

The History and Experience of Latinos/Hispanics in the United States

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History of Conquest

To speak about the U.S. Hispanic reality, one must begin with the history of conquest. The voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 would change the world forever. The violent conquest of the Americas was unfortunately linked with the missionary efforts of Spain. The greedy pursuit of wealth resulted in the genocide of countless numbers of Indigenous people in the Americas. And in their pursuit for fortune, Spain also brought African slaves to the Americas. The intermingling of Indian and Spanish blood produced a people of mixed blood who today live in Mexico, Central American, South America, the Caribbean and the United States. There is much diversity in the Hispanic/Latino population.

Hispanic Diversity

The heterogeneous reality of the Hispanic/Latino population defies ready identification.¹ People of Mexican heritage (66.9%) are the largest among the Hispanic constituency of this country. Puerto-Ricans (8.6%) and Cubans (3.7%) comprise the second and third largest groups within the Hispanic population. The fourth group of Hispanics is made-up of those coming from the countries of Central and South America (14.3%), e.g., Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, Costa Ricans, Panamanians, Hondurans and other Hispanics (6.5%).²

The historical process of becoming this “new race” is only five hundred years old. It is a process which has been marked by a variety of colonial experiences. And although Hispanics did not cross the borders of the territories that they had occupied for five centuries, the border crossed them.

Hispanic Religiosity

The religious experience of Latinos is varied. For some the experience is a traditional piety nourished by popular expressions of faith which are intimately connected to the rhythm of rural life. Other Latinos who have lived in political contexts of oppression, in which their human rights have been violated as in El Salvador or Guatemala, may have discovered in that struggle a new model of church. For these Latinos, religiosity is shaped in an ongoing way by human events that occur at all levels of life. The political arena is not separate from that of one’s faith, and the presence of Christ is sacramentally embodied in the community of believers.

What is important to note is that the religious sensibility of Latino people is alive. There is a strong and abiding faith in God and love for Mary. The other sad truth is that the Catholic Church in the United States has not understood the vibrancy of such faith. And U.S. Latino/Hispanic people have long been neglected by the very Church that it loves.

U.S. Hispanic Catholicism

The first significant movement toward establishing Church structures for the Hispanics occurred in the 1920’s. In 1923, an immigration office was established by the U.S. Catholic Bishops in El Paso. In 1945, Archbishop Lucey established the first

office for Hispanic concerns on a regional level. In 1968, the office would assume national dimensions when it was moved to Washington, D.C., as part of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. This office was closed in 2007. The consecration of the **first** Hispanic U.S. bishop, Patricio Flores, occurs in 1969. From 1972-1985, a series of grass-roots gatherings of lay Catholic Latinos take place as they search to find their place in the Church.

Several decades have passed since the process of the Encuentros. Despite the enthusiasm of those years, it has become painfully clear that even with educational formation, Hispanics continue to be minor players in the life of the Catholic Church.

Demographics

Population: The 2000 census lists the Hispanic population in the U.S. at 35.3 million.³ This represents 12.5% of U.S. population.⁴ The Hispanic population is young, with 37.5% under age 18. Seven states had more than one million Hispanic residents in 2000: Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas. Fifty percent of the Hispanic population in 2000 lived in California, the highest of any state.⁵

Hispanics can be found in almost every state in the United States. They can be found in unexpected places such as Hawaii and Alaska. Hispanics migrate to places where they can work.

U.S. Catholics

The 2002 Official Catholic Directory reports that Catholics represent 22.9 percent of the total population of the United States. According to a recent survey, 72.6% of Hispanics living in the United States (26 million) are Catholic. Sixty-four percent of all Hispanics attend church services regularly.⁶

Despite the significant population of Hispanic Catholic there are only a small percent of Hispanic clergy, and only twenty-five Hispanic Bishops that can attend to their pastoral needs or who are in a position to effectively advocate for Hispanic Catholics. Some dioceses have the practice of “importing” priests from Latin America, but their lack of familiarity with the realities of the U.S. context makes it problematic. Often times they bring with them cultural attitudes that disregard the values of lay participation, and the roles of Latinas as agents of change in the Church and in society. Clergy from Latin America are sometimes used to a “privileged” status and treat their Hispanic parishioners with arrogance and disrespect.

An increasing numbers of Hispanic Catholics are joining other religious denominations. Others are searching for a spirituality that will nourish their faith and relationship with God, and decide that the Catholic Church has nothing to offer. While this affects Hispanic adults, it has more serious consequences for Latino/a youth.

Latino/Hispanic Religious Affiliation

Recent studies on issues of faith and public life published in *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*⁷ reports that almost one quarter of all Latinos in the United States are Protestant. Seventy percent of Latinos are Catholic, translating into 29 million Catholic Latinos in the United States.

For both Latino Catholic and Latino Protestant, the relationship with the churches is a complex one. There is an experience of cultural marginalization. The religious sensibilities of both groups are historically shaped by Spanish Catholicism. While the call to ministry is more accessible for Latinos in the Protestant churches, few of them occupy roles of authority and decision-making. Over-all the treatment of women continues to be a challenge for Latinas in both denominations. And the religious expression of faith lacks the fervor typical of the Latino culture.

The tension between Latino Catholics and Latino Protestants is divisive to the unity of a community that already faces innumerable obstacles in the United States.

Education

Hispanics who graduate from high school or who have some college study experience represent 45.9 percent compared to 59.3 percent of their non-Hispanic counterparts.

Given these percents, over 50 percent of Hispanics will not be eligible to attend college or obtain a higher educational degree. And the lack of access to quality education seriously impacts the ability of Hispanic youth to enter the workforce.

Income/Poverty

In the Hispanic community, the poverty rate of 21.2 percent, or approximately 7.2 million people. The poverty level of Hispanics in the U.S. has serious consequences for the over-all health of the Hispanic communities.

Latino Youth and Gangs

The level of poverty forces adults in the household to spend extended times away from home. An increasing number of households are headed by single-mothers. Children are often left alone. In the absence of adult supervision, gangs provide “community” for these children. This gang culture destroys the hopes of a community. And it threatens the health of the communities on both sides of the border.

Immigration

The poverty in other parts of Latin America forces people to look elsewhere for jobs. It is estimated that there are 10 million undocumented from Latin America.

The political rhetoric post September 11th has unjustly targeted Hispanic immigrants as potentially dangerous to the security of this country. The punitive treatment of Hispanic “undocumented” has forced many to forego services for their children and themselves. In some cases, the fear of deportation has led Hispanic immigrants to endanger their lives.

Women and Children

Poor Mexican women who are desperate to find ways to provide for their children become the ideal labor force for transnational industry. Little attention is given to just wages or for the safety of the work environment. The health and safety of women are often in jeopardy. Women often occupy these low paying jobs and are exposed to toxic working conditions.

The involuntary immigration of the “poor” in pursuit of jobs is another example of exploitive labor practices.

Another situation along the border is the migration of men who come to the U.S. in pursuit of jobs. They leave their families behind and the mother carries the responsibility of caring for the needs of her family. Unjust labor practices affect the entire family, but since women are represented disproportionately among the world's poor and marginalized, it is especially harmful for women. This cycle of suffering is experienced by Latinas on both sides of the border.

The quality of food has become an issue as the environment is degraded. Due to lack of funds, poor women can only purchase poorer quality food. The feminization of poverty has become a global phenomenon with women comprising 70 percent of the world's 1.3 billion poor. And the feminization of poverty is experienced within the Hispanic/Latino communities on both sides of the border.

According to the American Community Survey Reports published in 2007 a larger proportion of Hispanic households are maintained by women (19%).⁸ Women from Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and Honduras often migrate to the U. S. by themselves. These numbers increase the percent of households maintained by women (Puerto Rico-26.6%; Dominican Republic 32.3%, Honduras 26.1%). The poverty rate was generally higher for Hispanic children (under age 18).⁹ About 29 percent of Hispanic children lived in poverty.¹⁰ Among some of the Hispanic national groups, the poverty rate for children is about 30 percent higher.

Conclusion

The colonization of the Americas by Spain has negatively marked the history of Latinos/Hispanics in the United States. We continue to live out the consequences of a history of conquest and colonization. Five hundred years later, the lives of the Hispanic community has not greatly improved. This is true of the Latino reality on both sides of the border. What is experienced in Latin America is shared in similar ways by the Hispanic/Latino community in the United States. The constant migration of Latinos from south and north of the U.S. border makes this a local and global reality for Sisters of Mercy. The Catholic Church has not given this migrant group the pastoral attention it needs.

Our foundresses were called to bring Mercy to a world in need. Mary Baptist Russell, California's first Sister of Mercy, answered the call to serve the wide diversity of languages, customs and religious traditions in San Francisco¹¹ during the Gold Rush. Mary Baptist Russell who before accepting a mission would make it clear that the primary duties were the instruction of poor Girls, the protection of unemployed Women of good character, and the visitation of the sick.¹² And any work of Mercy in accordance with the Spirit of the Mercy rule.¹³

We share in the history and heritage of Catherine McAuley whose dedication to the poor and especially women and children was the motivating force in her religious vocation. Can that same motivating force inspire us to accept a new call and challenge? Together we search for ways to being Mercy in the Twenty-first Century.

¹ I will use the terms Latino and Hispanic interchangeably to acknowledge their importance, and the unsettled situation of defining the identity of Latinos/Hispanics in the United States.

² The percents indicated here are taken from the U.S. Census Bureau report on the Hispanic Population in the United States, March 2002.

³ Total population of U.S. Hispanics: U.S. Census Bureau, *Census Brief*, May 2001.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau Demographic Profiles, 2002.

⁶ Survey commissioned by The Latino Coalition and conducted by McLaughlin & Associates' *Opinones Latinas*, August 2002.

⁷ Statistics compiled in the volume, *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁸ *The American Community-Hispanics: 2004*, drafted by U.S. Census Bureau's Ethnicity and Ancestry Branch, Pew Hispanic Center, Washington, D.C.(2007) 3.

⁹ Ibid. 20.

¹⁰ Ibid. 20

¹¹ Mary Katherine Doyle, RSM, *Like a Tree by Running Water*, Blue Dolphin Publishing, Inc., Nevada City, 2004) 62.

¹² Ibid. 215

¹³ Ibid. 215