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Growing Hispanic Church Community Hopes Visit Will Help Heal Society's Rifts

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When [Pope Benedict XVI](#) comes to Washington next month, he will set foot in a Roman Catholic community that is now one-third Hispanic. It is a vibrant and fast-growing segment of the regional church whose members overflow Spanish-language Masses and high-energy revival shows but who often say they feel socially isolated and harassed under local and national laws.

Their hopes for the visit of *El Papa* widely echo those expressed by Lilian Castillo, a housecleaner from [El Salvador](#) and mother of three who is a regular worshiper at St. Camillus Church in [Silver Spring](#).

"Our community is facing persecution and poverty. People are being deported, even members of our own church," said Castillo, 46. "I hope the pope can be a bridge to bring together Americans of all ages and races and levels. He is coming to bless all of us, and I hope everyone will be listening."

In addition to spiritual reinforcement, Hispanic church members and leaders in the metropolitan region are looking for moral and political support from the pontiff. They hope his visit to the nation's capital, as lawmakers continue struggling with immigration reform and the presidential race unfolds, will include a message of tolerance and inclusion toward immigrants.

The number of Hispanics among area Catholics has steadily surged in recent years; church officials estimate there are 400,000 in parishes in the District, [Northern Virginia](#) and suburban [Maryland](#).

Yet parish leaders express frustration that this growth has not led to a parallel expansion in Hispanics' influence or integration in the greater Catholic community, let alone in the society beyond.

Many churches offer Masses in both English and Spanish, and a few are experimenting with bilingual services, but language and cultural barriers often divide congregations. In some cases, the immigration debate has further split Hispanic and non-Hispanic worshipers, especially in suburbs that have dealt with such acrimonious issues as day-laborer centers and police helping to enforce immigration laws.

"We had to struggle for 10 years to be able to hold a Spanish Mass here," said Dan Masa, an immigrant from [Peru](#) who assists at communion at St. Joseph's Church in Herndon. The parish had virtually no Hispanics once, but now more than 1,000 people pour into the Spanish Mass on Sunday afternoons. "Some of the [people] still look at us funny, but we are all children of God," he said.

Still, the sheer number of Hispanics has changed the nature of Catholic worship in the region, from the booming market for frilly First Communion dresses to the rising popularity of charismatic spectacles like "Encuentro Catolico," a sold-out stage show at the D.C. Armory this past weekend. On Saturday, a series of electrifying preachers from [Latin America](#) had 5,000 people dancing, singing, praying, hugging and weeping in the bleachers.

Many in the audience were immigrants from [Central America](#); some mentioned their problems with immigration papers, family separations, addictions to alcohol, mortgage defaults and other woes. But by the time "Father Chelo" finished his mesmerizing, musical call to faith, the audience was humming with happiness.

The mix of worship and entertainment is also aimed at competing with evangelical Christian sects that have attracted many former Catholics by holding small services in Latino communities, often with live music, promises of help for social problems and an informal style that seems more personal than a vast, echoing cathedral.

"I used to hate the church," said Antonio Hernandez, 36, a laborer from [Guatemala](#) who wore a wooden cross around his neck and sang along with every bouncy hymn. "I drank a lot, and I almost lost my marriage. But finally God called me back." Hernandez said he was eager for the pope's visit: "This is like a family, and he is like a father to us."

The mass exodus of Central Americans from war and poverty over the past 25 years has been a major impetus for the growth of the region's Hispanic church. According to church officials, the area's first Spanish-language ministry opened in 1963, at the Shrine of the Sacred Heart in Northwest Washington. Today, the officials said, more than 60 churches from [Gaithersburg](#) to Herndon offer Spanish-language Masses and services, and at least one-third of all Catholics in the region are Hispanic.

The trend is similar nationwide, according to a study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. A survey found that although only 24 percent of all Americans are Catholic, more than 46 percent of foreign-born residents are. Hispanics now account for one-third of all Catholics in the United States, and their numbers are expected to grow steadily, balancing a gradual overall decline in active Catholics.

"Our community has grown tremendously, and the pope's visit will be a moment of grace and hope for all of us," said Msgr. Francisco González, auxiliary archbishop of the [Washington Archdiocese](#). "Many Hispanics are living in fear because of the raids and the

anti-immigrant sentiment. In many cases, they are not accepted. But no one can take Jesus away from us. You don't need a green card or a passport to live in His love."

The figure of the pontiff is especially beloved in Latin America, where the late [Pope John Paul II](#) visited numerous countries and won hearts with his humble and affectionate demeanor. Benedict XVI is not well known to Hispanic Catholics, and his visit to Washington is expected to be formal, tightly controlled and security-conscious, with little chance for intimate interaction with the public.

Still, competition for tickets to his April 17 Mass at [Nationals Park](#) is especially intense in Hispanic parishes. Church officials said tickets will be awarded to each parish through a quota system, then distributed within parishes by various systems. Several Hispanic priests said they were afraid illegal immigrants might be turned away for lack of a government-issued ID, but a spokesman for the Washington Archdiocese said "all parish members with tickets will be welcome."

At churches and parish halls in several Hispanic communities last week, many people said that whether they get a chance to see the pope in person or not, they hope his presence as a religious leader will help U.S. society welcome their presence a little more.

"If I could meet the pope, I would tell him to put his hand on people's hearts and to fight for our rights," said Margot Andino, 47, an usher at St. Joseph's.

When Pope John Paul II visited her native El Salvador in 1983, she said, she was too poor to go to the capital to see him.

"Now I have been working here for 17 years," she said, "and a new pope is coming to be an example and to save us."

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