolitan Asunción area and Guaraní in the interior of the country. Also, Standard German and Low-German are spoken among many Lutherans and Mennonites.

### **RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE**

The 1967 Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion, but allowed Catholicism to play a unique role in national life: "The official religion is the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion." Although it required the president of the republic "to profess the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion," the clergy was not allowed to serve in the legislature as deputies or senators, and was discouraged from partisan political activity. Traditionally, relations between Church and State were close, if not always cordial, as witnessed by the tumultuous events that occurred between Independence in 1811 and the ratification of a new Constitution in 1870, which established the Roman Catholic Church as the official State religion.

The new Constitution of 1993 replaced this condition with provisions that reflect modern times: "It is recognized: freedom of religion, worship and ideology without any limitations except those established in the Constitution and law. No confession will have official status. No person shall be harassed, inquired of or compelled to profess his beliefs or doctrines."

## **ROMAN CATHOLICISM**

**<sup>1</sup>DATE OF ORIGIN IN PARAGUAY**  
1547 C.E.

## <sup>2</sup>NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS IN PARAGUAY

Catholics number about 4.7 million and are 80 percent of the total population, according to official Catholic sources in 2000.

## <sup>3</sup>HISTORY

A papal decree created the Bishopric of Our Lady of Asunción in 1547, but the first Catholic bishop did not arrive in the diocese until 1556. In 1588 three Jesuit missionaries arrived with the intent of pacifying and converting the various Indian groups. After the arrival of additional Jesuit and Franciscan priests, the missionaries began working among the Indians in the southeastern region of modern Paraguay and along the shores of various rivers, including areas that are now part of surrounding nations.

The Jesuits soon realized that they had to protect the Indians from enslavement by the growing number of Spanish and Portuguese colonists if they were going to convert them to the Catholic faith. For about 158 years, from 1609 to 1767, the Jesuits maintained missions among a variety of Indian groups in the upper Rio de la Plata region. They accomplished this by settling the Indians in a system of communal towns, called Reductions (*reducciones*), under Jesuit administration.

The main part of this "Christian Indian State", as the Reductions have been called, was formed by the Guaraní Missions, which were founded in the territory of the modern nation of Paraguay, the Argentine Provinces of Misiones and Corrientes, and the Brazilian Province of Rio Grande do Sul. Until 1767 new Reductions were continually being formed, while a constant stream of converts won by the missionaries on their extensive journeys kept pouring into the older Reductions. Between 1610 and 1768, approximately 700,000 Indians of the various Guaraní tribes were baptized, according to Catholic sources. Eventually there were as many as 32 Guaraní Reductions with more than 140,000 inhabitants (ca. 1732).

However, the Treaty of Madrid in 1750 transferred the territory occupied by the Jesuit-Guaraní Missions from Spain to Portugal. Although Spain, at least officially, no longer permitted slavery, this inhumane practice was legal in the Portuguese territories. Shortly thereafter the Spanish rulers ordered the missions to be disbanded, and Pope Clement XIV suppressed the Jesuits, forcing the missionaries to abandon their work in approximately 100 Reductions in the Americas, including those in Paraguay. However, in 1754, the Guaraní Indians and a few dissident Jesuits refused to abide by the order to disband the missions, and created in a short-lived rebellion that was cruelly put down by the Spanish authorities.

Following the Jesuits' formal expulsion from the Spanish colonies in the Americas in 1767 by King Charles III, many of the Guaraní Indians were captured and sold into slavery, where they were gradually absorbed into *mestizo* society; however, those who escaped usually returned to their indigenous way of life in remote areas. After 1767 the spiritual administration of the Jesuit-administered Reductions, among a variety of Indian groups, was transferred to the Franciscans and other religious orders, while the public administration was given to Spanish and Portuguese civil officials.

For much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Church-State relations ranged from indifferent to hostile. The State assumed the prerogatives of royal patronage that the Vatican had granted to the Spanish rulers and sought to control both the bishops and the clergy. President José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia (1814-1840) was committed to a secular state; he was frugal and cruel beyond description, he hated all foreigners and was fearful of all foreign entanglements, and he was violently anti-clerical. He suppressed monastic orders, eliminated the tithe, instituted civil marriage and cut off communication with the Vatican. President Francisco Solano López (1862-1870) used the Church as if it were a branch of the government; he enlisted priests as secret agents to report on signs of disaffection and subversion among the populace.

Church-State relations worsened with the government execution of the Bishop of Asunción, Manuel Antonio Palacio, during the War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870). When the war ended, there were only 55 priests left in the whole country, and the Catholic Church was without a bishop for 11 years.

The modern Paraguayan Church was established largely under the direction of Mons. Juan Sinforiano Bogarón, the Archbishop of Asunción from 1930 to 1949, and Mons. Aníbal Mena Porta, the Archbishop from 1949 to 1969.

Both envisioned a Church whose role in Paraguay's endemic political struggles was that of a strictly neutral mediator among the various political rivals.

Starting in the late 1950s, the Catholic clergy and bishops were frequently at odds with the national government. Confrontations began with individual priests giving sermons calling for political freedom and social justice. The political and human rights activities of the clergy and various lay groups, such as Catholic Action, pushed the Church hierarchy to make increasingly critical statements about the regime of President Alfredo Stroessner Mattiauda (since 1954), who was finally overthrown by a military coup in 1989.

#### **<sup>4</sup>HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY LEADERS**

Mons. Juan Sinforiano Bogarón, the Archbishop of Asunción (1930 to 1949).

Mons. Aníbal Mena Porta, the Archbishop of Asunción (1949 to 1969).

#### **<sup>5</sup>MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS**

Unknown

#### **<sup>6</sup>HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES**

In 1997 there were 14 dioceses in Paraguay, with 325 parishes and 745 priests. Caacupé, in eastern Paraguay, is the most important religious center and the site of an annual pilgrimage. In Trinidad there is a hilltop site of a Jesuit *reducción*, which was built between 1706 and 1760; its centerpiece is a church that has been beautifully preserved. Other important Jesuit ruins are found at San Ignacio Guazú and Santa María.

#### **<sup>7</sup>WHAT IS SACRED**

Throughout the country in many Catholic churches, there are a variety of statues of Mary, Jesus, the Apostles and other Saints, which are revered and maintained by the faithful and used for special occasions, such as the processions during Christmas and Easter Week

#### **<sup>8</sup>HOLIDAYS/FESTIVALS**

Many towns are named after a Catholic saint, and in many of these places the most important day of the year is the celebration of their patron saint, which typically includes a parade of people carrying religious icons as well as a carnival of other attractions. Together with Immaculate Conception Day (December 8), the most important religious holidays are Lent (40 days before Easter) and Holy or Easter Week, when in hundreds of towns most of the population turns out to witness a parade led by the local Catholic clergy and a group of amateur actors who portray the various personages associated with the arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Christmas is more of a family holiday than a religious one, although special activities are planned such as pageants and parades.

Another prominent religious celebration is the Día de San Blas on February 3 (the Patron Saint of Paraguay). Carnival is also celebrated in February and is liveliest in Asunción. The religious center of Caacupé is the most important site for Immaculate Conception Day on December 8. Two important festivals are celebrated in Puno: the Virgin of Candelaria during February 2-14, and the Virgin of Mercy Day on September 24.

In 1988, Pope John Paul II canonized three Jesuit priests who were martyred in Paraguay, and their Feast Day is November 17. Spanish Jesuit priests Roque González and Alonso Rodríguez were slain by Indians during a rebellion in 1628 at a mission on the Jiuhi River in Paraguay, and two days later a Paraguayan Jesuit, Juan de Castillo, was murdered at Caaró in southern Brazil, near the Paraguayan border.

Various religious societies play an important role in planning and organizing local festivals and undertaking social welfare activities, such as assisting widows and children, among other duties associated with the care of the poor.

#### **<sup>9</sup>MODE OF DRESS**

There is no special dress code for Catholics in Paraguay.

#### **<sup>10</sup>DIETARY PRACTICES**

The only dietary restrictions among Catholics today are those practiced during Easter or Holy Week, when faithful

Catholics are supposed to refrain from eating the meat of animals and drinking alcoholic beverages. However, some Catholics still maintain the ancient custom of eating fish on Friday as a token sacrifice and proof of their piety.

#### **<sup>11</sup>RITUALS**

Traditionally, Catholicism has been an essential component of Paraguayan social life since colonial times. Even the poorest of homes display pictures of the Catholic saints and a family shrine. Active participation in the rites of the Church, such as Confession and the Mass, is more common among upper and middle-income groups, and among women more so than men, which reflects class and gender expectations.

#### **<sup>12</sup> RITES OF PASSAGE**

Catholic ritual marks the important transitions in life: baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial. However, the poor often curtail or delay rituals because of the costs involved.

#### **<sup>13</sup>MEMBERSHIP**

For many Paraguayans, affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church is more of a social obligation than a moral and spiritual commitment, with less than 20 percent of Catholics regularly attending Mass. The Archdioceses of Asunción had only 774,000 Catholic adherents out of the city's total population of 1,602,173, or about 48 percent. However, the lowest percentage of Catholic adherents was registered in the Apostolic Vicariate of Polcomayo, with only 45.7 percent of the total population of 75,000 inhabitants. In the rest of the nation's dioceses, the Catholic population ranged in the 80 and 90 percentiles.

#### **<sup>14</sup>SOCIAL JUSTICE**

During the 1960s, the Catholic University of Our Lady of Asunción became a center of anti-regime sentiment, when students and faculty began cooperating with workers and peasants and formed grass-roots organizations as an alternative to the government-sponsored unions. For example, they organized Christian Agrarian Leagues (also known as peasant leagues) among small farmers. Some of these organizations sponsored literacy programs, welfare activities and various types of cooperatives. In addition, progressive Catholics operated a news magazine and radio station, both of which were critical of the government.

#### **<sup>15</sup>SOCIAL ASPECTS**

Catholicism served as the major institution in society that transcended kinship relations, whereas political and economic activities were dominated by family feuds and the accumulated loyalties of past generations. Paraguayans of every social strata participated in the communal religious festivals, where Church holidays were public holidays as much as religious occasions, and as such served as exercises in civic pride and Paraguayan national identity.

Traditionally, religious devotion is a sphere of activity dominated by women and children, whereas men were not expected to show much concern about religion. If men attend church, it is infrequent and reserved for special occasions; men normally stand at the rear of the church and talk among themselves. Regular participation in church services is seen as a virtue on the part of women, who were more likely to seek the Church's blessing at critical times of family life.

#### **<sup>16</sup>POLITICAL IMPACT**

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Church authorities criticized the lack of political freedom in Paraguay and the government's dismal human rights record, and there were sporadic student demonstrations against the government and repressive government countermeasures. The government expelled foreign-born clergy and periodically closed the Catholic University of Our Lady of Asunción, the Catholic news magazine and the radio station. In response, the Archbishop of Asunción excommunicated several prominent government officials and refused, along with other clergy, to participate in major civic and religious celebrations.

In the early 1990s, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Paraguay, in a pronouncement entitled "One Constitution for our Nation" signed by 14 bishops, stated: "The II Vatican Council pointed out with clarity the Church-State relations based on autonomy and mutual respect of both parties.... both the State and the Church will better fulfill their roles if they maintain their independence and seek a good cooperation between them."

Referring to the notion of an official Church, the document states: "If at other times this nation completely identified itself with the Catholic religion, it was logical to talk about an official religion. Now pluralism better characterizes

the civil society and it does not seem justified to have one Church joined to the State that, for this reason, reflects something imposed by force upon the people. The [Catholic] Church does not want to confuse the people or to confuse itself with the State."

In this way, the Catholic Church of Paraguay gave its unconditional support to establish a new era of religious liberty in the nation, which began with congressional approval of a new Constitution in February of 1993.

### <sup>17</sup>CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The establishment of the Reduction or "communal township" system among a variety of Indian groups in the upper River Plata region, under the Jesuits and other Catholic religious orders between 1609 and 1780, was a brave attempt to mitigate the three principal difficulties in the way of the "conversion of the heathen" that resulted from the prevailing *encomienda* system, namely: the oppression of the natives by force or a system of virtual slavery; the consequent aversion to the religion of the oppressors that led to a series of Indian uprisings; and the bad example of the colonists who sought material rather than spiritual rewards.

The formation of Guaraní Reductions provoked a storm of animosity against the Jesuits among the colonists, which led to repeated expulsions of members of the Jesuit order from their colonies. Some of the clergy, who viewed the *encomienda* system as a righteous institution and who themselves lived off of its fruits, also opposed the Jesuits.

At first the Jesuits had a powerful ally in Philip III of Spain, who energetically supported the cause of the oppressed Indians, and who not only sanctioned the plans of the Jesuits but furthered them very effectively by a number of royal decrees and appropriations from the public treasury, which placed the Reduction system on a firm legal basis. With these royal decrees as a basis, the Jesuits began, in explicit understanding with the highest ecclesiastical and civil authorities who had been commanded by the Spanish Government to provide efficient aid, to found Reductions in the Province of Paraguay and elsewhere. The Indians came in entire groups to these places of refuge, where they found protection and safety from the bands of marauders of armed men who robbed and pillaged and carried them off by force as slaves.

However, this noble experiment in providing humane treatment of the Guaraní Indians under Jesuit administration came to an abrupt and violent end during the 1760s, although some of the Reductions continued until the 1780s under the administration of other religious orders. International political rivalry between the Spanish and Portuguese, together with the increasing power of the local civil authorities and colonists, forced the Spanish governmental and religious authorities to discontinue their protection of the Indians who were then exploited by the colonists as a cheap source of labor for agricultural, livestock, forestry, mining and production.

Since the 1970s, a growing number of Catholics have been unhappy with the Church's official policy regarding birth control, divorce, remarriage, abortion, the role of women in the Church, obligatory celibacy for priests and nuns, the absolute authority of the Pope and the bishops, the lack of lay participation in decision-making, etc. The ongoing tension between Conservatives, Moderates and Liberals over the Church's social priorities, its internal management, and the need for renewal and modernization is another area of conflict.

### <sup>18</sup>CULTURAL IMPACT ON MUSIC, ART, LITERATURE

Catholicism has had a strong influence on all aspects of Paraguayan life, including music and the arts. Theater is one popular medium, with performances in Guaraní as well as in Spanish. Visual arts of startling unconventionality can be seen in many galleries. The nation's pre-eminent literary figure is the poet-novelist Augusto Roa Bastos.

Paraguayan music is a mixture of native tunes and lyrics and European, with little or no traces of Black, Brazilian or Argentine influences. The guitar and harp are popular instruments in Paraguay, and its songs are usually slow and tearful. Agustín Barrios (1885-1944), one of Latin America's most revered composers for the guitar, often performed his music in full-Guaraní costume, and promoted himself as the Paganini of the guitar from the Paraguayan jungles.

## OTHER RELIGIONS

The Protestant movement entered Paraguay in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of agents of the American Bible Society (1856) and missionaries of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1886), the Church of England or Anglicans (1886) and the German Lutherans (1893, the Evangelical Church of the Plata River). During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, dozens of other Protestant groups appeared among the growing immigrant population or as missionary endeavors from Europe and North America: Seventh-day Adventists (1902), the New Testament Missionary Fellowship (1902), the Salvation Army (1911), the Plymouth Brethren (1911), German and Russian Mennonites (1920s-1930s), Argentine Baptists (1920s), the Christian Church-Disciples of Christ (1922), Russian Baptists (1930s), Brazilian Presbyterians (1938), and a variety of other groups, both Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals, in more recent times, especially during the 1950s and 1960s.

Prior to the 1950s, the total Protestant population in Paraguay was less than 10,000, but since then has grown to about 350,000 or an estimated six percent of the total population in 2002. The largest Protestant denominations in Paraguay today are the Baptist Convention (affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention in the USA), the Evangelical Church of the Plata River (Lutheran), the Church of God (Cleveland, TN), the Assemblies of God (USA-related), the Assemblies of God Evangelical Mission (independent), the Grace and Glory Pentecostal Church and the Seventh-day Adventists. Also, there are about a dozen Mennonite denominations with about 70,000 adherents, the largest of which is the Indian Mennonite Church; about 25,000 Mennonites live in 17 agricultural colonies scattered across northern and eastern Paraguay. Surprisingly, only 35.6 percent of all Protestants are Pentecostals in Paraguay. Other significant groupings are: Anglicans 5.9 percent; Lutherans 7.1 percent; Mennonites 23.7 percent; Baptists 8.6 percent; Adventists 5.6 percent; and all others 13.5 percent (PROLADES database).

The size of other religious groups in Paraguay is estimated at 11 percent in 2002. These include the Russian Orthodox Church and several nominal Christian groups (non-Protestant): the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, the People of God Church, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, the Voice of the Chief Cornerstone, among others. Also, a variety of non-Christian religious groups have appeared, some of which are found among immigrants from the Middle East (Judaism, Islam and Baha'i) and Asia (Hindu, Buddhist and Shinto sects from India, China, Korea and Japan). Animistic Native American Indian religions continue to exist among the Guaicuruan, Mascoian, Mataco-Maca, Tupi and Zamucoan linguistic groups, especially among those who dwell in the western region of Chaco. There has been an influx of other religious movements from Brazil and Argentina, such as those identified with the following traditions: Ancient Wisdom (Rosacrucians, Gnostics and New Acropolis Cultural Centers) and Spiritualist-Psychic-New Age (Condomblé, Umbanda, Basilio Scientific School, Spiritualist Centers, the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity—Rev. Moon, among others).

The size of the population with no declared religious affiliation is estimated at 3.0 percent in 2002.

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