

In her recent book, Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation, Linda Chavez contends that Hispanics are progressing toward the mainstream satisfactorily. Here is a contrary view reprinted by permission from America, published by the Jesuits of the U.S. and Canada, Volume 164, Number 10, March 16, 1991.

HISPANIC CATHOLICS IN THE U.S.: NO MELTING POT IN SIGHT

By Timothy M. Matovina

The exodus from Catholic "ghettos" in the years following World War II is seen as a positive development by many Catholics in the United States. This perception often leads to the expectation that Hispanic Catholics will walk down the same path the others have trod before them, as is evidenced by statements like: "They'll integrate in another generation or so anyway. By offering services in Spanish, you're just holding them back. Other immigrant groups also felt 'put upon' when they first got here. This is just one more group going through the adjustment to American life. This too will pass."

Such statements are based on the mistaken contention that assimilation into the cultural milieu of the United States is inevitable for residents of this land, be they Hispanics or any other group. The continued insistence that Hispanics will soon pass through the assimilationist melting pot and "be American like us" is not only false, but also harmful for our Hispanic sisters and brothers, and thus for the church. There are at least seven differences between the situation of today's Hispanics and that of European Catholics who arrived during the great century of immigration (1820-1920).

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Crossing el Rio, Crossing the Ocean

Perhaps the most important difference is the physical proximity of the countries from which Hispanics originate. Here it must be noted that many Hispanics are not recent immigrants, but have been here for generations. Others, e.g., Cubans and political refugees from Central America, are unable to return home at this time. Nonetheless, the fact remains that contact with the country of origin (and other countries where Spanish is spoken) is more frequent for today's Hispanic than for immigrants who crossed the ocean. Spanish television programs and improved transportation have added to the trend of greater

contact with one's homeland and the larger Hispanic world. This contact reinforces language and culture and counteracts the effects of the melting pot.

Continuous Flow of Immigrants

One of the key factors in the cultural assimilation of German, Italian, Polish, Irish and other 19th-century Catholic immigrants was the legislation of 1924 that effectively curtailed further immigration. As the flow of first generation immigrants from each group waned, group acceptance of U.S. cultural values accelerated. Despite continuing efforts to restrict immigration, however, this pattern of declining immigration is not evident among Hispanics. A steady flow of new arrivals continuously reinforces language and culture and is a second important difference between today's Hispanics and yesterday's European Catholic immigrants.

Poverty

Another reason for the assimilation of European immigrants groups was the rise out of poverty to a better standard of living. This was particularly true in the years following World War II, when an unprecedented number of Catholics and others in the United States achieved middle-class status. For many, this financial success provided irrefutable evidence of the superiority of the American way. The move to the suburbs placed Catholics in ethnically and religiously mixed neighborhoods, further enhancing their identity as Americans and dissipating their ethnic consciousness.

Here again the situation of most Hispanics is decidedly different. When the provinces of northern Mexico were forcibly annexed through the wars with Texas (1836) and the United States (1846-48), for example, the 80,000 Mexican citizens who remained in the conquered territory did not achieve greater financial prosperity. In fact, many were impoverished by the illegal confiscation of their lands. Today poverty continues to be the burden of many Hispanics, and current economic trends suggest that the middle class will diminish rather than expand. Although there are exceptions, the rise to the middle class, which was so influential in the assimilation of other Catholics, is not occurring massively among Hispanics.

Racism

Even if material prosperity is realized, the issue of racism remains. It is with good reason that proponents of immigration reform have pointed to the symbolic irony that the Statue of Liberty faces Europe and has its back to Asia and Latin America. Hispanics are not alone in the experience of discrimination, of course. Almost every immigrant group had to endure some form of prejudice upon arriving in the United States. With Hispanics and other groups (most notably African-Americans) from outside of Europe there is frequently a critical difference, however: skin color. While white European immigrants could blend into mainstream American society once they knew the language and culture, the ethnic origin of most Hispanics remains readily apparent. Often subtle (and not so subtle) racist treatment is the result. Continuing racism leads Hispanics to band together for mutual support and to resist assimilation into a society perceived as unappreciative of the Hispanic presence.

Urbanization

Census figures of 1985 indicate that 88 percent of Hispanics in the United States reside in urban areas. The pattern of living in urban enclaves is not without precedent among Catholic groups. Most of the Irish who came in the 19th and 20th centuries lived in cities. Because of enduring racism and poverty, however, the tendency to live in urban clusters appears to be more persistent among Hispanics. Situated in what amounts to a transplanted San Salvador, Havana, San Juan, Mexico City, etc., Hispanic cultural patterns and the use of Spanish are reinforced and the effect of the melting pot is further neutralized.

Church Teaching on Cultural Adaptation in Ministry

Another difference between the situation of Hispanic Catholics today and that of 19th-century immigrant groups is the changing perspective on evangelization within the church. Pope Benedict XV's *Maximum Illud* (1919) was the first apostolic letter devoted exclusively to the church's missionary efforts in foreign lands. Subsequently, Pius XI, Pius XII and John XXIII promulgated encyclicals on the missions, and Vatican II issued the first conciliar document on this topic (*Ad Gentes*). These magisterial statements evidence a growing awareness that Catholic evangelization has too often promoted Western culture as if it were intrinsic to the Gospel. Since the council, the theme of adapting the proclamation of the Gospel to local cultures and customs has been further developed, e.g., in Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) and John Paul II's encyclicals *Slavorum Apostoli* (1985) and *Redemptoris Missio* (1990).

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Hispanic theologians in the United States have pointed to the teaching on respect for culture in arguing that the image of the melting pot ought to be replaced by that of the stew pot. Just as in a stew pot each ingredient enriches and is enriched by the other ingredients, so too in our society the different cultures should be mutually enriching and should not overpower one another. Far from suggesting a mere superficial multiculturalism, the stew pot image ought to inspire the church in the United States to face the issue of culture in all its depth (see "The Crisis of Hispanic Ministry: Multiculturalism as an Ideology" by Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J., *AMERICA*, 7/21/90). This vision of a pluralistic society has also been articulated by grass-roots Catholics through the three national Hispanic *Encuentros* (1972, 1977, 1985), as well as by the National Conference of Bishops in their pastoral letters *The Hispanic Presence: Challenge and Commitment* (1983) and the *National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry* (1987). Seeing America as a stew pot rather than a melting pot has strengthened the efforts of many Hispanics consciously to resist assimilationist pressures. Unlike that of German Catholics and others of the last century who also attempted to resist assimilation, Hispanic resistance has been buttressed by the magisterial teaching and theological reflection that place such efforts within the Gospel imperative.

Persistence of Popular Religion

Hispanic American theologians have suggested that resistance to the melting pot is manifested in popular expressions of faith. The persistence of their popular religion as a defense against the assault of assimilationist pressures is a further difference between the experience of today's Hispanics and that of European Catholics, whose cultural Catholicism faded with (or shortly after) assimilation. To the extent that popular expressions of faith continue to be practiced among Hispanics, group resistance to cultural assimilation will tend to be fortified.

This essay reflects the views expressed by Hispanic Catholic faithful, theologians and bishops over the past 20 years. Yet despite the numerous voices that have called for an end to an attachment to the melting pot, we as a church seem to be suffering from collective denial, from a refusal to hear anything except the naive claim that soon Hispanic Catholics will pass through the melting pot like others before them. This collective denial is the cause of much cultural insensitivity, poor pastoral planning and failure in Hispanic ministry. If acknowledgment of the truth about the melting pot became more common among us, our ministry with Hispanics would be greatly enhanced. ■