

**The Catholic Church and Its Migrant Members:
Spiritual Capital in a Sending Community**

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Introduction

Scholarship of the last 10-15 years has begun to foreground the religious consequences and determinants of migration. Working within the transnationalism framework, Levitt (1998) proposes the theoretical concept of *social remittances* to describe the way migrants transport and deposit new sociocultural values and practices to their home communities. Ebaugh and Chafetz (2002) trace the social networks in various transnational religious communities in Houston, and describe emerging institutional and personal adaptations in religious practices stimulated by the transmigrant experience.

Alternatively, Hagan and Ebaugh (2003) focus more closely on how religious practices in the home community can (and do) affect the process of making the migration journey. And Espinosa (1999) shows how in the Mexico-U.S. migration flow, the Catholic Church's official position on the issue translates into specific rites for migrants and shapes the relationship that migrants have with their home community Church.

In this paper, I will combine the focus on the transmigrant home community with the understanding of local-level religion as a contested field in which migrants, both through their own agency and because of outside factors, are expanding their access to spiritual authority and promoting spiritual innovation. First, I will briefly trace the history of the Mexican Church's stance on migration in order to provide an institutional context for the current array of devotions, rites and practices that "spiritualize" the migration experience. Then I will discuss the results of my own fieldwork on religiosity and migration in Yerbabuena, a semi-rural town in central Mexico, highlighting some of the more unique practices occurring there. Finally, I will offer an assessment and analysis of

these religious changes. I employ the concept of *spiritual capital* to explain the dynamics of the relationship between Yerbabuena migrants, their families and the Church in the process of shaping the community's religious faith and practices. I argue that the migration process itself has both increased the demand for spiritual capital, leading to a greater reliance on unorthodox or semiorthodox religious practices, and created new means by which migrants may validate such practices.

The Church and migration¹

In the early part of the 20th century, the Catholic Church in Mexico viewed migration as social scourge. It was thought to be a negative phenomenon through which the U.S., with its Protestant identity and lax social mores, exerted a dangerous influence on the already vulnerable Mexican nation.² Migration jeopardized the nation's cultural and religious identity, as well as the social bonds holding Mexicans together. The Church treated migrants (at least rhetorically) with suspicion and cast them as traitors – both to the nation and to their families. At the same time, the Church blamed the government for spurring cross-border movements by failing to improve domestic economic conditions.

But as the century wore on and the migration flows continued, the Church adopted a more accepting attitude. Espinosa offers two reasons for this change. First, at the global level, the Vatican began issuing statements affirming the economic and

¹ The following historical survey relies on Espinosa's work (1999) on the subject, unless otherwise noted.

² The Revolution of 1910 and the ensuing decades saw much social upheaval in Mexico, with the Church the target of both legal and physical attacks by the new socialist government. In the late 1920s, the animosity between Church and State reached the breaking point, giving rise to the Cristero rebellion. Around 90,000 Mexicans died in the fighting, which raged most violently in central Mexico (see Meyer 1976).

cultural rights of migrants.³ Second, in Mexico, the Church was reacting to the financial support for their home parishes that absent members began to provide. These funds, and migrants' participation in their home communities, generally centered on the patron saint feast day celebrations; in many areas of Mexico the Church took to calling migrants *los hijos ausentes*, emphasizing their continued religious, national and local membership.

By the 1980s, the Mexican Church fully immersed itself in the human rights discourse and assumed the role of defender of its migrant members. Migrants were no longer considered traitors, but rather semi-heroic figures forced by circumstances beyond their control to make the journey to provide for their families. Still, the Church worried about the same possible negative consequences of migration as it did in previous decades: the disintegration of familial and marital bonds, drug and alcohol abuse, loss of faith or conversion to other faiths. Consequently, the pastoral strategy developed to minister to the Church's migrant members was focused on addressing just such issues, with particular attention paid to the wives, children and other family members left behind.

Naturally, pastoral efforts also provided spiritual support for migrants, taking the form of special prayers and prayer books. Some individual priests even accompanied their parishioners northward. But perhaps the most notable component of the pastoral plan was the implementation of a new Church celebration, *el Día del Emigrante*, which began first as a local initiative in individual parishes in Jalisco. Eventually, all across Mexico communities with high levels of out-migration adopted the new feast day.

³ For specific Church pronouncements, see the papal encyclical *Exsul Familia* (Pope Pius XII 1952), which affirms the right to migrate, and the apostolic letter *Pastoralis Migration Cura* (Pope Paul VI 1969), which calls for the pastoral care of migrants and refugees. In 2003, the episcopal conferences of Mexico and the U.S. issued a joint statement (USCCB and CEM 2003) that brings Catholic teaching to bear on the contemporary issues of migration between their two countries. Also, Casanova (1997) explains how the Church's adoption of the discourse on human rights – and the pope's concomitant transformation into the “first citizen of global civil society” – fits into the broader evolution of the Church's political role as a global actor outside of the set nation-state framework.

Although each town (or parish) decides when it will celebrate *el Día del Emigrante*, the vast majority choose a date in December or January, when the largest numbers of migrants return home. Similarly, the order and form of practices associated with the day may vary by location, but generally include a special Mass and prayers for migrants, a procession and a *fiesta*. The celebration serves to validate migrants as members of the Church and the local community. On this day, the Church, through its priests, provides spiritual guidance and support in rejecting the particular dangers of migrants' experience. The feast day celebration also imbues the migration process itself with a religious quality, often expressed explicitly through the priest's homily.

The Mexican Church, then, acknowledges migration as a significant life-experience for its members, to the point of incorporating it into the liturgical calendar.

The Church, the parish priest and Yerbabuena migrants

Yerbabuena⁴, the town in the highlands of the central state of Guanajuato, also celebrated *el Día del Emigrante*. The following case study is based on qualitative research that I conducted from June to August 2004. During those months, town members shared their migration experiences with me in in-depth interviews. Participant recruitment was achieved generally through a snowballing technique. In all, I spoke with 24 individuals, representing various sectors of the community – young men and women itching to make their first trip north, returning adult migrants and their relatives, and town elders (many of whom were themselves “retired” migrants). I also conducted several interviews with Father Carlos Bedoya, the priest within whose parish boundaries

⁴ In the interests of protecting privacy and confidentiality, I have used pseudonyms for the name of the town, the parish and all human participants involved in this study.

Yerbabuena was located. In addition to these one-on-one interviews, I engaged in participant observation, with a focus on the religious activities of town residents. I attended Sunday Masses in Yerbabuena throughout the course of my fieldwork, and also witnessed some residents' private devotions.

With about 20% of its population currently residing in the U.S.⁵, Yerbabuena is one of the countless small Mexican towns experiencing high levels of out-migration. There *el Día del Emigrante* is celebrated on December 26. On that day, in addition to officiating at the Mass, Father Carlos blesses the various personal belongings that migrants bring to him. These articles include the requisite rosaries, photographs and religious images, but also migrants' legal documents, and even the trucks that they have brought from the U.S. (and, incidentally, may be using on the return journey north).

As evidenced by the example above, Yerbabuena is a staunchly Catholic community. By all available accounts, Protestantism simply does not exist within its borders; town members fill the church for Sunday Mass; and those who admitted to not attending church services still professed a Catholic faith.

The generally orthodox nature of religious affiliation in Yerbabuena also showed up in the respectful attitude that Father Carlos inspired among residents. The elder women of Yerbabuena cooked meals for him, those active in the Church's lay ministries looked to him as their spiritual guide, and some residents sought his advice on financial matters. Several years ago, when a group of migrants collected enough money to pay for improvements to the town's plaza and church, Father Carlos, at the request of the

⁵ I arrived at the above estimate based on input from Yerbabuena's *delegado* (representative to the municipal government) and Father Carlos – who both judged that each family in the town has at least one member in the U.S. – as well as on interviews with Yerbabuena residents.

migrants and other Yerbabuena residents, played a significant role in organizing the local effort.

That the people of Yerbabuena look to the Church for spiritual (and other) guidance seemed clear to me. But the Church (i.e., Father Carlos) was often not available to its faithful; the reasons for this lie chiefly in the Church's demographics. Stretched by the declining numbers of clergy – a phenomenon not limited to Mexico – the presence of the Catholic Church in non-urban communities has suffered. In the case of Yerbabuena, the parish to which it belongs comprises several other *ranchitos*, as well as one neighborhood in the nearby city of Silao (pop. 61,000), located thirty minutes from Yerbabuena by car. (It is in Silao where the parish office is located.) In the intra-parish “pecking order”, Yerbabuena benefits from its geographic location and size: Father Carlos visits on Sundays to say Mass (and only infrequently on weekdays, for special meetings or celebrations). The smaller *ranchitos* that surround the town do not get a weekly Mass; their residents either attend services in Yerbabuena or in the main parish church in the city.

Often, I was amazed that Father Carlos spent as much time in Yerbabuena as he did. Between shuttling from church to church on weekends for Masses (and baptisms – at least twenty children a week at the main church) and receiving the long line of parishioners who came to see him at his office on weekdays, his ministry as the only priest of a large, geographically extended parish gave Father Carlos more than enough to keep busy.

Thus, Yerbabuena residents enjoy only limited access to the Church's sacramental, spiritual and personal support. For those planning to make the trip to the

U.S., this means that the desire to receive the blessing and guidance of the Church in preparation for their journey at times goes unfulfilled. But migrants' desire persists, and this ministerial gap of sorts is filled by other, less orthodox sources of spiritual support.

As the migration flow from Yerbabuena and the surrounding communities has increased, departing migrants have taken to visiting a local religious icon considered by most, if not all, to be miraculous. The image of the Christ Child under the title *el Santo Niño Mueve Corazones* has been in the town for decades, but its popularity has grown only in the recent past. Around three or four years ago, the son of the Doña Marta, an elderly woman who had purchased the image from a traveling salesman over 50 years ago, provided the money to build a small chapel to house the image. Before that, Doña Marta had simply kept it in her home; but her son had made a promise to *el Niño* to build a chapel if *el Niño* provided his safe passage to the U.S. So the family constructed a simple, nondescript structure of brick and cement, barely large enough to fit fifteen people inside, on the edge of their property along the road that leads into Yerbabuena.

In practicing their devotion to *el Niño*, migrants come to pray in front of his image, commend themselves to his protection and often leave votive candles at the chapel as a sign of their commitment. Some of the faithful also leave *milagritos*, tiny ornaments of body parts, children, crutches, animals, or other simple figures that represent a believers' gratitude for specific miracles that *el Niño* has performed. But perhaps the most striking representation of local migrants' devotion is the hundreds of photographs that migrants (or their families) have left at the chapel, fully covering one wall. (A common tableau in many of the images was a migrant, or group of migrants, in his work uniform posing at his place of employment in the U.S.) Although I was able to interview

relatively few of the town members currently active in the transmigration flow, the wall of photos and the stories offered by family members left in Yerbabuena confirmed that devotion to *el Niño* was an important part in the migration process for locals.

The devotion is not entirely unorthodox: its object appears to be a traditional Catholic image.⁶ Still, Father Carlos' attitude towards the practice was one of suspicion, if not displeasure – although he never condemned it outright. He presented the situation as potentially dividing the community between those who believe in the image's miraculous powers and those who don't:

“I don't go [to the chapel] because it belongs to one family. Because it's something that belongs to just one family, I prefer to keep some distance because I don't want to be exclusive to just one family... It's about maintaining the proper religious character. ... But the people don't see this chapel as the town's; they see it as that family's. That's why I'd rather be prudent about it. ... If I were to go to the chapel, the people would be divided about it.”⁷

The responses I received from Yerbabuena residents regarding *el Niño*'s popularity diverge from Father Carlos' characterization. In fact, I could not find one person who rejected or resented the presence of the image in the town. The feedback I received was unanimous in judging the image to be uncontroversial.

⁶ Unfortunately, I have not succeeded in finding much outside information on this particular Christ Child image. I believe the church in Villa Guerrero in the state of Mexico contains an altar to *el Santo Niño Mueve Corazones*. Mainly for this reason, I suspect it is indigenous to Mexico.

⁷ “No voy porque es un lugar de una familia. Y como es una cosa de una sola familia, prefiero mantenerme un poco distante porque no quiero yo ser exclusivo de una familia. Por el cuidar al aspecto religioso. ... Pero la gente no considera a ese templo como de todos; lo consideran como de una sola familia. Por eso prefiero ser prudente. ... Si voy con ellos, la gente se va a dividir.”

In spite of Father Carlos' lack of endorsement, devotees have planned to further increase *el Niño*'s profile in Yerbabuena. Local custom has settled on April 30 – *el Día del Niño*, a government holiday – as the unofficial feast day of *el Santo Niño Mueve Corazones*, and, according to the accounts of several members of the community, hundreds of people from around the area come to visit and pay tribute at the chapel. In the past, the celebration has consisted of little more than group prayer and lighting of votive candles, but plans for next year include bringing a band and holding a proper *fiesta* – much like the celebrations that take place on the town's regular feast days. The family that maintains the chapel has also expressed the desire to expand its dimensions in order to better accommodate the crowds. Of course, as all of the planners recognized, donations and support from Yerbabuena residents in the U.S. would be instrumental in making these ideas a reality.

Spiritual Capital in the Religious Field of Yerbabuena

Bourdieu's theory on the forms of capital and their use in social fields provides a powerful interpretive lens through which to clarify the tension between the laity and the clerical class. In the case of Yerbabuena, these two groups are represented by migrants and their relatives and Father Carlos, respectively. Applying this theory allows us to translate the various practices, beliefs and trends – all of those things I just described – into a more general vision of religion in this small Mexican town. Migrants' recent accumulation of capital has altered the balance of power and authority in Yerbabuena's religious field.

Bourdieu conceives of capital as “accumulated labor” that “can present itself in three fundamental guises”: economic, social and cultural capital (1986: 241, 243). The three forms may be exchanged and substituted, albeit at some cost. The latter form relates to dispositions, beliefs, goods and qualifications that are valued within a given culture. Cultural capital is acquired either by upbringing – being raised in a certain environment, often defined by class, that imparts particular tastes, attitudes and manners of behavior – by education – being overtly taught some set of skills of cultural value – or through exchange of other forms of capital. Religious capital – i.e., the religious dispositions, beliefs and goods that an individual possesses – is a subset of cultural capital; as such, it is acquired in corresponding ways. For example, a young child in Yerbabuena grows up immersed in Catholic symbols, rituals and attitudes. By the mere nature of his environment, he acquires the attitudes and behaviors of Catholicism, manifested in communal sacramental rites but also in personal activities like private prayer or instinctive reactions like making the sign of the cross at the mention of a deceased loved one. Further, the process of catechesis provides the overt religious education that endows individuals with a more systematic knowledge of the faith. Finally, as we shall see in the discussion of migrants, economic capital may be converted for the acquisition of religiously-valued goods and objects.

According to Bourdieu, people employ the various forms and amounts of capital in their possession to acquire power, to influence others, to shape society. Conceptually, this occurs in a defined social space. A field is the hierarchically-structured site in which actors compete for power, prestige and control (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Much like in sports parlance, the competition that takes place in a social field is governed by a

certain set of (arbitrary) rules, which all actors more or less implicitly accept. Actors enter – or, perhaps more accurately, choose to participate in – the field with different levels of capital at their disposal, which gives them corresponding competitive advantages or disadvantages. A broad number of fields overlap in the general social space of society; and, although each has its own unique valuation of capital (in its various guises) set by the rules of competition, some overlap in the value of capital across fields is also possible.

Verter (2003) proposes the term *spiritual capital* as an adaptation of Bourdieu’s religious capital. In Verter’s conceptualization, spiritual capital is potentially available to all participants in the religious field. This departs from Bourdieu’s view of religion, in which only the professionals (e.g., priests, rabbis, shamans) have access to “the means of production, reproduction, and division of the goods of salvation” (2003: 157):⁸

[I]f religious capital is conceived à la Bourdieu as something that is produced and accumulated within a hierocratic institutional framework, spiritual capital may be regarded as a more widely diffused commodity. (2003: 158)

Bourdieu’s perspective on the religious field granted only religious officials with agency in shaping its dynamics. For the present purposes, the analytical import of employing the concept of spiritual capital, as opposed to Bourdieu’s *religious capital*, is that it opens up the access to power in the religious field, acknowledging both that lay people can *also*

⁸ According to Verter, Bourdieu also portrayed different religious faiths as generally closed systems – parallel religious fields that did not overlap. As such, Verter’s theorization of spiritual capital is better equipped to accurately describe the more porous, heterogeneous religious contexts like the one that exists in contemporary U.S. society.

exercise agency in the religious field, and that spiritual capital does not operate in a closed system but in fact interacts with the other forms of capital.

Bourdieu (1986) states that cultural capital exists in three forms: in the *embodied* state, in the *objectified* state, and in the *institutionalized* state. Accordingly, spiritual in the embodied state, is “the knowledge, abilities, tastes, and credentials an individual has amassed in the field of religion”. In the objectified state, it includes “material and symbolic commodities”. And in the institutionalized state, spiritual capital flows through “the power that ... religious organizations exercise to legitimate an arbitrary array of religious goods, promote the demand for these goods, and feed the supply by bestowing qualifications on a select group of authorized producers” (2003: 159, 160).

Looking at the town of Yerbabuena through this lens, the argument can be made that the Catholic Church maintains a dominant control over the local religious field. The majority of the spiritual capital present exists in institutionalized form, manifested in residents’ continued reliance on the Church to sponsor and legitimate a wide array of community and individual practices. The celebration of important life-cycle events depends on rituals proscribed by the Church and performed by its representative, Father Carlos. Migrants seek an official blessing before their journey. Within this analysis, the Church’s use of the pilgrimage model to interpret the importance of migrants’ movements illustrates the exercise of institutionalized spiritual capital. By invoking the Church’s authority, Father Carlos justifies the characterization of migration – particularly return migration – in conformity with the values of Catholic theology.

Nevertheless, the Church’s dominant position was being challenged in two important ways. First, the shortage of priests – which for Yerbabuena translated into a

decreased presence of Father Carlos in the community – weakened the Church’s ability to meet the demand for spiritual goods. Second, the character of migration activities – i.e., the danger and risks involved – only increased people’s demand for access to salvation. This, combined with the new opportunities opened up by participation in migration circuits, has led migrants to seek out and claim other avenues of access to the “goods of salvation”. Consequently, by amassing spiritual capital of its own, this social group of the Yerbabuena community has continued to gain sway in the local religious field.

Migrants have accumulated spiritual capital through several means. Like all other Yerbabuena residents, they earned a certain amount of embodied spiritual capital through their (lifelong) participation in orthodox Catholic practices and corresponding knowledge of Catholic ritual and tradition. Return visits home, by renewing their familiarity with such dispositions, serve to maintain migrants’ embodied spiritual capital. But what separates their position in the local religious field from the rest of the laity is their access to the economic capital that they have earned in the U.S. – which they later exchange for more spiritual influence. This transfer of capital occurs when migrants invest in the religious structures, practices and events that exist in Yerbabuena. Many invested in the institutional Church, e.g., the group of migrants who funded the renovation of Yerbabuena’s sanctuary and thus laid claim to an objectified spiritual capital, or those who provided money for and returned to participate in the town feast day celebrations, which afforded them access to capital in both embodied and objectified forms. Another portion, including some in the previous number, contributed to less orthodox practices of religiosity, most notably the devotion of *el Santo Niño Mueve Corazones*.⁹

⁹ Devotion to *el Señor del Mezquitito* worked in a parallel fashion, but I limit the present discussion to *el Niño* for several reasons. First, I gathered far more data on the latter than the former. Second, the figure of

As I noted above, recourse to *el Niño* occurred because migrants craved more access to salvific goods than what was being supplied by the Church. While Father Carlos was present only once a week (at most) and *el Día del Emigrante* occurred only once a year, people could visit *el Niño* at almost any time, simply by knocking on Doña Marta's door and asking her to unlock the chapel. And as more people chose to seek his intercession, their actions snowballed to effect a change in Yerbabuena's religious field. Because migrant members were accumulating capital (in various forms) and thus improving their position in the religious field, by association the devotion to *el Niño* was accorded increased legitimacy and value. For every migrant who provided money to expand the existing chapel, or sent his picture from the U.S. to be placed on the wall of photos, or returned home with a new miracle story of how *el Niño* intervened during his trip or during his time *en el Norte*, the spiritual authority of *el Niño* grew stronger, independent of the imprimatur of the institutional Church. And the greater following that it attracted, the more migrants and others associated it with the identity of the community in general. (The chapel wall of photos was a close reproduction of the Yerbabuena community, in some ways more complete than the actual community in the town, since it incorporated many people in distant geographic locations.) Father Carlos' words, that people have a "personal desire to relate to the divine", and his reluctance to pronounce judgment on the devotion, offered an implicit recognition that the role that *el Niño* was playing in the local religious field was one that (at that time) could not be fulfilled by himself or the institutional Church. In effect, *el Niño* was important to the people of

el Niño seemed much more important, if not central, in Yerbabuena religious practice. Also, since the two devotions function in such similar ways, discussion of one can, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to the other.

Yerbabuena, and to migrants in particular, because it was more accessible and more closely tied to their community than the religious goods offered by the Church.

But, to be clear, its popularity did not arise simply because it represented a break from the institutional Church. Devotion to *el Niño* walked the line between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, perhaps without its followers even realizing it. Extending Bourdieu's social model further into the analysis, we may deploy his notion of *habitus* to explain the devotion's dependence on Catholic forms of religious practice. Bourdieu's habitus represents the internalization of the cultural dispositions, schemas and patterns of perception of an individual's society; it bridges the gap between the influence of social structures and individuals' agency (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Yerbabuena's residents internalized the dominant structures of Mexican culture – most importantly, the dispositions embedded in Catholic beliefs and rituals – so that whatever actions they took, or innovations they produced, were formed within that particular structural framework. Accordingly, even as they were motivated by an increased desire for spiritual protection, to look beyond the scope of institutional Catholicism, the alternatives they favored did not wander far into the realm of heterodoxy. (Migrants did not delve into Protestantism or animistic spirituality because these were only minor elements of little to no value in their cultural frame of reference.)

The institutional Church itself has also played a contributing role in the diffusion of spiritual capital in Yerbabuena. In response to the reforms of Second Vatican Council of the 1960s, new ministries and organizations arose that empowered lay Catholics to take ownership of their Church. In Yerbabuena, the effects can arguably be seen in the laity's increased participation at Mass (assisting Father Carlos during prayers, preparing

the altar for the consecration ceremony – the most sacred moment of the Mass – and distributing communion), in women’s leadership in teaching catechism to the children, and in the various Church-sanctioned lay groups that meet every week in the church (without any clerical presence) for fellowship, prayer and spiritual counsel. Vatican II reforms combine with (again) the shortage of priests to put pressure on dioceses and parishes to empower its members to take on more roles and responsibilities in non-sacramental ministries. Without lay involvement, many of the Church’s services – spiritual, social, and others – could not be fulfilled. And so the Church has adopted a new approach to exercising institutionalized spiritual capital. It no longer confers spiritual authority just to its professional class, but also to certain individuals belonging to its general membership. Migrants, whose general position in Yerbabuena has risen through their improved economic status and the Church’s support of their decision to engage in cross-border activities, are well-poised to reap the benefits of this change.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of Mexico-U.S. migration is changing the social, cultural and economic dynamics in countless communities on both sides of the border, and it is no surprise that the Catholic Church, one of the oldest and most powerful Mexican institutions, has also felt the effects. The Church has not sat passively by; rather, from the local all the way to the global level, it has increasingly engaged in the debates and discourses surrounding international migration, and implemented efforts to realize its vision of a just, safe and spiritual migration experience for all migrants. But the forces unleashed by the cross-border flows have led to some consequences beyond institutional

control. In one small, rural Mexican community, migrants have transferred some of their newfound status to a local miraculous icon that, while seemingly within the wider bounds of popular Catholic practices, has arisen and continues to thrive outside of the purview of the institutional Church.

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