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**The Virgin, the Priest, and the Flag:
Political Mobilization of Mexican Immigrants in
Chicago, Houston, and New York**

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**The Virgin, the Priest, and the Flag: Political Mobilization
of Mexican Immigrants in Chicago, Houston, and New York
by Gustavo Cano
UCSD-USMEX, April 2004**

“The day that the cult of the Indian Virgin [of Guadalupe] disappears, the Mexican Nationality also disappears.”
Ignacio Altamirano, *La Prensa*, San Antonio, Texas, October 10, 1920
(Quoted by T. Matovina, *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism*, p. 34, 2002)

Introduction

This paper examines the current role of religion and the Catholic Church to explain different levels of political organization and mobilization of the Mexican immigrant communities in New York City, Houston and Chicago. The paper analyzes the mechanisms and symbols used by Catholic-based grass-roots organizations when mobilizing the community in order to deal with a whole set of contextual needs, and how this process reinforces systematically the introduction of these dynamics of political incorporation within their respective localities.

The aim of the comparison is to identify and analyze the different factors that intervene in the process of nonelectoral mobilization of immigrants in an urban context. This research points out that processes of immigrant political mobilization and participation cannot be understood only by referring to spatially demarcated national or local cultures, indeed these processes reflect a set of symbolic references and socio-political spatial transformations that takes into account the demographic composition, the socio-political and cultural background of the immigrant communities, and the ‘new’ reality that they face on arrival.

In this paper, I mainly argue that, in the mainstream study of ethnic American politics, the Mexican community cannot be considered anymore a monolithic group, whose political behavior is one and the same all over the United States. Mexican communities living in the United States have different origins in Mexico, and they go through different experiences of political mobilization, organization, and incorporation through their daily lives in American cities. The initiatives of the local Catholic Church to mobilize the

community, the relations of the local church with the local government, and the use of religious symbols with political purposes, are the main components that make the difference.

Data for this work was obtained from historical research and secondary resources in the cities of New York, Houston and Chicago, and the Mexican state of Puebla, as well as in-depth interviews with local religious leaders, officials of the Catholic Church, and representatives of community-based organizations in these places during 2002. For the purposes of this research, Mexican immigrants are those persons who were born in Mexico, who live in the United States, and who are noncitizens.

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Religious Symbols and Political Mobilization

Studies on religious traditions -and/or symbols- and their relationship with immigrant groups have been developed mainly within a transnational context. They include implicit

¹ The opinions expressed in this article are the sole responsibility of the author and not necessarily represent those of the Mexican government.

or explicit references to transnational religious networks (Williams 1998, Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002, Sandoval 2002); transnational religious ties (Levitt 1997, 1998, 2001); the relationship between transnational religious groups or communities, the church and the nation-state (Garrard-Burnett 1998, Haynes 2001); the importance of Church relations with future immigrant generations as a key factor for a transnational religious field to survive (Cook 2002); and the consideration of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a powerful religious, national, and political symbol for Mexican-origin people in the United States (Goizueta 2002, Matovina 2002, Levitt 2002, 2003).

For the Mexican American and Mexican cases, in general terms, the literature suggests that the image of the Virgin becomes a source of empowerment for the community, and a symbol of Mexican consciousness (Rodríguez 1999). Moreover, the Virgin expresses not only a collective Mexican identity and cultural pride, but also enhances struggle for justice and even resistance to assimilatory pressures (Matovina and Riebe-Estrella 2002). However, there are practically no studies that assess the role of religious symbols and traditions in the political mobilization of an immigrant community from a comparative perspective.

This paper addresses the issue of religiously-based political mobilization of Mexican immigrants from two perspectives. The first one is based on mainstream models of mobilization in American politics, and the second one deals with the issue of mobilizing ethnic minorities in the United States.

According to Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), and Tilly (1978), mobilization is “the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate.” One actor has mobilized somebody by doing something to increase the likelihood of his/her political participation. Mainstream research on the topic considers political mobilization as one of the most important explanatory variables when studying political participation. This paper explains how and why political mobilization emerges as a product of religious-based means and symbols.

In general terms, political participation is explained by resources such as time, money, skills; motivations such as interests, identifications, trust, group consciousness, and beliefs of individual citizens; and mobilization, in which the strategic choices that leaders make, and the strategic decisions that they reach, shape the whos, whens, and whys of political participation (Verba and Nie 1972, Miller et al. 1981, and Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

More specifically, in a democratic context, Rosenstone and Hansen's model states that individual motivation and strategic mobilization work together to involve people in politics. In terms of individual motivation, people participate in politics for the following six reasons: (1) they benefit from it; (2) their involvement represents little cost to them; (3) they have a direct stake in political outcomes; (4) people strongly prefer one political outcome to another; (5) people's psychological identification with political contenders; and, finally, (6) people's beliefs and preferences.

The relationship between leaders and social networks stands at the core of strategic mobilization. Social networks (the everyday groupings of friends, family, and coworkers) provide political information at a relatively low cost. Social networks can exert pressure on the group to create and reinforce expectations that many members of the group will act in concert. However, social networks alone cannot make effective, coordinated political action possible. The role of leaders becomes essential for this purpose. Leaders target their efforts to particular people and they time such efforts for particular occasions. Activists, politicians, and political organizations are more likely to mobilize individuals they already know, individuals who are centrally positioned in social networks, individuals who can make things happen in the political arena, and individuals who have a certain predisposition to participate in politics.

This research analyzes the immigrants' identifications, beliefs, preferences, and predispositions that motivate their participation from an individual perspective. It also examines strategic mobilization by addressing the role of immigrant's social networks, the role of their religious-based leadership, and the political circumstances that allows

mobilization and participation.

Areas of political participation are primarily electoral, governmental, and organizational. Nonelectoral arenas and activities include involvement in local issues, participation on governing and advisory boards and commissions, contact with public officials and bureaucrats, and protest activities. Nonelectoral participation can take the form of members of a group or community working together through a voluntary organization or an *ad hoc* group organized to influence the government to accomplish some end, such as demanding street repair or school improvements (Uhlener 2000).

People's participation in institutions such as employment-related groups, church, and civic or voluntary associations helps to expose them to political messages and information, interactive and focused discussions, and interpersonal networks that generally evolve into social networks (Garcia 1997). Finally, the development of certain skills through participation of individuals on these organizations (for example, making presentations, conducting meetings, managing groups efforts, fund raising, and public speaking) is associated with higher levels of political participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 1999). This work starts by examining nonelectoral, and organizational participation of the Mexican immigrant community within different urban contexts.

The Context

In general terms, the church's actions are found at four levels. The basic level of action relies on priests, who lead or can be part of a parish. Priests work directly with and within the community, and are either Latinos or Anglos. The Hispanic Ministry (second level) is considered an intermediary between the first level (parish priest) and the third level, the office of the bishop or archbishop. The Hispanic Ministry sometimes takes the lead in coordinating a strategy to deal with the problems of the immigrant community, and to bring the issues to the attention of highest levels within the diocese or archdiocese. The office of the Hispanic Ministry may be occupied by a priest, a nun or a member of the laity. In this process, the office of the bishop/archbishop generally ponders how to deal with issues that can be of national interest. At the fourth level we have certain

organizations that are financed totally or in large part by the church, although this does not necessarily mean that they depend directly from the bishop/archbishop in order to act (Cano 2002). For the clergy, as a whole, to advocate for immigrants in their struggle for legalization and workers rights issues is a matter of social justice.

Chicago

In Chicago the actions of priests with Latino constituencies, along with the actions of the Hispanic Ministry, take place in a context heavily influenced by the Polish, Irish and mainstream Anglo sectors of the archdiocese. Latino priests are considered a minority within the ecclesiastical body, despite their heavy Latino constituency. Priests (regardless if they are Latinos or not) who openly exert an activism concerning legalization and workers rights issues are considered the minority within the minority. Other churches, like the United Methodist Church are also involved in the process, although the Catholic Church is considered as the leading force.

When we speak about religiously based organizations in Chicago, we refer mainly to two types of community-based organizations. The first type is one founded by religious authorities, and generally works in coordination with Catholic authorities. The second type has some organizational links with religious authorities, and use Catholic symbols to mobilize people, but it shows high levels of autonomy in financial and logistical matters. The *Resurrection Project*, and *Centro Legal Sin Fronteras* are the most representative organizations of these two types, respectively. Most of these organizations can be found all over the city, but mostly concentrated in Mexican neighborhoods, and addressing the needs of Mexican-origin population generally within the neighborhood's or the alderman district's limits. All of them have to deal within a dense network of organizations that address the same problems, but from different perspectives: unions, service-provider organizations, local and state coalitions, and Mexican state federations (macro associations that generally group Mexican hometown associations).

At least for the last thirty years in Chicago, members and leadership of religiously based organizations have gone through a set of different mobilization experiences in order to

defend immigrants' rights in several fields. These experiences include (1) parents taking an active role in the local school's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA's), and taking a decisive role in the current well-being and future of their children's education; (2) activists mobilizing and lobbying at federal level to obtain general amnesty or legalization for undocumented immigrants; and (3) dealing with issues of gentrification, to mention the most important. These experiences have proved to be extremely useful through time, mostly because activists have become familiar with how the system works, who and when to trust and, most important of all, when and how to mobilize people.

Mexican parish constituents in Chicago tend to show a lack of commitment with immigrant issues. However, the contact of the church with the community makes it attractive for other organizations when dealing with mobilization activities. In any case, there are low levels of social and political consciousness among Mexicans, whereas they show high levels of solidarity and financial generosity when problems of national concern rise in Mexico.

The lack of interest in politics is explained from different perspectives by members of the Hispanic branch of the Catholic Church. Mexicans come from a culture in which politics have been dominated by the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), for them, politics is corruption, and they are very distrustful towards local and Mexican politicians. Some priests think that definitely it is more difficult to work on political issues with Mexicans, than with other Latino-origin constituents, like Salvadorians, Colombians or Nicaraguans. However, it seems that in grounds of labor rights, the Hispanic leadership is on the rise.

In accordance to Rev. Walter Coleman, from the United Methodist Church, Irish and Polish currently control the Catholic Church in Chicago. If it is well true that it is an immigrant church, for practical purposes, the church is also part of the Chicago political machine. Even if Mexicans arrive with numbers and money, there is practically no space for a popular church in Chicago. Sometimes Mexican priests arrive to Chicago and they start to find obstacles in the very moment that they start to attract big numbers of Mexicans into their services. These obstacles include such things as the main parishioner

forbidding the new priest to say masses in Spanish, in order for him “to practice his English.” These new priests end up leaving Chicago.

On the other hand, the Catholic Church and City Hall have created organizations that address the needs of communities and neighborhoods. In these cases, the mobilization becomes issue-oriented, and they tend to finance every single detail of it. However, initiatives rarely come from the Mexican community. Generally, there is an alliance between wards (political machine) and parishes (Irish, Polish), that decide who, what, when and why to mobilize. However, Mexicans have increased in numbers, and this brings up to the table issues like legalization. It seems that Mexicans are ready to be mobilized, however, the “alliance” generally mobilizes nothing. This opens the door for new religions to get into the Mexican market.

The Catholic Church can be a strong force to make changes to happen, it can be the basis of a deep transformation of Mexicans’ minds regarding their disposition to mobilize, but the church is not taking any major initiative from an institutional perspective. However, the Church’s support of the AFL-CIO Service Employees International Union’s campaign to collect one million signatures for a general amnesty in mid-late 2002 is a sign that things start to be handled in a different way. In general terms, however, any mobilization action is left to the priests’ initiative, and it is not rare to see priests participating in public demonstrations in Chicago supporting issues related to Mexican immigrants.

Houston

In Houston, the actions of religious organizations and the Hispanic Ministry have to deal with the mainstream Anglo majority of the archdiocese. Mexicans in Houston also form the majority of the Latino constituency of the Catholic Church, although the Central American constituency is also significant. Within the context of mobilization, there are three types of organizational efforts lead by religious organizations: organizations that are supported by the church and the community, organizations that enhance the creation of other secular organizations that mobilize immigrants, and organizational actions that

advance the political education, and develop leadership formation, among immigrants.

Casa Juan Diego is a good example of an organization that deals with the every day and most elemental needs of undocumented immigrants, and that has the support of the community and the Catholic and Protestant churches in order to accomplish its task. In addition to the community support, acting in accordance to the principles and philosophy of the “Catholic Worker Movement” is pointed out as one of the principal strengths of the organization. It takes actions with the understanding that it always has to adapt to a changing environment and that it needs visibility and approval for this actions to maintain the community’s continuous support.

Finally, *Casa Juan Diego* also works in trying to make people “to think out of the box” at an individual level. It is not rare to find local or federal officials that have changed the way they look at the problems (and their solutions) related to undocumented immigrants, in large part because of entering in contact with this organization.

The *Catholic Campaign of Human Development* (CCHD) has been successful in assisting and financing the creation of community-based organizational efforts. The goal is to enhance the education and awareness of the whole community about the problems that face undocumented immigrants in Houston. The idea is to engage wealthy Catholics with the poor and the needy. The principle of action is never to back an initiative unless it comes from the community itself. The origins of the *Association for Residency and Citizenship of America* (ARCA, mostly Mexican constituency), and the *Gulfton Area Neighborhood Organization / Central American Refugee Center* (GANO-CARECEN, mostly Central American constituency) are directly related to the work of CCHD in providing the immigrant community in Houston with self-financing, highly effective, community-based organizations.

The Hispanic Ministry in Houston focuses its efforts on collaborating with “any secular organization that shares the same principles and values of the Church’s doctrine of social justice,” according to its director, Jorge Delgado. The Hispanic Ministry supports

political mobilization of Latino immigrants mainly through leadership programs (“Power to Serve”), and through an intensive networking effort among institutions and organizations that deal with immigrant issues.

At a parish level, the Latino Catholic Church follows the lines of speech and action of the bishop’s office: a church seen as the society’s conscience, the voice of the voiceless, and the explicit support of actions to defend the human rights of the immigrant community. Within this context, the Church’s support of the AFL-CIO Service Employees International Union’s campaign to collect one million signatures was an active proof of such policy. However, priests that participate directly in mobilization or organizational efforts are more the exception than the rule.

New York

To talk about political mobilization of Mexican immigrants in New York City (NYC) is to talk about the *Tepeyac Association of New York*. The mission of this non-profit, community-based organization is to promote the social welfare and defend the human rights of immigrants, specially the undocumented. Founded in 1997 and currently formed by at least forty committees (Guadalupano Committees), and currently has an estimated membership of ten thousand persons, across the five NYC boroughs, and some up-state areas. No other organization reaches such an impressive capacity of mobilization in the Tri-state area.

Some Guadalupano Committees have been in existence since 1983, way back before the foundation of the association. The organizational structure of these committees was (and still is) very similar to that of the Ecclesiastic Base Communities, which spread in Latin America in the late sixties, and the seventies. In accordance to Mainwaring and Wilde (1989), Ecclesiastic Base Communities (EBC’s) are small local religious groups in Catholic parishes created by pastoral agents (bishops, priests, nuns, or lay people trained and commissioned by the church). Most of these committees respond to a Jesuit formation, and spend most of the time praying and reading the bible, but also trying to connect these biblical lessons with the everyday life of the community.

The creation of *Tepeyac Association* received open support from the highest authorities within the Archdiocese of New York. In addition to the original objective of creating a social organization to defend the human rights of undocumented immigrants, the organization had the goal of creating a sense of belonging and identity from the Mexican immigrants towards their Catholic faith. The Association was created through the grouping of approximately twenty Guadalupano Committees. These committees were at the time exclusively dedicated to the worship of the Virgen de Guadalupe, without the further consideration of social or political concerns. With the creation of the Association, these groups started increasingly to deal with social and political concerns that affected them in a local context.

These groups became community-based committees (EBC's style) through a consistent education process, that included translation of biblical stories into everyday-life-situations, getting information about their rights, and getting organizational skills at an individual level, and as a group. The creation of the *Tepeyac Association* lead these groups from *la oración a la acción* (from praying into acting), from a *status quo* of individual convictions and prayer into an active status of reflection and action, without losing their personal, faith-based convictions.

Other goals of the association are, to promote the integration of the Mexican community into the economic, political, cultural, and religious life of American society, and to create a Mexican community in New York through the identity building process explained above. Both goals have the implicit mission of making the Mexican immigrant more 'visible' in the city. Related to the accomplishment of these goals, the Association carries on the following activities (Rivera-Sanchez 2002): (1) Organizing national and popular-religious celebrations, like the Mexican Independence Day, the Day of the Dead, the day of Our lady of Guadalupe, among the most important. (2) Helping to prevent fraud by certain immigration lawyers, who overcharge and cheat people with their services. (3) Denunciating employers that violate labor rights. (4) Providing legal advice and psychological support to workers whose legal rights have been violated. (5) Educating

Mexicans regarding labor and human rights through Labor Clinics in parishes. (6) Promoting self-employment through the creation of community-based business and cooperative societies in the US and in Mexico. (7) Struggling for a general amnesty for all undocumented immigrants, through lobbying at local and political leaders and politicians, in addition to organizing demonstrations, 'religious marathons,' parades, and developing a national network to coordinate mobilization efforts. (8) And promoting the City Hall's official recognition of December 12th. as the 'Virgin of Guadalupe Day.'

Regarding the symbols that are the core of mobilization efforts, there are two elements of Mexican Catholicism that have been recovered by the *Tepeyac Association*. First, it is the consideration of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a symbol of Mexican national identity. Her image was printed on Miguel Hidalgo's flag, when he declared war against Spaniards in 1810 in the state of Guanajuato, calling to fight for independence, and against oppression and injustice. In addition, the name of 'Tepeyac' refers directly to a sacred place for Mexican Catholics, which was the hilltop where the Virgin appeared and announced hope. On this very hilltop, is where the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, in Mexico City, currently stands. In accordance to the leadership of the Association, the Virgin of Guadalupe represents the mother and protector of the oppressed and discriminated, and the name of Tepeyac symbolizes the starting point in invigorating a new Mexican community in exile, it represents 'the land of hope.'

Main Findings

The most important religiously-based mobilization differences and similarities between Chicago, Houston and New York City can be summarized as follows:

1. In New York, community organizations among Mexican immigrants are predominantly religious-based. Most of the religious-based organizations in New York are grouped in the *Tepeyac Association*, and are called *Comites Guadalupanos*, or Guadalupano Committees. In Chicago and Houston, religious-based community organizations represent only one among many other types of Mexican immigrant organizations. Some community-based organizations are partially religious-based in

Chicago. In Houston, the most important community-based organizations had their origins in religiously lead organizational efforts.

2. The Guadalupano Committees follow the *Comunidades Eclesiasticas de Base*, or Ecclesiastic Base Communities (EBC's) as the dominant organizational mode. In Chicago, EBC's are just one of several types of organizational modes. In Houston, this type of organizational mode is not common at all.

3. Organizations in New York designate their leaders as *animadores*, which translates as 'hosts' or 'event-organizers.' The concept avoids making any type of reference to hierarchical positions within the organization. However, the designation of an *animador* in a Guadalupano Committee is always a potential source of tension among its members. In Chicago and Houston, the leadership role in community-based organizations is quite explicit, and it can be held by a priest or a lay person.

4. In New York, the explicit support for the formation of these organizations by the highest levels of the Church hierarchy is extremely important to mobilize Mexican immigrants. The current lack of support from comparable levels in Chicago and Houston leaves open the question if the Church's support is an essential factor in mobilizing immigrants. In Chicago, other groups like unions, and non-religious community-based organizations tend to fill the gap. In Houston, practically nothing fills the gap, and levels of mobilization are extremely low.

5. In Chicago, current religiously-based organizations are engaged in a wide set of struggles that range from legalization and workers rights issues to addressing needs such as education, health and gentrification issues for families of Mexican origin. In Houston, legalization and worker rights issues are at the top of the agenda. In New York, the main struggles are related to legalization and workers rights issues, and gaining space in the Catholic churches where Mexicans live. Currently, there are no "traditionally Mexican" neighborhoods in New York. In Chicago, there are at least three neighborhoods that can be considered as traditionally Mexican: Pilsen, Little Village, and a significant portion of

Back of the Yards. In Houston, Mexican immigrant population is spread all over the city, however, the Magnolia barrio is still considered a traditional Mexican neighborhood.

6. Whenever religiously-based mobilization takes place, the Mexican flag and the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe are the most important symbols in the three cities. However, the priest himself is also considered an important symbol of mobilization in Chicago and New York. In both cities, the family is the basic unit of mobilization. In Houston, almost no priests appear on scene, and if they do, it is in a sporadic way. The individual more than the family is the basic unit of mobilization in Houston. On the other hand, Mexican Catholics in Chicago, Houston and New York find attending mass to be a very comforting experience, like “feeling at home.”

7. Religion is not the only element that explains mobilization in Chicago, and certainly not in Houston. Work, family, and Mexicanness (ethnic pride) are important elements in Chicago. In Houston, the appeal to individual consciousness and work are the main elements, and to a lesser extent Mexicanness and family. In New York, religion is the most important element of mobilization, in addition to work, family, and Mexicanness.

8. In Chicago’s Hispanic Catholic Church, there is a strong debate about the pastoral work of priests. On the one hand, the majority of priests firmly believe that pastoral work only means sacramental work. On the other hand, a minority holds that pastoral work not only needs to be liturgical but also social. This latter group argues that building and transforming society is also part of God’s kingdom. In New York, the debate mostly takes the form of negotiation between the representatives of committees and priests for a Guadalupano Committee to become part of a parish. In Houston, virtually no debate of this type is known; pastoral work seems to be the rule.

9. In Chicago there have been cases in which the local leadership switched religion because of discriminatory practices by Catholic priests and/or for political reasons. Although discrimination exists, these types of reactions among leaders have not been seen in New York. In Houston, the work of Protestant Churches to convert Mexicans is

not directly related to political reasons. The Catholic Church, however, pays attention to growing rates of conversion among the Mexican community in Texas.

10. In the three cities, religiously-based Catholic organizations show high levels of distrust towards the Mexican consulate, and towards the Mexican government in general. The majority of these activists and leaders believe that President Fox has not been sincere regarding the situation in Chiapas. However, the Mexican consulate can be considered as a strategic ally, depending on the issue, the timing, and on the personality of the Consul General.

11. There is a significant difference between being a parish priest (mostly in Chicago, and theoretically in Houston) and a brother from a religious order in terms of mobilizing people (the leader of the *Tepeyac Association* in New York). A priest leads a parish and takes care of an entire flock. A brother arrives, organizes and mobilizes a community but generally, sooner or later, the brother has to leave. For the priest in charge of the parish, administrative issues absorb a significant portion of his time. Additionally, the constituency of the parish represents commitments in both the short and long terms. The constituency of a “hit- and-run” Catholic brother is mostly people who have urgent needs. The brother works with them in building an organizational “tool,” for mobilization purposes, that they could use whenever it is needed, with or without his presence. This is the EBC’s approach. The parish priest, conversely, not only owns the “tool” but also has the last word about how and when to use it. Without him, the “tool” is not available, and mobilization simply does not take place.

12. Discretionary factor. Activists in the three cities assert that there is no guarantee that a church-organized program that has proved itself efficient and fit for the community in terms of mobilization, organization, and formation of group consciousness will last forever, or even will reach a permanent status within the structure of the church. The application of a program within a church-based organization, or within the church structure, depends very much on the personality and views of the person in charge. Sometimes, years of work experience are completely ignored because a new boss has a

new vision of how to deal with old issues. Sometimes, the office just disappears because of budgetary or political considerations within the church. Sometimes, things just don't work because there was no capability of organizational adaptation to a changing environment. Activists have learned to work with whatever they have in the moment, there is no long term planning when having the Church as a partner.

Final Remarks

I would like to conclude this paper by assessing the main findings of this research from three perspectives: the use of religious symbols by the Catholic Church to mobilize people; the non-monolithic status of Mexican immigrant communities living in American cities; and the implications for mobilization theory from a nonelectoral perspective.

The Virgin Mary (Our Lady of Guadalupe, la Virgen de Guadalupe) is the most powerfully appealing force to mobilize Mexican immigrants. You may have problems at work, and even lose your work; or you may have problems in your family, but the Virgin will always be there for you and your family, with you and your family. Similarly, when a 20 year old undocumented Mexican immigrant arrives for the first time on US soil, he/she may not have family or a clear idea about what kind of work he/she will be performing, but chances are very high that he/she already has in his/her heart and mind an average "religious baggage" of at least six hundred Catholic masses.

The transnational character of the Catholic Church clearly helps Mexican immigrants to feel at home whenever they go to mass. The format and dynamic of the masses is virtually the same in the U.S. or in Mexico, regardless if you are at Chicago, New York, Houston, or Guanajuato. Mexican immigrants' relationship with the Mother of God is an essential factor that defines their identity once they arrive to the U.S. In addition to the Virgin Mary, the priest himself is another important symbol within the religious scheme. Mexicans are extremely faithful to the Virgin Mary, and they are very obedient to the directions of the priest in a diversified set of matters, largely about family and faith. Sometimes political matters are discussed in the Sunday sermon; however, they deal mostly with solidarity causes, and not direct mobilization. Activists and politicians are

conscious of the powerfully appealing potential of the Church to mobilize people through religious symbols, although they are also aware that the highest levels of the US Catholic hierarchy generally have the last word on the matter.

The pride of being and feeling Mexican is also an important factor in the process of mobilization. In this context, the Mexican flag is the preferred symbol by most Mexicans. At public events, Mexicans feel good and smile when they see the flag waving in the air, the larger, the better. There are even flags with the green, white, and red, but with the image of the Virgin Mary instead of the official eagle at the center of the flag. In Chicago, Aztec dancers, prehispanic conch players, and Mexican *conjuntos* are also very important symbols of ethnic pride or Mexicanness of the people; in New York, folkloric ballets play a similar function. Frequent references to certain Mexican heroes such as Morelos, Hidalgo, and Zapata, as well as negative references to what they call “seventy years of PRI-gobierno,” are also important components of public speeches.

These symbols of Mexicanness are generally part of the process of reaffirming the immigrant’s identity on U.S. soil. Their use in the process of mobilization is generally limited to the capacity of relating the sense of Mexicanness to the other three major topics for mobilization: family, work, and the Virgin Mary. The appeal to the Mexicanness of the immigrant fits very well into the picture when the issue comes up in a context where the Virgin Mary and family are the driving forces for mobilization. On the other hand, workers rights activists sometimes lessen, in an implicit manner, the appeal to the Mexicanness of their constituency because of the multi-ethnic composition of the constituency itself. Central Americans in Houston, and Puerto Ricans and Poles in Chicago give the “not-only-for-Mexicans” touch to a demonstration for immigrant and/or workers rights, for example. Moreover, the Service Employees International Union’s (SEIU, AFL-CIO) national campaign in 2002 to collect one million signatures to push for legalization is an example that the Mexican flag and the Virgin Mary are not *sine qua non* conditions to mobilize Mexican immigrants.

The use of symbols for political purposes varies from locality to locality. In Chicago

there is a strong debate about using the Virgin for mobilization purposes. On the one hand, the Virgin is considered the symbol of independence and revolution, a symbol of liberty and dignity for the Mexican people in general, and the indigenous in particular. The use of the Virgin as a symbol is highly encouraged along with the use of patriotic symbols, such as the Mexican flag, or by the visible presence of priests at public demonstrations. On the other hand, some assert that the devotion to the Virgin is not and should not be political, but personal. Its politicization is considered either as a matter that should evolve over a long period of time, or that it should not occur at all.

In New York, the same debate exists mostly at a parochial level. In addition to the Virgin and the flag, group consciousness is consistently reinforced by exposing all the suffering that immigrants have to endure while crossing the border, and all the exclusion, discrimination, exploitation, and humiliation that they have to endure once they become part of the city's labor force. In Chicago, this formation of group consciousness is mostly found at the organizational level of immigrant workers, and not necessarily from a religious perspective. In Houston, the debate over the use of the Virgin for political purposes is practically non-existent (no use of the Virgin is evident), it is not common to see priests at public demonstrations, and group consciousness is also found at an organizational level, but far from religious references.

In sum, the Virgin Mary and the Mexican flag have become strong symbols of identification in the process of mobilization, whereas the notions of family and work are the driving forces of mobilization. Depending on the type of mobilization, these four elements can be combined in order to persuade Mexican immigrants to participate. In Chicago and New York, these four elements are the basic components in the process of mobilization, mostly for public demonstrations. In Houston, the Virgin Mary and the Mexican flag are used to a much lesser extent, however, the vast potential of mobilization through the use of the Virgin remains intact.

In New York, the "Guadalupe Torch Run" is a run that has taken place from the Basilica de Guadalupe in Mexico City to the St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, between

October and December (2002 & 2003), is the most vivid example of the Virgin image's power to mobilize Mexican immigrants. The main objective of the run (about 2000 runners, 45 days, 45 cities in both countries) is to ask Our Lady of Guadalupe for the miracle of general amnesty, and to expose the systematic violations of the worker rights of Mexican immigrants in New York City, and the United States. Finally, in these three cities, mostly after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, it is not uncommon to see both the Mexican and American flags waving together at public demonstrations.

The Mexican community cannot be considered a monolithic group, at least from a perspective of religiously-based political mobilization. Mexican communities go through different experiences of political mobilization, organization, and incorporation through their daily lives in American cities. In addition to the varying use of symbols for mobilization purposes, in the case of New York, Chicago and Houston, differences are evident in mobilization goals, the type of constituency, and the political context in which mobilization takes place.

In New York, the main objectives of mobilization are to make the Mexican immigrant community "visible," to do advocacy work towards defending the human and labor rights of immigrants, to address and solve the wide range of problems that immigrants face, and to fight for a general amnesty for undocumented immigrants. Mobilizing and organizing Mexican immigrants also implies an identity-building process through an active enhancement of faith and nationalism.

In Chicago, mobilization is also focused on addressing and solving the problems that the community faces as a whole. However, strong emphasis is put on the needs within the neighborhood. Although the legalization of undocumented immigrants is one of the most important issues addressed in their agenda, the "language" that is used by different organizations goes from a moderated tone, such as "we are immigrants and want legalization," to a more accentuated one, as in "we are undocumented Mexican immigrants and we want general amnesty."

In Houston, the official speech of the Church makes no explicit reference to the Virgin (in terms of mobilization), and it is more oriented towards disseminating the principles of social justice that the individual should follow in society, mostly when dealing with the defense of human and labor rights of Mexican immigrants. Activists of Mexican-origin regard the Catholic Church in Houston as a very conservative institution, more an ally than an actor in matters of mobilization. However, the Church's efforts to improve organizational skills, leadership formation, and the proliferation of community-based organizations within the community are considered as a pivotal approach to make things change. Indeed, a common characteristic of the organizations that deal with issues related to Mexican immigrants in Houston is that they address the need to change the Texas labor rights system, largely focusing on its laws and their implementation.

The type of constituency matters as well. Although the demographic concentration of Mexican immigrants is not as neighborhood-accentuated as it is in Chicago, the majority of the constituency and membership of the *Tepeyac Association* in New York come from Puebla, more specifically, from *La Mixteca* region. Guadalupano Committees share many attitudes and organizational traditions the way they used to share back home, which makes it easier to spread the message in a rapid and uniform way.

In Chicago, the constituency is not uniform in the sense that Mexican immigrants come from numerous places in Mexico, have a variety of economic and professional backgrounds, and are established in specific neighborhoods throughout the city. Moreover, the message to mobilize is spread from diverse perspectives, depending on the organization, the parish, and the neighborhood. Even if the issues are the same, the message is similar but not uniform, which leaves room for the development of multiple interpretations about the best ways to solve a problem. This leaves the door open to dividing resources and efforts in pursuing the same goal. In Houston, Mexican immigrants also come from numerous places in Mexico, considerably from border states, but the community is spread all over the city more than living in specific neighborhoods, and the number of organizations that can disseminate the message is low in numbers when compared to Chicago, and low in efficiency when compared to New York.

As for context of mobilization, in Chicago, religion can be used to mobilize; in New York, religion generates mobilization; and in Houston, religion supports in a very indirect way mobilization efforts. In other words, religiously-based mobilization is part of the context in Chicago, and to a certain extent Houston; whereas in New York, religion is the context in which mobilization takes place. In these places the role of localities and transnational politics are important factors to define mobilization strategies. However, in New York, religiously-based mobilization has taken the lead in dealing with the issues of the Mexican immigrant community. In Chicago and Houston, multiple actors (unions, non-religious community-based organizations) deal with the same issues at the same time, and the influence of the Catholic Church is relatively diluted through the process, more in Houston than in Chicago.

This research reinforces the postulate of Verba et al. (1995) that people are likely to participate in politics if they are asked to do so. Moreover, Verba et al. address the level of participation of Latinos as a whole, and assert that Catholics show lower levels of participation in comparison with other religions. In Chicago and New York, the Church, implicitly or explicitly, asks Mexican immigrants to participate, whereas in Houston's parishes this rarely happens.

Moreover, this research makes the point that it is not enough anymore to address Latinos simply as Latinos. Depending on the context, generally defined by how city politics are conducted, and by the relative number of immigrants as part of the whole population, it is necessary to recognize that, in addition to the comparative work that has been done about different nationalities of Latinos living in the same place, it is necessary to do comparative work among single national groups living in different urban contexts. Studies of this sort can be made specifically on how institutions like unions, the Church, and host and home governments affect the way Mexican immigrants mobilize and organize in addressing their own political concerns, mainly from a nonelectoral perspective.

This research also suggests that it is possible for Mexican immigrants, the majority of them Catholics, to reach high levels of political participation. This would depend strongly on the religious symbols that are used, and the initial official support of the upper hierarchy of the Catholic Church for these kind of organizational and mobilization efforts to materialize. In New York, this is what has just happened. In Chicago the question is if the alliance between the mainstream Church and the political machine is the main obstacle for this to happen. In Houston, the support of the high hierarchy seems to be on its way, with its own timing. In any case, organizations like Houston's ARCA are proof that there are many ways to invite the community to participate, and that Church's direct involvement is not a necessary condition.

Mexican immigrants, mostly because of their increasing numbers, have an enormous potential to become strong political players in certain American cities, generally the most immigrant- populated ones, such as Houston, Chicago, New York, Dallas, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, San Antonio, Denver, San Diego, Atlanta, El Paso, and Philadelphia. Future mobilization studies on immigrants should focus also on the effects of political mobilization on the family and the community, paying attention to neighborhood and religiously-based organizational processes.

Finally, when addressing the question if New York will follow Chicago's steps of a consistent proliferation of organizations that do advocacy work for immigrant's rights, the question is difficult to answer. For the moment, one sure bet is that the *Tepeyac Association* is the only game in town, it has very well defined its mobilization strategies and goals, and no major change on this is expected in the short and mid terms.

Indeed, the question is if Chicago's organizations will adapt some of *Tepeyac's* strategies regarding the use of religious symbols, and if it will adopt some aspects of the organizational modes of the Ecclesiastical Base Communities. The answer to this seems to be related to the disposition of the Archdiocese of Chicago's highest authorities to launch a full, or partial, support campaign for the defense of the rights of undocumented immigrants. If this happens, the great advantage that Chicago has over New York is the

extensive social and political networks of organizations and activists already in existence. These networks would magnify the effect of such campaign into levels never seen before.

Only God knows if Houston will follow.

List of Interviews:

- Rev. Walter Coleman, “Adalberto” United Methodist Church, Chicago, Illinois, May 17, 2002.
- Father Charles Dahm, Parish of St. Pious V, Chicago, Illinois, July 3, 2002.
- Mr. Jorge Delgado, Hispanic Ministry, Houston, Texas, March 18, 2002.
- Mr. Germán Flores, Iglesia de las Mercedes, Bronx, New York, January 31, 2002.
- Mr. Lucino Flores, former parisher of Tulcingo de Valle, Hixcolotla, Puebla, March 11, 2002.
- Father Patrick D. Hennessy, Christ the King Parish, Bronx, New York, January 10, 2002.
- Brother Joel Magallán, Tepeyac Association of New York, New York, May 20, 2002.
- Father Raúl Martínez, Holy Family Parish, Waukegan, Illinois May 26 and July 7, 2002.
- Mr. Bill Purcell, Office for Peace and Justice, Archdiocese of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, May 29, 2002.
- Father Esequiel Sanchez, Hispanic Ministry, Chicago, Illinois, July 5, 2002.
- Father Miguel Solórzano, St. Philip of Jesus Parish, Houston, Texas, June 6, 2002.
- Ms. Stephanie Weber, Catholic Campaign of Human Development, Houston, Texas, March 26, 2002.
- Mr. Mark Zwick, Casa Juan Diego, Houston, Texas, March 22, 2002.

Interviews in New York and Puebla were performed by Liliana Rivera. However, the interpretation of those interviews remains the author’s responsibility.

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