Opinion
Guest Voices



Young Latinos hold signs in support of workers picked up during a 2019 immigration raid at a food processing plant in Canton, Miss., following a Spanish Mass at Sacred Heart Catholic Church. (AP/Rogelio V. Solis)



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On Ash Wednesday, 2026, two Roman Catholic priests and a religious sister entered an Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Broadview, Illinois, to celebrate Mass with detainees inside.

It might seem like a simple, routine event: a religious service to mark the start of Lent. But the Mass represented a legal win for the Coalition for Spiritual and Public Leadership, based in Chicago. Among its founders are Michael N. Okińczyc-Cruz and Joanna Arellano-Gonzalez, a young married couple dedicated to advocacy for migrant rights.

The coalition and other Catholic leaders sued the Trump administration after attempts to bring spiritual care to detainees in 2025 were blocked. In February 2026, a federal judge ordered authorities to allow clergy inside for Ash Wednesday.

That same day, Catholics in Communion, a new coalition of ministry organizations, religious orders, academic leaders and parish partners, launched its Season of Faithful Witness campaign. Spearheaded by faith-based community organizers such as Joseph Tomás McKellar and Sergio Lopez, the initiative invites Catholics to practice solidarity by praying and advocating on behalf of migrants.

And two weeks earlier, dozens of students at Juan Diego Catholic High School in Draper, Utah, many of them Latino, participated in a walkout to support migrants, although the school did not sanction the event.

What do these leaders have in common? They are young, Latino and Catholic. Most were born in the United States. Many of the migrants they advocate for are their relatives, friends and neighbors.

About 4 in 10 Catholics in the United States identify as Hispanic or Latino. Among young Catholics born after 1982, that rises to 5 in 10.

As Catholic theologians who have researched Latino Catholics for several decades, we believe they are redefining U.S. Catholicism. Young Latinos' faith-based advocacy has put a spotlight on this group that will shape the future of the church.

Beyond stereotypes

Young people constitute the largest portion of the more than 68 million Latinos in the United States. Despite their diversity, though, their experiences tend to be lumped together, and often treated as the same as migrants'.

Most young Hispanics in the U.S., in fact, are not immigrants. Ninety-four percent of Latinos under age 18 were born in the U.S, as were 65% of millennial Latinos.

The vast majority of Latinos under age 35 are English speakers. Around 40% say they are bilingual, while around 20% say they are dominant in Spanish.

An estimated 30% of Latinos between 18-29, and 42% between 30-49, identify as Catholic – a decrease from older generations. Overall, 43% of Latino adults in the U.S. are Catholic, compared to 67% in 2010. Among ages 18-29, 15% are Protestant, and 49% are unaffiliated. Among ages 30-49, 23% are Protestant, and 29% are religiously unaffiliated.

Regardless of how Latinos identify, however, many of them grew up deeply influenced by a Catholic spirituality that permeates Latino culture, with traditions such as small altars in homes and businesses; "posadas," a popular nine-day period of prayer leading up to Christmas that remembers Mary and Joseph's search for a a place to rest before Jesus' birth; and "quinceañeras," a rite of passage when young women turn 15.

The lives of young Latinos often unfold in between cultural worlds. This can be simultaneously a source of strength or confusion. Young Latinos often feel they don't fully belong anywhere: that they are "too Latino for the U.S. Americans" but also "too North American for Latinos."

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Bridging faith and activism

Yet many of these young people, whether they are Catholic or not, are increasingly embracing their two or more cultures. They see that inheritance as a gift – and often as inspiration to advocate for social justice. Leaders we have interviewed see themselves as "gente puente," or "bridge builders," who can find fresh ways of being Catholic and American, grounded in faith-inspired commitments to justice.

In another recent study from Boston College, one of us, Hosffman Ospino, looked closely at 12 national organizations serving young Hispanic Catholics. The report concludes that initiatives that invite young Latinos to get involved with faith-based social justice are one of the most important ways to keep them engaged with their Catholic identity. When serving in their parishes, young Latinos are often involved with efforts to teach English to migrants, denounce racism, bring food to the hungry, protect life from "womb to tomb" and care for the environment, among others.

Many young Latino Catholics balance faith and public engagement through social justice immersion trips, visiting the U.S.-Mexico border, starting social ministries in their parishes or collecting food for families of migrants who have been detained. Others write letters to elected officials about immigration reform and just treatment of migrants and refugees, or help migrants file their taxes.

Present and future of the church

As the percentage of U.S. Catholics who are Latino rises, the country's bishops have repeatedly asserted the importance of listening to young Latinos.

In 2018, for example, the bishops conference convened a gathering of 3,000 delegates as part of the Fifth National Encuentro for Hispanic/Latino Ministry. This multiyear process consulted nearly 300,000 Catholics, mostly Hispanic, about their faith and priorities. The "Encuentro" – or "Encounter" – highlighted the need to empower Latinos to participate in church and society.

In 2023, the bishops approved the National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry , which proposed 10 priorities to accompany Latino Catholics. Supporting Latino youth and strengthening young adult ministries were among the top four.

Pope Francis, too, emphasized the need to listen to young Catholics, and Latinos in particular. His 2019 apostolic exhortation "Christus Vivit" – "Christ is alive" – insisted that all in the church "need to make [more] room for the voices of young people to be heard." Visiting Philadelphia in 2015, he told Hispanic Catholics, "By contributing your gifts, you will not only find your place here, you will help to renew society from within."

It's the kind of message that resonates with young Catholic Latino community organizers like Joseph Tomás McKellar, one of the leaders behind the Season of Faithful Witness campaign. Born in California to a Mexican mother and a Scottish father, he wrote in the book we edited that "bridge-building and kinship are at the heart of my family's origin story."

McKellar recalled speaking with a border patrol agent who, seeing his brown skin and name, accused him of lying about U.S. citizenship. Instead of making him resentful, the experience deepened his commitment to be a bridge builder. It galvanized his "sense of vocation," renewing a commitment to "create a society where all people can belong and thrive."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.