

# Hispanics grow in number, decline in Catholic faith

A couple of weeks ago I met with diocesan directors of Hispanic Ministry of Washington, D.C., Arlington, Va., Wilmington, Del., and Richmond, Va. We had a lively conversation about the challenges and opportunities of ministering today to Hispanic Catholics. We discussed some recent research done on the topic, especially one provided by the Pew Research Center on Hispanics and Religion. Two insights in the study caught our attention: firstly, that “70 percent of the growth of the Catholic Church in the U.S. is due to the growth of the Hispanic population.”

Secondly, that the Catholic identity of Hispanics declines with every generation; only 68 percent of Hispanic/Latinos call themselves Catholics decreasing from 15 years ago in which it was reported at 75 percent. It was particularly alarming to all of us that the majority of second- generation Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are no longer Roman Catholic.

This reality should be a wake-up call not only for those involved in Hispanic ministry, but for all leaders in the church. What can be done? Is the church alienating Hispanic Catholic immigrants and their descendants? There is no doubt for those who have experience and expertise in Hispanic ministry that successful evangelization of Hispanic Catholics requires cultural-specific-ministries, which includes, especially for immigrants, the mass in Spanish. This situation implies that there is a great need of bilingual/bicultural clergy and at present they are a minority. Even more troubling is that seminarians are not prepared to minister a church that in 20 years, more or less, will be 50 percent of Hispanic descent.

This reality calls more than ever for parishes that are welcoming, evangelizing, missionary and open to change. The Catholic community needs to be the home away from home where Hispanics can continue to grow in faith and fellowship. This requires separate worship in Spanish, religious education and liturgical programs that are culturally appropriate. The one size fits all kind of parish is a model of the past that does not respond to diverse communities.

Pope John Paul II in his address to the Bishops of Brazil in 2002 remarked: "One can never say too often that "pastoral policies will have to be revised, so that each particular church can offer the faithful more personalized religious care and strengthen the structures of communion and mission."

There is a significant degree of separation in a parish that serves communities in two or more languages; but while pastors and pastoral leaders around the nation are worried about a "divided parish" or about the loss of the "homogeneous parish" the parishes that consider themselves to be a community of communities are thriving in their ministry to a culturally diverse membership.

As an evangelizing missionary church, we need to prepare our clergy and lay leaders to minister to Hispanic Catholics. At present, the seminaries and schools of ministry that offer certificates or concentration on Hispanic ministries continue to be low in comparison to the growth of the population. Many dioceses do not take such programs seriously. There are only a few seminaries that offer them and they are only elective programs which are often poorly attended.

Seminarians from Latin America studying for dioceses in the United States have expressed to me their apprehension at the lack of interest of North American seminarians to prepare themselves for the future church that will comprise large number of Hispanics. I suspect that there may be the supposition that by the second generation all Hispanics will speak English and the "problem" would be solved. However, the large numbers of second-generation Hispanics that are leaving the Catholic Church are saying that is not only a language issue, that there is a need for cultural and ministerial prepared pastoral agents who care enough to go in search of those who are leaving the faith of their parents; some to other denominations, many more remaining un-churched.

*Maria T.P. Johnson is director of Hispanic Ministry for the Archdiocese of Baltimore. She has a doctorate in ministry.*