

Hispanics: Not so Catholic anymore

Thomas Reese | May. 9, 2014 Faith and Justice

The U.S. Catholic church is becoming more Hispanic, but Hispanics are becoming less Catholic. That is the seemingly contradictory findings of a new study by the Pew Research Center, "[The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States](#) [1]."

Indeed, as of 2012, one-third of U.S. Catholics are now Hispanic, but the percentage of Hispanics who are Catholic has dropped from 67 percent in 2010 to 55 percent in 2013. If this trend continues, Catholics will make up less than half of Hispanics by 2015.

How can the church become more Hispanic while Hispanics are becoming less Catholic? "Both trends can occur at the same time," according to Pew, "because of the growing size of the Hispanic population, which has increased from 12.5% of the total U.S. population in 2000 to 16.9% in 2012. Indeed, if both trends continue, a day could come when a majority of Catholics in the United States will be Hispanic, even though the majority of Hispanics might no longer be Catholic."

Most Hispanics (55 percent) are still Catholic, but nearly one out of four (24 percent) are former Catholics who have joined the 21 percent who were never Catholic. The future does not look good for the church because only 45 percent of younger Hispanics (ages 18 to 29) are Catholic.

Why have 30 percent of Hispanics who were raised Catholics left the church? Where have they gone?

As the proportion of Hispanics who are Catholics has gone down, the proportion who are Protestant or unaffiliated has gone up. Protestants are now 22 percent of the Hispanic population (up from 14 percent who were raised Protestant) and unaffiliated are 18 percent (up from 6 percent who were raised unaffiliated).

Most (70 percent) changed religions before reaching the age of 24.

Some of these numbers remind us of [an earlier Pew study](#) [2] that found that one-third of those raised Catholic in the U.S. have left the church. Almost half of those leaving the church became unaffiliated and almost half became Protestant.

Is being in the U.S. bad for Hispanics' faith?

It is true that 36 percent of native-born Hispanics have switched religions compared with 30 percent of the foreign-born, but about half of the foreign-born switched faiths before arriving in the U.S. The Hispanic outflow from the Catholic church is an international phenomena.

About half of U.S. Hispanics were born outside the United States. Among these first-generation immigrants, Catholics have had a net loss of 19 percentage points because of religious switching.

Of those Hispanic Catholics born in the U.S., there has been a net loss of 25 percentage points. There appears to be little difference between the exit rates of second- and third-generation Hispanics.

Why are Hispanics leaving Catholicism?

Most say they just gradually drifted away, especially those who become unaffiliated (66 percent compared to 46 percent for those who became Protestants). A majority also say they stopped believing in Catholic teaching (51 percent of those who joined a mainline church, 59 percent of those who became evangelical, and 63 percent of those who are now unaffiliated).

For Catholics who became Protestant, finding a congregation that reaches out and helps its members more was important (51 percent of those who became evangelical; 45 percent of those who joined a mainline church).

Those who leave the church tend to be less enthusiastic about the Catholic liturgy than those who stay. Sixty-three percent of those raised Catholic who left say the typical Catholic Mass is not lively and exciting as opposed to 33 percent of those who stayed who said the same.

Pew also found that 84 percent of Hispanic Catholics have a favorable view of Pope Francis, and 57 percent believe his becoming pope is a major change for the Catholic church.

But "most Hispanic Catholics are at odds with the church's teachings on divorce and contraception, and most favor allowing priests to marry and women to become priests," Pew reports. "Disagreement with these church teachings is stronger among those who attend Mass less regularly, but even among weekly Mass attenders, roughly half or more support changing the church's positions on these issues."

Although the data in this study needs to be studied more closely, what is striking is how similar Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics are as measured by the study's questions.

"Overall, Hispanic Catholics closely resemble white non-Hispanic Catholics when it comes to levels of religious commitment," Pew concludes. "Among each group, four-in-ten attend Mass at least once a week, and about six-in-ten (61%) pray at least once a day. Roughly two-thirds of Hispanic Catholics (65%) say that religion is very important in their lives, while about half of white Catholics (54%) say the same."

Both Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics (and those who leave) are looking for welcoming communities with more lively liturgies. Both are questioning church teaching on controversial topics.

As bad as these numbers may be, Mark Gray of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate reminds us that [retention rates for the Catholic church are actually better than for most other religions](#) [3]. He agrees with Gregory Smith of Pew: "Because so many people were raised Catholic, it means that in terms of raw numbers, there are a lot of former Catholics out there. It's not because Catholics do a worse job keeping their members, but because so many were raised Catholic."

As for Hispanics, Gray argues that "few other Americans are as likely to remain in their childhood faith as Hispanics raised Catholic."

Although I have great respect for Mark Gray, the fact that the Catholic church starts out larger than other churches and has a better retention rate than other churches is no reason for complacency. We have to do better. Gray is not complacent, but I fear some in the church will find unwarranted consolation in his remarks. Simply because you are bleeding slower than everyone else around you should not make you happy.

When it comes to political issues, Hispanics, like non-Hispanics, have also been changing their views on gay

marriage. Almost 50 percent of Catholic Hispanics now support gay marriage, with only 30 percent opposed. Over half (54 percent) of Hispanic Catholics still say abortion should be illegal in most cases, but this is down from 64 percent in 2002. Hispanics are still more conservative on these issues than white Catholics, especially abortion, where only 44 percent of white Catholics want abortion illegal in most cases.

The support for churches expressing their views on political and social issues has been declining among Hispanic Catholics, from 57 percent in 2002 to 49 percent in 2013. Greatest support for churches speaking out comes from Hispanic evangelicals (61 percent), who are more conservative on social issues.

The Pew study continues to find that Hispanics are overwhelmingly Democratic (56 percent Democrat versus 21 percent Republican). The numbers for Catholic Hispanics are almost exactly the same (58 percent Democrat versus 21 percent Republican). Even among Cubans and evangelicals, the Republican numbers are low (33 percent and 30 percent, respectively). The general public is 48 percent Democratic and 39 percent Republican.

Hispanics, especially Catholic Hispanics, prefer a bigger government with more services (67 percent and 72 percent, respectively). Even 62 percent of evangelical Hispanics support a bigger government, as compared to 40 percent of the general public.

The Pew study shows that the Catholic church cannot take Hispanics for granted. If they do not find a welcoming community with a lively liturgy, they may well leave for a Protestant, probably evangelical, church.

Nor are they guaranteed foot soldiers in the culture wars. They are, however, strong supporters of the Democratic Party and big government. No wonder some Republicans do not want more of them as citizens.

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