

**Religious institutions, actors and practices:  
the construction of transnational migrant organizations and public spaces  
between Mexico and the United States**

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*Background Paper* prepared to be discussed in the session 7: *Faith-based organizing strategies*. Workshop on **Mexican Migrant Civic and Political Participation**  
Wilson Center, Washington D.C. November 4-5, 2005

# **Religious institutions, actors and practices: the construction of transnational migrant organizations and public spaces between Mexico and the United States**

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## **Abstract**

This background paper proposes that the ethnic-religious manifestations of Mexican migrants be understood not as segregated subcultures in US society, but as self-assertive cultural options within multiculturalism, and fundamentally, as manifestations of their incorporation into US society through memberships of belongings that point to a certain modalities of *Postnational Citizenships*. These forms of incorporating into US society through practices carried out in the religious sphere permit Mexican migrants not only to develop civic skills, through their associational memberships, and particularly from their experiences in attending neighborhood parishes, but also to develop forms of political participation promoted through churches' central civic associational roles, but they also promote a broader incorporation of immigrants into American civic life, which transcends not only the religious sphere, but also political-electoral participation.

This means that this other form of incorporation through the construction of other forms of citizenship permit to migrants develop civic skills, on the one hand, as well as other forms of participation and practices of socio-cultural, and then civic, involvement in American society, although without having total access to citizen rights in these receiving societies. From this perspective, I propose conducting a reading of religious institutional spaces, actors and organizations, as well as the ritualized events and religious practices of Mexican Catholic migrants between Mexico and the United States.

## **Resumen**

Esta ponencia propone entender las manifestaciones étnico-religiosas de los migrantes mexicanos católicos no como subculturas segregadas en la sociedad americana, sino como opciones culturales autoasertivas dentro del multiculturalismo y, fundamentalmente, como manifestaciones de incorporación a la sociedad norteamericana, a través de membresías de pertenencia que apuntan a ciertas modalidades de *ciudadanía postnacional*. Estas formas de incorporación se desarrollan a través de las prácticas de los migrantes en el campo religioso, las cuales permiten, no sólo el desarrollo de habilidades cívicas a través de membresías asociativas, y en particular de las experiencias de asistir y participar en las parroquias católicas de los barrios de asentamiento, sino el desarrollo de formas de participación política promovidas a través de los roles asociativo-cívicos de las iglesias, los cuales funcionan como conductos de información política, pero también como una forma más amplia para la incorporación de los inmigrantes en la vida de la sociedad norteamericana, la cual trasciende, a la vez que el campo religioso, también la participación político-electoral.

Estas otras formas de participación y de prácticas de involucramiento socio-cultural y, luego cívico, de los migrantes católicos en la sociedad norteamericana, posibilitan la actuación de los migrantes en el espacio público transnacional, no necesariamente como actores marginales, incluso consiguiendo transformaciones relevantes en el espacio social y las prácticas culturales de la sociedad norteamericana, a la vez que en las sociedades de origen, aún sin tener total acceso a los derechos ciudadanos en las sociedades receptoras. Finalmente, en esta línea, la ponencia analiza el papel de las instituciones, los actores y las prácticas religiosas de los migrantes católicos mexicanos entre México y los Estados Unidos.

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## Introduction

The objective of this document is to map some of the strategies, practices and organizations of migrants who, while linked to the Catholic Church, have contributed to the development of other forms of incorporation, participation and organization in receiving societies. I am particularly interested in observing the role of religious actors and Mexican Catholic religiosity practices, in the process of the civic involvement of Mexican migrants in transnational public space, and particularly in US society. However, I am also interested in demonstrating how at the same time—in some cases—this sociocultural, civic involvement in US society has been linked to the development of transnational practices between the so-called societies of origin and destination, contributing to the construction of public spaces in which the collective learning of migrants—resulting from past experiences in their country of origin, as well as from experiences and capital developed in their place of destination—is involved in developing forms of social and political participation, staged in both countries.

This document is organized into four parts: in the first, I propose some basic assumptions for conducting a reading of religious actors, religious practices of Mexican migrants, and institutional spaces between Mexico and the United States; in the second part, I address some of the institutional initiatives of the Catholic Church and the role played by religious groups and organizations linked to Mexican migrants in the process of reintegrating them into the life of parishes and neighborhoods where Mexicans have settled in the United States; in the third part, I address the role of associational memberships in churches and the role played by religious actors as agents of civic involvement by migrants; and lastly, in this context, I present the function of ritualized events and practices of transnational religiosity in the construction of public spaces and the development of community memberships at different levels.

Basically, I have conducted a review of the literature, incorporating some of the findings from previous research by the author. This paper is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of the topic, and not even a *state of the art* on this topic, but rather a background paper for stimulating discussion in the panel with/on religious actors, institutions and organizations of migrants, at the *Conference on Civic and Political*

*Participation of Mexican Migrants.* Finally, the primary objective of the paper is to demonstrate some relevant tendencies for understanding the link between Catholic practices of religiosity in the lives of Mexican migrants and the development of forms of transnational, civic-community participation —the effects of which transcend the religious sphere.

### **I) Starting Points: Between Religion and Migration**

There is a tendency for religious identities, beliefs and practices to take on added meaning in the global context of accelerated migration —not only as a reactive response to the hostility confronted by immigrants in their places of destination, but as an affirmative response based on their particular religious practices. Their response is not only a type of cultural and religious preservation of the traditions of their homelands, but a reaffirmation of values, practices and forms of religiosity. Some authors suggest that the particular structural and institutional context of US society has contributed to this growing affirmative process of the ethnic-religious identities of new immigrants in the places where they arrive (Herberg, 1961; Casanova, 2001). The triple melting pot resulting from the arrival of European migrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century —whose religious professions were primarily Protestant, Catholic and Jewish (Herberg, 1971)— has been expanded with the accelerated migration during the last two decades. We find, for example, large waves of Latin Americans arriving in the United States, and migrants from Asia, generally speaking from the East, from Eastern Europe, with diverse forms of non-European Christianity in some cases. The recent arrival of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist immigrants in particular has increased the complexity of the panorama of religious and ethnic diversity in US society (Warner and Witner, 1998; Casanova, 2001; Hirschman, 2004). Nevertheless, despite the increasing presence of non-Christian religious institutions among new immigrants, most of the immigrants profess Christian religions (Yang and Ebaugh, 2001).

In reality, the “free exercise of religion”<sup>1</sup> as a basic principle of the separation of Church and State in the United States has also permitted the institutionalization of

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<sup>1</sup> Some authors, such as Charles Hirschman (2004), suggest that *freedom of religion* (or of *no religion*), as mandated in the First Amendment, does not appear to be a sign of tolerance among individuals who practice different religions, but rather a commitment that emerged between rivals of the different

religious pluralism in US society. This is a tendency contrary to what theories of modernization and secularization have proposed, specifically the diminishing of religious and ethnic identities as a consequence of the construction of robust national States, and thus the affirmation of secular identities (Casanova, 1994 and 2001; Kearney, 1995). Thus, multiculturalism, ethnic diversity and religious pluralism appear as fundamental characteristics of all global population flows. Even so, the institutionalization of these principles as constitutive elements of US society does not eliminate the processes of social discrimination suffered by immigrants on a daily basis, nor does it suppose the absence of conflicts in these plural societies. Rather, it provides guidelines for understanding the logic of ethnic conflicts emerging from the “clash of civilizations” or “clash of religions” within or between States (Huntington, 1993) or the “clash of cultures” within civilizations (Fox, 2001). To some degree, these dynamics of religious pluralism in US society point to —according to Casanova (2001)— a certain collision and collusion between the formation of religious identities and the formation of ethnic identities, leading to what may be a positive effect through the diminishing of adscriptive racialization (decreasing racial stigmas, fundamentally against some groups such as Black Americans, for example), and then to the possibility of a process of dissolving racial categories in US society. Casanova (2001) suggests that the introduction of multi-racial self-identification in the US Census of 2000 appears to demonstrate some evidence of this tendency.

Nonetheless, the hostility, segregation and discrimination experienced in diverse spaces of work, residence and socialization in the United States continue to be a reality for immigrants, fundamentally for recent arrivals, most of who are undocumented.<sup>2</sup> However, churches, temples, prayer houses, congregations and religious associations appear on the scene, as possible places for building a new community of reference for new immigrants and a comprehensive place for socialization, information and

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Protestant denominations and the majority of the colonists who did not adhere to any particular religion (p. 1214).

<sup>2</sup> Immigrants in the United States experience different forms of social, political, cultural, religious and also ethnic and racial discrimination. Yang and Ebaugh (2001) suggest that some of these conditions have also been experienced in their lands of origin, however in the migration experience, there is an added diasporic sense, with respect to their traditions and cultural system. The fact that they are, in some cases, considered to be foreigners, recent arrivals, and even intrusive in the society where they have arrived, and in some cases to be members of a racial or religious minority, or the fact that they may have suffered through wars, catastrophes, or extreme poverty in their places of origin, may in some cases generate an experience of marginalization for migrants in the societies of arrival, exacerbating their situation in the structure of hierarchically racialized American society.

communication (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2004). Churches also become a means of assistance for obtaining social and economic resources for satisfying basic needs in a situation characterized by vulnerability. However, in addition, according to Hirschman (2004), churches can become a means for collective and individual socioeconomic mobility for immigrants and also for the second generation in ethnic communities. In other words, churches, including their various religious denominations, continue to play a significant role in both facilitating a certain assimilation of its members, as well as preserving ethnicity, promoting institutional theological transformations in this context, and also energizing and revitalizing religious and their different churches (see Yang and Ebaugh, 2001).

### *Basic assumptions*

In this context of religious pluralism and ethnic complexity, I would propose that the ethnic-religious manifestations of Mexican migrants be understood not as segregated subcultures in US society, but as self-assertive cultural options within multiculturalism, and fundamentally, as manifestations of their incorporation into US society through memberships of belongings that point to a certain “religious citizenship” (Levitt, 2004). These forms of incorporating into US society through practices carried out in the religious sphere permit Mexican migrants not only to develop civic skills, as proposed by Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995), through their associational memberships, and particularly from their experiences in attending neighborhood parishes, and not only to develop forms of political participation promoted through churches’ central civic associational roles, or in other words, channels of political information and recruitment, as suggested by Jones-Correa and Leal (2001), but they also promote a broader incorporation of immigrants into American civic life (Foley, 2001), which transcends not only the religious sphere, but also political-electoral participation.

This means that this other form of incorporation through the construction of other forms of citizenship involves responsibilities and rights defined in transnational topographies, basically in certain interstices in public spaces (given their condition as immigrants in receiving societies, added to their conditions of social vulnerability in their localities of origin) that are constructed on the basis of their beliefs, values, forms of organization and religious practices between the societies of origin and destination.

These public spheres delineated in the migration experience, through the development of practices of collective religiosity and forms of organization, are extended to other spheres of social action, and they point to the forming of organizations and actors whose action has significant effects beyond the religious sphere, or in other words, in the public-political sphere, broadly speaking. Migrants develop civic skills, on the one hand, as well as other forms of participation and practices of socio-cultural, and then civic, involvement in American society, although without having total access to citizen rights in these receiving societies. However, they construct other forms of *cultural citizenship* (Rosaldo, 1994) that facilitate the actions of migrants in this transnational public space, not necessarily as only marginal actors, and even attaining significant transformations in the social space and cultural practices of the American society at large (Gutiérrez, 1998; Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004), and at the same time in their societies of origin (Rivera-Sánchez, 2004; Fox, 2005).

From this perspective, I propose conducting a reading of institutional spaces, actors and organizations, as well as the ritualized events and religious practices of Mexican Catholic migrants in the United States. And I begin by supposing that while the institutional context in terms of rules and norms for social coexistence in the American society contributes to the process of reaffirming the values and religious practices of migrants, as well as their ethnic identities, we can say that the particular strategies for creating links among Mexican migrants and their communities of origin, as well as their cultural background (in this case I am referring particularly to the beliefs and practices of Catholic religiosity), contribute in a no less relevant way in the construction of dynamic transnational communities, and the subsequent development of certain forms of transnational membership (Levitt, 2004; Rivera-Sánchez, 2004; Fox, 2005). In particular what I will present in this document is the development of certain transnational public spaces, memberships, practices translated into “civic skills,” and forms of participation developed in the religious sphere. This leads us to consider the concept of *religious citizenship*, as conceived by Levitt (2004), in order to understand the potentiality of these practices of migrants in public life between both nation-states, as forms of *postnational citizenship*, in the demand for belonging and citizenship, on the basis of a recognition of universal human rights and notions of *personhood*, translated into legal residence, welfare, labor and social rights for immigrant workers —more than

as a reference to membership in nation-states (see Hondagneu-Sotelo, et al., 2004; also Sassen, 1998; Soysal, 1994).

## **II) Religious institutions: Catholic churches and parishes as spaces of socialization for public life**

In this document I refer particularly to the Catholic Church, although I recognize the religious plurality and diversity in Mexican migrants and non-migrants (in this regard, see Hernández Madrid, 2003), and recognize that the churches of other religious denominations also play important roles in processes of socialization and social recognition for their followers in their places of origin and in the places where they arrive in the United States (Yang and Ebaugh, 2001; Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001; Hirschman, 2004). Nonetheless, I will use the reference of Catholic churches, since the majority of the Mexican population professes the Catholic religion, plus the fact that the number of Catholic Latino migrants in the United States has remained stable during the last four decades,<sup>3</sup> apparently due to the arrival of many new Latin American immigrants, however fundamentally due to the arrival of a significant number of Mexican migrants (Espinosa, Elizondo and Miranda, 2003). In this context it is worth studying the experience of Catholic churches and observing some of their sociological implications for life for migrants in their societies of destination, and fundamentally in the construction of transnational public spaces.

I will begin by considering churches as spaces for social recognition and for establishing bonds of community solidarity, in this case for Mexican migrants in the United States. As well, churches in Mexico represent the center of public life in many towns of origin. Like parks, markets and local government buildings, churches are located at the center of Mexican towns, not only in geographic terms, but also in symbolic terms. Churches often represent the primary place for the socialization of children, young people and adults. It is, of course, the place where prayers and petitions are made, but it is also the site where blame is cleared away, and where some family and generational conflicts and certain local disputes are settled (Rivera-Sánchez, 2004). And churches are sites that, in some way, are significant in collective identity

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<sup>3</sup> According to Espinosa, Elizondo and Miranda (2003), of the total number of Latinos in the United States, 70.2% are Catholic, 23% are Protestant (Pentecostal and evangelical, primarily), 6% do not have a defined religious preference, and 1% belong to some other world religious denomination (p.14).

reconfiguration (Odgers, 2003). In this case, I will address the local and transnational nature of the church, as sites where the Catholic religion is created (Levitt, 2004), or in other words, where the global Catholic religion shapes the experience of transnational migration to some degree, while migrants recreate the global-transnational sense of Catholicism, by *making it local*, and *Mexicanizing* it, for example, but then *transnationalizing* it by practicing their religiosity in churches in both the United States and Mexico. The Catholic church that welcomes migrants becomes a site where the diffused global models of social organization and the local responses of individuals converge and generate new mixtures of religious beliefs and practices, and new ritual languages (Levitt, 2004; Yang and Ebaugh, 2001), in processes of the resignification of its particular contents. In another section of this document we will see how some practices of Mexican Catholic religiosity are staged in the migratory experience in the United States.

#### *Between structures, associations and forms of belonging to churches*

The Catholic Church, as a model of global, transnational religion, shows three tendencies in American society —just as other global religions— and here I will use the levels of analysis proposed by Yang and Ebaugh (2001) for the religions of recently arriving immigrants: specifically, a congregational form, a return to some theological foundations and an increase in inclusive memberships. The congregational form, that was originally part of the structure of American Protestantism, has been adopted by the migrant Catholic Church in two modalities —especially for addressing the new groups of immigrants— through organizational structure and ritual formality. In other words, it involves establishing a place of prayer in the form of congregations, as a type of local community that comes together voluntarily, and includes voluntary participation in religious activities, but also in other activities related to the neighborhood and to community problems. Thus, ethnic communities are formed, making it possible to function as a “refuge” in the context of the society of arrival. Of course, this form also functions for other religious denominations, and in fact has been a formula that has even led to the conversion of Mexican Catholics to Protestants in neighborhoods where Protestant influence and the corresponding services offered were greater than those offered by Catholics for recently arriving migrants. This form has also led to some Mexican migrants finding it easy to attend two churches in the same neighborhood at the same time, or one of them in their place of destination and one of them in their place

of origin—for example, attending a church of a Protestant denomination in the place where they have migrated, and attending a Catholic church in their Mexican town of origin (Yang and Ebaugh, 2001; Hernández Madrid, 2003).

Within the Catholic Church, the congregational form of organization has permitted the emergence of diverse forms of voluntary membership and secular leadership, involving decision-making regarding religious parish matters, but also civil matters related to the community or the neighborhood. In this sense, the Catholic Church has adopted two basic forms, one of a neighborhood nature and the other of a national denomination nature (by ethnic/national group), for attending to migrants among its faithful (Hirschman, 2004), and including the use of the national language of its faithful. These forms of organization have been strengthened by expanded types of social services provided to its members. These include both religious sacramental services in their national language (baptisms, blessings for homes and businesses, prenuptial and pre-baptism counseling, weddings, first communions, and now also for *quinceañeras*, among other examples), and also social services (job information, housing, basic food supplies, food coupons, support from NGOs and foundations, as well as availability of health services). Churches serve as recreational centers and civic spaces (for citizenship classes, English classes, afternoon school for children, and for community notices for legalization, or activities for promoting voting in elections, or participating in campaigns for demanding amnesty for undocumented workers), and also as spaces for religious festivities, but also civic festivities, such as Independence Day in September and the Battle of Puebla Day on May 5, for example, plus for organizing the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12. Thus, churches have functioned as “social communities,” with “fellow congregants,” and including a variety of associations and groups (Hirschman, 2004). And they have multiple objectives, as part of a constellation of associational memberships that also promote to some degree—as we will see below—the political engagement of migrants (Jones-Correa and Leal, 2001: 760).

In the same way, church basements and auditoriums have become social halls to be used for parties for *quinceañeras*—festivities that are part of popular Catholic religiosity, introduced in American Catholic churches, but not after confronting strong rejection in some parishes. This was true especially on the US east coast, where unlike

on the west coast, Mexicans arrived later, and Mexican Catholic migrants encountered rejection of the tradition of masses for *quinceañeras*, to the degree that some of them reported having to go from church to church, in different neighborhoods, to find one where they could celebrate mass for the *quinceaños* of their daughters. Some Mexican migrants even reported having to request these services in non-Catholic churches, and in some cases, that is where these celebrations were held (Rivera-Sánchez, 2004). Meanwhile, the Catholic hierarchy had recommended, through the Ministry for Hispanic Affairs, that these services be officiated, as a matter of obligation. However, some priests in parishes located in small counties persistently refused to celebrate these masses and religious services for *quinceañeras*, considering such vernacular traditions to be pagan and not part of Catholic rituality.<sup>4</sup>

Catholic ritual formalities have also been adapted to a congregational form, meaning that times, forms, places and processes for coming together have been modified and transformed, according to the needs of the Mexican immigrant community and thus, in each community of immigrants in each neighborhood and parish. The roles of priests have also been modified, as well as the forms of religious education and even the modalities of religious language, which has been translated into a vernacular language and adjusted to each group, according to the particular conditions of the society where migrants live (Yang and Ebaugh, 2001). Schedules in the churches have been established to meet the needs of each national group, or at least divided into masses and religious services by national language. Masses in Spanish, for example, are scheduled several times on the same day, depending on the composition of the neighborhood and the faithful attending mass in each parish. The priests who speak Spanish report that services in this language were gradually specialized, including for each national, Spanish-speaking group—not only generically for Hispanics—and parishes became ethnic churches, in the genuine sense of the term, however fundamentally churches of migrants, that is, adapting to the particular needs of each national group, also according to the time it arrived in the neighborhood.

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<sup>4</sup> Interview conducted by the author with the Minister for Hispanic Affairs at the New York Archdiocese, Father Josu Iriondo, New York City, November 2001.

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In the absence of Hispanic and basically Mexican priests, we find in some parts of the United States where Mexicans have migrated during the last two decades that Irish diocesan priests<sup>5</sup> have become specialized in each national, Spanish-speaking group, by neighborhood and parish. Thus, today we find “Mexican” parishes in the state of New York, and in Chicago, North Carolina and South Carolina with Irish priests, due to the lack of Latino and particularly Mexican personnel. On the west coast, and particularly in states bordering with Mexico, there is a greater presence of priests of Hispanic origin and even of Mexican-American and particularly Mexican origin.<sup>6</sup>

What we can observe and what I am interested in demonstrating in this section is that not only did the conditions of religious plurality and institutional and normative structures in the American society influence the modalities adopted in immigrants’ forms of religiosity, in the way that “in the United States, we Mexicans became more *Guadalupanos*,” according to community leaders of the Tepeyac Association of New York. Rather, immigrants have also influenced the forms of relationships and organization, and even the ways that religions, and particularly American churches, operate. In the case of the Catholic Church, we find in some parishes that they have adopted the modalities of organization and celebration of Mexican migrants in their congregational forms, with the introduction of some of the forms of organization and rituality of Mexican Catholicism, and especially popular rituality —not only those divided according to devotion to patron saints and local virgins, to the *cofradías* of the Virgin of Guadalupe and *mayordomías* of the saints, according to the towns of origin, for example. These are changes that to some degree affected the work of pastors and priests in parishes, however all of this was in addition to the implementation of secular counselors for different topics, such as marriage counselors, and counselors for groups of children and youth, for married women and men, and others for single women. In other words, it has been necessary to specialize some services to specifically attend to the congregational members of parishes, in ways influenced by the presence of new

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<sup>5</sup> Catholic diocesan priests of Irish origin, as well as some Italians, had traditionally worked with Hispanics in the American Catholic Church, and became specialized in the use of the Spanish language, after campaigns to learn the language and “Latino customs” were carried out during the 1970s and 1980s, especially in Puerto Rico, to respond to the needs of Catholics from the Caribbean and other Latinos who had settled on the east coast of the United States.

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted by the author with the Minister for Hispanic Affairs at the New York Archdiocese, Father Josu Iriondo, New York City, November 2001.

groups in the neighborhoods and particularly in the parish for each neighborhood in which new migrants arrived.

Therefore, the presence of Mexican Catholic immigrants, in this case, however of each religious group in particular, has also modified the organizational forms of the Catholic Church. And not only have migrants adapted and become inserted in the Church. Rather, they have generated important institutional changes in the American Catholic Church overall, through their forms of association, celebration and particular practices of rituality. Nonetheless, in some cases, these changes have been operationalized exclusively in particular local parishes, or in the best of cases, in some dioceses. Consequently, it is difficult to connect what takes place in local churches — that perceive the particular needs of new groups of migrants— with the organization of larger groups of churches or regions, such as those making up a diocese or archdiocese. And it is even more difficult for them to be transformed into institutional policies within the American Catholic Church. The same is true in the translation of pastoral letters and initiatives of the Catholic hierarchy through, for example, the *Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People* in the Roman Curia of the Catholic Church from the Vatican.<sup>7</sup> In some cases, these changes have been personally implemented by particular priests or religious, who have been unable to link their initiatives with those issued by the Catholic Church hierarchy —the latter of which has, in fact, taken an important position with regard to the particular conditions of new immigrants and the services that should be offered to them, basically considering them to be part of a sector of the population that is disadvantaged and socially vulnerable. These initiatives have appeared recently in the communication media, and have been translated into public efforts and public positioning through official statements and documents. A pastoral letter signed in January 2003 between two Bishops' Conferences —between the bishops of Mexico and of the United States— known as “*Stranger No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope*,” marked the beginning of a more active and direct institutional response by the transnational Catholic Church.

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<sup>7</sup> In this regard, see: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/migrants/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/index.htm)

*Regarding how the Catholic Church becomes global by becoming transnational: the dilemmas of inter-parish relationships*

Despite this lack of institutional connections between the different governing bodies of the Catholic Church, we find that transnational inter-parish activities, and the exchange and coming and going of priests between different points located within Mexican and American geography have been a constant. Trans-local or trans-parish relationships—even though they do not represent an institutional initiative—have functioned effectively through personal arrangements between the faithful who live their lives in the two sites, and who have somehow managed to connect a parish in the neighborhood where they have settled in the United States with the parish in their Mexican town of origin. They make use of their solid family and community networks, or arrangements made by priests who have managed to come into contact with their counterparts, generally through followers or through individual priests, given the concentrations of populations of migrants who come from the same locality of origin and who settle in the same area or the same neighborhood in some part of the United States (Badillo, 2004; Rivera-Sánchez, 2004). These concentrations in particular neighborhoods and the connections established between parishes make it possible for migrants—as faithful Catholics, but fundamentally as migrants—to establish what we might refer to as trans-local spaces connected through parishes, more than through any other institution or social group (Levitt, 2004). In this modality, we find countless stories of Mexican and American priests—diocesan, Scalabrinian, Jesuit and charismatic clergy people—who have traveled on these paths that connect transnational spaces of Mexican migration, and who have, in a significant way, increased visibility, and provided religious services and moral support for Mexican migrants. However, their transnational initiatives have been detained when these priests are removed from these parishes—because their time at a certain parish or in a certain mission is completed, or because they are sent to new missions in other parishes or religious centers. Consequently, some of the transnational connections of migrants through their parishes are not institutionalized. Nevertheless, in many cases, this associational membership in parishes (or in groups organized within parishes) represents the most important, and in

some cases, the only affiliation —the primary affiliation— or associational membership within the reduced spectrum of possibilities for undocumented Mexican migrants.<sup>8</sup>

### *The institutional initiatives of the Catholic Church*

As we have seen, any effect from an institutional policy on the part of the Catholic Church for addressing migrants has remained at the level of *localized initiatives* in translocal spaces, between one parish and another, in the best of cases — even when a structure for providing pastoral care to this itinerant sector of the population has also been created in Mexico. One example is the *Comisión Nacional de la Pastoral del Migrante* in the Mexican Catholic Church. It is made up of priests from different regions and parishes with populations characterized by high levels of migration. However, it has been difficult to translate these initiatives into coordinated actions in the different spaces, parishes and dioceses through which migrants move, as transnational migrants, in some cases with a high degree of circularity between Mexican communities of origin and the areas where migrants settle in the United States. Consequently, while there are also important initiatives originating in the various entities governing the Catholic Church, there is a certain distance between these initiatives and the intermediate levels coordinated by churches and parish communities in the different US neighborhoods and in Mexican towns, even though some successful initiatives have had a certain effect between particular dioceses. They have, however, obtained only a modest impact, with notable exceptions of course, such as the coordination for organizing transnational Catholic events such as the *Antorcha Guadalupeana* run between Mexico and New York. Various dioceses and parishes from both Mexico and the United States were involved, through an organization of Catholic migrants, the Tepeyac Association of New York. Without a doubt, however, this corresponds to an initiative of a few parish priests, clergy, religious and some lay people, that stops short of achieving the institutionalization of cooperative initiatives for comprehensively addressing the transnational Catholic communities between the two countries.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Jones-Correa and Leal (2001), church membership represents the only mode of civic engagement for Latinos in the United States, particularly because most of them do not participate in other types of associations.

There are interesting cases of organizations of Mexican Catholic migrants in which various memberships overlap. These may include *Guadalupano* committees, for example, grouped around what is a central Catholic devotion for Mexicans, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, or local patron saints. However, at the same time, this committee may actually be a town committee, or may have become constituted as a hometown association, and it may also function as part of the network of *Guadalupano* committees within the Tepeyac Association, and simultaneously participate in a larger network, in the National Coalition for Dignity and Amnesty for Undocumented Immigrants (Rivera-Sánchez, 2004). The Catholic leaders of these groups have also become civil and then political leaders, since they recently also became involved in campaigns for promoting the right of Mexicans living abroad to vote in Mexican elections. In other words, Mexican Catholic migrants develop—in the same organizational structure— forms of religious participation around devotional figures, and then transform them into forms of social participation, and then political and civic participation—in a broad sense which may include all of the above, as a genuine part of a migrant civil society (Fox, 2005).

Therefore, these associational forms —although not yet institutionalized— which have been developed among groups, parishes or dioceses, and learned through the experience of transnational parish work, may serve as triggers for transnational civic and political engagement as well. Foley (2001) suggests that churches and particularly some priests and religious who participate in and encourage migrants to become involved in these associational forms may be important agents of socialization for citizenship in both settings, even when ethnic churches are said to be promoters of ethnic particularism (Odgers, 2003), and may sometimes encourage contentious ethnic politics. However, these two results are not mutually exclusive, since ethnic particularism may take place within different forms of civic engagement, and to the contrary, a religious/ethnic identity may lead to a broader simultaneous incorporation in the social and political life of American society and in migrants' country of origin (Foley, 2001; Levitt, 2004).

#### *Institutional responses to political initiatives*

If we review some of the most recent initiatives of the Catholic Church, fundamentally involving an organized institutional response to government proposals affecting border security policies and migrants' mobility and living conditions, we find

that on July 19, 2005, Bishop Gerald Barnes (Bishop of San Bernardino, California), Chairman of the Committee on Migration of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops through Migration and Refugee Services, publicly supported the initiative entitled *Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act of 2005*,<sup>9</sup> which was presented on May 12 of this year by Senators John McCain (Arizona) and Edward M. Kennedy (Massachusetts) in the US Senate, and by Representatives Jim Kolbe (Arizona), Jeff Flake (Arizona) and Luis Gutierrez (Illinois), in the US House of Representatives. The Bishops invited other partisans to join in supporting this initiative, and urged President Bush to consider the proposal. The Bishops also invited —by way of their web page, public speeches and homilies from church pulpits— all parishes and parishioners to add their support, since it was feasible that the initiative would open up a possibility for legalizing undocumented workers, basically so that a program for temporary workers would be created.

The Catholic Church initiated a campaign for supporting the proposal, *Justice for Immigrants—A Journey of Hope*, through which they invited Catholic parishes to not remain detached from the process and rather, become involved in a campaign of “justice for immigrants.” A Parish Kit was designed to facilitate everyone joining this campaign. Its web page reads: “...the Parish Kit including hints for homilies, prayer petitions, talking points, and curriculums for adult study on the topic of immigration in light of Catholic social teachings as well as different tools to organize within your dioceses [as] such tools will enable you to lead focused dialogue, build sustainable coalitions, and provide you with resources for working with the media.”<sup>10</sup> An internet line and another telephone line were made available, through which it was possible to contact the Representatives in each district, and to sign a letter of support for promoting the initiative among the legislators from the different parties in both the House and Senate.

This type of initiative has led to the establishment of inter-denominational alliances with other churches, and with diverse social, ethnic and migrant organizations, and in general with groups and organizations that share interest in and support for this

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the primary points contained in this proposal are: a temporary worker program with appropriate worker protections, and reform of the family preference system to reduce waiting time for family reunification.

<sup>10</sup> (<http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/parishes.html>, p. 1)

issue. Alliances have also been created with important coalitions such as the National Coalition for Dignity and Amnesty, as well as the Service Employees International Union and the AFL-CIO, and alliances have been established among different religious groups in the Inter-Faith Leadership Coalition of Cicero, Berwyn and Stickey, located near Chicago, Illinois, for example. The latter is characterized by Catholic Latino leadership, and advocates improvements in services to immigrants in these counties (basically related to health services), however it especially advocates amnesty for undocumented workers around the country (see Badillo, 2004: 27). This inter-faith based group demonstrates the organizational potential of some of the parishes in the suburbs, and represents precisely the counterpart of institutional initiatives that we illustrated in the case of support and strategies from the different entities of the ecclesiastic hierarchy. In this case, diocesan clergy recognize that there is no open support on the part of the dioceses that unite them by territories, however there are “grassroots” initiatives developed by priests, clergy and lay people who contribute and promote these initiatives from their neighborhoods and parishes (Badillo, 2004). In particular, the mission of these clergy consists of involving parishioners in the demands and activities for improving services in the short term, but also in creating new horizons in the medium and long term for immigrants who are without guarantees of formal citizenship, but who have the right to demand their rights.

Finally, we can observe that these initiatives in parishes —whether or not a consequence of institutional initiatives— that appear to operate at the micro level and that contribute to forming ethnic communities (which may outline closed, self-referential communities, as suggested by some authors) also contribute in an important way —as we observe in the case of the parishes in Chicago neighborhoods and in the network of *Guadalupano* Committees in New York— by connecting parishioners and ethnic/national communities to broader networks in the public sphere, not necessarily limited to the religious sphere. Levitt (2004) suggests that the transnational organizational model of the Catholic Church functions as an “extended pattern” for migrants, precisely allowing new immigrants to move between communities of origin and destination, and among religious groups, as well as to join well-established networks in the transnational space, and then build memberships in these spaces, which assist them in developing skills in expressing their interests and in making petitions and demands in both their countries of origin and destination, precisely because they

perceive themselves as belonging to both countries in a *quasi-natural* way, given their simultaneous involvement at both sites (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004).

### **III) Ritual events, celebrations and practices of transnational Catholic religiosity, as spaces for civic engagement and political learning**

In this section, I will develop some basic ideas regarding the role played by religious celebrations, cultural events linked to neighborhood churches, and practices in the transnational religiosity of Catholic migrants, between Mexico and the United States —not only as particular ethnic-religious expressions, but as *public spaces for collective learning*. This implies the socialization of information and the development of civic skills, such as speaking in public, organizing groups, defining and establishing agendas, identifying common problems in the neighborhood, city or group, deliberating relevant issues in a collective manner, and making decisions regarding matters of collective interest. This collective learning process acquired by organizing, carrying out and participating in events linked to the Church, and acquired and developed in the congregational space of the church and neighborhood —as we saw in the previous section— can provide information for public protest, as suggested by Hondagneu-Sotelo et al. (2004), and it can also motivate civic and political involvement, as suggested by Jones-Correa and Leal (2001), through collective action, but fundamentally through moral and religious precepts such as justice and equality, which are among the universal values promoted by the Catholic Church as a global institution.

Consequently, I would suggest that these religious events and practices are not only religious ceremonies or rituals of the Catholic faith —or particularly of Mexican popular Catholic rituality— but also acts of cultural reaffirmation of belonging to an ethnic community (Hirschman, 2004; Foley, 2001). And at the same time, they are expressions of “politicized spirituality” in some form. As we will see, faith-based rituals and transnational celebrations take on new meaning in the context of transnational migration, and also encompass other contents, not only in ritual or institutional terms, as I have pointed out in other sections of this document, but also through a certain sense of public morality and social justice based on the Judeo-Christian tradition. In these contexts of social marginalization, racialization and invisibilization of migrant workers and their families, the latter translates into public protest of a civic and political nature

that can transcend the demand for rights circumscribed to an exclusively national State (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004; Rivera Sánchez, 2004).

Religious ceremonies —beyond their religious-ritual content— transform into claims, protests and demands in response to the unilateral policies of two national States, on the one hand, and into an affirmation of belonging to a vital space under construction beyond the borders of both States, between the coming and going in the migration experience and the involvement in both settings. These events and practices are transformed into ritual-political spaces for increasing the visibility of Mexican migrant communities in the various neighborhoods where they settle. This may take place when migrants participate in a pilgrimage or patron saint's procession, or in the Way of the Cross on Holy Friday, through the streets of Chicago neighborhoods, for example (Badillo, 2004). Or in the Way of the Cross procession in New York, a simulation representing the Three Stations of the Way of the Cross, with all the “setbacks” and difficulties experienced by immigrants in their journey from Mexico to the United States, and then in the place where they settle. Or events at the point where Mexico and the United States meet, such as the transnational *Antorcha Guadalupeña* run (Rivera-Sánchez, 2004), or celebrations such as *La Posada sin Fronteras*, which takes place precisely at the Mexico-US border, in San Ysidro, California (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004).

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that not all religious celebrations of Mexican migrants necessarily become automatically politicized or “civilized.” Some ceremonies, even when they are collective celebrations, are kept within the private space of religiousity, through prayers, and as acts of spirituality that do not seem to transcend the border between what is public and what is private. According to Levitt (2003), for some of the faithful, this means that they are “working for God, to build His kingdom,” however in reality they are also socializing their experiences and may be building the foundations at the embryonic level for another type of involvement in their communities. What takes place in these acts of spirituality may remain within the realm of prayers, however even attending mass at church may extend to a broader community, beyond their religious congregation, through actions related to their faith, through a sense of solidarity, of welcoming others, and social coexistence —all basic principles of the Christian Catholic community.

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Rituals and celebrations, as migrants' practices of religiosity, allow them to create alternative forms of expression and belonging —forms that are also based on memories, as forms of remembering and returning to their places of origin, and that are also based on creativity and context, which are strengthened in public spaces. This facilitates the formation of transnational identities which can also become post-national identities, leading to the construction of other forms of citizenship (Soysal, 1994; Fortier, 2000; Levitt, 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004).

The possibility of immigrants becoming involved, and even transforming their own celebrations into publicly protesting and claiming their rights (these are celebrations that would seem to be confined to rituals within the private sphere in their countries of origin) is also linked to the fact that in the churches they attend, priests and clergy are active agents in neighborhoods and work with the communities that have settled there. Consequently, clergy, religious, priests and community leaders in church groups play key roles in involving and not involving other members of the religious community in activities with actions and performance that extend beyond the activities of the church, beyond social volunteering and the religious sphere in general (Levitt, 2003; Edgell-Becker and Dhingra, 2001). In other words, religious actors can be translators of the language of faith, and the language of the politics of everyday life, however they can also become significant obstacles, preventing this translation from taking place, and preventing activities from moving beyond the private sphere —and this has also taken place in some of the parishes with Mexican migrants in the United States.

What I would like to highlight is that there are diverse mechanisms that have allowed communities of Mexican migrants established in US neighborhoods to become involved or not become involved in activities of collective-public interest. And, that in some cases, such involvement in religious celebrations, processions and pilgrimages in neighborhood streets has led to involvement in activities around claiming the right to use public thoroughfares for processions, for example, and to defend the rights of all workers to stand on a street corner and hope to be hired for work, or to demand wages earned for overtime and not paid, or to defend employees mistreated by their employers, to demand the right to rent a department, to have access to public services, and that their

children not be discriminated against in schools because they do not speak English, to name a few examples. In some cases, these experiences have also led to transnational activism.

These religious practices include events that consist of carrying images of the patron saints of their hometowns, to build a niche for them in the church in their new neighborhood, and praying to the same saint at both sites —facilitating a transnational connection and assuring a symbolically relevant place not only for the Saint or the Virgin in the parish, but also for the community that is devoted to these figures— as well as annual journeys by the images of their “original” patron saints from their towns of origin to the places where they now reside. For example, the fact that *Santiago Apóstol* has traveled from Chila de la Sal, Puebla, to Brooklyn, New York, to celebrate with his faithful in exile may have the effect of bringing visibility to *Chileños* (natives of Chila de la Sal) in the parish and in the neighborhood where they currently reside. This may also lead to the forming of town organizations, religious groups, agreements between parishes or at least agreements between priests. And this may also strengthen the bonds within the *Chileño* transnational community, or rather, it may redefine —as has taken place in this case— the boundaries of what it means to belong to the community, or in other words, to focus new attention on who *Chileños* are, and who are those with commitments, obligations and rights in and with the community —as citizens of the community, because they recognize themselves as such and are recognized as such by others— and also define those who are not *Chileños*. To some extent, the effects can be diverse, and will depend on the distinction, as suggested by Levitt and Glick-Schiller (2004), between *ways of being* and *ways of belonging* to a transnational community. In the first case, reference is made to those who act in both settings but who do not assume they belong to both sites, and do not develop identities at this level, even though they may belong to some groups that might be transnational in nature, or even when they may carry out some practices in those particular spaces, however they do not assume a sense of transnational belonging or involvement. In the second case, in contrast, there is a consciousness of a type of belonging to a community, and beyond their localized reference, they develop and commit themselves to an identity in relation to a transnational community, independently of whether they are in Chila or in Brooklyn, since in the end, they are *Chileño* no matter where they are. They assume this

identification as a form of community membership that combines actions and awareness of the kind of identity that action signifies (Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004).

### *Performances toward Postnational Citizenship?*

Other forms adopted by these ritualized events involve on-site celebrations of commemorations that are part of the Mexican Catholic calendar, such as All Saints' Days (November 1 and 2), which recently became a symbolically timely moment for carrying out a binational protest at the Mexico-US border over the death of undocumented Mexican migrants, challenging the hard-line US policies aimed at closing the border with Mexico. Religious organizations and human rights centers that work in the border region —on both sides— took on the task of publicizing the mistreatment and deaths of migrants at this border (one of the most dangerous in the world). However, they not only brought public attention to the consequences of unilateral US policy, but also increased the visibility of the conditions in which migrants make their pilgrimage across the border to reach some point in the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004). The All Saints' Day ritual, when altars are prepared for remembering those who have died, was also transformed into a public protest of the lack of recognition of the undocumented immigrants who died in the 9-11 tragedy in New York City. Since 2001, November 2 has been marked with an event in memory of the undocumented migrants who died in the World Trade Center Towers. Emphasis is not placed on any particular nationality, but rather on the demand that “no human being is illegal” —in the words of the Tepeyac Association. The ritual is recreated with the traditional altars and including the names, photos and offerings for the Mexicans who died in that tragedy, in a style that is very similar to that used in many Mexican towns to remember family members who have passed away. The occasion is used to emphasize that not even such a tragedy can remove the dilemma of being undocumented, of being face-less —even after death— with family members not receiving all the federal compensations received by the families of US residents who were victims (Solis and Rivera-Sánchez, 2004). Finally, we would underscore that these are public demands for justice and equality as universal values, but these public protests also allude to policies that foster marginalization and racialization, and that foster the hierarchization of public spaces in American society and in the US government's migration policies.

Similarly, Hondagneu Sotelo et al. (2004) point out that *La Posada sin Fronteras*, a Catholic celebration that symbolizes the pilgrimage of Joseph and Mary, the parents of Jesus, in their search for a place of shelter for their son's birth, is transformed into a ritual-religious event, and one that is symbolically contested. It compares the pilgrimage of these figures in Catholicism with the pilgrimages of Mexican migrants, as they ask for refuge from their neighbors to the north, when they attempt to cross the border. The event is not reduced to a Catholic, ethnic ritual, in which we are reminded of the origins, family and memories of local traditions of the past. Rather, it is an event of inter-ethnic and inter-denominational solidarity, since while it is of Catholic origin, those invited include human rights organizations, social activists involved with migrants, independently of their origin, and persons who profess other religions or who do not practice any religion, but who believe that justice and morality are resources and values that form part of our social coexistence, beyond the national or religious origin of the celebration. Thus, there are various motivations for participating in *La Posada sin Fronteras*, which is transformed into an intercultural, inter-faith event that challenges US unilateral policies, and at the same time, challenges the lack of action on the part of the Mexican government to protest the treatment received by Mexicans at that border and in that country (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004).

Consequently, demands are transformed into a postnational protest based not only on discourse on human or social rights, or on ethnic solidarity, but on morality and faith, independently of religious denomination (Hondagneu Sotelo et al., 2004). In Mexico, in migrants' towns of origin, the celebration of *las posadas* symbolizes a warm encounter between neighbors, with food and sweets to share with families and children participating in the ritual, while representing an event that strengthens community, neighborliness and coexistence. In the United States, the Biblical meaning of the request for a place to stay the night is transformed into universal meanings of coexistence and hospitality, along the line of global neighborliness, and it is filled with meaning as a space similar to the border, a contested "third space," where participants in these rituals challenge the policies of both national States (Hondagneu-Sotelo et al., 2004; Valenzuela, 2004).

### **Some final remarks**

By the large, I would like to point to some of the challenges currently confronted by Mexican immigrants involved in transnational religious and civic activities — challenges which, in turn, clearly present important challenges for the global Catholic Church, as it attempts to meet the needs of the Catholic faithful who are continually coming and going between two national States. The first challenge has been repeatedly expressed in this paper as a problem of *disconnectedness* between the various bodies governing the Catholic Church, but also evident between the specific demands of the faithful in the parishes where migrants have settled, the identified needs and the strategies developed by clergy, in relation to the initiatives of the Catholic hierarchy. I would also emphasize the challenges imposed by transnational coordination, in this case, between the Mexican Catholic Church and the US Catholic Church. What role should the transnational Catholic Church play in relation to its itinerant members and what strategies should it use?

The second point I would highlight clearly alludes to the role played by the church's space as a social community for sociocultural involvement and the incorporation of immigrants and their families in American society. It is also an important marker for observing the way in which the institutional context contributes to shaping the experience of transnational migration, on the one hand, and at the same time, the way in which migrants also affect the forms, structures and modalities for action by the Catholic Church in US neighborhoods and in Mexican towns of origin. This presents the challenge of whether the Church generates ethnic communities without a future in terms of integrating with the rest of society. I have shown evidence to the contrary, however the questions we must ask include: What is the scenario that will be faced by the future generation of migrants, who have grown up in the context of the reaffirmation of an ethnic, politicized, socialized identity in the transnational arena? Will this generation of migrants continue to carry out transnational practices of demanding their rights? Or will they generate other forms of relating with spaces of transit and residence? Is it true that the number of Catholic migrants has decreased among the second generation of migrants? Has the Catholic Church prepared a new strategy for meeting the needs of this generation? How are these challenges viewed from within the Catholic Church?

A third point that I believe to be worth highlighting here—in the interest of fostering discussion in the panel with religious actors—is in relation to the meaning acquired by celebrations, religious rituals and practices of Mexican Catholic religiosity in the context of transnational migration. I basically consider them to be public spaces for collective learning and empowerment and for the development of other forms of membership and belonging, which are created through religious practices and strengthened in transnational public spaces. I would suggest that religious practices allow for national ethnic affirmation, however they also assume a form of integration/incorporation into American society, and then, new forms of dual belonging and membership—beyond double nationality, of course. However, this assumption also points to new challenges in relation to the demands for certain expressions for postnational citizenship, for example: What are the responsibilities, the sociopolitical commitments, and also the rights corresponding to this new form of dual membership experienced by migrants in the transnational context? Who represents those citizens in those spaces? And which national State should guarantee their social rights? Should not both national States fulfill this function? How can we interpret, in any case, contemporary transnational activism? As a phenomenon emerging from the first generations of migrants? Some authors suggest that this form of religious citizenship (Levitt, 2004) —or what the Catholic Church has called *faithful citizenship*<sup>11</sup>—expressed by Catholic Mexicans in spaces socially contested in migrant life, will come to an end in the second generation of migrants, when the children of today’s active migrants no longer look to their country of origin. Consequently their demands will fall within the demands for rights with a national State, and not necessarily with a transnational dimension. The controversy regarding the second generation of migrants is a latent one, and it is impossible today to predict its behavior. Nonetheless, it is necessary to analyze the implications of this involvement of migrants through faith-based groups and organizations in contemporary society between Mexico and the United States. Finally, what I am proposing is that these organized groups be considered as constituting a migrant civil society, and while this makes public spaces and political agendas in both countries more complex, it also contributes in a crucial way to the

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<sup>11</sup> “As it has every four years since 1976, the Administrative Committee of The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has published a statement to educate the Catholic Faithful about our moral responsibility to engage in political life. Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility, published in January 2004, reminds us of our responsibility to be a witness in the Public Square based on the moral principles in Scripture and Catholic teaching.” In Hopkins, Sheila, “Faithful Citizenship,” in *Catholic Woman*, Vol. 30, Issue 3, May-June, 2004, Washington, D.C. p. 4.

public debate and the deliberation of other forms of political and sociocultural integration —and also in the development of other forms of citizenship that can strengthen the role of a transnational civil society that is not only migrant in nature. This transnational civil society also consolidates deliberative public spheres in both societies of origin and destination.

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