

CENTER FOR PUERTO RICAN STUDIES
HUNTER COLLEGE - CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

PRESERVING IDENTITY:
PUERTO RICAN SHIFTS FROM CATHOLICISM TO PENTECOSTALISM

An examination of the indirect and direct factors why the change from Catholicism to Pentecostalism allowed the early generation Puerto Rican to preserve their identity in New York City

by

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Spring 2009

PRESERVING IDENTITY

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The Spanish Eastern District of the Assemblies of God is celebrating 80 years of Hispanic Pentecostalism in the Northeastern part of the United States. This means that in 1927 there was a Hispanic who accepted Pentecostalism somewhere within the Northeastern United States. With the influx of migrants into New York City from Puerto Rico, it is more than likely that a Puerto Rican was one of those who accepted Pentecostalism; especially if consideration is made for the Pentecostal missionary activity in Puerto Rico by the 1920s. Interestingly, while the early generation Puerto Ricans were migrating into mainland United States and undergoing varied changes in their lives, a substantial number of them did not follow the same pattern of consistency or similarity to their religious faith as their counterparts from Europe. In comparison, many of the European migrants such as the Irish, Germans, or even the Jews who entered the United States not only brought their religious faith and practices along with them, but their ministers as well. This could be viewed as the European migrant's attempt to either alleviate the already stressful conditions due to their relocation, as well as, an attempt to preserve their identity within a religious context in a foreign environment. The migrant Puerto Ricans also attempted to preserve their identity as well as their European counterparts but they did so in a different manner. A substantial number of migrating Catholic Puerto Ricans did not use their Catholic faith as a vehicle to preserve their identity. Considering Puerto Rican identity is found in culture and language where Spanish (Iberian/Mediterranean) heritage resides, within this heritage there is a priceless ingredient – Roman Catholicism.

Spain, at the time of its unification in the late 15th and early 16th century was intensely Roman Catholic (the Reconquista and the Spanish Inquisition). This translated into Roman Catholicism as the predominant faith in Puerto Rico for a about 400 years. Initially, it was difficult for me to understand why the early generation Puerto Ricans – in the midst of experiencing drastic changes during their migrating period (from rural to urban, a language barrier, climatic conditions, racial tension, etc.) – would willfully add another stressful situation, replacing Catholicism (a centuries old faith, of which they should be very comfortable) with Pentecostalism (a neophyte Protestant faith, that “didn’t exist” prior to the 20th century) as their vehicle to preserve their identity, especially since Roman Catholicism existed in New York City when the first Puerto Ricans arrived. This led me to believe that there was something (or a few things) that either encouraged or forced the many early generation Puerto Ricans to reject Catholicism for Pentecostalism. It is the intent of this essay to show the indirect and direct factors that led to the rejection of Catholicism and acceptance of Pentecostalism that helped the early generation Puerto Ricans preserve their identity.

For this study, the definition of early generation Puerto Rican means the first two generations of Puerto Ricans who entered mainland America (first generation Puerto Ricans in New York City are those individuals who were born on the island of Puerto Rico and have migrated to mainland America; second generation Puerto Ricans are those born in mainland America and have, at least one parent, if not both, born in Puerto Rico).

The Indirect Factors

There were two indirect factors that led the early generation Puerto Ricans in New York City to preserve their identity: one is the economic and the other – which is possibly the genesis

of their desire to preserve their identity – is the social. Within the economic, I will discuss the reason(s) for migrating to mainland America and also examine why Puerto Ricans choose New York City, instead of the closer and similarly climatic Hispanic inhabited cities like Miami or states like Texas. Using statistical information, we will be able to see New York City and the Middle Atlantic states as the preferred destination among first generation migrant Puerto Ricans in the 1920s and 1930s compared to other regions within the continental United States. Within the social aspect, we will see the relation early generation Puerto Ricans had with the American ethos and its specific ethnic groups in New York City such as blacks, Italians and the Jews, as well as show how they carved out their own communities within New York City, specifically East Harlem (affectionately called “El Barrio” or “Spanish Harlem”).

The Economic Situation

The early generation of Puerto Rican’s came into the United States due to their economic situation in Puerto Rico after the Spanish American War in 1898. Spain ceded Puerto Rico to the United States and left most of the growing Puerto Rican population as low-wage earners, and landless laborers that lived in substandard living conditions (compared to their future situation in New York City). American corporations or small businesses looking for cheap labor opened opportunities for the Puerto Ricans on the island. Puerto Ricans took full advantage regardless of how far away from the island these opportunities were because, as Francisco Cordasco mentioned: “Migration usually benefits the migrant economically.”¹

Kal Wagenheim claimed: “Like the waves of immigrants before them, Puerto Ricans came to the United States in search of work.”² New York City was the primary target for early

¹ Francisco Cordasco and Eugene Bucchioni. *The Puerto Rican Experience: A Sociological Sourcebook*, 157

² Kal Wagenheim. *The Puerto Ricans: A Documentary History*, 283

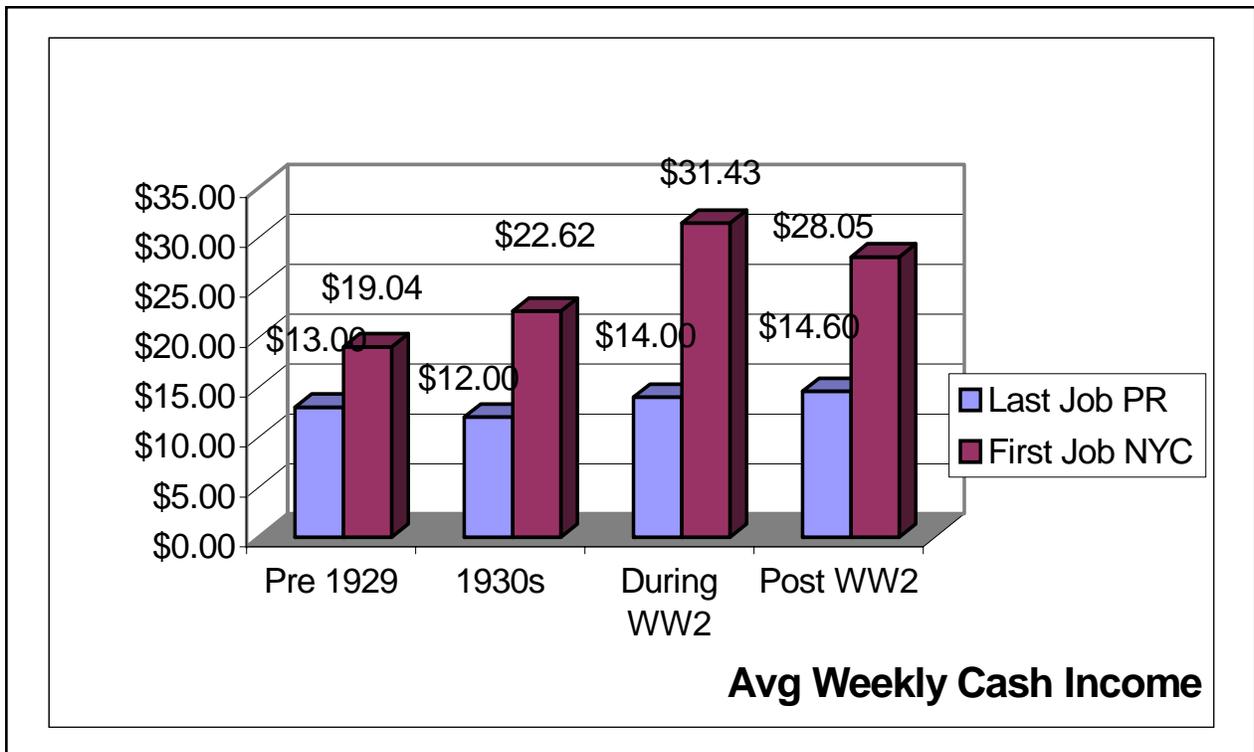
generation Puerto Ricans, mainly because it was, as James Jennings mentioned: "...the largest labor market in the world."³ Lawrence Chenault claimed: "The attraction of high money wages comes from cities and not from farming sections."⁴ For example, the average salary received in any period between the 1920s and 1950s was more in New York City compared to Puerto Rico.⁵

In addition, New York City was feasible to the Puerto Ricans due to the housing opportunities (although they were slums, it was an improvement compared to housing condition on the island), transportation affordability (via boat and airplane), the familiarity of New York due to its products imported to Puerto Rico, and lastly word of mouth by previous Puerto Rican visitors. Cities like Miami and some locations in the Southeastern portion of the United States had similar weather to Puerto Rico (when compared to New York) but because of the already

³ James Jennings and Monte Rivera. *Puerto Rican Politics In Urban America*, 25, 26

⁴ Lawrence Chenault. *The Puerto Rican Migrant In New York City*, 56

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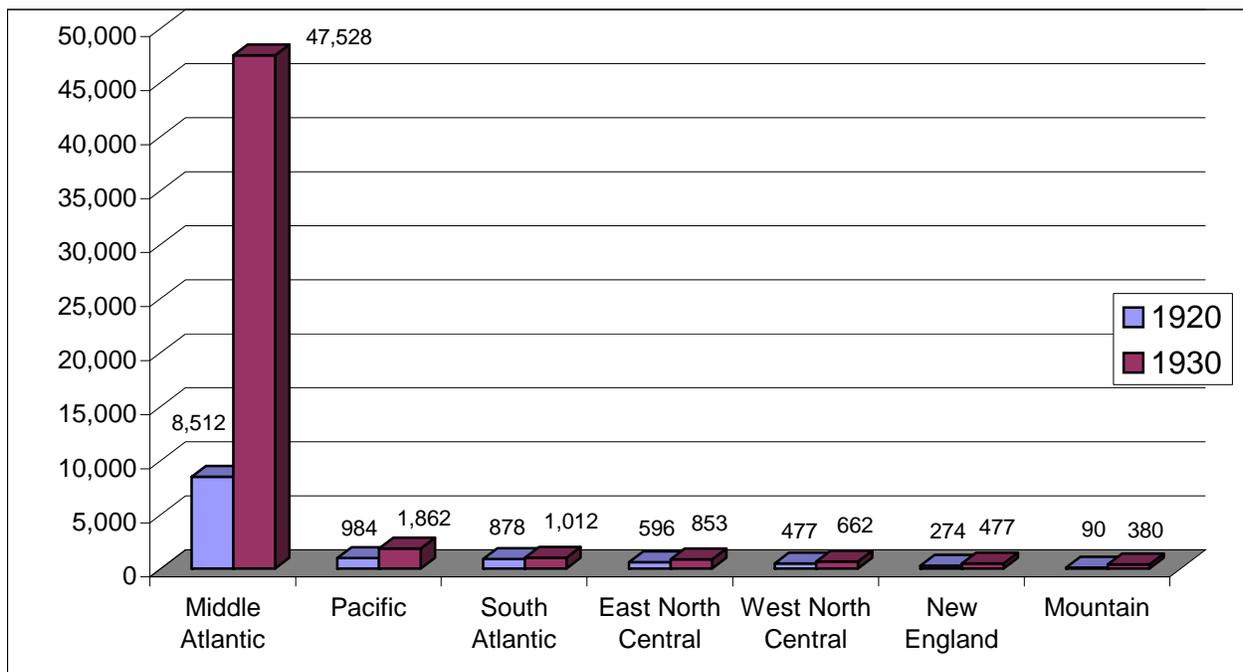


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established residency of the Cubans in Miami, Mexicans in the Texas region, and Blacks in the Southern states living in below standard conditions, Puerto Ricans felt there was probably little or no employment and housing opportunities. Other major cities like Chicago and Cleveland, as well as other regions within the United States had some Puerto Ricans there, but not substantial enough to make the impact in their surroundings as New York (Middle Atlantic States) prior to the 1940s.⁶

It was the early generation Puerto Rican’s economic situation that brought them to New York City; now, their social situation is where are they going to live? With low-paying jobs or none at all, the early generation Puerto Ricans were going to live in the poorest sections of the city. In this case, places like Greenpoint, Brooklyn, a neighborhood near the Brooklyn Navy Yard where many of the early Puerto Rican migrants first arrived on boats; or East Harlem where the early generation of Italians, Jews and Negroes, lived.

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Source: U.S. Census

When the Puerto Ricans moved into these poor neighborhoods, there were social issues such as race and language that culturally identified Puerto Ricans as separate from mainland Americans. Two of the social issues the migrant Puerto Rican faced within mainland America were the dissimilarity with the American culture as well as their resistance to the American “melting pot” ideal for all newcomers into the United States.

The reason Puerto Ricans had a problem with American culture was the race issue. Puerto Ricans did not have the same racial dichotomy issue that whites and blacks had in America in the early 20th century. It should be noted that while there could have been racial prejudice in Puerto Rico, there was a successful racial integration. In the United States there was a common separation between whites and blacks, however, in Puerto Rico, as Dolan noted: “A white and a dark Puerto Rican had things in common with each other which they valued intensely...these created solidarity between them”⁷ such as their Spanish heritage, which included the Spanish language. As a result of the white and black Puerto Rican commonality, the Puerto Ricans resisted the American racial dichotomy when, upon reaching mainland, experienced American racism and the pressure that emanated to conform to either the white or black side of the race issue. This drew the ire of both white and black Americans who accused the migrant Puerto Ricans of not appreciating their whiteness or blackness. George Lipsitz mentioned: “[the Puerto Rican’s] situated knowledge, historical experiences, and current struggles with power give their ethnic identities their determinant meanings.”⁸ The solidarity between white and black Puerto Ricans created a Puerto Rican national identity that superseded color as an identifier, led to the formation of a Puerto Rican nationality or “Puerto Ricanness,”

⁷ Jay Dolan and Jamie Vidal. *Puerto Rican and Cuban Catholics in the U.S. 1900 – 1965*, 59

⁸ George Lipsitz. *The Possessive Investment In Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics*, 63

but more importantly, became the basis for the preservation of their identity.

Another example of the disdain mainland Americans had for Puerto Ricans became visible whenever Puerto Ricans spoke Spanish in public. Not speaking English was offensive, especially to white Americans, because it was considered as un- or anti-American – a rejection of Americanization or the “melting pot” concept of assimilating all immigrants into the American ethos. This was particularly disturbing to the American Catholic Church (I will discuss this in greater detail later) as it considered itself as the “express lane” for Americanizing Catholic immigrants.

In summary, the migrant Puerto Rican desire to preserve their identity indirectly began with their economic situation, prompting them to come to New York City. After arriving, mainly within New York City, the migrant Puerto Rican’s social situation or their experiences with other ethnicities created a disdain for American culture. At the same time, the experiences the migrant Puerto Ricans faced created their nationalistic “Puerto Ricanness,” of which, became the genesis of their desire to preserve their identity.

The Direct Factor

Culture and language was the locus of the early generation Puerto Rican’s desire to preserve their identity and directly factored into the reason why the early generation Puerto Rican transitioned from one aspect of Christianity (Catholicism) to the other (Pentecostalism). What directly caused the rejection of Catholicism and the acceptance of Pentecostalism lies with the following: first, Catholicism’s adverse dealings with the migrant Puerto Ricans desire to preserve their identity; and lastly, Pentecostalism’s ability to be contextual.

The Rejection of Catholicism

Puerto Rico, since the discovery in 1493, was a dominant Catholic state. Dolan explained: “From the religious point of view, the primary component of the Puerto Rican ethos is Iberian Catholicism.”⁹ This was the result of Ferdinand and Isabella, the royals of Spain, who wanted to centralize their power and used Catholicism as a means to that end: “All persons in Spain were now supposed to be Christians...‘to be Spanish is to be Catholic.’¹⁰” Catholicism was then introduced in Puerto Rico, however not in the usual manner as the rest of the Indies, and Central and South America – through the conquistadors and their successors whom either murdered and tortured (for gold) or enslaved (via the *encomienda* system also for gold) the indigenous peoples in the name of Jesus Christ – but as a result “of the immigration of a Spanish population which was already traditionally Catholic...with its own version of popular Catholicism.”¹¹

Puerto Rican popular Catholicism would eventually be exposed as inferior (which I will discuss later) compared to the post-Tridentine (Council of Trent), European and American institutional Catholicism at the close of the 19th century and after the Spanish American War. The reason why it would eventually be considered inferior was based on a couple of factors. First, is the Iberian (or Mediterranean) concept of city life where anything (such as fiestas and ceremonies) and everyone (mainly Puerto Rican leaders) important did everything in the city – San Juan. Even in the smaller cities or the *pueblos*, the activity of the community would be done within the pueblo, specifically in the *plaza* – or the center of the pueblo. This is where community interaction (such as mass) would take place. At the center of the pueblo or plaza was

⁹ Dolan and Vidal. 12

¹⁰ Jackson Spielvogel. *Western Civilization Volume II: Since 1550*. 438

¹¹ Dolan and Vidal. 12,13

the church, the most important building signifying the importance of God being the center of people's lives. The benefits that came with being part of the community – acceptance with peers, a sense of belonging to something productive – encouraged the Puerto Rican to be active in the church, working in some capacity which was part of the daily routine. This made the Puerto Rican a Catholic – not necessarily in the sense of being an adherent to the Church – but it was the “membership card” into the community. New York Catholic scholar Joseph Fitzpatrick mentioned:

When a Latin American said he was *catolico*, or, more commonly, *muy catolico*, very Catholic, he did not necessarily mean he had been at Mass or the sacraments; he simply meant that he was a member of a people, a *pueblo*, which was Catholic.¹²

Another factor was the country and/or mountain people or *jibaros* that lived far from the cities. Because of their distance from the pueblos and the church, it was difficult for the priests of the town to administer the sacraments to those living in the country. Eventually, Christian mission stations were erected to address the distance issue and priests would tirelessly attempt to gather the scattered families into a particular location to minister to them. However, this led to the last factor that was the lack of spiritual education. Not only was the distance between church and country people difficult for the priests to visit them (once a year at best) but this led to the growth of ecclesiastical ignorance. Eventually the lack of a good church education was exacerbated with the lack of an educated clergy throughout the island. This Puerto Rican “non-

¹² Joseph Fitzpatrick. *Puerto Rican Americans*, 116

ecclesial Catholicism”¹³ led to a drop in church attendance with only the special events like Holy Week as a good enough reason to attend church. As generations passed, Puerto Ricans still considered themselves religious with their popular version of Catholicism. However the lack religious instruction “resulted in a dangerously widespread religious ignorance, which made the [Puerto Rican] people’s cultural Catholicism vulnerable to Protestant challenges after 1898.”¹⁴

The United States victory over Spain in the Spanish-American War in 1898 ushered in the annexation of Puerto Rico as American property. This event, not only eventually provided Puerto Ricans with instant American citizenship (when compared to the European immigrant counterparts), but also opened the door for American Protestantism to evangelize Puerto Rico. Eventually, Pentecostalism found its way to Puerto Rico as Allen Figueroa Deck noted: “whereas the first Protestant outreach was principally in the hands of the mainline churches of the nineteenth century, the second outreach has occurred...and its main protagonists have been the...Pentecostals.”¹⁵ Of all the Protestant faiths, it was Pentecostalism that was the most opportunistic and rigorous in its evangelization of both urban and even the hard to find rural locales on the island. Anderson mentioned: “Pentecostalism is notorious for its sometimes aggressive forms of evangelism, and from its beginning was characterized by an emphasis on evangelistic outreach, its highest priority in mission strategy.”¹⁶ In other words, it was the Pentecostal evangelist that would go looking for people to evangelize, even in the most remote locations. This passion the Pentecostal evangelist had was motivated by the classical Pentecostal train of thought¹⁷ ministers had at the time: they were “being led by the Spirit,” similar to the

¹³ Dolan and Vidal, 21

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Jay P Dolan and Allen Figueroa Deck. *Hispanic Catholic Culture in the U.S: Issues and Concerns*, 412

¹⁶ Allen Anderson. *An Introduction To Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, 214

¹⁷ Goss, Ethel. *The Winds of God: The Story of the Early Pentecostal Movement in the Life of Howard Goss*

Apostle Paul and this dream of the Macedonian man (Acts 16:9, 10). This was one of the main reasons, if not the only one, why Pentecostalism reached the hard to find rural locales on the island.

In 1917, the United States Congress passed the Jones Act that conferred citizenship on all Puerto Ricans. This action became the genesis of the problem American Catholicism faced in dealing with Puerto Ricans especially in New York City. Up to this point, the success of American Catholicism was its ability to Americanize the incoming European Catholic immigrants. This ability (outside the obvious social, economic and religious reasons that made America attractive in the first place for such a long journey) was due to the fact that many of the European Catholic immigrants (such as the Polish, Irish and Italians) came with their clerical leaders. The transition into the American Church was then made smoother (compared to their Puerto Rican counterparts) because churches were formed specifically geared to a particular ethnic group that settled in a particular area within New York City (called the *national parish* - which will be discussed later). Another reason for American Catholicism's success was its detachment from the American perception that the American Church was "un-American precisely because it had ties of loyalty and obedience to a European pontiff...its ethos and traditions were perceived as linked to undemocratic philosophies of life."¹⁸ The American Church responded by taking on the role, as mentioned earlier, of being the "express lane" for Americanizing Catholic immigrants. Within this role, the American Church would assist in the assimilation or Americanization of immigrants into the American "melting pot" making the institution pro-American. One result of the American Church's success is the Americanization of both the Irish and Italian Catholics into the early 20th century development of the Ameri-centric

“white” racial group.¹⁹ Although American Catholicism flourished with European immigrants, it would face a difficult situation with the early generation Puerto Rican.

One of the difficult situations was that Puerto Rican Catholicism and American Catholicism were incompatible. Dolan mentioned: “The Puerto Ricans...came to New York with a different kind of Catholic ethos...[which] has been out of tune with the prevailing ethos of American Catholicism.”²⁰ Compared to each other Puerto Rican Catholicism was a liberal, “loose-fitted,” folk faith where strict observances were usually reserved for attending church during special events or specific times like Holy Week, whereas American Catholicism was conservative, rigid and institutional. There was a presence of the clergy throughout American Catholicism that was sorely absent in its Puerto Rican counterpart. Because of this difference, American Catholic leaders considered the only way to deal with the incoming Puerto Ricans is to consider them as targets for American Catholic missionary work in the hope of converting the migrant from their “warped” Hispano-Caribbean Catholicism to the “true” Catholicism found in America and the American ethos. In other words, American Catholicism attempted to Americanize American citizens.

With American citizenship already conferred on Puerto Ricans, how was American Catholicism going to Americanize American citizens? One of the attempts of the American Church was through the use of the *national parish*. A national parish is a Catholic church that was created for a particular ethnic group. Its clergy would be from their homeland, mass would be done in the group’s particular language and all of the other ceremonies were performed in

¹⁸ Dolan and Vidal, 64

¹⁹ Lipsitz stated the early 20th century response to the rise of the black population in the United States was the formation of a “white” racially identified group composed of White Anglo Saxon Protestants and other European ethnicities (i.e. dark or olive skinned Italians).

²⁰ Dolan and Deck, 322

respect to the groups cultural heritage. There were two Hispanic national parishes to serve all the Hispanics within New York: “*Our Lady of Guadalupe* in Fourteenth Street was founded for them in 1902”²¹ and *Nuestra Senora de la Esperanza* in Washington Heights, in 1912. These parishes dealt with all the Hispanics, not only Puerto Ricans, because there was no dominant Hispanic group in New York City prior to the 1920s. In this case, the national church idea was defined as inclusive of all Hispanic nationalities (Mexicans, Spaniards, Puerto Ricans, etc.) or actually language (Spanish speaking) parishes. The initial and moderate success of the New York Catholic Church incorporating the New York Catholic Hispanic in *Guadalupe* or *Esperanza* was based on neither one particular Hispanic nationality becoming the dominant group. Eventually, that changed with the incoming early generation Puerto Ricans.

After the 1920s, *Guadalupe* and *Esperanza* became less feasible to handle the rise of Puerto Ricans entering New York City. One reason was church location. Puerto Ricans were concentrating in East Harlem, which was about five miles north of *Our Lady of Guadalupe* and three miles Southeast of *La Esperanza*. Another problem with *Guadalupe* and *Esperanza* was the overall concern of the national church ideology: whenever an ethnic group dissolved from a neighborhood and another manifested, such a church will become obsolete because it was originally created for the preceding group, not the succeeding one. Such was the case in East Harlem with the Italians who moved out of East Harlem concurrently with the Puerto Ricans who moved in. New York’s leading Catholic at the time, Cardinal Hayes, responded by establishing two Puerto Rican national parishes in 1926 – *La Milagrosa* and *Santa Agonia*. The national parish idea seemed successful from the 1930s – 1950s because, “*La Milagrosa* was the

²¹ Dolan and Vidal, 70

center of Puerto Rican Catholic life...”²² However, even with some success, the Catholic national parishes goal was: “the integration of Puerto Ricans into American parishes...designed to make the...Puerto Ricans give up their language and culture”²³ The idea was to follow the same path as the Irish and Italians into the cultural pluralism of the American ethos. This, coupled with the rise of the Puerto Rican population into New York City after the 1920s, and the resistance to Americanization, the national parish idea was replaced with the *integrated* parish.

New York’s leading Catholic, Patrick Cardinal Hayes²⁴ felt the integrated (or territorial) parish – the Catholic attempt to deal with Puerto Ricans by having Spanish speaking mass in the churches that were predominately English – would be more attractive to the early generation Puerto Ricans. Dolan explained: “a territorial parish which would include...at least one priest who could speak the language of whatever ethnic group was present in its territory, and...offer services in that language in addition to its regular English services.”²⁵ The problem with the integrated parish was the Puerto Ricans found themselves as the subgroup of the entire church collective that had to submit to the general English-speaking consensus. Because Puerto Ricans were a minority in the integrated Catholic Church it was expected by the English-speaking majority that Puerto Ricans would eventually integrate into the English Mass as part of the Catholic Church’s mission to Americanize them. This was not only a direct conflict with the Puerto Ricans attempt to preserve their identity, but this also interfered with the desire Puerto

²² Dolan and Vidal, 71

²³ Dolan and Vidal, 79

²⁴ Cardinal Hayes (elected Archbishop of New York, 1919; elevated to Cardinal 1924 and served in this capacity until his death in 1938) devoted himself to local (New York City matters) and avoiding the spotlight and shunning national controversies. Occasionally Cardinal Hayes did speak out on public issues such as when he opposed bigotry and endorsed unemployment relief during the Depression. Hayes’ opposition to bigotry and endorsement of unemployment relief had, at the very least, an indirect effect to the incoming migrant Catholic Puerto Ricans. (<http://www.answers.com/topic/patrick-cardinal-hayes>).

²⁵ Dolan and Vidal, 73

Rican Catholics had to have a church they can call their own. When the first wave of Puerto Ricans entered the United States mainland in the early 20th century they were herded into already established Catholic churches in New York City. Other ethnic groups, most notably, Irish and Italian, established these Catholic churches. This made the Puerto Ricans feel insecure because it wasn't "their own" church. It was "someone else's" church. For example Dolan mentioned:

“When [Peter Bardeck] became pastor...he found flourishing Puerto Rican...societies...[and] when he tried to bring the Spanish Mass out of the basement into the main church he discovered...the Puerto Ricans were attached to the basement because it was exclusively their own.” [Bardeck] found an incipient Puerto Rican community within the...integrated parish...while he could not deny its success...he deplored and discouraged this development because it would retard the integration of the Puerto Ricans into the united parish of American Catholics.”²⁶

With this resistance by their religious leaders within their own church, early generation Puerto Ricans did not feel the Catholic Church welcomed them. This feeling persisted for many years among New York's Catholic Puerto Ricans as reported in The New York Times in 1968: “[second generation Puerto Ricans complained they still] “have to share religion with the Irish and Italians.”²⁷ . In fact Dolan mentioned: “If they didn't feel at home in the parish church, they could just as easily stay home and pray there, or join a storefront [Pentecostal] church...led by a Puerto Rican Protestant minister,”¹ which many Puerto Ricans eventually did. Deck wrote:

²⁶ Dolan and Vidal, 79, 80

²⁷ New York Times. 23 April 1968, 49

...the movement from popular Catholicism to...Pentecostal Protestantism...is a way to maintain a continuity with their popular Catholic faith which in a period both before and after the Second Vatican Council has been disparaged, opposed, dismissed, or ignored by many official teachers of the Church.”²⁸

In summary, although attempts were made by the church to accommodate the Puerto Ricans the important ingredient missing was helping Puerto Ricans maintain their Puerto Ricanness in America. Instead, the Roman Catholic Church tried to “Americanize” early generation Puerto Ricans into the American “melting pot” design for all immigrants. This did not work because Puerto Ricans who came to the mainland America already knew they were American citizens but not “*Americanos*” or English speaking Anglo- or African-Americans. Since Puerto Ricans did not want American culture, there was no need to become assimilated – no need to Americanize American citizens. Ironically, being an American citizen helped the incoming Puerto Ricans resist Americanization because it exempted them from hassles of American immigration policies. However, it didn’t prevent American Catholic leaders in their insistence and attempt to assimilate the migrant Puerto Ricans into the American ethos. It is likely that American Catholicism’s persistence coupled with the migrant Puerto Rican’s resistance that led to the rejection of Catholicism as well as the acceptance of Pentecostalism.

The Acceptance of Pentecostalism

The disputed genesis of modern American Pentecostalism was sometime immediately before or after the dawn of the 20th century in various locations within the continental United States. However, most church historians seem to favor the three year Azusa Street Revival in

²⁸ Dolan and Deck, 422

Los Angeles California that began in April 1906 as the “Cradle of the Modern Pentecostal Movement”²⁹ The reason for this particular event is American Pentecostalism became more visible in the public and religious areas of American life both in a positive (inclusiveness of women, socio-economic class, and race) and negative (alienation from mainline Protestant faiths,³⁰ sensational news reporting³¹) perspective.

Pentecostalism is a form of Protestant Christianity that reflects the primitive or apostolic Christianity of the first century C.E. Historian William Menzies defines:

the Pentecostal movement as that group of sects within the Christian Church which is characterized by the belief that the occurrence mentioned in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost not only signaled the birth of the church but described an experience available to believers in all ages.³²

It is interesting to note both the early generation Puerto Ricans and Pentecostalism had one thing in common. They were both considered inferior by their respective peers. Mainline Protestant churches considered Pentecostalism much in the same view as the middle or high social class viewed their Puerto Rican counterparts: the inferior, poor or lower class because most, if not all, of the early Pentecostals were usually the poor or lower class citizens. Another negative aspect against Pentecostals was the seemingly uncontrollable, erratic behavior exhibited by its adherents. Compared to the mellow, bland behavior of mainline Protestants, Pentecostals

²⁹ During my April 2006 visit at the Azusa Street Centennial at the LA Convention Center, there was a street sign in downtown Los Angeles’ Little Tokyo that marked the location of the Azusa Street Revival (formerly known as 312 Azusa Street), appropriately labeled: “this is the site of the Cradle of the Modern Pentecostalism Movement.”

³⁰ Dr. G. Campbell. Fundamentalist and Bible expositor who called the early 20th century Pentecostal movement: “*the last vomit of Satan.*” Menzies. *Anointed To Serve: The Story of the Assemblies of God.*

³¹ “*Weird Babel of Tongues: New Sect of Fanatics is Breaking Loose - Wild Scene on Azusa Street.*” The Los Angeles Times, 18 April 1906, 1

³² William Menzies. *Anointed To Serve: The Story of the Assemblies of God.* Vol. 1

were made out to be a bunch of disorderly fanatics. Even so, the key point of Pentecostalism's ability to eventually rise out of the level of sect into a global faith transcending race, culture, gender and social class, was initially, its attraction to the lower class citizens – like the early 20th century Puerto Ricans in (Puerto Rico and) New York City. Because, as Cordasco mentioned: “Puerto Ricans are a religious people in search of a religion,”³³ and it seemed to the early generation Puerto Ricans that the importance of having such a religion was that it belonged to them or something they felt as their own; a faith that would allow them to preserve their identity not as spectators but active participants, Pentecostalism became that faith. How did American Pentecostalism, during its embryonic stage, and scorned by its own Protestant peers, appeal so much to group of migrants who have issues as a result of their migration into New York City? It was Pentecostalism's ability to be contextual.

Pentecostalism's ability to be contextual, as Allen Anderson noted: “not only takes into account cultural values, but also tries to make the gospel relevant to the current situation of social change and new economic and political contexts.”³⁴ With regard to the early generation migrant Puerto Ricans entrance into New York City, Anderson's point, especially his further elaborated view³⁵ could be viewed with the following example: Upon arrival into mainland America, most of the early generation Puerto Ricans entered the same low class status as the Italians in the upper east side of Manhattan, or the Jews in the lower east side. It was highly unlikely the poor, Catholic, migrant Puerto Rican would find help from some of the established Protestant churches. Not necessarily because the Puerto Ricans were Catholic, but definitely

³³ Cordasco 95, 96

³⁴ Anderson, 203

³⁵ Anderson claimed: “Contextualization on the other hand assumes that every theology is influenced by its particular context and must be so to be relevant. It relates the Christian message to all contexts and cultures, including especially those undergoing rapid social change... It results in the possibility of ordinary people being

because they were poor. Early 20th century mainline Protestant churches in New York City traditionally appealed to, and were dominated with, middle to upper class believers. Daniel Ewearitt's biography of the founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance and Pentecostal pioneer Dr. Albert Benjamin Simpson gives us a glimpse of this milieu at that time when he reported:

“When Simpson proposed to the session that over one hundred of his converts from the poor Italian quarters be allowed to worship at Thirteenth Street...The session kindly suggested that the Italians might be happier in a church of their own class and rejected his plan to bring them into their prosperous, higher class church.”³⁶

Since Puerto Ricans were poor (like the Italians) they needed faith that would complement their economic status because, as Cordasco mentioned: “The sometimes traumatic migration to New York's hostile environment is ameliorated, too, by joining a revivalist group.”³⁷ Pentecostalism eventually became that complimentary revivalist group that attracted the migrant Puerto Ricans. Fitzpatrick stated:

“Adaptation to a style of life related to industrial and commercial development...leaves a social and psychological vacuum which many of the poor Puerto Ricans [sought] to fill through involvement in the Pentecostal congregations. They provide an ideology, a sense of community and purpose, which compensates for the loss of a traditional style of life.”³⁸

lifted out of mundane daily chores into a new realm of ecstasy.” 212

³⁶ Daniel J.Ewearitt *Body & Soul: Evangelism and the Social Concern of A. B. Simpson*, 20, 21

³⁷ Cordasco, 99

Puerto Ricans were attracted to Pentecostalism because it not only provided them an opportunity to be active participants in their faith, but more importantly, they could do so within their Spanish ethos. This participation, an active measure in their preservation of identity, was accomplished through the following three examples: liturgy, church polity and evangelization.

First, the liturgical aspects of the church were primarily with the laity, but more importantly, it was predominately done (if not always) in Spanish. Spanish liturgical worship was so strongly implied that even today with subsequent Pentecostal generations who are either bilingual or English speaking only members (mainly the youth), the hotly demanded aspect of Puerto Rican (and generally Latino) Pentecostal church life is the insistence of speaking only Spanish in church! Most of the storefront early generation Puerto Rican Pentecostal churches were small with a membership usually under 50. This allowed the members of the church to be actively involved in many aspects of church activity such as singing, praying, reading the Bible (in Spanish), and playing Puerto Rican-centric instruments: guitar, bongos tambourines, etc. Anderson claimed:

“The most important element of these liturgies is the active participation of every member in the congregation. Pentecostal liturgy has social and revolutionary implication in that it empowers marginalized people. It takes as acceptable what ordinary people have to give in their worship of god and thereby overcomes the social barriers of race, status and education.”³⁹

Second, church polity in most Pentecostal churches, if not all, was (and still is) congregational as opposed to the Episcopal government within the Catholic Church. With the

³⁸ Fitzpatrick, Joseph. *Puerto Rican Americans*, 122.

³⁹ Anderson, 235

power vested with the membership, the small autonomous Pentecostal church would elect its leader (a pastor), who would be given powers by the congregation to oversee church activities. The benefits of electing the leader gave the congregation an identity with its leader because the pastor was usually a working, lower class individual (usually male) just like the members. The head and the body of the church were usually of the same social class. Eldin Villafane claimed:

...the significant, socio-reality in the genesis and development of Pentecostalism was its attraction and ministry among the 'disinherited'...the socially marginalized...struggling working classes and impoverished unemployed that the Pentecostal movement drew its following in the urban area of the nation...⁴⁰

Another benefit of electing the leader gave the congregation a significant purpose within the group setting that satisfied their desire to be active participants in their faith as well as the power to shape or influence their community. Cordasco mentioned:

...The Pentecostal faith, which offers group singing and emotional public testimony, also demands the discipline of exemplary dress and behavior, including abstinence from tobacco and alcohol; this helps the poor withstand the apparent hopelessness of their existence.⁴¹

Lastly, it was the Pentecostal pastors who encouraged each member to evangelize their friends, neighbors and the rest of the community. This gave the lay members a sense of purpose, an activity that would, from their perspective, benefit the Puerto Rican community – similar to the community involvement within the plaza of the pueblos back on the island. The result would

⁴⁰ Eldin Villafane. *The Liberating Spirit: Towards an Hispanic American Pentecostal Social Ethic*, 88, 89

be either the rise in membership within a particular church (which would grow to about 100 members), or the further development of other small, independent storefront Pentecostal churches that practically littered Spanish Harlem and other predominately Puerto Rican neighborhoods. The reason for the success of these storefront churches is noted in a New York Times article that discussed the Catholic reaction to incoming Puerto Ricans attending storefront Pentecostal churches. Dr. Thomas F. O’Dea, a professor of sociology at Fordham University, noted: “a typical answer to the question, ‘Why did you go to the [storefront] church?’ was, ‘Me senti como en casa, [I felt at home].’”⁴² Sexton confirmed O’Dea’s comments when she noted:

“The Pentecostal Church specializes in togetherness, friendliness, activity, excitement, warmth – special low income Puerto Rican and Negro qualities. ...the Pentecostal Church draws a stranger in and treats him as part of the family. The storefront church, resembling the Puerto Rican living room...”⁴³

Patricia Sexton had a similar sentiment when she pointed out:

“...Pentecostalism...does for the Puerto Ricans some of the things the Black Muslims do for Negroes...emphasizes the virtues of self-help thrift, industry, self-control – virtues that may lead to upward mobility.”⁴⁴

Many of the Puerto Ricans evangelized here within their community as well as (due to cross-migration) back in Puerto Rico. Villafane claimed:

“...their experience of migration has made them a “bridge” or “border” people, a “bilingual and bicultural church” living between the rich North and the

⁴¹ Cordasco, 99

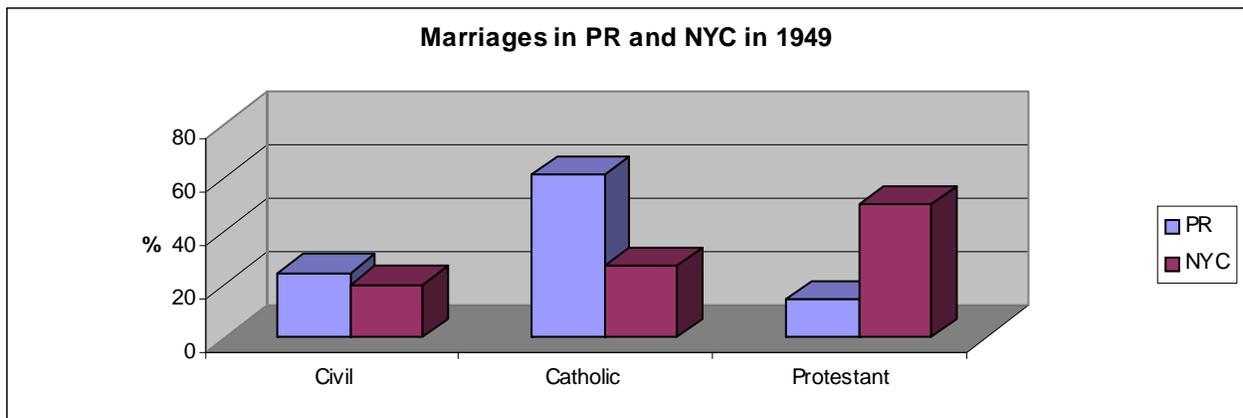
⁴² New York Times 9 March 1958, 68

⁴³ Sexton, 73, 74

impoverished South...they are a “locus” where the poor and the oppressed can find liberation⁴⁵

The result of Pentecostalism in the life of the migrant Puerto Rican living in New York City was addressed by Mapp when he claimed:

“...Pentecostalism became the great proselytizer of the newcomers in New York City. A survey in 1949 showed that 50% of Puerto Ricans married in New York that year were united in Protestant ceremonies, as contrasted with...27% Catholic ceremonies in the City...About 70% or more of the Protestant churches referred can be considered Pentecostal.”⁴⁶



In summary, Pentecostalism gave the early generation Puerto Ricans in New York City what they were lacking in most of the Catholic churches: a sense of purpose, a sense of knowing something was theirs, or the opportunity to play an active part in something. It was this relationship that not only symbolically brought the first generation Puerto Rican back to the times when they were back on the island as part of the pueblo or community, but more importantly, provided the means to preserve their identity.

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Villafane. *The Liberating Spirit: Towards an Hispanic American Pentecostal Social Ethic*, 198, 199

⁴⁶ Edward Mapp. *Puerto Rican Perspectives*, 121

In conclusion, the reasons how the early generation Puerto Ricans in New York City rejected Catholicism in favor of Pentecostalism to preserve their identity began indirectly with the economic and social factors. Although minor in their role in the overall argument in regards to the migrant Puerto Ricans desire to preserve their identity, the economic and social factors introduced and then laid the foundation to the argument, respectively. The migrant Puerto Rican's economic situation provided the reason for migrating into New York City. This led to the migrant Puerto Rican's social situation – their relationship with other ethnicities within New York City; in addition to their confrontation with assimilation into the American “melting pot” ethos – that became the basis for “Puerto Ricanness” and the genesis of their desire to preserve their identity. Afterwards, the direct reason the early generation Puerto Rican rejected Catholicism in favor of Pentecostalism is found in the fact that Puerto Rican (Iberian) Catholicism was different in comparison to American Catholicism. As a result, American Catholicism, as the actual agent of American assimilation into the “melting pot” idea, not only did not act in a way conducive to the migrant Puerto Rican's desire to preserve their identity, but in addition, became the barrier towards that end. In becoming Pentecostal, many of the early generation Puerto Rican were offered an opportunity to be a separate ethnic entity, speak Spanish and express themselves according to their particular culture. As a result, Pentecostalism, due to its contextual ability – allowing the inclusion of everyone in its participatory endeavors, as well as a feeling of ownership, of which the Puerto Ricans desired as a means towards preserving their identity – became the more viable alternative for the migrant Puerto Ricans. Almost a century later, the Assemblies of God's Spanish Eastern District can celebrate the fact that the genesis of this celebration began because a group of Puerto Ricans just wanted to be themselves: un-Americanized American citizens.

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