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10 ways Hispanics are redefining American Catholicism in the 21st century

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The Immigrant City. This is how many know Lawrence, Mass., a town in New England with a population of about 80,000. Perhaps the most appropriate name for Lawrence is The Catholic Immigrant City. Not long ago it had 15 Catholic churches, none of which was established to serve Hispanics. Today, the three Catholic parishes left celebrate several Masses in Spanish every week. The transformation took place in about 50 years.

In the Northeast and the Midwest, changes like this are more recent. In the South and West, entire generations of Catholics have not known a time without a Hispanic neighbor, the ever-present image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, quinceañera celebrations, Masses in Spanish and some good empanadas after worship! What used to be a phenomenon restricted to places like Los Angeles, San Diego, Brownsville, Houston or Miami is becoming the new norm.

As a researcher of U.S. Catholicism, with particular focus on the Hispanic Catholic experience, I get to meet incredible people in faith communities across the country: Tireless pastoral leaders, families passing the faith on to their children in different languages, young people discerning how to integrate the Gospel in their lives, immigrants searching for a new life with the same longings as their sisters and brothers who have been in the country a little longer. And they all love being Catholic.

This is not the first time that U.S. Catholicism has been drastically transformed. The arrival of millions of European immigrants in this country in the 19th and 20th centuries had a similar effect. Today's immigrant Catholics are arriving from the global south. Catholics of all cultural backgrounds find themselves sharing their churches with fellow parishioners about whom they know little. Rapid demographic changes along with the fear of the unknown seem to explain some of the anxiety that invades the hearts of many Catholics in the United States today.

The best remedy to address such anxiety is to know more about each other. To that end, here are 10 ways Hispanics are redefining American Catholicism in the 21st century—and why this is good news for all.

1. Hispanics are at the heart of the church's growth. In 1965, there were 48.5 million Catholics in the country. Fifty years later the number had risen to 75 million. Despite millions of baptized women and men who stopped self-identifying as Catholic, the number of Catholics in the United States is growing.

Hispanics account for 71 percent of the growth of the Catholic population in the United States since 1960. Long before 1776, the first Catholics in what is now U.S. territory were Hispanic. They became part of the country as the nation expanded its borders (e.g., Mexican-Americans in 1848; Puerto Ricans in 1898).

Over the last half century, the growth of the Hispanic population has come through sustained migration patterns from Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, including significant numbers of exiles and refugees; high birth rates among Hispanic women, especially immigrants; and family reunification policies.

2. Hispanics are forming a new geographic center for U.S. Catholicism. The vast majority of Catholics who arrived from Europe during the 19th century and the first half of the 20th settled mainly in two regions: the Northeast and the Midwest. These immigrants and their descendants built there thousands of parishes, established the largest network of private schools and founded hundreds of universities. They also built a large network of social services, rivaled in resources and outreach only by the U.S. government. Thanks to this structural presence, Catholics became not only the largest church in the country, but also one of the most influential.

It is imperative for the church to build parishes, schools, universities, pastoral institutes and seminaries and houses of formation in the Southwest.

About 61 percent of parishes, 61 percent of Catholic schools, 83 percent of Catholic colleges and universities, 60 percent of seminaries and houses of formation, more than half of Catholic hospitals and most Catholic publishing companies are located in the Northeast and the Midwest. More than 50 percent of archdioceses and most U.S. cardinals heading a diocese are also in these two regions.

But during the second decade of the 21st century, a major threshold was crossed: the majority of U.S. Catholics now live in the South and the West. Hispanics are the major reason for this geographical shift, joined in these regions by the fast-growing Asian population.

It is imperative for the church to build parishes, schools, universities, pastoral institutes and seminaries and houses of formation in the Southwest. This is a time for Catholic pioneers and entrepreneurs, a time for true missionary work that sets the foundations for what most likely will be growing centers of Catholic life in the United States.

3. Hispanics are transforming how we communicate with each other. There are 20 million immigrants from Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean presently living in the United States mainland. About 14 million (60 percent) self-identify as Catholic. If these Catholics constituted one nation, the population would be larger than that of every island in the Caribbean and larger than that of most countries in Latin America.

These demographic comparisons help us assess whether we are investing enough in welcoming and embracing a population that is transforming thousands of Catholic communities in the United States. How much do we understand the lives and practice of the faith of Spanish-speaking Catholics? Do we integrate that knowledge as

part of our pastoral planning and outreach?

According to the National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry (for which I served as the principal investigator), there are about 4,500 parishes in the country with explicit outreach efforts to Hispanics Catholics, primarily in Spanish. Most dioceses and parishes in the country define Hispanic ministry mainly as ministry in Spanish with a focus on immigrant populations.

Hispanic immigrants come from every Spanish-speaking nation in the continent. They bring a rich array of cultural and religious traditions that are redefining the American Catholic experience in the 21st century. Thanks to Hispanics, in many parts of the country U.S. Catholicism is de facto a bilingual reality.

4. Two-thirds of Hispanic Catholics in the United States were born here. Some pastoral leaders, and many Catholics in the pews, are bewildered to learn that nearly two thirds of Hispanics are U.S. born (about 65.5 percent). But it should not be a surprise, given that Hispanics are the oldest Catholic group in the land and their growth has been steady for more than a century.

About half of U.S.-born Hispanics self-identify as Catholic. Their lives unfold in a constant process of negotiating identities as both Americans and Hispanics. This both/and experience allows U.S.-born Hispanic Catholics to draw from the riches of multiple cultural wells. That same experience also places them at odds with a society that often sees diversity as a threat—as in the case of negative attitudes toward bilingualism and biculturalism. Hispanics are expected to assimilate quietly into the mainstream.

It is naïve to assume that the pastoral needs and faith expressions of U.S.-born Hispanic Catholics are the same as their immigrant relatives. These Hispanics, upon whom much of the future of U.S. Catholicism rests, are forging a new way of being Catholic.

5. A majority of U.S. Catholics under 18 are Hispanic. The median age of Hispanics is 28, significantly younger than White (43), Asian (36), and Black (33) populations. About half of Hispanics are younger than 30. How are Catholic pastoral leaders reaching out to youth and young adult Hispanic Catholics?

About 60 percent of all U.S. Catholics younger than 18 are Hispanic. Of that population, 93 percent were born in the United States. Most young Hispanics remain significantly influenced by their immigrant families, retaining their faith, culture and language. (More than half of all U.S.-born Hispanics older than 5—about 20 million—speak Spanish at home.)

About half of all Catholic millennials are Hispanic.

Although most are English-speaking and grow up embracing many of the values of the larger U.S. culture, they are also influenced by the Spanish language and a faith mediated through Hispanic cultural narratives and symbols. Programs of youth ministry and religious education serving young Hispanics must engage the family. It is important that pastoral leaders affirm—in the most appropriate language—the faith and the role of Hispanic relatives in the process of passing on the faith.

About half of all Catholic millennials are Hispanic. They are choosing careers, deciding on family life and re-evaluating their faith. They question how much to draw from their Hispanic background when integrating into the larger U.S. cultural matrix. Whether the Gospel and the best of the Catholic tradition will inform these decisions will largely depend on adequate pastoral accompaniment.

6. About one in four Hispanics is a former Catholic. The engagement of Hispanic youth and young adult Catholics may be the single most significant factor that will determine the vitality of Catholic communities and pastoral efforts during the next 30 years. These are the young women and men who soon will be sustaining parishes, sending their children to Catholic schools and universities and leading church ministries.

Yet it is estimated that about a quarter of Hispanics are former Catholics. That is almost 14 million people who could have been in our communities partaking in the sacraments and discerning ways to better live the Gospel. Most of them (about 70 percent) made the decision to “leave the church” before the age of 24. When surveyed, the following are the top two reasons they provided for leaving: they “drifted away” and they “stopped believing in the teachings of their childhood religion.” These reasons are similar to those provided by former non-Hispanic young Catholics. Most are joining the ranks of the non-religiously affiliated (i. e., nones).

This is a clear indictment of how inadequately we welcome and create spaces for people to fall in love with Jesus Christ and the mysteries of the Christian faith. This is not “normal.” Silence in the face of this trend cannot be an option.

7. Hispanics are underrepresented in Catholic education. By the middle of the 20th century, more than five million school-age Catholic children (more than 50 percent of this sector of the Catholic population) were enrolled in Catholic schools. Many went to college and then on to successful professional lives. Many became priests, vowed religious and lay ecclesial ministers. Yet over the last 50 years, enrollment in Catholic education has plummeted, and thousands of schools have closed.

Of the approximately 14.5 million school-age Catholic children today, about eight million (or 55 percent) are Hispanic. The majority reside in the southern and western regions of the country. But barely 4 percent of school-age Hispanic Catholic children are enrolled in Catholic schools. Just about 11 percent of the student population in Catholic colleges and universities are Hispanic.

The large number of Hispanic Catholic children and youth can be an opportunity for renewal and creativity among Catholic educational institutions. Hispanics can bring a new spring to Catholic schools, colleges and universities. To do that, leaders must do four things: intentionally increase enrollment of Hispanic children; ensure welcoming environments; build new schools and universities where Catholicism is growing; and imagine new models to introduce young Hispanic Catholics to the treasures of Catholic education.

8. There is room for growth in the number of Hispanic ministers in the church. The areas of ministerial service where Hispanics are growing most steadily are the permanent diaconate and lay ecclesial ministry. There are about 2,500 Hispanic permanent deacons in the country. About 50 percent of lay Catholics enrolled in ministry formation programs are Hispanic, although only 17 percent of them are in degree-granting programs.

It is not farfetched to anticipate, given demographic trends, that in the near future most ministerial leaders for the church in this country will have a Hispanic background. Yet the number of U.S.-born Hispanic priests and vowed women and men religious does not match prevailing population trends. About 83 percent of Hispanic priests and more than 90 percent of Hispanic vowed religious women and men are foreign-born.

The cultural, linguistic and spiritual needs of U.S.-born Hispanics demand pastoral accompaniment.

Are we overlooking the potential of the U.S.-born Hispanic population to assume ministerial leadership? The cultural, linguistic and even spiritual needs of U.S.-born Hispanics often demand a distinct type of pastoral accompaniment.

A critical and sustained conversation about Hispanic vocations to ministerial life could address various dynamics, including: obstacles to vocational discernment among Hispanics; vocational outreach to U.S.-born Hispanics; welcoming practices in seminaries and houses of formation; cultivation of a culture of vocations among Hispanic families and faith communities; and effective pathways from apostolic service to ministerial life.

9. Hispanic Catholics draw from deep U.S. Latino and Latin American foundations. Hispanic Catholics draw from a rich world of pastoral and theological foundations. The language and the vision of the last four conferences of Latin American bishops—at Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992) and Aparecida (2007)—live in the minds and hearts of countless Latin Americans who did missionary work as catechists and pastoral leaders. The language of Pope Francis' pontificate (e.g., missionary discipleship, small faith communities, a church that goes out, etc.) is almost second nature to Hispanic immigrants involved in evangelizing activities in their countries of origin.

Also, hundreds of thousands of Hispanic immigrants are associated with the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, a movement that originated in the United States. As they find a home in Catholic parishes nationwide, many bring with them a Latin American style of this spirituality that is renewing entire communities. Nearly half of all parishes with Hispanic ministry have a Catholic Charismatic Renewal community.

Various currents of Latin American theological thought also influenced a smaller group of formally educated Latin American immigrants. They learned methodologies for theological reflection that brought the best of the Catholic tradition into dialogue with the social and human sciences and key sociocultural dynamics that shape the lives of Latin Americans.

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In turn, U.S. Hispanic Catholics also draw from important sources of theological and pastoral life grounded in reflection on what it means to be Catholic and Hispanic in this country.

The Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States is the third largest Catholic theological guild in the United States. For several decades A.C.H.T.U.S. members, committed to doing theology “on the ground,” have been advancing substantial theological reflection in close conversation with Hispanic Catholics.

The Encuentros (Encounters) started as national gatherings of Hispanic pastoral leaders advocating for better outreach to Hispanic Catholics. Some evolved into full-fledged processes of consultation, reflection and evangelization. The Encuentros have inspired a renewed awareness about the Hispanic Catholic presence, the development of new structures, commitments to serve this community well and the development of dynamic models of pastoral life. Most important, the Encuentros have been instrumental in fostering new waves of Catholic pastoral leaders.

10. Hispanic Catholics offer innovative approaches to evangelization. The Fifth National Encuentro of Hispanic/Latino Ministry (V Encuentro) is a four-year process of ecclesial reflection, consultation and evangelization (2017 to 2020).

The process is driven by a well-defined methodology. It starts by listening to Hispanic Catholics and others at the grass roots who spent some time meeting other Catholics living on the peripheries of church and society. What is heard is then discussed in prayer and reflection in small faith communities. Then large meetings—also called Encuentros—at the parish, diocesan, regional and national levels serve as a way to distill the wisdom gathered during several months of listening and discernment. Faith communities identify pastoral priorities and commitments. The process provides the perfect background for pastoral planning.

More than anything, the V Encuentro is a process of evangelization that aims at renewing the nearly 5,000 parish communities currently engaged in it. It hopes to involve at least one million Catholics, mostly Hispanic, and identify at least 20,000 new Hispanic pastoral leaders. Although the initial timeframe is four years, the spirit of Encuentro will likely inspire many conversations well into the future.

The process of the V Encuentro focuses primarily on the Hispanic Catholic experience, but it is for the entire church in the United States. The model could become a standard for evangelization initiatives across Catholic communities. It draws from the Scriptures and from centuries of missionary and evangelizing wisdom.

Hispanics ... find themselves in a unique position to build the foundations of U.S. Catholicism.

The redefinition of American Catholicism in the 21st century—driven in great part by the fast-growing Hispanic presence—is a true blessing and opportunity for all. Five centuries ago, Hispanics planted the first seeds of Catholicism in this land. Two centuries ago, European Catholics and their children built a massive presence that continues to permeate much of the religious and social life of our country. Once again, Hispanics, along with Catholics from various other cultural families, find themselves in a unique position to build the foundations of

U.S. Catholicism for decades. The 10 ways described above that Hispanics are redefining American Catholicism give us a good sense of what is happening, what is possible, where to invest and how we can accompany this important sector of the Catholic population in the United States.

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