

# Hispanic Catholics: History, Challenges, and Recommendations

Antonio Medina-Rivera



The United States Catholic Conference of Bishops' Liturgy Committee declared Spanish as one of the official languages in 1985. English, Latin, and other Native American languages share this official status with Spanish. Although there is more than one official language, English is the language of preference when the USCCB meets; however, its incorporation in the liturgy is as recent as the incorporation of Spanish. Latin is still commonly used for solemn or extraordinary ceremonies or in the case of an international audience, and is still a common language of celebration, especially in some of the parishes of the northeast of the US. The use of Native American languages is more limited, whereas the use of Spanish is growing at an unprecedented pace. The presence and contribution of Hispanics is giving the US Catholic Church an opportunity to grow, to become renewed and vibrant, and to transform some of its traditions and celebrations.

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## HISPANIC PRESENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

According to the US Census, 16.7 percent of the US population are of Hispanic origin. The USCCB calculated in 1999 that more than 40 percent of US Catholics are of Hispanic origin, and 70 percent of Hispanics are Catholics. Due to the continued growth of Hispanics in the country, it is almost evident that Hispanics are close to reaching or even surpassing half of the Catholic population in the US.

Hispanic presence in the US goes all the way to Juan Ponce de León and his voyage to Florida in 1513. The city of San Agustín in Florida was founded in 1565 and it is a testimony of Hispanic presence before Jamestown's enterprise of 1607 or the Plymouth religious experience of 1620. Hispanic presence in the Southwest goes all the way to the conquest of Mexico in 1521, a conquest that started in the central part of Mexico, but that eventually moved to the current territories of northern Mexico and southwest US. The Spanish explorer Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca is the first person to describe the US southern territory between 1527-1536 after his ship sunk during his expedition.

Mexican presence in the US started before the independence of the United States in 1776. At that time, a great part of the southwest territory was part of the Viceroyalty of New Spain (Mexico), and eventually Mexico lost its territories during the

second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, becoming part of the United States. Mexican immigration started right after losing those territories, since those new borderlands separated families and towns.

Puerto Rico became a US property in 1898 during the Spanish-American war. Puerto Ricans became US citizens in 1917, and Puerto Ricans joined the US military forces during the end of the First World War. Today Spanish and English are co-official languages of the Island; however, less than 10 percent of Puerto Ricans living on the Island are fully bilinguals. The Puerto Rican immigration is sometimes compared to a "flying bus" since many families and individuals move within the US and Puerto Rico on a regular basis.

Economic, cultural, and musical exchange between Cuba and the US started many years before the Cuban Revolution. Cuban immigration to the US has increased since the beginning of Fidel Castro's government in 1959. There was another major immigration wave in 1980, and eventually in the decade of the 1990s, after Cuba stopped having the support of the dismantled Soviet Union. Cubans who come to the United States can apply for political asylum, having the opportunity to become US citizens almost immediately.

Dominicans, Salvadorans, and other people from Central America and South American have arrived to the United States due to political and economic problems — from the US military intervention, and problems related to drug dealing, to pursuing the "American Dream." The stories of the Hispanic presence in the US are multiple and very complex, but the reality is that today Hispanics form an important part of this diverse and multicultural society.

## AMERICANIZATION

The use of Spanish in the US liturgy runs parallel with the incorporation of English. By 1967, the Hispanic presence in some of the main cities of the United States was already noticeable (Mexicans in the Southwest and Illinois, and Puerto Ricans in New York and other regions of the northeast US). Many Hispanic communities were established years ago in areas of the Southwest, prior to the US conquest of the west during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In these communities, the use of Spanish in some parts of the liturgy was already normal. Jay P. Dolan indicates that by 1925 there were two churches in Chicago offering some services in Spanish. The dioceses of



Photo by Adam Baker

Chicago and Los Angeles created “Americanization” programs with the intention of helping the Hispanic community assimilate within mainstream Catholicism as indicated by Dolan:

In keeping with the spirit of the 1920s, the church in Los Angeles inaugurated an extensive Americanization program. The bishop of Los Angeles, John Cantwell, was a big supporter of this movement and received help from Knights of Columbus, who published a civics Catechism in Spanish. Cantwell’s successor, Francis McIntire, continued this emphasis on Americanization; during his episcopacy, the parish school became the principal agency in the Americanization of the Mexican population (373-4).

In Chicago, Archbishop George Mundelein “who was a staunch supporter of 100 percent Americanization” (300) also used the parochial school as an Americanization tool. It is important to notice that even though some of the ideas seem racist in principle and unconceivable in today’s eyes, that was the mentality during those years of massive European immigration in the United States. The ideas of bishops Cantwell and Mundelein were very well received by most Catholics during that time. However, opposition was also evident especially among German and Polish Catholics, who understood those linguistic initiatives as an attack on European culture and identity. The Irish Catholic way, already ingrained among US Catholics, was imposed on many of the new immigrants coming to the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It is evident that the Americanization Project started by Mundelein, Cantwell, and McIntire did not have the immediate

success they were expecting due to the constant increase in Hispanic immigration during the following decades. Another factor that leads to the segregation of Hispanics within mainstream Catholicism is the racial and cultural issue. In many churches, especially in the east, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans had no other choice but to sit in the back of the churches or to celebrate the liturgies in the churches’ basements or school auditoriums. These discriminatory incidents contributed deeply in the separation of the Hispanic and mainstream Catholicism in the United States. Matovina and Poyo (2000) observe that many Protestants and Evangelical churches proliferated among Hispanics during that time. For example, in a 1951 report on the religious conditions of Puerto Ricans in New York, Encarnación Padilla de Armas and other Puerto Rican women opined that the “most striking aspect of the Puerto Rican situation is the constant and energetic activity of Protestants.” Their report emphasized that Protestants offered extensive ministries in Spanish and that some 800 Puerto Rican ministers served in New York, where at that time was not a single Catholic priest of Puerto Rican origin (98-9).

### HISPANIC REVITALIZATION

During an interview with one pastor in the city of Bethlehem, PA, he mentioned that the main reason to start offering services in Spanish in cities such as Bethlehem and Allentown was because other Protestant churches in the area were already offering such services to the community. It is clear that the Catholic Church in the US felt the pressure to start recognizing the presence of Hispanics, welcoming them into their local churches, and offering liturgies and services in their own

language. Today Hispanics are welcomed in most dioceses of the US, they have contributed to the revitalization of many parishes, and pastors make an effort to provide services and liturgies in Spanish to support their spiritual needs.

The Knights of Columbus, which originally participated in the Americanization Project of the 1920s, eventually played an important role in supporting the Hispanic Catholics in the US. During their K of C 1950 State Convention in El Paso, Texas, they wrote the following letter to Rev. T.J. Radtke:

It is unfair to apply the standards of our Catholic tradition as generally interpreted in the United States to the people whose Catholic tradition is entirely different. We have a tendency in the United States to pride ourselves on our strict Catholicity, that we have the best in the world (153).

This kind of initiative, in addition to many other anonymous efforts during this time, concluded with the transferring of the Office for the Bishop's Committee for the Spanish Speaking from San Antonio to Washington, DC. This was a significant step for Hispanic Catholics in the US, since the main offices of the church were located in this city.

While the Puerto Rican community in the east struggled during many years in order to have visibility within the church,

the history of the Southwest church was very different. In 1972, the founding of the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) in San Antonio, TX, became an important event in the development of the Hispanic church. This center created many initiatives, programs, and materials to help in the spiritual growth and formation of many Hispanics in the US, while respecting the idiosyncrasy and church experience of the people of Mexican origin living in the area. The efforts of San Antonio's bishop Anthony Lucey and his successor, Patricio Flores, had an important impact in maintaining the Spanish language in the church and in the community.

### EQUAL FOOTING

The 1980s were of special importance for the development and growth of Spanish within the US Catholic Church. The creation of the Hispanic Liturgy Subcommittee in 1982, part of the USCCB's Liturgy Committee, was essential to elevate the status of Spanish as one of the three important languages of liturgy in the US. This was just not the possibility of having liturgies in different national languages such as Italian or Polish (as it has been the tradition with different national churches in different cities of the US), but the possibility of being recognized as a language of almost equal importance with English and Latin as stated by Dolan and Figueroa Deck:



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Through the work of this subcommittee the U.S. bishops would petition Rome to consider Spanish as a liturgical language proper to the United States in 1984. Great satisfaction would be felt by the members of the Hispanic liturgy subcommittee in January of 1985 when Rome confirmed Spanish as a liturgical language in the United States. This action gave the National Conference of Catholic Bishops authority over its own liturgical Spanish texts and freed it from the use of a confusing array of liturgical books produced by other Spanish-speaking national bishops' conferences. From this base two significant accomplishments would be made: the development of the *Sacramentary* (the book of prayers used by priest at the Eucharist) adapted for the U.S. Hispanic community and the official recognition of the United States as a Spanish-speaking country (374).

From a global point of view this is an important effort to recognize the US as a Spanish-speaking country. This linguistic policy helped to unify the US Catholic Church by giving recognition to the Spanish-speaking community which today forms more than 40 percent of the total Catholic population in the United States. Besides the *Sacramentary* the subcommittee also published in Spanish the *Lectionary of the Mass* (based on the *Mexican Lectionary*), the *Book of Blessings*, the *Funeral Rite* and it is currently in the process of publishing the *Rite of Baptism of Children* and the *Rite of Marriage*. The USCCB has also published other books and documents in Spanish, and all documents and materials originally written in English are almost simultaneously translated into Spanish as well.

Today the office of Hispanic/Latino Affairs (formerly known as the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs) is part of the Secretariat for Cultural Diversity in the church created in 2008. In many ways it is questionable that such a large group as the Hispanics in the US are part of a Cultural Diversity Office instead of being one of the main secretariats or constituents of the USCCB, since they are close to being the majority of Catholics in this country. I believe that this type of reorganization is a step back to the history and development of Hispanic Ministry in the US. We are a church with two main languages, and a sense of equality between the two languages needs to be clear and transparent in the structure and organization of the US Catholic Church.

## FIVE PRINCIPLES

Finally, I want to acknowledge the five Principles for Achieving Ecclesial Integration and Inclusion included in the document *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers* produced by the Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church. (2012: 32)

1. Articulate a vision of ministry based on ecclesial integration and inclusion
2. Foster the inculturation of the gospel in all cultures
3. Plan with the people, not for the people

4. Broaden your understanding of minority groups, program, and structures, and cast a bigger net.
5. Empower people from different cultures and ethnicities into leadership positions

I would like to add to these principles the importance of knowing each other deeply, understanding the history and development of each ethnic group (including the Whites), and having a sense of numbers and representation of each of these ethnic groups with the US Catholic Church. As an official language of the US Catholic Church, and taking into consideration that more than 40 percent of Catholics in the US are of Hispanic origin, there is a need to reevaluate the role of Spanish within the church, there is a need to teach Spanish in the seminaries and for the staff working in parishes and dioceses to better serve our community, and there is a need to see our church in the US as a church with two major languages which need to be represented equally at all levels. The future of US Catholic Church has a Hispanic face. ■

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