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If we don't make a home for Latinos, they'll go elsewhere

April Gutierrez | Jun. 28, 2012 Young Voices

I sat with a mixture of awe and disgust as I read a Huffington Post article about obesity in the Latino community. The opening sentence, "Feel bad telling your *gordito* that he can only have one helping of flan?", was so brazenly derogatory that I could barely believe a major publication would be willing to attach its name to it.

Today on NPR, my husband heard that officials in Houston have bans on piñatas [1] in large parks, which include signs that say "no piñatas" next to "no littering." I wondered how comfortable we could get as a society with our intermittently pejorative and abusive attitude toward a large part of our national family -- so large and rapidly growing in fact, that we are the youngest and fastest-growing demographic in our nation.

According to the Pew Research Center [2], "the Latino population, already the nation's largest minority group, will triple in size and will account for most of the nation's population growth from 2005 through 2050. Hispanics will make up 29% of the U.S. population in 2050, compared with 14% in 2005."

Growth in the Latino population has accounted and is projected to continue to account for the majority of our population growth as a nation. At present, the United States is the second-largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world by way of population. Where I sit now, in the dense urban center of Los Angeles County, Spanish is more commonly spoken in the home than English. This trend is not limited to traditionally Latino counties. Beginning in 1990, states throughout the South and Midwest saw explosive growth in a previously nonexistent Latino community.

These staggering numbers, which paint Latinos with a single brush, can be somewhat misleading. I have a dear friend who emigrated from El Salvador as a teenager. When my son (who is one-quarter, sixth-generation Mexican) was born, his birth and my friend's immigration were counted as the same against population growth. My friend and my son enter the world with different experiences and have different cultural preferences and national affiliations, and yet will both check Latino on the census forms.

Perhaps the monolithic presentation of a very diverse group of people contributes to our national xenophobic response. Perhaps it is exactly our size and robust growth that provokes mainstream society to respond, to reign in and to attempt control. And public discourse is not the only venue for such assertions of power. Arizona's SB 1070 (recently gutted thanks to the better judgment of higher courts) was widely interpreted as not only anti-immigrant but hostile toward any who might be mistaken for an immigrant. Legislating intimidation did not stop in Arizona, but inspired copy-cat laws in a number of other states, many of which were more aggressive. The goal of inspiring "self-deportation" does not only affect those individuals here without legal status, but millions of Americans who enjoy legal status, many who have for generations. For many, it is by virtue of our brown skin and the Z at the end of our names that our sense of belonging is threatened, our place in society called into question.

So what of the institutions to whom we entrust our sense of belonging more than any other? Are our churches embracing this population shift? Although change is difficult, this demographic trend is swinging in the favor of

the Catholic church, which has suffered declining attendance nationally for more than a decade. The majority of Latinos living in the U.S. are Catholic. The Catholic church already has the attention and loyalty of the youngest, fastest-growing group of people in the nation. If we as a body embraced this fact, might we not regain a footing in American life that is increasingly precarious and unstable? Might we not find the answer to the question of "who we are to become" by realizing who we already are?

One thing is certain: If we do not welcome the Latino community, other churches will. There is often a perception among those involved with Latino ministry that there are two options out there: the Catholic church and Pentecostal-leaning store fronts. The truth is that all major denominations have developed plans to adjust to the changing face of their community. Outward-facing evangelical churches and the old-guard denominations have by and large recognized the ministry opportunities presented by a large, young and vital group of people interested in putting down roots and making a home for their families. When I entered "Hispanic-Ministry-Plan" into a search engine, I was readily connected to resources published by the Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal and Presbyterian denominations. These plans outlined strategies for reaching out to, making welcome and empowering Latinos into active leadership by denominations that have historically not enjoyed significant participation from Latinos.

Is there a challenge in this response to a church that the Latino community already calls home? Are we ready to embrace, from every Catholic vhurch on every street corner, urban or rural, all our members as priest, prophet and king? Is my family an equally cherished member of the Catholic family? Might this publicly dressed-down and derided building block indeed be the cornerstone of our new Catholic America?

Evan Gutierrez contributed to this column.

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