News



Bibles and other books are displayed at an exhibitor's table during the annual New York Catholic Bible Summit June 18, 2016, at Cathedral High School in New York City. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Peter Feuerherd

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In an age of coronavirus and social distancing, Latino Catholics may have an advantage in keeping a vision of church alive.

Latinos, formed in a church in their home countries reliant on small base communities, are prepared to nurture a church life that cannot accommodate large-scale gatherings, Alejandro Aguilera-Titus told NCR. Aguilera-Titus is assistant director of the Secretariat for Cultural Diversity for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops

"It's part of the culture. It's how Latinos experience church," said Aguilera Titus, who lives in Maryland, 36 years after coming to the U.S. from Mexico.

In Mexico, Brazil, Honduras and El Salvador, as well as many other Latino countries, much of church life has focused around small groups who gather for Bible study, reflection and prayer. It is a model that grew out of a region where there are relatively few priests. In the growth of liberation theology in the late 20th century, small groups — known as base communities, or *communidades de bases* in Spanish — emerged, focusing on finding a church response to the intractable issues of poverty that still wrack the region. Single communities usually contain from eight to 12 participants, according to Aguilera-Titus. They meet regularly, often once a week, and the style is informal, with gatherings in homes.

Hosffman Ospino, professor of Hispanic ministry and religious education at Boston College and an expert on Latino Catholic life, told NCR that the small-group model could be a viable alternative for Latinos amid a pandemic that prohibits large gatherings in churches. It can be a model for the wider church as well, he said.

"If it is not ready, it better get ready," said Ospino, speaking about the wider church community. He noted that American Catholics will need to develop alternatives to large-scale church gatherings if the current situation continues. Already most American Catholics plan to spend much of this Lenten season without access to large church gatherings.

Much of the response to the emergency in church circles has been to build virtual communities, like broadcasting Masses on TV and online or providing religious education and inspiration via social media. Yet that approach has its limitations, said Ospino, and he noted that it aggravates the problem of individualism in American

culture, with the temptation to craft a church around individual wishes.

"We all need the human community," he said.

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The small-group approach worked through the *Encuentro* process, a program developed for Latinos in the church in the United States that culminated last year in the development of a national pastoral plan for Latino ministry, said Aguilera Titus. Small groups contributed to the findings in a series of meetings that grew from parishes to dioceses to regional gatherings.

Small groups have already contributed in times of crisis, Aguilera-Titus said. While the groups focus on prayer and Scripture study, they are flexible enough to provide discussion forums for other topics as well. In Latin America, they have become known as centers of social activism, gatherings addressing issues of poverty and violence. When the sex abuse crisis hit a tipping point over the revelations surrounding former cardinal Theodore McCarrick and the Pennsylvania grand jury report in 2018, Aguilera-Titus said that the base communities became a forum for Latino Catholics, particularly in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, two hard-hit areas, providing a spiritual response to the crisis.

"It became a real source of consolation during a difficult time," he said.

Some Latino-oriented parishes contain networks of small communities. Many are based in neighborhoods or around family ties. Aguilera-Titus is a member of one such community associated with his parish, St. Camillus in Silver Spring, Maryland.

The groups fit smoothly into Latino culture, he said. Groups pray the Rosary, others promote popular devotions, such as to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Some study the Scripture readings for Sunday Mass. Among many Latino Catholics both in the U.S. and in their countries of origin, the groups have become a central part of the church experience. They often serve as familiar social centers to cope with the dislocation of the immigrant experience.



Hosffman Ospino speaks at conference at the Catholic University of America in Washington in 2018. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

The groups provide an oasis in the immigrant experience, he said, as people seek out the familiar structure of what they have experienced with church in their home countries.

"There is a need for people to have a sense of being. It's a part of the culture. It's how Latinos experience church," he said.

At this time, he cautioned, even small groups can create a health hazard. And he cautioned that people should follow prescribed health procedures and social

distancing. Expectations are that wider gatherings will continue to be discouraged. The small base communities often are linked via family or neighborhood ties.

The experience of small communities can offer a lesson for the wider Catholic community in the United States, said Ospino. As the coronavirus crisis continues, many are finding church via social media and other links, but there is the risk that American Catholics tend to seek out online those aspects of the church that appeal to them, with Mass rituals and homilies selected that reinforce existing beliefs, said Ospino. The need for human connection with faith life will remain, and peering through a computer screen cannot fill that need. The model has long been used by groups such as RENEW, which have developed small group communities among both Latinos and non-Latinos.

Small communities can provide an alternative, with a human element that is reminiscent, Ospino said, of the very early Christian communities, who met in homes, centuries before churches became common. Faith in Christ, he said, is not simply an individual experience. It requires being part of a wider group.

Corona virus may force social distancing, but, said Ospino, for Catholics, whether Latino or not, "it does not mean we should not be a community."

[Peter Feuerherd is news editor for National Catholic Reporter.]

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