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# “But how could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?” An ESL/ESP class for Catholic immigrants

Mary C. Tillotson

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“But How Could We Sing a Song of the Lord in a Foreign Land?”  
An ESL/ESP Class for Catholic Immigrants

by

Mary C. Tillotson

Thesis

Submitted to the College of Arts & Sciences  
Eastern Michigan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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in

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)

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Ypsilanti, Michigan

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As a language teacher, I love helping my students gain the ability to become part of a community. We were not made to be alone, and the ability to communicate with others allows us to participate in human society. Whether it's deciding who will go to the grocery store, planning a conference, encouraging a friend through a difficult time, or debating the nature of God, we use language to understand the ideas of others and express our own ideas.

But there are times when language is simply insufficient, and this is one of those times. It is not enough to say I am "grateful" to the many people who have helped, but in this medium I am limited to words, so it will have to do.

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## Abstract

The U.S. Catholic population has a larger proportion of immigrants than the U.S. population at large. The majority of Catholic immigrants come from Latin America and are not native speakers of English. In this qualitative study, I interviewed nine Catholic immigrants from Latin America to better understand their experiences of navigating their Catholic faith in the United States and the role an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) class could play in helping them successfully adjust to United States Catholicism. Findings suggest that, beyond a general ESL class, an English-for-specific-purposes class, capitalizing on the universality of Catholicism and specialized for Catholic prayer, liturgy, sacraments, and community life, could equip immigrant Catholics to live their faith in English. English Language Teaching (ELT) and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) professionals are encouraged to be more attentive to their students' spiritual needs, and Catholics conducting outreach efforts, including ESL classes, are encouraged to specialize their ESL classes to assist students in ways other ESL programs cannot.

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## About the Title

The title of this thesis is taken from Psalm 137; the liturgical text of the Psalm, as it appears in the Catholic Mass on certain days of the year, is printed below. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI: “The text evokes the tragedy lived by the Jewish people during the destruction of Jerusalem in about 586 B.C., and their subsequent and consequent exile in Babylon. We have before us a national hymn of sorrow, marked by a curt nostalgia for what has been lost” (Benedict XVI, 2005). Of course, present-day Catholic immigrants to the United States are in a very different situation from that of the Jewish people during the Babylonian Captivity. But when these immigrants spoke of their experiences struggling to pray, participate in the sacraments, and otherwise live their faith in an unfamiliar place, I was reminded of the words I have heard so often during Mass: “But how could we sing a song of the Lord in a foreign land?” (Catholic Church, 2002).

*Response: Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!*

By the streams of Babylon  
we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the aspens of that land  
we hung up our harps.

*Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!*

For there our captors asked of us  
the lyrics of our songs,  
And our despoilers urged us to be joyous:  
“Sing for us the songs of Zion!”

*Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!*

How could we sing a song of the LORD  
in a foreign land?  
If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
may my right hand be forgotten!

*Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!*

May my tongue cleave to my palate  
if I remember you not,  
If I place not Jerusalem  
ahead of my joy.

*Let my tongue be silenced, if I ever forget you!*

## Literature Review

### U.S. Catholicism: An Immigrant Church

For most, if not all, of its history, the United States has been a nation of immigrants. As political and economic situations around the world change, so do the specific reasons for immigrating, but the influx of immigrants and interaction of different immigrant, domestic, and indigenous cultures have been part of the fabric of the North American continent for centuries. For some, religion was a primary motivation in their decision to come to North America (Lippy & Williams, 2010a); others came for economic, political, or personal reasons and brought their religion with them (Lippy & Williams, 2010a); others are not particularly attached to Christianity or any religion. The religion these immigrants brought with them—in particular, Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant—adds an additional flavor to the cultural story of the United States.

As of 2015, immigration rates were nearing historic highs, with more than 13% of the country's population being immigrants (Lopez & Bialik, 2017). The proportions are even higher when we consider the Catholic portion of the American population. Catholics are more likely than non-Catholics to be immigrants or children of immigrants (Lipka, 2015).

Consider the following statistics:

Table 1		
<i>Immigrant Population of American Catholics</i>		
	<u>Americans</u>	<u>American Catholics</u>
percent who are immigrants	15% (adults)	27% (adults)
percent born in the U.S. to two U.S.-born parents	74%	57%
<i>Note.</i> This information appeared in Lipka (2015).		

At the present moment in U.S. history, it is not surprising to find a larger proportion of immigrants among the U.S. Catholic population compared to the U.S. population at large, given the numbers of immigrants coming from heavily Catholic Latin America. Consider the following: Of the 27% of U.S. Catholic adults who are immigrants, a majority (22% of U.S. Catholics) are immigrants from elsewhere in the Americas (Lipka, 2015). In 2015, 11.6 million immigrants living in the U.S. were from Mexico, the most common country of origin for immigrants; El Salvador was the fifth most common with 1.4 million (Lopez & Bialik, 2017). Guatemala and Honduras are 10th and 15th on the list, respectively. El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras make up the Northern Triangle, from where immigration to the U.S. has increased 25% from 2007 to 2015 (Cohn, Passel, & Gonzales-Barrera, 2017). The Northern Triangle emigrated 115,000 people to the U.S. in 2014, up from 60,000 in 2011 (Cohn et al., 2017). In 2015, 3 million immigrants in the U.S. were from the Northern Triangle (Cohn et al., 2017).

Latin America is heavily Catholic, even though Catholicism there has been declining over the past few decades. Almost 40% of the world's Catholics live in Latin America (Pew Research Center, 2013), and nearly 70% of adults living in Latin America are Catholic (Pew Research Center, 2014a), with 84% saying they were raised Catholic. In Mexico, 90% of adults were raised Catholic, and 81% currently identify as Catholic; in the Northern Triangle, the numbers are 69% and 50% for El Salvador, 62% and 50% for Guatemala, and 61% and 46% for Honduras (Pew Research Center, 2014a). We should expect, then, to see an influx of Latin American immigrants in U.S. Catholic churches, and this is indeed the case. In fact, 71% of the growth of the U.S. Catholic population since 1960 can be attributed to Hispanics (Ospino, 2014).

### **The National Parish**

Beginning in 1788 when German Catholics split from an English-speaking Catholic parish in Philadelphia, many Catholic parishes in the United States were national parishes; that is, they were founded to serve Catholic immigrants from a particular country. National parishes typically played a combination of two contradictory (or at least paradoxical) cultural roles: first, providing solidarity among immigrants of the same culture and preserving their language and customs, and, second, helping them successfully adjust to their new home, or “accompanying and accommodating ethnic populations in the arduous acculturation process toward the gradual loss of many ethnic markers” (Calvillo & Bailey, 2015, p. 57-58; see also Hammond & Warner, 1993). The parishes “allowed immigrants a period of adjustment to that society with the support of an institution that was familiar” (Matovina, 1999, p. 47). It was argued in the 1950s that “the national parish had enabled previous immigrants to assimilate gradually, while at the same time preserving their faith and giving them a sense of security during the difficult transition to life in a new land”<sup>1</sup> (Matovina, 1999, p. 49). But both functions of these national parishes, solidarity and assimilation, were generally assumed to be temporary, only lasting until later generations had successfully integrated or assimilated into American culture (Ospino, 2014). As early as the 1930s, there was controversy within American Catholicism about whether national parishes should be the norm.<sup>2</sup> Typically, the third generation of an immigrant group would leave the national parish. Fueling the argument

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Fitzpatrick argued this at the Conference on the Spiritual Care of Puerto Rican Migrants, held in 1955 in Puerto Rico. At the conference, Catholic leaders discussed pastoral plans for Puerto Ricans in the mainland United States, considering whether the national parish model was appropriate for this population (Matovino, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> The emotional importance of the national parishes should not be underestimated. When non-Italian priests were appointed to the historically Italian Our Lady of Good Counsel in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in the early 1930s—an explicit attempt at Americanizing the parish—parishioners locked their pastor in the rectory and refused to allow the new priests to enter (Matovina, 1999).

against national parishes were dwindling congregations and an observation that “children of immigrants too often abandon their ancestral religion because they identify the Catholic faith with the archaic practices of their national parish community” (Matovina, 1999).

### **The Hispanic Parish**

The national parish norm declined in the second part of the twentieth century, about the same time immigration from Latin America began to increase (Palmer-Boyes, 2010); therefore, Catholic immigrants from Latin American have had a different experience from Catholic immigrants from Europe: “The experience of African American, Latino, and Asian American Catholics illuminates that the assimilationist role of the national parish is not universal” (Matovina, 1999, p. 45). Ospino (2014) notes that the oldest Catholic parish in the U.S. is Hispanic, but more importantly, that Hispanic parishes have historically served a different function from that of European national parishes. Some were simply typical Spanish-language parishes in Spanish-speaking lands that became part of the U.S. Others formed after Spanish-speaking Americans began moving toward industrialized cities; at these parishes, Spanish-speaking Catholics from a variety of Latin American countries, as well as Puerto Rico and Spain, gathered. These parishes, therefore, were not “national” parishes: they did not follow the pattern of European national parishes, drawing parishioners from a single country or immigrant group (Ospino, 2014).

In the 1940s and 1950s, a new model emerged: a parish where services and activities were offered in Spanish, separately, but on the premises of an existing English-speaking, American parish: “Even when physically, pastorally, and linguistically separated, this model united the parish in one building” (Ospino, 2014, p. 6). Many parishes operate with this model today; interestingly, it seems to work better than similar earlier efforts with European

immigrants. An attempt in the late 1800s to place newly arrived Italians in existing Irish parishes failed for a variety of reasons, including cultural tensions and a language barrier (Matovina, 1999); the common Catholic faith was evidently not enough to sustain a multicultural parish in this setting.

The 1960s brought cultural and political changes in the United States, including the Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, and the Vietnam War, many of which had significant impacts on Hispanic Americans. During the same decade, Catholics experienced the changes brought on by the Second Vatican Council, which extended permission for the use of the vernacular in the Mass (Vatican II, 1963), and the promulgation of the 1969 Missal, which encouraged the use of the vernacular (Paul VI, 1969). In the U.S., that meant English—but not only English. In the 1970s and 1980s, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops convened three *Encuentro* (“Encounter”) conferences to discuss ministry to Hispanic Catholics. A fourth, focusing not only on Hispanics but cultural diversity in general, was held in 2000 and a fifth in 2018.

Palmer-Boyes (2010) notes that many modern Latino parishes (defined as those where the majority of parishioners identify as Hispanic or Latino) play a dual role similar to that of the European national parishes, serving as both a haven and agent of acculturation. But attitudes toward acculturation have changed since the days of European national parishes, both in American culture at large and within American Catholicism: “Today Catholics are more comfortable with cultural and linguistic differences in our communities. . . . In the conversations I have had with pastoral leaders, integration is defined in various ways. For immigrants, integration is about being both/and (e.g., Hispanic and American)” (H.

Ospino, personal communication, April 24, 2018). However, not much has been written about integration in Catholic parishes, Ospino said.

The National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry (2014) found significant growth in outreach to Spanish-speaking Catholics. In the mid-1990s, the number of parishes celebrating Masses and Baptisms in Spanish in the U.S. increased: The study found that most parishes celebrating Masses and Baptisms in Spanish began doing so in 1995. Today, many U.S. parishes offer volunteer projects, parish assessment and planning discussions, classes for married couples, parenting classes, and other activities in Spanish. Forty-one percent offer English classes. Parishes with Hispanic Ministry are typically led by younger priests; the average pastor<sup>3</sup> at these parishes is 58 years old and was ordained around 1985, compared to national averages of 62 years old and a 1976 ordination. A hundred and seventy-two dioceses have an official diocesan-level Hispanic Ministry; of the directors, 94% speak Spanish fluently, and 61% were born outside the United States, principally in Mexico (46%) and other parts of Latin America.

### **Integration: An Ongoing Challenge**

Despite this increase in outreach, integration is still a challenge. More than half of pastoral leaders saw Hispanic parishioners as either “minimally” or “not at all” integrated into the life of the parish (Ospino, 2014). The presence of apostolic movements like the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Cursillo, and the Knights of Columbus in parishes is an important part of the Catholic experience of many Hispanics in the United States: “More

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<sup>3</sup> Catholic priests can serve different roles at parishes (or in other settings). The Catholic Church’s Code of Canon Law outlines the duties of a pastor: “The parish priest is the proper pastor of the parish entrusted to him. He exercises the pastoral care of the community entrusted to him under the authority of the diocesan Bishop, whose ministry of Christ he is called to share, so that for this community he may carry out the offices of teaching, sanctifying and ruling with the cooperation of other priests or deacons and with the assistance of lay members of Christ’s faithful, in accordance with the law.” (Catholic Church, 1983, can. 519)

attention is to be given to the integration of these groups into the larger ministerial strategies in the parish so they do not function as independent, perhaps isolated, units” (Ospino, 2014, p. 19).

And this data only accounts for parishes that have Hispanic Ministries. Not every parish with an influx of Spanish-speaking Catholics is equipped with the tools and resources for appropriate outreach, and there is no consensus over whether the national (or, in this case, Hispanic or Latino) parish model is ideal. Segregation by language may be the better way to honor Latin American cultures, or it may fuel feelings of xenophobia or racism that could be eased by a real encounter with a different culture.

### **English Classes as a Possible Solution**

Part of the integration difficulty is likely due to language and culture barriers, like the Italians and Irish found a hundred years ago. Among immigrants to the U.S., English proficiency is particularly low among those from Mexico and Central America (Lopez & Bialik, 2017), and it is difficult to communicate with someone with no (or very little) shared language. Furthermore, regrettable as it may be, it is normal to feel uncomfortable encountering people from a different culture. An English-as-a-second-language (ESL) class could ease that discomfort and build a bridge between Latin American immigrants wanting to belong to a Catholic parish in their new home and those parishes trying to reach them—but it would have to teach more than just language.

**Trends in church-based ESL programs.** Much of the research on church-based ESL programs focuses on programs that are offered to English learners at large. For example, Chao and Mantero (2014) studied two church-based ESL programs and found that they promote family literacy. Pennycook and Coutand-Marin (2003) critiqued evangelical Christians' efforts to use English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL)<sup>4</sup> teaching to spread Christianity globally and urges serious debate over the role of politics and religion in the EFL classroom. Responding to a debate over whether ESL teachers' adherence to Christianity augments or hinders ESL teaching and the appropriateness of teachers sharing their faith with their students, Sanchez (2017) examined the motivations of teachers at various church-based ESL programs, finding that "teaching-based goals are significantly more important than faith-based goals for this group of educators" (p. ii). But there seems to be no research on teaching English in a religious context to coreligionists.

**English for specific purposes.** English teaching professionals often ask themselves why their students are learning English. Some study English to integrate into an English-speaking culture to which they have immigrated (or to which they will immigrate), and others to read academic or other texts in English from their non-English-speaking home countries. Some learn English to have conversations with other non-native speakers of English, even if they never even plan to visit an English-speaking country. Not every student of English has the same needs or goals with the language.

From this diversity of language-learning goals stems the subfield English for specific purposes (ESP). Medical students planning to work in healthcare fields in English-speaking

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<sup>4</sup> English-as-a-second-language (ESL) refers to English language teaching and learning where English is the predominately spoken language (e.g. the United States). English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) refers to English language teaching and learning where English is not a predominately spoken language.

countries need to know healthcare terminology, but have no use for engineering terminology. English-language learners (ELLs) planning to pursue an academic career in English need to master academic writing; those in service industries need conversation skills and vocabulary related to restaurants, hotels, or their particular field; and those pursuing business careers need the language and culture skills to give presentations, make sales, negotiate deals, and participate fully in meetings. An ESP class includes the vocabulary, formulaic language, and other elements of the language specific to the purpose for which students are learning—medical vocabulary for healthcare workers, academic paper writing for future academics, and so on: “ESP, then, is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s need for learning” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 19).

The diversity of ESP, then, should not come as a surprise. Countless textbooks, programs, and assessments have been created for English for academic purposes (EAP), English for occupational purposes (EOP), English for vocational purposes (EVP), English for medical professionals (EMP), and others that have not yet earned an acronym.

Another ESP subfield, English for Bible and theology (EBT), has been developing. Pierson and Bankston (2013) note that English has become a lingua franca for Christian theology, a role formerly played by Latin, Greek, and other languages. Many theology students study in English-speaking countries because of the lack of literature in their home countries, and even those studying in other countries need an academic English reading proficiency in order to access the majority of theological literature. But the proficiency needed for reading academic theology is more nuanced and complex than the proficiency needed for reading academic literature in other fields. Pierson and Bankston (2013) explain:

Regarding the most universal need, reading theological texts, students must comprehend the meaning of a passage written for a native-English speaker. In addition, they must understand the meaning of general academic vocabulary, as well as specific theological and biblical vocabulary. After they have read the text in English, they must be able to transfer and articulate the concepts they have encountered into their native language.

This process is complex and involves more than the literal translation of language. More specifically, it involves processing information at the level of values and worldviews. The students are not only dealing with their own worldview, values, and Christian development, but now, they must also process those presented in a foreign language text—one often authored by a person with a far different set of assumptions. This method, mildly stated, is formidable and can cause emotional stress and physical exhaustion. (p. 37)

Reading theological literature is not simply an intellectual exercise. Theology is more personal than most academic subjects, potentially making claims about God, morality, or existence that affect the reader on a cultural, personal, or even intimate level. This is true even without a language barrier between author and reader.

Pierson and Bankston (2013) note also that learning English for the specific purpose of Christian theological studies not only benefits students' English acquisition but also their theological learning. Theology can often be so abstract that students are intimidated and never internalize it, despite the authors' observation that "we all theologize" (p. 38). They write: "At the bottom of each person's worldview lies the foundation of their own personal theology, whether they realize it or not, deriving from any and all conclusions regarding

God's existence, attributes, and actions" (p. 38). But there's often a gap between the worldview a student (perhaps unconsciously) espouses and the ideas they profess as true in the theology classroom. In an EBT classroom, students can form a community in which to explore theology both academically and personally.

The majority of immigrants trying to navigate a church in a new country likely have little interest in academic theology, but an approach similar to EBT could be useful for immigrants wanting to navigate English-speaking parishes. A teacher could provide, at the church, a setting in which learners could discuss their own ideas about life, death, truth, morality, eternity, and so on, and how those ideas relate to their culture of origin, the culture they've entered, and the universal teachings of the Catholic Church (with which the teacher should be familiar)—without fear of being theologically or linguistically wrong. This class could be a true "community of practice" (Brown, 2014), where ideas are respected, errors are met with encouragement (and, as appropriate, clarification or explanation) and expertise is not required of students. In this setting, the teacher could use students' own ideas and experiences to create a community where students can learn the English necessary to express their religious ideas in English—and grow in their knowledge of the Catholic faith.

Something similar has already been successful at a Lutheran English-language Bible study in Japan. Suen (2017) followed an American pastor and nine Japanese English learners in the greater Tokyo area and found that the participants were encouraged toward a deep and personally meaningful reading of the English text, and an increase in proficiency in their speaking and listening skills used in their discussions. In an interview, "Diago," one of the participants, said,

. . . but that's not the only reason why I read Bible. It's because many times I find that I cannot judge what to do on my own. So many things I don't know how, I don't know what I should do. At times like that I would think about what the Bible says. I might not know the solution after reading the Bible, but because the Bible is the Word of God, I think about it. Then I feel I am one step closer to overcoming the problem, or minimizing the problem. (Suen, 2017, p. 25)

The fact that the English learners were applying their Bible study conversations to their lives outside the Bible study group encouraged deeper comprehension of the English text. They were not simply translating the words but considering values and worldviews, which is a difficult skill to master. Suen (2017) saw this particularly when the group discussed controversial concepts like oppression, China, democracy, and so on. Because the learners were working together to understand the meaning of a text and how it applied to their own lives, they were engaged more deeply in the English language they were learning.

Using the approach that Suen observed, or a similar one, learners could improve their ability to learn, understand, consider, and express religious and spiritual ideas in English by simply having those conversations in a supportive environment. At the same time, they could deepen their knowledge of Catholicism. The teacher's role would be one of a facilitator who could help students navigate their understanding of cultural differences in the context of a universal faith, as well as provide students with English vocabulary, phrases, grammar, and pragmatics as needed.

**Content-based instruction.** A second approach that could be beneficial to these English learners is content-based instruction (CBI), an approach to ESL teaching. In a content-based language classroom, students are learning both the content (e.g., history or science) and the language at the same time. The approach has been used in a variety of contexts, including K-12 classrooms (usually called Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol, or SIOP; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2017) and university ESL classrooms (Delk, 2008). Stoller (2008) summarizes: “Despite differences in emphases, what most content-based approaches share is the assumption that content and language create a symbiotic relationship; that is, the learning of content contributes to the learning of language and a mastery of language gives learners easier access to content” (p. 59). Where ESP presupposes that language learners know their field (e.g., medicine or sales) but need to acquire the language to conduct business or work in their field in English, content-based instruction teaches both field knowledge and language.

With a CBI approach, the class could focus on some combination of the Catholic faith and American Catholic culture. A focus on the universal teachings could lead to fruitful discussions of different cultural expressions of those teachings; a focus on American Catholic culture would, of course, be a more direct approach to teaching culture. The content class would be supplemented with relevant vocabulary and language lessons to boost the students’ understanding of the content and help them integrate into the parish.

### **Conclusion**

With the influx of Latin American immigrants to Catholic parishes in the United States and the resulting language and culture barrier, it seems likely that a well-designed ESL class could empower immigrants to navigate parish life and ease cultural tensions. This study

was designed to explore the experiences and perspectives of Latin American Catholics and therefore begin laying the groundwork for the design of such a class.

### **Methodology**

My exploratory study investigates the linguistic and cultural gap between Catholic immigrants from Latin America to the United States and Catholic parishes in the United States, and the role an ESL class could play in bridging that gap. I conducted nine semi-structured interviews with immigrants from a variety of Latin American cultures, aiming to understand their respective backgrounds, expectations, and experiences when encountering Catholicism in the United States, and ultimately to identify these linguistic and cultural gaps. Specifically, I posed the following research questions:

1. What expectations do Catholic Latin American immigrants have of Catholic parishes in the U.S.?
2. What linguistic and cultural difficulties do they encounter when trying to integrate into the parish?
3. In what way could these difficulties be eased/solved with an ESL class that focuses on language and culture in U.S. Catholic parishes?

### **Population & Sample**

My participants were all Catholic immigrants from Latin America living in Southeastern Michigan. While a precise definition of “Latin America” can be elusive,<sup>5</sup> my participants were all from Spanish-speaking countries or territories in the Americas. It is difficult to give a precise number of Catholic immigrants from Latin America living in Southeastern Michigan, but perhaps some related data will suffice.

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<sup>5</sup> “First of all Latin America is a region poorly understood and difficult to define” writes Schwaller (2011, p. 1). He points out that defining the region by Latin-based languages includes Quebec, Canada; defining it as areas settled by the Spanish and Portuguese excludes French Guiana. In addition, the Caribbean seems to have its own history and culture, with the bigger islands settled by the Spanish and the smaller islands claimed by other European powers, and not until the eighteenth century. A 2014 Pew study titled “Religion in Latin America” contains data from “18 countries and one U.S. territory (Puerto Rico) across Latin America and the Caribbean.”

**National data.** The following data will help us understand the Latin-American born Catholic population of the United States at large.

- In 2012 and 2013, Hispanics made up 16.9% of the U.S. population, but 33% of the U.S. Catholic adult population (Funk & Martinez, 2014).
- According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate's (CARA) estimates, included in the U.S. Catholic population were about 16 million U.S.-born Hispanics and 14 million foreign-born Hispanic Catholics (CARA, 2014).
- CARA's 2010 estimates have Hispanic/Latino Catholics making up about 38% of the U.S. Catholic population (CARA, 2014)

**Regional/local data.** Since I conducted the research in Southeastern Michigan, it will be useful to consider demographics for this region.

- In the Detroit, Mich. Designated Market Area (DMA), which includes nine Southeastern Michigan counties (Sanilac, Lapeer, St. Clair, Livingston, Oakland, Macomb, Washtenaw, Wayne, and Monroe), Hispanics numbered about 188,000 in 2010 (or 3.9% of the population) in 2010 and more than 217,000 in 2018 (or 4.4% of the population; DemographicsNow).
- In the Catholic Diocese of Lansing in 2018, there were about 83,000 Hispanics; an estimated 40,000 were Catholic. The diocese includes 10 counties (Clinton, Shiawassee, Genesee, Eaton, Ingham, Livingston, Jackson, Washtenaw, Hillsdale, and Lenawee; "V Encuentro," 2018).
- In the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit in 2018, there were about 186,000 Hispanics; an estimated 91,000 were Catholic. The archdiocese includes six counties (Lapeer, St. Clair, Oakland, Macomb, Wayne, Monroe; "V Encuentro," 2018).

- It is unclear how many of these Hispanics are immigrants and how many are native speakers of Spanish.

**Participants.** All nine participants in this study were Catholic, from Latin America, and living in Southeastern Michigan; some had lived elsewhere in the U.S. before moving to this area. Two were first- or second-generation immigrants from the Middle East to Latin America before immigrating to the United States. All had native proficiency in Spanish and advanced non-native proficiency in English; at least one was fluent also in Arabic. All were educated, and eight attended Mass at least weekly. Participants varied in age, country of origin, length of time in the U.S., reasons for coming to the U.S., and parish. Participants' Latin American countries of origin were Cuba, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

### **Study Design**

A quantitative study seemed inappropriate for this study because, as Hitchens (2019) noted: "Everyone agrees that there are some things money can't buy. We should be just as sure that there are some questions calculators can't answer." In this study, I wanted to ask questions that calculators cannot answer—to learn about my participants' experiences and their perspectives on their experiences. An important research tool for qualitative studies is the interview: "An interview is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 645). It seemed best, then, to conduct interviews with my participants, but as "interviewing includes a wide variety of forms" (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 645), the *type* of interview had to be chosen according to the data I hoped to elicit.

One possibility was to conduct interviews with one or more focus groups, bringing multiple participants together for a single conversation. While this could be a valuable way to elicit perspectives—and would be a valuable method for a future study—I chose to conduct one-on-one interviews. With group interviews, participants can form perspectives by building on each other’s comments, which can be valuable, but I wanted to hear what my participants thought apart from the influence of others; I wanted them to have the freedom to express opinions that might not be shared by others—and many did. In addition, my participants had different levels of English proficiency and different personalities, both of which can influence a speaker’s confidence, willingness to share his or her ideas, and ability to navigate or direct the conversation. I wanted to pace the interviews individually, moving more slowly and carefully when participants had lower English proficiency or a quieter personality so their perspectives were not lost behind those of more outspoken participants (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 652). And finally, some of my participants shared experiences or perspectives that were especially personal, the expression of which helped them think through their ideas and helped me understand their ideas in the context of their own lives. In a group interview, participants may have been less willing to share their more personal experiences. It seemed best, then, to conduct one-on-one interviews.

A completely structured interview seemed inappropriate for this study: “In structured interviewing, the interviewer asks all respondents the same series of pre-established questions with a limited set of response categories. There is generally little room for variation in responses except where open-ended questions (which are infrequent) may be used” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 649). Because this study is exploratory, and because it was important for participants to speak freely about their experiences on their own terms, in their

own words, and from their own perspectives, open-ended questions were indispensable. A structured interview “often elicits rational responses, but it overlooks or inadequately assesses the emotional dimension” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 651). As the emotional dimension is crucial to this study, I would not be able to elicit the responses I sought using a structured interview.

At the other extreme is an unstructured interview or ethnography: “Unstructured interviewing can provide a greater breadth of data than the other types, given its qualitative nature” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 652). That greater breadth of data was my goal. But unstructured interviewing “attempts to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 653), and I did intend to limit the field of inquiry, if not as strictly as with a structured interview. I hoped to focus my participants’ responses on certain themes, even while I gave them room to discuss those themes in any way they felt appropriate.

I therefore arrived at the semi-structured interview. I prepared a list of questions, most of them open-ended, and used these as the basis of my interviews. I asked follow-up questions or skipped some of the questions as seemed appropriate throughout the conversation, keeping my opinions to myself as much as possible and encouraging participants to respond freely.

### **Instrument & Data Collection**

I developed interview questions designed to elicit participants’ perspectives on their experience at Mass and other Catholic functions, both in their Latin American countries and in the United States, and to have them make comparisons between the two cultures. I anticipated that some participants would have experienced Catholicism in various places in

the United States, whether it was different parishes in Southeastern Michigan or in other parts of the country, so I incorporated questions about those other parishes as well. I asked about various aspects of parish life, including Mass, confession, the role of the priest, the role of the family, parish activities, and so forth to elicit a holistic picture of their experience. Questions were generally open-ended and designed to invite participants to share their experience from whatever perspective they felt appropriate. The list of questions can be found in Appendix A. After having the questions approved by my advisory committee, I submitted them and the rest of the research design to my university's institutional review board (IRB) for approval. The IRB approval letter can be found in Appendix B.

Beginning with friends and acquaintances at Catholic parishes in Southeastern Michigan and snowballing, I recruited nine participants, seven women and two men. Some of my contacts invited me to attend Spanish-language Masses in the area where they introduced me to additional participants. The recruitment script, sent via email to prospective participants, can be found in Appendix C.

I did not omit any interviews from my study. I had open conversations with a few additional potential participants about the possibility of participating in the study, but decided not to pursue them further in order to limit the study to a manageable size. I attempted to contact one Portuguese speaker from Brazil, but this person did not respond. (Participants and other contacts were typically eager to connect me with additional potential participants, and the study could have become unmanageable very quickly if I had permitted it.) Some participants revealed particularly personal information that would be very difficult to keep anonymous; I have refrained from publishing this information.

Interviews took place at mutually agreed-upon locations, including a library, a place of work, a church, area coffee shops, and participants' homes during the fall of 2018. I conducted the interviews in English and made audio recordings of them; interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

With participants' permission, I made audio recordings of every interview. I began noticing certain themes during the weeks in which I was conducting the interviews. After all the interviews were completed, I transcribed the audio recordings, omitting occasional filler words and noting where the participants' responses were unintelligible. I did not note or time pauses. I kept intact grammatical errors, but (with assistance from a copy editor) made minor edits for clarity.

I completed some of the transcriptions in the fall of 2018 in preparation for a presentation of my preliminary results at a professional conference, and the rest of them in the first few months of 2019. As I transcribed, I further considered the themes I had begun to notice, and I noticed additional themes. After transcribing, I printed the transcriptions and I read, skimmed, and compared the transcriptions and listened to selections of the recordings again. During this time, I developed an informal coding system, noting themes that emerged.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

Fontana and Frey (2000) note that even the most structured interview is susceptible to influence from the interviewer, and the researcher's role in a semistructured interview is not negligible (p. 650). Being a member of the community one is researching and being outside that community both have advantages and disadvantages for gathering accurate data: The connection can help win the participants' trust and inform which questions to ask and how to

ask them, but feelings of loyalty and friendship can affect objectivity. Being outside the group or community has corresponding advantages and disadvantages: Trust is more difficult to win and questions can be misguided, but the outside perspective can help the researcher be more objective. In the case of this present study, I am in some ways part of the community, being Catholic, a regular churchgoer, and a friend, acquaintance, or friend-of-friend to many of the participants, some of whom I had met previously in a parish setting. I am in some ways not part of the community, being not Hispanic or Latino, not an immigrant, and not a proficient Spanish speaker.

To mitigate the biases, I anonymized the transcripts and sent them to a colleague in my Master of Arts in TESOL program who is outside the target community. That colleague read the transcripts plus my results and discussion sections and informed me of any areas of bias she noticed. I incorporated her comments into revisions of this paper.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Before beginning the research, my university's IRB approved the entire study (approval number UHSRC-FY17-18-407), including consent forms, interview questions, and plan for protecting participants' privacy and confidentiality, which was the primary ethical concern in this study.

Before each interview, participants were presented with the IRB-approved consent form (Appendix D) and given ample time to read it and ask questions before they signed it. I reiterated some of the information from the consent form: that participants that they were not obligated to answer any particular question, that they could terminate the interview at any time, and that they were not expected to provide any information that they were not comfortable sharing. During the interviews, if a participant seemed uncomfortable, I

reminded them that they were not required to answer fully, and that recordings and transcripts would be kept confidential. I took particular care with questions about a person's faith, morality, and religious practices, as these are often sensitive subjects. I asked no questions about immigration status or the immigration process.

Each interview began with participants choosing a pseudonym, by which I refer to them in the paper. One participant chose a pseudonym that would have made her easily identifiable; I asked if she would change it, and she agreed. Because the local community is small, I take care in the paper to conceal identifying information: I omitted names of parishes and countries, territories, or cities of origin where they could be connected with a particular participant's pseudonym. Countries of origin are referred to as "my country" in brackets, even in cases where a participant referred to Puerto Rico; while this is not, strictly speaking, accurate for Puerto Rico, I made this decision to keep my participants anonymous.

Audio recordings, transcripts, and any other identifying information is protected by passwords (in the case of digital files) or lock and key (in the case of physical papers or other data). The transcripts sent to a colleague outside the research team were fully anonymized.

### **Cost**

The cost for this study was minimal. I used my personal computer and headphones for transcription and did not purchase any additional software. When I met participants at coffee shops, I paid for my refreshments, although twice a participant insisted on paying for mine (one cited gratitude for the opportunity to share her story and the other cited the financial circumstances of most graduate students; neither could be convinced otherwise). I drove my own car to interviews. I hired a friend who has a freelance copy editing business to help format some of the paper, and I paid her out of my own pocket according to her usual

hourly rate. I received no grants or research funding specifically for this project. I enrolled in six academic credits to complete this thesis; they were funded through a combination of my own out-of-pocket payments and a tuition waiver through various graduate assistantships I held.

## Results

The nine participants in this study offered their perspectives on Catholicism as expressed in their Latin American countries of origin and in the United States. Many of the interview questions were aimed to better understand the cultural differences they experienced, and participants described their observations of these differences. But they also pointed to the similarities they noticed, which in their minds highlighted the universality of the Catholic Church. Their perspectives on language and culture were also notable, with varying preferences and views on acculturation and preservation of their cultures of origin. Having had the experience of immigrating to the United States and navigating U.S. Catholic parishes, they offered their perspectives on how parishes could improve their outreach and how English acquisition could be a part of that.

Before we begin this discussion, however, I would like to add a note about “tradition.” Many participants mentioned tradition and said that Catholicism is expressed more “traditionally” in one culture or the other. I sought out specific examples of what participants meant by “tradition” and “traditional” and have avoided using the term here for the sake of accuracy, because the term itself is too broad to be helpful.

The term is unhelpful first of all because what is considered traditional in one culture can be very different from what is considered traditional in another culture. When we speak of traditional beliefs or practices, we mean “what those who came before us believed or did,” and the meaning of the first-person pronoun “us” depends on the speaker and context. For example, I could make traditional food according to recipes passed down in my family, but the same food would not be traditional in a different family.

The term is unhelpful second of all because even if we take “present-day Catholicism” as our cultural point of reference and look at the heritage of present-day Catholics, it is by no means clear which part of history the term refers to. “Traditional Catholicism” could refer to the faith as expressed in the United States in the 1940s or in France in the 1740s or in Japan in the 1540s or in Jerusalem in the A.D. 40s or any number of cultures in which Catholicism has existed. Referring again to the family analogy, I could cook my family’s traditional food by imitating what my parents and grandparents ate when I was a child, or I could resurrect traditions from generations ago that have been lost. Catholicism spans too many cultures, both geographically and temporally, to have an unambiguous understanding of what traditional really means.

The term is unhelpful third of all because, especially in the context of religion, to modern ears, tradition often connotes a package of incense, ritual, and a severe authority over an unquestioning, obedient laity, contrasted with a “modern” package of equality, openness, and friendliness. These stereotypes of traditional and modern approaches to faith and life do not accurately reflect reality, which, as we know, is routinely more nuanced than stereotypes.

With this in mind, let us consider their voices and perspectives on cultural differences in the expression of the Catholic faith, the universality of that faith, language and culture, and parish outreach to immigrants.

### **Cultural Differences**

Many of the interview questions were designed to better understand the cultural differences my participants experienced at Catholic parishes in their home countries compared to the United States. Besides the obvious difference in language, the most salient differences participants noted were physical affection and space, the liveliness and

colorfulness of various celebrations, the role of godparents or *padrinos*, the integration of faith and mainstream society, structure and organization in church activities, the relationship between the sacraments of Reconciliation (confession) and the Eucharist (Communion), a sense of reverence for God and personal unworthiness, and the role of priests.

**Physical space & affection.** It is well-established that cultures differ in their expectations of physical touch:

Cultures whose norms allow for more touching, as well as closer interpersonal communication distances and more eye contact, are often referred to as contact cultures. People in such cultures. . . are usually comfortable with high levels of sensory input from touch or smell. People in noncontact cultures. . . tend to touch less often, stand farther apart, and may rely more on visual communication. (Berglund, 2015a)

It is not surprising, then, to find that many Latin Americans said that they noticed this difference when they arrived in the U.S. Many participants said that Latin Americans in general are more physically affectionate, hugging and kissing friends, family, and acquaintances more than U.S. Americans. “Susana” contrasted her experience of Mass in the United States with Mass in her country, where people are much more physically affectionate:

Well, I noticed [in the U.S.] that there was a community, but not as close as I had encountered in the communities in [my country]. After a Mass in [my country], people—“oh, hello,”—they hug, they kiss, they stay for maybe half an hour longer to talk about this and that... (Susana)

For her, hugging and kissing was a natural part of the expression of community—as natural as chatting. “Pablo” felt similarly, stating explicitly that people in his country are much more

physically affectionate than he found in the U.S.; Americans hug and kiss less than he experienced in his home country, he said:

You tend to show more your affection with bodily things like hugging people or kissing, . . . it's not uncommon in [my country], you see a friend in church, man or woman would kiss their friends, you see your friend, you hugging or you shake your hand all the time. (Pablo)

For Pablo, as with Susana, hugging and kissing was completely natural. Madame X noticed the same—that Latin Americans hug and kiss more and think nothing of it:

At the part [of the Mass] where you say “Peace be with you”<sup>6</sup> and all that stuff, it takes about half an hour—I’m exaggerating—to say hi to everyone, and here I notice that it was nice but it wasn’t as long, and more people I notice, people didn’t like me standing next to them. There have to be a space. It was like, ’cause usually when I talk to somebody I get close to them, but Americans are different. They want the space, and I notice now. . .that I’ve been getting close to Americans after because they don’t feel so comfortable, so I have to step backwards. It’s interesting. There’s a difference in culture. . .[in Latin America], you hug more and kiss more on the cheeks and stuff like that and nobody really thinks about it, nobody says anything, but it’s a

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<sup>6</sup> The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM), which outlines the rubrics for the Mass, describes the Rite of Peace in this way:

“There follows the Rite of Peace, by which the Church entreats peace and unity for herself and for the whole human family, and the faithful express to each other their ecclesial communion and mutual charity before communicating in the Sacrament.

As for the actual sign of peace to be given, the manner is to be established by the Conferences of Bishops in accordance with the culture and customs of the peoples. However, it is appropriate that each person, in a sober manner, offer the sign of peace only to those who are nearest.” (United States Council of Catholic Bishops, 2011).

lot of hugging and saying hello, so it's a very interesting difference in culture.

(Madame X)

Many Latin Americans, it seems, retain their preference for more touching and physical affection even when living in the United States. Interestingly, every participant who mentioned this reported consonant experiences—that Americans seem to be less comfortable with hugs and kisses.

**Celebrations.** Many participants said that celebrations were typically more lively and colorful in Latin America. The Catholic Church's sacraments and calendar are universal, but the same feast day might be merely mentioned at a parish in the U.S. and the cause for a much bigger celebration in Latin America. Madame X emphasized this, although she noted that she personally "[doesn't] like it too rowdy." She said: "I think that Latinos always like to get together with food, like a party for everything. There's a party for everything." She added:

Latinos are more loud, oh my gosh. We are so loud, . . . here what is so loud is the music, but there, you don't have to have music there to be loud. People are talking all the time, some people are, so it's a real difference. There's a lot of music and dancing. But I welcome the American way because I don't like it too rowdy.

(Madame X)

While Madame X commented generally, Laura spoke about baptisms, saying that in the U.S., baptisms are oriented toward welcoming a new member into the church community, whereas in her country, baptism still seems oriented to the community, but not necessarily the church or parish community, and in a less spiritual or religious way:

For us, baptism . . . in [my country] is like a big party, you know, more than anything, even a special celebration and a big Mass...In here, it's just part of the ceremony, because most of the baptism, in here it's like part of the Mass, it's not separate, but all the community actually is accepting and receiving this new member, and in [my country] now, it's independent kind of ceremony and it's like a party. (Laura)

But the celebrations aren't limited to baptisms. Carlos described saints' day celebrations in his country: "If you go to an old town, they probably have a celebration for the entire month sometimes in honor of this local patron, or a week." And Pablo noticed the absence of processions, which he felt to be a staple of Catholicism in his country: "You guys never do processions here. It's nuts." "Carmen" observed that, though many of the significant days are the same, the observations are more celebratory in her country and simpler in the U.S.:

The way we celebrate all the special events—Mother's Day, Christmas, the patronage of the church – for example, today we celebrate the patron of [my country]. It's a big deal . . . in [my country]. This church is gonna be full, we celebrate with joy, music, with everything, you know. Here is different. Here is more simple. (Carmen)

Interestingly, she also felt that celebrations were more superficial in the United States:

[In the U.S.,] it's not that deep. Today, we're gonna mention that today we celebrate. . ., for example, December 8, the Immaculate Conception. . . . They just mention the name, you know, and then they make a special prayer, but that's it. We need more. In [my country], any other country, whenever we celebrate any other saint, it's more than just that mentioning. We do more. (Carmen)

For Pablo, it wasn't so much about depth or shallowness of celebrations but about "dryness," which he noticed in the American expression of Catholicism. That dryness he attributed to an

influence from Puritanism, whose stereotypical adherent is “someone overly moralistic and a kill-joy” (Lippy & Williams, 2010b) and which was influential in the founding and cultural shaping of the United States (Robertson, 2010). Pablo explained:

I think American Catholicism has a lot of influence from Puritanism...I’m not saying this in a pejorative kind of way, but . . . I think the Americans are drier; American Catholicism in general is a little bit drier, and it’s also more puritanical...Not all American priests are like that, but I think in general tend to be drier. (Pablo)

While Catholicism came to the Americas from Europe, Pablo seemed to believe that the differing European cultures had an influence on the way the faith is expressed in different parts of the Americas.

**Padrinos.** Several participants mentioned a custom of having *padrinos* for sacraments including baptisms, First Communion, Confirmations, and weddings. *El padrino* and *la madrina* are usually translated *godfather* and *godmother*, although their cultural roles are not identical. The Catholic Church’s Code of Canon Law requires, under normal circumstances, that those to be baptized have at least one sponsor<sup>7</sup> (godparents in the U.S., *padrinos* in Latin America), that those to be confirmed have at least one sponsor<sup>8</sup> (sponsors in the U.S., *padrinos* in Latin America), and that those to be married have two witnesses<sup>9</sup> (best man and

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Catholic Church’s Code of Canon Law, “Insofar as possible, a person to be baptized is to be given a sponsor who assists an adult in Christian initiation or together with the parents presents an infant for baptism. A sponsor also helps the baptized person to lead a Christian life in keeping with baptism and to fulfill faithfully the obligations inherent in it” (Catholic Church, 1983, can. 872).

<sup>8</sup> “Insofar as possible, there is to be a sponsor for the person to be confirmed; the sponsor is to take care that the confirmed person behaves as a true witness of Christ and faithfully fulfills the obligations inherent in this sacrament” (Catholic Church, 1983, can. 892).

<sup>9</sup> “Only those marriages are valid which are contracted before the local ordinary, pastor, or a priest or deacon delegated by either of them, who assist, and before two witnesses according to the rules expressed in the following canons and without prejudice to the exceptions mentioned in [a few additional canons]” (Catholic Church, 1983, can. 1108 § 1).

maid of honor in the U.S.; *padrinos* may fill this role or another role in Latin America).

“Camila” explains the role of *padrinos* in baptism:

The sacrament? OK, for example, baptism. In [my country], when they baptize a child, they put more interest into the godmother and the godfather, for the child, . . . because the godmother and the godfather. . . *la madrina y padrino*, they bring gifts, every time the child has a birthday or you know, they take care of that child, you know, like a second child, yeah, *la madre, madrina* are always there, involved with the child, like OK, teaching them about God, teaching them about . . . life. If the father is not around, this child go to the padrino, if the mother is not around, they go to the madrina. It’s like a second father, second mother. That’s in the Latino culture. I was really surprised to find out that in English you don’t have a *compadre* and a *comadre*, . . . [if your child is baptized and I am the madrina], you are *comadre*, you would call me *comadre* and I would call you *comadre*. *Comadre* mean to—mother, like with the mother, with mother. It’s cute, you know, it’s nice. You don’t see that in the English language, in the English culture. I really don’t know why.

While the *padrino* and *madrina* tradition is an important part of baptisms, as Camila explained, it is not limited to baptisms. Catholicism recognizes seven sacraments; the three sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Communion, and Confirmation) and weddings often serve as milestones in a person’s life. Carlos explained that the *padrinos* custom expands beyond baptism:

I think for Confirmation you [a person in Latin America] only get one [*padrino*]. . . We’ve seen that for baptisms, you have the couple is your *padrino* and *madrina*, or godfather and godmother. . . We haven’t been to a Catholic wedding here

in the U.S., but in [my country] that's huge, I mean, you have to have like several *padrinos* actually. You have the main one, the main couple who are basically like your sponsors too for . . . paying for the Mass and any other needs for the church. You have the *padrinos* for the—oh my gosh what's the word? It's like a little golden rope; it's a symbol of the union between the two couple, so they put that around the couple actually, and actually that . . . symbolizes the union. And there's *padrinos* for the coins actually, golden coins so you have the golden coins that you give to your bride as a way of expressing . . . "I'm gonna be the provider, here you go," so it's a little tiny box here, that has these little coins to give to her. And you also have the *padrinos* for the rings actually, as opposed to like the best man, here right, actually the best man concept was kind of a little different, weird for us, like what is this? And I understand, like I said, it's people . . . you love supporting your wedding and things like that, but the difference is *padrinos* are also involved in some of the religious classes that lead up to the final ceremony... They truly have to participate, it's not just oh this is my friend he's gonna be doing the speech for the best man and all that. No no, he has actually come to these classes too; that I think I've seen is somehow different. But yeah, *padrinos*, you have *padrinos*. People say, oh this is a good fundraiser, because I'll have *padrinos* for the pictures, the banquet, for the wine. It's a terrible habit that people are saying yeah, instead of me paying for this, I want people to offset all my costs.

It seems, then, that the *padrinos* tradition extends also beyond the religious sphere and into the cultural and financial sphere.

**Religion & secular culture.** When the practice of having godparents become a fundraiser, as Carlos described, perhaps it is no surprise that the line between Catholicism and secular culture in general is less defined in Latin America, according to several of the participants of this study. People speak more freely about religious things; banks and government offices may be closed for religious holidays; many people attend Mass weekly because of a cultural inertia—they go because everybody goes.

Pablo said that people in his country feel much freer to be open about their religious practices outside of strictly religious contexts:

Especially in [my country], it's embedded. People speak more freely about . . . church and God and things like that, and some young people at work, they say, "Oh, God bless you" and things like that. It's a little bit less, less correct to do that [in the U.S.]...which has good things and bad things, [unintelligible] cultural Catholicism. But I don't know whether, how deep it is sometimes, because everybody, like, you know, "I went to church because my parents took me to church," I mean, it took me a while after I left church . . . to reconnect. . . In [my country], for example, it's not uncommon, you go to an office or something and they have an [religious] image or something. It's more part of the culture. (Pablo)

Carlos felt similarly, noting that, in his country, many public institutions close for religious holidays – a practice not necessarily endorsed by the government:

In [my country], you do see a lot of social activities and all that, but because the government wants to stay away from church intervention, they don't always allow that. However, it's funny because there are some holidays that are . . . Christian-

related, like for instance, our Lady of Guadalupe is December 12, and in many places that's a holiday for like banks, schools, even though it's a religious thing.

Laura also said that Catholicism was more embedded in the culture in her country. She explained how the Triduum, or the three-day period at the height of the Catholic liturgical calendar culminating with the Easter Vigil, seemed backwards when she came to the U.S. In her country, everything is closed on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, then open for celebration on Easter Sunday; in the U.S., she found that everything was closed on Easter Sunday:

The main celebration in here is a little different, especially Easter. For us, Easter, . . . you just are—how do you say? “*in luto*” [mourning], when you are sad because something is happening. It started in Thursday, when everything started for Jesus Christ before he's dying. Friday because is when Jesus Christ died. Those two days in [my country], nobody does anything. Everything is closed. Not even alcohol, nothing for the Catholic community, nothing because we are really upset and we are sad that our Jesus Christ is started the process to die for us, so those two days for us are closed. Nothing is open . . . not even the malls are open, nothing. And then Saturday is when everybody start going out and getting together because they are going to start the celebration, of Jesus coming back, you know, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and Sunday actually for us is a big celebration . . . It was a little different for us, and for us the two days, the day before the dead and the day that the dead for us is just silent, is just pray, for us that was a little different. In [my country], people, they don't work, all the companies close. (Laura)

That infusion of Catholicism and culture that many participants felt was more present in Latin America seems to have an effect on how the faith is experienced and practiced in the United States. “Lolita” and Susana both said that in their countries, nearly everyone can be found at Mass on Sundays. Lolita said that some Latin American parents have come to rely on that cultural support, and they struggle to pass on their faith and culture when they come to the United States:

On Sunday . . . most people would be at church, you know, so it’s, it’s, it is expected. Whether you want to go or not and even the kids who don’t want to go, they sit there, and heaven forbid that you make a face or whatever, because when you get to the car, you’re gonna get a big one. . . . That’s the difficulty that they, Latino families have here when they come, and the moms tell me that, they say, you know, this culture is so different, and I have to, my kids want to do what the American kids want to do, and it’s not our way. (Lolita)

Susana noticed differences in how priests act toward the laity, and she attributed those differences to the fact that “everybody goes to church” in her country, and “there are so many other options” in the United States—that is, the option not to attend Mass for whatever reason:

I felt that priests here [in the U.S.] were more careful about making the connection. . . . I feel in general they have to work harder to keep the members happy. In [my country], they don’t have to worry about it. Everybody goes to church. It’s what you do. Here, there are so many other options, you have to be careful about really building a relationship with the members of the church. (Susana)

While the participants who discussed the relationship of faith to their old and new cultures all felt that Catholicism was infused more into Latin American cultures than United States culture, that was expressed in a variety of different ways. But there was no consensus on whether one or the other was preferable, as the differences seemed to affect in different ways the depth of people's faith, the passing on of the faith to the next generation, and the friendliness of priests.

**Structure.** Many participants felt that parish activities were much more organized and structured in the U.S. compared to their experiences in Latin America. In fact, when I asked Susana what she expected to find at a parish in the United States, she said, "I expected what I saw: Exactly the same thing, but better organized." "Lily" felt the same: "It's pretty similar, yeah, the same, yeah, and totally more organized here than there," she said. Carlos felt similarly, finding more organization in the U.S. and seeing that as one of the more salient differences in how the sacraments are celebrated in his home culture and in the U.S.: "I will say that the sacraments are pretty much the same, or I will actually think that they're more organized here than in other countries." Carmen observed the U.S. habit of being organized and structured at one of the two parishes she attends regularly. She was surprised at the amount of training the parish required for tasks that, at her other U.S. parish, requires no training. She could see positives in both approaches:

In here [the U.S.], they have to go by the book. I give an example. I serve at [parish], and so at [parish] have to go by training after training after training for everybody who want to, you know, readers, usher, altar assistant, ushers, everybody have to go through a big long training, which is good, but also, in here, I like to give, I like to let the congregation to participate, even if they not professional, even if they don't read

well, or they don't know how to sing very well because they don't have music classes...I cannot do that at [that other parish] but I can do that here [at this U.S. parish]. (Carmen)

Carlos seemed to find the organization to be a positive, even as he missed his traditions from home:

I kind of miss. . . some of the traditions from [my country] and all that not being present in the church, but on the other hand, I like the sense of formality and well-structured and generally in the church here in the U.S., . . . they're way more organized than some countries, Latin American countries sometimes. (Carlos)

Susana observed this organization specifically in how parishes raise money for construction.

Keeping detailed records of particular donors' contributions was a new concept to her:

I remember, in [my country], they would need a certain amount of money to build something, and yeah, they will collect the money, but here, basically what I overheard once, people, the churches keep charts, and they will tell you this person donated this much, this time, the money was just for this or that, because I think they have to be accountable with the government for taxation. In [my country], nothing of that happens, so it seems to me that yeah, things are more structured and more transparent in this country, when it comes to the Church. (Susana)

She went on to say that this wasn't limited to Catholicism; she noticed more organization in the United States in general: "Everything here is more transparent . . . Everything to this country to me seems to be more organized, more efficient, and that applies to schools, government, church."

While not every participant mentioned organization, those who did consistently felt that U.S. Americans were more organized, structured, and efficient, and this was generally seen as a positive.

**Confession and Communion.** Officially, the Catholic Church encourages its members to receive the sacraments of Reconciliation (commonly called confession) and the Eucharist (or Communion) frequently (Catholic Church, 1997, par. 1458, 1417), and to prepare for reception of the Eucharist by going to confession (Catholic Church, 1997, par. 1415). In terms of the meaning of “frequent” and what proper “preparation” looks like, cultural practices vary. A 2015 Pew Research survey found that in the U.S., Hispanic Catholics are less likely than White Catholics to receive the Eucharist at Mass (Sandstrom, 2015). This was supported by the responses of my participants. Many were surprised at the number of U.S. Mass attendees who presented themselves for Communion and assumed that they had all gone to confession recently. Pablo said it most succinctly: “In Latin American countries, if you don’t go to confession, you don’t go to Communion.” He said that when he went to Mass in the U.S., he was surprised to find so many attendees receiving Communion and even felt pressured to receive, even if ordinarily he wouldn’t:

One of the things we thought it was a little bit different, very striking was that everybody would stand up for Communion, where in [my country], if you don’t go to confession . . . holy moly is everybody kind of went to confession? It wasn’t true, just everybody would go to Communion. That was a little bit striking, I think, so that was a big thing. . . . We also found it very curious, people would go, the ushers would go from pew to pew, it was almost like a pressure to go to Communion, because in [my

country], you stand up and then some people stay, some people don't. That was a big cultural shock. (Pablo)

Lolita referred to a similar initial understanding of confession and Communion. While she attended Mass weekly from her arrival in the U.S., she abstained from both sacraments for a decade because she did not feel confident enough with her English to confess in English and could not find a Spanish-speaking priest to hear her. Since she couldn't confess, Lolita said, she couldn't receive Communion: "A lot of people confess every other week...and you don't take Communion if you don't go to confession, so that was why I didn't go to Communion. I mean I couldn't confess."

Camila also noticed a more frequent reception of the Eucharist in the U.S., and this surprised her. While Pablo surmised that the whole parish may have been to confession recently—something he found strange—Camila assumed that Massgoers in the U.S. expect their sins to be forgiven more casually and without the formal sacrament of confession, or that they felt they were "saints" and had no need of forgiveness:

In [my country], people don't get Communion too easy like they do here. My gosh, here the whole parish get Communion...all the people here are saints, nobody commit sin look like, everybody take Communion. . . . [In my country], to take Communion is very serious; I mean you don't go there and take Communion just like that. You are a sinner...I think, ok, what is my sins I have, seems to me like I have to take for granted, if you swear, well it's not so bad, God forgive me for swearing. When I was young, you swear, you go and confess first before you take Communion. Now, you can, I don't know, you can get mad, you can swear, you can scream, you go to

church, forgive me Lord for what I'm doing, then you go and take Communion, it's not a big deal. (Camila)

While my participants generally agreed that everyone was expected to attend Mass and that it was not uncommon to attend Mass and abstain from Communion, the frequency with which people went to confession varied widely. Lolita noted that confessing every two weeks was common in her country. Susana noticed a variation within her country and among Latin Americans in the United States. I asked her what frequency was common in her hometown, and she told me:

In my family, for example, talking about three generations, my grandparents, my parents, and myself and siblings, my grandmother used to go to church three times a week, and I'm sure two of those times [were] confession, but she was such a nice lady I don't know what she was confessing. But I remember her always, my mom, I remember she used to go often, maybe twice a month? She would go, not every, once a week because she had six kids, I went with my mom would remind me, once every three months, I never liked it, my siblings never did, very seldom. That was one of the sacraments we believed less, for us didn't make any sense, but here, like my friend [name] and her friends, she will tell me all the time, "[Susana], *necesito confesarme.*" "What have you done? You're a saint!" "I have to go." So she will be more like my mom, and all of her friends will go. (Susana)

My participants did not consistently express a sense of urgency to go to confession and have their sins forgiven, nor did they agree on how frequent it was appropriate to go to confession. They did express a consensus that personal sin was real, that confession was the normal way

of having sins forgiven, and that abstaining from Communion was appropriate if one had not been to confession recently.

**Reverence for God and a sense of unworthiness.** Participants also noticed variations in liturgical practice where the Latin American practice indicated a greater sense of hierarchical distance between God and people, although they experienced that hierarchy in different ways, ranging from fear of sin to a “sublime” experience with God. To better understand this section, it will be useful to know that the Eucharist or Communion is not, in the Catholic understanding, bread and wine with particularly notable symbolism; rather, the Catholic Church teaches that God becomes physically, literally present in the Eucharist (Catholic Church, 1997, par. 1374-1376), specifically during the prayer of consecration at Mass (Catholic Church, 1997, par. 1377).

The Eucharist is particularly special to Madame X, who tried other churches when she was young, because she “didn’t understand my faith at that time,” but said she’s “felt more comfortable in the Catholic Church” and eventually returned. Asked why, she replied: “I don’t know. I think now I know why, because the truth of the gospel, the fact that Jesus is present in the Eucharist, made such a difference, but at the time, I didn’t know it.”

Lolita, who serves as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion (colloquially but incorrectly referred to as a “Eucharistic Minister”) at her parish, had a difficult time mentally adjusting to the idea of being an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion when it was suggested to her.<sup>10</sup> The idea was initially presented to her by another American lay

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<sup>10</sup>According to Canon Law, clergy are the “ordinary” ministers, distributing Communion to those who receive it at Mass; lay people sometimes serve as “extraordinary” ministers, stepping in when there are not enough priests (Catholic Church, 1983, can. 910, 230).

person, and still another American lay person encouraged her past the hesitations she brought from Latin America:

My same friend . . . said, why don't you try to do, you know, Eucharistic Minister? I said no, I can't do that, because that is for us, touching the host . . . It's the priest who should serve that. But my parish has a few people and they are very very dedicated people to church things, ok, very very dedicated. It's an honor, you know, it is an honor. . . I remember one time I had a conversation with [a U.S. parish staff member, who said] "Remember, he didn't come here to look for good people, [but] sinners. You're serving, you're doing his will, and it's his will, not your will." (Lolita)

Several participants spoke specifically to surprises in the liturgy. Laura found it strange that the Eucharist was presented to the congregation in both forms (bread and wine) instead of only in the form of bread. Carlos noticed that U.S. Catholics more commonly receive the Eucharist in their hands, instead of directly on their tongues. Toward the beginning of the Mass is the Penitential Rite, wherein clergy and laity alike acknowledge their sinfulness in a general way and ask God for mercy; Carlos noticed an apparent absence (in the U.S.) of the *Confiteor*, one of three options for the Penitential Rite, and of those options probably the most explicit acknowledgment of personal sin: "In our church, we've been using it a lot now, but initially, it was like we ask God for forgiveness and that's it," he said. Susana felt that Mass in her country "was too much of a ceremony or a ritual, a lot of *culpa, mea culpa*."

That sense of *mea culpa* was particularly acute for Laura, who said that her mother and grandmother never permitted her to cross her legs in church, because it was a sign of

disrespect and she could be punished. After living in the United States, her fear lifted and she came to a different understanding of personal sin:

I was raised . . . you have to be not just respect, you know, you at some point you were kind of afraid. . . . In here, it's not like that. You feel really free to believe that nothing is going to happen. Actually I think at this time I believe that my beliefs are stronger, uh, than they were before because now all that afraid that I had before . . . that it could be, you could be punished in a different way, is something that in here I discovered in a different way . . . That is something that I learn in here, that everything is acceptable, you don't have to be afraid, because it's what is coming from inside you, it's not what you do exactly . . . We discover that all that afraid that I have . . . to do something wrong, and it's not to do something wrong intentionally, but you know, everything could be bad when Jesus was looking at you. In here, that made me stronger, because I know that he loves us . . . I lost that kind of afraid. Now, I think I can give more. I can give more than I did. (Laura)

Where Laura felt fear, Camila's experience was more one of reverence and awe, a kind of "sublime" intimacy with God that seems to depend on humbling gestures and postures like kneeling. Here she describes her experience in Latin America:

The priest will not face the community, the parishioners; they face only the altar. . . . And the Communion, only the priest can give Communion. They put the plate under your neck, you know, and the priest will. . . . give it to you, but you kneel, you know, you kneel. It's kind of a very, I don't know how to explain it to you, but it's a moment of *sublime*, something very sublime. . . . you kneel, and the priest will give it you. It's very beautiful. I still love that, never change. (Camila)

Carmen also felt that kneeling and other forms of reverence were necessary, and she was disappointed when she did not see them at a First Communion Mass she attended in the United States:

I was very disappointed, because I noticed more I didn't see the spiritual part, I see more emptiness when the kids it was about the beautiful dress, the what is going to happen after they finish. They was not getting on the knee to receive, there was no speaking and letting kids know what they really going to receive, what the importance, to what they gonna get, you know all these, it wasn't there, and I was like, really? And believe it or not, not only the kids but also nobody was getting their knee in that moment in the consecration. This is the most important part of the Mass, and everybody was standing up, and people was looking the phone or the way people was dressing up, and I say Lord, forgive them, they don't know what they doing . . . everybody was about the party that was coming next, anyway, but to see more than 50 people do their First Communion, but to see the emptiness, that's not right. What are we doing with the future of our Church? (Carmen)

Pablo said he noticed some of the same differences—less kneeling in the U.S. and some other liturgical changes away from that hierarchical sense that made some people wonder whether the parish was actually Catholic. But he also said these habits were not manifested at every American parish:

In the Mass? One of the things, for example, people [in Latin America] would not go to Communion, like 'cause you feel the respect . . . The churches [in Latin America] usually, as I said, have all these saints and the whole atmosphere. They do a lot of like we do in our [Spanish] Mass [in the U.S.], usually, you know, like a sprinkle with

holy water at the beginning of Mass. It's these kinds of details, things like that, like, okay, for some examples [people in the U.S.] will not kneel during the consecration. [In Latin America], everybody kneels. I think there's a respect for the liturgy in that sense, but again many American parishes do it [this way]. . . . I remember once I went to [a local parish], a woman says is this a Catholic? Because, I mean, the Mass had changed a lot, because the priest was extremely . . . the host were like little pieces of bread . . . Because in the middle of [identifying information] they were like very liberal . . . Some of the stuff was like, holy moly is this a Catholic church? It was very weird the way they do some stuff, so it was kind of unusual. So in fact one priest said that somebody asked him, is this a Catholic Church? (Pablo)

**Priests.** Several participants compared the role of priests in their home countries to that in the U.S., and their comments varied. Some felt that priests took on a greater sense of authority in Latin America, but they differed as to whether that authority was a positive or negative. For example, Pablo said that authority could translate to a very positive relationship with lay people: "In Latin America, they really do, they say 'father,' *padre* . . . in general, historically, they see [the priest] more as an authority figure, just like a father. Where there's a wonderful priest, they love it." Pablo also spoke of an additional role priests often take on: "Priests are almost like psychiatrists for people in Latin America." But in Lolita's experience, that authority meant strictness and fear or punishment:

The Spanish Inquisition, I call it. I remember the priests that I made my First Communion under. He was very strict. I mean, for example, here I see [a priest's name], 'Hey how you're doing.' Not in my country; I would never do that. If you see the priest, it's like you turn around and go the other way because you knew that you

were gonna get in trouble; they were gonna say something like you were gonna get in trouble. That's how I grew up. It was respect; there was also fear, at least on my part, that was my perception, but there was that, there was that respect, but there was like a wall on my part because I just thought that these people are, you know, still closer to God. (Lolita)

That strictness was similar, though not identical, to what Pablo remembered from his country. He said priests can be harsher in Latin America than in the United States:

Sometimes they tell people, they will scold people—just don't do this!—in the U.S., you can't do that. You'll get upset with the priest and probably slap him and call the bishop. (Pablo)

For him, it seems that the priests' behavior is in some way influenced or controlled by the laity—U.S. American lay people do not allow priests to scold them and Latin American lay people do. Susana had a similar perspective. Her quotation below appeared earlier in this chapter, but it is relevant here also:

I felt that priests here [in the U.S.] were more careful about making the connection. . . . I feel in general they have to work harder to keep the members happy. In [my country], they don't have to worry about it. Everybody goes to church. It's what you do. Here, there are so many other options, you have to be careful about really building a relationship with the members of the church. (Susana)

Again, Susana felt that the lay people's experience of the faith significantly affected the priests' interactions with them. Because Americans are freer to stop attending Mass – or, for Pablo, freer to “slap [the priest] and call the bishop,”—priests in the U.S. have to be more

careful about how they treat them. But for Pablo, even the scolding he referred to does not preclude love.

Some participants felt that they could be closer to priests in the United States compared to Latin America. For example, Laura said:

[In the U.S.], they are closer to you, they are not that distant. Before when I grew up, it was the distance: he's the priest you are somebody. In here, I didn't see that line. That makes sense. But I think even in [my country] it's changing. . . . When I moved to here I didn't have that experience in [my country], eighteen years ago, but in here, I saw that from the very beginning. I saw that be a little closer to you to try to keep the community close to you, be confident to you, trust you. I think that is the main thing to be a priest.

While priests in Laura's home country may be moving toward a less distant relationship with lay people, she said that "from the very beginning" of her time in the United States, she noticed less distance here. Susana felt that priests were more personable in the United States, and that they related more to the family in her home country and more to the individual in the United States:

I think the priest here is more open to know the people personally. In [my country], they are also very personal, but it's more like the family, the priest is there for the family, but here I think that you can interact more like one to one, one to one, yeah, I remember a priest in [the U.S.] when I, the one that I used to go to more often, he will remember my name, he will shake my hand, he was more personable, more than [my country]. (Susana)

While Susana and Laura felt that U.S. priests could be closer to lay people, others felt the opposite. For example, Carmen felt more distance in the United States, which she attributed to abuse scandals:

I feel like the priests there are more open to do more different things with the congregation, with the kids, different activities outside and everything. I think here is more what going through right now with the abuse and scandal and stuff like that, maybe the priest is, you know, more kind of [rejected]<sup>11</sup> and more reserved in what to do and how to do. United States have to be concerned about lawsuit, sorry to say it... in the Latino communities, people are different. We welcome our priests as our family, we want to do with them the kids and everybody. We enjoy to do that. With here it's different." (Carmen)

In referring to priests' concerns about lawsuits or perceptions of abuse, Carmen noted that lay Latin Americans "welcome our priests as our family," and also attributed the priests' behavior, at least in part, to the reactions of lay people like Pablo and Susana did.

Lily said priests were more "in the streets" with the people in her home country compared to the United States. She said much of the difference in priestly interaction with the laity comes from different circumstances: "The community is different and the problems are different. The neighbors are different. The neighborhood and situations are different...Of course it's not the same. The necessities are different." Again, we see the priests' role changing because of the lay people, although not in the same way as the others mentioned.

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<sup>11</sup> Carmen literally said "rejecting," but I have changed it to "rejected" in this case because, given what I heard in her speech over the course of the interview, she often confused these suffixes, and it is clear from the context that she meant "rejected" in this case.

Carlos also felt closer to priests in his home country, noting that many people would come in contact with the same priest at various milestones throughout their lives:

One thing in [my country] which is really, really common is that you are baptized almost by the same priest that is actually marrying you, so you get to see this priest throughout your whole life, and that's perhaps one of the biggest differences, you have this sense of connection, oh, Padre Jose, or Padre Alberto, and you always met him and he knows your family and sometimes you invite him for dinner or breakfast or whatnot. And here, well, 'cause it happens in many churches, sometimes you have that connection with the priest and [unintelligible] assigned to a different church. . . . Throughout my teenage years and even when I was turning an adult, I met different priests that I felt that special connection, you know, and here it's also that same connection, but I think not perhaps as close as I think, or maybe because it's a different culture. (Carlos)

For Carlos, the difference in connection with priests in Latin America compared to the United States could have been a difference in culture or simply his own experience.

While many participants felt that priests had different roles or acted differently in Latin America compared to the United States, there was no consensus on the exact nature of those differences or which culture's practice was preferable.

### **Universality**

Catholicism has spanned the globe for centuries and has seen cultures evolve over the course of those centuries. Its ability to transcend culture seemed especially important for many participants. One participant<sup>12</sup> seemed to be particularly aware of this:

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<sup>12</sup> I am omitting this participant's pseudonym in this case to protect his or her anonymity.

When I think about Jesus in Arabic or in Spanish or in English, I see the same Jesus. Jesus doesn't change for me. The Mass doesn't change for me. It's amazing. To me, it's like a miracle. The Mass is the same for me in Arabic, in Spanish, or in English; it's the same. When I focus on God. But if I'm gonna focus about who is around me and the parish or in the church, then you start thinking, "Oh, these are Latinos, oh, these are [Middle Easterners], oh, these are Americans." There, you see differences, is when you are aware of the culture. But if you are focused deeply in the Holy Host [the Eucharist] and in Jesus, not a chance. It's the same.

This participant found that when he or she thinks about people, cultural differences matter, but when he or she thinks about God, cultural differences matter much less.

Other participants, however, said they saw differences in different parishes, but attributed those differences more to individuals than to culture. Some people might be especially devout not because of their country or culture of origin, but because they are older, according to Camila:

[A]ny priest in the world you go, some homilies were excellent, some of them are boring. [I]t . . . depend of the priest. And the Communion, you notice the old people having more devotion, *devoción*, and the young people are like, you know, no, it's really not too much different, really.

Speakers of every language grow older and slow down. That includes priests. Susana noted that the energy and activity in a parish is related to the age of the priest. I asked her, "Could you compare how it is generally in the U.S. to how it is generally in [your country], or is it different enough parish to parish?" She said:

I could say that there are 60-70% similar in every sense, then the other 30%, it gets defined by the neighborhood, by the priest himself, you know. Like in [my country], if you have young priests it's a more active community, and if you have an older priest, it's more quiet.

Susana also noted that socioeconomic factors affect parish life as well:

When I was in [a city in the U.S.], there was a neighborhood, it was for working class, but if I drove a few blocks, there were more, um, higher skill neighborhoods, and I remember those churches having better choirs, for example. So music in those churches was more selective. They were better singers than the ones in my neighborhood where there were kids with their guitar getting together and practicing maybe a few minutes before the service. So I saw different situations in different churches in [that city] at that time.

Like age, wealth and poverty coexist in every (or nearly every) culture. Also present in every culture is diversity of personalities, experiences, approaches, social skills, and philosophies.

When I asked Lily whether she preferred confession in Spanish or English, she said she usually confesses in English because when she first arrived in the U.S., "it didn't exist in Spanish." Now, she is proficient in English and has access to several Spanish-speaking priests, so I asked which language she prefers. She said, "Well, now I think I choose the priest first, not the language. It depends more on the priest than the language. Of course, could be a good priest in Spanish that do it better." I also asked her if she noticed differences in regular Sunday Masses other than the language: "Does it feel different or seem different at all?" She said, "Hm. It doesn't depend of the language; it depends on the priest. That's what I think."

Upon attending Mass in the United States, many participants found a sense of familiarity that was more significant than the cultural differences they saw. In particular, many respondents pointed to the Mass. Mass in English, Spanish, or any other language is a translation from the official Latin text, and many participants intuited a kind of familiarity. Here are a few examples of the comments I heard:

From Laura:

Actually, even in Spanish here, the experience is exactly the same as in English, because; the practices, the crosses and all the Mass follow is exactly the same. They only thing is they try to speak Spanish, but besides that actually is the same, the singing, the prayers are exactly the same, and the Communion is exactly the same.

So, actually, no, there is no difference.

From Susana: “They follow the same order. I’m amazed, the same order, the same prayers. Translated, yeah. They follow Rome, I guess. Rome is what sets the order.” From Camila: “The other parts of the Mass, you know, is more or less the same. The only thing that is different is the homily.” She added:

You know what, honestly, the people don’t need to understand language to go to Mass, because the Mass is—what you call it?—It’s universal. But the people, what they need understand really more than anything is to communicate with the community. (Camila)

It seems that the participants were able to recognize and follow the Mass, even if they couldn’t understand the language. Carmen has seen priests deviate from the prescribed prayers at Mass, and she said they should not—an indication of her sense in the universality of the Mass:

It doesn't matter where you go, that connection that have to be that way . . . If you notice a change, it's not right because the priest have to follow exactly . . . I don't like those changes. I think we have to continue the same way. The ritual should be the same. (Carmen)

While several participants commented on the Mass itself, Susana also noticed similarities in the visual aspects, like vestments and the decor around the altar: "You know, that was very similar in terms of the role of the priest wearing the same type of clothing, the altar always being lit very respectfully, flowers, fresh flowers, what I saw was similar."

That familiarity brought comfort to many of the participants. Laura specifically sought that comfort when she began attending Mass in the U.S.:

I was just expecting to feel. . . to be sure that my faith is still there, to be sure that the beliefs didn't have to change. And I think that is the thing that I got most.

And she found that comfort, it seems. Susana had a similar experience, finding the Mass a way to connect with home because it was so familiar:

[Mass] was a way to connect with home. I mean, it was a different language, but it was something very familiar to me, so it felt like—it was nice, the way that it gave me peace and a way to connect. Everything was so new that just having something that was so common for me, it was nice. It was nice. I felt comfort going to church. (Susana)

Like Laura and Susana, Carmen sought out that comfort and familiarity within Catholicism, and that encouraged her to work through the language barrier: "I said, my Lord is here also, so I'm going to try to learn English and be able to enjoy, so that's what I did."

Lolita also felt a mix of comfort and struggle with the language. For her, the different language made the Mass feel very foreign, and while she recognized the different parts of the Mass, the language presented a challenge: “It was very different. It was very different because, first of all, everything was in English. The rite was the same, you know . . . there was nothing new that I couldn’t do, but the prayers were impossible.”

Carlos said he thought the most uncomfortable aspect of U.S. Catholicism, or the hardest part for Latin American Catholics to adjust to, was the language.<sup>13</sup> That barrier seemed particularly difficult in confession. Lily, who, as we saw before, chooses her confessors not based on their language, said she still struggles to confess in English:

It’s hard to go to the reconciliation or make a confession when you are not elemental or basic in English, right? It’s hard to do it. It’s hard for me even now after 20 years.

It’s not easy to express yourself and everything in another language.

Carmen has found the same at her parish. There, they make do: the priest offers confessions to Spanish speakers with a third-party interpreter:

[Confession] is a little bit difficult, because we definitely need . . . a Spanish priest, because that connection has one between the priest and the person who wants to confess. Sometimes [a third party] had to step [in] because the person really want to have comprehension, and [the priest] may not understand completely—and he have to be in one corner and helping, by the authority of the persons who want to have confession, and that the only way we have been able. It’s not the same. (Carmen)

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<sup>13</sup> We should note that, while he did indicate that language was the hardest part of U.S. Catholicism for many Latin Americans to adjust to, he was not entirely consistent with this, saying elsewhere that someone familiar with the Mass could follow it in a different language without too much trouble, and also that recognizing traditions seemed more important to him personally than language.

In the absence of an interpreter, these Spanish speakers would be unable to confess.<sup>14</sup> That was the case for Lolita, who, despite succeeding in university-level work and making friends in English, did not go to confession for nearly a decade because of the language barrier. That barrier was broken almost by accident:

The one thing I couldn't do was confession...So it was almost 10 years before I did my confession. And actually, this was very funny, I wasn't planning on going. I was looking for a church that had a Spanish priest, that would do the confession in Spanish, so I found the church with the priest, [and he] wasn't there. And then the American priest was there, and he invited me, and I said, "I just want to confession with the Spanish priest," and he started talking and said, "Oh, where you're from?" and he said, "Well, you're here, might as well do it. You speak very well English," and I'm like, "Oh, well, I wasn't planning on doing this." So that's how it happened. And it was so easy, and when I got out, I said, "I can't believe I waited so long to do this." (Lolita)

She discovered that her English proficiency was good enough for confession only by confessing, and then only with encouragement from the English-speaking priest. Her story implies that a language barrier may go beyond simple language proficiency.

While many participants noticed cultural differences between their Latin American parishes and those in the United States, many felt that the universality of the Catholic Church was more important to them – but that language was a significant barrier to full participation in parish life.

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<sup>14</sup> Strictly speaking, it may be possible for a Catholic with no other options to confess and receive absolution validly if the priest and penitent have no common language, but only under unusual circumstances and with various caveats. Cf Roman Catholic Church, 1983, can. 960, 978, 990; and Prummer, 1956.

### **Language & Culture**

While every participant was a native speaker of Spanish and an immigrant from Latin America, I heard a variety of views on language, culture, integration, and maintaining one's culture of origin. But before we consider those diverse views, we should remember that Latin America comprises dozens of different countries of different sizes and with different subgroups. As Pablo noted:

The other problem is Spanish/Latino are not a monolithic community. People from Mexico are different from people from Cuba . . . there's more in common Latin American countries because you see some of the same things—devotion to the Virgin Mary and the saints and things like that, you see some in the United States but not as much, and of course you like Latin American countries if you don't go to confession you don't go to Communion. But there are differences.

While some things may be true of “Latin American culture” at large, it's important to be aware of the cultural diversity within Latin American cultures. In addition, socioeconomic factors including wealth, education, employment, and immigration status are factors in how immigrants relate to religion and parish participation. Susana said:

I see different groups within the Latino community that go to church. I can see very different groups. I see the Latinos who, most of them are undocumented. They support their families with jobs like cleaning restaurants or schools or houses. And they do have another group that is conformed by professionals, and their approach is very different to church. The group, the, uh, with fewer resources, economical resources, are much more committed to helping, to being a volunteer, to really getting involved in everything that relates to the church. Their faith seems to me that they . . . have a lot of faith; they feel like their religion, their faith is going to resolve their

problems or situations. Then you have the professionals who, they are the ones who give more money, obviously, but they don't get that involved in the church. They go to Mass, then they leave. And they both have their kids with First Communion and Baptism, but you can see that the first group is much more into what's happening at church.

In Susana's experience, fewer economic resources seems to correlate with increased activity in the parish, and greater wealth correlates with less activity.

Given the diversity within the Latin American immigrant community, both cultural and socioeconomical, we should expect to find nuance and a diversity of perspectives on language, culture, and integration. One theme that arose repeatedly was a personal preference for Spanish and a desire to pass Latin American language and culture to the next generation alongside a desire for integration. Many participants, though not all, felt this way, and among those who did, their perspectives were not identical.

Pablo said that he and his wife, also from Latin America and a native Spanish speaker, prefer Mass in Spanish. "We both feel Masses in Spanish feel warmer, probably because you grew up with it," he said. When I asked for clarification, he said, "I don't know, the music, I mean the people, maybe it's just because we feel more comfortable with the language . . . but usually the homilies are different and more kinda vibrant. . . . I think always your mother tongue feels warmer for some reason."

While Pablo prefers Spanish, he worries about language being too much of a barrier in parishes: "Often what is happening is . . . you have almost like two different communities [in a parish] under the same roof, and they're not interacting, and I think that's not good." Pablo would like to see more integration instead of two communities completely separated

by language. But he maintained that diversity is a necessary part of the Catholic Church, and integration should not minimize or eliminate those differences:

St. Paul says the Church is like a body, right? Not everybody can become an arm. Not everybody's a leg. The Church is a single entity, but there are differences within the Church... We need this unity. The differences are part of what the richness is... You need diversity, in a good sense, not like separating people. You can't say to the leg, "Eh, I don't need them." (Pablo)

Pablo is aware that language is a barrier, and that for this reason, integration is a little easier with younger people who are typically more proficient in English:

Part of the problem is many people in the [Spanish-language] community in [my parish] don't speak English. Some do, some don't, so it's always a little bit tricky. You can get away with that for young people. I love youth groups that invite Latino kids, then they will truly be multicultural groups. It just doesn't happen. It's tricky. You have to become a coconut. . . . My oldest kid especially has my sense of humor. She went to see *Crazy Rich Asians*. . . . The joke is that apparently in the movie – I haven't seen it – someone refers to an Asian as a banana: You're yellow on the outside and white on the inside. She said, "Papi, I think this makes me a coconut." So for coconuts this is a little bit easier, because she can straddle both [cultures]. There's no reason why on the youth level you can't have that integration. . . . It just does not happen, it just does not happen. It's almost like two different communities in general living under the same roof. (Pablo)

But in Pablo's experience, even at the youth-group level where language is less of a barrier, integration is still a struggle.

While Pablo felt that Spanish was “warmer,” Madame X felt it is more “romantic”:  
I love the Spanish Mass. Sometimes I say the prayers in Spanish, but at the beginning for many years it was just in English . . . I’ve always preferred Spanish. I like it because that’s what I grew up with, that’s what I grew up with. I think the Spanish language is a little more romantic. . . . It’s such a romantic language. . . . I just love reading [the Bible] in Spanish; it’s so romantic. (Madame X)

Despite her preference for Spanish, however, she said that when she first arrived in the U.S., Mass was only offered in English, and she would not have preferred Spanish at that time—“because then, how else would I learn English?” she said. “If you come to this country, you really have to adjust,” she said, expressing her views on integration. But even as she prefers Spanish now, the convenience of the Mass schedule is a bigger factor than language in determining which Mass she attends: “Until now, there hasn’t been a . . . weekly Mass [in Spanish] except for [at a particular parish], and the time that they have it, it’s not as convenient for me.” Preferring Mass in English in some cases, Spanish in other cases, and a convenient time above all, Madame X did not seem particularly attached to one culture or another, one language or the other, but rather—in her own words—“What I do is take the best of every culture and throw the rest.”

Laura also tries to keep both languages and cultures alive in her life and family, though she balances them differently. She speaks Spanish at home, with her husband and son, believing it important to foster their native language, in particular so their son can communicate with his grandparents:

In our house, even with my son, we speak Spanish, because I think it’s very important to keep your—where you’re coming from, because our family’s still there and

because my son has to understand that he born in [Latin America] . . . have to respect that country as well. (Laura)

While maintaining the first language was important to her, she felt that learning English was an expression of gratitude and respect. For Laura, her gratitude was not limited to the economic and educational gains she and her family made in the United States, but extended to the less tangible benefits she found at her parish:

Most of the time, we go [to Mass] in English, and I will tell you why. This country [has been] very generous with us, and it's not just because we have a job, we have a house, and our son go to, you know, a good college education and things like that. It's because I found a family here. And because in order to pay all the things that I got from this country, I think that they deserve respect, and one of the things, the only one way that I can give as a respect is respect the language, try to speak properly and better every day, and that's why had the English class. (Laura)

For Laura, both languages are important, but they have clearly defined roles. Spanish allows her to stay connected to her family in Latin America (and build that connection between her son and those family members), while English allows her to become part of the parish community in the United States. She expects to accommodate herself to her new culture, but does so without losing her old culture.

In a similar vein, Lily sees both languages as valuable, but has a clearly defined role for each. Unlike Pablo and Madame X, Lily prefers English, and her reasoning is similar to Laura's. At the same time, however, she is actively involved in growing a Spanish-language community at a Catholic parish and uses Spanish for that reason:

I'm probably more with the English. I have been helping at [a parish] in the Spanish group, but just because I want to be a person to welcome the others that doesn't speak English, and I could help, trying to grow the community of Spanish people at [that parish]. But I think once they develop and are better and organized, I probably will be back to the English. (Lily)

Spanish helps her connect with the community she is hoping to welcome to the parish, and she uses it for that, despite her personal preference for English. She feels that while it is easy to speak Spanish with other Spanish speakers, it is better to practice English—and especially for her, as she has been in the U.S. for more than 20 years and does not see herself as a newcomer:

The Spanish people are always speaking in Spanish, and if we have another person that knows how to speak Spanish, we will do it of course, automatically, so it's better when you force yourself and you practice and you do it in English. Why not? It's not my first or second or third year. I'm doing for others, but not for me. If it were for me, I would do English. (Lily)

When I asked her about her preference for English, she reaffirmed her preference: “Why?” she said. “Because I'm a citizen in an English country.”

Interestingly, Lily said that it is still difficult for her to confess in English, but she was ambivalent about whether she preferred English or Spanish in the confessional—or whether she had a preference at all. Consider this exchange (which was quoted in part earlier):

Lily: It's hard to go the reconciliation or make a confession when you are not um, um, elemental or, or basic English right? It's hard to do it. It's hard for me, even now after

twenty years. It's—it's—it's not easy express yourself and everything in another language.

Mary: Do you, do you prefer confession in Spanish or in English now?

Lily: Um, in English. Now I do it in English, yes. [When I first came,] it didn't exist in Spanish [laughter].

Mary: Yeah [laughter]. But I mean, now you have the option now, do you still prefer English?

Lily: Well, now I think I choose the priest first . . .

Mary: Ok.

Lily: . . . not the language.

Mary: Ok.

Lily: It depends more on the priest than the language. Of course, could be a good priest in Spanish that could do better.

Lily's two languages serve two distinct functions for her—Spanish for welcoming Spanish speakers to her parish and English for generally living in an English-speaking country and recognizing her citizenship therein. But that distinction is not absolute for her.

While Lily felt that using English was a way to affirm her U.S. citizenship, Lolita felt almost the opposite—that using Spanish was important to affirm Latin American heritage. When she works with second-generation immigrants, she acknowledges their U.S. citizenship but affirms their Latin American heritage, especially if she sees the children rejecting it:

They're gonna tell you how, [they're] having this difficulty because their kids are identifying with this culture more than their parents'. And they might be two

generations, you know, like the grandparents came, the parents were born here . . . the kids are born here. . . . I talk to the kids and I tell them, what I tell them, I say, “Listen, you will always be Mexican or whatever, because that’s what you are raised in your house. If you were born here, the only thing that you have here is the citizenship. Excuse me, but you’re—the way that they’re raising you is their culture, and do not ever say no to that. Do not ever be ashamed of that, because that is very healthy on your road. Learn both languages. There’s nothing better than a bilingual person.” (Lolita)

While Lily felt that she ought to speak English because she was a U.S. citizen, Lolita felt more strongly the need to affirm the Latin American culture despite the children’s U.S. citizenship.

Carmen had similar worries about Latin American culture being passed to the next generation. While Lolita’s concerns centered around the children’s rejection of the culture, Carmen’s focused more on the parents not passing on the traditions: “I noticed that the children sometime the parents they are not teaching the Spanish the way they should. Children are speaking more English . . . they don’t speak Spanish. . . . The kid not getting the beauty that we have in our culture.”

For this reason, it was important for Carmen to find a Spanish-language Mass. She was concerned first of all about raising her own daughter with these traditions:

Since [my daughter] was little, I said you’re not gonna grow up speaking only English. I’m going to start teaching you Spanish from the moment that you start talking until you leave the house to be independent, so for me it was important to continue to find the Spanish Mass because I want my child to be able to get out this

beautiful in Spanish, and so that's why I come here. But for me it's okay, it doesn't matter English or Spanish. Now I enjoy more Spanish, yes. (Carmen)

Outside the concerns of raising her daughter with the Latin American culture, Carmen still prefers Spanish, but her desire to pass on the language and traditions intensifies that preference.

Interestingly, Carmen's language learning was not simply a matter of attending classes. In fact, she never attended English classes, she said, but rather taught herself the language, infusing her studies with faith and prayer:

To be able to understand the whole Mass was the most difficult to me, but I mean by praying, little by little I was able to understand more, but I can tell you something, I came here, but I never went to school directly to learn English. I did it on my own, research, talking to people, I was comparing my Bible to the English Bible . . . That's how I was able to. It wasn't easy. It was very difficult, but when you do a lot of prayer, the Lord give you the strength that you have to be able to do it, there was a lot, I was saying, "Lord," with tear in my eye, "Lord, please, I don't, I'm never gonna be able to go back right now home, and I'm here, and I need you, and I want to feel you the way I feel you [in my country, or in Spanish] . . . so please help me." By those prayers, I was able to receive what I need to continue moving forward.

(Carmen)

For Carmen, language proficiency was intimately tied to her experience of the faith. Her initial limitations with English seemed to inhibit her intimacy with God while she was in the United States, and she seemed to believe that improved English proficiency would renew that

intimacy. But she seemed to rely on that relationship for support as she mastered the language.

Language proficiency was also a factor in Susana's preferences and in her experience of what others prefer. For her, it was the priest's language proficiency that matters most. She said she prefers Mass in English because, in her experience, American priests are not very good at Spanish: "Even to this day I prefer to go to an English Mass because what I've noticed is that the priests don't speak Spanish very well, so they repeat certain things that doesn't really make sense in Spanish." But given better proficiency on the part of the priest, she would prefer to hear Mass in Spanish: "I think I would prefer the Spanish. Because then I would follow the praying. But yes, only if they could really speak well."

Despite her personal preferences, Susana said that for many Latin American immigrants she knew, availability of Spanish-language Mass was the sine qua non of Mass attendance. Relating a story about another immigrant, she said:

[A]ll of her friends will go because it was Spanish, the Mass was in Spanish. Their English was never good. So having those Masses in Spanish was key for them to do that. So depends on the community, yeah. For them, no Spanish, no Mass. For me, I would rather go in English because of the quality of their Spanish. (Susana)

For Susana, language proficiency—whether the priests', her own, or that of other lay Catholics—was key to determining best language for the Mass. While she preferred Mass in English because of the low Spanish proficiency of most priests she had heard, Susana said she would have liked to have had an opportunity to participate in Latin American cultural activities, which were not available at the first parish she attended in the U.S. Like Carmen,

Lolita, and Laura, she felt it important to pass down that culture to the next generation, noting that cultural activities were more important to her when she had her own children:

I would have joined, definitely. In fact, more because when I had my kids, it was very important to go, get involved in activities that related to my culture, so when I had my kids would go and I would prefer going to activities and events [unintelligible] Spanish and Latin American people there. (Susana)

While Susana expressed a desire to share her Latin American culture with her children, that desire did not extend to a preference for Spanish-language Masses if the priest's Spanish proficiency was subpar.

Language was less important to Carlos. Instead, he felt that traditions were more important than language. But he spoke more of his own experience, not of passing those traditions to the next generation. Asked whether he had a preference for English or Spanish at church, Carlos said:

No, not really. The one thing rather than language is more recognition of our traditions as a Catholic parishioner from Latin America. Like for instance we. . . honor virgin Mary of Guadalupe, and there's really few churches we've been to that really recognize that, so that's one of the biggest changes. So it's not a big situation obviously. The core of the Catholic programs and that are always available in churches.

For him, culture mattered, but he didn't seem to feel as intensely about it as some of the others.

Camila had perhaps the most unique perspective. More than any other participant, she believed strongly in integration and even assimilation, abandoning one's former culture upon moving to a new country. She spoke from her own experience:

My concern is this. This is my concern. If people don't, if the foreign people don't get, what you call that, um, what is the word I'm trying to find, where you come from one country and you get to another country, what is it you supposed to do? Integrate, integrate. If we're gonna accommodate everybody that come, then nobody will integrate. That's my concern, my concern. It was so good for me to integrate.

But her views toward integration go beyond simply adjusting to the new culture. Those who are unwilling to give up their first culture and language should not immigrate but remain in their countries of origin, even if they are living in poverty. She has seen poverty in her home country and wealth in the U.S., and she insists that happiness, which she witnessed in the midst of poverty, is more important than wealth:

Now, if you want . . . your language, you want your culture, you want your tradition, you want everything, honestly, Mary, then why don't you stay where you were? Why you wanna leave it? . . . I mean, look, I'm tell you honest. I've been to places in [my country], very poor, very poor, and guess what, people are happy in their poverty. They found time to be happy; they find time to pray to the Lord, they find time to socialize, they find time for everything. . . . I know people that they have a lot of stuff, stuff, house and you know all kind of stuff stuff stuff, and honestly, they're not happy, and they're not even productive, and they're in debt from head to toe in debt, and they work like slaves, be like, you know, you take your money, you pay your bills, every day the same baloney, every day, take the check, pay the bill, go to work,

take the check, pay the bill, go to work, take the check, pay the bill, go to work. So I don't like that. (Camila)

For Camila, poverty is not a sufficient reason to leave a place if one is intent on retaining one's culture; a person who leaves his or her country should adapt and assimilate to the new culture. She said Mass in the United States ought to be in English, and immigrants ought to adjust themselves to this aspect of American culture like a guest adjusts to the culture of his or her host's home:

I think it's better that [the Mass] be in English, ok, and I'm gonna tell you why. . . . If I invite you to my house . . . I think I should be welcoming you to my house, and at the same time you should be like trying to be polite, to learn and to be . . . gracious, that, okay, this person invite me to they house, you have to be on your best behavior . . . but if you come and bring all you bags with you, and you gonna tell me, you know, you have to bring someone who know how to speak to me . . . it doesn't make sense at all. So, in my opinion . . . people, when they come here and they learn the new language, they have more respect and more interest. If they come here to expecting that everything that they have is gonna be offered to them, then it's entitlement behavior, and I don't know, I think it's not good, it's not good. (Camila)

Camila felt strongly about the need to adjust to the new country, and she even connected her views on culture with her understanding of God and prayer. Different languages bring her memories of different times in her life, but she said that ultimately it does not matter which language is used for prayer:

You go to church because you want to worship with others. . . . and you can do that in any language, Mary. It doesn't have to be . . . in one language or in any language. So

to me, really, it doesn't make no difference to pray to the Lord in [any language].

What it main difference is the memories . . . to pray in Spanish bring me memories of [my country] and what I went through there, in English bring me the memories that I go to Bible, I have my husband, I have my children. So language is really . . .

language, what it does to you is connect you with culture. But what is wrong in my opinion if you went to a new place, connect with the new culture? And be familiar with the new culture? And the old culture, that's what it is, the old culture, but if you gonna demand that you want the old, well, then, stay where you are. That's my opinion. [laughter] (Camila)

While Camila felt that giving up one's former culture was necessary, she was open to some accommodations, and her opinion was not consistent throughout our conversation. She talked about a friend of hers, also from Latin America, who has trouble understanding priests' homilies in English, and said that there may be a place for Spanish-language Masses in the United States:

She tells me . . . that she prefer to go to the Spanish Mass, because the English Mass, the homily, she has problem understanding the homily, you know, when the priest read the gospel and give the homily, she have a hard time paying attention to that.

And it happen to me, too; I couldn't understand in the beginning that, and I think is a very important part of the Mass, the homily. But I don't know, I don't know, honestly I don't know what to tell you. Maybe the people should go to the Mass that they feel comfortable with, if you learn English you will go to the [English Mass]. (Camila)

She also recommended that priests prepare their homilies in both languages. Interestingly, while she considered the issue of language, culture, and Mass, she expressed an appreciation

for the Extraordinary Form of the Mass (the Tridentine or “traditional” Latin Mass used in the Catholic Church from the 1570s to 1960s) because it was universal and would have lessened cultural barriers:

That’s why I used to like the Latin Mass, because it would encourage you to learn Latin. It’s like, you know, music. If you read music, music is universal, the music language, it’s universal, so any place you go it’s the same, do re mi fa so la ti. So I used to like when the Mass was in Latin, because that way it’s everywhere in the universe the same, Latin. (Camila)

Over the course of the conversation, Camila expressed an exhortation to abandon one’s former culture and not expect any accommodations alongside an openness to accommodate immigrants to some degree. Both views were partially based on her experience—of how good it was for her to integrate, and how difficult it was for her (and still is for her friend) to understand homilies at Mass. Perhaps most interesting was her interest in the “traditional” Latin Mass and its greater universality.

### **Catholic Outreach**

Participants had mixed views about the state of U.S. Catholic outreach to Latin Americans, ranging from positive,

The Catholic Church has actually bent over backwards to help the Latinos. I don’t have any complaints at all. I think that if somebody has complaints, it’s because they probably had one incident, you know, something, but in general, everything that I’ve seen is great (Madame X),

to weak but improving,

I will say like the mainstream Church in general doesn't really have a lot in terms of outreach to Hispanics, but of course there's recognition obviously different aspects of the Church, especially now that the pope is Latin American, there's been more sense of that (Carlos),

to varying widely depending on the parish and diocese,

You have to be careful with generalizations and also different stages. In [another city], many parishes are well-integrated, sometimes in spite of the bishop . . . I think in general, some places better than others, you have more power or participation to the lay people to kind of at least facilitate that. (Pablo)

Participants did not hold a consensus as to whether the Catholic Church in the United States has, as a whole, conducted effective outreach, but they did have their own experiences to relate and their own ideas to suggest.

Several participants said they would like more opportunities to express their cultures, and would like to feel that this is welcomed. Some expressed concern about the importance of culture in sustaining a person's faith and keeping them in the Catholic church. Carmen said her main suggestion for outreach would be "to give us the opportunity to do celebration, you know, a little bit like the way we do in our country." She expressed concern that many Latin Americans are leaving Catholicism because they are not experiencing the same warmth that they remember from their parishes in Latin America: "A lot of Spanish, Latino people to be moving [away from Catholicism] because they not feeling the same warm, you know, when the way we celebrate everything here in the American churches."

Camila noticed something similar. Despite her views that immigrants should assimilate and leave their first culture in their country of origin, she said that cultural matters

often need to be addressed before matters of faith: “People in general pay more attention to culture than the faith in the Lord. . . . First, they have to feel comfortable, and then they think about God. But first they need to be comfortable. That’s what I noticed.”

While Camila and Carmen seem to agree that finding familiar cultural practices at their new parishes is important for immigrants, Pablo pointed to another cultural aspect. In Latin America, most people attend Mass regularly out of a sort of cultural inertia—they go because everyone goes. That cultural inertia is lacking in the United States, and as a result, many Latin American immigrants leave the Church, he said:

When you go from Latin America to the United States, you go to church once a week or once every couple weeks and that’s it, and you come to the United States, and you don’t have the availability and you don’t make it accessible to people and they aren’t on fire and they don’t seek it . . . If you look at the percent of Latinos who remain . . . they go to other denominations or stop practicing, and it’s a big worry of mine.

(Pablo)

It’s important, Pablo said, to make Mass and parish activities easily available and accessible to immigrants who may be relying on cultural habits more than they realize.

Several participants offered suggestions for outreach activities, including a Spanish-language faith group or Bible study; inviting bilingual parishioners to help expand existing ministries so that, for example, the parish’s existing outreach to single mothers could also reach those single mothers who struggle with English; publicly recognizing (with public prayers and material support) tragedies that occur in Spanish-language countries; creating cultural ambassadors, staff or volunteers who act as liaisons between the parish and the

Spanish-language community; and including a Spanish-language section in the parish bulletin with contact information for Spanish-language parish representatives.

Perspectives differed on whether Mass should be offered in Spanish and whether American priests should learn Spanish. Some who emphasized the importance of learning English and integrating also said priests should learn Spanish and parishes should offer Mass in Spanish. Camila, as we saw earlier, felt strongly that immigrants should assimilate to their new culture, but she considered seriously recommending that the priest learn Spanish instead of having the immigrants learn English—simply for efficiency. But she also considered the reasons people need language and decided that a common language was not necessary for Mass, but it was necessary for navigating the community:

I would say, well, if the priest doesn't know another language, I think it's easier for the priest to learn Spanish than to put all these people to learn English, so I guess he has to learn Spanish. The priest has to learn Spanish, to kind of help these people, um, understand the Mass. . . . You know what, honestly, the people don't need to understand language to go to Mass, because the Mass is—what you call it?—universal. But the people, what they really need understand more than anything is to communicate with the community, so the priest needs to learn Spanish and the new people need to learn English. (Camila)

At this point in Camila's thinking, everyone should learn a second language.

Lily said that if the demographics call for it, Mass should be offered in Spanish: "I think probably there is all around town, we have to recognize that Spanish is a numerous group, a numerous group of Spanish speaking people, right? So it should be both language."

But as we saw before, Lily typically prefers English because she is a citizen of the United States, though she uses her Spanish for outreach to immigrants.

Carmen said the Spanish-language community would welcome priests wanting to learn Spanish. In her experience, that community is ready to help priests who want to learn to offer Mass in Spanish. This is a task she personally takes on weekly:

Always, even if they don't speak Spanish, it's always a person who can help, you know. . . . [The priest] might not speak Spanish, but [the priest at our parish], he doing the Mass today, [he] don't speak Spanish. Anybody will notice today how he doesn't speak Spanish, not really. Did you see how he did the homily? He translated it. He read it. He practiced. I go inside that room, he read it to me and say, yup, good job, you ready to go. . . . We can help them to get prepared to enjoy the Spanish community with Mass. (Carmen)

As we saw before, Susana noted that some Spanish speakers will not attend Mass if it's not offered in Spanish, and that for her, that the priest's language proficiency was a bigger factor for her Mass attendance than which language he used to celebrate that Mass—that is, she would prefer a Mass in Spanish only if the priest had sufficient Spanish proficiency. Whether she would attend the Spanish Mass at Carmen's parish is up for debate. But she said she would be happy to see an American priest's efforts to learn Spanish:

Since practically . . . you go to church to listen more than sing, I think I would recommend [the priest] to find somebody who speaks our language, Spanish, and then even as he would be interested in learning it, even better, because I welcome people who try to speak my language. I really respect that, and I'm very conscious about never ending the sentences for them. I really think it takes a lot of effort to learn

another language, and that would gain the respect of a lot of people. So I think that will be, that will be, it's essential, I think, to learn to speak the language of the community you want to communicate [with]. (Susana)

Despite Susana's preference not to hear Mass celebrated by priests with limited Spanish proficiency, she appreciates priests' efforts to learn.

Several participants recommended incorporating some Spanish into the regular English-language Mass. Ideas included having the homily translated to Spanish, printed, and placed in the pews; having the homily delivered twice, once in each language; and having some Scripture readings or hymns in Spanish. Some recommended that priests speak slowly and clearly, without dropping their voice at the end of sentences.

Many participants discussed their struggles with English, and several participants also stated explicitly that ESL classes could form an important part of parish outreach. As Camila mentioned above, "the new people need to learn English," and an ESL class could certainly help with that. When I asked Laura for her recommendations for outreach to this demographic, her initial response was, "Um, maybe first some English classes." Others felt similarly. Lily said she benefited from reading the Bible in both languages, and for that reason, she recommended that parishes offer English classes:

When I read the Bible now, of course I want to read it in Spanish, but sometimes I want to read it in English, too, because you compare and find out how you are doing it, how you say it's the same, but it's not really the same and I like to compare. So English classes are good, too. (Lily)

English classes would give Spanish speakers the ability to read the Bible in both languages, as Lily likes to do, but Pablo said it could also help with integration:

Adult [integration] is tricky. . . . I don't have an easy answer to it, to be honest with you, and it's because language is a big barrier, to be honest with you, and I think the best we can do is get people together and in activities where they have to interact. But it is tricky. I mean, it is tricky. I think we have to teach English to the people, obviously. (Pablo)

If language is a "big barrier," language classes can help wear away that barrier.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen the variety of perspectives these nine participants have discussed. Several cultural differences were mentioned. In general, participants felt that Latin Americans are more comfortable with physical touch or affection and that celebrations in their cultures are more vibrant and colorful. Their traditions regarding *padrinos* differ from related traditions of godparents and sponsors in the United States. Religion is more infused into their Latin American cultures, while religion and secular culture are more distinct in the U.S. Generally, parishes and church activities in the U.S. are more structured and organized compared to Latin America. Latin Americans tend to be stricter about going to confession before receiving Communion and more comfortable attending Mass without receiving Communion. Participants also seemed to have found a greater sense of reverence for God in Latin America, whether that manifested as fear of sin or a more transcendent experience. Finally, they felt that priests played a slightly different role in Latin America compared to the United States, though they disagreed about the specifics of those roles. But participant comments were not limited to the differences they saw. Many of them commented on the universality of Catholicism and the familiarity they found at parishes in the U.S. In addition, they expressed a variety of views on language and culture as such and on parish outreach to

immigrants. Their responses, supported by research, lead me to believe that a well-designed, targeted ESL class could benefit present and future Catholic immigrants.

### Discussion

Before we begin to consider the findings of this study in more detail, we should remember that it is a qualitative study. The nine participants told me about their own experiences and observations, and I do not propose that they speak for all Latin American Catholic immigrants. Furthermore, I do not propose that every nuance of their experiences has been perfectly and fully understood, either by myself as an interlocutor and researcher or even by the participants themselves. Years of experience cannot be perfectly condensed in an hour-long interview: “No single method can grasp all of the subtle variations in ongoing human experience” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19). Therefore, I offer not a comprehensive or exhaustive explanation of the experiences of Latin American Catholic immigrants; rather, I propose to “seek[] better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience [I] have studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19) and contribute to a deeper and fuller understanding of at least this part of the human experience.

The one aspect of this study that can be scaled up and generalized is this: Immigrants from Latin America come from a great diversity of cultures, and they bring with them their individual differences as well. Spanish-language Masses and culturally Mexican activities will not necessarily meet the needs of every Spanish-speaking immigrant. Even those with similar cultural experiences may have different perspectives on language, culture, integration, language learning, maintaining of traditions, and so on. A common language, some common cultural elements, and the common experience of immigrating to the United States are important elements to consider, but do not override individuals’ experiences. We should not assume that what works well in one setting will necessarily work equally well in

another setting. Rather, we should gather perspectives from the target demographic, not seeing them only as “Catholic immigrants from Latin America” but as individuals.

I designed this study with these questions in mind:

1. What expectations do Catholic Latin American immigrants have of Catholic parishes in the U.S.?
2. What linguistic and cultural difficulties do they encounter when trying to integrate into the parish?
3. In what way could these difficulties be eased/solved with an ESL class that focuses on language and culture in U.S. Catholic parishes?

We will consider each question based on the results of this study.

### **Research Questions**

**Expectations.** First, I considered the expectations Latin American Catholics have when they encounter Catholic parishes in the United States. Susana provided perhaps the pithiest summary of her expectations and experiences at parishes in the U.S.: “I expected what I saw: Exactly the same thing, but better organized.” While there is much to say beyond this, her response is insightful. My study participants generally found their experience at U.S. Catholic parishes to be a combination of familiarity and foreignness. When I asked about differences, they had plenty to discuss, but they frequently mentioned familiarity and universality without prompting. The familiarity they experienced seemed as salient—sometimes more salient—as the strangeness and foreignness.

In general, participants seemed to arrive at Catholic parishes in the U.S. expecting to find something familiar. Carlos said he found a Catholic church promptly upon his arrival in the U.S. because his family believes the Catholic religion—something he evidently expected

would carry over from his country to the U.S. Laura similarly hoped to find that her beliefs would carry over: “I don’t think I was expecting anything. I was just expecting to be sure that my faith is still there, to be sure that the beliefs didn’t have to change, and I think is the thing that I got most.” Madame X said she always felt more comfortable in a Catholic church and attributed that comfort to the Eucharist—again, something universal. Susana said that Mass was a way of connecting with home. Participants who noticed nearly the entire congregation receiving Communion initially interpreted this through the lens of their home cultures: for Pablo, that everyone had gone to confession recently, and for Camila, that they all asked God for forgiveness of their sins through a less formal means before receiving Communion. In these cases, their expectation of familiarity may have caused them to misinterpret their observations.

None of my participants described exactly the reason they expected this familiarity, but some possibilities can be surmised. The word “Catholic” means “universal,” after all (“catholic,” 2018). But in addition, stories from the Bible are all set in different cultures and times, including the historical events around which the entire liturgical year is organized; letters contained in the Bible are written from a different cultural perspective; saints from a variety of cultures (or who were missionaries, bringing the faith from one culture to another) may be revered. In addition, the Church has a universal leader, the pope, who resides in Rome and may have come from a different culture. It would be difficult to present the Catholic faith as culturally bound, and for this reason, it makes sense that my participants would not see it as culturally bound and therefore would expect similarities.

But not everything was identical. Participants expressed differences that they noticed between parishes in Latin America and in the United States, and emergent themes were

exhibited in the previous chapter. The most salient differences that participants noticed included physical touch, vibrance of celebrations, the *padrinos* tradition, the infusion (or lack of infusion) of religion in mainstream culture, structure and organization, traditions for receiving sacraments (especially confession and the Eucharist), reverence, and the role of priests. Regarding unmet expectations, most striking were slight changes in the liturgy, the language of the Mass—Carmen said she expected to have an easier time finding a Spanish-language Mass—the closeness of the community, and a sense of the reality of sin.

**Linguistic & cultural difficulties.** My second research question considered the linguistic and cultural difficulties Latin American Catholics experienced in their Catholic parishes in the U.S. While language is an obvious barrier to communication, culture can create difficulties as well—for example, if the U.S. culture is “more organized” as many participants felt, immigrants may not understand why they need to complete training or paperwork before volunteering for a particular role. Language and cultural proficiency do not always develop in tandem. Furthermore, the impact of culture shock should not be underestimated, as it can be particularly difficult for immigrants and refugees (compared to, for example, tourists). The language and cultural barriers manifested themselves in parishes primarily in two ways: participants struggled to have their spiritual needs met and to feel a real part of the parish.

**Culture shock.** According to Brown (2014), the process of culture acquisition is typically divided into four stages:

1. An initial period of excitement and euphoria.
2. Culture stress or culture shock, erosion of self-esteem and security.
3. Gradual recovery, adjustment to new ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

4. A final stage of adaptation/integration, acceptance of a new identity.

Culture shock is the second stage, which can be extremely disorienting and stressful. Not everyone experiences a new culture in the same way, and various factors can influence the difficulty of the transition, including similarities of race, religion, and language, the length of stay in the new culture, the quality of that stay, the reasons for leaving one's culture of origin, health problems, proximity to conflict zones, and so on (Peraica, 2017). Other variables matter, too: "Culture shock may be greater where tourism involves people who are of different races, nationalities, religious habits and those who speak different languages from one another and do not know another language" (Peraica, 2017, p. 331). Peraica (2017) divides "populations experiencing culture shock" into four categories: travelers (tourists), sojourners (who become temporary residents, like visiting faculty or international businesspeople), immigrants, and refugees. Of these groups, immigrants and refugees typically have the greatest difficulty adjusting to a new culture: "The degree of shock depends on whether they have arrived at the new location voluntarily and whether they can or want to return to their previous location" (Peraica, 2017, p. 332). While participants experience some differences at parishes in the U.S. compared to their home countries, the familiarity they found provided comfort.

In any disorienting environment, it's natural to seek out something known and familiar. Participants in my study came to parishes in the U.S. at least in part for this reason. Susana seemed to be seeking familiarity itself:

[Mass] was a way to connect with home. I mean, it was a different language, but it was something very familiar to me, so it felt like—it was nice, the way that it gave me peace and a way to connect. Everything was so new that just having something

that was so common for me, it was nice. It was nice. I felt comfort going to church.

(Susana)

Others, however, seemed to be seeking God and a faith that was not bound to a particular culture:

I was just expecting to feel, um, to be sure that my faith is still there, to be sure that my faith is still there, to be sure that the beliefs, uh, didn't have to change. And I think that is the thing that I got most. (Laura)

Whether participants came to a Catholic parish because they wanted to connect with home or to connect with the God they also knew from home, they instinctively sought out Catholicism, expecting it to be as a place to find solace amid the stress of immigrating. This dovetails with the observations of Ospino (2014): "Parishes are among the first places Hispanic Catholic immigrants seek when searching for a familiar experience of community in a foreign land" (p. 5).

***Individual spiritual needs.*** Participants identified two main spiritual needs that could be met only with difficulty because of a language barrier: confession and Mass. Camila felt that the universality of the Mass precluded the necessity of a common language: "You know what, honestly, the people don't need to understand language to go to Mass, because the Mass is—what you call it?—universal." But Lolita recognized that universality and still struggled: "[Mass] was very different. It was very different because, first of all, everything was in English. The rite was the same, you know, I could, there was nothing new that I couldn't do, but the prayers were impossible."

The need for mutual comprehensibility is more salient in confession than at Mass, and the language barrier, therefore, is much more of a barrier. We can recall Lolita's ten-year

absence from the sacrament, described in the previous chapter, which she attributed to a language barrier. Despite her proficiency in both academic and interpersonal English—she was an honors student with a thriving social life—she did not feel comfortable confessing in English. Whatever she lacked, be it subject-specific vocabulary or confidence or something else, could be addressed in an ESL class. We can also consider Lily's comments on her difficulty:

It's hard to go to the reconciliation or make a confession when you are not elemental or basic in English, right? It's hard to do it. It's hard for me even now after 20 years.

It's not easy to express yourself and everything in another language. (Lily)

In addition, Carmen said that Spanish speakers at her parish sometimes confess through a third-party interpreter, a system which works as a stopgap (cf Canon Law 990), but is certainly not ideal for something as private and personal as a confession.

We should also keep in mind hidden language barriers. The Catholic Church's official teaching is that one should prepare for the reception of Communion by confessing and receiving absolution through the sacrament of Reconciliation when necessary (Catholic Church, 1983, can. 916; Catholic Church, 1997, par. 1457). It seems, however, that not every culture understands this teaching in exactly the same way. Participants in this study said that Catholics in Latin America are much more serious about going to confession before receiving Communion compared to Catholics in the United States. While Hispanic Catholics are generally more comfortable attending Mass without receiving Communion compared to white Catholics (Sandstrom, 2015), it is not uncommon to *want* to receive, and receiving is officially encouraged by the Church (Catholic Church, 1997, par. 1388). Catholics who are

comfortable attending Mass in their second language may not be comfortable confessing in a second language—and therefore, they may not be able to receive Communion.

A second invisible language barrier is a preference for one's native language for personal and emotional exchanges—a preference which may be present even after one acquires proficiency in a second language. While Camila felt she could pray in any language, she was an outlier. Pablo said he felt that Spanish was “warmer” than English; Madame X said she felt it was “more romantic,” and Carmen seemed to have trouble feeling the presence of God in English like she was accustomed to in Spanish. It is not uncommon for speakers of multiple languages to prefer their native language for these types of interactions, and English may feel artificial to some non-native speakers.

*Integration & community needs.* But individual spiritual needs were not the only needs my participants brought up. They also saw themselves as part of a community and generally expressed a desire for integration, a desire to express their faith in culturally familiar ways, and concern about Latin American Catholics leaving Catholicism for various non-Catholic Christian denominations.

Camila noted that integration was personally important in her own experience, and Pablo expressed concern about “two different communities under the same roof . . . not interacting.” He noted that integration is easier with youth, compared to adults, because most younger immigrants or children of immigrants speak English, although language was not the only barrier with youth.

Multiple participants expressed a desire to find some of their Latin American faith traditions in the parishes in the U.S., or to bring their traditions to those parishes. For example, for Carlos, this was more important than finding the Spanish language: “The one

thing, rather than language, is more recognition of our traditions as a Catholic parishioner from Latin America. Like, for instance, we honor Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, and there's really few churches we've been to that recognize that."

Finally, multiple participants expressed concern about Latin American Catholics leaving Catholicism. Pablo and Lolita people attend Mass weekly in much of Latin America in part because everyone else attends weekly, and they said the sudden lack of that community expectation allows people to fall away after arriving in the United States. Carmen and Camila pointed to the lack of familiar cultural "warm[th]" and "comfort" as reasons people leave. Pablo recommended a combination of welcoming and growth in the faith as solutions: "I think you need to make people feel welcome, you also need to educate them in the faith make it a mature faith, [you] have to make them feel part of the parish."

**The role of an ESL class.** In light of all this, a well-designed ESL class, teaching both language and culture, could play a significant role in assisting Catholic immigrants to the U.S. from Latin America transition to Catholic parishes in their new country. The class would be tailored to the target demographic, assisting them through the difficulties of culture shock, assisting them with their spiritual needs, and helping them integrate successfully into the wider parish culture. Furthermore, this class—situated at a parish, where many such immigrants will instinctively look for something familiar—will give them a firm footing from which to integrate successfully into U.S. culture outside their parish.

***Adjusting to a new culture.*** Considering the linguistic and cultural difficulties participants encountered in parishes in the U.S. (the second research question), we first discussed the effects of culture shock on the target group of immigrants. Palmer-Boyes (2010) notes that "a congregation can function to provide a cultural refuge for an ethnic

group” (p. 307), but in most cases, Catholic parishes in the U.S. are not situated to be a cultural refuge for a particular group of immigrants. An ESL class within the parish can be that refuge, however. In this class, immigrants can find others who share the same first language, a similar culture of origin, a faith, and the experience of immigrating to the United States—all of these being particularly salient identity markers. Led by a skilled teacher, immigrants will learn both language and culture and have a place where they can ask questions about both.

Many of my participants seemed particularly aware of similarities between parishes in the U.S. and in their home countries. Perhaps this is because the experience of finding something familiar in a strange land can be particularly salient. Capitalizing on the universality of Catholicism, the ESL teacher can help learners connect with aspects that are familiar, giving them language to participate in familiar things in an unfamiliar language. The teacher could facilitate distinguishing between the aspects of the expression of the faith that are cultural and those that are universal, which could help immigrants find the familiar in what seemed foreign and could encourage mutual respect between cultures.

*Meeting spiritual needs.* Second, we considered the immigrants’ spiritual needs. These needs should not be underestimated: “Individuals have spiritual needs just like biological, psychological, and social needs. . . . Examples of spiritual needs include the experience of God’s forgiveness, hope in an afterlife, connection with others, and the experience of inner peace” (Callahan, 2014, p. 1,253). Even those who do not consider themselves religious or spiritual should not ignore the reality of spiritual needs and the importance of having them met: “Unmet spiritual needs can lead to the experience of spiritual pain. . . . Spiritual pain may include feelings of meaninglessness, anguish, isolation,

alienation, and emptiness” (Callahan, 2014, p. 1,253). Meeting these needs can certainly lessen the effects of culture shock.

But low English proficiency can prevent immigrants from having their spiritual needs met—particularly confession and following the Mass, the two primary needs my participants mentioned. This ESL class would be designed to give students the language to go to confession and follow the Mass in English. The class would primarily focus on speaking and listening skills, including speaking without visual cues (to prepare for confession through a screen, which some students may prefer). Students would learn vocabulary and formulaic language for confession and Mass and possibly some phrases or formulaic language from the local priests’ idiolects and themes that are the frequent subjects of their preaching.

For students who retain a preference for their native language, the ESL teacher could ease this hidden language barrier in three ways. First, he or she could talk with students about the psychology of language learning and affirm that their experience is neither uncommon nor a mark of deficiency. (As Pablo noted, “I think always your mother tongue feels warmer for some reason.”) Second, he or she could discuss the Catholic understanding of the sacraments and emotions, specifically, that the “warmth” Pablo described—while desirable—is not, strictly speaking, necessary for the validity of the sacrament, and that while increased English proficiency (or simply finding a Spanish-speaking priest) may be preferable, discomfort with a language does not need to be a barrier. And third, the teacher could be a liaison, advocating for students by explaining that their continued desire to express their faith in their native language is normal and helping to find a Spanish-speaking priest and make arrangements with him so immigrants can, for example, confess in Spanish if they prefer.

*Becoming part of the parish.* Third, we considered immigrants' desire to be a part of the wider parish community. This included integrating themselves into the community, expressing their faith publicly in a culturally Latin American way, and retaining as Catholics fellow Latin Americans who may be leaving Catholicism for various Protestant denominations.<sup>15</sup> An ESL class could empower immigrants in all these ways.

The first of these is integration, which does not have an obvious yardstick; I believe the best measurement is agency. According to van Lier (2011), "Teaching, in its very essence, is promoting agency. Pedagogy is guiding this agency wisely." Immigrants are fully integrated when they participate according to their own choices, not barred by language or culture. Przymus (2016) describes a program at the high school where he teaches, where ESL students were matched with extracurricular activities. His students said the program helped them learn English because they were interested in the activities and were therefore more motivated to learn the relevant language, and they were able to "move beyond the limitations of the ESL bubble." While Przymus focused primarily on language acquisition, a similar approach in a parish could facilitate both language learning and integration. Most parishes offer a variety of small groups, outreach activities, service opportunities, and so on, all of which are planned and organized by staff or lead volunteers. With an approach like Przymus's ambassadors program, the ESL class itself can avoid becoming an isolated or segregated group of English learners who seldom interact with ordinary parishioners (Valdés, 1998) and instead be a starting point from which immigrants learn what the parish offers (or could offer), be connected with parish programs, and gain the language and cultural skills necessary to join them. In the ESL class, students would have a place to ask questions about

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<sup>15</sup> Latin America is becoming less Catholic, and about two-thirds of former Catholics in Latin America are Protestant (Ghani, 2014).

unfamiliar aspects of these activities—the necessity of filling out all the forms, for example. Immigrants would increasingly become the agents of their own participation in the parish, no longer prevented from joining parish groups because of a lack of language proficiency.

Participants also mentioned a desire to have some religious celebrations following the religious traditions of their own cultures. An ESL class could address this issue with task-based lessons or units in which students plan an event—either on a small scale, in the ESL class itself, or on a larger scale, for the whole parish. ELLs can take on different tasks (reserving a room, making flyers, writing an announcement for the bulletin, etc.) based on interest and English proficiency. ESL classes would become planning meetings, where ELLs discuss ideas, make decisions, ask questions, learn the language necessary for their tasks, and reflect on their accomplishments—facilitated by the teacher. The ESL teacher can act as a liaison to the parish, preparing parish staff to speak with non-native speakers and smoothing over any miscommunications. This, too, furthers immigrants' agency and integration in the parish, as they would interact with parish decision-makers when planning the event and could help the ELLs be recognized not as a small group segregated by language but as individuals belonging to the wider parish community.

In addition, multiple participants expressed concern about fellow Latin American Catholic immigrants leaving Catholicism for Protestant denominations. An ESL class as a community of practice could provide a place for parents to share concerns about their children's faith as well as serve the adults' own needs. The class could provide the cultural accountability they may desire for their religious practices—that is, a community of people who will notice when a member, for example, misses Mass—and give them a place to ask questions about the faith and acquire language to wrestle with spiritual and religious ideas

(Suen, 2017; Pierson & Bankston, 2013). Finally, the class would be a community from which they could spearhead their own outreach to fellow Latin American Catholic immigrants if they choose to.

### **Implications for the TESOL Field**

English-language teaching (ELT) professionals have developed various English for specific purposes (ESP) fields into textbooks, curricula, and other programs that help non-native speakers acquire the proficiency they need to serve as tour guides, medical professionals, sales people, scholars, and other professions that are becoming increasingly international. But the “specific purpose” of navigating a Catholic parish—or any kind of religious community—has been neglected, and that neglect is a disservice to many English learners.

In 2013, Pierson and Bankston published an article that begins, “This article introduces English for Bible and Theology (EBT), an inherently interdisciplinary field that merges English language learning with the content of biblical and theological studies in a context that is, by nature, cross-cultural” (p. 33). While their ESP field is aimed more at academic English than the day-to-day “church English” that was the focus of my study, they are correct in their assessment that the field needs to be introduced—that there is a dearth of research and materials in this area. When I began reading the literature in advance of conducting this study, I found almost nothing in the way of teaching ESL in a Christian or religious context.

This neglect may be due in part to the move toward secularization in Western cultures, including the majority of English-speaking countries. Many Americans are familiar

with the cultural taboo on discussing religion, and according to Pew, that taboo is generally followed:

About half of U.S. adults tell us they seldom (33%) or never (16%) talk about religion with people outside their family. And roughly four-in-ten say they seldom (26%) or never (13%) discuss religion even with members of their immediate family.

(Cooperman, 2016)

The participants in my study seemed to have experienced the effects of this taboo. Pablo told me that in his country, “people speak more freely about, you know, church and God and things like that. . . .It’s a little bit less, less correct to do that here.” His use of “less correct” was telling, as it seemed to indicate a feeling of being judged for his expression of his religion. Lily described some of the religious traditions in her country, then said,

But I was a child at that time. I don’t know. In my country, we have lost a lot of Catholics. We [Catholics] are less and less every day, people are disappearing but are more Americanized, so the kind of life that is more fast and stressful. (Lily)

While she didn’t say this explicitly, she seemed to connect the decline in Catholicism with the increase in Americanism, as if Americanizing necessarily means secularizing. So the lack of research and materials should not come as a surprise: A culture that is uncomfortable with religion will not produce much religiously oriented classroom material.

A second potential reason for this neglect is lack of funding. Community programs are often run by volunteers with grants from the government (which cannot easily fund faith-based programs) or from other nonprofits or companies, many of which follow the taboo of avoiding religion. Parishes are frequently on tight budgets, and those running an ESL

program (if there is one) are typically volunteers without specialized expertise within the TESOL field (Durham & Kim, 2019).

But the need of some immigrants to acquire English proficiency related to their faith should not be underestimated. In 2014, 58% of immigrants said that religion is “very important” to them and 24% said it was “somewhat important”—these two groups totaled more than 80% of immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2014). According to the same survey, 40% attend religious services at least once a week and another 35% attend “once or twice a month/a few times a year.” But nearly half reported that they “seldom” or “never” attend any type of prayer group, religious education, or scripture study, implying a lack of participation in their place of worship, even as they said religion was very important to them.

Furthermore, both the research and some of my participants pointed to religion as a source of comfort and orientation, something familiar in a strange, new land: “Some immigrants may even become more religious upon immigration, perhaps strategically renewing religious ties for their nonmaterial and material benefits” (Calvillo & Bailey, 2015, p. 59). Susana said that:

[Mass was] a way to connect with home. I mean, it was a different language, but it was something very familiar to me, so it felt like—it was nice, the way that it gave me peace and a way to connect. Everything was so new that just having something that was so common for me, it was nice. It was nice. I felt comfort going to church.

(Susana)

The comfort and peace that Susana found was more elusive for Carmen, but she had the same instinct to seek it in her faith. Here is her poignant description of her initial struggles with English:

It was very difficult, but when you do a lot of prayer, the Lord give you the strength that you have to be able to do it...I was saying, “Lord,” with tear in my eye, “Lord, please, I don’t, I’m never gonna be able to go back right now home, and I’m here, and I need you, and I want to feel you the way I feel you [in my country, or in Spanish]. . .so please help me.” By those prayers, I was able to receive what I need to continue moving forward. (Carmen)

For many immigrants, religion is something they want—and something that will help in their overall adjustment to their new country, even outside of the parish.

The focus of the present study is the experiences of nine Catholics from Latin America. While this study is not generalizable to all Catholic immigrants, or all Latin American immigrants, or all immigrants who follow any religion, it is imperative that ELT professionals be aware that their students’ spiritual or religious needs are often real, and that those needs often intersect with their linguistic needs. As researchers, ELT professionals should further the development of research and materials in this intersection; as teachers, ELT professionals should be prepared to assist their students with their needs. ESL teachers often serve as coaches or advocates for their students who need to talk with their landlord about a leaky pipe or their non-ESL professor who may have assigned grades unfairly. In my own experience as an ESL teacher in community-based programs, I have personally (for example) reviewed a biotechnologist’s cover letter and resume for grammar before she applied for a job, advised a computer programmer on etiquette when his boss suffered a family member’s death, helped a mother communicate with her realtor, gathered examples of American folk music for a guitar player, and been asked countless questions about the immigration process. ELT professionals routinely serve their students in ways beyond

language acquisition, regardless of their knowledge of those additional fields.<sup>16</sup> ELT professionals should incorporate religion into this service. “If a client seeks information about spiritual or religious coping practices, the human service worker must be sensitive to the client’s spiritual worldview. The need for this type of assistance, however, would likely involve a referral to clergy or experienced professional” (Callahan, 2014, p. 1,254). If the ESL classroom is a safe place to ask for help with buying a house, it should be a safe place to ask for help with religion—even if the teacher is neither a realtor nor a priest.<sup>17</sup>

Let us return to the present study. The nine Latin American Catholics who participated in my study have been given a voice; their experiences, combined with those of participants in future studies, can help further the conversation about the religious needs of the immigrants ELT professionals serve. I intend to design an ESL course for this constituency, and my recommendations for such a course appear later in this chapter. My recommendations for future studies are in the next chapter.

### **Implications for Catholic Outreach**

The Catholic Church in the U.S. has been increasing outreach to Latin American Catholics over the past few decades. American Catholics’ efforts to welcome their foreign-born coreligionists are laudable; further research can (and should) consider myriad aspects of outreach and how to continually improve them, but the present study is limited to the aspects of outreach pertaining to the acquisition of English. Many participants in this study discussed the language and cultural barriers they experienced at Catholic parishes here. A well-

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<sup>16</sup> My knowledge of biotechnology is limited to what I remember from my 100-level biology class in undergrad. Following my review of my student’s resume, I recommended that my student have someone in her field review it because of the field-specific vocabulary I have not obtained in my own native language of English.

<sup>17</sup> Anecdotally, two ELT professionals, both teaching at a public university, told me they understand that religion is important to their Muslim students, but it often goes overlooked with students belonging to other faiths.

designed ESL class can assist the target demographic in overcoming the difficulties of culture shock, getting their spiritual needs met, and successfully integrating into the parish.

Multiple participants said that many Catholic immigrants would benefit from an ESL class or some type of English acquisition assistance, and that it could be a key part of parish outreach to this demographic, although this suggestion never precluded other outreach efforts (such as the priest learning Spanish) or the value of English outside the parish. Those participants recommending English include Camila, “the new people need to learn English”; Laura, “maybe first some English classes”; Lily, “So English classes are good, too”; and Pablo, “I think we have to teach English to the people.” This is in addition to those who expressed their own struggles living their faith in English.

While “English” is important, it is too broad a subject for this context. An ESL class could equip students to write academic papers or give sales presentations in English, but those skills are not needed in the context of a parish. An ESL class could equip students to speak with doctors and bank tellers and landlords, but those skills are also not needed in the context of a parish. Of course, immigrants who arrive at Catholic parishes may need these skills for other aspects of their lives, but those skills can be attained at other English for specific purposes classes (English for academic purposes, business English) or at community-based ESL classes offered at, for example, the local public library. Catholic immigrants also need to learn English for Catholicism—English to be an ordinary lay Catholic, with access to the sacraments, a voice in conversations about faith and the Church, and agency in choosing which parish events to attend and which parish activities to be a part of. These language skills will not be taught at a university, or a business English seminar, or

at a public library. The local Catholic parish may be the only institution that can provide Catholic immigrants with language to live their faith in English.

The local Catholic parish already serves as haven or refuge for Catholic immigrants struggling to orient themselves in a new land. Several participants expressed that they went to the Catholic parish looking for something familiar, or looking for the faith or God they knew in their home countries. But the parish can be disorienting as well. Most obviously, it is difficult to communicate with priests and parish leaders without a common language. An ESL class can be that refuge at the parish—a place where immigrants meet others like themselves and find, in the teacher, a liaison to the parish, someone who can answer questions, make connections to have their needs addressed, and otherwise help them to flourish. This would echo the words of Jesus: “I was . . . a stranger, and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35 New American Bible Revised Edition).

Catholics, immigrant and otherwise, come to Catholic parishes to have their spiritual needs met—for the sacraments. While it is possible to participate in Mass without a common language, it is difficult for many who try to do so. While confession is, strictly speaking, not impossible with no language in common, it is certainly not desirable, and many participants mentioned this difficulty in particular. An essential part of the purpose of the Catholic parish is providing for the spiritual needs of those who come, and a part of providing for those needs is providing the language with which to have them met. Acknowledging Catholic immigrants as fellow Catholics with the same sacramental needs would echo the words of St. Paul: “So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all, but especially to those who belong to the family of the faith” (Galatians 6:10).

But the parish is not only about meeting individual spiritual needs. It is also a community, a place where parishioners can attend Bible studies, feast day celebrations, parish picnics, and fundraiser dinners for the school's drama club; a place where they can teach religious education classes to the children, volunteer at the maternity home, and prepare meals for the homeless. All of this is close to impossible with no common language. Increased English proficiency for these immigrants would bring about opportunities to join small groups or the choir, or to lead or volunteer at existing charitable programs; it would empower immigrants to make their ideas and needs known, and to take fuller advantage of what the parish offers to help parishioners grow in their faith. Most importantly, increased English proficiency would mean increased opportunities to chart one's own course at the parish: to participate in activities of one's own choosing, to ask the questions one wants to ask, to learn what one wants to learn—whatever the individual finds valuable. Providing a targeted English for specific purposes class would help those who struggle with English gain the proficiency they need to do this. Valuing the immigrants' participation echoes the words of St. Paul, who compared the Church to a body: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I do not need you'" (1 Corinthians 12:21).

This language class ought to be an integral part of parish outreach to immigrants.

### **Recommendations**

I should add one final note before I make my specific recommendations for class design. As I mentioned before, my sample size was very small and not intended to be generalized or applied to other contexts. Even in my small sample, I found a variety of opinions and perspectives. For these reasons, my recommendations are limited to the context in which I conducted this study; to design a class for a different context, one ought to solicit perspectives of the constituents and design a class accordingly.

The needs I hope to address with this ESL class fall into three broad categories: First, to provide a haven for immigrants struggling to adjust to their new country; second, to help those immigrants have their spiritual needs met; and third, to help them fully integrate into the normal life of the parish. Integration here does not mean assimilation, or that they abandon their culture of origin, but that they are free to join and have a voice in mainstream parish events, celebrations, and activities. These goals dovetail with the Catholic Church's 1969 Instruction "De Pastoralis Migratorum Cura" ("On the Pastoral Care of People who Migrate"), which indicates that immigrants ought to "accommodate themselves willingly to a host community and hasten to learn its language" and that [m]igrating people carry with them their own mentality, their own language, their own culture, and their own religion. All of these things are parts of a certain spiritual heritage of opinions, traditions, and culture which will perdure outside the homeland. Let it be prized highly everywhere. Not least in its right to consideration is the mother tongue of emigrant people, by which they express their mentality, thoughts, culture, and spiritual life. (Confalonieri, 1969)

**First goal: Building a community.** The first goal of the class, then, should be to create a welcoming community, focusing learners on what they have in common. This focus on commonalities can help a diverse group form a community: “When communities of practice form through shared interests and shared goals, these shared interests and goals have the potential for bringing together individuals who may be quite different culturally and linguistically” (Przymus, 2016, p. 267). With proper differentiation, the class can include learners of a variety of proficiency levels, united by a common goal of navigating their new country and their faith in a new language.

For this, the teacher should capitalize on the universality of Catholicism. The teacher can facilitate conversations among learners about their observations of similarities and differences between the U.S. parish and what they remember from parishes in their home countries. This conversation decreases “teacher talk,” especially if the teacher takes a genuine interest in the experiences of the learners. As a facilitator, the teacher’s role would be one of asking questions, prompting discussion, providing language (vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.) and explanations (of English, U.S. culture, or Catholic teaching and practice) where needed, encouraging quieter or less proficient students to have a voice, answering questions about his or her own experience with parishes in the United States. Being more aware of the familiar can help immigrants feel more comfortable and at home; furthermore, through being encouraged to take an active role in the conversation, students would know that they are not alone in struggling to navigate this new country, and that their experiences and perspectives are valued at the parish.

In addition to the community-building aspect of the class, the output learners produce in these contexts will boost their English proficiency. Swain (1995) argued that target-

language output promotes language acquisition for a few reasons, including “noticing”—becoming more aware of what they can and cannot yet do:

Learners (as well as native speakers, of course) can fake it, so to speak, in comprehension, but they cannot do so in the same way in production. They can pass themselves off as having understood...However, to produce, learners need to do something; they need to create linguistic form and meaning and in so doing, discover what they can and cannot do.” (p. 127)

The simple act of talking highlights gaps in their proficiency, which can be filled in class, either by a teacher or by classmates.

While talking can help students become aware of gaps in their language proficiency, conversation can help them become aware of gaps in understanding their faith or between their knowledge and practice (Pierson & Bankston, 2013). Suen (2017) recounts how participants in an English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) Bible study in Japan grew in their English proficiency and deepened their understanding of Bible passages through discussion, particularly discussion of more controversial and personally important topics. The teacher should be prepared to facilitate these conversations, assessing English proficiency of individual students, monitoring the social dynamic in the classroom, noting acculturation difficulties students express indirectly, and explaining or clarifying Catholic teaching as appropriate.

**Second goal: Spiritual needs.** The second goal of the class should be to empower students to have their individual spiritual needs met—beginning with language for confession and Mass and continuing with other needs as students indicate.<sup>18</sup> Most Catholics are familiar

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<sup>18</sup> The Catholic Church explicitly encourages lay people to help immigrants in this way: “[W]hen distance or scattered location or lack of clergy of their own people or of the place deprive immigrant people of religious

with the structure of the Mass, since it follows the same basic order every time, and the text is readily available in both languages. The teacher could begin by coaching students in the responses given by the congregation during Mass and use the bilingual text to teach vocabulary and formulaic phrases for the liturgy, then extend that vocabulary to its use outside the liturgical context. A Mass typically has two or three readings from the Bible (including one from a Gospel), plus a Psalm; these readings follow a calendar and are sometimes associated directly with a feast day. The teacher could prepare students to hear the specific readings at the upcoming Sunday Mass, using those readings as content for lessons on listening skills and strategies, then debriefing with students the following week about their successes and challenges with what they learned in class. The homily, which follows the readings, is the most variable part of the Mass. If the priest is willing, he could provide his homily notes or themes to the teacher, who could then use them as content for a more challenging listening lesson. As with the readings, the teacher and students could debrief their successes and challenges with listening to the homily, though debrief would be different as students who attend different Masses would hear different homilies. These listening skills and strategies could easily be applied outside the Mass as well, and the teacher could help students extend them to other arenas in which they need to listen and comprehend in English.

The sacrament of Reconciliation (confession) presents a different challenge, as students must be proficient speakers as well—and as Swain (1995) noted, speaking cannot be “faked” like comprehension can. Like the Mass, confession is liturgical, following a pattern, much of which can be scripted—and therefore lends itself well to scaffolding. The teacher can help ELLs follow the script (and, as appropriate, giving explanations and clarifications;

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care, let the laity zealously seek them out, receive them hospitably, comfort them, and introduce them to the local church” (Confalonieri, 1969).

fostering discussion; and connecting words, phrases, and ideas to what ELLs may remember from their experience in their home countries), and then teach vocabulary and listening skills for the unscripted part of confession. This should be handled with appropriate sensitivity and respect for privacy as the unscripted part of confession is typically very personal. The class could end with lighthearted mock confessions—“free” or “uncontrolled” practice—where students take turns playing the roles of priest and penitent, and the “penitents” make their “confessions” based on characters drawn from a hat. If a priest is available, he could hear real confessions during or immediately following this activity. Ideally, the teacher would coach him beforehand so he is better equipped to converse with non-native speakers.

In addition to helping students participate more fully in Mass and confession, the teacher should encourage and facilitate conversation, both cultural and theological, about the sacraments, assessing and assisting students when proficiency gaps are discovered. The teacher should be equipped to answer or clarify basic theological questions pertaining to the theme of the lesson, potentially bringing in catechetical materials or guest speakers. (It is particularly important for the students to learn, if they do not know already, how much language proficiency is actually necessary for the sacraments; therefore, it is important for the teacher to be prepared to teach this.) The teacher should also be aware that students’ spiritual needs are not likely limited to Mass and confession, and should be available to learn what those needs are and work to have them met, through the appropriate combination of English instruction and liaising with the parish.

**Third goal: Integration.** The third goal of the class is successful integration into the normal life of the parish. The first part of this goal is to provide students with the language necessary to participate in the parish activities they choose. To do this, I recommend

organizing an ambassadors program, following the model of Przymus (2016). The teacher should know what the parish offers and learn what the students are interested in, match them up, and find native- (or proficient-) speaking participants in those programs who can serve as ambassadors, welcoming the immigrants into the Bible study group or prison ministry or whatever the English learner chooses. In this case, much of the language acquisition will be done outside of class, but the class can serve as a place to debrief, ask questions (both linguistic and cultural), and connect again with the ESL community.

The second part of the goal of integration is to have some events or celebrations that follow Latin American customs. This could easily take the form of task-based learning, where students end up planning, for example, a parish-wide celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The teacher would act again as a liaison with the parish, clearing the basic idea with appropriate decision-makers first. The ESL class could become a series of planning meetings, where students decide what type of event they would like to host and choose tasks based on proficiency and interest—with a skilled teacher facilitating the conversation and assisting to fill gaps in proficiency. When students need to use their English outside the classroom—for example, to ask the art teacher for materials or request a parade permit from the city for a procession—the class can be a place to prepare for those conversations, learning vocabulary, practicing, and so on.

The third part of this goal is addressing churchgoing Latin American Catholics' concerns about their fellow Latin American Catholics leaving the Catholic Church. If the parish already has in place some type of outreach to fallen-away Catholics, this concern can be addressed in the manner of the ambassadors program, connecting students with this particular concern to the parish group or committee responsible for this outreach. The ESL

teacher can help them with language to advocate for themselves and for this demographic with which they have a particularly valuable perspective. If the parish does not have such a committee in place already, the students may want to form one and act as liaisons to the parish for this demographic. The ESL class can be a place where they hone their ideas, make plans, and learn the language necessary to propose their ideas to the pastor or appropriate staff member.

### **Further Considerations**

**Culture & faith of immigrants.** In any outreach to Latin American Catholics—and to any ethnically Catholic group—one must balance the relationship of faith and ethnicity, recognizing certain expressions of Catholicism (e.g., processions) may be culturally bound, but the faith itself is not. In his description of the 1955 Conference on the Spiritual Care of Puerto Rican Migrants, convened when national (European) parishes were declining and Catholic leaders in the U.S. were considering how best to serve immigrants from Puerto Rico, Matovino (1999) indicated what can happen when the faith becomes too attached to ethnicity:

Conferees contended that the third generation of an immigrant group frequently moves out of national parishes, leaving the congregation depleted and the church building in disrepair. Furthermore, they observed that the children of immigrants too often abandon their ancestral religion because they identify the Catholic faith with the archaic practices of their national parish community. (p. 48)

This observation is fairly consistent with the three-generation model of immigration (Alba, et al, 2002), where the children of immigrants are bilingual and bicultural, and the grandchildren of immigrants are fully assimilated into the new culture and retain few, if any,

ethnic markers. If the Catholic faith is too closely associated with the culture of the old country, the third generation may abandon it along with language and other ethnic markers.

The Catholic Church's 1969 Instruction "De Pastoralis Migratorum Cura" ("On the Pastoral Care of People who Migrate") also addressed the closeness of culture and faith and how that closeness can be an obstacle for immigrants:

Experience shows that the Christian faithful in these circumstances [of migration], perhaps because of an inadequate 'interiorizing' of the faith, are subjected to a danger of relaxing their practice of the Christian life and gradually abandoning it; they can lose the great treasure of the faith practiced up to now. This happens all the more easily as their human and culture heritage, with which immigrant people's religious faith is usually closely bound, is put in danger/ (Confalonieri, 1969)

This too-close association of faith with culture could explain the exodus of Latinos leaving Catholicism, according to Sutherland (2014), who commented on Pew data:

Perhaps given Catholicism's relatively deep roots in Spanish-speaking countries and its close links to many cultural practices, some Hispanic Americans experience the faith less as a relationship with God and more as an element of their ethnicity, to be expressed or set aside as they choose.

But Sutherland ultimately concluded that Latinos leave Catholicism for many of the same reasons non-Latinos leave Catholicism, arguing that "first and foremost, Latinos and others need not new programs targeted to their demographic but a living, salvific relationship with God." With this in mind, those initiating outreach to Latin American Catholics should not limit themselves to fostering a sense of the Catholic faith as a valuable part of being Latin American, but also as something transcending any particular culture.

**Culture & faith of U.S. Catholics.** Thus far, we have considered various aspects of helping immigrants integrate into their new community with little attention to the effects of immigration on members of the host community. While a full consideration of the attitudes, concerns, and perspectives of American Catholics is beyond the scope of the present study, those initiating outreach to any immigrant group should be aware that American Catholics (like everyone) are not *tabulae rasae*: they bring with them their own experiences and concerns. Individuals may be more or less inclined to welcome newcomers; they may be more or less attached to their culture's customs and traditions; they may be more or less comfortable with change and the unknown. Culture shock is not limited to travelers to a new country: "[E]ven the host can feel endangered in overly tourist places, with different habits and religious practices and unknown languages. This is especially likely to happen when the number of tourists suddenly increases" (Paraica, 2017, p. 331). When parish leaders begin considering or planning outreach to immigrant groups, they should consider the needs of longtime residents in addition to the needs of the newcomers in order to make transitions and changes as smooth as possible.

**Mitigating cultural tensions.** Despite obvious differences, immigrants' and locals' experience of culture shock are similar in some ways, and therefore mitigation strategies can be similar. The feelings of culture shock and discomfort with other cultures are primarily mitigated, I believe, by a growing recognition of commonalities. The ambassadors program, described above, can serve both to help immigrants interact with locals and to help locals interact with immigrants, building a bridge out of common interests or goals. If an immigrant joins the choir, for example, he or she is likely to "creat[e] [an] identit[y] of affiliation" (Przymus, 2016, p. 276)—to become a choir member and not only a member of the

immigrant group. When friendships form between immigrants and locals, both become more interested in each others' cultures, perspectives, and input. An American who has no particular interest in Guatemalan culture may become friends with a Guatemalan immigrant who shares a love of singing and, through that friendship, become more comfortable with Guatemalan culture (or other cultures in general) and feel less threatened by immigrants and their influence on the parish.

On a more spiritual level—which is where a religious institution like a Catholic parish is more likely to be focused anyway—we can take a cue from the participant who said:

When I think about Jesus in Arabic or in Spanish or in English, I see the same Jesus. Jesus doesn't change for me. The Mass doesn't change for me. It's amazing. To me, it's like a miracle. The Mass is the same for me in Arabic, in Spanish, or in English; it's the same. When I focus on God. But if I'm gonna focus about who is around me and the parish or in the church, then you start thinking, "Oh, these are Latinos, oh, these are [Middle Easterners], oh, these are Americans." There, you see differences, is when you are aware of the culture. But if you are focused deeply in the Holy Host [the Eucharist] and in Jesus, not a chance. It's the same.

Catholics worship the same God, love the same Eucharist, and depend on the same sacraments in any language. Immigrants who place God as a higher priority than Spanish will find it easier to live among English speakers; locals who place God as a higher priority than English will find it easier to welcome Spanish speakers. Priests are already encouraging those under their care to place God as a high priority; while it can be difficult to lead a parish experiencing cultural tension, it does not need to be complicated. In the words of Pope Paul VI (1969),

It is easily understood that this pastoral care cannot be effectively accomplished without a sufficient understanding of the spiritual patrimony, and also the cultural mindset, of the migrants. In this regard their native language is of great importance, since by means of it the migrants express their thoughts, their way of thinking, and their religious life. It is clear, however, that care must be taken lest these differences and these accommodations for different ethnic groups, legitimate though they are, should result in harm to that unity to which all in the Church are called, as St. Paul admonishes us.

## Conclusion

### Limitations

One study could never exhaust the wealth of experiences that Latin American Catholic immigrants to the U.S. have amassed over decades. The primary limitation of this study is the small and limited number of participating immigrants, and the results of this study should not be generalized or applied beyond this context. Future research should consider a wider variety of immigrants, varying in socio-economic situation, immigration status, family life, religious practice, geographic area, English proficiency, and ethnic or national background—findings and recommendations may be very different in these different demographic groups. Additionally, future research should consider immigrants who are priests, who belong to religious orders (both men's and women's), and who hold leadership roles with parish or diocesan Hispanic Ministries or other official outreach, as this study is limited to lay Catholics, some of whom participate (or have participated) in outreach in informal capacities.

Ideally, I hope to see a bridge built between the Spanish-speaking immigrant population and Catholic parishes, which includes lay Catholics in the pews and the parish or diocesan staff seeking to reach this population. This would, naturally, require further studies interviewing these staff members (clergy and lay) about their current and future outreach, their goals with outreach, and so on, in addition to research into the perspectives of U.S. American Catholics. My study, limited to the immigrant side, could not include these perspectives.

**Additional Barriers**

The class recommendations outlined here come from the perspective of an ELT professional who does not necessarily have expertise in other areas that are crucial to the success of such a program. For example, Durham and Kim (2019) note that many faith-based or church-based ESL programs are taught by poorly trained volunteers. If the program is to grow, the ELT professional may be required to train additional teachers to meet a growing need, either within a single parish or at multiple parishes. Properly training teachers is within the purview of an ELT professional, but recruiting motivated teachers and incentivizing them toward retention is the area of someone else's expertise. Navigating potential sources of funding—for the purpose of hiring paid teachers (to increase teacher quality and commitment) or purchasing quality materials—is also beyond what an ELT professional is trained to do (though many take on this task out of necessity). Therefore, an ELT professional should partner with other professionals with expertise in different fields in order to provide quality classes to those who choose to participate.

**Final Thoughts**

This study serves to connect U.S. Catholics and the TESOL field, a connection that has been lacking. Catholic immigrants need specific-purpose English to navigate their faith in the United States, and only with a combination of expertise in both ELT and Catholic life can this need be met. Catholics hoping to serve non-native speakers of English should be aware that teaching a targeted ESL class, seeking to give immigrants the language for their faith, may be more effective and better received than a generic ESL class of the type that can be found at local libraries. This understanding is increasingly important as the immigrant population among U.S. Catholics grows. TESOL professionals need to consider the spiritual

needs of their students and be aware that faith-based language may be necessary for them to navigate life in their new countries as they desire.

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APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to this conversation. I have turned on the audio recording. Could you start by choosing a pseudonym?

I will be asking some questions in English. If there's anything you feel that you could talk about in Spanish but not in English, let's talk about it in Spanish.

I will begin by asking some demographic questions.

Where are you from?

*Depending on their response, I will ask follow-up questions to obtain the city, state/province/region, and country of birth and any movements around Latin America.*

How old were you when you arrived in the U.S.? Did you come straight to Washtenaw County or have you lived in other places in the U.S.? Where else have you lived? How long have you been in Washtenaw County?

About your age, would you say you're in your 20s? 30s? 40s? 50s? 60s or older?

Were you raised Catholic by your family?

Have you always been Catholic?

When you first arrived, how important was it for you to find a Catholic parish? Why?

When you began looking for a Catholic parish, what did you expect to find? What was the reason for those expectations?

What parish(es) did you attend? if you settled at a particular parish, where did you settle?

*If the participant has attended multiple parishes, I will ask the following questions about each parish they attended.*

What did you like or dislike about the parish?

What did you find strange at the parish?

- Follow-up questions: What seemed different to you compared to what you experienced at home? What seemed different to you compared to your expectations?

Did that parish offer sacraments, services, and/or activities in Spanish? if so, describe them.

- Did you feel that the parish leadership made it a priority to offer these in Spanish?
- What sacraments/services/activities were offered in Spanish? How important was it for you to participate in these in Spanish (as opposed to English)?
- Were the leaders of these activities Hispanic/Latino? How important was that to you?

- Did you feel that these activities were run in a way that's culturally appropriate? If so, what did you like about them? If not, what could be improved?

Do you feel that the parish values you (and your family) as members? How can you tell? Do you think English-speaking parish members feel equally valued? More valued? Less valued? Why do you think this?

*I will ask the following questions in general, not about specific parishes.*

In which language do you prefer to participate in activities at the parish? Why?

Comparing your home country to what you found at U.S. parishes, how would you describe the role of the pastor/priest at the parish? The role of parish staff? The way the sacraments are celebrated? The types of activities offered? The place of the family? The value placed on family participation?

Comparing your expectations of parishes in the U.S. to what you found at U.S. parishes, how would you describe the role of the pastor/priest at the parish? The role of parish staff? The way the sacraments are celebrated? The types of activities offered? The place of the family? The value placed on family participation?

What changes could parishes make to help Latin American immigrants feel more comfortable at the parish?

Based on your experience, what aspect of Catholic parishes in the U.S. would make Latin American immigrants most uncomfortable? What do you think Latin American immigrants would have the hardest time adjusting to? What did you have the hardest time adjusting to?

What do you wish your parish had offered when you first arrived here? Why? Who should run those activities? Who should attend them?

I think that was all the questions I had. Is there anything that I didn't ask you that I should have? Is there anything you would like to add?

Before beginning our conversation, what did you expect that we'd talk about? What did you expect to tell me about?

Thank you so much for your time.

## Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter

Aug 24, 2018 1:03 PM EDT

Mary Tillotson  
Eastern Michigan University, World Languages

Re: Exempt - Initial - UHSRC-FY17-18-407 Latin American Catholics in the United States:  
The Role of an ESL Class in Bridging the Linguistic and Cultural Gap

Dear Mary Tillotson:

The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee has rendered the decision below for Latin American Catholics in the United States: The Role of an ESL Class in Bridging the Linguistic and Cultural Gap. You may begin your research.

Decision: Exempt

Selected Category: Category 2. Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Renewals: Exempt studies do not need to be renewed. When the project is completed, please contact [human.subjects@emich.edu](mailto:human.subjects@emich.edu).

Modifications: Any plan to alter the study design or any study documents must be reviewed to determine if the Exempt decision changes. You must submit a modification request application in Cayuse IRB and await a decision prior to implementation.

Problems: Any deviations from the study protocol, unanticipated problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may affect the risk to human subjects must be reported to the UHSRC. Complete an incident report in Cayuse IRB.

Follow-up: Please contact the UHSRC when your project is complete.

Please contact [human.subjects@emich.edu](mailto:human.subjects@emich.edu) with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee

## Appendix C: Recruitment Script

Dear [name],

I hope you're doing well.

I'm a graduate student at Eastern Michigan University, working toward an MA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Over the next few months, I will be completing my thesis. I'm writing to ask if you would participate in my research.

My study is entitled "Latin American Catholics in the United States: The Role of an ESL Class in Bridging the Linguistic and Cultural Gap." The goal of my study is to better understand the cultural differences between Catholics who are originally from Latin America and Catholic parishes in the United States, and to see how a parish-based English-as-a-Second-Language class could help people from these different cultures connect at their Catholic parishes in the United States.

In order to do this, I plan to interview several Catholics who came to the United States from Latin America, to understand their experiences at U.S. parishes. Would you be willing to participate in an interview sometime in the next few weeks?

Additionally, if you know of other people I should interview for this study, please let me know.

Best,  
Mary

## Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

**Informed Consent Form**

**Project Title:** Latin American Catholics in the United States: The Role of an ESL Class in Bridging the Linguistic and Cultural Gap

**Principal Investigator:** Mary C. Tillotson, Eastern Michigan University

**Faculty Advisor:** Ildiko Porter-Szucs, Eastern Michigan University

**Invitation to participate in research**

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be at least 18 years of age, Catholic, and originally from a Latin American country. Participation in research is voluntary. Please ask any questions you have about participation in this study

**Important information about this study**

- The purpose of the study is to better understand the linguistic and cultural differences between Latin American Catholics and Catholic parishes in the United States, and to learn how an English as a Second Language (ESL) class could help Catholics from both cultures better understand each other.
- Participation in this study involves answering interview questions.
- There are no anticipated risks of this study.
- The investigator will protect your confidentiality by attaching your responses to a pseudonym instead of your real name, not discussing your responses with anyone outside the research team, and keeping audio files secure in a password-protected folder on the computer.
- Participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and if you decide to participate, you can stop at any time.

**What is this study about?**

The purpose of the study is to better understand the linguistic and cultural differences between Latin American Catholic immigrants to the United States and Catholic parishes in the United States, and to learn how an English as a Second Language class could help Catholics from both cultures better understand each other.

**What will happen if I participate in this study?**

Participation in this study involves

- responding to interview questions for approximately 60-90 minutes from the researcher. These questions will relate to your personal background and your experience in Catholic parishes both in the United States and in your home country.

We would like to audio record you for this study. If you are audio recorded, it will be possible to identify you through your voice. You may participate in the study without being audio recorded.

**What types of data will be collected?**

We will collect data about your racial and ethnic origin, religious beliefs, and your experience in Catholic parishes both in the United States and in Latin America.

**What are the expected risks for participation?**

The primary risk of participation in this study is a potential loss of confidentiality.

Some of the interview questions are personal and may make you feel uncomfortable. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer. If you are upset, please inform the investigator immediately.

**Are there any benefits to participating?**

You will not directly benefit from participating in this research.

Benefits to society include an increased understanding of the cultural differences between Catholics in Latin America and the United States.

**How will my information be kept confidential?**

We plan to publish the results of this study. We will not publish any information that can identify you.

We will keep your information confidential by using a pseudonym in all published work and not publishing audio files. Your information will not be discussed with anyone outside the research team. We will store your information for at least three years after this project ends, but we may store your information indefinitely.

We will make every effort to keep your information confidential; however, we cannot guarantee confidentiality. The principal investigator and the research team will have access to the information you provide for research purposes only. Other groups may have access to your research information for quality control or safety purposes. These groups include the University Human Subjects Review Committee, the Office of Research Development, the sponsor of the research, or federal and state agencies that oversee the review of research, including the Office for Human Research Protections and the Food and Drug Administration.

The University Human Subjects Review Committee reviews research for the safety and protection of people who participate in research studies.

**Storing study information for future use**

We will store your information to study in the future. Your information will be labeled with a code and not your name. Your information will be stored in a password-protected or locked file and will be stored indefinitely.

We may share your information with other researchers without asking for your permission, but the shared information will never contain information that could identify you. We will send your de-identified information by email and only upon request.

**What are the alternatives to participation?**

The alternative is not to participate.

**Are there any costs to participation?**

Participation will not cost you anything.

**Will I be paid for participation?**

You will not be paid to participate in this research study.

**Study contact information**

If you have any questions about the research, you can contact the Principal Investigator, Mary C. Tillotson, at [mtillots@emich.edu](mailto:mtillots@emich.edu) or by phone at (734) 489-4815. You can also contact Tillotson's adviser, Ildiko Porter-Szucs, at [iporters@emich.edu](mailto:iporters@emich.edu) or by phone at (734) 487-6487.

For questions about your rights as a research subject, contact the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee at [human.subjects@emich.edu](mailto:human.subjects@emich.edu) or by phone at (734) 487-3090.

**Voluntary participation**

Participation in this research study is your choice. You may refuse to participate at any time, even after signing this form, without repercussion. You may choose to leave the study at any

time without repercussion. If you leave the study, the information you provided will be kept confidential. You may request, in writing, that your identifiable information be destroyed. However, we cannot destroy any information that has already been published.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and am satisfied with the answers I received. I give my consent to participate in this research study.

**Signature**

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Name of Subject

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Signature of Subject

---

Date

