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## A Populist Shift Confronts the U.S. Catholic Church



Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times

**A GROWING FORCE** Pastor Fabio Tinouco, in green shirt, at a service at the Portuguese Language Pentecostal Missionary Church in Astoria, Queens. "Our mission is to welcome the immigrant and be his guide and his support," said his father, Pastor Zeny Tinouco, who has 11 churches, three in New York City.

By **FERNANDA SANTOS**  
Published: April 20, 2008

To say she was a practicing Catholic would be an understatement. For years, Maria Aparecida Calazans was a mainstay at her Long Island church, joining dozens of fellow Brazilian immigrants for the Portuguese language Mass on Sunday mornings. She and her husband, Ramon, were married at the church. Their two daughters were baptized there, and every Friday she attended a prayer meeting that she had helped organize.

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But six years ago, her husband went to a relative's baptism at a Pentecostal church in a warehouse in Astoria, Queens, and came home smitten.


The couple made a deal. "We would go to the Pentecostal service on Thursdays and to Mass on Sundays, and then we would decide which one we felt most comfortable with," Mrs. Calazans said.

Within 40 days, they had given up Roman Catholicism and embraced Pentecostalism, following the path of the estimated 1.3 million Latino Catholics who have joined Pentecostal congregations since immigrating to the United States, according to a survey released in February by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

"I feel whole here," Mrs. Calazans, 42, said one recent Sunday in the Astoria sanctuary, the Portuguese Language Pentecostal Missionary Church, as she swayed to the

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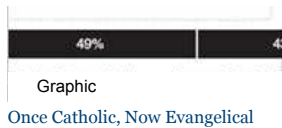
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Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times  
"I feel whole here," says Maria Aparecida Calazans, 42, at her Pentecostal church in Queens.



Piotr Redlinski for The New York Times  
The church has drawn young parishioners.

pop-rock beat of a live gospel band. "This church is not a place we visit once a week. This church is where we hang around and we share our problems and we celebrate our successes, like we were family."

As [Pope Benedict XVI](#) completes his visit to the United States on Sunday with a Mass at Yankee Stadium, in a borough that has been home to generations of Latinos, he does so facing something of a growing challenge to the church's immigrant ranks.

For if Latinos are feeding the population of the church, many have also turned to Pentecostalism, a form of evangelical Christianity that stresses a personal, even visceral, connection with God.

Today, it has more Latino followers in the United States than any other denomination except Catholicism; they are drawn, they say, by the faith's joyous worship, its use of Latino culture and the enveloping sense of community it offers to newcomers. As the Pew survey revealed, half of all Latinos who have joined Pentecostal denominations were raised as Catholics.

They are part of a global shift. Pentecostalism, the world's fastest-growing branch of Christianity, has made such sharp inroads in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, that in an address to bishops there last year, Pope Benedict listed its ardent proselytizing as one of the major forces the Catholic Church must contend with in the region.

Catholic leaders and experts on the church in the United States say that the impact of Pentecostalism has been less

dramatic here. Still, the pope has urged the nation's bishops to make every effort to welcome immigrants — "to share their joys and hopes, to support them in their sorrows and trials, and to help them flourish in their new home." And any number of Catholic clergy and laypeople have conceded that the church needs to work harder at reaching, and keeping, its Latino flock.

"That some of the newly arrived Latinos are drawn to Pentecostalism is certainly reason for concern," said the Rev. Allan Figueroa Deck, the executive director of the Office for Cultural Diversity, which was created last June by the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) to help the church adjust to its changing ethnic makeup.

"But we can counter that with the kind of music we use, with the sense of celebration that we bring to our worship, the spontaneity and some of the popular customs that are not part of the official liturgy of the church. We're doing some of that, but we could do better."

The Pentecostal church in Astoria vividly shows what Catholicism is up against. It offers enough activities to fill a family's calendar: services on Sunday and Thursday, youth group meetings on Friday, a Bible study group on Wednesday and all-night prayer vigils throughout the year. Then there are the birthday and engagement parties, to which every congregant is invited.

The church, on the second floor of a stucco building opposite a nightclub and three blocks from the subway, is half house of worship and half community center. It ministers primarily to a single immigrant group, Brazilians, in the group's language, Portuguese — much as the ethnic urban parishes founded by European Catholics did more than a century ago.

The Sunday service starts at 4 p.m., but the front door opens at least two hours earlier,



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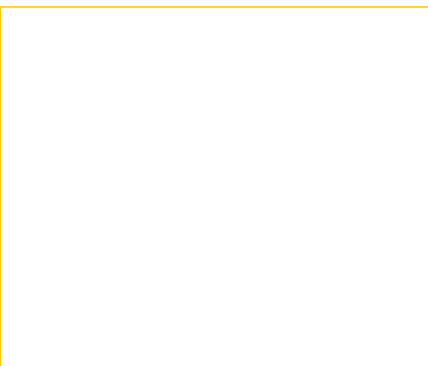
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and families trickle in. One recent Sunday, children giggled and ran around while mothers greeted one another with a kiss on each cheek, as is the custom in Brazil.

The pastor, Zeny Tinouco, himself a former Catholic, preached to about 100 people from a pulpit framed by American and Brazilian flags. Arms rose into the air and hands were turned to the ceiling as a guitar-and-drums band tore through pop-inflected hymns. Over and over in his sermon, the pastor exclaimed, “Alleluia!” and the congregants fervently responded, “Glória a Deus!” (“Praise the Lord!”).

“The first thing I tell the newcomers is that there are no lambs without a shepherd in our church; no one is a stranger,” said Pastor Tinouco, 62, who has a high school education and 11 churches — three each in New York City, Portugal and his native Brazil; one in Switzerland; and one in Newark.

“Our mission is to welcome the immigrant and be his guide and his support,” he said. “If they need money to pay the rent, we’ll raise the money for them. If they need work, we’ll find them work. If they need someone to talk to, they can come to me.”

He counts more than 500 members among his churches in the United States — more than half of them, by his estimate, former Catholics. They include people like Renato C. Silva, who converted to Pentecostalism right after he immigrated in 2005, then met his wife at Pastor Tinouco’s church. And there are others like Tatiana DeMauro, who said her conversion in 2000 had strained her marriage.

“My husband is American and he is Catholic, and he won’t come here with me,” Ms. DeMauro, 40, said as she fed pretzels to her 2-year-old twin daughters. “He says I’ve changed and that this church has brainwashed me, but he doesn’t get it. I have friends here. Some of the strongest relationships I have I made at this church.”

The Rev. Virgil Elizondo, a professor of pastoral and Hispanic religions at the [University of Notre Dame](#), said that Latinos who practiced a populist, emotional brand of Catholicism in their home countries experienced a cultural clash when they encountered the more traditional, low-key ways of the church in the United States.

“To Latinos, the church is a place for socializing,” Father Elizondo said. “Even people with the deepest of Catholic beliefs, if they’re in a foreign country and they can’t find a church where they can experience companionship, they will look elsewhere.”

Father Deck, of the Office for Cultural Diversity, said the Catholic Church was making progress. Latinos now make up about 15 percent of all seminarians. “And we’ve had an explosion in what we call lay ministry,” he added. “There are thousands of Latinos who are lectors during Mass, do outreach work, are catechism teachers, and we have some who are administering parishes.”

Latinos have also fueled the growth of the church’s charismatic movement, whose high-energy Masses are reminiscent of Pentecostal services. Many parishes, particularly in the South and the West, have introduced mariachi Masses, colorful processions, and communal meals after the liturgy.

Luís D. León, a professor of American religions at the University of Denver, said many of those gestures toward Latinos were “token changes.”

“Latino immigrants still find some kind of solace and connection with their home country through Catholicism, and they’re looking for a reason to hang on to the church in this country,” he said. “But for that to happen, they need to feel that their culture is being understood and recognized. They need to feel that the church is their caretaker in a much more profound and personal way than it is today.”

Adriara Mello, who came from Brazil in 1996, said many of her Brazilian friends began attending Pentecostal churches after immigrating.

But she has remained faithful to Corpus Christi Church in Mineola on Long Island — the

same parish that Mrs. Calazans and her family left to join the Pentecostal congregation in Astoria.

In fact, the two women had started a series of prayer meetings, which Ms. Mello has continued.

Corpus Christi is a mainly English-speaking parish, but it has a long history of catering to immigrants. Aside from its Portuguese Mass, which has been celebrated by the same Brazilian priest for 35 years, the church has a Portuguese ministry offering translation services and tutoring for immigrant students who attend the parish’s school.

Ms. Mello said Brazilian parishioners have also raised money for compatriots facing financial difficulties, and have cooked and cleaned for a man who had to raise his children alone after his wife’s death.

“We’re trying to be a faith community and a support community,” Ms. Mello added. “We’re here to help.”

Still, just a few minutes after the 8:30 a.m. Mass ended last Sunday, the Portuguese-speaking faithful had dispersed, to make way for the English language service that followed.

“I can see how people might get turned off by that,” Ms. Mello said. “I mean, if you’re alone in this country, there goes an opportunity to make the church part of your life. There goes a chance to make friends.”

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