

Protestant Faiths Appeal to Many Hispanics

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The Catholic Church, overwhelmed by the Hispanic community's booming growth, has been caught with a severe shortage of Spanish-speaking priests. Rival faiths, meanwhile, have stepped into the void with a powerful offer: Join us, and your life will have meaning. They offer a straightforward guide to live by—be virtuous and prosper.

It is a message especially enticing in immigrant communities, where social problems such as drug addiction, alcoholism and gang violence are common, and where links to homeland traditions, including Catholicism, are weakened as people struggle to escape poverty in their new country.

Meanwhile, certain Catholic strictures—such as those barring unmarried couples and those not wed in the church from taking sacraments—can drive away Latino immigrants who are sometimes caught in awkward situations, such as having one family in the U.S. and another across the border.

In the U.S., the Catholic Church has lost members before, notably among the Irish. And its angst about the defection of some Latinos is tempered by overall growth in church membership, including Hispanics. In the 1990s, the number of Catholics in this country climbed to 64 million, from 59 million, thanks chiefly to immigration from Latin America and high Hispanic birth rates. "Wherever you have masses in Spanish, churches are full," says Ronaldo Cruz, executive director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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Nonetheless, the steady erosion of Latino loyalty is a problem. A 1997 study by the Rev. Andrew Greeley, a sociologist, concluded that between the early 1970s and the mid-'90s, the ranks of Hispanics who were Catholic had dropped to two-thirds from more than three-quarters. Other studies show a less severe falloff, but they point to the same general trend, especially among the children and grandchildren of immigrants. A recent survey funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, for example, found that 74% of Latino immigrants are Catholic, but by the third generation, the number drops to 59%.

"The bishops are very concerned at what is going on," acknowledges Mr. Cruz. Indeed, a 1999 Catholic Church report found that 69% of diocesan bishops believe Latinos are "highly susceptible" to evangelizing by non-Catholics.

Mateo Rodríguez, 35, is one who left the fold. A building contractor who arrived in the U.S. eight years ago, Mr. Rodríguez was brought up a Catholic in Mexico. But he had never gone to services here and was feeling lonely and out of sorts when the couple whose home he was working on invited him to visit La Familia de Dios one Sunday last May. The experience, he says, was overwhelming. "God destroyed my ego and turned me into a new person," he says, choking back tears. Now, he plans to move his family from San Fernando, north of Los Angeles, about 60 miles east to live near his new church.

Evangelical Christianity has likewise changed the life of Mr. Hernández. In the early 1980s, he was both Catholic and a member of the Sandinista revolutionaries, a leader of the bank workers' union in his hometown of Chinandega in northern Nicaragua. Disenchanted with the revolution, he ultimately fled the country with his wife and son, arriving illegally in the U.S. after a dangerous trek from Mexico. The Hernándezes crossed the Rio Grande near Brownsville, Texas, just under the nose of the Border Patrol. After arriving in the U.S., they were granted political asylum and have become citizens.

"In Mexico, we went to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe to ask for a miracle," recalls Mr. Hernández. Once in California, he says he and his wife went on their knees before the statue of the Virgin at Saint Martha's in thanks for making it to the U.S. They started to attend the church regularly.

But at Saint Martha's, Mr. Hernández and his wife, Gloria, never even met the priest. "You executed the traditions and then everybody went home," Mr. Hernández says. Adds Mrs. Hernández: "The Catholic Church left me empty."

When her sister invited them to attend an evangelical Calvary Church service in 1987, they were immediately drawn in. Mr. Hernández stopped drinking, and the couple even ended their beloved salsa-dancing sessions. "We thought it wasn't contributing to our Christian life," he says. Two years ago, the Hernándezes switched to

La Familia de Dios, which is similar in flavor and belief to the Calvary Church. In return for their faith, Mr. Hernández says, God has provided. Mr. Hernández credits his new faith for, among many other things, the new job he got last year as a controller at a school-bus dealership.

The Catholic Church is trying to woo back its strays. Dioceses have opened special offices for Hispanic ministry, and seminarians are learning Spanish. About 50 pastoral institutes train Latino lay leaders all over the country, including a Jesuit group that travels from parish to parish across the Midwest. The Catholic Church has also launched an effort, known as "Charismatic Renewal," in some Hispanic parishes to introduce a more lively, cathartic style of worship.

However, even as the Catholic Church tries to make itself more accessible to Latino immigrants, it lacks the manpower to minister to them effectively. In the U.S., there is only one Spanish-speaking priest for every 10,000 Hispanic Catholics, compared with one priest for every 1,200 Catholics in the general population, according to Mr. Cruz, of the bishops' conference. And training a priest can take seven to 12 years.

The competition has a much faster turnaround. For instance, the Hispanic Baptist Theological School in San Antonio takes two years to train a "church planter" or a pastor. And unlike the Catholic Church, which demands high-school diplomas of its candidates, the Baptist school accepts "people that have never stepped into a school anywhere," says Javier Elizondo, the dean.

Although the Catholic Church does do some missionary work, it is ambivalent about proselytizing. Meanwhile, the competition is relentless. "You can start evangelizing the minute after you received Christ," says Mr. Hernández.

On a recent Sunday, as he usually does after services, Mr. Hernández drove his white Ford Expedition, with a "Jesus is Lord" chrome plate under the back window, to the parking lot of the Cardenas supermarket a few blocks from the church. There, he led a team of evangelists seeking new converts among the mostly Mexican clientele.

The Southern Baptists worked the blacktop for about two hours. Mr. Hernández himself used various tactics to persuade people to come to God, including a sort of spiritual cost-benefit analysis: "If you take Christ in your heart and it turns out he doesn't exist, it didn't cost you anything. But if what the Bible says is true and you didn't take him in, you'll go to hell."

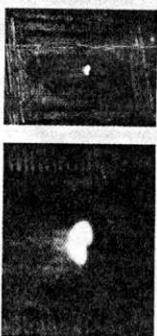
At one point, Mr. Hernández strode briskly toward a couple pushing a grocery cart. He pressed leaflets into their hands, and asked them in Spanish, "Have you taken Jesus Christ into your heart?" They promised to do just that.

NOT ONLY HISPANICS

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