

'We'd Rather Be Protestants': More Hispanics Give Catholicism an Unwanted Wake-Up Call

A growing number of U.S. Hispanics are turning away from the Roman Catholic **religion** of their youth and now identify as **Protestant** or unaffiliated with any church, according to a survey released on Wednesday.

Catholics represented 55 percent of U.S. Hispanics in 2013, a drop from 67 percent in 2010, the Pew Research Center survey found. About 16 percent of Hispanics are evangelical Protestants, up from 12 percent three years earlier, and 18 percent are unaffiliated, up from 10 percent.

Three-quarters of those interviewed said they were raised Catholic. More than half of those who left their childhood faith said they "gradually drifted away," while 31 percent said they found a congregation that helps its members more.

Religious scholars said the shift could serve as something of a warning to U.S. Catholic leaders, who have relied on the growing Hispanic population to fill pews and collection plates.

"It does represent what has been a wake-up call for Catholicism for several decades now," said Allan Figueroa Deck, theology professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

"We have become a little lukewarm," said Deck, a Jesuit priest. He said a particular challenge is reaching youth, who need to not just be entertained and instructed but understood.

Twenty-eight percent of former Hispanic **Catholics** who now identify as **Protestants** say they are **Pentecostal**.

Factors drawing them include smaller, more intimate churches and a democratic pastorate where anyone can minister, according to Arlene Sanchez-Walsh, history professor and expert on Hispanic Pentecostals at Azusa Pacific University In Los Angeles. She said Pentecostals practice emotional worship with plain, commonsense reading of the Bible replacing “traditionalist, often arcane” Catholic sacramental **worship**.

Hispanics make up an increasingly large share of U.S. Catholics, representing a third of the U.S. church, reflecting their growing numbers.

About 53 million U.S. residents describe themselves as Hispanic, representing 17 percent of the nation’s population, according to the Census Bureau.

Just 3 percent of Hispanics identify as atheist or agnostic, half the rate in the general public.

Jose Alvarado, 40, founder of Chicago Latino Atheists, said he believes that many Latinos have doubts about religion but that it was tough to “come out” in a culture where church is such a powerful force.

“We’re much more outsiders than probably any other Latino group,” said Alvarado, who was raised Catholic.

The survey interviewed 5,103 people between May 24 and July 28, 2013, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.1 percentage points.

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