



Nineteen Sixty-four is a research blog for the [Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate \(CARA\)](#) at Georgetown University edited by [Mark M. Gray](#). CARA is a non-profit research center that conducts social scientific studies about the Catholic Church. Founded in 1964, CARA has three major dimensions to its mission: to increase the Catholic Church's self understanding; to serve the applied research needs of Church decision-makers; and to advance scholarly research on religion, particularly Catholicism. Follow CARA on Twitter at: [caracatholic](#).

5.06.2014

Newsflash: We are being visited by Catholics from outer space (probably...)



In 1931 Vatican Radio began transmitting a signal and these waves have now traveled very far through our galaxy. Someone out there was listening (...call it “The Pope Pius XI Effect”). Next Sunday at Mass look closely at your fellow parishioners. Welcome them. Really emphasize “peace be with you” because many of them are clearly from outer space. This has to be true because it is the only way I can make sense of much of the research about American Catholics in recent headlines.

We’ve learned that a large number of people raised Catholic are leaving the faith only to be replaced in the pews:

- **Pew** (2007): “Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses. ... Catholicism has lost more people to other religions or to no religion at all than any other single religious group. These losses, however, have been offset partly by people who have switched their affiliation to Catholicism, but mostly by the significant number of Catholics who have immigrated to the U.S. in recent decades, primarily from Latin America.”
- **American Grace** (2010): “Over the last few decades, large numbers of ‘Anglo’—that is, non-Latino—Catholics have been dropping out of or disengaging with the Catholic Church, without being replaced by other Anglo converts. ... The Catholic fraction of the U.S. population has held steady only because the departing grandchildren of white ethnic immigrants of the first decades of the twentieth century have been roughly balanced by arriving Latino Catholics. ... Just as white ethnic Catholics have rushed out one door of the Church, they have been replaced by new Latinos rushing in the other door.”
- **PRRI** (2013): “Of all major religious groups, Catholics have experienced the largest net loss of adherents due to switching religious affiliation, but these losses have been largely offset by Hispanic immigration to the United States.”

Three different pieces of quality research all reaching the same (but incomplete) conclusion. This has become a staple of reporting and commentary on U.S. Catholicism (...always ignoring that the single largest religion is also likely to have the largest number of former members and that Catholicism has has a **higher** retention rate than any Protestant denomination). A new wrinkle has emerged to the story and it is beginning to really complicate things. It goes something like this...

- **PRRI** (2013): “When comparing today’s Hispanic adults to their childhood religious affiliations, Catholic affiliation drops by 16 percentage points (from 69% to 53%). ... Catholic affiliation is sharply declining among Hispanics as a result of more Hispanics becoming Protestant (25 percent currently)

and religiously unaffiliated (12 percent currently).”

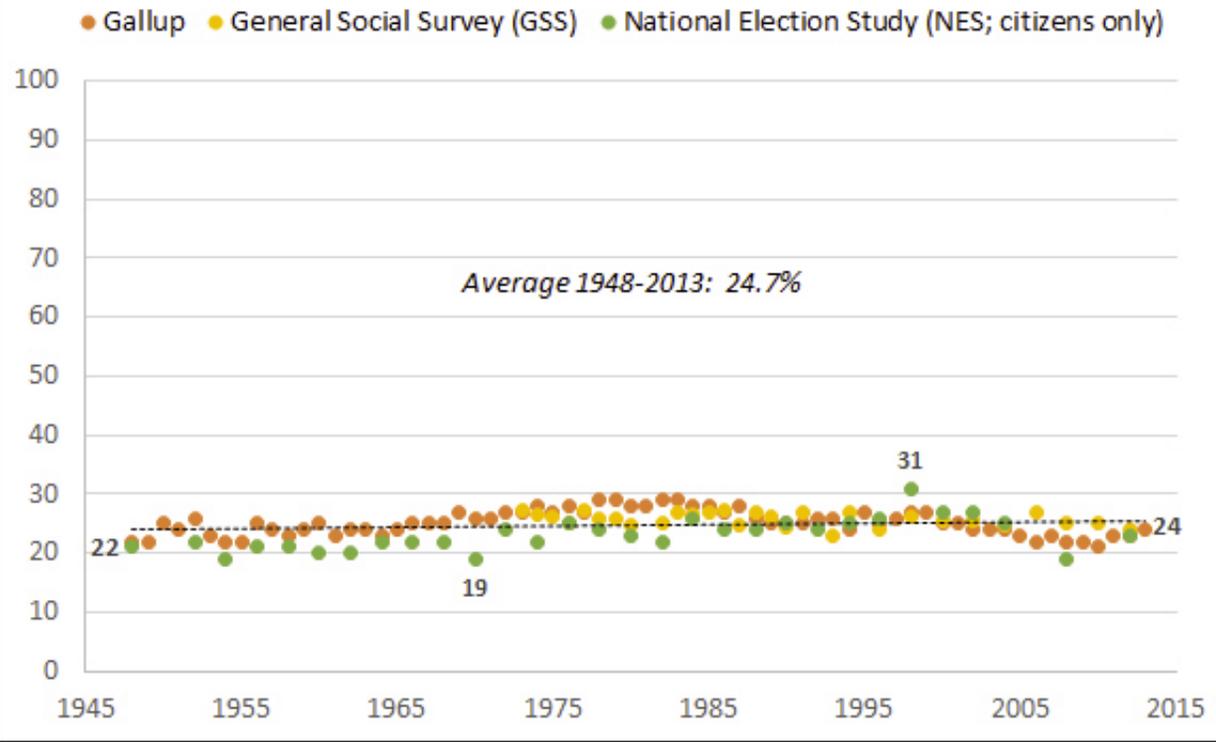
- **Gallup** (2013): “Catholics in the U.S. today are suffering from an identity shortfall among Hispanics younger than the age of 30. Less than half of 18- to 29-year-old Hispanics are Catholic, significantly lower than the percentage Catholic among those aged 30 and older. ... A majority of Hispanics in America continue to identify as Catholic, although the Catholic percentage among Hispanics appears to be decreasing.”
- **Pew** (2014): “The Catholic share of the Hispanic population is declining, while rising numbers of Hispanics are Protestant or unaffiliated with any religion. Indeed, nearly one-in-four Hispanic adults (24%) are now *former* Catholics.”

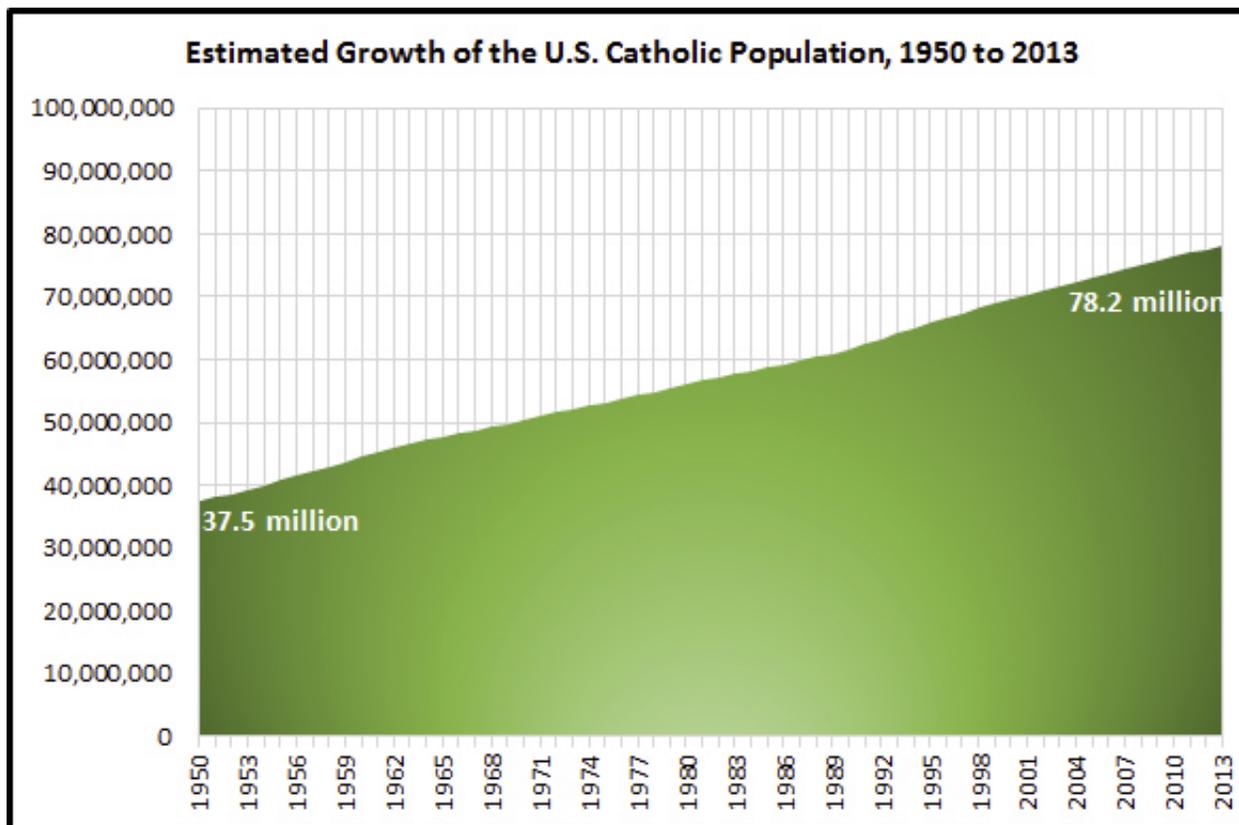
Another three good studies each reaching similar conclusions. Hispanics are leaving Catholicism as well—especially younger Hispanics. But wait a minute aren't Hispanic Catholics the whole reason we don't notice a big drop in the Catholic population? Mix in a few more pieces of research and things get even more confusing:

- **Pew** (2011): “The birth rate for U.S.-born women decreased 6% during these years [2007-10], but the birth rate for foreign-born women plunged 14%—more than it had declined over the entire 1990-2007 period. The birth rate for Mexican immigrant women fell even more, by 23%.”
- **Pew** (2012): “The largest wave of immigration in history from a single country to the United States has come to a standstill.”
- **Masse**y (2012): “As America recovers from the Great Recession, refugee migration is small, legal immigration seems to have stabilized at just over 1 million entries per year, and undocumented migration has effectively ceased for the first time in six decades.”
- **Pew** (2014): “The slowdown in growth of the Hispanic foreign-born population coincides with a decline in Mexican migration to the U.S. Today, about as many people from Mexico are leaving the U.S. as entering, after four decades of explosive growth.”

Immigration and fertility trends seemingly spell even more doom for the growth of Catholicism (...as the story goes). So just who is walking through Robert Putnam's church door from *American Grace* to take the place of all the Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholics sprinting to their cars in parish parking lots (...searching for Protestant churches on their GPS systems)? There has to be someone because the figures below still reveal one giant, stubborn, inconvenient (often ignored by the news media) truth that challenges many of the simplistic narratives in the headlines. The Catholic population is growing. How do we solve this paradox?

Percentage of U.S. Adults Self-identifying as Catholic, 1948-2013



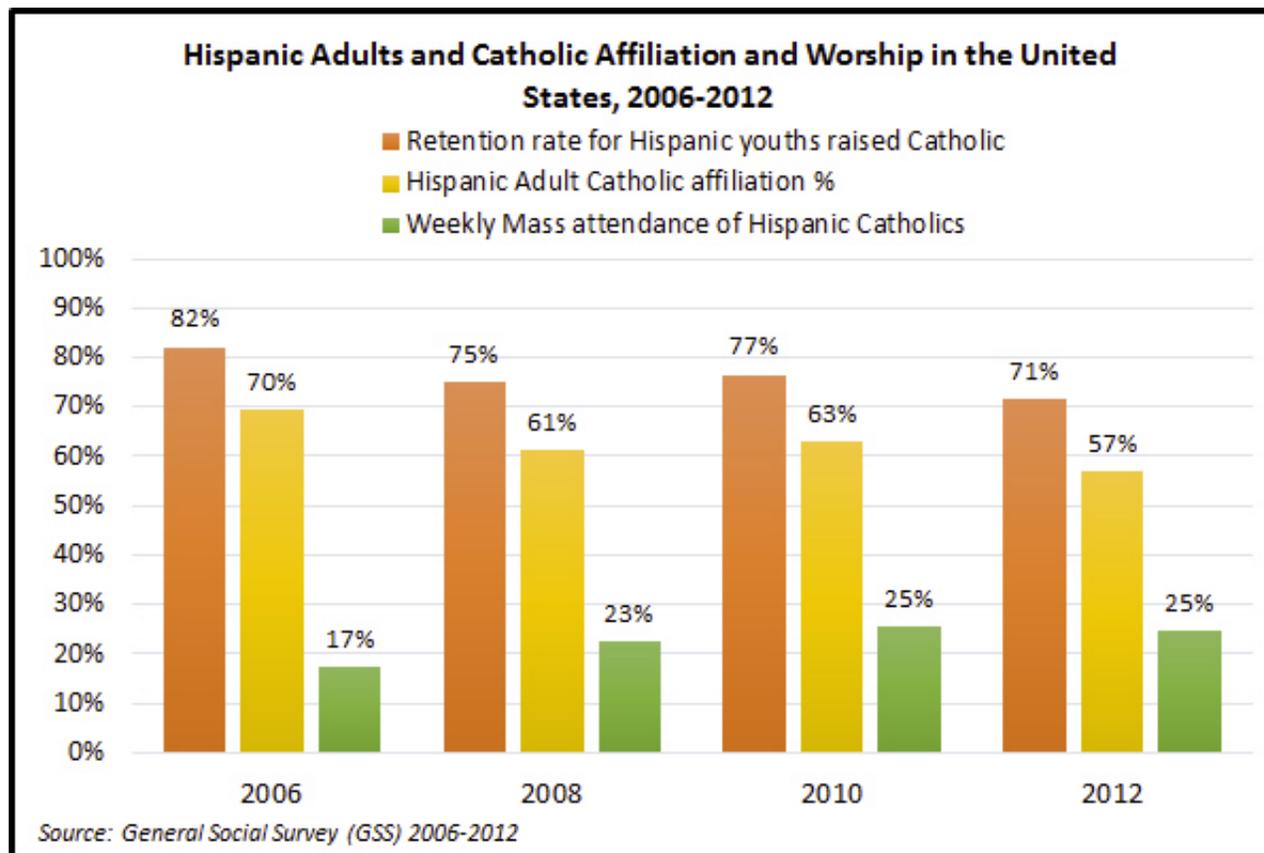


Pew, Gallup, and PRRI all do good and reliable research. I frequently use and enthusiastically cite their data on this blog. However, the manner in which their research is often *communicated* and then *translated* by the press tends to be a bit sensationalistic and lacking of a complete context. Only *after* the news stories have all been written does a more comprehensive and realistic tone seem to set in. For example, see John Allen's enlightening [interview](#) with Pew researchers regarding the numbers on Catholics leaving the Church. Louis Lugo notes, "From headlines, they may have the impression that the Catholic church is just bleeding members, but that's out of context. You have to compare it to retention rates of other religious groups" and Greg Smith indicates, "Because so many people were raised Catholic, it means that in terms of raw numbers, there are a lot of former Catholics out there. It's not because Catholics do a worse job keeping their members, but because so many were raised Catholic." By contrast, research reports and executive summaries often seem to include more hyperbole chasing headlines. Journalists also seem to lose too much of the research in translation for a more sensible portrait to emerge.

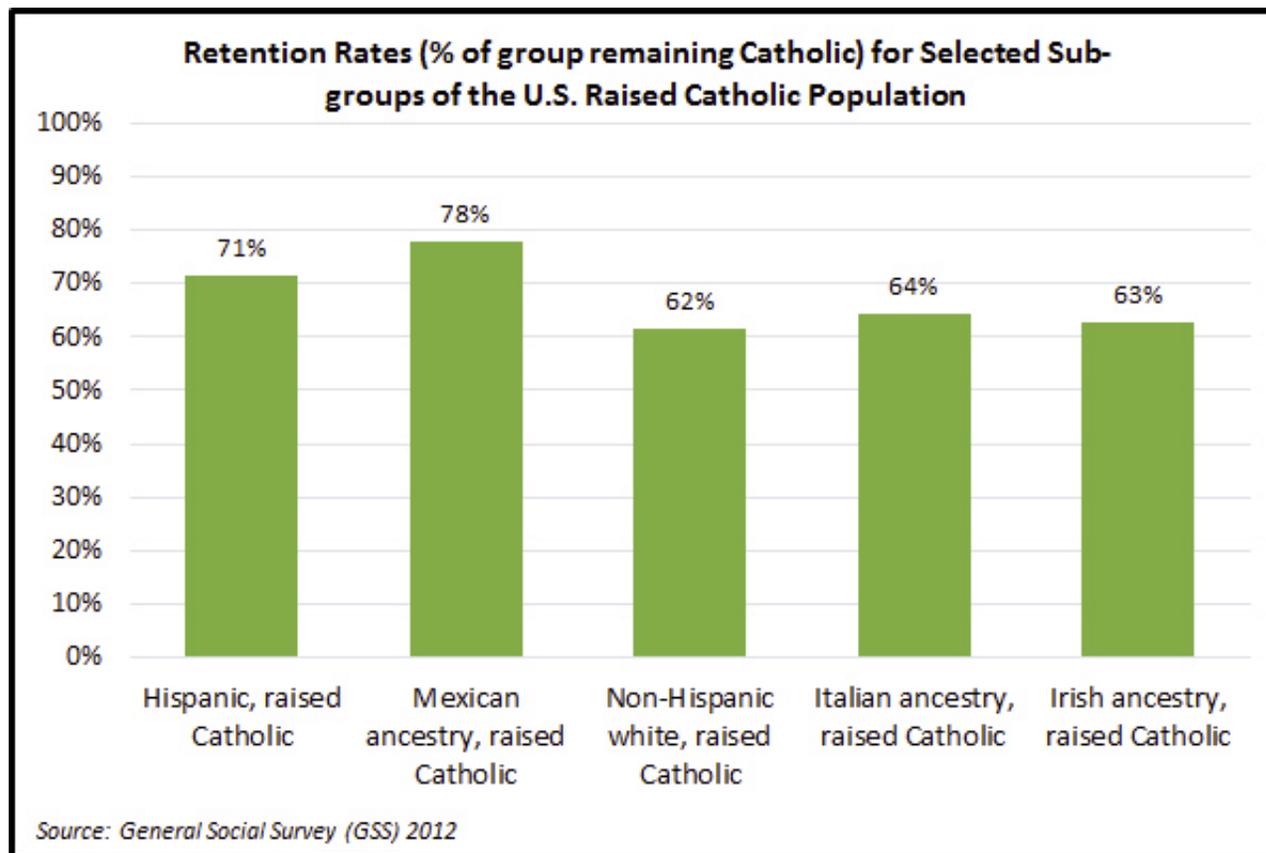
In the end numbers have to add up. Equations must balance. Paradoxes should fall. Sometimes I wonder if I will live long enough to see the Catholic affiliation percentage significantly deviate from its post-World War II average (outside margin of error) so the newspapers starts making sense again. Or perhaps it is more likely that some future study will note: “Catholicism has lost more people to other religions. These losses, however, have been offset partly by visitors from outer space living secretly among us who have converted to Catholicism.”

Seriously though the paradox still leaves an important mystery. If everyone is leaving who are all these people still here? Of course we’ve posted many times trying to provide a broader context to these changes in the Church that consider a more complete set of factors (e.g., [growth](#) of the Catholic population, [immigration](#) effects, [reverts](#), [foreign-born](#) Catholic population, [converts](#), Hispanic Catholic [retention rates](#), the changing numbers of [non-Hispanic white](#) Catholics...). I’ve been thinking again about all of this research as well of the dominant news narratives while working on a new [study](#) about Hispanic Ministry in the United States that was released Monday by [Professor Hosffman Ospino](#) at Boston College. Even here the news coverage ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#)) seemed to miss the major points and content of the study that are quite far from “doom and gloom.”

Although the “sky is not falling” there is certainly some cause for concern about how the Church is doing Hispanic Ministry. As shown below, the retention rate and affiliation rate among Hispanic Catholics are indeed declining. Mass attendance rates are more stable. It is important to note that a 71% retention rate is still comparatively very high (...to estimate a retention rate divide the number or percentage of those who currently self-identify as Catholic by the number or percentage of those who were raised Catholic).



As we've noted before, the only religious sub-group in the U.S. with a retention rate above 80% are those raised Hindu (84%). Only four others have a retention rate above 70%: those raised Jewish (76%), Muslim (76%), or Greek Orthodox (73%). Thus, even though one could say with the GSS data that more than one in four Hispanics raised Catholic are now "former Catholics" (27%) it is also the case that few other Americans are as likely to remain in their childhood faith as Hispanics raised Catholic. As you can see in the figure below, the descendants of distant European Catholic immigration are less likely to have held on to Catholicism if they were raised as such. Hispanic Catholics appear to be regressing toward a similar retention rate over time with those of Mexican ancestry being the most likely to remain Catholic.

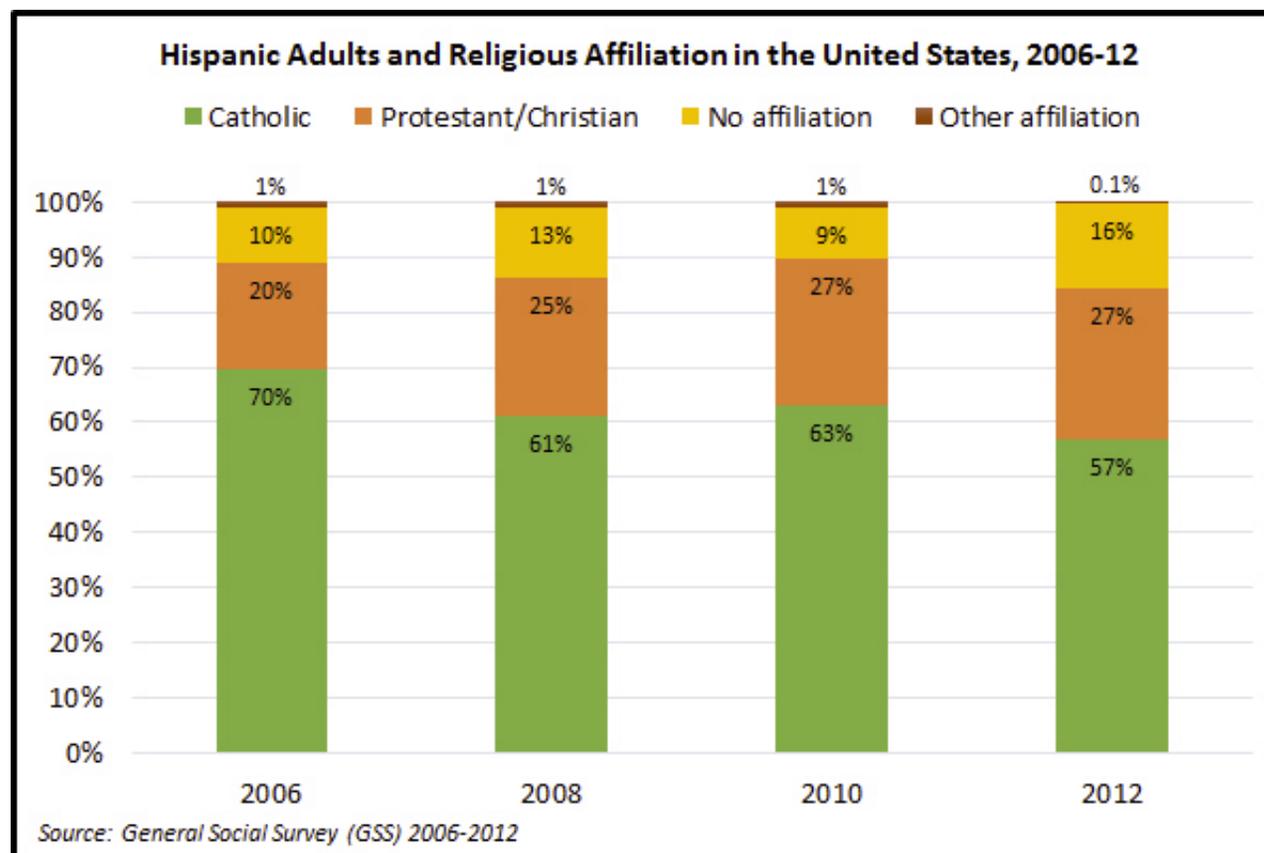


Yet the Church still needs to ask, where are Hispanics who become former Catholics going? Disproportionately they become Protestants. One of the big challenges for the Church's Hispanic ministries is to figure out what Hispanic former Catholics are seeking and finding in other churches. A religious switch does not always reflect an institutional cause or failure but surely the Church should introspectively look to see what may be lacking in its own ministries and what can be improved. Hosffman's new study provides an unprecedented opportunity to do this. It reveals both challenges as well as some extraordinary growth in the Church.

CARA research indicates that some of the most important changes are occurring among parish leaders. For example, only about 3% of U.S. Catholic priests and men and women religious self-identify as Hispanic or Latino. But the average age of priests is in the sixties and men and women religious are even older, on average. Their demography reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of Catholics born in the 1950s. Younger priests are more likely to self-identify as Hispanic. Fifteen percent of priests born since 1960 self-identify as such as do 16% of

permanent deacons. Eighteen percent of religious women and 11% of religious men professing perpetual vows in 2013 self-identified as Hispanic. Only about one in ten Lay Ecclesial Ministers (LEMs), professional lay ministers working in parishes (e.g., music director, director of religious education), self-identifies as Hispanic (9%) but again many of these ministers are in their late fifties. Big changes are coming soon with 43% of students *currently* enrolled in U.S. lay ministry formation programs self-identifying as Hispanic (...for more research findings see CARA's new [Hispanic Catholic Fact Sheet](#)).

Another area of concern is those who leave for no faith at all. A growing number of Hispanics say they do not have a religion when asked the standard survey-based affiliation question. Yet it is also the case that many in this group also self-identify as born-again or Evangelical. A recent Gallup study indicates about a third of Hispanic Nones self-identify as such. Can someone be an Evangelical or born-again None? There are so many paradoxes and mysteries to explore in religious research (e.g., 14% of atheists [believe](#) in God...).



On that note, keep your eyes open this week for Catholics in the pews with pointy ears, three eyes and/or antenna... If you were only to go by news headlines you'd have to find a solution to the Catholic population paradox somewhere!

Toy UFO image courtesy of [Marc Brüneke](#).

at 13:43



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▼ [May](#) (1)

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▶ [April](#) (2)

▶ [March](#) (3)

▶ [February](#) (2)

▶ [January](#) (2)

▶ [2013](#) (30)

▶ [2012](#) (45)

▶ [2011](#) (33)

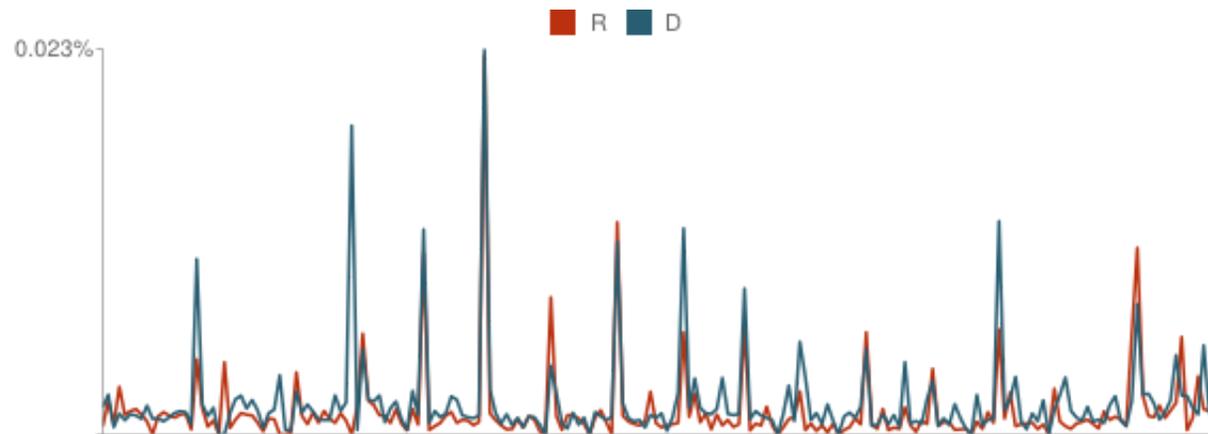
▶ [2010](#) (25)

▶ [2009](#) (12)

TRENDWATCH: MENTIONS OF "CATHOLIC" IN THE CONGRESSIONAL RECORD

Catholic

- Overall
- By party



TRENDWATCH: GOOGLE SEARCH VOLUME FOR ANYTHING "CATHOLIC"

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Interest Over Time for 'Catholic'

Location: United States

Growth compared to category: Religion & Belief

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