

U.S. Hispanic believers prefer “Spirit-filled” worship in Spanish

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—Hispanic believers in the United States prefer “Spirit-filled religious expression” and gravitate toward a “distinctively ethnic” worship experience, opting to go to church with other Hispanics and speak Spanish when they get there, according to a recent report by the Washington, D.C.-based [Pew Hispanic Center](#).

Titled “Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion,” the Pew study suggests more than half of Latino Catholics in the United States, 54 percent, are charismatic or Pentecostal, with the proportion of charismatic and Pentecostal believers even larger among Latino Protestants, at 57 percent.

These figures sharply contrast non-Hispanic believers, among whom about one of every 10 Catholics is charismatic or Pentecostal, compared to one out of five Protestants.

The report uses “renewalist Christianity” as an umbrella term for Pentecostal and charismatic movements worldwide. Renewalism stresses the direct presence of the Spirit in believers’ lives as evidenced by speaking in tongues, miraculous healings and divine revelations. A rapidly growing movement across the globe, renewalism includes about a quarter of the world’s Christians, the study says.

In addition to charismatic experiences, renewalist Christianity emphasizes regular Bible reading, evangelism, a literal view of Scripture, and the “prosperity gospel”—the belief that God rewards faithfulness with health and financial success.

Surprisingly, embracing practices like miraculous healings and divine revelations—phenomena associated with Pentecostal Protestants—has not undermined the doctrinal core of Latino Catholics in the United States.

The study showed charismatic Latino Catholics are more likely than their noncharismatic counterparts to pray the rosary, go to confession and believe in transubstantiation—the doctrine that the bread and wine of communion become Christ’s literal body and blood.

Samuel Rodriguez, president of the California-based [National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference](#), marvels at the widespread charismatic presence among Latino Catholics.

“There are more Catholic Pentecostals than there are Pentecostal Pentecostals,” Rodriguez said.

He offered both theological and cultural explanations for the charismatic tilt of Latino believers. Latin America was colonized principally by Spain and Portugal—southern European nations remaining largely outside the Protestant Reformation that swept the north of Europe. So, Mexico and Central and South America were unable to experience the original spiritual revolution associated with Germany’s Martin Luther, Rodriguez said.

He linked the arrival of dramatic religious reform to the expansion of Pentecostal Christianity following the birth of the modern Pentecostal movement around the beginning of the 20th century.

“All of a sudden, the Protestant Reformation hit Latin America via Pentecostalism,” Rodriguez said. “The very first time Latin America removed itself, in its definition, from the shackles of Catholicism came via this very experiential faith.”

Culturally, Rodriguez believes, charismatic Christianity resonates with the emotional and relational dimensions of Hispanic culture.

Hispanics represent “a very affective ... sort of culture,” Rodriguez said. “The charismatic movement ... talks about relationship with the person of God through the Holy Spirit,” he explained. “The Spirit-filled ethos embraces emotions and experiential moments of faith, and ... that is the DNA of the Latino culture.”

The Pew report also found Hispanic believers in the United States prefer worshipping with fellow Latino believers. Among Hispanic Catholics, 70 percent worship in ethnically and linguistically Hispanic churches. For evangelical Christians, the figure is 62 percent, for mainline Protestants, 48 percent. In the report, an “ethnic church” means one with at least some Hispanic clergy, worship services in Spanish and a majority of Hispanic congregants.

While higher percentages of foreign-born Latinos than U.S.-born go to services done in Spanish, Hispanic churches are by no means uniquely for Spanish-only immigrants. The study found 48 percent of U.S.-born Latino believers worship in Hispanic congregations.

As for language ability, 80 percent of Hispanics who primarily speak Spanish attend Latino churches, but, even among bilingual believers, 64 percent prefer a Hispanic worship experience.

Rene Maciel, who will become president of the [Baptist University of the Americas](#) in San Antonio in August, confirmed the tendency of Hispanic believers to stick together. While Latino Christians don't intentionally avoid other believers, they often have practices rooted in culture that "keep drawing them to ... their congregations, to their people, to their worship services, to their music," he said.

And with the university's mission to train church leaders for service in Hispanic settings, Maciel emphasized the need for believers of all stripes to pay attention to the changing ethnic makeup where they live.

"There are more and more Hispanics moving into ... our neighborhood," he said. "For us to be able to reach those people, we need to be cross-cultural. We need to understand the culture."