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Mexicans Fill Pews, Even as Church Is Slow to Adapt

By **KIRK SEMPLE**

Two years ago, St. Joseph's Church in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, seemed to be headed for extinction. Attendance at Sunday Masses had fallen below 100. The 159-year-old parish's buildings were crumbling and its coffers were empty.

Today, the scaffolding outside bustles with workers. Sundays draw more than 300 worshipers, many of them families with small children. And where the prevailing language heard in the pews was once English, it is now overwhelmingly Spanish, with a Mexican accent.

As the [Roman Catholic Church](#) in the United States struggles with an exodus of American-born faithful, its ranks have been replenished by recent Latino immigrants — most of them Mexicans, who have brought an intense faith and a youthful energy. That buoying effect is especially evident in New York City, where the Mexican population has grown more than 25-fold since 1980. In parishes where they have settled, they have flocked to church, replacing worshipers who have died, moved away, defected to evangelical congregations or abandoned religion altogether.

"If we lost all our Mexicans," said the Rev. Francis Skelly, pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in the Bronx, "we'd be in big trouble."

Yet while no one expects anything that drastic, some clergy members, parishioners and even bishops say that decades after Mexicans began streaming into New York, the city's two dioceses still have not done nearly enough to attract and hold on to Mexican Catholics, particularly younger immigrants and their children.

Timothy Matovina, a professor at Notre Dame and a specialist in United States Catholic and Latino theology, said that just as other groups have strayed from the church as they have become more assimilated, Mexicans, too, are leaving the church in growing numbers — though apparently at lower rates than other Latino immigrant groups.

Religious experts familiar with the challenge say that archdioceses in Los Angeles, San Antonio and Chicago have focused more attention on Mexicans, providing comprehensive social services and referrals, and advocating for political causes like immigrants' rights. Some dioceses have worked to recruit seminarians from among Mexican immigrants.



The Archdiocese of New York made a promising start: In the 1990s, under Cardinal John J. O'Connor, it began developing a strategy to cater to these new arrivals, including bringing priests and nuns from Mexico. But those efforts faded after several years.

“They are still in the process of formulating a more effective way of reaching out,” said Mario J. Paredes, a native of Chile who is the founder and former president of the Northeast Hispanic Catholic Center. This weekend, the archdiocese is collaborating on a conference at [Fordham University](#) and [Lehman College](#) that will examine the role of Catholicism in the lives of Mexican New Yorkers.

Parishes, meanwhile, are adapting on their own. Many have added Spanish-language Masses and Spanish-speaking clergy. They have redrawn worship schedules, adding Mexican celebrations and Masses at unusual times — like weekday evenings — to accommodate many Mexicans who work long hours.

The transformation of St. Joseph's is due in no small part to the arrival in 2009 of the Rev. Jorge Ortiz-Garay, a Mexican-born priest whose presence has drawn new parishioners from as far away as Coney Island, an hour's trip by subway.

But that resurgence happened almost by accident. Father Ortiz-Garay was sent to the faltering parish because it needed a priest, not necessarily a Mexican one. That he has unexpectedly attracted Mexicans from all over the city is partly a testament to their craving for a personal connection to the church, said Msgr. Kieran E. Harrington, the parish administrator and the spokesman for the Brooklyn Diocese.

“That’s what makes it a home for them,” Monsignor Harrington said.

Angela Reyes, who travels an hour each way to the church from her home in Gerritsen Beach, Brooklyn, said that while Mexicans might adapt to non-Mexican priests, they felt a deeper connection to a countryman. “It’s very important,” she said. “It’s good for the community.”

Still, Father Ortiz-Garay is the only Mexican-born priest in the 192 Brooklyn and Queens parishes that make up the diocese. The Archdiocese of New York — with 370 parishes in Manhattan, Staten Island, the Bronx and seven upstate counties — has five priests from Mexico.

Recent studies attest to Mexican immigrants’ fidelity to the Catholic Church; of major Latino groups, they are the most likely to call themselves Catholic and the least likely to say they have no religion. A 2008 survey by the Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life found that about 72 percent of Mexican immigrants were Catholic, compared with 51 percent of other Latinos.

Officials of the New York Archdiocese and the Brooklyn Diocese said they did not track their parishioners’ ethnicity. But the change that Mexicans have brought is easily visible in churches

where they sit on parish councils, lead prayer groups and observe their own cultural and religious customs.

Chief among those practices is a deep devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, that has helped to anchor the Mexican population in the Catholic Church. At parishes around the city, Mexicans have won permission to hang Guadalupe paintings, install Guadalupe shrines and celebrate the Virgin every December.

Though it is unclear whether Mexicans have given the church a financial boost — many are barely scraping by — they have contributed in other ways. In churches needing repairs, Mexican parishioners, many of them in construction work, have stepped forward to volunteer their labor.

“They may not be dropping their money in the collection plate every Sunday, but they’re still going to get involved,” said Alyshia Gálvez, an assistant professor at Lehman College whose recent book “Guadalupe in New York” explores Mexican devotion.

Their reception in parishes where they have bumped up against more established groups has not always been brotherly. Some parish councils have tried to block the creation of Guadalupe shrines. Priests have had to remind their congregations that the Catholic Church in New York has always accommodated new immigrants.

For much of the 20th century, Puerto Ricans were the dominant Latino Catholic population in New York. But in the 1990s, as Mexicans started showing up at services, a delegation of three priests working in East Harlem and the South Bronx began meeting regularly with Cardinal O’Connor to discuss the newcomers.

“We would say to him, we lost the Puerto Ricans and we didn’t want this to happen again,” Father Skelly recalled.

The cardinal invited Joel Magallán, a Mexican Jesuit brother, to help devise a plan to assist Mexicans and integrate them into the church. Seminarians were sent to Mexico to study Spanish and Mexican culture; the cardinal invited clergy members from Mexico City to work in the archdiocese. The church also helped Brother Magallán create Asociación Tepeyac, an umbrella group for dozens of Mexican church-based committees that had formed to organize the Guadalupan celebrations.

But Cardinal O’Connor’s task force disbanded after the cardinal’s death in 2000. Tepeyac soon grew apart from the church, shifting its aim from religious concerns to secular issues like education and political advocacy. The network of Guadalupan committees fell apart, and the concern about Mexicans gave way to the larger challenge of attracting and ministering to all Latinos.

