# LATINO CATHOLICISM IN LA: MYTHS, REALITIES AND POSSIBILITIES

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### **Loyola Marymount University**

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Good evening. Thank you for inviting me to be with you. I must say, this is a more engaging topic than the discipline that usually finds me in front of the "class" at LMU...Canon Law! It is timely to be engaged in dialogue around Latino Catholicism both here in Los Angeles and across the nation.

## **Some Myths and Realities**

- All Latinos look alike and sound alike
- All Latinos are domestics, gardeners or provide auxiliary services for restaurants
- All Latinos are "illegal" (undocumented)
- All Latinos speak Spanish
- All Latinos are Catholic
- All Latinos are democrats

 Celebrating Latino heritage and or cultural expressions are anti-American and not real Catholicism

Why do I even mention these? Because they have served to shape perceptions of Latinos that have lingering and lasting effects both in Church and in society.

Latinos comprise more than one-third of the 65 million Catholics in the United States. They represent 19 different countries, with 64% tracing their origins to Mexico. Over ½ of Catholic youth in the USA (25 and under) are Latino. In Los Angeles more than 70 percent of the 5 million Catholic population is Latino.

The 10 largest national or cultural origins of Latinos in the Los Angeles

Latino population include: Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, El Salvador,

Dominican Republic, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Ecuador, and Peru.

We all know that Latinos do not look alike nor do they sound alike. We come in all sizes, shapes and shades of color, or no color. Some of us bear the features of our indigenous ancestors, others of peoples that migrated south from the North and East, and others of our colonial history. We are the

newly arrived, the 2nd, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and even 5<sup>th</sup> generation from national origin or we can trace our ancestry to before 1848, when the national boundary of Mexico included California.

We may or not speak fluent English; we may speak English that bears the accents of the family origins or the part of Los Angeles where we were raised. We may or may not speak Spanish and if we do, our accent, colloquial expressions and use of words will reflect differing realities and contexts. We may speak dialects or indigenous languages that have yet to be written.

We are among those who struggle to find work, to provide a life with dignity for our families. We are employed in service related areas, we are in business, and we are entrepreneurs, artists and professionals. We get lost in the educational systems and are counted among the largest in number of high school dropouts. We make up 40% of the federal prison population, nearly half for immigration violations. But we are also college graduates and those who have earned graduate and professional degrees. We live from pay check to pay check, own our homes and businesses and can be counted among the fortune 500.

We are undocumented, hold "green" cards, and are citizens by choice or by birth. We choose to exercise our right to vote or not. We make up a significant faction of our country's defense forces. We are members of local communities, services and social agents, religious and political groups. We are also leaders, CEO's, CFO's, presidents of colleges and universities, labor leaders and social justice advocates. We hold political offices as elected officials, locally, state wide and nationally. We are shepherds of faith communities, lay leaders, sisters, brothers, priests and bishops. We are democrats and republicans, political or apolitical. We are religious and non-religious, practicing or non practicing Catholics, Protestants and Evangelicals.

We are, for the most part, from the Americas and as a matter of pride, we have continued to bring the traditions and customs of our families of origin to civic, cultural and religious celebrations. We all represent a part of and complete the Face of America.

We are part of the fabric of everyday life in Los Angeles and at the heart of the Church.

As I mentioned previously more than 70 percent of the 5 million Catholics in L.A. are Latino.

It seems to me that when most people think of Church and Latinos, they tend to focus on language, popular devotions, religious traditions, how we can accommodate what is familiar so that our Latino peoples will feel welcome.

This is important, but it is not enough.

Well the Church in Los Angeles has laid out a new welcome mat, one that is woven from the strands of our peoples' experience, that responds to Gospel imperatives, takes direction from Catholic Social Teaching and that recognizes the unique call and gifts of the baptized. Believe me, the mat is not well worn, we have many more steps to take when welcoming, including and empowering our Latino peoples...all peoples.

Membership and participation in parish liturgies and programs does not constitute inclusion and full participation, or solidarity. The usual way of acknowledging belonging, registration and use of envelopes, are not consistent with our sense of being at home in Church and raise "red flags" for our undocumented. The Church in Los Angeles must stand with, not

linger among, our Latino peoples. We must embrace a call to solidarity.

Latino's in Los Angeles face many challenges, challenges that fly in the face of the values that they treasure: family and community, education, work and faith. These challenges include the social, economic and political issues that keep them on the margins. Most of which are systemic.

To move towards solidarity will mean engaging in some very difficult conversations with all community members and taking actions that most would consider not appropriate with Church. Dialogue is not always a part of the hierarchical structure of our church. However, I believe that leaders of Catholic communities must be formed and educated in such a way that prepares and opens their hearts to the people they serve. I believe that the Church needs to identify and respond to the spiritual and temporal well being of persons, to intercultural congregations, to engagement with the political, social and economic realities of our neighborhoods, to be advocates for justice and a voice for the poor and marginalized. We must be women and men who call forth and nurture the best in people, to empower them to be agents of the Gospel, to support them in the enterprise of building up the Kingdom. Leaders of the Catholic community of necessity must have the will and talent to encourage and to engage in the art of dialogue in many different and often difficult forums.

I made reference earlier to some realities. These realities affect our Church and beg us to raise the hard questions, invite difficult conversions and impel us to act.

The **gap between the rich and poor** globally is reflected in our back yard.

A disproportionate number of Latinos live below the poverty level and constitute the working poor. Our young people are exposed to, involved with or are victims of violence.

We have too many single mothers, children raising children and grandmothers raising second families. Too many of our young people drop out of school and, with jobs being scarce, the only option for many is the military. Too many of our men and women populate the over crowded and inhumane prisons. Issues related to health care, education and housing all pose challenges and adversely affect the dignity and life of Latinos in LA.

We face tremendous **fear and pressure as immigrants**, documented or undocumented. Anti immigrant sentiments pervade and comprehensive

immigration evades us. College age children of our undocumented, who have been in the USA from early childhood and are eminently qualified for university education, are deprived of the opportunity. Wouldn't it be great if Catholic Colleges and Universities created an avenue for these young people and opened up their doors!

We experience **racism**. Myths and many more hurtful and harmful stereotypes limit our options and opportunities, wear at our self esteem and dignity, isolate and exclude us.

Added to the mystery and complexity of our culture, we are a matriarchal culture with a macho public face. We were introduced to our faith and the church in the arms of our mothers and grandmothers and are often more receptive to the **role of women in the Church** than most. Do not confuse the clerical culture. It is a whole different story.

Because we value family and community, we have been attracted to faith communities that we perceive are welcoming and inclusive. These may be outside of our tradition, i.e. evangelicals, or those that have emerged from within our tradition and sanctioned by the institutional Church, i.e.

movements. **Apostolic Movements** are attractive, not only for their sense of community, but everyone seems to have a role and responsibility, individual gifts are recognized, nurtured and they lend to building up the life of the community and promoting the charism of the group. For some it is an opportunity to develop their gifts as leaders. The difficulty is that some of the movements are focused inward, have a limited understanding of our faith and do not promote education or foster development. They sometimes lack adequate formation or mentoring of leadership skills.

What do Latinos bring to the Church? We bring a sense of the sacred that is not limited to Church walls, sacred scriptures or the sacraments; a sense of belonging that transcends parish boundaries; expressions of faith that incorporate life's experience. We bring youth and vibrancy, creativity and imagination. We are by culture family and community oriented. We are concerned about the welfare of the group and are responsible to and for the group; we rely and can count on one another. We also bring a different sense of time, one that holds relationship as a priority.

We bring a wealth that comes from tradition and custom; faith in the Holy

One and stories that bring a particular perspective to the history of

humankind. We bring a heart for the poor, an ability to shoulder suffering, a capacity for compassion, a generous and adventurous spirit and a regard for the other.

In closing I would ask some questions for our ongoing dialogue and reflection. How do we genuinely welcome the diversity of experience and tradition of our Latino peoples? How will we dispel the myths and acknowledge their realities? How will we include them in the dialogue? What paths will we make available to them to continue to grow as human persons and persons of faith? How will we stand in solidarity with our Latino peoples? How will we empower my people to use this same voice which cries out both in supplication and praise to our God in a way that is heard and respected as we continue to reveal God's reign?