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From the Los Angeles Times

Hispanic numbers reshape religious landscape

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The growing numbers of Hispanic people in the United States, and that population's embrace of charismatic styles of worship, are reshaping the Roman Catholic Church and the nation's religious landscape, according to a study of Hispanics and faith released Wednesday.

The study, by the Pew Hispanic Center and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, found that a majority of Hispanic Catholics practice a distinctive, charismatic form of Catholicism, one that may include speaking in tongues, prophesying and other practices considered more typical of Pentecostal churches.

Those traditions are much less widespread among non-Hispanic Catholics, who also are less likely to identify themselves as charismatics or Pentecostals, the researchers found.

The study showed that Hispanic worshippers tend to gather in churches that have some Hispanic clergy, offer Spanish-language services and serve predominantly Hispanic congregations. These "ethnic congregations" are emerging across the country and draw in both immigrant and U.S.-born Hispanics.

"Latinos are finding each other and worshipping together," Roberto Suro, director of the Pew Hispanic Center, said in a conference call with reporters Wednesday. "Religion appears to be one area where ethnic identity matters a lot."

The analysis, "Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion," is based on several telephone surveys, with the main one conducted between August and October 2006. More than 4,600 Hispanic adults participated in what the researchers called one of the largest examinations to date of Hispanics and faith. The margin of error was plus or minus 2.5 percentage points.

Overall, the study found, about 68 percent of Hispanics identify themselves as Roman Catholic, 15 percent describe themselves as evangelical or born-again, 5 percent say they are mainline Protestants, 3 percent belong to other Christian denominations and about 8 percent say they are secular. The remainder declined to answer.

About one-third of all U.S. Catholics are Hispanic, with that percentage considered certain to rise, alongside the growing Hispanic population. And about 54 percent of Hispanic Catholics surveyed identified themselves as charismatics or Pentecostals, compared to about 12 percent of non-Hispanic Catholics.

Both charismatic and Pentecostal Christians, often grouped under the term "renewalist Christianity," place special emphasis on an intense, personal experience of the divine and believe that the Holy Spirit is manifested through supernatural phenomena, such as miraculous healing and prophesy.

The researchers said they used "Pentecostal" to refer to survey participants who belonged to specific Pentecostal denominations. They used "charismatic" to describe Christians, including Catholics, who did not belong to such

denominations, but described themselves as being either charismatic or Pentecostal in their beliefs.

Luis E. Lugo, director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, said this style of Christianity attracted Catholics who may not feel a strong connection to God through the traditional Mass.

"This is introducing a new way to worship, a new way of being in church," Lugo said in the conference call. "This extends not merely to the expressive -- what I call bringing the fiesta spirit into the Catholic church -- but to speaking in tongues and prophesying."

But he and Suro also emphasized that many Hispanics embrace these charismatic practices while remaining Catholic. And the survey found that charismatic Hispanic Catholics are more likely than others to go to confession, sing in the choir and participate in activities at their church.

"They remain very Catholic," Suro said.

In other findings, the survey showed that for many Hispanics, religious belief is intertwined with politics, with a majority saying that religion is an important influence on their political thinking.

Religious affiliation also appears to play a significant role in determining the choice of political party for many Hispanics. Those who are evangelicals were twice as likely as those who are Catholics to identify themselves as Republicans. Hispanics who are Catholic, on the other hand, were largely Democratic.

The Pew Hispanic Center and the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life are both projects of the Pew Research Center, a Washington-based nonpartisan research organization.

The report is available online at <http://pewhispanic.org/>.

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