

# Scholars explore Latino Catholicism

By José Martínez on October 11, 2010

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Approximately 90 people gathered in Ahmanson Auditorium to listen to scholars explore the increasingly Latino nature of Catholicism in the United States in an event which was co-sponsored by 18 offices, departments and organizations last Thursday night.

“Latino Catholicism in L.A.: Myths, Realities and Possibilities” was the inaugural lecture for LMU’s Latino Theology and Ministry Initiative, which featured Bishop Gavino Zavala, who is the auxiliary bishop for the San Gabriel region of the Los Angeles archdiocese, as the keynote speaker.

Keeping with the title of the event, which was moderated by the chair of the department of theological studies Michael Horan, Zavala addressed myths about what it means to be a Latino, such as the idea that all Latinos look and sound alike or that all Latinos speak Spanish.

“Why do I even mention these?” he asked. “Because they have served to shape perceptions of Latinos that have lingering and lasting effects both in [the] Church and in society.”

Zavala mentioned statistics that painted a picture of the Latino and Latino Catholic demographic.

“Latinos comprise more than one-third of the 65 million Catholics in the United States,” he said. Narrowing his focus, he added that more than 70 percent of Los Angeles’ Catholic population is Latino.

“We are part of the fabric of everyday life in Los Angeles and at the heart of the Church,” Zavala said.

“The Church in Los Angeles must stand with, not linger among, our Latino peoples. We must embrace a call to solidarity,” he added. “So it’s not just that we feel empathy and try to respond to the needs of our people, but are we walking with Latino people?” Bishop Zavala ended with questions; some referred to the LMU community in particular.

“How do we genuinely welcome the diversity of experience and tradition of our Latino peoples?” he asked, raising the question of how one could stand in solidarity with the Latino people.

“As a community and within the Latino community, we challenge, for instance, [Loyola Marymount University](#) to delve into the formation of Latino leadership,” he said, pointing out that LMU is the largest Catholic university in L.A.

Three respondents were on hand to offer reflections on Bishop Gavala’s keynote; the first, Fernando Guerra, is the director of LMU’s [Center for the Study of Los Angeles](#) and a professor in the departments of political science and Chicano studies. He indicated the need for substantive inclusion of Latinos as a response to the needs of the community.

“Most responses in education, politics – have been symbolic,” he said. “That’s a good step, and that’s something that needs to be done, but that’s incomplete, and it needs to go way beyond that. And I think the Church has gone way beyond that. It’s provided a legitimacy for Latinos.”

Pointing to the fact that, save for a few exceptions, LMU has no Latino leadership, Guerra said that looking forward, strategy development would be crucial for the Church.

“Now it’s time to develop a strategy that utilizes Latinos to further enhance the mission of the Catholic Church.”

Ellie Hidalgo, a graduate student at LMU who works in pastoral ministry in Boyle Heights, said that embracing different languages as something to be treasured would help “honor the great gift of our geography,” referring to Los Angeles’ proximity to Mexico. She also said the Latino community is called to take on leadership roles in certain areas, like restorative justice.

“I think this is a place where Latino Catholics have an opportunity to lead all of us,” she said.

Hosffman Ospino, assistant professor and director of graduate programs in Hispanic ministry at [Boston College](#), was the final respondent, and emphasized the need for dialogue.

“We need to have intentional and sincere conversations about the Hispanic reality, in L.A. and in the rest of the country,” he said. “Whatever happens with Hispanic Catholics does and will impact the future of the Catholic experience in the United States.”

He also called the growth of Latino Catholicism a “golden opportunity” to hire Hispanic theologians, offer courses that address the Latino Catholic experience and create scholarships and centers of study centered on raising awareness about the Hispanic Catholic reality.

“There is perhaps no better time for Catholic universities to do this than the present moment,” he said.

Zavala emphasized the importance of the participation of the younger generation. “We can talk to the gray hairs in the Church all we want, but we need to talk to young people because of the life and the vibrancy and the creativity and the new ideas that they have, and we need to challenge them to be part of our strategy, part of our sincere and intentional conversations,” he said after the event’s conclusion.

“We always stress that we’re preparing all of our students to be future leaders, and certainly to lead in the United States, Southern California, but in the world; a very big part of that is to know the communities that you are with and to be able to work together,” said Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, a theological studies professor and a member of the Latino Theology and Ministry Initiative Committee.

“The Church in Los Angeles is largely Latino,” said Kevin Brown, a graduate student in theological studies. “To learn about the different demographics of the Church is to look at the Church and learn how to minister to it. So by learning how to minister to it, the Church is really learning how to be the Church of the future.”