NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

# How will Latinos impact Catholicism in the United States?

Pat Perriello | Jun. 2, 2014 NCR Today

In recent years the church in the United States has been blessed with a large influx of Hispanic Catholics. Yet, there is so much we don?t understand about this group. It is perhaps not surprising then, that so much fascinating information is emerging from the new Pew Research survey on the religious beliefs and practices of Latinos in the United States [1].

Much has been written about how this infusion of Hispanic Catholics will dramatically change the face of Catholicism in the United States. Latino Catholics tend to be seen as more conservative, very religious with many personal devotions to Mary and the saints, and faithful to traditional Catholic teaching. Apparently this perception is either false or woefully incomplete. Just consider that twenty-four percent of Hispanic adults are actually former Catholics.

The data from the Pew survey raises some significant issues. The first of these issues has to do with the large number of Latinos who are abandoning Catholicism. In 2010, 67% of Latinos identified themselves as Catholics. That figure is now down to 55%. This change represents a drop of 12 percentage points in just four years.

A significant percentage of these Latinos are joining Evangelical churches, but there is also a considerable number of Latinos that are simply unaffiliated. Evangelical Latinos are now 16% of the total population while 18% are unaffiliated. About 6% are joining mainline Protestant denominations.

The exodus seems particularly acute among the young. While a trend persists among foreign born Latinos to join Evangelical communities, this does not appear to hold with those in the 18-29 age group. This group is moving more and more toward no religious affiliation. Less than half of Hispanics (45%) under the age of 30 are now Catholic.

One then has to ask what do these Hispanic Catholics and former Catholics believe? What are the factors that are leading them to make different choices? It is interesting that the Evangelicals are the most religious of Latinos. They attend church weekly, pray daily, and adhere to a literal interpretation of the Bible. Catholics and mainline Protestants stand in the middle between Evangelicals and the unaffiliated.

What reasons do they give for having left the church? The number one reason offered by Hispanics (55%), is that they simply drifted away. Another 52% say they stopped believing in the teachings of their faith. Also important is the fact that 49% say they joined a Protestant denomination because they found a church that reaches out and helps its members more.

Most Hispanics disagree with church teaching on divorce and contraception. They favor married priests and women priests. Their support for same sex marriage has grown from 30% in 2006 to 46% in 2013. Hispanics remain closest to church teaching in their opposition to abortion. Still, 40% of all Hispanics believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases.

Two things strike me about this data. First, despite all the efforts to analyze the Hispanic community, the reality is that they are essentially no different from the rest of us. Their thinking, beliefs, and practices generally parallel that of the rest of us in this country. Secondly, the Hispanic community remains a powerful and growing segment of American Catholicism for the foreseeable future. We are going to have to do more as a church to welcome them into our community than taking for granted their loyalty and obedience.

I know that many Hispanic communities organize their own liturgies, and this is good. Yet if this trend merely isolates this group from everyone else, it may simply contribute to the problem. Latinos should be actively involved not only in setting up their own liturgies, but in providing leadership for the parish as a whole. We first need to listen to their needs and wants. Second, they need to become active participants in directing and guiding the life of the parish. They need to feel welcome and be made an integral part of parish life, as they apparently are in many Protestant Evangelical Churches.

Ultimately Latinos need to find a meaningful and positive religious experience in our communities. It is only this positive experience that can serve to curtail the exodus from the church that seems to be accelerating. A vital Catholic Hispanic community will be able to reach out to those who have drifted away and encourage them to look at a revived Catholicism as a place to consider finding Christ again.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on *07/29/2014 - 15:14*):** http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/how-will-latinos-impact-catholicism-united-states

**Links:**
[1] http://www.pewforum.org/2014/05/07/the-shifting-religious-identity-of-latinos-in-the-united-states/