

**SHARED VISIONS IN SHARED SPACE:  
LATINO AND EURO-AMERICAN IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION AT ST. REGIS  
CATHOLIC CHURCH**

by

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Throughout the history of the United States, the religious beliefs, traditions, and organizations of immigrant groups have often played important roles in establishing and redefining personal, interpersonal, and cultural identities. In contemporary society, a particularly relevant example of how religion influences processes of identity transformation can be seen within Latino communities in America. As Latinos now make up one third of all Catholics in America (Stevens-Arroyo 2008, 59), American Catholics of *all* racial and ethnic backgrounds increasingly find themselves confronted with what it means to be Catholic in relation to both religious and ethnic identity.

This is the situation confronting church leaders at St. Regis Catholic Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Similar to many other parishes in the United States, St. Regis faces the difficult task of serving several distinct ethnic groups within the congregation – in this case, predominantly older Italian-American parishioners and parishioners of Central and South American descent – with unique religious heritages and expectations. Interacting in this shared religious space, however, has caused subtle but significant changes in parishioners' perceptions of the church community and their place within it.

The experiences and perceptions of Latino and non-Latino Catholics in Pittsburgh suggest that sociological forces other than cultural retention or assimilation may be possible within parishes comprised of multiple ethnic groups. I demonstrate that the current,

predominating model of cultural retention is not an accurate description of the internal social dynamics and cultural transformation that is occurring at St. Regis; the cultural retention model cannot accommodate parishioners' inclusion and expansion of diverse national holidays, the creative reimagining of traditions and festival Masses, or a pervasive sense of confusion surrounding formerly stable community linguistic identifiers and stereotypes. I offer the concept of localized transculturation as an alternative lens through which to view these cultural negotiations, and I support this argument by highlighting the St. Regis community's interwoven use of three languages, the incorporation of culturally different foods at community meals, and similar descriptions of community and a sense of belonging articulated by wide cross-sections of the congregation. This paper concludes by addressing possible theoretical and methodological challenges to these conclusions.

## **DEDICATION**

To the people of St. Regis Catholic Church for being not only welcoming and sincere, but also  
surprising.

And to Joy, whose love and support made this project possible.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: LATINO AND CATHOLIC IN THE UNITED STATES

Throughout the history of the United States, immigrant groups arriving in this country have often had to reevaluate their concept of self, community, and belonging. It is widely recognized that the religious beliefs, traditions, and organizations of immigrant groups have often played an important role in this process. Religious influences may shape or complicate personal identity, unite or separate communities, and help retain or break down cultural and traditional heritage. One particularly relevant example of how religion can be tied to various immigrant groups' cultural and national identities can be found within Latino communities in America.

Latino immigration to and migration within in the United States have been parts of American religion and history for hundreds of years; even prior to the United States' acquisition of the present-day American Southwest from Mexico in the 1840s, Latino and Spanish religious and cultural influences permeated the region. Much of this history is inextricably tied to the decisions and influence of the Catholic Church, and Catholicism continues to command a dominant position in the lives of many Latinos today. In 2007, the Pew Research Group reported that just under 70% of all Latinos (90% of whom are Christian) identified themselves specifically as Roman Catholics (Pew Hispanic Center 2007; Wilson 2008, 5). As Latinos and those of Hispanic origin now make up both the largest minority<sup>1</sup> in America and one third of all Catholics in America,<sup>2</sup> American Catholics of *all* racial and ethnic backgrounds increasingly find themselves forced to reevaluate what it means to be Catholic in relation to both religious and

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<sup>1</sup> This terminology is used as it is reported in the Census, and as a result does not reflect current arguments that race is culturally and not genetically determined (see McDonald 2007, 13; Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo 1998, 10-19).

<sup>2</sup> Latinos became the most numerous 'minority' in America in 2003 (Stevens-Arroyo 2008, 59). By 2005 there were 42.7 million people of Spanish Caribbean, Central American, or South American descent legally in America; altogether this figure comprises 14% of the total U.S. population.



ethnic identity. Indeed, the influence of Latino Catholics in the life of the church is most likely to only continue to grow in the future in both proportional influence and in sheer numbers; half of all Catholics in the United States under the age of forty are Latino, and by 2050 there are expected to be over 130 million Latino American citizens. This figure suggests that Latinos will comprise between twenty five and thirty percent of the total U.S. population (“Portrait of American Catholics...” 2008, Wilson 2008, 5).

The increasing visibility of Latin Americans as members of political, social, and religious life has been instantiated and experienced in local congregations across the country in specific ways. Among Catholic churches located near urban centers of Latino immigration and migration and within the American southwest in general, *de facto* national parishes have been growing in both size and quantity, especially since the 1960’s (see especially Ortiz 32, Wilson 4-10). According to many reports, these congregations tend to recreate or otherwise emulate both Catholic festivals and styles of worship taken from parishioners’ home churches in Central or South America (Castaneda-Liles 159-173, Sandoval 164, Badillo 2003, 15-25) . This means that most U.S. Catholic churches that are predominantly comprised of Latino members tend to promote religious practices that foster cultural retention for their ethnic groups.

While a (shrinking) majority of American Catholic parishes are still composed primarily of either European immigrants or congregants who identify themselves as white, it is clear that they can no longer ignore the presence of Latinos in the American Catholic Church at large. The last several decades in particular have seen an increase in the number of Catholic leaders and laypeople alike mobilizing politically towards the stated goal of supporting Latinos and promoting immigrant rights<sup>3</sup>. Tellingly, both Pope John Paul II and his successor, Pope Benedict

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<sup>3</sup> See particularly the first chapter of Hondagnue-Soletto, 2008, for an excellent summary of recent Catholic political activism regarding immigrant rights.

XVI, have spoken publicly about specific issues that are important to Latino American Catholics, such as immigration (both legal and illegal), human rights, and family unity (see *Ecclesia in America*, 1999, and Wakin and Preston, 2008).

## **1.1 LATINO AND EURO-AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE IN PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA**

This personal and institutional negotiation is certainly on the minds of the priests and church leaders at St. Regis Catholic Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Like many parishes in the United States, St. Regis faces the often delicate task of serving many distinct congregational groups with unique religious heritages and expectations. On one hand, the church is seeking to retain its traditional membership base of European immigrant descendants, many of whom have long-standing family ties to the neighborhood and the formerly Italian parish. Not surprisingly, almost all of these ‘traditional’ attendees are of Italian descent, and many have been members of St. Regis for decades.

On the other hand, St. Regis has become the *de facto* Latino national parish for the diocese of Pittsburgh, and as a result also caters to hundreds of new parishioners of Puerto Rican, Central American, and South American descent. These new members and attendees came to this church in groups that perceived themselves as ethnically and culturally distinct both from St. Regis’ Euro-American (i.e. mostly Italian and Italian-American) constituents<sup>4</sup> and from one another.

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<sup>4</sup> There is also a small, mostly elderly Polish population that was absorbed into St. Regis Parish within the last decade due to its dwindling population. Despite both technically being part of the parish and the fact that the same parish priest, Father Vallecorsa, ministers to both them and St. Regis, they generally maintain their community separately at St. Hyacinth Catholic Church several blocks away. Because this ethnographic project focuses on the interactions and dynamics in the community at St. Regis, the Polish contingent at St. Hyacinth is not included in this analysis.

The pages that follow contain a summary of the attitudes and experiences I witnessed and discussed with Latino and non-Latino members of St. Regis Catholic Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania over the course of 2009 and 2010, focusing on the inter-congregant and group interactions and dynamics in the parish environment. Specifically, I argue that efforts by both the church leaders and laity at St. Regis demonstrate that Latino and Euro-American parishioners are working to create a new, more unified vision of both Catholic and community identity.

One way in which this project contributes to the existing literature surrounding Latino religious experiences and communities in the United States is by calling attention to the fact that the kinds of cultural and religious identity negotiations occurring at St. Regis are not recognized or well documented within academia. Though this project is a step in that direction, contemporary scholarship concerned with Latino immigration and migration generally highlights the resilience of Latin American cultural identities rather than commonalities that are cultivated with other ethnicities. Indeed, while this paper argues that cultural and religious give and take can occur between formerly distinct ethnic and cultural groups over even a short time, many scholars argue that Latino communities firmly retain their culture and ethnic identity. In fact, scholar Felix Padilla described this pervasive academic oversight explicitly in *Latino Ethnic Consciousness*:

Another reason why the study of Latino or Hispanic ethnic identity and consciousness has been obscured is that, in general, most studies of intergroup relationships in [the United States] have been more concerned with the maintenance of ethnic boundaries and expressions of competition or conflict, both symbolic and actual (see also Glazer and Moynihan, 1963; Gordon 1975). Thus, *theoretical models have not been developed* to explore those possibilities in ethnic relations when a flow of individuals among

groups takes place to create new ethnic innovations... (147, emphasis added).

This theory among academicians – that Latinos almost always resist “assimilation” into different cultural settings – is also projected into the experiences and cultural negotiations of Latinos within the Catholic Church in the United States. Indeed, the academic consensus has correctly surmised that Latinos usually establish church communities that foster and promote purely Latino culture and values. Noted scholar David Badillo, for instance, argues that the immediate community, particularly the local parish, dominates and conditions perceptions of nationality. He writes that, in many cases where Latino families worship together, “saints, devotions, holidays... and the Spanish language and Roman Catholicism serve as common denominators” that separate these parishes from other, non-Latino Catholics (2007, 133).

## **1.2 THE ANOMALY OF ST. REGIS CHURCH**

While the majority of literature on the subject of Latino catholic experiences in the United States either suggests or assumes that Latino cultural retention and separate parishes are the norm, the data collected at St. Regis suggests that a sociological force other than cultural retention may be feasible within parishes that are comprised of multiple ethnic groups. This paper argues that the levels of intercultural exchange and accommodation occurring within the St. Regis community are unique within the existing literature on American Catholic Latinos and cannot be explained through academics’ standard appeals to either models of Latino cultural retention or assimilation.

The aim of this discussion, then, is twofold. First, this paper summarizes the pertinent literature on Latino and Latin American immigrant experiences within the Catholic Church in the United States to demonstrate that the current, predominating concept of cultural retention –

though in many cases a perfectly valid tool for describing and explaining both Latino and immigrant experiences – is not an accurate description of the internal social dynamics and cultural transformation that is occurring at St. Regis. Instead, I argue that the St. Regis parish’s process of creating a sense of identity and belonging *without* excluding non-Latino Catholics most closely resembles a localized, parish level instance of transculturation. Simply stated, transculturation can be understood as a process in which groups with distinct ethnic and/or cultural heritages interact in an environment free from oppressive power relations to mutually benefit one another; the product of this interaction over extended periods of time is a single, integrated culture. In the coming chapters, I present a wide range of evidence from parishioners’ experiences and testimonies to suggest that transculturation on a localized<sup>5</sup> community level is developing within a single generation.

After introducing the methodology and terminology employed for this study, this paper begins with an explanation of the cultural retention model of ethnic identity favored by many scholars. I argue that this current conceptualization is inadequate for understanding the social and ethnic identification processes that are occurring at St. Regis Catholic Church; the shortcomings of this model of analysis can be demonstrated through the church community’s observance of national holidays for countries other than the United States, the creative reimagining and compromising of parishioners’ expectations for traditions and festival Masses, and the increasing uncertainty that has accompanied their use of linguistic identifiers, group terminology, and certain stereotypes used to talk about other ethnic groups. I then offer the concept of transculturation<sup>6</sup> as an alternative lens through which to view these cultural

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<sup>5</sup> The area described by the term ‘localized’ as it is used here signifies only the St. Regis parish community.

<sup>6</sup> As explained in the fourth chapter of this thesis, my use of the term transculturation starts from Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens and Anthony Stevens-Arroyo definition in their 1998 work, *Recognizing the Latino Resurgence in U.S. Religion: the Emmaus Paradigm*.

negotiations, and I support this argument by highlighting the St. Regis community's interwoven use of three languages, the utilization of culturally different foods together at community fundraiser meals, and the overarching sense of community and belonging members of the church express regardless of national origin or ethnicity. Before presenting my final conclusions, this discussion also addresses possible challenges to this interpretation.

## **2.0 METHODOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS**

As in any ethnographic study, the manner in which the research is carried out must be addressed. Due to the “limited, situated positions” from which everyone must approach both fieldwork and theory (see Tweed 2006, 29–53), it seems both logical and academically responsible for me to begin this discussion by clarifying my research methodology and identifying my own cultural background. This section also includes a discussion of definitional problems relating to ethnicity and explains how and why this term is used. Once both these methodological and definitional difficulties have been addressed and the frame for my research thus established, the results and conceptual arguments that this research highlights can be presented.

### **2.1 THE METHOD AND POSITION OF THE RESEARCHER**

While the discussion and arguments in this paper are quite obviously not meant to focus on their author, modern standards of scholarship advise that the reader be informed of the manner in which ethnographic research has been conducted – in this case, among Catholics at St. Regis in Pittsburgh. For this study, in many ways I was an ‘outsider’ in the traditional ethnographic sense; I am not Italian, Latino, or Catholic. Prior to the inception of this project, I had conducted extensive background research on modern immigration into the United States and the ways in which both the Catholic Church in America and individual parishes have responded to immigration and changing parishioner demographics.<sup>7</sup> However, I had never attended St. Regis Catholic Church prior to January 2009.

Despite these potentially offsetting circumstances, none of the characteristics described above proved to be significant barriers for entry into the church community. I never sensed that I

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<sup>7</sup> For an excellent overview of this subject, see Stevens-Arroyo’s “The Latino Resurgence” (1998).

was excluded or misled based on my age, ethnicity, or non-member status in the community. On the contrary, many (if not most) of the parishioners were eager to speak with someone who was interested in their church community, even though they well knew that my interest was for professional and not personal reasons. I was introduced via an email letter from Father Vallecorsa, the parish priest, to a wide and (as I later concluded) fairly representative section of the parish; this initial introduction gave me a valuable starting point with contacts who had a wide range of experiences and knowledge concerning the church community.

These emails served as only a small part of my overall research methodology at St. Regis. Introduced to some initial contacts by Father Vallecorsa, I conducted face-to-face interviews with these parishioners ranging from a half hour to nearly two hours in length. Many of these interview sessions resulted in follow-up interviews and conversations at the church, the church office, or over the phone. Roughly half of these contacts, it turned out, were Latino and half were Euro-American, and the group overall represented people who had been active in the church to varying degrees and for varying lengths of time. Indeed, I spoke with not only the parish priest after masses and during the week, but I interviewed and chatted with members of the office staff, CCD program, past members, cleaning volunteers, and both Latino and Euro-American parishioners ranging from about 10 to 89 years of age. Congruent with these scheduled interviews and discussions with parishioners, I attended Mass roughly twice a week; these were often Thursday evening services and either one or both of the Sunday morning Masses.<sup>8</sup> Before and after these periods of observation, I was able to speak with attendees and ask questions; discussion topics ranged from their thoughts on the service and the people who had come that week to the history of the church community and the ways in which the people at

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<sup>8</sup> I also attended a few of the Masses held on Tuesdays and Saturdays at the St. Hyacinth church building several blocks away, but this separate (primarily Polish) group of parishioners was not the primary focus of my research.



St. Regis interacted. I was also able to witness group interactions before and after most of these ordinary Masses, the observances for Good Friday, evening prayer vigils, and two of the annual St. Regis fish fries.

Finally, the use of language was an important part of the methodology of this study. Unlike many of the people with whom I spoke during my time at St. Regis, my first language is English. I spoke Spanish with the parishioners only to the extent that I could introduce myself and determine if they were willing and able to speak with me in English. My choice to communicate primarily in English had both benefits and drawbacks. On the one hand, it is possible that some parishioners may have responded differently to some questions if they had been asked or answered in Spanish. In some social situations language can be an important contextual influence or a trigger for certain social responses (Woolard 1994, 56). Fortunately, the number of instances in which Latino parishioners told me that they could not (or did not want to) speak with me in English was so infrequent that such occurrences can all be counted on one hand.<sup>9</sup> I also did not converse in Italian during this research, but every informant of Italian descent with whom I spoke was at least moderately proficient in English. On the other hand, by choosing to conduct my research primarily in English, I was assuming a relatively neutral position in the community linguistically. By refraining from conversing extensively in either Spanish or Italian I was able to ensure that I did not appear to favor either linguistic group since most members of both groups also spoke English.

It could be argued that using English in this kind of setting is less than ideal if one assumes that some Latinos may have come to associate English with America's historical imperialistic and domineering attitudes towards Latinos (see, for example, Stevens-Arroyo

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<sup>9</sup> It must be noted, however, that the wide ranging ability and desire among the Latino congregants to converse with me in English in and of itself may have important connotations concerning their attitudes, education, or expectations.

1998). However, this religious community had structured their linguistic base in such a way that both English and Spanish were employed equally; both were commonly used in many aspects of church life depending on the particular speaker. Yet, many Latinos in the congregation spoke to one another in Spanish while some of the older Euro-Americans spoke to one another in Italian. Thus, while one could address the parish's priest, Father Vallecorsa, in any of these three languages, in my observation – including many conversations in which I was not directly involved – English was almost always used as the 'default' language, such as when members from different linguistic and/or ethnic backgrounds interacted but did not necessarily know each other well.

## **2.2 THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING ETHNICITY**

In any discussion involving ethnicity, one must define prerequisites for inclusion in the ethnic group of interest; among Latinos in particular this is no easy task. Throughout this discussion the term 'Latino' will be used almost exclusively; this phrasing is generally perceived to be the more politically correct term. The other widely used delineating term, 'Hispanic,' today often evokes the Spanish conquest and brutal colonization of native people (Wilson 2008, 10, citing Arlene Davila). However, in many cases it seems to remain acceptable for use in scholarship when discussing Latin American ancestry.<sup>10</sup> This use of the term is less objectionable, presumably, because with many Central and South American ethnic groups there exists the possibility for mixed ancestry spanning any number of arbitrarily defined ethnic or racial groups dating back to the conquest of much of the Americas by the Spanish. In any case, "Latino" is

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the phrase "she is an American with Hispanic ancestry" will be understood in this discussion to refer to an individual with roots in Mexico or any point south or the Spanish Caribbean. While the term Hispanic ancestry technically also refers to people from Spain, this meaning is rarely found anymore in this context in most American scholarship; 'Spanish ancestry' is the preferred nomenclature. (see Ortiz 1993, 26; Stavans 1995, 24-27; Wilson 2008, 9-10. See also Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo, 1998, 9-11, although their definitions differ somewhat from my use of terms here).

used throughout this discussion to demarcate any person who has immigrated to the United States from Central or South America, the Spanish Caribbean (including Puerto Rico), or is a citizen of the United States with Hispanic ancestry.

Before the process of delineating current scholarly conceptualizations of cultural retention and ethnicity in Latino and non-Latino Catholic parishes can begin, this discussion must first address the ambiguous terminology surrounding ‘ethnic identity.’ How does one define ethnicity? Ian Stavans notes that ethnic and cultural identifiers are no more than “anachronistic symbols and larger-than-life abstractions.” These abstractions “are less a shared system of beliefs and values [and more] collective strategies by which we organize and make sense of our experience” (1995, 21). This sentiment is also expressed by Jason McDonald; in his *American Ethnic History* McDonald demonstrates that most issues surrounding scholarly understandings of ethnicity have enormous bodies of literature but little clear consensus. Ethnicity or ethnic identity may come from inherited, innate and intrinsic properties of certain groups of people, as described by Geertz (1973) and Novak (1973),<sup>11</sup> or it may be a situated, socio-historical construction (McDonald 2007, 7; Conzen et al 1992). More recently it has been proposed that the real mechanism underlying the formulation and perception of race and ethnicity lies within some combination of the former two theories (see Ueda 1994). Following McDonald’s summary further, it is clear that there is also no consensus as to how ethnic identity may emerge; it may be transplanted from “Old World nationalities” (McDonald 2007, 8), from American WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) perceptions and impositions upon particular groups of people (Padilla 1985, 55), or in response to economic or political necessity (Ortiz 1993, 25; Padilla 1985, 3; Nagal and Olzak, 1982, 132). There is also contention surrounding

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<sup>11</sup> See Olzak’s *The Dynamics of Ethnic Competition and Conflict* 1992, especially page 6, for a description and argument against primordialist theory.

discussions of whether or not (and in what ways) perceptions of ‘ethnicity’ can be meaningfully differentiated from those of ‘race’ (see Diaz-Stevens 1998, 17-20, 42, and Stevens-Arroyo, 1994, 81).

In light of the continuing debate that surrounds the use and meaning of the term ‘ethnicity,’ I have elected to incorporate a definition that mediates (as much as possible) among the conflicting opinions cited above. Thus, for the purposes of the discussion that follows, ethnicity is understood as “the feeling of belonging to – and the quality possessed by – an ethny” (McDonald 2007, 4). While this definition by itself offers little clarification, I have also taken an ethny to mean “a people with a shared or common culture or a sense of identity based on religion, race, or nationality.” (Dinnerstein et al 2003, ix). Leonard Dinnerstein’s inclusion of religion as a factor that can inform group identity is useful for his conceptualization of ethnicity because it reflects the manner in which the environment of the St. Regis community is structured. As the following pages will show, these members actively use religion as a sometimes shared, sometimes contested “cultural resource” (Williams 2003, 173) that provides structure and meaning for their own boundaries and conceptualizations of inclusivity.

### 3.0 CULTURAL RETENTION: NATIONALLY AND AT ST. REGIS CHURCH

The argument that Latinos can both define themselves as a distinctive group and at the same time include in that group other, non-Latino members of their parish is not controversial unless one is familiar with the manner in which existing scholarship discusses Catholics Latinos. With the “melting pot” image of American society called into question by the revisionist scholars of American history over the last several decades,<sup>12</sup> one of the central assumptions that has come into vogue in modern discourse concerning specifically Latino ethnicity is that ethnic and religious identities among Latinos are resistant and often opposed to assimilation into so-called ‘American’ culture (McDonald 52-55, Stevens-Arroyo 1994, 81).

In the pages that follow, this general conceptualization of Latino identity is described as an overview of the relevant literature surrounding the subject. This review, additionally, serves as an introduction for my explanation of the differences that exist in the specific dynamics of ethnic relations and perceptions at St. Regis Church as compared to those described in other sources. Thus, following this literature review I introduce the setting and the people who comprise the St. Regis church community. This section highlights the blending of cultures and expectations occurring within the celebration of national festivals, religious holidays, and the very terms the people at St. Regis use to define one another. This juxtaposition between scholarly theory and my observations at St. Regis forms the heart of my argument that strict models of Latino cultural retention propounded in works such as Sandoval’s *On the Move*, Stavans’ *The Hispanic Condition*, Ortiz’s *The Hispanic Challenge*, Padilla’s *Latino Ethnic*

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<sup>12</sup> Classic examples that argue that American immigrant history is not a history of assimilation can be seen in John Bodnar’s *The Transplanted* (1985), Ronald Takaki’s *Iron Cages* (1979) and *A Different Mirror* (2008), and Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (1980). Jason McDonald cites Michael Novak and his work, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, published in 1973, as the origin of this school of thought (2007, 57).

*Consciousness*, and Diaz-Steven and Steven-Arroyo's *Recognizing the Latino Resurgence in U.S. Religion* are not adequate models with which to describe the social dynamics observed at St. Regis Catholic Church.

### **3.1 THE LITERATURE: THE RESILIENCE OF LATINO IDENTITY**

The consensus in modern scholarship that Latino culture is resistant to assimilation into 'American' culture ranges from well-constructed arguments defending the enduring separateness of Latino lifestyles and ideals to passing references that simply assume the truth of the matter is well-known. Further, these arguments can be found as far back as the "Third World" movement in the 1960s to scholarly discourse in the twenty first century (Stevens-Arroyo 1998, 138). As such, little more than a passing discussion is necessary to demonstrate the pervasive and established nature of this claim.

Latino historian Moises Sandoval writes that even though "Hispanics live in the United States... [they are] not blurring or erasing their cultural identity. All Hispanics, even those with the longest tenure, share language, views, and values different from other minorities and non-Hispanic whites" (2006, 164). In summation of the idea of transplanting culture wholesale, Stavans writes that Latinos left their old homes and came to America "carrying along with them their former environment" (1993, 26). Using less cautious language, theologian Manuel Ortiz accepts the 'assimilation' model of American immigrant history while simultaneously claiming that this model does not accurately describe Latin American immigrant experiences. Instead of assimilation, Ortiz argues, Latinos firmly retain their traditional culture:

[Hispanics] are committed to their cultural roots. ...[this highlights] the related issue... of identity versus assimilation.

Hispanics have long occupied the communities of the US without losing their identity. They have not followed the assimilation patterns of [earlier immigrant groups] who have managed to join mainstream America. Hispanics are growing in their value and awareness of self. Few will accept any form of the ‘melting pot’ notion (1993, 32).

Ortiz also joins with scholars Felix Padilla and Nagal and Olzak in arguing that a common reason why Latino ethnic groups maintain distinct nationalistic and/or cultural identities is because they frequently band together to face common economic or political concerns or necessities (Ortiz 1993, 25; Padilla 1985, 3; Nagal and Olzak, 1982, 132). The development of these socio-economic conditions and their unifying effects within and among Latino communities are outlined admirably by Anthony Stevens-Arroyo in “The Emergence of a Social Identity among Latino Catholics: An Appraisal” (1994, see especially pages 102-116).

Some of the clearest signs that assimilation is no longer discussed as a tenable theory can be seen in the recent changes in the metaphorical language used to describe American ethnicity and identity. Previously, phrases such as the American “melting pot” have been used to describe the assimilation of culturally and racially diverse groups into some sort of ‘mainstream’ American society. David McDonald points out, however, that since the 1960s this metaphor has been widely regarded as a myth intended to force ethnic minorities to assume Anglo-American values (2007, 53). Today, metaphors such as “salad bowl,” “patchwork,” and especially “mosaic” are common ways of discussing ethnic identity in America within a pluralistic model (McDonald 2007: 55).

More specifically, within the scope of Catholic religious organization, one finds ample evidence that assimilation is no longer<sup>13</sup> the goal for Latinos. Stevens-Arroyo and Diaz-Stevens note that:

Latino Catholicism... develops Latino leaders, promotes Latino cultural expression, and fosters organizations... [that are] important to all Latinos. ...Latinos who are upset with special attention can attend all-English services, if they wish, of course, choosing to assimilate into the mainstream, but we have seen nothing to suggest that... (1998, 217).<sup>14</sup>

Catherine Wilson also notes in passing the importance of Catholicism (and Christianity generally) in maintaining Latino identity. “The Christian congregation,” she writes, “is the ‘central location’ for the Latino community, according to Luis Padraja. In providing Latinos with a community of faith, the Christian congregation *helps safeguard Latino cultural traditions and religious customs*” (2008, 5, emphasis added). Even Pope John Paul II recognized this important trend, and since 1987 the Catholic Church has highlighted and supported Latino traditions and the Spanish language as a tradition to be fostered “separate from Euro-American Catholicism” (Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo 1998, 190). This stance was made perfectly clear, for instance, when the Pope addressed Latinos in New York City in 1996 in Spanish and encouraged them to “keep alive [their] faith and culture” (Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo 1998,

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<sup>13</sup> Good examples of overviews of the Catholic Church in America’s historical attempts to assimilate Latino populations include Badillo, *Latinos and the New Immigrant Church* (2006), or Dinnerstein et al, *Natives and Strangers* (2003, particularly pages 165, 189, and 229). Additionally, particularly insightful examples of cultural retention and adaptation can be seen in David Badillo’s *Latinos in Michigan* (2003), Peggy Levitt’s *The Transnational Villagers*, and Thomas Tweed’s seminal work, *Our Lady of the Exile* (1997).

<sup>14</sup> See also Stevens-Arroyo “Pious Colonialism...” (2008) and Diaz-Stevens “Colonization versus Immigration...” (2003).



190). More than just verbal encouragement, however, can be read from the U.S. bishops' decisions to approve Spanish language versions of the Ordinary of the Mass,<sup>15</sup> the Proper of the Mass, and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in 1989, 1990, and 1991, respectively. It is also notable that a ritual for the celebration of *la quinceanera* was published by a recognized agency of the U.S. Catholic Church in 1995 (Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo 1998, 190-191).

### **3.2 THE EVIDENCE: THE LATINO AND EURO-AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN ST. REGIS CHURCH**

For observers entering the St. Regis sanctuary for the noon Spanish language Mass, it might appear that Latino cultural retention is alive and well. While the church building itself is an unimposing, square, steeped brown brick building constructed in the late 1950s, the otherwise staid interior is brightened with six Marian statues and pictures, most notably Our Lady of Guadalupe just to the right of the altar. Despite the fact that the priest, Father Daniele Vallecorsa,<sup>16</sup> as well as much of the surrounding neighborhood, is Italian, the entire service is conducted by Vallecorsa in Spanish. While the ten o'clock English (and occasionally Italian) speaking service usually utilizes only a piano keyboard and a guitar with the choir, the noon service employs flutes, drums, panpipes, tambourines, and sometimes more than one guitar to accompany the swell of Spanish liturgy and songs. Between the two services, in the fellowship hall a floor below, anywhere from thirty to fifty children attend CCD<sup>17</sup> – and almost all the

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<sup>15</sup> The decision that accompanied this specific text actually made it a mandatory addition in all parishes in the United States (Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo 1998, 190).

<sup>16</sup> Though he is referred to as Father Vallecorsa throughout this text, he is simply called Father Dan by nearly all the regular parishioners.

<sup>17</sup> CCD stands for Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. Its purpose is to instruct new members and the children of the Church in basic tenets such as the Lord's Prayer, the sacraments, the Ten Commandments, the Nicene and/or Apostle's Creed, and so on. It is referred to as CCD throughout this text because, without exception, this was the term used by congregants and church leaders at St. Regis. It should be noted that within the Catholic Church in

classes are in Spanish. In addition to the fact that all but one or two of the teachers having Hispanic ancestry, Father Vallecorsa confirmed my own observation that Latinos occupy positions in every level of the church administration. Perhaps the most telling sign, however, is church attendance. Here, the Latino population at St. Regis easily outnumbers the older Euro-American parishioners two-to-one, and almost every person regularly attending Mass under the age of 12 is Latino.

How then can one argue that the vibrant and thriving Latino population at St. Regis does not fit into the traditional academic discourse surrounding ethnic identity? While the circumstances described above may seem impressive, this is the case primarily because both Latino and Euro-American leaders and members in the church community have worked hard to mediate, compromise, and often combine a significant number of different cultural norms and expectations. Led by Father Vallecorsa, the community at St. Regis includes immigrants and descendants of immigrants from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Peru, Argentina, Guatemala, Columbia, Venezuela, and Spain. The cultural differences accompanying these national groups have been, and to some extent continue to be, the foremost cause of tension in the community. These groups have all come to St. Regis with different cultural norms and expectations for how the service should be run. Thus, even today there are occasional disagreements concerning which song should be sung at the noon Mass or what instruments should be used.<sup>18</sup> On the whole, however, when discussing church matters such as the organization of feast days, church meals, religious education, or church outreach activities (such as sponsoring ESL courses), it was

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general, however, the term CCD was replaced by the title RE – religious education – following the reforms of Vatican II.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the use of maracas seems to be an enduring ‘point of contention’ informed along nationalistic lines. Several of the Latino and Euro-American parishioners familiar with the music planning for the Spanish Mass confirmed that there are occasionally disagreements among the St. Regis band members from different countries about whether or not maracas should be used. “Honestly,” one informant said to me in mock exasperation, “would it kill them to include more percussion once in a while?!”

my observation that members more consistently endeavored to support each others' goals and be flexible with their own religious and cultural expectations.

### **3.2.1 Cultural Expectations and Feast Days**

One aspect of planning the worship services that has inspired cultural sharing among the parishioners has been the question of how to recognize national or quasi-national festivals and holidays recognized by only some of the members. Some festival celebrations, it seems, were just naturally easier than others to establish; the biggest festival celebrated by St. Regis is for Our Lady of Guadalupe. In late 2007, this special service was held in St. Paul's Cathedral (the seat of the diocese) in Pittsburgh, and both members and the event planners from St. Regis attest that that the cathedral was entirely full – the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported that there were over 1,000 people in attendance (Rodgers 2007). It is clear that this festival has, within the St. Regis community, expanded far beyond the “predominantly Mexican nationalism” and/or cultural overtones usually associated with this holiday (Castaneda-Liles 153-6). Rather, this festival is developing as a rallying point for a larger sense of Catholic identity that extends beyond ethnic identification or nation of origin for members of the St. Regis parish. At each festival I have attended, flags from many different countries – not all of them Central or South American – have been waved during the procession, and even these flags have over the years decreased in comparison with the number of flags that simply bear the image of *la Virgen*. Additionally, not only do significant numbers of Euro-Americans attend this special service, but Euro-American and Latino choir members performed together hymns in English, Italian, and Latin (see also

Bartos 1). These performances were followed by mariachi music at the conclusion of the Mass.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly to the planning and execution for the feast for Our Lady of Guadalupe, Father Vallecorsa holds to his policy that national feasts or holidays may be celebrated at the church if the service is organized by the parishioners themselves. This being the case, there are several that are generally held every year, including Columbian Independence Day in July, and, in the fall, the Feast of San Lorenzo, the Feast of the *Virgen de Coromoto*, and the Feast of the *Senor de los Milagros*, to name a few. These events are sponsored by Columbian, Italian, Venezuelan, and Peruvian community members, respectively. Also, most years there are special, multicultural conglomerations for All Saints Day and a special Mass in August for St. Hyacinth.<sup>20</sup> These festivals are generally accompanied by statues of the corresponding patron or representation of the Virgin, whichever the case may be, and the icons are kept in various locations around the sanctuary the rest of the year. Special attention has been paid to the ordering and placement of the icons throughout the sanctuary; the statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe is to right of the altar at the front of the church, St. Regis' likeness is kept to the left, and the others line the back sanctuary wall. Finally, a recently hung picture of St. Padre Pio (an Italian monk recently canonized) is displayed on the right wall towards the front. This placement demonstrates a clear effort on the part of the church leaders to physically demonstrate the acceptance and incorporation of what might otherwise be considered Central and South American icons into the church and its congregation. For the most part, this seems to have been successful. These events clearly seem to have evolved beyond whichever nationality introduced

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<sup>19</sup> Bartos' (2008) description of one of the first festival Masses held at St. Paul's Cathedral documents many of the trends upheld in later *Our Lady of Guadalupe* festivals I attended.

<sup>20</sup> St. Hyacinth, along with St. Regis, is the patron saint for the parish, and according to Father Vallecorsa, members plan this Mass "to highlight the Polish culture" that was historically a part of the congregation.

the particular tradition and have been largely adopted by the general congregation. Most are now well attended by a wide variety of nationalities (including Euro-American parishioners); this was particularly apparent at the parish-wide feast for Our Lady of Guadalupe, which in 2009 boasted almost the entire population of St. Regis Church in attendance.

The new, multicultural approach to religious ceremonies has been significantly altered by the Euro-American population as well. One parishioner recounted to me her experiences at St. Regis's Good Friday service in 2008. Father Vallecorsa had orchestrated a processional at the end of the service during which the crucifix would be taken down from above the altar and processed out into the streets. This ceremony was drawn up by several of the Latino members from their own traditions, and it was agreed upon that the processional out of the building would be conducted in a somber silence befitting the occasion. However, the expected silence was somehow not communicated to some of the older Italians who had come to the bilingual Mass. Thus, when the crucifix, the image of the body of Christ, was being carried past them, my informant told me that "they began to sing from memory a low, sorrowful song in Italian from the old country... full of discord and minor keys. It was absolutely haunting." While not part of the original plan, then, the Latino planners and many people who were present agreed that the procession was a great success. This process of experimentation and cultural give-and-take embodied in changing a simple procession is one example of the melding of cultures which scholars suggest rarely occurs between Latino and non-Latino cultural groups.

### **3.2.2 The Euro-Americans at St. Regis**

The Latino population at St. Regis is only part of the total congregation, however. The other important contingency of this community of faith is the mostly older, predominantly Italian part of the congregation. While they have hitherto been referred to as Euro-Americans in this paper,

this terminology comes from Stevens-Arroyo and Diaz-Stevens and is not used or even known to the local community. Indeed, I have had many discussions with primarily older and middle-age parishioners in which they admitted to me their confusion about what label, if any, should be applied to them. One woman told me, when the conversation turned to differences between Latinos and herself, that “I’m not even sure what you’d call me – all of us, really. Where do we [Euro-Americans] fit? I mean, we fit here at the church, there just aren’t any good words for it, you know?” Another woman expressed her dissatisfaction with the available terminology. “I don’t get it,” she said matter-of-factly. “Father refers to us as Anglos, but we are not Anglos. We don’t come from Britain – we are Italians! But you can’t call us white, either; some of the Latinos are more fair [skinned] than some of us, and some of them are almost black. Oh, and when he wants to get the Latinos going, you know, motivated, he calls us *gringos*. ‘If the gringos can do this, then all of you can, too,’ he’d say.”

The more I talked with people of all nationalities, the clearer this confusion became, and the more clearly it seemed that the old modifiers and labels they used for one another were losing their applicability. One Latina who moved here from Peru and is a university professor and health professional told me that often “the father [Vallecorsa], for lack of a better term, sometimes calls the whites ‘*gringos*’ when he talks to us. And I think, why do you say this? That does not describe our friends. I know he means it in jest – it’s not a big deal – but it is not the best thing. ...In my old country, or to my parents, for example, he would be a *gringo* too, after all.” The implication in this conversation was that the parishioner felt that this sometimes derogatory term<sup>21</sup> did not accurately capture or describe the other members of her church. Rather, she was expressing her confusion and unease with what she perceived to be the

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<sup>21</sup> This term may be derogatory depending on a variety of contextual factors, including the nationality or culture of the speaker, the inflection or tone, to whom specifically the term is addressed and for what reason.

inadequacy of this linguistic signifier's ability to describe or delineate 'white' or 'Anglo' members in the church population. Father Vallecorsa himself demonstrated this conceptual ambiguity in his discussions with me. He alternated, sometimes with obvious unease and pauses (as if unsure what term to use in my presence), between using the term 'white' and 'Anglo' to describe what he called "the older<sup>22</sup> congregation," acknowledging that he himself belonged in this ill-defined category.

A growing awareness also exists among the Latino population that the indistinct borders between arbitrary classifications of race and ethnicity are breaking down. This sentiment can best be demonstrated by a conversation I had with a young Latina teenager after Mass one Sunday. As we talked about why she came to church, I asked her what, if anything, she liked best about St. Regis. After thinking about it, she told me that church allowed her to be close to God. After a pause, though, she reflected that the reason she came to church was "for all of *this*," indicating the sanctuary still fairly full of people from all over Pittsburgh and the western hemisphere talking and laughing in aisles and outside in the chill but sunny spring air. When I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by 'all of this,' referring to the people spread out and talking in the aisles, she decided, "I don't really know. You can call it whatever you want."

This apparent and widespread confusion and ambiguity concerning which, if any, labels and identifiers might appropriately describes them, then, is strong evidence that the supposedly "rigidly structured... ethnic boundaries" (Padilla 147) that are necessary for the conceptual models of cultural retention are no longer rigid nor clearly structured for the members of St. Regis church. Rather, these statements and questions from both Latino and Euro-American

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<sup>22</sup> This reference, I learned, speaks mostly to the chronological progression of the ethnic makeup of the congregation, not the age of its individual members. The Italian contingent was the original congregation, so now they are commonly referred to as "the older congregation" by the priest and other church leaders. This phrase may have a convenient double meaning, however, as many of the members of this segment of the church are also advanced in age beyond that of many – but by no means all – of the Latino members.

parishioners in conversations throughout the church year point to the conclusion that a different process of cultural interaction, one which allows for greater social cohesion, cultural give and take, and the parishioners questioning of their own understanding and definitions of ethnic labels and identifiers, must be taking place. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the best model to explain such a process is found in the theory of transculturation.



#### 4.0 TRANSCULTURATION IN GENERAL AND AT ST. REGIS

The above sections have highlighted how the parishioners and leadership at St. Regis have incorporated national holidays into the church schedule and altered traditions like Good Friday through negotiating initially divergent expectations and combining multiple traditions while working through the confusion and blurring of ethnic labels and cultural identifiers within the community. These examples all point to the simple fact that something much more complex and nuanced than simple ‘cultural retention’ or non-assimilation is occurring among the many cultural and national groups meeting together at St. Regis. Indeed, Jason McDonald points out that both of these paradigms are not “flexible or comprehensive enough to provide on its own an adequate picture of ethnic configurations in the United States” (62), and Felix Padilla explicitly complains that theoretical models that can adequately explain interactions between ethnicities that result in cultural exchange and cohesion are not being adequately developed and discussed in academic discourse.

There is one term, however, that can be used to explain the shift in cultural understanding and the cooperative give-and-take occurring among the parishioners. This concept is called transculturation. In the decade following Padilla’s call for a more inclusive and flexible model for understanding cultural interaction specifically among Latino communities and other ethnic groups, the theory of transculturation *has* been developed and discussed within a specifically Latino context by Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens and Anthony Stevens-Arroyo. The following section introduces both the concept of transculturation as it has been proposed by other scholars and the manner in which this sociological mechanism actually seems to be developing in the St. Regis Church community.

#### 4.1 THE THEORY OF TRANSCULTURATION

According to Stevens-Arroyo, transculturation refers to a phenomenon that is “original and independent” from pluralists’ existing mosaic paradigm (Stevens-Arroyo 2008: 59, citing Malinowski in his introduction to Ortiz’s *Cuban Counterpoint*, 1947). As Stevens-Arroyo and Diaz-Stevens envision it, transculturation is a process in which different cultural or ethnic groups “exchange” cultural traits for “mutual enrichment” in an environment free from oppressive power relations (1998, 40). Diaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo suggest, however, that a “pure encounter in which different cultural groups mutually enrich each other without damage” is almost “purely theoretical... in actuality such exchanges seldom take place.” These authors argue instead that transculturation can only occur over vast periods of time as “drawn out historical processes” because of the amount of time that is supposedly needed to overcome unequal power relations between different groups (Stevens-Arroyo 2008: 59; Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo 1998, 40). They cite the interactions between Normans and Saxons as an example;<sup>23</sup> it took “the process of centuries to produce not two separate groups, one out of power and the other with a hegemonic role, but one people” (Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo 1998, 40).

Diaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo use their discussion of transculturation in their work specifically to comment on whether this process could be repeated in America between Latinos and Euro-Americans. In *Recognizing the Latino Resurgence in US Religion*, they conclude that such a cultural combination could only happen if societies in America are given “enough time” to overcome “the present state of power relations [which currently] impedes a kind of ‘mutual’ assimilation on both sides” (1998: 40). In a later essay, Stevens-Arroyo returns to the concept of

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<sup>23</sup> In his 2008 essay, Stevens-Arroyo provides an example of transculturation within a Latin American context in the centuries following the Spanish conquest of Central and South America (59).

transculturation between Euro and Latin American cultures, arguing that this process could in theory be sped up “if the reminders of who is inferior and superior are removed from society, if there is significant intermarriage, if the religion is the same, and so on” (2008: 59).

While these discussions to transculturation retain a fairly positive tone initially, later discussion of this concept and its chances for success are not viewed in such an optimistic light. As their argument begins in *Recognizing the Latino Resurgence in U.S. Religion*, Diaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo point out that “transculturation is not an uncommon phenomenon... [and] there have been instances of U.S. transculturation on [even the] more difficult terrains” of religion and culture. Here, U.S. civil religion – the appropriation of symbols functioning as common property across denominational boundaries – is cited as a possible example. Later in the same work, however, these authors conclude that it is unlikely that any kind of meaningful transculturation will actually occur among Latino and Euro-American cultures. Correctly noting that true transculturation goes well beyond superficial incorporation of select elements of Latino culture, the scholars predict that the United States is more likely to “Balkanize” than come together (1998, 86). In this respect, the United States may be facing a future similar to that of Canada, perpetually “divided between an English speaking and a French speaking population” (1998, 86). In his essay “Pious Colonialism,” Stevens-Arroyo concludes his discussion of transculturation by asserting in no uncertain terms that “the relations between Latinos and Euro-Americans today do not meet most of the criteria for transculturation” (2008, 59).

#### **4.2    TRANSCULTURATION AT ST. REGIS CHURCH**

These descriptions of transculturation paint a grim prognosis for the current and future state of Latino and so-called mainstream American society. While the discussion at hand is in no way qualified or intended to comment on larger scale racial or ethnic relations, on the very local level

of the St. Regis Catholic Church community, Diaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo's tentative predictions do not seem to hold. The authors themselves acknowledge that the future of Latino relations in America is fraught with variables, especially social and economic ones, that "are difficult to predict" (1998: 86), and there are several impressive examples I have witnessed which indicate that transculturation is in fact the most appropriate way to classify the interactions and compromises at St. Regis among various cultural norms and expectations. The examples that are outlined here include the fluctuating use of language during Masses, the evolving, inclusive nature of community meals, and the manner in which the parishioners speak to and about one another.

#### **4.2.1 Transculturation within the St. Regis community: Language**

One of the most important and pervasive identifiers for ethnicity has long been considered to be language.<sup>24</sup> Proponents of assimilation theory assume that ethnic groups will (or must) give up their 'native tongues' to become part of American society, and pluralist theoreticians argue that language retention plays an important role in forming resistance to hegemonic or otherwise dominating societies (McDonald 2007: 51 & 59). Within the walls of St. Regis, English, Italian, and Spanish are all spoken, but in a context that does not privilege any one linguistic group. As has already been mentioned, Masses are usually conducted on Sunday mornings separately in English (at 10:00 am) and Spanish (at 12:00 pm). However, there are important exceptions to this state of affairs. During communion, Father Vallecorsa will administer the body to parishioners in their own language if he knows they prefer one over the others. Thus, the older Italians can attend either Mass and still hear their native language as they receive the sacrament,

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<sup>24</sup> For a thorough and wide-ranging discussion of this phenomenon, see Dinnerstein *et al*, *Natives and Strangers* (2003).

as can Latinos who wish to attend the earlier service (both of these situations, though not numerous, occur at every Mass). Further, on feast days and during special services – such as the Stations of the Cross Fridays during Lent – both English and Spanish are used back to back for all prayers, announcements, and the like, and songs are often chosen that offer both Spanish and English lyrics. As previously mentioned, the CCD (i.e, religious education or catechism) classes for younger students that occur between services are all administered in Spanish, but the older grades are taught in English by both Latino and Euro-American volunteers. This switch is especially surprising given the fact that the ethnic composition of the younger and older CCD classes do not change; all classes are overwhelmingly attended by Latino youth. Father Vallecorsa noted in one of our interviews that he and the Latino CCD coordinator had set the classes up so that some English would be spoken in hopes that “they [the Latino youth] would see that the church mirrors their own lives, which are increasingly conducted in both Spanish and English. If we only speak Spanish, they will see us as their parents’ church from the old country, and that is not what we are... it’s not what we want to be.”

Most interesting, perhaps, is the give-and-take of language acquisition that is apparent among the church members. While English as a second language classes are advertised in the church when they are offered in the larger community,<sup>25</sup> many members – particularly those who have been in Pittsburgh for a number of years – speak English well. That in and of itself is not surprising, of course, but what may be somewhat more remarkable is the fact that at least two dozen members in the smaller Euro-American community that I saw or conversed with speak Spanish. Many of these same individuals attend the noon Mass; one couple told me that, though they were born in Pittsburgh and are of European descent, they learned Spanish back in high

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<sup>25</sup> St. Regis does not teach any ESL courses itself.

school and now attend the Spanish mass because they have “friends there” and “the music is better.”

#### **4.2.2 Transculturation within the St. Regis community: Meals**

St. Regis contains several other instances of transculturation besides a shared bilingual system of language. Throughout the year, St. Regis hosts a limited number of opportunities<sup>26</sup> for the church community to come together around food. These meals traditionally involved spaghetti dinners and fish fries,<sup>27</sup> due to both the Italian heritage of the parish prior to the arrival of the Latino community and the relative ease of cooking either spaghetti or fish. Far from being abandoned, in recent years these traditions from the Euro-American community have been adapted and altered to include Latinos. While at two separate fish fries held in March and April, it was clear to me that there was a good deal of effort by both the Latino and Euro-American contingents (for lack of a better word) to include everyone. At each dinner, which lasted from noon to seven o'clock in the evening on a Friday, members of varying ethnicities would stop by throughout the afternoon, and the cook staff included both Latinos and Euro-Americans. Not one of the dozens of people with whom I spoke expressed any concern that this was an event originally operated by the Italian members, though many of the Latinos confided that the meal was something that “the church had always done” or that “it is mainly for the older members.” When asked why they came, these particular members said it was because everyone could still enjoy the food and because they could visit with and “show support” to one another. This conscious awareness of the desirability to support other members of the community is crucial; it demonstrates that efforts to foster inclusion and mutual respect and support are prized within the

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<sup>26</sup> These are limited to roughly four or five a year, not counting separate festivals like Easter or Christmas.

<sup>27</sup> Despite having the word ‘fry’ in the title, one could request either fried or baked fish along with macaroni and drink and dessert choices.

Latino community at St. Regis. Indeed, this seemed to be the case for many of the Latinos that stopped by throughout the day; some did not buy any food, or they would donate money but not eat. Mostly, people of all different ethnicities simply stood around and talked. Based on the significant amount of time I spent at these events, I placed the percentage of Italians versus the percentage of those of Hispanic descent at sixty percent and forty percent, respectively.<sup>28</sup> I knew that many of these people were from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Peru and Ecuador; there were also many people present of both Hispanic and Euro-American descent who may have been born in the United States.<sup>29</sup> Similar to the patterns I noticed after the noon mass at St. Regis, the groups of people that tended to gather to talk included many groups comprised entirely of either Latinos or Euro-Americans; however, there were several groups that I knew included both Latinos and Euro-Americans. Other members, I was told, had placed orders from their jobs in Oakland and Pittsburgh, and two of the older Italian women drove meals to both Latino and Euro-American parishioners from as early as eleven in the morning. In the kitchens downstairs from the sanctuary in the church, three out of the nine people cooking the 250 pounds of fish and the more than 100 pounds of macaroni and cheese were Latino, as were two of the three volunteers overseeing the drinks, silverware, and desserts. Many (if not all) of the cooks had worked together in the kitchen the entire day; they fired up the grills at seven-thirty in the morning and flipped the last fish over at seven in the evening.

In addition to retaining the fish fry, spaghetti dinners are still served at St. Regis, particularly during the fall each year. However, they have been adapted to accommodate and

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<sup>28</sup> The Italian women fielding tickets at the door, however, admitted that the predominance of the Italian congregants was due in large part to these congregants' greater ease of access to the event; many of them could simply walk over to the church and were able to participate during the day because they were retired. Most of the Latinos, these women speculated, couldn't get away from their jobs during the day and couldn't come afterwards because they had to travel to get back home once they were finished with their work.

<sup>29</sup> There is some concern that questions concerning national origins may not be answered truthfully by people for a number of reasons, citizenship and legal status among them. There is no way to verify the authenticity of such statements, but verification was never my intent.

include more diverse people; the spaghetti dinners now also include the opportunity to purchase Mexican flatbread. Alternatively, St. Regis now also hosts taco dinners in the food lineup with the fish fries and spaghetti. Though I did not attend these other meals, almost every parishioner I spoke to, regardless of ethnicity, volunteered fond memories or anecdotes about the spaghetti dinners or the taco sales as events that were meaningful, memorable, or well attended. These events was frequently among the variety of answers I recorded when I asked parishioners if they could recall a positive experience at St. Regis that did not include the Mass itself. While I of course do not assume that the entire church community attends these meals or that ‘everyone’ likes them, the event is mentioned frequently enough and in such an unambiguously positive light that it is safe to assume that the dinners and taco sales – like their fish fry relatives – serve to bring together people with a variety of national origins in an inclusive and culturally blended environment.

#### **4.2.3 Transculturation within the St. Regis community: Relationships**

Finally, this localized version of transculturation can be seen simply in the way the members of the parish talk about one another. The bonds that many of the members express – both male and female, old and young, and from all parts of the hemisphere –attests to the mutual acceptance and the interweaving of lives and cultures at St. Regis. Some of what I saw and heard was among Latinos from different nations and cultures. One of the members of the twelve o’clock band told me that “we [in the band] are all brothers... I come to St. Regis and I have found *mi hermanos*” (my brothers). Others told me after services that the church was a place to come together, where they could see each other and catch up; in this sense, they felt that it was like nowhere else in the city. A young woman told me as we folded napkins and sorted silverware together that being in St. Regis was like being home. When I asked her about the church before



the Latinos came, she speculated that the Italians used to be all one people. When all the different Latino groups came to St. Regis, they “were not one people,” but “we are all one now... even the Italians.” In a lengthy interview, one of the parishioners, who had lived in Pittsburgh for over thirty years and had followed the Latino community through every transplant that the diocese had implemented told me that “here, in this place, we are creating a nation where we can all belong.” These quotes and paraphrases are also representative of many other, similar statements I encountered during my time at St. Regis as well as of interactions and conversations between members who were likely unaware of my presence.

Responses from the Euro-Americans in the congregation took a different, more appreciative tone. In a striking consensus, when I asked respondents how they felt about the Latino community coming to the parish, I was told that “they [the Latinos] saved our parish.” This was the sentiment expressed even by members who had belonged to St. Regis prior to the construction of the church building itself. One Italian woman who said that she had been in the parish for over 55 years was glad that the Latinos “came and saved us... plus, some of those young [Latino] men hold the church door for me, since they are around outside when I come, you know. I’ve never had anyone hold a door for me before!” This sense of ‘salvation’ was confirmed by Father Vallecorsa and the parish’s old ledgers. Both attested to the fact that the parish was in serious financial straits (despite significant effort and some progress on the part of the previous parish administrator) as attendance dropped in the years before St. Regis became the de facto national parish for Latino Catholics in the Pittsburgh diocese. It is possible that the need for new members and finances significantly and positively altered the Euro-Americans’ perceptions of – and openness to – the incoming Latino population. As a possible example of this (and certainly as an example of transculturation), one of the Italian laywomen involved in

orchestrating certain aspects the weekly services expressed to me her view that Our Lady of Guadalupe is the patron saint of all the Americas and all the people in all of the Americas. “After all,” she said, “she is the only vision of Mary to appear anywhere in the Americas. She came for all of us.” Whether or not this is the case, it is clear that in many ways the Latino community has, like the appearance of the Virgin in the traditional<sup>30</sup> story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, provided a healing and inspiring presence that quite literally allowed St. Regis parish to make an about-face in membership, lay participation,<sup>31</sup> and financial status.

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<sup>30</sup> For a detailed history of the descriptions and uses of Our Lady of Guadalupe, see Castaneda-Liles (2008).

<sup>31</sup> Events at which attendance has risen include the aforementioned dinners, church picnics, a yearly rummage sale, and attendance at services. Additionally, requests for special events, which are all listed on separate sheets hanging in the St. Regis rectory, have risen from just a few instances in 2002-2003 to 52 baptisms and 2 weddings in 2007-2008. These events include baptisms, confirmations, first communions, new members, and a new celebration, *la quinceanera*. Before the arrival of the Latino community – that is, when the parish was comprised almost entirely of aging Euro-Americans/Italians – none of the above events were scheduled at the church with any regularity... except funerals.

## 5.0 POTENTIAL OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

The preceding pages have demonstrated that the concept of transculturation is both a useful and appropriate way to describe the mechanism of social change and the confluence of originally separate cultures and ethnic identities at St. Regis Church. The evidence includes parishioners interchanging use of multiple languages, the utilization of culturally different foods together at community events, and the sense of community and acceptance parishioners consistently demonstrate towards one another regardless of potentially exclusive ethno-linguistic identifiers. As seemingly unambiguous as this evidence may be, the following section addresses several potential objections before presenting some final thoughts on the subject. Possible criticisms that are addressed include distinguishing between transculturation and multiculturalism as well as the validity of my observations and conversations with both Euro-American and Latino parishioners given my predominantly ‘outsider’ status.

The use of parishioners’ statements throughout this argument presents a possible point of contention, and is largely tied up in the traditional ‘insider/outsider’ dilemma of ethnography. As I stated in my methodology, I am not Latino. Though I am a Euro-American according to the standards I have applied to my informants throughout this study, I am not specifically Italian-American, either. As an ‘outsider’ in both of these respects, it is natural that some readers may wonder whether the interviews and discussions I had with parishioners – particularly Latinos – represented altered or masked opinions based on what they thought I wanted to hear or what they thought would present themselves and the church in the best possible light. As in most any ethnographic study, this is not an easy criticism to overcome; while all the interviewees I talked with seemed quite sincere, that *by itself* clearly does not guarantee anything. To counteract this concern, I have relied as much as I can on observable evidence of events and groups of people.

Only one section of this extended argument, which ranges from festival incorporation and language usage to community meals and altered traditions, is primarily concerned with how people spoke to me about their fellow parishioners. My decision to include the selections and quotes from interviews stemmed from the fact that what the parishioners were saying corroborated my independent observations within their community. Indeed, in some instances, parishioners I overheard talking after Masses or at events did not know me or notice that I was listening.

A second possible criticism of the evidence presented here is that what I have described is merely ‘multicultural’ and not trans-cultural. However, the differences between the two terms are straightforward. As noted above, transculturation involves an equitable process of give-and-take among two or more cultures resulting in *one* new collective identity and culture. Multiculturalism, which literally (and quite obviously) means ‘many cultures,’ does not denote this type of cultural synthesis and unity into a single group identity. One appropriate metaphor for describing multiculturalism is that of the “salad bowl” described by Jason McDonald in his overview of pluralistic culture theory (2007, 57). The different ingredients in the salad – which represent separate cultures – are brought together by the ‘salad bowl’ of society, but the individual ingredients do not lose their original identity. As I have demonstrated throughout this paper, what is occurring at St. Regis goes far beyond the together-yet-distinct implications of the term ‘multicultural.’ I have shown that this social process must be the accepting and creative fusion of different cultures through the use of multiple, increasingly interchangeable languages among church members, the inclusion and reinvention of festivals and Church traditions (including community meals), and the effusive sense of camaraderie expressed in both the words and actions of the parishioners. Such creative interaction and mutual give-and-take is the very

definition of transculturation, and the fact that it is occurring within this religious community very rapidly only suggests that time frame within which transculturation is thought to occur needs to be reevaluated. As implied by the title of this paper, the social mechanism at work St. Regis goes far beyond allowing groups of people to simply inhabit the same building; they are blending expectations and attitudes across cultures to create a group of people that have come to understand each other, their church, and their spiritual goals in largely similar ways.

One important detail that supports the assertion that transculturation is at work in St. Regis is the balance of power and authority among groups of people. The theory of transculturation states that the dynamics of power that inevitably exist between ethnic groups must be relatively equitable if “mutual enrichment” between these groups is to occur. This is exactly what has happened at St. Regis. As was mentioned previously, St. Regis was historically an Italian-American parish. However, several years ago the number of members was dwindling at such a rapid pace that many in the community feared that they would be disbanded and absorbed into the larger parish adjoining theirs. This was undesirable for these members because the church in this parish, St. Paul’s Cathedral, was over a mile away and would have proved to be much less convenient and accessible – particularly for the more elderly members. Besides, many of the remaining Euro-Americans had been members of St. Regis for decades; many were married or baptized there, and as a result did not want to lose what had for so long been a place of special memories and spiritual significance. Given this state of affairs, it was clear to most of the people involved that the Latino population had significant influence in St. Regis. The other members of St. Regis clearly needed Latino members’ participation if they wanted to stay solvent, and the vast majority of the Euro-American members of the church with whom I spoke expressed that sentiment to me during some point in our conversations. The original members at

St. Regis knew that they were able to keep their beloved parish running only because of the infusion of life and money the Latino community provided. In this very real sense, then, the relationships between the existing and incoming group of parishioners were equitable. The Euro-American parish provided a new and permanent home for the Latino Catholic community in Pittsburgh, and the Latinos, through the positions they held in all levels of the parish administration and their sheer numbers<sup>32</sup> bolstering the congregation, allowed the parish to continue operating. As mentioned earlier, this new relationship is unmistakably demonstrated in the placement of iconography within the sanctuary; the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe takes precedence over all the other Marian images and saints – including the patron saint of the church –in the most prominent spot in the church after the altar.

Finally, the role and influence of the parish priest for St. Regis community, Father Daniele (sometimes spelled Daniel) Vallecorsa, must be given some consideration. Interestingly, similar to the parish itself, Father Vallecorsa represents an unusual synthesis of multiple ethnic and intellectual cultures. Though he was born in Italy and travels to Italy and the Vatican almost every year, Father Vallecorsa has lived in various regions of the United States his entire adult life. He is middle aged – his spry physical appearance and energy suggest that he will be active for decades to come – and this fact means that he is both similar in age to many of his parishioners of both Latino and Euro-American descent and that he is situated in between sizable contingents of younger Latino members and elderly Italian members in the parish. He is fluent in Spanish, Italian, English and Latin and is also conversant in Polish and French. During my earliest discussions with the priest, I noticed that his office shelves are filled with a wide

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<sup>32</sup> In 2007, the parish administration under Father Vallecorsa organized an initiative to register the Latino families who regularly attended the church. According to the official records reported to the diocese, this effort resulted in 180 Latino adults being registered that year alone. The 2007 fiscal year thus saw the number of registered Latinos at St. Regis rise to 441 – over 60% of the entire congregation – and the formerly non-existent CCD/catechism program rise to include over 30 children.

selection of books that range from church history and philosophy to feminism and immigrant rights; I also learned that he has taught language classes at Duquesne University and has presented lectures on immigrant rights and social justice at conferences in Pittsburgh and beyond.<sup>33</sup>

The impetus to form and foster a Latino community in Pittsburgh was begun by Father Vallecorsa's predecessor at a different church in the diocese in the form of informal prayer groups and social gatherings. The diocese moved the "Latino group," as they were referred to at the time, to the St. Regis parish in the 1990's – ostensibly for a larger meeting space and a more central location within the city. It was around that time, too, that Father Vallecorsa was transferred to the St. Regis parish (see also Breier 1). It was this reorganization by the Pittsburgh Diocese, then, that began Father Vallecorsa's long and active involvement with both the St. Regis parish and the Latino community. These circumstances, combined with the authoritative role that Father Vallecorsa occupies as the parish's priest, suggest that he has been a significant force behind the social transformation in the St. Regis community. Indeed, it was he who facilitated Latino church members inclusion into all levels of the church administration, began offering services in Spanish, and has in general encouraged the reevaluation of parishioners' cultural and religious expectations and understandings of one another. All of these alterations have been integral parts of the transculturation process at St. Regis.

Stevens-Arroyo and Diaz-Stevens do not consider to what extent individual or group agency is necessary or important in the development and progression of transculturation. They are also silent concerning the roles that authority figures – in the case of the St. Regis parish, authorities such as the Diocese of Pittsburgh and Father Vallecorsa himself – can or should

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<sup>33</sup> For example, during my time at St. Regis, Father Vallecorsa presented a lecture on immigration reform at the 20<sup>th</sup> annual Parish Social Ministry Institute in Pittsburgh. The flyer from that conference can be found at [http://ccpgh.org/fliers/2009\\_0918\\_SMI.pdf](http://ccpgh.org/fliers/2009_0918_SMI.pdf).

contribute to the process of transculturation. This silence presents promising avenues for future theorizing and research. In the meantime, at least, this research demonstrates that within the St. Regis religious community the use of authority has clearly functioned as a catalyst for – and compliment to – the process of transculturation, and that for more than a decade that authority has primary been vested in Father Daniele Vallecorsa.



## 6.0 CONCLUSION: THE TRANSCULTURATION OF A COMMUNITY

Ilan Stavans wrote that “the new Latino” approaching the twenty-first century is “a collective image whose reflection is built as the sum of its parts in unrestrained and dynamic metamorphosis, [with] a spirit of acculturation and perpetual translation [that is both] linguistic and spiritual...” (1993, 13). While not contesting the accuracy of this phrase in its applicability to large segments of Latino populations in America, it seems that this conceptualization applies to both the Latino population *and* the entire congregation at St. Regis Church. This congregation is comprised of people from all over the Western Hemisphere; they come from diverse socio-economic, linguistic, cultural, and nationalistic/ethnic backgrounds. Many parishioners, including both Euro-Americans and Latinos, have been in this country their whole lives; others came to America as many as fifty or sixty years ago, and still others have just arrived. What many people did not bring with them to St. Regis, but have discovered there nonetheless, is a sense of ethnic and trans-ethnic unity based on community and a mutual respect of cultures rather than divisions based on race, misguided preconceptions, or even language.

This discussion has argued that Latin American parishioners at St. Regis Catholic Church in Pittsburgh are redefining their Catholic community as one that provides a sense of a collective ethnic identity, incorporating all members regardless of language or national or cultural origin. This cultural combination and symmetrical cooperation among groups has resulted in rapid, localized transculturation and a hybrid understanding of belonging and community among the parishioners. Such rapid and mutual change among Latino and Euro-American groups resists explanation through both assimilation and cultural retention or resistance theories. Even within discussions of transculturation, such as in the explanations presented by Stevens-Arroyo and

Diaz-Stevens, this concept seems to at best be conceived of as a hypothetical or theoretical possibility that might never actually emerge among Latinos in the United States.

Yet, the ethnographic evidence presented here all points to the same conclusion. The ethnic and inter-nationalistic paradigm that St. Regis Latinos and Euro-Americans have created incorporates both native languages and many traditional cultural practices while at the same time retaining an open, reciprocal relationship of cultural give-and-take. These practices and attitudes do, in fact, mirror the definition of transculturation; the only departure from the description proposed by Stevens-Arroyo and Diaz-Stevens is that the process occurring at St. Regis has been much more rapid and is based on only a localized level of observation. Seen in this light, this author cannot but conclude that the phenomenon transpiring at St. Regis is a condensed variation on the theory of transculturation playing out among the various members of this community of faith.

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