
Introduction

En la frente de liberación del pueblo Mexico-Americano existen mujeres,
lindas y valientes,
existen mujeres que saben luchar.

*[In the forefront of the liberation of the Mexican American community
are beautiful and courageous women,
women who know how to fight.]*

—*Canción de Las Hermanas*

THIS VERSE from *Canción de Las Hermanas* declares passionately the self-understanding of the women forming the first national religious-political organization of Chicana and Latina Roman Catholics in the United States. Envisioning its participants as beautiful and valiant warrior women in the front lines of the Chicano movement, Las Hermanas proclaimed a self-identity transcending the traditional boundaries for women religious in the early 1970s.¹ As agents of change, they transformed religious life to be intimately connected to the struggles of their ethnic and gendered communities. Through direct involvement in the Chicano movement, Las Hermanas expanded the ministerial role of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church as it bridged the civil rights struggles of Chicanos and Chicanas and their religious needs.² As feminists they joined the ranks of Chicanas who battled the gender oppression rampant in the Chicano cultural nationalist movement and brought Chicana feminism into the Catholic Church. Chicana sociologist Mary Pardo indicates that although an organi-

zation might not identify itself as feminist, it is the outcomes of the organization that signifies it as feminist or not. Feminist outcomes would include female agency, women's empowerment, and social change.³ Thus, I identify Las Hermanas as a feminist organization, as they are primarily concerned with the empowerment of Latinas within the context of social change. Their distinct arena, the sanctified patriarchy of the Catholic Church, made them keenly aware of the forces of male domination. The women of Las Hermanas defy long-standing stereotypes of Latina Catholics as apolitical and asexual passive bearers of their faith.

Within Las Hermanas laywomen interacted closely with women religious, as well as Chicanas with other Latinas, primarily Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Their collective identity as sisters, as *hermanas*, transcended the distinction between clergy and laity imposed by a hierarchical Church. Their eagerness to collaborate across Latina cultural specifics also contrasted with the strong nationalist tendencies of some sectors of the Chicano movement during the 1970s. Las Hermanas created a model of church based on mutuality and solidarity among Chicanas and Latinas and one that superseded the boundaries and limitations of the institutional Church and nationalist ideologies. Thus, when I refer to a member of Las Hermanas, I will indicate her association with religious life in the first reference only. This is meant to deemphasize whether a member is a woman religious or laywoman, as both are considered of equal status within Las Hermanas. I also will not always identify the specific ethnicity of each woman, as the pan ethnic identifier *Latina* encompasses the self-perception of the members. The term *Chicana/Latina* further emphasizes the *comadrazgo* (female bonding) between Chicanas and Latinas in the organization.⁴ I do want to emphasize, however, that the initial cohort of members were primarily Chicana and the majority of the members today are of Mexican origin. Contrary to the broader feminist movement, the concept of sisterhood within Las Hermanas allowed for differences among Latinas and created solidarity among its members. The spiritual foundation of Las Hermanas, combined with its call for justice, sustained the bonds of sisterhood over the years.⁵

Las Hermanas organized in 1971 during a time of intense social upheaval for the Roman Catholic Church and for the world. Civil rights movements, feminism, antiwar protests, gay and lesbian activism, Latin American liberation movements, and Vatican II contributed to a milieu of social unrest and radical transforma-

tion. Influenced by the politics of mass protest, primarily Chicana women religious mobilized to challenge the overt discrimination toward Chicanos and Latinos in the Catholic Church and in society at large. Their own experiences with racism and sexism in the Church amplified their desire to push for change. Their early concerns included institutional representation and accountability for a rapidly growing Latino Catholic population, culturally sensitive ministry and educational programs, church and secular labor practices, women's empowerment, and ecclesial support for the Chicano movement. By its third year of organizing, Puerto Rican and Cuban women joined the organization. After their first decade of activism, attention turned specifically to empowerment for grassroots⁶ Latinas, including issues of leadership development, moral agency, reproductive rights, sexuality, and domestic abuse. National biennial conferences, regional retreats, meetings, and newsletters created the spaces to analyze issues integral to the daily lives of Latinas, issues silenced by the institutional Church.

Between 1971 and 1985, Las Hermanas influenced the policy decisions of major ecclesial bodies such as the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference (NCCB/USCC), the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), and the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs of the United States Catholic Conference. By 1974, Las Hermanas had conducted two national surveys, one on the absence of Latino ministry programs in parishes across the nation, and one on the exploitation of Mexican sisters as domestics in U.S. rectories and seminaries. Early on members joined forces with Padres Asociados para Derechos Religiosos, Educativos y Sociales (PADRES), an organization of Chicano priests, for numerous projects. Together they lobbied successfully for the appointment of Chicano bishops; developed the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC), the first national Chicano pastoral institute; co-planned and facilitated the first national *encuentros* of Latino Catholics; and contributed to the first formulations of raza theology.⁷ During the 1970s Las Hermanas and PADRES, along with numerous individual laity, represented the emerging Latina/o religious leadership of the U.S. Catholic Church. Many remain in leadership positions. A new generation of Latina/o leaders in the Church today inherits a path forged by the courageous women of Las Hermanas, the men of PADRES, and their supporters.

Collaborative work between Las Hermanas and PADRES did not occur without tension. A long-term association never materialized. Ultimately, an attitude of male clerical superiority within PADRES hampered its ability to relate to the Hermanas as equals and endorse fully the equal status of women in the Church. Recognizing the powerful role of the Church in justifying patriarchy and shaping Chicano/Latino cultures, accompanied by a sense of entitlement to their own religious tradition, compelled Las Hermanas to continue the fight against sexism inherent in the Church's structure. As one Hermana stated, "If the boys want me to go, they are going to have to carry me out because it is not their Church!"⁸

In addition to influencing ecclesial matters in their first decade of organizing, Las Hermanas's members participated in Chicano student protests for educational rights, the farmworker struggle for labor rights, and widespread community organizing. Their activism represents the first time that Chicana and Latina religious leaders collectively challenged public and private institutions to address ethnic, gender, and class discrimination. Their presence brought the Chicano movement into the Church and the Church into the Chicano movement.

From its inception, Las Hermanas espoused feminist ideas, yet a specifically feminist agenda did not shape the organization until its second decade. According to Catalina Fresquez, "From the beginning we had a very strong message that women count, that women can be agents of change."⁹ A "community-centered consciousness"¹⁰ with women as central actors describes their activism. Shared leadership, reflecting "one of the basic themes of Chicana feminism,"¹¹ continues to shape their organizational structure. By 1980, Las Hermanas actively pushed for women's ordination, tirelessly bringing the subjectivity of Latinas to the national agenda of the predominantly Euroamerican Women-church movement. Although no longer focused on ordination for women, Las Hermanas has consistently provided Latinas with the opportunity to experience their own sacred authority in rituals and prayers conducted at conferences and retreats.

I identify the activism of Las Hermanas as political activism and I seek to make a clear connection between their religious work and its political significance. Contrary to male-centered political science theory, political work extends far beyond the arenas of electoral politics and public policy. As feminist social scientists

have helped us to understand, political action occurs whenever and wherever persons attempt to shape their personal and/or communal lives in opposition to social orders sustained by inequality. As sociologist Mary Pardo states, "The significance of politics occurring outside political institutions, and women's community activism particularly, continue to be largely excluded from conventional notions of political activity."¹² Although operating in relation to an established institution, Las Hermanas emerged as a purely organic effort to transform the Catholic Church and has chosen autonomy over institutional dependency. It remains an organic grassroots effort and its work continues to hold political significance for empowering Latinas.

By the beginning of its third decade, theologians within Las Hermanas recorded and analyzed the spirituality and theology of its members. The first book on U.S. Latina religious praxis titled *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church*, was published in 1988 with the assistance of Las Hermanas and several other social justice and women religious organizations.¹³ Spirituality based on transformative struggle would later give shape to *mujerista* theology, a unique blending of feminist concerns, Latina cultures, and liberation theology. Clearly unrecognized is Las Hermanas's contribution to this now internationally recognized Latina feminist theology.

Representing diverse regions, the women drawn to Las Hermanas shared certain experiences: working-class origins, Catholic education, and varying degrees of cultural alienation either in religious life or as lay members of the Roman Catholic Church. When Las Hermanas first mobilized, some of the members were ministering in Spanish-speaking communities, while the majority had been denied the opportunity.¹⁴ Collectively they understood their power to claim their right to minister to Latinos/as. The idea for an organization immediately attracted women such as Teresita Basso (California), Ramona Jean Corrales (Arizona), Yolanda Tarango (Texas), María de Jesús Ybarra (Washington), Linda Chávez (New Mexico), Sylvia Sedillo (New Mexico), Mario (Lucie) Barron (California), María Iglesias (New York), Olga Villa Parra (Indiana), Margarita Castañeda (New York), María Carolina Flores (Texas), Carmelita Espinoza (Colorado), Clarita Trujillo (New Mexico), Consuelo Covarrubias (Wisconsin), and Irene and Molly Muñoz (Iowa). The majority of these women would rise to

leadership positions in the organization. Other women, including Rosamaría Elías (New York), Rosa Martha Zárate (California), Elisa Rodríguez (Texas), Sara Murrieta (California), Catalina Fresquez (Texas), María Carolina López (Colorado), Carmen Villegas (New York), Ada María Isasi-Díaz (New York), Clara Herrera (Colorado), María Luisa Gastón (New York), Dolores Florez (Colorado), and Lucie Ortiz (Florida), joined at different times and contributed immensely to the leadership of Las Hermanas. Each woman brought to the organization a determination to create a new way of being church in a conflicted society, “*la Nueva Iglesia Latina*.”¹⁵ They have been joined by numerous other women over the years, some very active on a regional basis and others participating on the sidelines.

This book broadens the scope of three disciplines: Chicano/a studies, women’s studies, and religious studies. As the first in-depth study of Chicanas and Latinas as religious leaders and agents of transformation, it offers an interdisciplinary examination of religion, ethnicity, gender, and politics. Previous scholarship on the Chicano movement has virtually ignored the presence of religious leaders among its participants, particularly women religious. My focus on women activists within the social context of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s offers a necessary corrective to this absence and to the male-centered historical treatment of the Chicano movement. I argue that Las Hermanas and PADRES brought the Chicano movement into the religious arena, and the Catholic Church into the Chicano movement.

Contrary to popular and scholarly belief, Chicana/o and Latina/o religious leaders, sisters, priests, and laity fought valiantly in the struggle for civil rights and self-determination. They have been overlooked in large part because of the estrangement of many Chicano/a activists and scholars from institutionalized religion, specifically Roman Catholicism. As Chicanos/as critiqued their history shaped by colonizing powers intertwined with Christian missionaries, many saw rejecting Catholicism as an essential element for self-determination. Furthermore, for Chicana feminists the Catholic faith had for too long determined their subjugation in a patriarchal culture. For many activists, a fervent Mesoamerican indigenous spirituality replaced the European religion of their parents. Marxist influence on some sectors of the movement stressed “religion as an opiate of the masses,” and further alienated many

Chicanos from religion in any form.¹⁶ Some Marxist Chicanos/as, however, understood the power of religion and religious leaders to influence social change due to their exposure to Latin American liberation theology. These interrelated factors combined with the absence, or at times negative presence, of the Catholic Church in Chicano struggles convinced the majority of a generation of activists that the Catholic Church and its representatives had little to offer. In complete antithesis, Las Hermanas chose to confront the Church from within.

In religious studies the Catholic story is traditionally marginal to and eclipsed by the extensive attention scholars devote to Protestant Christianity. And within the field of American Catholicism, the narrative centers on Euroamerican devotees. Chicano/Latino Catholics are for the most part absent from historical treatments of U.S. Catholic history. This study brings to the discipline the contributions of Latina Catholics in the “religious landscape” of the Americas.

Women’s studies will also benefit from this book with its focus on the agency of Latinas, an ongoing neglected area within the discipline. Its close look into how one group of Latinas organize and strategize to combat the interrelated forces of racism, sexism, and classism offers a model of praxis to all feminist scholars. My integration of oral history and archival research brings to life a story yet untold.

In many ways my personal background prepared me well to write this book. I am Chicana, raised in a Catholic family, and have been a participant in the Chicano movement since the early 1970s. During my college years at the University of California at Santa Barbara, my consciousness-raising process also led me to reject the Catholic faith as part of my struggle for self-determination. Little did I realize that years later I would return to the Church in need of spiritual direction. My deep questioning about life and faith eventually led me to graduate work in theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. It was there that I first met Las Hermanas. The book *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* by Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango had just been published. How affirming to finally hear my experiences as a Chicana reflected in theological discourse! Soon after, another member of Las Hermanas, Teresita Basso, gave a guest lecture in a class on Latino religiosity taught by Allan Figueroa Deck. I still

recall her confidence and ease in speaking about Las Hermanas and its history of challenging the institutional Church. In the midst of learning about Latin American liberation theology, feminist theology, and the history of Chicana/o Catholic activism, I began to see the need for a Chicana/o theology, the subject of my master's thesis.

After graduating, I relocated to Los Angeles, where I worked as a lay minister in the Catholic student center at University of California at Los Angeles. Through my contacts in the Chicano community, I met another Las Hermanas member, Rosa Martha Zárate. She quickly showed me how to apply liberation theology in southern California. I visited the self-help economic cooperative, CALPULLI, and the small base communities organized by Zárate and Fr. Patricio Guillen, where I was encouraged in my pastoral work among Chicano/Latino students. I saw little distinction in the roles of this priest and this sister. They both functioned as religious leaders, sharing power and responsibility, regardless of gender. Father Guillen had been a longtime member of PADRES and Sister Zárate, a *veterana* of Las Hermanas. Together they represented a microcosm of the numerous Chicano and Chicana priests and sisters who understood themselves as part of the Chicano movement and continued to carry on the struggle. I knew then that their stories must be told. When a colleague, Timothy Matovina, suggested that I write the history of Las Hermanas for my doctoral dissertation, I welcomed the opportunity to interpret its significance as the first and only national religious-political organization of Chicana and Latina Roman Catholics.¹⁷

This study draws on the voices and collective memories of many of the women who helped shape the organization. A total of forty-five oral interviews, including several with members of PADRES, provided me with insight into their stories of protest, strategic planning, and prophetic witness. I supplemented the oral interviews with the primary documents of Las Hermanas archived in Special Collections at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, Texas, and with secondary sources. The papers and newsletters of PADRES also provided primary documentation on the events of the 1970s. Las Hermanas members María de Jesús Ybarra, Silvia Sedillo, Rosa Martha Zárate, Teresita Basso, and Clarita Trujillo supplied materials from their private collections. Juan Romero of PADRES also gave me some of his own writ-

ings on the historical events. Newspapers, including the *Abilene Reporter-News*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Los Angeles Times*, and the *National Catholic Reporter*, added context. The stories told to me, however, yielded the deepest insight into the events recorded. Although I have gained much information through numerous interviews and secondary sources, I realize that many more members of Las Hermanas and PADRES were not interviewed, and that my interpretations may be contested. I welcome the dialogue generated by my interpretation and preservation of this history.

Chapter 1 sets the social context in which Las Hermanas emerged. Vatican Council II opened the Catholic Church to “the modern world” and created new opportunities for women in religious life to choose their own ministries. Institutionalized patterns of discrimination against Chicano Catholics offered an immediate agenda for Chicana sisters. As the North American church underwent dramatic change so did the Church in Latin America. Liberation theology inspired a generation of religious leaders to live out their faith by choosing “a preferential option for the poor.” The civil rights and ethnic nationalist movements in the United States coincided with these global changes. Chicana women religious enthusiastically joined the Chicano movement and bridged religion and politics.

Chapter 2 looks at specific events in West Texas that spurred the founders of Las Hermanas to mobilize other Chicana sisters nationwide. An immediate membership set in motion a long-lasting commitment of sisterhood “united in action and prayer.” Early organizational goals specified “effective service to *el pueblo*.” The consciousness-raising process experienced by those attending Las Hermanas soon gave the organization a reputation of radicalizing previously “obedient” sisters.

Chapter 3 examines the early activism of Las Hermanas, including Proyecto Mexico, a project designed to rectify the exploitation of Mexican sisters employed as domestics in church-related institutions. Collaborative work with PADRES for institutional accountability and culturally specific ministry programs exemplified their efforts to make visible Chicana/o/Latina leadership within the U.S. Catholic Church. Their work with the United Farm Workers of America receives attention in order to fill the gap in scholarship regarding Chicano/a religious leaders involved in the labor movement. Political activism shaped theological insights and

Las Hermanas contributed to an emerging Chicano/Latino theology. Las Hermanas's participation in *Theology of the Americas*, a multiracial project intended to explore the significance of Latin American liberation theology for North Americans, enhanced the preparation for their own theological discourse rooted in the experiences of grassroots women.

Chapter 4 considers the challenges faced by Chicana/Latina Catholic feminists, a complex identity that manages the intersection of gender, ethnicity, class, and religion. A keen awareness of the influence of Catholicism on gender expectations within Latino cultures compelled Las Hermanas to engage clerical male counterparts in the praxis of gender equality. Their commitment to women as full participants in the life of the Church and society met the same kind of exclusion encountered by Chicana feminists in the secular arena. This chapter examines the experiences of Rosa Martha Zárate, Sara Murrieta, and Yolanda Tarango, experiences that exemplify the obstacles placed in the paths of strong and vocal women. Besides battling "intragroup sexism,"¹⁸ Las Hermanas challenged the discrimination operating within the predominantly Euroamerican Women-church movement, a struggle that ultimately led to their renewed commitment to their own autonomous feminist organization.

The final chapter discusses the spirituality and theology of Las Hermanas based on transformative struggle, or the process of embracing struggle for the goal of making justice a reality. Articulated through *mujerista* theology, this spirituality finds expression not only in social activism, but also in women's creativity, women-centered rituals, and nurturing relationships. Through ritual, song, poetry, and activism, Las Hermanas continues its legacy of living in the intersection of politics and religion.

This examination of feminist praxis and Latina sisterhood provides insights for the future of an expanding U.S. Latina/o Catholic population. Latinos currently comprise at least 40 percent of the U.S. Catholic Church and are the majority in more than a dozen archdioceses. Over twenty-seven archdioceses are between 25 and 50 percent Latino.¹⁹ Yet underrepresentation of Latinos and Latinas in decision-making positions of the ecclesial structure, a lack of culturally sensitive services, the closing of viable Latino ministry programs, and increased centralization of male authority continue to plague the Church in the twenty-first century.²⁰

According to the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB), about 3.8 percent of Catholic priests are Latino, or about 1,818 out of 47,582 Catholic clergy in the United States. Of these about 500 are U.S.-born Latino. There is one Latino priest for every 9,925 Latino Catholics, compared to one Euroamerican priest for every 1,230 Catholics. Of the 75,000 sisters, less than 750 are Latina. Of the nearly 280 Catholic bishops, about 9 percent, or 25, are Latino. Of these, less than a quarter are Chicano. The ratio of Latino bishops to Latino Catholics is 1,000,000 to one, compared to the general Catholic population, where the ratio of bishops to parishioners is 231,000 to one. If we look at the pipeline of future Chicano priests and sisters and the pool of potential bishops, the numbers are not promising. While half of the dioceses claim to offer special programs in "Hispanic" ministry, Latinos make up only 11 percent of seminarians.²¹

The Church today faces a significant loss of its clergy. From 1965 to 2005, the Church will lose 40 percent of ordained ministers, and the average age for ministers will be fifty-five years old.²² At the same time, the U.S. Catholic Church will increase about one percent a year, due primarily to Latina fertility rates and immigration. Euroamerican Catholics will decrease in numbers, due to low fertility rates and an aging population. Whether the Church is prepared or not, the numbers of Latino/a Catholics will continue to grow.

Las Hermanas, an autonomous feminist Catholic organization, continues to offer a critical response to the marginalization of Latino/a leadership and women within the Roman Catholic Church. Las Hermanas expands our understanding of the role that women and religion have played and continue to play in the struggle for self-determination.

1

The Emergence of Las Hermanas

The Social Context

Times are changing rapidly and by necessity . . . the Church must also “change” . . . The “church” . . . is seeking ways and means of identifying more closely with the people of God. This “identity role” must also be ours.

—Gloria Gallardo, co-founder of Las Hermanas, 1971

The religious are to embody themselves into the real world with greater daring today than ever before: they cannot consider themselves removed from social problems, from democratic awareness, or from the pluralistic mentality of the society in which they live.

—Second General Council of Latin American Bishops, 1979

FOR THREE days in early April 1971, fifty primarily Chicana women religious met in Houston, Texas, to discuss and pray about the implications of the Chicano movement for the Catholic Church. The seeds planted during those three spring days became the roots of Las Hermanas, a national religious-political organization of Chicana/Latina feminist Catholics. During the past three decades, Las Hermanas has offered a counter-discourse to the patriarchy and Eurocentrism of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church by creating an alternative space for Latinas to express a feminist spirituality and theology.

Las Hermanas emerged in the context of the Church's renewal through Vatican Council II, Latin American liberation struggles, the civil rights movements, Vietnam War protests, and feminism. The ferment of change combined with a legacy of discrimination

in the U.S. Catholic Church toward Chicanos and other Spanish-speaking persons convinced Chicana sisters to mobilize in 1971.

Encouraged by the organizing efforts of Chicano clergy in 1969 known as PADRES, Gregoria Ortega, a Victoryknoll sister from El Paso, and Gloria Graciela Gallardo, a Holy Ghost sister from San Antonio, contacted Mexican American sisters nationwide. A letter dated 20 October 1970 expressed their reasons for uniting as Chicana sisters:

We, as religious exert much influence among our Spanish-speaking people because of their deep-seated religious principles. Many of us feel that we are not doing this to our fullest capacity. On the other hand, there are some of us who have tried to become more relevant to our people and because of this, find themselves in "trouble" with either our own congregation or other members of the hierarchy. Then there are some of us who would like to be able to do more among our people but cannot, either because they are not yet quite sure of themselves or because they are being constrained by the lack of understanding or communication in their congregation.¹

Six months later fifty women religious from twenty congregations gathered in Houston. The decision to form *Las Hermanas* quickly took root, and a motto, "*Unidas en Acción y Oración*" [United in Action and Prayer], was chosen. The participants unanimously supported four goals in order to effectively serve "the Spanish-speaking people of God using our unique resources as Spanish-speaking religious women"²: (1) activate leadership among themselves and the laity; (2) affect social change; (3) contribute to the cultural renaissance of *La Raza*; and (4) educate their Anglo-dominant congregations concerning the needs of Spanish-speaking communities.³

The second meeting eight months later (25–27 November 1971, in Santa Fe, New Mexico), drew four times as many participants. The first issue of *Informes*, the organizational newsletter, dated September of that year, stated, "Our current 'membership' is over 900, giving HERMANAS members in twenty-five [U.S.] states, Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru."⁴ Fourteen states elected state coordinators, and Colorado, Texas, and California held regional conferences.⁵

This remarkable response to the invitation to unite as Mexican American sisters was also a response to a long history of overt

discrimination within the Church toward Chicano and Latino Catholics as well as the current climate of activism and reform. Chicano and Latino communities were seeing the demands of Chicano activists for Church support, transformations of the Church after Vatican Council II, the growing influence of Latin American liberation theology, and feminism, which merged and set in motion the ethnic and political consciousness of Chicana women religious.

Ecclesiastic Discrimination

A pattern of second-class status in the Roman Catholic Church for Mexican Americans and extreme cultural alienation and discrimination experienced by many Chicanas in religious life compelled Las Hermanas to organize for change. Yolanda Tarango of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word recalls the racism she and other Chicanas experienced:

At that time you were supposed to leave behind your past as it was not desirable to work with one's people. I experienced much racism. Nothing cultural was valued. We were forbidden to speak Spanish even in hospitals, schools, not even to the janitors. This is the climate we walked into. For everyone it was a culture shock; anything Hispanic was devalued. It was a violent tearing away from our pasts.⁶

In some situations Chicana sisters were encouraged to draw on their cultural capital. Exceptions to a pattern of discrimination in religious life did exist; for example, the Victoryknoll sisters were established principally to work in Mexican American communities and thus had a percentage of Chicana sisters. Leadership, however, remained dominated by Euroamerican sisters.⁷ Other orders such as the Congregation of Divine Providence welcomed Mexican American women, but before the 1960s did not encourage them to pursue higher education. Euroamerican sisters consistently received greater educational opportunities.⁸ The Sisters of Loretto established a novitiate in Santa Fe in 1852 with primarily Mexican American women. According to Sylvia Sedillo, SL, "I always felt like I belonged."⁹ Teresita Basso also always felt supported by her congregation, the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.¹⁰

The treatment of most Chicana sisters did not differ much from the discrimination that Spanish-speaking Catholics encountered historically in the Church. An overview of Chicano-Catholic history beginning in 1848 is helpful to assess the legacy of institutionalized racism. Following the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Mexican Catholics in the annexed territories became members of the U.S. Roman Catholic Church overnight. These now Mexican Americans soon experienced discriminatory practices under the authority of European-born pastors and bishops. With Spanish, French, Irish, and German clergy, recruited to minister to the Spanish-speaking, a lack of cultural understanding reigned.¹¹ The actions of the first bishop of the New Mexico territory, including present-day Arizona and southern Colorado, Fr. Jean Batiste Lamy of France, exemplify the religious struggles of the era. Arriving in 1851, Lamy expelled the sixteen native Mexican clergy ministering in New Mexico. In 1854 in a pastoral letter, Lamy instituted tithing and threatened to excommunicate any pastor who did not comply. Uncooperative parishioners would be denied the sacraments. Mexican-born Fr. José Martínez refused and was subsequently banished from his ministry among native New Mexicans. Lamy proceeded to insult further the native Catholics by recruiting additional priests from France and replacing indigenous religious art with European statues.¹²

Further examples of institutional efforts to strip Mexican Americans of their cultural and religious identity abound. With no understanding of the communal and family-centered religious customs of Mexican Catholics, Bishop Taddues Amat of the Monterey–Los Angeles diocese attempted to regulate religious orthodoxy. Between 1862 and 1876, Amat published three decrees prohibiting any popular devotions that “offended clerical sensitivities.”¹³ Mexican public celebrations such as *Los Pastores*, a Christmas play, *Los Judeaos*, a Holy Week drama, and funeral customs were among the first traditions declared scandalous. Concern for Protestant nativism convinced the Spanish bishop to refashion Mexican Catholicism according to the rubrics of Roman ritual.¹⁴ By the late 1800s, Mexican Catholics in southern California retained a distant relationship with the Church.¹⁵ Ironically, the insensitivity of Amat and others encouraged the “unofficial” rituals of a community and family-centered faith to take on even greater significance for the people.¹⁶

By the turn of the century, many Catholic parishes with a substantial number of Mexican American members forced these parishioners into the church basement for separate Masses.¹⁷ In the early 1900s, in Phoenix, Arizona, a German cleric, Fr. Novatus Benzing, expected Mexicans to sit on the church floor while Anglos occupied the pews. He denied Mexican Americans the sacraments unless they enrolled their children in the parochial school.¹⁸ Southwest Mexican communities often responded to such blatant discrimination by building their own churches.¹⁹

Whereas the majority of Mexican Americans remained faithful to their Catholic roots, some did convert to Protestantism.²⁰ Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist ministers made the first inroads into Mexican communities throughout the Southwest in the 1820s. By the turn of the century, "a significant number of Hispanic churches had been planted. They were ministered mostly by Hispanics, though under the 'tutelage' of Anglo missionaries."²¹ The Pentecostal Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in the early 1900s marked a significant expansion of Latino Protestants and attracted even "devout [Mexican] Catholics."²² Issues of paternalistic control, however, shaped the patterns and structures of Mexican American Protestantism in the Southwest well into the late twentieth century.²³

By the second decade of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church increased its efforts to respond positively to its Mexican members. Fear of Protestant conversions rather than cultural acceptance, however, characterized its motivations.²⁴ As examples, Bishop Cantwell of Los Angeles appointed Fr. Robert E. Lucey as director of the Bureau of Catholic Charities. By 1929 Lucey had established five diocesan community centers serving Mexican American neighborhoods. In addition, a medical clinic and a recreation center including an employment bureau tried to meet the needs of the growing Mexican Catholic population.²⁵ These efforts, however, focused extensively on Americanizing the Mexicans with little analysis of the root cause of poverty.²⁶ With the onset of the Depression, charity programs decreased and the Church turned to religious education as a means of continuing Americanization efforts. Raising good Catholics meant forming good Americans.²⁷

A few Catholic settlement houses in the Midwest serviced Mexican immigrants; however, none ever matched those established by Protestants such as Hull House and the University of Chicago Set-

tlement.²⁸ In fact, the Catholic-sponsored Gary-Alerding House in Gary, Indiana, opened in 1923, yet blatant anti-Mexican sentiments expressed by its director, Fr. John deVille, discouraged Mexicans from utilizing settlement services.²⁹

The efforts of Mexican sisters at times offered a different experience. In the 1930s, a Mexican order, the Company of Mary, fled the anti-Catholic Mexican government under Plutarco Calles, and established their convent in Douglas, Arizona. Finding themselves in a heavily populated Mexican town dominated by an Anglo Protestant society, these women offered their teaching services to Mexican women and children. According to historian Raquel Rubio Goldsmith,

For Mexicanas in Douglas, the convent symbolized a Mexican world . . . no other building housed Mexican culture so grandly . . . [it] stood proudly for that which was pushed into corners in the rest of the town. There, Mexican culture found a home, and Mexicanas . . . reveled in its existence, feeling pride along with comfort.³⁰

Such unusual circumstances, however, did not have a broader impact beyond the fortunate women and children who encountered these Mexican sisters in Arizona.

The post-World War II Church hierarchy succeeded in building a massive parochial school system that aimed to further Americanize and strengthen Catholic ties among Mexican Americans.³¹ Despite these efforts, discrimination on the pastoral level persisted. In 1945 in Riverside, California, the Zuniga family suffered public chastisement for entering the church during the Mass designated for Euroamerican Catholics. Numerous other stories describe Mexicans being forced to occupy the pews in the back of the church and having to wait to receive the Eucharist until after their fellow white Christians had.³²

Councils for the Spanish-speaking began to appear in the early 1950s as an outgrowth of the Bishops' Committee for the Spanish Speaking first organized in 1945. Under the leadership of Robert E. Lucey, then archbishop of the San Antonio archdiocese, the bishops' committee agreed to construct medical clinics, settlement houses, and community and catechetical centers in Los Angeles, Santa Fe, Denver, and San Antonio.³³

By the mid-1960s, diocesan councils, and in some areas regional offices for urbanized Chicano/Latino Catholics, began to appear, at times under the leadership of Latino laity. Moisés

Sandoval states that by 1965, representatives of seventy dioceses worked in liaison with the bishops' committee. The archdioceses of New York, Chicago, and Denver had offices, committees, or projects dedicated to Latino ministries. The dioceses of Cleveland, Miami, Madison, Wisconsin, and Baker, Oregon, also had offices devoted to Latino ministry and migrant needs.³⁴

Not until 1970, however, did the institutionalization of Latino leadership on a national basis occur when the Office for the Spanish Speaking (OSS), established in 1945, relocated to Washington, D.C., under the direction of Pablo Sedillo, a layman from New Mexico. Housed within the building of the NCCB, the OSS proved ineffective as Sedillo lacked both staff and a budget. Initially Sedillo led OSS as a division in the Department of Social Development and World Peace, but the new director lacked access to the policy-making committees of the NCCB. After four years of lobbying with the help of PADRES, Las Hermanas, and Latino laity, Sedillo's office was elevated to the Secretariat for the Spanish Speaking in 1974.³⁵

Accompanying this success was the gradual development of regional offices for Latino ministry in the Midwest (1968), the West (1973), and the Northeast and the Southwest (1974). Small budgets and understaffing, however, characterized the operational limits of these programs.

Regional Latino/a directors, including Las Hermanas members Olga Villa, director of the Midwest office, and Lupe Anguiano, director of the Southwest office, lobbied tirelessly for more Latinos at the decision-making level, from chanceries to parish councils. Culturally relevant services, liturgies in Spanish, and social justice concerns held top priority as Villa and Anguiano sought to minister to immigrants, farmworkers, and the urban poor. Leadership development and the preparation of Latino lay ministers also received primary attention.³⁶

Overall, however, institutionalized patterns of discrimination continued to characterize Chicano-Catholic Church relations. As sociologist Gilbert Cadena states, "From 1848 to 1970, Mexicans/Chicanos had virtually no voice in the national decision-making process of the church . . . nor did they plan pastoral or social policy."³⁷ Not until 1970 did the Catholic hierarchy appoint its first Mexican American, Fr. Patricio Flores, as an auxiliary bishop even though Latinos comprised approximately 27 percent

of the U.S. Catholic population. In comparison, Irish Americans comprised 17 percent of the U.S. Catholic population yet had a representation of 56 percent among American Catholic bishops. Chicanos represented only 200 members of the 54,000 priests and Latinas less than 5 percent, or 1,000 of 104,000, women religious in the United States.³⁸ In many regions Spanish-speaking Catholics still had to worship in substandard conditions. In the 1970s ecclesiastical employment practices relegated sisters from Mexico to domestic tasks in rectories and seminaries; their meager earnings were sent to their communities in Mexico.³⁹ Inheriting this legacy of discrimination compelled Chicana sisters in 1971 to challenge the racism in the Catholic Church and immerse themselves in national and international secular/political struggles for justice. They courageously brought the Chicano movement into the Catholic Church.

The collaboration between Chicana and Latina sisters and Chicano priests in the early 1970s reflects an era of intense action and optimism. In the words of *Las Hermanas* member Carmelita Espinoza, RGS, "It was a real decade of conversion and change!"⁴⁰ Latina/o Catholics became very visible as these women and men struggled to empower themselves as leaders for the sake of Latino communities. María Iglesias, SC, remembers the energy and excitement: "All of us were calling for dialogue with the hierarchy. It was the first time we had a voice."⁴¹

Vatican Council II

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) convened by Pope John XXIII called upon the Church to modernize in response to the "signs of the times." The cries for self-determination among colonized peoples, protests for workers' economic rights, and the struggle for women's equality in public and private arenas were singled out as significant pressures requiring the attention of religious leaders.⁴² The papal mandate for the Church to engage in the concerns of the world encouraged an unprecedented involvement of religious leaders, both men and women, in social and political affairs.

The Council's "recognition that God speaks through cultures"⁴³ broadened the Church's identity in the world. By bringing together bishops from numerous countries and cultures, approving

vernacular languages for liturgical use, affirming historical consciousness, and pronouncing the validity of other religions, Vatican Council II opened the door to culturally specific ministries.⁴⁴ For Teresita Basso, a member of Las Hermanas from its inception, the Church's validation of culture as an expression of the sacred pointed her to ministry in Chicano communities. "I realized I knew the language and the culture: The Church had been absent for so long among our people."⁴⁵

The Council produced sixteen documents providing direction to religious leaders and laity, endorsing principals such as a ministry of collegiality among clerics and laity, ecumenism, correction of the Church's errors, regional and local diversity, scriptural reflection by the laity, and a recommitment to the social mission of the Church.⁴⁶ The longest document, *Gaudium et spes: The Church in the Modern World*, declared social justice activity as a primary way of fulfilling the mission of the Church. As a synthesis of Catholic social teaching, the document declared that the Church could no longer remain indifferent to the world and its changes. According to historian John O'Malley,

never before in the history of Catholicism have so many and such sudden changes been legislated and implemented which immediately touched the lives of the faithful, and never before had such a radical adjustment of viewpoint been required of them.⁴⁷

Such sudden changes affected Church leaders and laity in diverse ways.

Divisions among the 2,700 bishops present at the Council reflected the heterogeneity of the Church. Conservatives maintained that the weakening of ecclesial authority stemmed from "a growing secularization in the world, a decrease in faith, and a lessening of respect for authority."⁴⁸ The progressive sector believed that "the institutional church needed restructuring and reform because it was too hierarchical, too impersonal, and too detached from modernity. Service to all humankind should be the church's first priority."⁴⁹ These distinctly different positions resulted in final documents marked by inconsistencies and evident compromises. For example, article nine of *Gaudium et spes* emphasizes the mission of the Church to accompany humanity as it seeks "to establish a political, social, and economic order which will to an ever better extent serve man [*sic*] and help individuals as well as groups