

Latinos drift from Catholic Church

by [Cathy Lynn Grossman](#) in the [June 11, 2014](#) issue

A new report, “The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States,” reads very much like a biography of Fernando Alcantar.

Like six in ten Hispanic Catholics in the United States, Alcantar was born in Mexico, where “you are Catholic as much as you are Mexican. You like jalapeños and worship the Virgin of Guadalupe,” he said.

But once he moved to California after high school, his faith journey diverged—and was derailed. Today Alcantar, 36, calls himself a humanist.

The Pew survey report released May 7 is subtitled: “Nearly One-in-Four Latinos Are Former Catholics.” And Alcantar is one of them.

Hispanics are still a pillar of American Catholicism—fully a third of the U.S. church today. And their share is climbing along with the overall growth of the Hispanic population.

More than half (55 percent) of the nation’s estimated 19.6 million Hispanics identify as Catholic, according to Pew’s report, which uses “Hispanic” and “Latino” interchangeably.

But that’s 12 percentage points below 2010, when 67 percent of Latinos surveyed said they were Catholic, the survey found.

“Everyone was surprised in some way by the findings, the first time the size of the decline in Hispanic Catholics has been measured in depth,” said Pew research associate Jessica Hamar Martínez. “If both trends [immigration and shifting] continue, a day could come when a majority of Catholics in the United States will be Hispanic, even though the majority of Hispanics might no longer be Catholic,” the survey said.

According to the report:

- Nearly one in three Hispanics (32 percent) said they no longer belong to the major religious tradition in which they were raised (not including changes between Protestant denominations). Among foreign-born Hispanics, half switched faiths before arriving in the United States.
- Today 18 percent of Hispanics claim no religious identity, up from 10 percent in 2010. “I think people were expecting the growth in evangelicals among former Catholics, but the rise of the unaffiliated was unexpected,” said senior researcher Cary Funk.
- Now 22 percent of Hispanics say they are Protestant. This includes 16 percent who call themselves evangelical, up from 12 percent in 2010.
- The movement out of the Catholic Church is led by the young and middle-aged. Only 45 percent of Hispanics under age 30 are Catholic. And four in ten (37 percent) of those young Catholics say they can imagine leaving the Catholic Church someday.
- Most Hispanics (seven in ten) who left the church for any new direction left before the age of 24.

That story sounds familiar to Alcantar, of El Centro, California. He left Catholicism at age 18 and Christianity altogether by the time he was 32. Two of his three siblings are agnostic; only one sister remains devoutly Catholic.

Among ex-Catholics who turned to another denomination, the Pew survey found that many have turned to the enthusiastic worship of Pentecostal, charismatic or “renewalist” churches that celebrate gifts of the Holy Spirit such as divine healing, receiving direct revelation from God, and “a strong sense of God’s direct, often miraculous, role in everyday life.”

That is the route taken by Alcantar’s parents. His mother, Teresa Foucar, is an evangelical Protestant, and his father became a deacon with an Assemblies of God church.

Among ex-Catholics, most told Pew they either “drifted away” (55 percent) or just stopped believing in the teachings of their childhood faith (52 percent). “There’s rarely, if ever, a single reason,” Funk said.

Pew drew a wide range of responses to an open question on why people moved. Only 9 percent said they switched because they married someone who practiced a different religion. Just 3 percent mentioned the clergy sexual abuse scandal as a reason for switching.

Timothy Matovina, a University of Notre Dame theology professor who is familiar with the new survey, is skeptical that the out-the-door trend can be reversed, particularly for millennials.

“Among all young people, it’s a challenge to keep them in a religion,” said Matovina, executive director of the Institute for Latino Studies. “Can we stem the tide among Hispanics? I doubt it. Can we stem the tide among non-Hispanics? I doubt it. It’s not only Catholics who are struggling. Everybody is struggling.”

Matovina observed that American children don’t grow up with deeply embedded cultural Catholicism. And even those who did—such as immigrants from Mexico and Central and South America—need more than that to remain with the Catholic Church.

“They need a Catholicism of commitment, one based on a personal encounter with Jesus Christ that enlivens their faith and makes them stronger in this culture of religious choice that is the United States,” Matovina said. “The real story is all the switching in a pluralistic culture. The hardest switch is the first one. But then you can do it again and again with less cultural dissonance.”

Alcantar’s path illustrates Matovina’s concern. He was initially drawn to evangelical Christianity for the strong sense of community and the beautiful promise of a personal relationship with Jesus, he recalled.

He graduated from Pentecostal-friendly Azusa Pacific University, switched to a non-denominational evangelical church, then went to work leading youth groups for the United Methodist Church. He did international mission work with believers of many denominations, had a Mormon girlfriend, and finally landed on a pile of questions.

“The emotional connection between me and Jesus and God was finally broken. I became angry at God for all the misery, poverty, and discrimination I saw in the world. I finally allowed my doubts to come to the front burner,” said Alcantar.

Allan Figueroa Deck, a Jesuit theologian at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, said the findings are custom-made for Pope Francis's mission to the church.

"Many groups reaching out to Catholics do have some level of success. But it's not because people want to leave the church but that the church is not present to them," he said. "Pope Francis's reform is that the church must be totally focused on outreach. It has to go to the parks and the plazas and strip malls and be present in the workplace."

The Pew Hispanic survey was conducted in English and Spanish between May 24 and July 28, 2013, with 5,103 Hispanic adults, age 18 and older. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.1 percentage points overall. —RNS