

# Latinos moving away from Catholicism: Evangelicals, Pentecostals have increasing numbers

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The bongo drums and keyboard at Iglesia El Shaddai, a Pentecostal church in Elizabeth, New Jersey, are being played so briskly that they could support a conga line. The Salvadoran-born pastor shakes a tambourine, some women rock their hips and everyone sings praise to Jesus in Spanish.

Soon the pastor takes the service down a notch. But just a notch. With his eyes shut, Renato Castro shouts, "Gloria, Jesus! Aleluya!" and paces before 300 people. In the first row, Evelyn Yax, 29, sways. Her right arm extends forward, her palm out. Her left arm clutches her two-year-old daughter, Nathalie, to her bosom.

Like most Latinos on a recent Sunday praying in this rented, second-floor church space, Yax was baptized Catholic. And like an increasing number of Latinos, she left the Catholic Church to embrace an exuberant style of worship that she says brings her closer to God.

"I feel something special in this church," said Yax, a dental assistant born in Guatemala. According to Yax, Catholicism in America lacks the appeal that the faith held for her in her home country. "In this church you feel Jesus is very close to you. You feel something in your heart." In a series of interviews her opinion was echoed by many others.

Pollsters say Catholicism remains the religious preference for most Latinos in the United States. But evangelical, Pentecostal and other charismatic churches are drawing away an increasing number of worshipers.

Because of immigration patterns and high birth rates, the number of American Latinos will rise from 40 million to 100 million by 2050, or one-quarter of the population, the U.S. Census Bureau projects. There are about 67 million people in the American Catholic Church, 25 million of them Latino.

Latinos who have left the Catholic Church give many reasons for switching. Some echoed reasons behind other Catholic-Protestant divides. They say they don't want to rely on the pope, or even a priest, to interpret the Bible for them. They feel that the Catholic Church has too many rules, too many saints.

In addition, evangelical and Pentecostal churches often are smaller, seem more welcoming to immigrants and have staff more likely to speak Spanish. Those who switch may feel that U.S. Catholic leaders focus too much on politics and dogma. Many don't want to register with a single church as Catholic dioceses request. And they find the evangelical and Protestant services more animated.

"You go to a [Catholic] mass, you hear the priest talking and there's not that much participation from the members of the church," said Isidro Reyes, 39, a member of Iglesia El Shaddai who was born in the Dominican Republic and raised Catholic. "I feel more spiritual here. I used to belong to the [Catholic] choir. I used to be active in [the Catholic] Church. But something was missing."

A few decades ago, about 85 percent of Latinos in the U.S. said they were Catholic, according to Ron Cruz, executive director of the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Today, studies suggest that the figure is between 60 and 70 percent. Putting a more precise number on the downward trend is difficult because many polls are flawed—often because they are not conducted in Spanish—according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, which studied several surveys funded by universities and foundations.

Catholic leaders across the Americas long have worried about losing souls to evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic churches. The U.S. bishops have had a national office for Hispanic ministry since 1945. Many dioceses have similar offices. Catholic agencies run massive health care and social service operations that help Latinos in large numbers, and bishops speak out forcefully on behalf of legal and illegal immigrants, but shortages of Spanish-speaking priests haunt Catholic evangelization efforts.

“The reality is we do not have the trained staff of the priests and sisters needed because the numbers [of Latinos] are so large, and it’s been such a fast growth,” Cruz said. “Our churches are not able to respond in the language or with the Bible studies and formation the people are looking for.” -*Jeff Diamant, Newhouse News Service*