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Deborah E. Kanter, Chicago Católico: Making Catholic Parishes Mexican

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Deborah E. Kanter. *Chicago Católico: Making Catholic Parishes Mexican*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020. pp. 214. \$24.95. Paper. ISBN 9780252084843

Catholics of all Latino origin always tend to remain invisible in American society. This is the case in both historical accounts of major events, and current contributions. Yet, Spanish-speaking Catholics have resided in the United States longer than the founding of this nation, and many neighborhoods and parishes have and will continue to be reshaped by our contributions. Deborah Ellen Kanter's new book, *Chicago Católico: Making Catholic Parishes Mexican*, attests to this fact, providing a window into the century-long contribution of Mexicans and Mexican-American Catholics in Chicago neighborhoods.

Kanter's 18-year research project, *Chicago Católico*, elevates narratives of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who transformed American Catholicism in the Midwest. An expert in colonial Mexican ethnohistory, Kanter details the transformation that occurred throughout the 20th century by delving into parish records and oral histories of the everyday experiences of Chicago's Mexican laity and the communities they re-founded. By focusing on Chicago parishes, Kanter is able to compellingly trace the development of Mexican Catholicism through the lens of Mexican immigrant parishioners, their children and the neighborhoods they reshaped. These lay Mexican Catholics found in Chicago parishes a place of refuge, providing one constant location in the neighborhood for the community to build a sense of identity. These parishes also served as spaces for social and community functions, in addition to religious and cultural devotional needs.

The book is divided into five chapters, following Mexican migration and integration from the 1920s through the 1970s, while focusing on specific neighborhoods in Chicago. Her research uses several parishes as the *locus theologicus* for both ecclesial integration and migration research, incorporating stories of parents, children and communities as they reshaped the landscape of Chicago in the twentieth century.

A chapter is devoted to the early Mexican migration of 1920 to 1939, from Mexico to Texas and finally to Chicago. The reader follows characters such as Elidia Barroso and her family as they cross the border. Prior to the 1920s, crossing the Mexico-US border was a simple process for the educated, middle-class traveler. When Elidia and her family crossed the border in 1916, they would not have encountered Customs and Border Patrol (that agency wasn't created until 1924), nor the overly militarized points of entry they have become, such as El Paso del Norte Bridge. As Kanter describes, by the 1930s, "Mexicans, if they could pass the literacy test and pay the eight-dollar head tax, easily entered the United States" (23).

As Kanter outlines in her book, low paying jobs, seasonal labor, and the ever present discriminatory economic inequality that kept so many in poverty, forced families north. Tired and weary of these conditions, plus labor shortages in the Midwest precipitated by World War I, made *enganchistas* (contractors) able to recruit workers from Texas to Chicago. Mexican migrants either worked on the railroads from Kansas to New York, or on farms from Nebraska to Michigan. During this period, Illinois became the fourth most common destination for Mexican nationals.

In Chicago, these families found an 'immigrant-ready infrastructure' that not only provided jobs and housing, but also schools (both public and parochial), businesses and decreasing attendance to 'national' parishes. One neighborhood in Chicago, Near West Side, emerged as one of two Mexican focal points. It is the same neighborhood that from the mid 1800's welcomed German, Irish and Italian immigrants. The location provided several jobs as it was less than a mile away from the Illinois Central Freight House, factories and downtown hotels in the vicinity.

In Kanter's book, the story of Mexican migration and the reassignment of Claretian priests nearly come together as one narrative. Just as Elidia and countless Mexican families had encountered the Claretian missionaries in Texas, they soon found the Claretian order ministering to Chicago's new growing population.

In many ways, the Claretian missionaries were instrumental in integrating countless of Mexican and Mexican-American families into parishes and communities across the country, including Chicago. In 1924, they assumed responsibility of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in South Chicago, and in 1927, they became St. Francis of Assisi's administrators. That same year, a shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe was integrated into the sanctuary of St. Francis, indicating an essential element of Mexican Catholicism was incorporated into the community. Without both the Claretians' service, attention and perseverance to the most vulnerable in these communities—and the waves of Mexican migration to Chicago—St. Francis of Assisi would not have been dubbed *La catedral mexicana* in the coming decades.

Kanter's research is about migration and integration. It tells the stories of so many Mexican nationals and Mexican-American families who transformed not only the city of Chicago but also the Catholic community in those neighborhoods: Near West Side, South Chicago, and Pilsen. It also hints at other immigrant communities who sat in those same pews, assimilated to American culture and left these parishes behind, making way for Mexican Catholicism to flourish.

These narratives confirm how American Catholic parishes didn't *become* Mexican-American Catholic overnight. Taking almost a century in the making, these parishes and communities are further evidence of the historical presence and lasting impact of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans on local churches and communities. Kanter mentions John T. McGreevy's

observation of how Catholic institutions both facilitated and inhibited assimilation to American society as “the central drama of the twentieth century U.S. Catholic history” (6). This book, and the narratives elevated provide a different take on history. They further illustrate how parishes *assimilated* to Mexican culture, not the other way around.

This is an insightful book which illustrates the importance of **Latino** religious history in the United States. It should be read by all who care for the history, present and future of American Catholicism.

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