

***Franciscan University Presents***  
**“Hispanic Catholics”**  
**With guest, Archbishop José Gomez**

Los Angeles, Calif., May 28, 2010 / 06:02 am ([CNA](#))- As he prepares to lead the largest archdiocese in the United States, Archbishop Jose Gomez, spoke with Catholic News Agency (CNA) in an exclusive interview addressing the role of Hispanics in the U.S. Catholic Church.

The full text of the interview can be read below:

**CNA: What is your own background?**

Archbishop Gomez: I grew up in Monterrey, Mexico. My father was a medical doctor in Monterrey. My mother was raised in San Antonio, Texas, where she completed high school. She also went to college in Mexico City, and although she completed her course, my mother married my father instead of graduating. Education was always very important in my family.

I am both an American citizen and an immigrant, born and raised in Monterrey, Mexico. Some of my ancestors were in what's now Texas, since 1805. (At that time it was still under Spanish rule.) I've always had family and friends on both sides of the border.

**CNA:** As the next Archbishop of Los Angeles, you will be the most prominent Hispanic prelate in the Catholic Church in the United States. What is your view of the state of Catholicism among U.S. Hispanics?

**Gomez:** The number of Hispanics self-identifying as Catholics has declined from nearly 100 percent in just two decades, while the number who describe themselves as Protestant has nearly doubled, and the number saying they have “no religion” has also doubled.

I'm not a big believer in polls about religious beliefs and practice. But in this case the polls reflect pastoral experience on the ground.

**CNA:** What questions do you see as key for Catholic ministry to U.S. Hispanics?

**Gomez:** As Hispanics become more and more successful, more and more assimilated into the American mainstream, will they keep the faith? Will they stay Catholic or will they drift away—to Protestant denominations, to some variety of vague spirituality, or to no religion at all?

Will they live by the Church's teachings and promote and defend these teachings in the public square? Or will their Catholicism simply become a kind of "cultural" background, a personality trait, a part of their upbringing that shapes their perspective on the world but compels no allegiance or devotion to the Church?

Hispanic ministry should mean only one thing—bringing Hispanic people to the encounter with Jesus Christ in his Church.

All our pastoral plans and programs presume that we are trying to serve Christ and his Gospel. But we can no longer simply presume Christ. We must make sure we are proclaiming him.

We should thank God every day many times for the good things we have been given. But we also need to give thanks to God through service, through works of mercy and love.

**CNA:** What is the most serious problem Hispanic Catholics face in the U.S.?

**Gomez:** The dominant culture in the United States, which is aggressively, even militantly secularized. This is a subject that unfortunately doesn't get much attention at all in discussions about the future of Hispanic ministry. But it's time that we change that.

"Practical atheism" has become the de facto state religion in America. The price of participation in our economic, political, and social life is that we essentially have to agree to conduct ourselves as if God does not exist. Religion in the U.S. is something we do on Sundays or in our families, but is not allowed to have any influence on what we do the rest of the week.

This is all very strange for a country that was founded by Christians—in fact by Hispanic Catholics. Indeed, in San Antonio, the Gospel was being preached in Spanish and Holy Mass was being celebrated by Hispanics before George Washington was born.

**CNA:** You have said these secularizing forces put even more pressure on Hispanics and other immigrant groups. Why?

**Gomez:** Because immigrants already face severe demands to “fit in,” to downplay what is culturally and religiously distinct about them; to prove that they are “real” Americans, too. We might feel subtle pressures to blend in, to assimilate, to downplay our heritage and our distinctive identities as Catholics and Hispanics.

I believe that in God’s plan, the new Hispanic presence is to advance our country’s spiritual renewal. To restore the promise of America’s youth. In this renewed encounter with Hispanic faith and culture, I believe God wants America to rediscover values it has lost sight of—the importance of religion, family, friendship, community, and the culture of life.

**CNA:** What are other challenges facing Hispanics in the U.S.?

**Gomez:** In our Hispanic ministries, we must understand that we are preaching the Good News to the poor. The second and third generation of Hispanics are much better educated, much more fluent in the dominant language, and are living at a higher economic standard of living than the first generation.

But still about one-quarter of all Hispanics, no matter what generation, are living below the poverty line. Combine that with high school drop-out rates of about 22 percent, and a dramatic rise in the number of Hispanic children being raised in single-parent homes—both strong indicators of future poverty—and I worry that we may be ministering to a permanent Hispanic underclass.

We have moral and social problems too. Our people have some of the highest rates of teen pregnancy, abortion, and out-of-wedlock births, of any ethnic group in the country. These are things we don’t talk about enough. But we cannot write these issues off as just “conservative issues.”

To my mind, these are serious “justice” issues. If we want justice for our young people, if we want what God wants for them, then we need to find ways to teach our young people virtue, self-discipline, and personal responsibility.

**CNA:** What do you tell Latino leaders?

**Gomez:** Don't be intimidated by the truths of our faith. They are a gift from God. Let these truths touch your heart and change your life.

You should own copies of the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. If you spend a few minutes each day reading these books and also reading from the Gospel, you will notice a change. You will look at the world and your own lives with new eyes.

“Be proud of your heritage! Deepen your sense of your Hispanic identity, the traditions and customs of our ancestors!” I tell them. “But you are Catholics. And ‘catholic’ means universal. That means you can’t define yourself —nor can you let society define you—solely by your ethnic identity. You are called to be leaders—not only in the Hispanic community, but in every area of our culture and society.”

As Catholic leaders and as Hispanics, we must reclaim this culture for God.

Being a leader means, first of all, accepting Jesus Christ as the ruler of your life. The martyrs of Mexico all lived—and died—with these words on their lips: Viva Cristo Rey! (“May Christ the King live!”) To be true leaders, the living Christ must be your king.

**CNA:** What is the role of the Church in the political debate over immigration?

**Gomez:** The Church is not a political party or interest group. It is not the Church’s primary task to fight political battles or to be engaged in debates over specific policies. This task belongs to the laity.

The Church’s interest in immigration is not a recent development. It doesn’t grow out of any political or partisan agenda. No. It is a part of our original religious identity as Catholics, as Christians. We must defend the immigrant if we are to be worthy of the name Catholic.

For bishops and priests, our job as pastors is to help form our peoples’ consciences, especially those who work in the business community and in government. We need to instill in our people a greater sense of their civic duty to work for reforms in a system that denies human dignity to so many.

While we forcefully defend the rights of immigrants, we must also remind them of their duties under Catholic social teaching. Chief among these duties is the obligation to respect the laws of their new country.

We need to help ensure that these newcomers become true Americans while preserving their own distinctive identity and culture, in which religion, family, friendship, community, and the culture of life are important values.

I'm not a politician. I'm a pastor of souls. And as a pastor I believe the situation that's developed today is bad for the souls of Americans. There is too much anger. Too much resentment. Too much fear. Too much hate. It's eating people up.

In this volatile debate, the Church must be a voice of compassion, reason, and moral principle.

The Church has an important role to play in promoting forgiveness and reconciliation on this issue. We must work so that justice and mercy, not anger and resentment, are the motives behind our response to illegal immigration.

**CNA:** How should Catholics respond to immigration?

**Gomez:** Unfortunately anti-immigrant sentiment and anti-Hispanic bias is a problem today, even among our fellow Catholics. I don't want to over-dramatize the situation. But we do need to be honest and recognize that racial prejudice is a driving factor behind a lot of our political conversation about immigration.

In the bitter debates of recent years, I have been alarmed by the indifference of so many of our people to Catholic teaching and to the concrete demands of Christian charity.

It is not only the racism, xenophobia, and scapegoating. These are signs of a more troubling reality. Many of our Catholic people no longer see the foreigners sojourning among them as brothers and sisters. To listen to the rhetoric in the U.S. and elsewhere it is as if the immigrant is not a person, but only a thief or a terrorist or a simple work-animal.

We can never forget that Jesus himself and his family were migrants. They were forced into Egypt by the bad policies of a bad government. This was to

show us Christ's solidarity with refugees, displaced persons, and immigrants—in every time and in every place.

We all know these words of Jesus: “For I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:35, 40). We need to restore the truth that the love of God and the love of neighbor have been forever joined in the teaching—and in the person—of Jesus Christ.

Many of these new laws on immigration are harsh and punitive. The law should not be used to scare people, to invade their homes and work-sites, to break up families.

I would like to see a moratorium on new state and local legislation. And, as the U.S. bishops recently called for, I would like to see an end to federal work-site enforcement raids.

The bottom line is that as long as workers can earn more in one hour in the U.S. than they can earn in a day or a week in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, they will continue to migrate to this country. Immigration has to do with peoples' rights to share in the goods they need to secure their livelihoods.

We need to come together and find a solution to the complicated economic, national security, and legal issues raised by immigration.

**CNA:** But how would you respond to those angered by illegal immigration? Shouldn't those in the country illegally face punishment?

**Gomez:** As we stress the Church's moral principles, we need to be more sensitive to people's fears. The opponents of immigration are also people of faith.

They are afraid. And their fears are legitimate.

The fact is that millions of immigrants are here in blatant violation of U.S. law. This makes law-abiding Americans angry. And it should.

We have to make sure that our laws are fair and understandable. At the same time, we have to insist that our laws be respected and enforced. Those who violate our laws have to be punished.

The question is how? What punishments are proper and just? I think, from a moral standpoint, we're forced to conclude that deporting immigrants who break our laws is too severe a penalty.

Now, this doesn't mean we shouldn't enforce the laws. It means we need to find more suitable penalties. I would suggest that intensive, long-term community service would be a far more constructive solution than deportation. This would build communities rather than tear them apart. And it would serve to better integrate the immigrants into the social and moral fabric of America.

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**Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*  
“Hispanic Catholics ”  
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**\* *Still Point: Loss, Longing, and Our Search for God* by Dr. Regis Martin. Ave Maria Press.**

**\* *Consuming the Word: The New Testament and The Eucharist in the Early Church* by Dr. Scott Hahn. Image Publishing.**

**\* Available through the Franciscan University Bookstore, 1235 University Blvd., Steubenville, OH 43952, 1-888-333-0381, [www.franciscan.edu/bookstore](http://www.franciscan.edu/bookstore).**

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