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Charismatic services the new trend in South Florida Catholic churches

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May 27--Every Thursday night, they fill a hall, ramp up the salsa music and testify about being saved.

It's a far cry from the hushed tones and pipe organs that Hispanic charismatic Catholics at Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church in West Palm Beach knew growing up. But for some who had drifted to other faiths or simply dropped out of church, the arm-waving, praise-God worship of charismatic Catholicism was a way back to the pews.

Followers say they feel more at home in services where the music is lively and the Holy Spirit moves through the room.

"We are intimate with God," said Colombian-born Elizabeth Velez, who discovered charismatic Catholicism when she became ill with emphysema. She said she went to several charismatic healings that cured her symptoms.

Seven years ago, Velez, of West Palm Beach, founded Holy Name's charismatic prayer group, New Life in Christ. Like Spanish-language charismatic groups that have sprouted from coast to coast, it draws Catholics in search of an animated spiritual home.

As the band warmed up one Thursday night, Maria del Carmen Rivera grabbed the microphone and kicked things off: "God's spirit moves in this place! Come, Holy Spirit! Take over my entire being!"

Marked by festive band music, a personal bond with God and faith healing, scholars say the Catholic charismatic renewal movement is an outgrowth of the Second Vatican Council of 1965, which sparked liberalizing reforms in the Catholic Church. It originated with a group of students and professors from Duquesne University in Pittsburgh who, at a 1967 retreat, claimed they experienced the manifestation of the Holy Spirit and began promoting spirit-filled services. The trend caught fire around the country.

After it peaked in the 1970s, scholars say Charismatic renewal was on the wane until an exodus of Hispanic Catholics to other faiths forced a change in the Catholic Church. Today, 54 percent of Hispanic Catholics say they're charismatic, compared to 12 percent of non-Hispanic Catholics, according to a new study by the Pew Hispanic Center and Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

Hispanics also are leaving Catholicism for Protestant evangelical churches -- around 20 percent of Hispanics are converts from one religion to another or to no religion, and 70 percent of Hispanic converts are former Catholics. In particular, the exuberant services of Pentecostal churches have lured record numbers away from the Catholic Church. In a bid to address those numbers and keep Hispanics in its ranks, the Catholic Church is slowly adapting itself to the cultural needs of Hispanics, experts say. As a result, Spanish-language

charismatic services are packing Catholic churches such as San Isidro, in Pompano Beach, and St. Rita, in Wellington. Hundreds of worshippers gathered at Holy Name on May 19 and 20 for the annual charismatic Hispanic conference of the Diocese of Palm Beach.

Church officials say the reinvigorated charismatic Catholic renewal movement is not a planned strategy to win Catholic worshippers, but part of dynamic change in the church as the Hispanic population grows.

"It wasn't something planned. It's the summoning of the spirit in the lives of the believers," said the Rev. Jesus Bohorquez of St. Jerome Catholic Church, in Fort Lauderdale, which celebrates the traditional Catholic Mass but also has a charismatic group. He attended charismatic services as a seminarian.

Bohorquez said the bolstered movement is a sign of Hispanics' demand for a different approach to worship combined with the legacy of the Second Vatican Council.

Many of the festive services in charismatic churches reflect Latin American traditions that include indigenous-influenced healing rites and spirit worship.

"The charismatics are able to create a sacred carnival every Sunday," said **Manuel Vasquez**, who teaches religion at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. "They preserve that aspect of celebration, of living life intensely and celebrating, that is central to many Catholic countries in Latin America."

Talk of miracles flows with the music at New Life in Christ's gatherings.

Colombian-born member Alba Correa, 39, of West Palm Beach, said she was looking for spiritual relief after a bad breakup.

"I was desperate," she said. "I asked a friend, 'What should I do?' She said, 'Find God.'"

The friend brought her to a group of charismatic Catholics who prayed for her, and she became a charismatic, renewing ties to the Catholic Church she said had faded over the years.

When asked why he became a charismatic Catholic, Antonio Otapia, the group's musical director, pinches his abdomen, where crippling pain flared for years. A charismatic church service did what no doctor could, he says, and left him pain-free.

Many members say the traditional Catholic Mass lost all meaning for them years ago.

"I'd go to Mass and walk out feeling empty," said Mercedes Romero, 89.

Several years ago in the Dominican Republic, her native country, she left Catholicism for an evangelical Protestant church. When she moved to Lake Worth in 2005 to be with her daughter, both women began attending New Life in Christ meetings together.

She said severe arthritis keeps her in bed on most days. But every Thursday she's at Holy Name, arms raised and eyes shut.

"Jesus works miracles in this group," she said.

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