

The challenge of enculturation, a look from Hispanic millennials

On Oct. 24, the National Catholic Reporter (NCR) published a survey highlighting the struggles of Hispanic Catholic Millennials. The report described the difference between Hispanic millennials (making up 45 percent of the millennial generation of U.S. Catholics) and “non-Hispanic” millennials. Key differences between the two groups were largely related to differences in education and economics.

However, the differences in Catholic identity and the practice of the Catholic faith, seem to have stemmed from the fact that Hispanic millennials maintain a closer connection to their cultural heritages; either because their ancestors were the original inhabitants of their territories before it became the U.S. or because their ancestors are part of the more recent wave of immigrants.

When it comes to finding identity as a “Catholic,” there are both commonalities and differences among non-Hispanic and Hispanic millennials. Both groups “affirm that ‘being Catholic’ is an important part of who I am,’ that ‘the sacraments are essential to my relationship with God,’ that ‘it is important to me that younger generations of my family grow up Catholic,’ and that ‘I cannot imagine being anything but Catholic.’” However, for all four statements, Hispanics had a higher percentage or “stronger sense” of being Catholic than their non-Hispanic counterparts.

When asked about the “important reasons” for attending mass, the top three reasons were, “I enjoy taking part in the liturgy” (Hispanics, 59 percent; other millennials, 93 percent); “I feel the need for Communion” (Hispanics, 70 percent; others, 85 percent); “I enjoy being with others in our church” (Hispanics, 54 percent; others, 74 percent). The fourth reason for going to mass because “It’s a habit” was highest among Hispanic millennials (54 percent; others, 40 percent).

The survey indicates that Hispanic millennials have a stronger sense of their Catholic identity. Yet their reasons for attending mass, particularly out of “habit” reflects that being “Catholic” may simply be part of the ethos, mindset, tradition or way of being for Hispanic millennials.

On the other hand, while non-Hispanic millennials seemed to identify less strongly with being Catholic, their reasons for attending mass seemed grounded in their own conviction and personal knowledge for doing so.

Both Hispanic and Non-Hispanic millennials can learn from each other. The former, as do all Catholics, has the challenge of learning more about the teachings of the church. A better understanding of the dogma of faith, particularly the mystery and grandeur of the Eucharist, and how it relates to everyday life is crucial. The non-Hispanic millennials can learn from the Hispanics to commit, embrace, and take ownership of their Catholic identity by living out the faith in every aspect of their lives - in school, work and with family.

What we learn from the millennials in NCR's report is the challenge of enculturation of the Gospel message, or the process by which the faith transforms our culture. Our cultural faith practices, whether it is the celebration of the Day of the Dead, St. Patrick's Day, Santo Nino, St. Gennaro or Our Lady of La Vang, are tools to catechize our communities and create an affinity to a larger Catholic family. Through a sense of "fiesta" our cultural expressions should remind us of our Eucharistic nature as we recognize a Triune God intimately present in our lives to whom we belong and in whom we can trust.

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