

For Some Hispanics, Coming to America Also Means Abandoning Religion



Gary C. Knapp for The New York Times

Edgar Chilín attended Mass on Sundays as a child in Guatemala, but after moving to the United States, his family stopped going. Now he spends Sundays on the soccer field.

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN
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RICHMOND, Va. — On Sunday afternoons, when the local Roman Catholic church holds Mass for Spanish-speaking Catholics, Edgar Chilín is playing soccer in a league with hundreds of Hispanic players.



Jay Paul for The New York Times

"Church is not very popular," said Francisco Hernandez, a pastor for a Pentecostal congregation in Richmond, Va.

As a child in Guatemala, Mr. Chilín attended Mass every Sunday. But after immigrating to the United States 25 years ago, he and his family lost the churchgoing habit. "We pray to God when we feel the need to," he said, "but when we come here to America we don't feel the need."

A wave of research shows that increasing percentages of Hispanics are abandoning church, suggesting to researchers that along with assimilation comes a measure of secularization.

Several studies show that Hispanics are just as likely as other Americans to identify themselves as having "no religion," and to not affiliate with a church. Those who

describe themselves as secular are, without question, a small minority among Hispanics — as they are among Americans at large. But, in contrast to many of the non-Hispanic Americans who identify themselves as secular, most of the Hispanics say they were once religious.

The [Roman Catholic Church](#), the religious home for most Hispanics, is experiencing the greatest exodus. While many former Catholics join evangelical or Pentecostal churches, the recent research shows that many of them leave church altogether.

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“Migrating to the U.S. means you have the freedom to create your own identity,” said Keo Cavalcanti, a sociologist at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., and a co-author of a recent study that found a trend toward secularization among Hispanics in Richmond. “When people get here they realize that maintaining that pro forma display of religiosity is not essential to doing well.”

A separate study of 4,000 Hispanics to be released this month by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Pew Hispanic Center found that 8 percent of them said they had “no religion” — similar to the 11 percent in the general public. Of the Hispanics who claimed no religion, two-thirds said they had once been religious. Thirty-nine percent of the Hispanics who said they had no religion were former Catholics.

Hispanics from Cuba were the most secular national group, at 14 percent, followed by Central Americans at 12 percent, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans at 9 percent, and South Americans at 8 percent, the Pew poll found. Mexicans in this country were the least likely to say they had no religion, at 7 percent.

A larger survey, called the American Religious Identification Survey, a study of 50,000 adults, including 3,000 Hispanics, found that the percentage of Hispanics who identified themselves as having no religion more than doubled from 1990 to 2001, to 13 percent from 6 percent.

This change is happening even though many Hispanics immigrated from countries steeped in religion, where saints’ days and festivals mark the passage of time, and grandmothers round up their progeny each Sunday to go to Mass.

“They come, they adopt the American way, and part of the American way is moving towards no religion,” said Ariela Keysar, associate director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College in Hartford.

Each year, Diana Lemus — a real estate agent and owner of Happy Mart, a busy Latino market in Richmond — makes New Year’s resolutions that include working out more, getting out of debt, being a better mother and attending church once a week.

Ms. Lemus, a first-generation immigrant, said that this year she had kept all of them, except going to church — and spends Sunday mornings at the gym. She thinks her faith is important, but said that perhaps she has grown “too materialistic.”

“I need God in my life, but I told the pastor, I get sleepy,” she said. “You have to stay in church from 1:30 to 5. I think if services were shorter, more entertaining.”

Like Ms. Lemus, many Hispanics in Richmond said that even though they no longer attended church, their religion remained important to them. This confirms research findings that Hispanics who said they had no religion represent a small subset; many more Hispanics are living rather secular lives but still identify themselves as Catholics or Christians. The phenomenon is similar to that of “cultural Jews,” said Roberto Suro, director of the Pew Hispanic Center.

“You can feel very strongly about the Virgin of Guadalupe and believe your children ought to be baptized, and still not participate in the Catholic Church or make it a major factor in your life,” Mr. Suro said.

Richmond and adjacent Chesterfield County have a rapidly growing and diverse Hispanic population, with immigrants from the Caribbean, Central America, Colombia and Mexico. Some are new arrivals, but many have been in the United States for years and resettled here from Northeastern and Southern states, attracted by the area’s jobs, relatively affordable housing and receptive local governments.

The increase in the Hispanic population has meant a proliferation of churches. But even when their own churches are thriving, Hispanic ministers say that most Hispanics they approach are not interested.

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“Church is not very popular,” said Francisco Hernandez, who is pastor with his wife, Connie, of the Iglesia de Dios Alfa y Omega, a Pentecostal church with 400 members. “The majority don’t go, and those who go, go one time.”

Asked why, he said that his church’s strict rules were a hard sell, adding, “People like a superficial religion.”

This may be true, and a few young Hispanic women said in interviews that they avoided strict evangelical churches because they frowned on women wearing pants or makeup. However, many more Hispanics said they were simply too busy to attend any church. They said Sunday is a work day, or it is their only day off to wash clothes, go to the market, do errands and relax.

Before Mirna E. Amaya and her husband bought their restaurant, Palacio Latino, three years ago — and when she lived in Maryland — she went to Mass every Sunday. Now she says she is working too hard to go, even though she says she misses it.

“In El Salvador, people went to the church because there’s nothing much else to do,” Mrs. Amaya said.

She said that some of her women friends had stopped going because they became disillusioned with the Catholic Church after the priest sexual abuse scandals. But she said the Roman Catholic Church was still her preference. The closest parish, St. Augustine Catholic Church, has bent over backward to minister to Hispanics. It offers Mass in Spanish, classes in English, a medical van, job assistance and an instant community for lonely new arrivals. The Sunday Spanish Mass is standing room only.

And yet, the pastor, Msgr. Michael Schmied, also the vicar for the diocese’s Hispanic Apostolate, said: “My fear is the strength of secularization, the influence of Americanized pop culture. Is the spiritual tradition of the church, Catholic and Protestant, strong enough to withstand the secularizing cultural influences?”

Jesus Cerritos, a 37-year-old construction worker who immigrated from Mexico 18 years ago, said he spent his weekends running errands, going to Wal-Mart and watching television. His children, ages 11 and 9, tell him that church is boring and that they have no desire to go, but Mr. Cerritos has mixed feelings.

“Here, the people get more materialistic,” Mr. Cerritos said. “The culture here is really barren. There’s no traditions.”

If he were still living in his hometown of Guanajuato, he said, “I would probably go to church.”

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