

December 24, 2006

## Nuevo Catholics

By DAVID RIEFF

Like the three services celebrated earlier in the morning and the four that will follow into the afternoon, the 10:45 a.m. Sunday Mass at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in the Pico-Union district of downtown Los Angeles is crammed to the rafters, even though the church holds nearly 1,000 parishioners. When I spoke on a recent Sunday to Msgr. Jarlath Cunnane, or Father Jay, as he is known by his congregation, he said: "If we had the space, I think another thousand people might well come to each Sunday Mass. We're full, bursting at the seams, and so are most churches in the archdiocese."

In many ways, this is the best of times to be a Catholic in Los Angeles. "In the 1980s, we were conscious of dioceses closing churches all over the Eastern United States," Cunnane told me. We were sitting in his office in a low-slung new building across the street from the church, where the administrative work of the parish is done. "Our problem is the reverse: were it not for the shortage of priests, we would be expanding our ministry."

This news comes as something of a surprise, given the fact that the last four decades have been such a catastrophe for American Catholicism. The statistics speak for themselves: In 1965, there were 49,000 seminarians; in 2002, there were 4,700. In 1965, there were 1,556 Catholic high schools; in 2002, there were 786. Mass attendance dropped from 74 percent of self-identified Catholics in 1958 to 25 percent in 2000. The number of priests has not fallen quite as drastically — 58,000 in 1965; 45,000 in 2002 — but the median age for priests today is 56, and 16 percent of them are from foreign countries.

And yet, to hear Cunnane tell it, things are different in Los Angeles. Indeed, what he was describing sounded like a throwback to the glory years of American Catholic devotion — the baby-boom era, when the native-born children and grandchildren of Irish, Polish and Italian immigrants filled an ever-expanding number of Catholic churches, often in places where there had been no Catholic diocese before, and they clamored for more priests to say Mass, hear confession, preside over baptisms and petition for more parochial schools.

In those days, young American Catholic males answered this call in steadily increasing numbers. To be a priest was to play a central role in the life of much of both urban and suburban America, spiritually and also in the everyday concerns of parishioners. The priestly hierarchy was overwhelmingly Irish then, and it remains so today. But that is where all similarity to the church of the 1960s ends. For if the priests are cut from much the same ethnic cloth as they were a generation ago, their parishioners are not: out of the eight Masses celebrated at St. Thomas every Sunday, seven are in Spanish, as are all three of the Masses on Saturday and two out of the three daily Masses. Parish business is routinely done bilingually, and priests like Cunnane probably spend more of their working lives speaking Spanish than they do English. New seminarians in the archdiocese of Los Angeles are required to be able to say Mass in Spanish (or another language of recent Catholic immigrants, like Tagalog or Vietnamese) as well as in English.

St. Thomas is in inner-city Los Angeles, but there is nothing anomalous about what takes place there. Throughout Southern California, from the San Gabriel Valley to downtown Los Angeles and from Orange County to East L.A., almost every parish church is in the same position, or at least inclining that way. As Fernando Guerra, a professor at

Loyola Marymount University, has said, churches in Los Angeles now fall into two categories: they “are either Latino or in the process of becoming Latino.” Although the trend is not as extreme in other parts of the country, it is being reproduced almost everywhere in Catholic America to one degree or another. Take, for example, another St. Thomas the Apostle Church — the one in Smyrna, Ga. There, Masses in English still predominate during the week, but on Sundays there are four English services and three Spanish ones, despite the fact that large-scale Hispanic [immigration](#) to the state is a very recent phenomenon.

Nationally, Hispanics account for 39 percent of the Catholic population, or something over 25 million of the nation’s 65 million Roman Catholics; since 1960, they have accounted for 71 percent of new Catholics in the United States. The vast increase, both proportionally and in absolute numbers, is mostly because of the surge in immigration from Latin America, above all from Mexico, that has taken place over the course of the past three decades. Today, more than 40 percent of the Hispanics residing in the United States, legally and illegally, are foreign-born, and the fate of the American Catholic Church has become inextricably intertwined with the fate of these immigrants and their descendants.

Nowhere is this clearer today than in Los Angeles. One key to the history of the city (mostly forgotten by non-Latinos) is the fact that the great migration of Mexican nationals northward in the past 30 years has a precedent in the 1920s, when waves of migrants flowed into California after the failure of the Cristero rebellion — an uprising against the abolition of many of the church’s privileges by Mexico’s ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party. The regime of President Plutarco Elías Calles suppressed the Cristeros ruthlessly. (“The Power and the Glory,” Graham Greene’s novel that follows the hunting down of a “whisky priest” by government forces, is set during the Cristero rebellion.)

On one level, this is all ancient history, yet for many new immigrants from Mexico, the echoes linger on. One battle cry of Cristerismo, as it was known, was “Long Live the Virgin of Guadalupe,” a reference to the apparition of Mary that Mexican Catholics believe appeared to a native Mexican in the 16th century. In a caustic moment, the great Mexican writer Octavio Paz suggested that Mexicans believe only in two things: the national lottery and the Virgin of Guadalupe. The fascination continues: ask any Border Patrol agent, and he will tell you that many of the illegal immigrants whom the service intercepts today wear tattoos of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

In the aftermath of their defeat, many of the Cristeros — by some estimates as much as 5 percent of Mexico’s population — fled to America. Many of them made their way to Los Angeles, where they found a protector in John Joseph Cantwell, the bishop of what was then the Los Angeles-San Diego diocese. Though he was born in Limerick, Ireland, Cantwell was determined to serve his Hispanic congregants. During the course of his tenure, Cantwell created dozens of new Hispanic parishes and missions — this at a time when race relations in L.A. were at a nadir, and the bishop’s mostly Irish congregants wanted little or nothing to do with their Mexican co-religionists.

The Cristeros arrived in the tens of thousands, but the current wave of immigrants dwarfs their numbers. Roger Mahony, the current cardinal archbishop of Los Angeles, likes to point out that the United States is reaching “the greatest levels of immigration in our nation’s history,” and to him and others in the church hierarchy, the new arrivals herald a rebirth of American Catholicism. Many within the church also say that these new arrivals could reverse the trend toward more tolerant attitudes on issues like contraception and [abortion](#) — what orthodox believers dismissively call cafeteria Catholicism. If Los Angeles is the epicenter for the astonishing Hispanicization of the American Catholic Church, it is also the site of a return to orthodoxy.

The question, though, is whether these changes represent something lasting. Is this a real turning point in the history of the American church that will lead to its enduring revival or, instead, only another cycle in that history? A cynic might observe that while the Catholic Church in Los Angeles has a great new market to serve, it has had great

markets before. After all, the faith of the Irish and Italians in the 1950s seemed unbending, and yet it eroded in the aftermath of [Vatican II](#) and assimilation. Then, as now, priests routinely described their immigrant parishioners as possessed of traditional family values, a deep historical as well as spiritual connection to Catholicism and a belief that the church would look after their best interests. As Mahony himself told a group of seminarians in a recent speech, the pastoral task today among Latinos “is not much different than at other times in the church’s life in this country, such as when Catholic immigrants from Europe — mostly Irish, Italian, Polish and German immigrants — came in search of better lives and looked to the Catholic Church for assistance in their spiritual, material and legal needs.”

At times, there seems to be a certain wishful thinking in the church hierarchy’s insistence on the unshakable faith of Hispanic Catholics. At the very least, it seems to underestimate the effect assimilation has had throughout American history on religious orthodoxy. With the children and grandchildren of European immigrants, the church fought what turned out to be a losing battle against the secular mind-set. As Latino immigrants become more settled, will they not, in their turn, choose to adopt views reflective of the American norm — a norm in which religious ideals of community have tended to give way to individualism and the quest for prosperity? Monsignor Cunnane has certainly thought about the problem. Cunnane, who comes from County Sligo, acknowledges ruefully the decline of faith in his native Ireland and says of his new flock, “We’ll not let these people slip away.”

You do not have to spend much time with the Catholic hierarchy in Los Angeles to realize how deep the church’s commitment is to its Latino parishioners. The priests I spoke with praised the moral seriousness of their new parishioners and displayed a palpable exhilaration about the depth of their faith, an almost romantic, idealizing rendering of their spiritual commitment. As Cunnane put it, “The renewal we’ve experienced has not just been in numbers but in terms of vibrancy of faith and in the sense of community.”

This extraordinary flow of feeling seems to go both ways. At Spanish Masses all over Los Angeles, there is the pervasive feeling of ardent devotion among the congregants. Clichéd though it may seem, what seems evident at the end of a Mass in an immigrant church is the sheer power of the experience. Parish priests talk a great deal about the need to make their new parishioners feel at home. To do so, these priests have tried to accommodate their habits of worship. At St. Thomas, for example, a mariachi band with the musicians in full ranchers’ regalia stands behind the altar and intermittently steps forward to play. As well, fewer and fewer churches in greater Los Angeles make use of communion rails, and while this a tendency that is increasingly visible around the country, there is a particular informality and, more important, a particular intimacy to Masses in Latino churches. People bring their children, and the intermingled sounds of laughter, babies’ tears and parents’ admonitions and reassurances echo through the church as a counterpoint to service, sermon and song.

At St. Thomas, as the priest moves among his parishioners delivering the homily in Spanish, microphone in hand, he can seem to an outsider more like an evangelical pastor than a traditional Catholic priest. As he steps forward to ready communion, the priest is aided by a number of female members of the congregation. Most are elderly; all are dark-skinned — this in a congregation where people of every color come to worship. The communion itself is given with those who wish to receive it standing around the priest. From a distance, it can seem as if they are almost purposelessly milling about him, although, of course, the reverse is true.

To be sure, it is still possible in Los Angeles to hear a more formal Mass said in English, in a more hierarchical manner, notably in the new cathedral downtown. But many local parish priests have done everything they can to break down the barriers between themselves and their congregations. As Msgr. David O’Connell, who has worked as a priest in the inner city for the past 18 years and now is the pastor of St. Michael’s Church in South-Central Los Angeles, explained it to me: “The church must always be willing to ‘reread’ our own tradition in terms of those we’re serving. It’s what we’ve always done.”

Of course, the archdiocese has not severed its ties with the powerful in order to stand exclusively with the meek and the poor. The church is an institution that wields enormous political power in Los Angeles, just as it has always done. The city has a Catholic establishment, which, while not as old as that in Boston or New York, dates back at least to the 1920s, when the Doheny family held sway. Edward L. Doheny, who made his fortune when he struck oil in Los Angeles and later added to it with oil holdings in Mexico, left in his estate millions of dollars for the building of Loyola Marymount University. His wife's rare-book collection formed the nucleus for the library at St. John's, the diocesan seminary. The Doheny family has since largely faded from the scene, but decade in and decade out the archdiocese has maintained its influence. Emblematic of this is the fact that the list of donors who underwrote the building of the new cathedral reads like a who's who of L.A.'s power brokers and includes many non-Catholics, most notably Eli Broad, the businessman and philanthropist, who is Jewish.

There are tensions between the church as an establishment institution and the church as the champion of poor Latinos, but they rarely surface. To the extent they are referred to at all, they are spoken of obliquely. Members of the hierarchy will tell you that there was some resistance to Spanish Masses when they started becoming the norm in the archdiocese and that there is some lingering resentment at how ubiquitous they have become. Some Latino officials, both clerical and lay, intimate that the church still has a way to go before the hierarchy properly reflects the composition of Catholic Los Angeles. And it is telling that it was far easier for Cardinal Mahony to raise money for the new cathedral than it is for him to raise money for outreach in immigrant neighborhoods or to support the social activities of parish churches.

After the pontificate of John Paul II, there is little left within the official church of the spirit of liberation theology that cut such a swath in Latin America and to some extent in the United States in the '60s. And yet, on the grass-roots level, that spirit is not extinguished. A number of the homilies I heard could have been uttered by the leftist priests of the immediate post-Vatican II period, like Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Dominican theologian, or Ivan Illich, the radical educational theorist whom the present pope, [Benedict XVI](#), threatened to excommunicate when, as Bishop Ratzinger, he was the head of the Vatican's Holy Office. The organizing tool that many priests in Los Angeles use, which is to form groups of neighbors into *comunidades de base*, or base communities, was itself one of the fundamental innovations of liberation theology. Within certain orders active in Los Angeles, above all the Jesuits, campaigns for social justice continue to loom large, and it sometimes can seem as if the social commitments of the church of an earlier era are alive and flourishing in L.A., no matter what the current Vatican line may be.

At St. Thomas the Apostle, for example, the priest at the Mass I attended preached that while the powerful might hold sway on earth, their rule was transient and their importance as nothing compared with that of Jesus and of the faith. On one level, of course, this is standard Sermon on the Mount stuff — Roman Catholic religious boilerplate. Presumably, it would be possible to hear such words in almost any Catholic church across America today. The difference, though, was the electric effect the words had on the priest's congregants. Some of the congregation nodded emphatically; others clenched their fists; still others sighed audibly with relief. This is not to diminish the centrality of the priest's religious message. It was a Mass, not a mass rally, after all. But the social message embedded in the scriptural passages, above all the call for justice and a validation of the dignity of the poor — that is to say of the parishioners themselves — evoked the strongest reactions.

"What the priest talked about today was what I feel" was the way one parishioner, a middle-aged immigrant, put it to me later, speaking in Spanish. "Not just about God or my children, though that is most important of all, but about the world, this world here in Los Angeles."

"Yes," his friend chimed in, "this unjust world."

Had the church made a special effort with Latino immigrants, I asked? The two men I was speaking with only laughed. “The church doesn’t need to make a special effort,” one of them said. “It knows us perfectly. It’s part of us.”

Would his grandchildren feel the same way, I wondered? That perhaps depended more on the hand America dealt them than on anything the priests could do themselves. But many priests I spoke with in Los Angeles did emphasize the need for the church to adapt to their new congregants, just as Bishop Cantwell did in the 1930s. By this, they meant not only stylistically and emotionally but also in terms of the church’s social mission. The Rev. Sean Carroll, a young Jesuit who is an associate pastor of the Dolores Mission in East L.A., put it this way: “Our mission as a community of faith is to try to realize as best we can Jesus Christ’s injunction to us to make a reality of what he longed for.” He added: “Our effort is part of what it means for us to build the kingdom of God. Our engagement in civic life helps that happen. We don’t see this as separate from our religious vocation but essential to it.”

Such commitments have made priests like Carroll heroes to many in the Latino community in Los Angeles. At times, the reverence bordering on adulation with which they are treated can seem cloying. And yet, starkly put, it is a reverence based on need. The priests, for their part, are painfully aware that, as Monsignor O’Connell put it, “for many immigrants, the church is the mediating institution they trust the most, in which they feel they already have a foothold and are treated with respect.” O’Connell himself spends a great deal of his time trying to serve as a go-between linking the immigrant community, including those who are in the United States illegally, with the local authorities. Many people in his parish, he told me, “exist in an underground economy, a cash economy. They also live in a culture in which there is a lot of gang violence. What we often do is go into a neighborhood, say Mass and then talk with people about the issues that most concern them. Often, that means crime. So we will try to bring them to meet with the local police captain. The effort is meant to give them a stronger voice in the local community.”

Over the past 25 years, enormous numbers of people all over Latin America have become Protestant. In the smallest market towns of Tabasco or northeastern Brazil, you see storefront evangelical churches competing with Catholics for adherents. In Guatemala, the most extreme example of the phenomenon, 60 percent of the population is Pentecostal or charismatic. And this trend has repeated itself among Hispanics in the United States, where Pentecostalism has become an extraordinary phenomenon. Curiously, modern Pentecostalism was born in Los Angeles in 1906, when William J. Seymour, the son of former slaves, began to preach in a dilapidated building on Azusa Street in what is now the Little Tokyo neighborhood of the city. In Pentecostal literature, this is referred to as the Azusa Street revival, and from the start it involved Latinos.

Today, about 20 percent of American Hispanics are Pentecostal, and their churches, whether conventional religious buildings or simple storefronts, are found in every neighborhood in Hispanic Southern California. Pentecostal leaders insist that their numbers are growing steadily, and the church is visible in many parts of Los Angeles. For example, around MacArthur Park, which is only a short drive from St. Thomas the Apostle, Pentecostal preachers, male and female, sermonize in Spanish through tinny loudspeakers, Bibles in hand.

Some Pentecostal ministers in L.A. say that the Catholic Church is still too hierarchical. When I spoke to the Rev. Sammy Fernández of La Puerta Abierta, the Open Door Church, in East Los Angeles, he said, “People love touching God themselves.” In Catholic churches, and even in mainline Protestant churches, he added: “God is out there somewhere. He’s probably too busy to touch us little peons. But our faith” — the Pentecostal faith — “is based on the ability to express yourself freely and in the presence of the Lord.”

Fernández’s language was the language of faith, but in contrast to the Catholics I met in Los Angeles, it was also the language of capitalism. The Catholics’ vision emphasized social justice, and while it encouraged people to organize themselves, it also at least implicitly made demands on them (and had high expectations of the state). In contrast, it

seemed to me that Fernández's focus was closer to [Margaret Thatcher's](#) or [Ronald Reagan's](#), and there is little question that part of the appeal of Pentecostalism generally among immigrants is its emphasis on prosperity, in contrast to the traditional Catholic emphasis on solidarity. "Whosoever will, do it yourself," Fernández told me he liked to say to his parishioners. "Don't bother the pastor. Do it yourself."

Neither Protestants nor Catholics were eager to speak about the tensions between them, but those tensions are palpable in Los Angeles. "The Roman Catholic Church views us as little storefronts," Fernández remarked. "They assume that no matter what they do, Latinos are always going to be Catholic. But we've showed they're wrong. That's just a fact."

Fernández did not deny that he was proselytizing, though he declined to single out Catholics specifically. "We teach that we will be rewarded in heaven by the souls that we bring to the feet of the Lord," he said. After St. Thomas was damaged in a fire in 1999, a group of Pentecostals came to preach in front of it, exhorting the church's parishioners to join them. Proselytizing goes on all the time, on the streets, in door-to-door ministries, even in the workplace. Cunnane at St. Thomas told me that he had been in a restaurant and heard a Pentecostal and a Catholic arguing in Spanish about a biblical passage. The Pentecostal, it seemed, had brought his own Bible to work.

No Catholic I spoke with believed that the church's history rendered it any less capable of being close to the people (a standard Pentecostal charge). They simply emphasized the goal of social justice alongside that of catechizing. Historically, this is almost certainly easier for the Catholic Church than for any other religious group, because the church has such a long-developed social gospel and such an elaborate language for advocating for it, both when it raises its own voice in the debate and when it seeks to help make the voices of its congregants heard. And contrary to what Rev. Fernández said, I saw no evidence of the church's indifference, either in terms of its teachings — some of which, as in the case of birth control and priestly celibacy, of course makes liberal Catholics squirm — or in terms of its activism.

On the grass-roots level, that activism has taken, and continues to take, many forms, ranging from the month of prayer and fasting that the Dolores Mission initiated when an anti-immigration bill sponsored by Representative F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., Republican of Wisconsin, passed in the House of Representatives to lobbying for labor rights and immigrants' rights in Washington to participating in the mass rallies for immigrants' rights that took place in Los Angeles last spring. The Sensenbrenner bill was a particular goad in that it not only made illegal entry into the United States a felony but also imposed penalties on anyone who gave aid to illegal immigrants. From the priests' perspective, this bill would have criminalized almost every aspect of their work and, as several of them remarked, would have forced them to repudiate the essence of their commitment to their parishioners. But there was no need for individual priests to announce they would defy the law (which in fact died in the Senate, thanks to the fierce opposition of Senator [John McCain](#), as well as President Bush's refusal to push for the bill). As Father Carroll recalled: "When the Sensenbrenner bill passed, the cardinal announced that if it became a law, he would ask his priests to disobey it — that is, to continue to provide services. What he was saying, of course, was that it was an unjust law."

Given the dislocation that the arrival of literally millions of Hispanic immigrants has produced in Los Angeles over the course of the past 25 years, both materially and cognitively, it is probably fortunate that its archbishop during much of that time has been a man whose engagement with labor and immigrants' rights literally dates back to his childhood. Tall, slender and economical of movement, Cardinal Mahony, who is 70, is a paradigmatic representative of American Catholicism, a man who became a priest at a time when the Irish dominated the Catholic Church both in Los Angeles and in the country as a whole. When he was made a cardinal in 1991, Mahony was viewed within the church as being comparatively conservative. Today, however, he is often described as the last of the liberal lions, a

sort of sacerdotal equivalent in the College of Cardinals to Senator [Edward Kennedy](#) in the [U.S. Senate](#). He has emphasized the church's continuing opposition to abortion and euthanasia and has insisted that it is in this context that its support for immigrants' rights must be understood — in other words that all form part of the church's culture of life. Unsurprisingly, this constellation of views dovetails perfectly with that of Latino Catholics in Los Angeles, who are themselves overwhelmingly liberal economically and conservative socially.

The connection is one that the archdiocese emphasizes. For example, in its Spanish language publications, the cardinal is almost always referred to as “Rogelio Mahony,” Rogelio being the Spanish equivalent of Roger. One of Mahony's Latino admirers, Louis Velasquez, the former head of Hispanic outreach for the archdiocese, went so far as to insist to me that “the cardinal speaks Spanish with an American accent, but he has a Mexican heart.” And in conversations in Spanish with people in parishes all over L.A., I found some version of the sentiment was widely shared and readily expressed, almost like a kind of devotion.

“The cardinal is one of us,” said an old woman after Mass at St. Thomas the Apostle. “You don't need to ask any more.”

Her daughter, on whose arm she was leaning, nodded her assent.

Mahony was born in Hollywood in 1936. His father owned a poultry-processing plant, whose work force was overwhelmingly Latino even back in the 1940s. “Way back to my earliest years,” he told me, “I was exposed to the difficulties of immigrants. I used to work in my father's factory as a kid, and I remember the day when we got raided by the Border Patrol. These guys came in with guns drawn as if a bank robbery was taking place. And the way they treated people! It was as if they were dirt.” After a pause, Mahony added musingly, “Even now, I can close my eyes and see it as if it were yesterday.” Then he went on, “From that day forward, I believe my life and that of immigrants have been intertwined.”

As a student at St. John's Seminary in the early '60s, Mahony, who was then a rarity among his fellow seminarians in that he spoke Spanish, taught catechism to the local farm workers (St. John's is in Ventura County, in the heart of avocado-growing country, and the vast agricultural work force is almost entirely Latino). When he speaks of the farm workers, his tone becomes almost reverential. “I saw firsthand the sacrifices they were making,” he said. “I saw goodness and generosity on their faces.”

Mahony divides the history of his own engagement into two periods: the time before 1965, when, as he puts it, “I was mostly aware of the immigrants' pastoral needs,” and the years since, when, he says, “the church became more and more involved in social-justice issues for immigrants.” Mahony himself was ordained in Fresno, another agricultural, immigrant-heavy diocese, in 1962, during the period when Cesar Chavez began his campaign for farm workers' rights in earnest. Mahony was close to Chavez, and photographs from the time show the young priest saying Mass from the back of a flatbed truck. His involvement was such that in 1975 — Mahony was by then auxiliary bishop of Fresno — Gov. Jerry Brown named him to head up the newly formed California Agricultural Labor Relations Board. In effect, he became the lead negotiator in a series of labor disputes that culminated in the edgy peace between growers and farm workers that persists to this day.

As the first native Angeleno to be archbishop of L.A. (he was appointed in 1985), Mahony was particularly sensitive to the extraordinary demographic changes that were taking place in Southern California. He had not been in office very long when he mandated that anyone graduating from the seminary had to be able to speak a second language well enough to say Mass and hear confession in it. In practical terms, this represented a de facto “bilingualization” of the archdiocese since, while there are substantial numbers of Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean and Samoan Catholics in L.A. nowadays, the church's base constituency is Latino, and because this is likely to remain the case for the foreseeable

future, the most pressing need is for Spanish-speaking priests. Of course, since Mahony made this decision, the Hispanicization of the church has surpassed anything even he could have imagined at the time.

As a result, the church has shifted its emphasis from labor rights for legal residents of the United States to the rights of immigrants. Mahony views this mission as one that is biblically ordained. In a recent speech at St. John's, he said, "If you look today to see who are the most vulnerable, these are the same ones who are singled out by the prophets: people in poverty, single mothers, children and immigrants." In other words, he said, "the challenge of the prophets is for us here and now."

For Mahony, there is nothing new about this. "The church," he told me, "has been doing direct service for centuries and doing advocacy as well." But there is little doubt that the Sensenbrenner bill and the rise of virulent nativist feeling in America, above all on conservative talk radio, played a role in galvanizing the Los Angeles archdiocese and Mahony personally. The church had already been campaigning hard, but, the cardinal told me, the immigration restrictionists in Congress "teed up for us a home run by passing a bill so unlike the spirit of America."

It was not only the archdiocese that was galvanized by the Sensenbrenner bill. Last spring, a series of pro-immigration rallies swept Los Angeles. They were not directed by the church, but once the priests realized how the demonstrations were snowballing into something of great significance, the church joined a broad coalition of labor unions and activist groups that were committed to making the rallies work. As things turned out, the rallies succeeded beyond all the organizers' expectations. And certainly no one who knew Mahony was surprised to see him at the march that took place on the afternoon of May 1 wearing not his prelate's garb but a T-shirt that read "We Are America" in English, Spanish and Korean.

Los Angeles, of course, remains a city divided, and while to his Hispanic congregants Mahony is thought of as a hero, he is criticized by many people on the rich, Anglo West Side, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, for his focus on immigrants' rights and, more significant, for his supposed connivance in transferring parish priests involved in the pedophilia cases — part of the sexual-abuse scandal that in recent years has hobbled the American Catholic Church and bankrupted several dioceses. Some of these critics go as far as to say that the cardinal's commitment to the Latinos in his diocese is actually a way of deflecting attention from the scandal, and intermittently there are loud, bitter demonstrations in front of the cathedral, much to the fury of the mostly Latino worshipers. I never heard the sex-abuse issue raised once by the Hispanic Catholics I spoke to at parish churches all over the city — testimony, perhaps, to the yawning gap between West and East Los Angeles, Anglo and Hispanic.

As a practical matter, the church's commitment to the immigrant cause now far transcends any individual's commitment, even the cardinal's. As Msgr. John Moretta, the pastor of the Church of the Resurrection, put it: "I think the church will always side with the rights of people to live where it's best for them to live. We took that position when the Irish came and when the Italians came, and now we are doing the same with the Latinos." Moretta added that the changes in some of the atmospherics of church ritual, as well as the emphasis on certain saints on the calendar rather than others, was a form of reaching out not so very different from what the church did during the great Catholic European immigration to America in the last part of the 19th century.

Moretta may well be right. But this does not make the transformation any less overwhelming. Perhaps the most resonant change of all, symbolically, is the new centrality of the Virgin of Guadalupe, adored in Los Angeles 70 years ago by the Cristeros and adored by the illegal immigrants today. The difficulty for the archdiocese is that while the Virgin of Guadalupe occupies this central place in the religious imagination of Mexicans — "who in Mexico is not a Guadalupano?" was the way Moretta put it — she has not traditionally been terribly significant either to Anglo Catholics or, more crucially, to the hundreds of thousands of Central Americans in Los Angeles. Moretta said,

somewhat obliquely: “We’re making a big effort to be inclusive with the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the past, it had been Mexican parishes that mostly celebrated, but today we’ve made a big effort to reach out to Vietnamese, Koreans and Filipinos. On Dec. 3, when an annual procession in her honor takes place, and then on Dec. 12, when we celebrate her feast day, many people besides Mexicans will participate.”

The story of the Virgin of Guadalupe goes that in 1531 an indigenous man known as Juan Diego had a vision of the Virgin Mary on a hill called Tepeyac. Addressing him in Nahuatl, his native language, and appearing not as the white woman of traditional Western Christian iconography but as an Indian herself, the Virgin instructed him to build a basilica on Tepeyac. By appearing as a poor woman, appearing before a poor man rather than a Spanish prelate and speaking Nahuatl rather than Spanish, the Virgin expressed her fundamental solidarity with the poor and the weak. By extension, the “Guadalupe” perspective embodies the church’s concern for the poor.

The Catholic Church in both the United States and Latin America has been trying for some time to “de-Mexicanize” the Virgin of Guadalupe, as Louis Velasquez put it, and to give her the same central importance throughout the Americas that she had always had in Mexico. In 1999, Pope John Paul declared her to be the patron saint of the Americas. (Three years later, he canonized Juan Diego as well.) In Los Angeles, as the Rev. Scott Santarosa of the Dolores Mission put it to me, many people already experience the Virgin of Guadalupe as not just the patroness of the Americas but also as the mother of all immigrants. Indeed, that was the theme of the march in her honor a few weeks ago on Dec. 3.

What is taking place in Los Angeles is an erasing of the border between Catholicism in the United States and Catholicism in the rest of the Americas. When I asked Mahony about the Virgin of Guadalupe or the church’s view on immigration, he referred to studies and declarations issued jointly by American and Mexican prelates. In a sense, as mass immigration and economic interdependence have all but erased California’s southern border, so the Hispanicization of the American Catholic Church has made it increasingly part of a single pan-American Catholicism.

But even the Virgin of Guadalupe, powerful though she is symbolically, would be no more than a symbol were Latino Catholics not convinced of the sincerity of their church’s commitment to them. The authority of the church in L.A. finally boils down to the fact that for the poor, the church has come through and continues to come through. When all is said and done, can a poor immigrant really depend on anyone else caring about his or her immortal soul and also his or her material fate?

The Rev. Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit who ran the Dolores Mission when things were at their roughest in East L.A. and who now heads up Homeboy Industries, a group that helps gang members (their slogan is “Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job”), summed it up when he said, “As a priest, you’re always connecting the Gospel to people’s lives.” He continued, “Ours is not the escapism of some kinds of religion, nor is it the disconnected, boring experience I’m afraid some Catholics remember.” What inspires Boyle, he told me, is seeing women — the women who stand up to the gangbangers while their husbands, as Boyle said sarcastically, “sit in front of their televisions watching their telenovelas” — tackle some of the toughest, most pressing problems in their own communities and ask themselves, with a complete lack of sentimentality: “What would Jesus do? How would Jesus respond to a gang member?”

As Boyle puts it: “You don’t evangelize the poor; the poor evangelize you. I learned that as a young priest in Bolivia long ago, and it’s my ongoing experience. The simple truth is that here you’re called to something deeper, more radical, more credible.” So where did that leave him, I asked? Where did that leave the church? Boyle paused, and then he said: “You’re always standing with the demonized, so that the demonization stops. You’re always with the people on the outer fringes of the circle of compassion, so the circle of compassion can expand. You’re always at the margins, so the margins once and for all disappear. And you’re always with the disposable, so the people stop being

disposed of.”

Boyle’s Catholicism, harking back, as it does, to liberation theology and committed to standing in solidarity with the poor, is one whose authority and relevance is immediately clear on the streets of East Los Angeles. But historically, such radical interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount have always been in conflict, within the church, with the Catholicism that tells its flock to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s and concedes that the poor will always be with us. It is a tension as old as the church itself. For the moment, the church in Los Angeles is closer to Greg Boyle’s vision than it has been for many decades. The question, of course, is whether an increasingly conservative hierarchy, both in Rome and in the United States, will choose to allow it to remain so or will alter its course. It is this decision that will in the end determine whether the Hispanicization of the American church signals its rebirth or is a false dawn after all.

*David Rieff, a contributing writer, reported for the magazine on the recent elections in Bolivia and Mexico.*

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