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Volume 19  
Issue 2 *Special Issue: Latinos, Education, and  
the Church*

Article 12

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January 2016

## **Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Audette, A. P. (2016). Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 19 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1902122016>

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## BOOK REVIEW

### Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church

Timothy Matovina

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

328 pages, \$45.00 USD (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback)

ISBN: 9780691139791 (hardcover), 9780691163574 (paperback)

<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/9545.html>

Reviewed by Andre P. Audette, University of Notre Dame

Timothy Matovina's book, *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church*, comes at a critical time for the Catholic Church in the United States. While the proportion of Catholics who are Latino is increasing, the proportion of Latinos who are Catholic is steadily declining. These substantial demographic changes in the Church raise a fundamental question about how Latinos are shaping Catholic life and, in turn, how the Church responds (or *should* respond) to serve the growing Latino population. This book provides a comprehensive assessment of the changes, challenges, and opportunities for enrichment that arise as Latinos and the Church "mutually transform one another" (p. vii). The result is a rich yet accessible analysis that serves as a useful resource for a wide audience: scholars of Latino religion and society, Catholic educators and ministers, and those interested in the shifting demographics of the Catholic Church in the United States.

In order to understand the transformations presently occurring in the Church, Matovina helpfully begins with two chapters describing the history of Latino Catholics in the United States. U.S. history, generally taught through a Eurocentric lens, often overlooks the long historical roots and important contributions of Latinos in the American Church, particularly in the Southwest. This history is crucial for recognizing the significance of Latino religious practices and traditions, which have been marginalized for centuries by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. The author goes on to detail the cultural tension between assimilation (abandoning historically Latino traditions to become "Americanized") and integration (retaining and blending Latino

traditions with those of other groups), a pressure that continues to play out in schools, churches, and neighborhoods, for Latino faith communities today.

These challenges are evident in the following chapters as Matovina discusses the transformation of liturgy, ministry, and parish life when Latinos take an increasingly prominent role in the Church. He notes several instances where the incorporation of traditional Latino religious practices and culture (such as Spanish Mass, devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, or Good Friday rituals) lead to conflict with non-Latinos in the church. These conflicts are exacerbated by a relative lack of representation of Latinos in church leadership, especially the priesthood, potential political divisions, and class differences between Latino and other Catholics. Outside of conflict, however, these changes are of value to the Church as Latinos revitalize parishes and bring a renewed youthful spirit and deeper commitment and faith to their congregations. These examples illustrate the fact that transformation is not immediate, but rather a gradual process of “mutual transformation” as the author effectively demonstrates.

After providing a compelling context of the Latino Catholic experience, the final chapter, entitled “Passing on the Faith,” is especially important for understanding the role of education in religious change. Catholic education and active participation in youth ministry by Latino children is espoused as an effective way for churches to stem the tide of Catholics converting to Pentecostalism, other faiths, or leaving religion altogether. The current statistics are not especially promising for the Catholic Church, however. Only three percent of Latino Catholic children and teens are enrolled in Catholic schools (p. 239), and Catholic youth programs are ranked among the least effective components of the Church’s Hispanic ministry (p. 223). Without considerable improvement in the administration of services, it is possible that the young generation of Latinos is setting the stage for another great transformation in the Catholic Church: a continued exodus and even more rapid decline in the number of Latinos who identify with and practice the Catholic faith. Because Latinos are a young ethnic group, with “one-fifth of school-children and one-fourth of newborns in the United States [being] Hispanic,” effective catechesis in Catholic schools and religious education programs may “significantly determine whether Catholic pews are full, half full, or empty” in the future (p. 222). In response to these issues, Matovina provides some useful advice for improving educational outreach to Latinos, such as disseminating information in Spanish or finding innovative ways to reduce tuition costs.

Following the theme of mutual transformation, the chapter goes on to suggest that, in addition to the transformation of the Church, Catholic schools can also be transformational to young Latino students. Education is widely viewed as being important for generating upward socioeconomic mobility among all racial and ethnic groups, but may be particularly advantageous for Latinos, who have lower average incomes than other populations. Matovina highlights the fact that Latino students in Catholic schools tend to have more positive life outcomes than their counterparts attending public schools. The chapter also discusses Catholic post-secondary education, but finds that opportunities to engage large portions of the Latino population are limited due to the small number of Catholic colleges offering two year programs. This represents another potential area of growth for Catholic education.

Timothy Matovina's book is ultimately an excellent account of the many dynamic changes occurring among Latino Catholics. Though there are a few areas where greater depth would help illuminate the material, such as providing more information about competition between Catholic and Protestant churches or about the role of other nonreligious civic organizations, it remains one of the preeminent books available on Latino Catholicism today. The author presents thoroughly nuanced arguments, making relevant and useful comparisons both among ethnic groups and within the Latino population, and carefully avoids overgeneralization by placing his arguments in the proper historical context. In an age of constant mutual transformation between Latinos and the Catholic Church, it is also worth considering whether the patterns identified in the text will stay the same, accelerate, or even reverse course entirely. Among the notable developments that may affect the transformations described in the book are the election of Pope Francis as the first pontiff from the Americas, higher socioeconomic status for many Latinos, and new immigration patterns from Latin America. These ongoing changes make the theories and treatment of the topic in Matovina's exceptional book all the more engaging and relevant to the mission of Catholic education and to Catholic life today.

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