IN FOCUS
HISPANIC MINISTRY

Our Sunday Visitor May 2014

By Hosffman Ospino

A good indicator to measure the vibrancy of Catholic life in the United States is the parish. While not exclusively, for U.S. Catholics the parish has been and remains a privileged space to celebrate and share the Faith, to experience community and live our discipleship.

Catholic parishes in the United States have experienced many transitions during the last two decades. Closings and mergers have decimated the number of parishes in many of these faith communities. The aging of large sectors of the active Catholic population and the scant participation of young and young adult Catholics in many of these places is a serious concern. Is the Catholic parish in the United States on its way to extinction? Will we experience the fate of thousands of parishes in Europe?

My answer to these two questions is a hopeful “no.” At least, not yet — if we take into consideration perhaps the most significant transformation of parish life in the past few decades, one many Catholics often miss: the fast-growing presence of Hispanic Catholics and Catholics of Asian background.

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Staggering numbers from a new study show how important Hispanics are to the future of Catholicism in the United States.

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Twenty-five percent of all Catholic parishes in the country have Hispanic ministry (only 15 percent did in the 1980s). This percentage is expected to increase.

I hope that these numbers have gotten your attention. U.S. Catholicism in what remains of the first half of the 21st century will be largely shaped by the Hispanic experience. The vibrancy or decline of thousands of Catholic parishes in our country will be closely linked to how these communities embrace Hispanics with their joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties. In turn, the future of thousands of parishes will depend on how much Hispanic Catholics commit to bringing them to the fullness of their potential. After all, the character of the parish is determined by the people who belong to it.

Tall order, isn’t it? The cultural and demographic transitions transforming our parishes call for serious discernment on the part of the entire U.S. Catholic community to envision how to best serve Hispanic Catholics in our parishes in the spirit of the New Evangelization.

To do so, we need to do pastoral planning that leads to envisioning creative ways to passionately bring people to an encounter with Jesus Christ in the everyday of their lives. And to do such effective pastoral planning, we do well studying and learning more about the faith communities where Hispanics are present.

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The study

In 2011, Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry launched a three-year research project called the National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry. This is the first time a comprehensive national study focuses solely on Catholic parishes with Hispanic ministry. The effort was possible thanks to several organizations — including the Our Sunday Visitor Institute — committed to supporting initiatives that lead to a stronger Catholic experience in the United States. I had the privilege of leading the project as its principal investigator working in close collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA).

In 2011, 4,368 parishes were identified as having Hispanic ministry, mostly defined by pastoral leaders as communities with Spanish-language liturgies. All parishes received three comprehensive questionnaires designed for pastors, directors of religious education directly working with Hispanics and parish directors of Hispanic ministry. Also, all diocesan directors of Hispanic ministry or their equivalent in the territorial, Latin rite U.S. dioceses where these offices exist were invited to participate. We identified 178 directors in 172 dioceses and all received a questionnaire specifically designed for them. All materials and communications were available in English and Spanish.

The generous participation of pastoral leaders in these parishes, as well as the diocesan officers, has yielded a wealth of information that allows us to better assess life in parishes serving Hispanic Catholics. This information gives us a good sense of what Catholic life in the United States is like in many places where Catholicism is growing vibrantly — of course, not without challenges.

Considering current demographic trends and the steady growth and influence of Hispanic Catholics, these communities also provide us with glimpses of what U.S. Catholicism will look like in vast regions of the country in the near future.

The first summary report has been released and is available at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry website (www.bc.edu/stm). A number of specialized reports looking more closely at parish dynamics and pastoral leadership will follow.

The following are some preliminary observations based on data collected from responding parishes. Upcoming articles will address other areas of parish life in communities doing Hispanic ministry throughout the country.

ATTENDANCE

Hispanic ministry leaders were asked to name the spiritual/liturgical celebrations that attract the largest numbers of Hispanic parishioners:

- 30% Lent, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, Easter, etc.
- 25% Our Lady of Guadalupe
- 19% Sacraments, Masses, weddings, first Communions, etc.
- 10% Advent, Christmas, Christmas Eve, Epiphany

Breakdown by Geography

While 61 percent of Catholic parishes in the U.S. are in the Northeast and Midwest, that isn’t the case for parishes with Hispanic ministries — 61 percent of which are located in the South and West.

Look south and west

Most Catholic parishes (61 percent) in the United States are in the Northeast and the Midwest. These are the regions that have experienced most of the parish closings and mergers. Only 39 percent of all parishes are in the South and the West. Yet, it is in these regions where the vast majority of parishes with Hispanic ministry (approximately 61 percent) are located; only 15 percent are in the Northeast and 24 percent in the Midwest. The geographical distribution of parishes with Hispanic ministry is consistent with the distribution of the Hispanic Catholic population in the United States.

From a historical perspective, it is worth noting that the strong Catholic presence in the Northeast and Midwest led to the establishment of very important structures such as parishes, schools, universities, social service institutions and networks. For many decades these structures served not only the Catholic population in these regions, but also allowed Catholicism to exercise an influential voice in the immediate social context where those structures thrived. A good number of these Catholic institutions will remain in these regions. However, given the current demographic changes, their future will largely depend on how Hispanic Catholics — and Catholics from other ethnicities — benefit from them and eventually are invited to lead them.

In the South and the West, however, the existence of similar structures and networks is not as strong as in the Northeast and Midwest. But this might change in light of the increasing growth of the Catholic population in these regions, mainly due to the Hispanic presence. For this to happen, Catholics need to invest in the emerging communities with a spirit of solidarity, build necessary and efficient structures to continue the work of evangelization and remain open to shifting understandings of what it means to be Catholic in the United States.

We must invest in parishes serving Hispanic Catholics. In some places, investment is needed to strengthen those communities already doing so. Many of them didn’t begin serving Hispanic Catholics until very recently and are still adjusting their structures and cultures to do this well. Parishes with Hispanic ministry typically began celebrating Masses and baptisms in Spanish in 1995. In others places, Catholics must build new parishes to meet the needs of the Catholic population there. All we need to do is look at our local demographics.

Ministry in flux

Hispanic Catholicism is a gift for the Church in the United States, as our bishops have repeatedly indicated. When parishes intentionally serve this population, they enter into a unique process of transformation. What is clear from the...
experience of parishes with Hispanic ministry is that such transformation is not reduced to uncontested assimilation into pre-existing models of pastoral life. We are witnessing the birth a new way of being a parish and with it, a fresher way of redefining the U.S. Catholic experience.

Most parishes doing Hispanic ministry today channel their resources and energy to meet the immediate needs of immigrants. Consequently, nearly all of these communities define Hispanic ministry as ministry done predominantly in Spanish. These Hispanic immigrants embody a world of experiences from all Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America, Puerto Rico (U.S. territory) and Spain — mostly Catholic nations. When all these experiences coincide, including the experiences that have shaped the lives of those Catholics who have been there longer, parishes guided by their pastoral leaders, must develop the appropriate intercultural sensibilities to be places that all can call home.

But we need to keep in mind that Hispanics as a whole are hardly an immigrant population; nearly two-thirds (61 percent) were born in the United States.

Parishes need to develop creative approaches that simultaneously meet the needs of the immigrant and U.S.-born Hispanic Catholics. Some of these efforts are advanced, for instance, through religious education programs for Hispanic children in parishes with Hispanic ministry.

Fifty-two percent of parishes with Hispanic ministry conduct their religious education programs for Hispanic children primarily in English; 12 percent indicate that these meetings are conducted primarily in Spanish; 36 percent indicate they run bilingual meetings on an ongoing basis. But there are significant regional variations as to language preferences: parishes in the West are least likely to conduct meetings only in English (38 percent) while those in the South are most likely to conduct meetings in this language (60 percent). Parishes in the West (44 percent) and Northeast (40 percent) are most likely to offer bilingual catechetical programs. Something similar occurs with other faith formation programs for children and adults.

As we can see, to adequately respond to the complexity of the Hispanic Catholic population in parishes it is necessary that these communities have well-trained bilingual and bicultural pastoral agents. It also requires the development of catechetical and spiritual resources that appropriately connect with the experience of the various Hispanic sub-groups.

Worship services for Hispanics in these parishes are largely conducted in Spanish. The higher the number of Hispanic Catholics who attend Mass in the parish, the more likely they are to go to a service celebrated in Spanish. Needless to say, we should not assume that all Hispanics attend Mass said in Spanish. Also, a high percentage of Hispanic parishioners does not indicate that these parishes are exclusively constituted by Spanish-speaking Catholics. In fact, only in one-quarter of these parishes’ Hispanics are more than 75 percent of total active Catholic population.

Most parishes with Hispanic ministry are “shared parishes” or “multicultural parishes.” The group with whom Hispanics typically share their parishes are non-Hispanic white parishioners — about 80 percent of the cases.

About 84 percent of the parishes with Hispanic ministry celebrate Mass and other services bilingually (English and Spanish) a few times a year, mostly on major holy days.

Weekend Mass attendance in parishes with Hispanic ministry is 22 percent higher compared to all Catholic parishes in the country. On average Hispanic parishes constitute 48 percent of all parishioners going to weekend Mass in these communities. However, it is interesting to observe that weekday Mass attendance tends to be very low among Spanish-speaking Hispanic Catholics. Thus, most parishes (65 percent) do not offer weekday Masses in Spanish.

What about finances?

Parishes with Hispanic ministry usually have to do more with less. On average, these parishes receive $7,744 in weekly parish offertory collections (median of $5,000). This is 15.7 percent lower than the average income parish.

The Hispanic presence in the Catholic parish is an opportunity for the Church in the United States to look at the 21st century with renewed hope and to creatively respond to the call to the New Evangelization.
Candles are placed in sand to form a cross at St. Francis Xavier Parish in Tulsa, Okla., during a “Dia de las Muertos” celebration at the predominantly Hispanic parish. CNS photo

of $9,191 collected in all parishes nationally.

However, the average weekly offering in responding parishes that is received from parishioners at Spanish language Masses is merely $1,502 (median contribution of $840). In our study, we found that the higher the percentage of Hispanic parishioners attending Mass in a parish, the smaller the total of revenues and expenses (see chart). These numbers are worrisome. The financial stability of parishes with Hispanic ministry will certainly depend on creative approaches to stewardship among all Catholics in these communities, Hispanic and non-Hispanic.

Apostolic movements

On a more positive note, apostolic movements play a very important role in Catholic parishes with Hispanic ministry throughout the United States. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal is the most widespread apostolic movement in these communities, with exactly half of all responding parishes indicating that it is active in them. Note that this number refers to presence of the movement in parishes, not overall affiliation of Hispanic Catholics to this particular spirituality. A third (34 percent) of all parishes report the presence of the Knights of Columbus. Three-in-10 reported that the Cursillo movement is active and 1-in-5 notes the same about the Legion of Mary. Jóvenes Para Cristo and the Movimiento Familiar Cristiano are equally reported as being active in 13 percent of all responding parishes.

When the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is present in parishes with Hispanic ministry, it is typically the largest movement in the community. Though widespread throughout the country, it has a stronger presence in the Northeast and the West.

It is the apostolic movement most likely to form small groups, choose its own catechetical materials and celebrate Mass on a regular basis inspired in its spirituality. The movement has been significantly instrumental in fostering vocations to leadership among Hispanic Catholics.

Based on data collected through this national study, we can estimate that about 25 percent of all active Hispanics in parishes with Hispanic ministry are somewhat associated with an apostolic movement. Based on交叉引用，大约40% of self-identifying Hispanic Catholics attend Mass on a typical weekend, we can say that close to 10 percent of all active Hispanic Catholics are somewhat associated with an apostolic movement at the parish level.

An open-ended conclusion

The above findings and observations are glimpses of a reality that the National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry has aimed to study more deeply. Hispanic Catholicism will continue to transform profoundly the U.S. Catholic experience.

The first Catholic parish in what is today U.S. territory was Hispanic. This is true whether one looks at the first church erected in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1523 or the oldest Catholic mission established in 1566 in St. Augustine, Florida. Hispanic parishes have been part of our common tradition all this time. It is one of the anomalies of history that the Hispanic parish, which came first for American Catholicism, is often viewed as a new creation.

In what is left of the 21st century, nonetheless, Catholics in the United States cannot ignore what is happening in Hispanic parishes. We simply cannot afford it as a Church.

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