Keeping the Faith: Spirituality & Religion among Hispanics Age 40+
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Executive Summary

November 2007
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The growth of the Hispanic population has introduced a new element into the way that religion is practiced in the United States. Today, Hispanics comprise about one-third of the membership of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Church has responded by making sure that most new priests speak Spanish, as well as English. But despite these efforts, many Hispanics have converted to Evangelical, Pentecostal, or other Protestant denominations, and others are no longer practicing any religious faith.

In this AARP study, we want to gain a better understanding of Hispanic spirituality and the practice of religion among Hispanics. This report explores not only the reasons for this exodus from the Catholic Church but also the reasons why many Catholics remain faithful. It describes the Catholic devotions and rituals that both Catholics and some former Catholics practice, the things that Catholics value and former Catholics miss about being Catholic, the things that bother both Catholics and former Catholics about the Catholic Church, and reasons for leaving the Catholic Church and joining a new church. It also describes the challenges of transmitting faith to the next generation and the impact of religion on political ideology.

The study is based on 1,000 bilingual telephone interviews with Hispanics ages 40 and older conducted during February and March 2007 and eight focus groups, conducted in New York City, Houston, Miami, and Los Angeles. Quotations from the focus groups are used to illustrate key survey findings.

FINDINGS

Religious Affiliation

Three in ten Hispanics practice no religion. Forty-one percent are practicing Catholics, and 29 percent are Protestant.

Twenty-eight percent of the Hispanics interviewed are former Catholics, with 12 percent being Protestant, and 16 percent remaining unchurched. Seventeen percent are Protestants who have never been Catholic. Fourteen percent are unchurched and have never been Catholic. In all, 28 percent are former Catholics, and 31 percent have never been Catholic.

Mexicans are the most likely to be Catholic; Central and South Americans are the most likely to be former Catholics; and Hispanics of Caribbean origin are the most likely to have never been Catholic. Men are much more likely to be unchurched than women, and people under 50 years of age are somewhat more likely than older people to be former Catholics.

However, language dominance, education, being born in the United States, and time spent living in the United States are not related to religious affiliation.

Almost all of the seven in ten Hispanics who currently practice a religion are either Catholic (59%) or Protestant (38%).
The Meaning of Spirituality

More than nine in ten Hispanics – and nearly all churched Hispanics – believe in God, and the word, spirituality, is much more likely to evoke images of God or a Supreme Being than it is to evoke images of religion/church or inner states, such as peace and tranquility, one’s soul, or the search for the meaning of life.

Nine in ten Hispanics pray to express their spirituality, and about three-quarters go to church, meditate, and learn about the sacred texts of their own religion. Catholics and Protestant former Catholics are equally likely to do all these things, but Catholics are more likely to go on retreats or pilgrimages and try to communicate with the spirits of the dead, while Protestant former Catholics are more likely to learn about spiritual topics and other religions.

Observance of Catholic Devotions and Rituals

Most current Catholics are deeply involved in Catholic devotions and rituals, and former Catholics who remain unchurched seem at least moderately involved. However, former Catholics who have joined a Protestant church are unlikely to practice any Catholic devotions and rituals, except giving a blessing when someone leaves, which is viewed as protection. The focus groups suggest that Protestant former Catholics have been transformed by their new churches. Their new goal is developing a direct relationship with God, primarily through Bible study and prayer, so they tend to view the Catholic devotions as irrelevant, meaningless, esoteric, and repetitious.

Just one percent of Catholic Hispanics say that they do not take part in any of the devotions and rituals they were asked about in this survey on a regular basis. At least eight in ten pray to the Virgin Mary to intervene with Jesus on their behalf, attend Mass and Holy Communion, give blessings to people when they leave, and cross themselves when passing a church. At least seven in ten fast or refrain from eating meat during Lent, have a statue of Mary or Jesus in their home, say the Rosary, have statues of the saints at home, and pray to the saints. More than two-thirds celebrate the Saint’s Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and go to Confession, and six in ten light candles as a prayer for the dead.

Just over half of unchurched former Catholics retain the custom of giving a blessing before someone leaves, and more than four in ten pray to the Virgin Mary to intervene with Jesus on their behalf and cross themselves when passing a church. At least one-third have statues of the saints at home, fast or refrain from eating meat during Lent, pray to the saints, and have statues of Mary or Jesus in their home. Just 20 percent do not practice any of the observances.

Although 68 percent of Protestant Former Catholics give a blessing before someone leaves, few practice any of the other Catholic devotions and rituals. Just 19 percent fast or refrain from eating meat during Lent, and fewer than one in ten observe any of the other devotions and rituals.
What Catholics Value and Former Catholics Miss about Being Catholic

Strong majorities of Catholics value all of the possible benefits of being Catholic, with the exception of the Church’s political views and activities, and most unchurched former Catholics miss something about being Catholic. However, most Protestant former Catholics do not miss anything about being Catholic. Again, the focus groups suggest that Protestant former Catholics have replaced Catholic devotions, rituals, and other aspects of being Catholic with a new emphasis on developing a direct relationship with Jesus or God and learning Divine Truth through Bible study.

Almost all Catholics value the Mass, being part of their family’s Catholic tradition, feeling at home in the Church, the music and singing, kneeling and genuflecting in church, and being able to ask the Virgin Mary to intercede for them. At least eight in ten value inspiring sermons, the Church’s commitment to social action, sharing the same religion as family and friends who are priests or nuns, the opportunity to confess and have your sins forgiven, rituals like novenas and the Rosary, being able to ask their patron saint to intercede for them, having a sense of belonging/things done by the Church or parish for them, and having the Pope as a world leader. Almost as many value taking Holy Communion every week, having the Pope as the one authority on faith and morals, and the vestments of the priests and bishops. Clear majorities also value the belief that Catholicism is the surest path to salvation, public processions and fiestas, and not being pushed to study the Bible. However, just over half value the Church’s political views and activities. All of the Catholics surveyed value something about being Catholic.

Only 22 percent of unchurched former Catholics do not miss anything about being Catholic. More than four in ten say they miss the music and singing, being part of their family’s Catholic tradition, the Mass, and kneeling and genuflecting in church. At least one-third miss being able to ask their patron saint to intercede for them, feeling at home in the Catholic Church, the Church’s commitment to social action, and being able to ask the Virgin Mary to intercede for them. Just 13 percent miss the Church’s political views and activities.

What Bothers Catholics and Former Catholics about the Catholic Church

Most current and former Catholics are bothered by the conduct of some priests and the lack of community feeling and fervor of congregations, all parish-level problems. Protestant former Catholics are bothered by what they see as too much emphasis on rituals and not enough emphasis on the Bible. Unchurched former Catholics are more bothered about social issues than are either Catholics or Protestant former Catholics. Although it was not included in the survey, the focus groups suggest that Hispanic immigrants are also bothered by what they view as the impersonality of large American Catholic churches, which they compare unfavorably to the village churches in their home countries.

Priests are a source of bother for the majority of both Catholics and former Catholics on the grounds of child abuse by some priests (84%) and not treating their congregations well (60%). Nearly half are also bothered by lack of community feeling and lack of emotion
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during the liturgy in the congregation, as well as lack of understanding of the Hispanic community.

After child abuse by some priests, Protestant former Catholics were most bothered by lack of emphasis on reading the Bible (74% compared to 34% for Catholics, and 40% for unchurched former Catholics). Their next greatest bother is too many rituals (58%, compared to 17% of Catholics and 38% of unchurched former Catholics.)

Unchurched former Catholics are more bothered about the Church’s stance on social issues than are Catholics or Protestant former Catholics. Half say they are bothered about the Church’s emphasis on abortion and contraception, compared to 40 percent of Catholics and 28 percent of Protestant former Catholics. Nearly half are bothered about strict rules about marriage, birth control, and other personal matters, compared to 32 percent of both Catholics and Protestant former Catholics. Three in ten are bothered about not having any women as priests, compared to 15 percent of both Catholics and Protestant former Catholics.

Religious Attitude Segments

A Cluster Analysis revealed that there are four distinct segments of Catholics and former Catholics based solely on what they value (or miss) about being Catholic and what bothers (or bothered) them about the Catholic Church.

• **The Devoted (33%)**: The Devoted place a higher value on almost all aspects of being Catholic and they are less bothered about the Catholic Church than are other Catholics and former Catholics. Their few “bothers” are related to priests. They are almost as bothered by child abuse by some priests (79%) as all Catholics and former Catholics (84%), and some are bothered by priests who do not treat their congregations well (41%) and having too few priests (37%). These bothersome aspects of Catholicism, however, are clearly overridden by all the things they value. Almost all of the Devoted (92%) are practicing Catholics, and the few that have fallen away remain unchurched.

• **The Conflicted (20%)**: The Conflicted place a high value on the greater Church, for example, having the Pope as the one authority on faith and morals, the vestments of the priests and bishops, having the Pope as a world leader, and being able to ask the Virgin Mary to intercede for them. However, they are also bothered by many things about the Church, particularly at the parish level. They are particularly bothered by lack of Hispanics in the congregation and lack of understanding of the Hispanic community, lack of religious fervor and community feeling in the congregation, and by priests who give uninspiring sermons and do not treat their congregations well. However, like the Devoted, the great majority of the Conflicted have stayed with the Catholic Church because the things they value about the greater Church far outweigh the things that bother them at the parish level. Almost all are practicing Catholics (88%), and the few that have fallen away remain unchurched.
- **The Dissident (17%)**: The Dissident are bothered by the Catholic Church’s strict rules about marriage, birth control, and other personal matters; priests telling them how to vote; the Church’s political views or activities; strict rules about who can receive communion; and too much emphasis on contraception and abortion. However, they also tend to be bothered about a host of other things, including uninspiring sermons, a lack of community feeling in the congregation, too many rituals, and being too authoritarian. There seems to be little holding them to the Church, aside from being part of their family’s tradition, the Mass, and the music and singing. They are less likely to value (or miss) the central ritual of the Catholic Church: taking Holy Communion every week than are other Catholics and former Catholics. Not surprisingly, they place little value on the Church’s political views and activities. They also place little value on the authority of the greater church, for example, having the Pope as the one authority on faith and morals and having the Pope as a world leader. Nor do they seem very impressed by the pomp associated with Catholic rituals, such as public processions and fiestas and the vestments of priests and bishops. Despite their disagreements with the Church, 61 percent of the Dissident are still Catholic, and 33 percent are unchurched former Catholics. Just six percent have joined a new church.

- **The Defected (30%)**: As their name suggests, almost all of the Defected are no longer Catholic. Ninety-six percent have fallen away, and just over half (52%) have joined a new church, suggesting that their decision to leave the Catholic Church is final. The Defected miss very little about the Catholic Church, and it appears that they are no longer bound by family ties to the Church. For example, they place a very low value on feeling at home in the Catholic Church, being part of their family’s Catholic tradition, and sharing the same religion as family and friends who are priests or nuns. The Defected are also unlikely to say they miss the Mass, kneeling and genuflecting in church, being able to ask the Virgin Mary to intercede, the music and singing, inspiring sermons, and a host of other things. Aside from too many rituals and not enough emphasis on reading the Bible, the Defected are not any more bothered about the Catholic Church than are other Catholics or former Catholics. This suggests that their decision to leave the church rested more on their perception that the Church was not meeting their spiritual needs and – possibly – the attraction of another church than on dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church.

**Leaving the Catholic Church and Joining a New Church**

**Leaving the Catholic Church**: Reasons given for leaving the Catholic Church are varied, and include disagreement with the Church on politics and social issues, such as divorce, birth control, and abortion; divorce and subsequent inability to receive Holy Communion or remarry in the Church; problems with the parish, such as not liking the priest, feeling like a stranger in the church, or inconvenience; and priestly abuse.

When asked a retrospective question, two-thirds of Protestant former Catholics – say they were not very satisfied or not satisfied at all with the Catholic Church when they were Catholic. However, 60 percent of unchurched former Catholics indicated that they were at
least somewhat satisfied with the Church, suggesting that circumstances, as well as attitudes, can play a role in leaving the Church and that some unchurched former Catholics may return. In fact, 39 percent of unchurched former Catholics say that they have seriously considered going back to the Catholic Church, compared to three percent of Protestant former Catholics. Friends and family seem to view joining a new church as a more decisive and final action than merely falling away from the Catholic Church, since Protestant former Catholics (43%) are much more likely to report having problems with Catholic friends and family after leaving the Catholic Church than are unchurched former Catholics (17%).

As noted earlier, immigration to the United States does not seem to trigger defection from the Catholic Church. In fact, about one-third of all former Catholics who are immigrants left the Catholic Church before coming to the United States. Those who immigrated less than ten years ago (64%) and Central/South Americans (53%) are most likely to say they left the Church before coming to the United States.

Immigration to the United States, and adopting a work-oriented lifestyle, makes it more difficult to go to church for some. Twenty-eight percent of immigrants say they go to church less often than they did in their home country, and 43 percent of them attribute this to more time at work. However, immigration to the United States seems to have a different impact on Protestants than on Catholics. Both Protestant former Catholics (76%) and Protestants who have never been Catholic (52%) are much more likely than Catholics (33%) to say they are attending church more often in the United States than they did in their home country.

**Joining a New Church:** Nearly half of former Catholics joined a new church after they left the Catholic Church. They were attracted to that church because it fulfilled their spiritual, emotional, social, Hispanic cultural, and – in a few cases – financial needs better. The primary reasons given for being attracted to the new church include emphasis on the Bible, greater spiritual fulfillment, inspiring or energetic sermons, more heartfelt emotion in worship services, and a feeling of being welcomed and accepted. About two-thirds of former Catholics who have switched to a new church say they were not very satisfied with the Catholic Church when they were Catholic. However, almost all are satisfied with their new church, and nearly eight in ten are extremely or very satisfied.

**Satisfaction with Catholic and Protestant Churches**

Almost all churchgoers are at least somewhat satisfied with their current church, but Protestants are more satisfied than Catholics. About nine in ten Protestant former Catholics (90%) and Protestants who have never been Catholic (92%) are extremely or very satisfied with their church, compared to 73 percent of Catholics.

Ninety-eight percent of practicing Catholics indicated that they are not seriously considering switching to another type of church. This, along with the fact that no former Catholics mentioned being attracted to a different type of church as a reason for leaving the Catholic Church, suggests that Protestant churches draw few members from the ranks of practicing Catholics, but rather from those who have already fallen away.
Church Attendance and Involvement in Church Activities

Professed Catholics are more likely than professed Protestants to “ever” attend church, but Catholics (46%) and both Protestant former Catholics (46%) and Protestants who have never been Catholic (42%) are about equally likely to attend at least once a week.

Protestants are generally more active in their churches than are Catholics. More Protestants, whether former Catholics (67%) or not (73%) play an active role in worship services than do Catholics (49%). In addition, more Protestant former Catholics (85%) and Protestants who have never been Catholic (78%) than Catholics (67%) attend events, meetings, or programs outside of regular worship services. Among those who are involved, both Protestant former Catholics (69%) and Protestants who have never been Catholic (63%) are much more likely than Catholics (42%) to spend at least six hours a month in church activities outside of worship services.

The focus groups suggest that going to church is important to Catholics and Protestants for very different reasons. Protestants talk about personal growth, knowledge gained from reading the Bible, and having a sense of community. Catholics talk about duty, obedience, and going to a sacred place.

Transmitting Faith to the Next Generation

The great majority of those who practice a religion and have children at home or grandchildren say that transmitting faith to the next generation is extremely or very important to them. Most parents take their children to church, pray with them, say grace before meals and read or study the Bible with them. Ninety percent of parents with children at home who have done something to encourage them to have faith think that they have been at least somewhat successful, as do 76 percent of grandparents. The biggest challenges for those who do not feel successful are not wanting to force their children to go to church, the influence of television and popular culture, peer pressure, and being too busy to get involved in church activities.

The Role of Religion in Shaping Political Views

Religion is a force that encourages Hispanics to adopt conservative political views. Not only are both Catholics (35%) and Protestants (41%) more likely to be conservative than unchurched former Catholics (28%) or the unchurched who have never been Catholic (25%), but conservatives are the most likely to say that religion has played an extremely or very important role in shaping their political views (55%).

Although most Hispanics who practice a religion say their religion has influenced their political views, both the survey results and the focus groups suggest that many Hispanics do not think that churches should try to influence their vote.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Because Hispanics who practice a religion place a great deal of importance on transmitting their faith to the next generation, organizations might publish articles that help parents and grandparents communicate spiritual and religious values to the next generation.

Those working with Hispanics also should be mindful that there is significant variation among Hispanics regarding religion and spirituality. For example, there are differences in religious affiliation based on country of origin. Hispanics from Mexico are the most likely to be Catholic, while those from Central/South America are most likely to be former Catholics. Hispanics from the Caribbean are most likely to have never been Catholic. Outreach to Hispanics should take these differing sensibilities and sensitivities into consideration.

The results clearly show that belonging to a community is important to Hispanics and that religion plays a strong role in their sense of community. Seen from this perspective, the data suggest that organizations working with Hispanics might consider becoming a stronger player in helping Hispanics fulfill their need for community. Actions might include:

- Grass roots efforts, including creating or sponsoring local events or programs.
- Developing or sponsoring programs where parents and grandparents can take their children and grandchildren.

Study data provide ways of understanding Hispanics that might guide belonging to the local Hispanic community:

- Practicing Catholics (41%) look to the Catholic Church to fulfill their need for community. Having local representatives as visible members of the Church could make organizations stronger community partners.

Protestants (20%), whether former Catholics (12%) or Protestants who never were Catholic (17%), generally fulfill their need for community through their affiliation with a Protestant church.

- For organizations, people on the ground who are visibly involved in one or more Protestant churches are probably the best way to be a trusted community member among Protestants.
- Data also suggest that Protestants tend to value information. The best way to build trust and respect among these people is through information that helps them make their own decisions. Publications and the website should be seen as valuable to these people. We could see to it that Hispanic Protestants know about these resources, perhaps using grassroots work.

The sixteen percent of Hispanics that have fallen away from the Catholic Church and are not now related to a church say they value and miss the sense of community that belonging to the Church provided. They are open to going back to the Church for this sense of community. Organizations might find this group especially receptive to becoming part of an organization, or an AARP community.
In order to work most effectively with Hispanics, this study suggests that organizations must be fully versed in the political and social positions held by the Catholic Church and local diocese, as well as the more conservative Protestant groups. While Hispanics in general say that they believe in separation of church and state, they also say that religion influences their political views.

Religious affiliation seems strongly related to political views and conservatism. Region of origin seems to be related to religious affiliation. Therefore, in determining how political positions might impact behavior, a religious affiliation question and a region of origin question will be useful in related research.

This study shows that language dominance, education, being born in the United States, and time spent living in the United States, are not related to religious affiliation. But, are these characteristics related to other kinds of affiliations? If yes, how? Knowing the answer to this question might be important for understanding how to engage people from the Hispanic community.