

1-1-2014

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Repository Citation

Hoover, Brett C., "Lost and Found: Immigrant Conversion Stories, the New Evangelization, and Parish Life" (2014). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 169.

http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/169

Recommended Citation

Hoover, Brett C. "Lost and Found: Immigrant Conversion Stories, the New Evangelization, and Parish Life," *New Theology Review* 27, no. 1 (October 2014): 33-39.

Lost and Found: Immigrant Conversion Stories, the New Evangelization, and Parish Life

by Brett C. Hoover

Perhaps the most important story in the history of US Catholicism is that of movement or migration.¹ As James T. Fisher argues, “America is a nation of immigrants and the story of Catholicism in America is largely the story of an immigrant church.”² This story has most consistently been told of European immigrants and their descendants, but even many who do not see themselves as coming from an immigrant experience *per se*—African American, New Mexican *Hispano*, and Native American Catholics, for example—still tell stories of movement on the land, sometimes violent and involuntary, and the transformations that have gone with it. Recent immigration from Asia and Latin America continues to provide examples of compelling migration stories. The theologian San Hyun Lee speaks of Korean migration to the United States as a “pilgrimage in the wilderness of marginality.” He writes, “Creative and redemptive events occur at the in-between and often despised margins of the world.”³ The theologian Daniel Groody focuses on the transformative interior journey evoked by the exterior journey of undocumented immigrants. For Groody, migration has a paschal character to it. It is a *Via Crucis*—a way of the Cross, an imitation of Christ’s journey through Calvary to the empty tomb.⁴

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Narratives like these—of pilgrimage in the wilderness or of the Way of the Cross—are powerfully evocative of the immigrant experience, but they are far from the only stories that today’s migrants tell to make sense of their experience. One contemporary narrative that deserves the attention of pastoral leaders and theologians is a conversion narrative associated with the *nueva evangelización*, the new evangelization. Emerging from the precincts of Latin@ Catholicism today, this “lost and found” narrative has roots in Latin American manifestations of the new evangelization but has taken particular form here in the United States. It frames conversion as the outcome of explicit religious education in the Catholic tradition, an approach that offers both gifts and limitations. On the one hand, this new evangelization conversion narrative offers immigrant parishioners a rich template for articulating their own stories of faith, especially in times of dramatic change. On the other hand, that same template has some polemical and reductionist themes that do not serve the common good of parish life in a pluralistic society.

1 Earlier versions of some of the arguments in this article appeared in Brett C. Hoover, *The Shared Parish: Latinos, Anglos, and the Future of U.S. Catholicism* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 93-99. Much of the ethnographic data quoted or paraphrased here also appeared in that work.

2 James T. Fisher, *Communion of Immigrants: A History of Catholics in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), x.

3 San Hyun Lee, “Pilgrimage and Home in the Wilderness of Marginality,” in *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*, ed. Ho-Youn Kwon, Kwang Chung Kim, and R. Stephen Warner (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 64.

4 Daniel Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life: An Immigrant Journey of Heart and Spirit* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 32-33.

Pastoral leaders and theologians do well to note both the advantages and ambiguities of this story as they attempt to reflect back in preaching and teaching the everyday experience (what Latin@ theologians call *lo cotidiano*) of Latin@ Catholics in a US Church increasingly their own.

The conversion narratives presented here come from the parishioners of All Saints Roman Catholic parish in the small Midwestern city of Havenville.⁵ I spent a year listening to Mexican immigrant parishioners there as part of a larger research project on shared parishes, that is, parishes with distinct masses and ministries for different cultural communities who nonetheless share the space of parish facilities.⁶ Here I try to reproduce them faithfully but also respectfully and critically.

Francisco Martínez was the head usher for the Latin@ community at All Saints. I met him there in 2007. Francisco, a middle-aged man with a thick shock of dark hair, had migrated to Havenville in the late 1990s from a small town in Central Mexico. He described himself as disoriented and lonely in those days after he arrived. Migrants deal with that disorientation and loneliness in different ways, but he addressed it by getting himself to church. As he very eloquently expressed it in Spanish: “I came with a thirst to find a church in order to feel tranquility, to unburden myself. When one comes as an immigrant, one arrives with that weariness and one desires to pray, to rest with God.”⁷ After an initial mishap in which he went to the county courthouse instead of the local Catholic parish—the courthouse sat in the middle of a downtown plaza with an imposing clock tower—he found his way to All Saints. Shortly thereafter, he was present at a Bible study led by the priest. And there, according to Francisco, it happened. “One day God removed the blindfold from my eyes,” he said, “and I could discover the truth. It was for me very beautiful, for me at that time I began to weep because I had remained in the shadows and the Word of God made it so my life was given expression.”⁸ By his own account, Francisco’s commitment to learning about his Catholic faith at All Saints increased dramatically after that.

During months of ethnographic research at All Saints parish, I heard many similar conversion narratives. People told about how migration had left them alienated, lonely, or even in a place of great moral and spiritual temptation. They felt lost. Participation in parish life helped them to feel “found,” but it was often a particular kind of participation in parish life—religious education courses, ministry training, sacramental preparation, Bible study. They saw faith formation as giving them solid ground on which to stand amidst the disorientation of migration. Many claimed they had lived in great ignorance of their Catholic faith before attending such programs at All Saints. In a memorable phrase frequently quoted, they had merely “warmed the pew,” (in Spanish, “*calentabamos la banca*”). Faith formation changed their lives. It helped relieve many difficulties in people’s lives, including confusion and grief, marital troubles, and even the threat of addiction.

A middle-aged man known as Don Chuy described his movement out of alienation and bitterness toward women; he attributed this to his involvement in faith formation at All Saints. Paulina Delgado described the emotional claustrophobia and ennui she felt upon arriving in the United States, resolved by her joining a group of catechists who met weekly to plan their classes for children. “Now,” she said, “our family is much bigger.” Others echoed this narrative of conversion through faith formation as a proposition for *other* people. Adriana Garcia, a young widow, thought that conversion would undoubtedly follow if people could just learn more about Catholic tradition. Maria del Pilar Mercado said that faith formation at the parish could help those who had little sense of God in their lives.

5 The names of the parish, the city, the priest, and all parishioners are pseudonyms. Hoover, *Shared Parish*, 2.

6 Hoover, *Shared Parish*, 2.

7 Hoover, *Shared Parish*, 6.

8 Hoover, *Shared Parish*, 93.

Miguel Fernandez, one of the ushers working with Francisco Martínez, thought that the entire parish should be focused on educating people in their Catholic faith. It would make them better human beings in every part of their lives.

Of course, dramatic narratives of conversion have always been a part of Christian life; though, their style and structure has varied with the times. Bruce Hindmarsh, a scholar of evangelical conversion narratives, writes, “Yet for all the similarities at one level, the Damascus road encounter [of St. Paul], [Augustine hearing] the child’s voice in the garden at Milan, the tower experience [of Luther] at Wittenberg, and the strangely warmed heart [of John Wesley] at Aldersgate Street took place in very different religious and cultural contexts.”⁹ At All Saints, the tales of dramatic change emerged from the disorienting experience of entering a different and often inhospitable culture. Yet the remarkably consistent tropes of the story—alienation and temptation upon arrival in the United States; a lack of or languid participation in faith life; incorporation in the faith formation programs of the parish; and immersion in a supportive community of meaning, liberation, and awareness of God’s presence—imply structured expectations of what such a story ought to sound like. Where did these expectations come from? Oddly, they seem to echo the conversion narratives of the American evangelical tradition. Whether they come from the preaching of the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century or evangelical megachurches today, these stories nearly always speak of dramatic change; exposure to the Christian story provokes a transformation from an unchurched life steeped in temptation to a rich, meaningful life in Christ. Some scholars refer to these stories as “crisis conversion narratives.”¹⁰ Their partial similarity to the conversion narratives at All Saints seems assured, but how exactly do elements of an American evangelical tradition of storytelling become embedded in the stories of Mexican immigrant Catholics?

The answer is contained in a word many All Saints parishioners (and their priest Padre Nacho) used over and over again: the Spanish verb *evangelizar*, to evangelize. They used this word to frame their notion of faith formation instigating conversion of life. Jorge Alvarez, a young adult leader, summed it up thus:

The most important thing is that each person feels the need and has the interest to do what they can to evangelize (*evangelizar*). Sometimes we are limited by the lack of people who are well-educated, but from the same people comes the desire to get ahead. And they start to investigate, to go to courses, to go on retreats, to go to classes. And in this way we are continuing to evangelize.¹¹

For many parishioners at All Saints, evangelization constituted a necessary defense. Antonio Nuñez argued that a lack of knowledge about the Catholic tradition made people vulnerable to proselytizing by evangelical and Pentecostal groups. They needed to learn to defend themselves. Manuel Nieves also worried that Pentecostal and evangelical groups were making inroads. And this is how the evangelical conversion story enters US Hispanic contexts. Latin@ Protestant churches have long adapted the American evangelical tradition of conversion narratives in a powerful way. Latin@ Catholics have, in turn, borrowed that narrative tradition but altered it subtly. On the one hand, Francisco Martínez and others saw their lives as permanently altered by an encounter with the word of God just as evangelicals and Pentecostals expressed it. But Catholics tended to replace the evangelical language of encounter with a personal savior with a narrative of encounter with Catholic tradition through faith formation. This is not surprising, since for centuries the chief model of spiritual conversion for Catholics came from entrance and incorporation into religious life. For Catholics, to be evangelized is to be formed in a tradition.

9 D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 16.

10 Hindmarsh, *Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 16.

11 Translation by Maria Charria and the author. See Hoover, *Shared Parish*, 94.

This adaptation started in Latin America and then came to the United States. A view of evangelization as faith formation that changes people's lives and inoculates them against the proselytism of evangelicals and Pentecostals specifically echoes Latin American perspectives on the new evangelization. In Europe and North America, the new evangelization is generally perceived as the redoubled effort of the institutional Church to promote the faith against the tides of secularization or secularism. While secularization and secularism have an impact in Latin America, the greater concern of pastoral leaders there is the perception that Catholics have a superficial understanding of their faith. The Dominican scholar of Latin America Edward Cleary expresses the point with less delicacy: "Awareness of ignorance in cultural as well as practicing Catholics is the great engine driving priests and lay Catholics toward a 'new evangelization.'"¹² Accordingly, the 1992 Santo Domingo assembly of CELAM, the Latin American bishops' conference, asserted in their final document, "The aim of the new evangelization is to form people and communities whose faith is mature."¹³ The 2010 Aparecida CELAM assembly generally avoided the term *new evangelization*, but they still insisted, "The challenges posed by the situation of society in Latin America and the Caribbean require a more personal and better grounded Catholic identity. Strengthening this identity entails adequate catechesis to promote personal and community attachment to Christ, especially in those who are weaker in faith."¹⁴

From a theological perspective, this "finding Christ through catechesis" may tap into an impoverished vision of the nature of Christian faith. After the Reformation, Catholics and Protestants fought nationalist wars that seemed to hinge on doctrinal distinctions on multiple fronts—the role of faith and works, different Eucharistic theologies, notions about baptism, the place of the clergy in the Church. Ever since, Christians have been tempted by a reductionist view of faith as intellectual assent to correct doctrine.¹⁵ Twentieth century theologians—Catholic and Protestant—re-articulated faith as an existential commitment to God across the whole of one's life made possible by grace.¹⁶ The new evangelization, on the one hand, often argues for the need for an existential encounter with God in Jesus Christ, but its pastoral emphasis is too often on imparting a fuller sense of doctrine as the key means of arriving there. We might also wonder if a doctrinal approach to forming "people and communities whose faith is mature" may rest on assumptions of the educated class that poor people whose faith was inculcated through intergenerational storytelling and popular religion could not possibly possess "mature faith."

To be fair, understanding the new evangelization requires historical context. Starting in the 1980s and 90s, the Vatican promoted the new evangelization in Latin America to offer an alternative theological vision to liberation theology. The Vatican long worried that the Marxist social analysis in liberation theology reduced Catholic faith to economics or ideology, and CELAM explicitly echoed this worry at its 2010 Aparecida assembly.¹⁷ The *nueva evangelización* thus, for the most part, eschews economic analysis and political advocacy. Nevertheless, a focus on relieving poverty and misery remains. At Santo Domingo, human development—not liberation—is called a "privileged dimension" of the new evangelization, with a particular focus here on promoting Catholic social teaching as a means of addressing poverty and inequality. "As the Church's social teaching points out," the final document argues, "development ought to lead man and woman from less human to ever more human conditions until they come to full knowledge of Jesus Christ."¹⁸ This personalist view does not ignore the terrible impact of miserable

12 Edward L. Cleary, "The Journey to Santo Domingo," in *Santo Domingo and Beyond*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 11.

13 CELAM, "Conclusions," in *Santo Domingo and Beyond*, ed. Alfred T. Hennelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 82.

14 CELAM, "Concluding Document," Aparecida (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Bishops, 2010), no. 297.

15 Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25.

16 See, for example, Karl Rahner, "Way to Faith," in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 496-500.

17 Anna L. Peterson and Manuel A. Vásquez, "The New Evangelization in Latin American Perspective," *Cross Currents* 48, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 317-318.

See also CELAM, "Concluding Document," Aparecida (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2010), no. 36.

18 CELAM, "Conclusions," 117-118.

poverty on Latin Americans, but it sees economic development as one aspect of the full development of the human person, a full human development crowned by an explicit knowledge of Jesus Christ. CELAM, with encouragement from the Vatican, argued that salvation comes more through good theology than through political liberation. Nervous about Marxist-tinged social and political analysis, the Latin American bishops decided to rely on ecclesial tools reminiscent of the late Reformation Era—strategic use of papal and magisterial authority, propositional truth statements, catechisms, and a precise focus on correct doctrine as boundary maintenance between religious groups.¹⁹ This was in accord with CELAM's strong concerns about the spread of evangelical and Pentecostal groups.

This focus on doctrine and belief and suspicion of activism provided the seedbed in which the conversion narratives at All Saints grew. The Mexican immigrant priest at All Saints, Padre Nacho, who was educated at a regional seminary in central Mexico where the *nueva evangelización* had taken hold, told me that he chose to focus on faith formation when he realized that many immigrant parishioners had not had their first communion and confirmation. He saw his mission at All Saints as enabling parishioners to not only attend mass and pray but to deeply understand the faith they had inherited. In his native Mexico, he observed, the tight scheduling of masses and sacraments meant that crowds of people came and went with little understanding of their faith. His cousin, also a priest, described the parish in Mexico as like a *fábrica*, a factory. Padre Nacho emphasized his own preference for more faith formation time with parents of children rather than simply celebrating more (and perhaps less crowded) masses. He clearly felt that faith formation served as the most powerful tool for the growth and development of his people as human persons.

The CELAM bishops did not intend the focus on religious education in the new evangelization as an excuse to ignore social issues or secular concerns. "It [the new evangelization] shows continuities with Vatican II," Peterson and Vásquez argue, "in its recognition of the church's need to be in touch with the laity's secular life and in its continuing concern for social issues."²⁰ At All Saints, Padre Nacho and his parishioners agreed. He preached constantly about the dignity of too frequently exploited immigrants, and involved parishioners spoke about that same experience alternatively with sarcasm and poignancy. At the Easter Vigil, Padre Nacho echoed Jesus' resurrection command not to be afraid, telling people they should not even be afraid of *La Migra*—the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE).

Yet both priest and people shied away from structural analysis or activism. Fr. Nacho refused to speak publicly about immigration raids, persuaded it would only lead to panic. Parishioners interviewed at All Saints never even supposed that the Church should assist deportees or help people arrange their immigration papers. They just hoped and prayed for change. As one immigrant parishioner noted:

I think that all those that are here and attend the church are praying to God so that an agreement come together in this country and allow us to work peacefully without worry of this, without worry that you are going out into the street and...God only knows if you are going to return again home or if they are going to grab you and send you back to Mexico.²¹

Peterson and Vásquez note a parallel movement away from political involvement in Latin American base communities of the 1990s: "Rather than fostering participation in extra-ecclesial social movements that address larger social questions, CEBs [*comunidades eclesiales de base*] and other pastoral programs now tend to concentrate on personal and family problems."²² Indeed, at All Saints, no one had much confidence in political change or saw ways

19 McGuire, *Lived Religion*, 22-44.

20 Peterson and Vásquez, "New Evangelization," 327.

21 Hoover, *Shared Parish*, 98-99.

22 Peterson and Vásquez, "New Evangelization," 322.

of participating in it. In 2007, the immigration system seemed broken beyond repair. A city meeting on immigration reform drew very few parishioners. Immigrant parishioners had little faith in government; in their experience, one-party rule in Mexico had ended only to give way to capitalist cronyism and the organized crime of the cartels. But parishioners did believe in the power of a deeper education in their faith tradition to empower them to take control over their personal lives. It gave them focus and discipline. It helped them resist temptations. It initiated them into a world of personal and spiritual growth that made a definitive difference for them.

This echoed Father Ignacio's teaching. He routinely emphasized spirituality, personal maturity, and commitment to marriage and family in his catechetical talks and homilies. Social justice advocates and critics from the political left often warn that such an intense focus on personal matters draws people's attention away from structural injustice, perpetuating the status quo. Certainly at All Saints people had little interest in any activism that might address structural injustice. But neither were they naïve about it. Indeed, the common sense narrative about immigration I chronicled in the community framed the issue of immigration structurally, especially through the lens of governmental hypocrisy. Here in the United States, they saw that people wanted their labor and their consumer spending; the US government just did not want to afford them the rights and privileges that would go with legal papers. Thus, though pastoral leaders may find fault with the new evangelization and its conversion narratives for an individualistic focus or for a lack of focus on social justice, that criticism does not seem entirely fair.

Perhaps more troubling is the polemical tone of conversion narratives shaped by the new evangelization. Because education in the faith serves as the fulcrum of conversion in these stories, storytellers may look disparagingly upon those less educated in the faith. Indeed, parishioners at All Saints did so, even deprecating themselves in their former lives of faith. They constructed a firm boundary between the ingroup of involved parishioners and those who simply "warmed the pew," to whom they sometimes seemed to extend little sympathy. Additionally, as already noted, some parishioners articulated the new evangelization conversion narrative in an ecumenically defensive manner. It empowered Catholics to fight off the threat of the *sectas*, a pejorative term for evangelicals and Pentecostals. At All Saints, Manuel Nieves, said, "The *sectas* and Protestantism are gobbling us up out there, while we are left behind." He led an apologetics group specifically designed to educate Catholics to combat the influence of Pentecostals and evangelicals. He began the session I visited by criticizing evangelical pastors who demand a ten percent tithe and who preach that withholding it is tantamount to robbing God. A few others nodded and confirmed this as a kind of "narrative of greed." But one man, offering something of a minority report, corrected this set of stereotypes, noting that many such preachers were actually volunteers.

This drawing of firm and defensive boundaries with both the uninvolved and Protestants occurs in accounts of the new evangelization in Latin America, but it takes on particular force in the United States, probably as a response to shifting religious demographics. The Pew Research Center has found that US Latin@s' identification with Catholicism has declined significantly in recent years. In 2013, almost a quarter of all Latin@s claimed to be former Catholics; 55 percent claimed to be currently Roman Catholic. About 8 percent of Latin@s have become Protestants—most evangelicals or Pentecostals—but a larger number, 12 percent, have disaffiliated with religion entirely. The latter group is more likely to be young and US born.²³ Indeed, parishioners at All Saints felt the force of these changes. They pointed to the presence of neighborhood proselytizers as well as friends and relatives who urged them to join evangelical or Pentecostal churches. They also spoke of those who did not attend mass or even refused to identify as Catholic, even some who sent their children to Catholic school. Their own "lost and found" conversion narratives seemed to depend on a definition of these "others" in their midst.

23 Pew Research Center, "The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States" (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2014), 5-19.

Whatever the reason for this greater emphasis on boundary marking, it has aroused criticism among both Protestant and Catholic theologians and pastoral leaders. The Peruvian evangelical theologian Samuel Escobar has complained about this negative tone vis-à-vis Protestants in the new evangelization in Latin America itself, which he finds wildly inappropriate after Vatican II.²⁴ The 2010 assembly of the Latin American bishops' conference (CELAM) agreed, and it re-emphasized ecumenism after a lukewarm mention at Santo Domingo in 1992. Closer to home, the US Catholic biblical scholar Jean-Pierre Ruiz has criticized the new evangelization for its adversarial tone directed at Latin American Protestants.²⁵

Nevertheless, despite these developments, the conversion narratives of the new evangelization at All Saints provided a powerful way of framing the disorienting experience of migration. Francisco Martinez, the man whose story I shared at the beginning of this paper, had felt lost, lonely, robbed of a sense of confidence and well-being. Learning about his faith in Bible study had helped him feel found, solid, at home. As I quoted at the beginning, he said, "One day God removed the blindfold from my eyes, and I could discover the truth . . . my life was given expression." Whenever a narrative structure gives voiceless people a means for self-expression, we must take notice. Indeed, from the uncertainty of his early days in Havenville, Francisco went on to become a leader and mentor in the parish. His story reminds us how a narrative with flaws can still function as a template for empowerment. Many other stories at All Saints demonstrated a similar passage from anxiety and loss to confidence and leadership. Pastors and theologians should take note.

It remains to be seen, however, whether this lost-and-found narrative of conversion fits the experience of the children of migration. In focus groups among the Latin@ youth at All Saints parish, almost all born in the United States, I never heard someone speak of how education in the faith changed his or her life. They had no life divided into two halves, before and after, old country and new country. Their challenge was different. They stood uneasily on the boundary between cultures and between cultural interpretations of the Catholic faith. Many expressed that they were bored at mass in Spanish; yet they found the English mass *rara*, that is, *weird*. I attended a confirmation class in Spanish full of children of immigrants in their late teens and early 20s. The teacher asked me to help a young woman, Lupita, who spoke Spanish passably well but could only read and write in English. As she wrote a summary of the day's lesson in English, she turned to me and asked, "How do you say *Espíritu Santo* in English?" She found herself in the curious place of having been religiously socialized in Spanish even though she lived a hybrid life, much of it in English. She did not need a narrative of disjunction like that of the new evangelization. She needed a narrative of integration, something to help her synthesize the elements of her bicultural life, giving due honor to both sides. As well as the new evangelization conversion narratives serve the parents of these young people, we might wonder what new narrative, perhaps still unexpressed, will come along to speak of their experience and our common future as Roman Catholics in the United States.

24 Samuel Escobar, *Changing Tides: Latin America and World Mission Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 31-32.

25 Jean-Pierre Ruiz, "Naming the Other: US Hispanic Catholics, the So-Called 'Sects,' and the 'New Evangelization,'" *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* 4, no.2 (1996): 34-59.