In the half century since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), many Euro-American Catholics have emphasized concerns like liturgical reform, the role of the laity, dissent or obedience to sexual ethics and other church teaching, the proper exercise of authority, the question of who is called to ordination. The focus on these issues has produced debates along a liberal-conservative continuum, at times so stridently that they are deemed the "Catholic culture wars." Conversely, Latinos have been more inclined to accentuate concerns like funding for Latino youth initiatives, outreach efforts, and leadership training and formation programs, as well as an increase in Spanish Masses, celebrations of feast days that are part of their Latino traditions, efforts to promote immigration reform, and culturally sensitive formation programs for seminarians and other ecclesial leaders. Such efforts are primarily intended to equip the church to serve and accompany its Latino members in their faith and daily hardships. In a word, while Latino Catholic leaders frequently perceive the U.S. Catholic Church as a significant institution that could do much to uplift their struggling sisters and brothers, Catholic leaders of European descent tend to be more concerned with issues of authority and the adaptation of the church to the U.S. milieu or, conversely, with the alarming worry that U.S. Catholics already embrace societal norms far more than they do fundamental Catholic teachings.

Latinos’ concerns reveal that, besides the widely-discussed split between the right and the left, another prominent divergence in U.S. Catholicism is one along class and cultural lines. From perspectives on parish life to immigration policy, Latinos’ viewpoints are more akin to those of European immigrants of yesteryear than to those of many present-day Euro-Americans. Latinos are a rapidly expanding group that advances their cultural and working-class perceptions in a church whose membership is still significantly Euro-American and middle class, and whose leadership is overwhelmingly so. As the late Joseph Fitzpatrick, S.J. so aptly put it, they comprise the "Hispanic poor in a middle-class church." The seismic demographic shift summarized in this turn of phrase underlies Latino perspectives and modes of participation that are altering the landscape of U.S. Catholicism. These changes and the immense and often competing challenges they produce will intensify over the coming decades as the transition from a Euro-American to a majority Latino church continues to unfold.

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