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Latino to Lead Los Angeles Diocese

By [LAURIE GOODSTEIN](#) and [JENNIFER STEINHAUER](#)

The [Vatican](#) has chosen Archbishop Jose H. Gomez — who was born in Mexico and became an American citizen while serving in Texas as a priest for the conservative Catholic organization Opus Dei — to become the next leader of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the largest Roman Catholic archdiocese in the country.

The choice is an acknowledgment that the church's future in America depends on the growing numbers of Hispanic faithful, and that the Vatican is intent on elevating leaders who are solid theological conservatives.

The appointment of Archbishop Gomez, 58, to succeed Cardinal [Roger M. Mahony](#) represents a historic first for Hispanics, the largest minority group in the United States, and was greeted with enthusiasm by some. But the news comes as the church faces revived criticism over its handling of sexually abusive priests.

At his first news conference as the archbishop-designate, at the city's modern downtown [Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels](#) on Tuesday, Archbishop Gomez did not seem eager to engage repeated questions, many in Spanish, about the scandal, its impact on Catholics and accusations made by victims' advocacy groups that he mishandled abusive priests in his former archdiocese.

Instead, he focused on his passion for evangelism, his support for comprehensive [immigration](#) reform and the distance he himself had traveled as an American immigrant.

"I was born in Mexico, my sisters still live there," he said, his voice shaking, "and I am very proud of the Mexican love for life and family and faith that first turned my heart toward God." While talking about his background, the archbishop abruptly stopped to sip from a cup.

"This is getting a little emotional — forgive me," he said, adding jovially, "By the way, it's just water."

Archbishop Gomez, who is currently the archbishop of San Antonio, was named coadjutor bishop of Los Angeles, which means he will succeed [Cardinal Mahony](#) when the cardinal retires on Feb. 27, his 75th birthday.

As the leader of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, which traditionally is headed by a cardinal, Archbishop Gomez is likely to receive a red cardinal's hat as well. If that happens, he would become the first Hispanic cardinal in the United States, experts on the church said Tuesday.

With this appointment, [Pope Benedict XVI](#) has further solidified his imprint on the leadership of the church in the United States. In only five years as pope, he has appointed dozens of bishops in this country, including new archbishops in the large and influential dioceses of Baltimore, Detroit, New York and Washington.

Alejandro Bermudez, director of the Catholic News Agency, based in Denver, said of Archbishop Gomez: “He is definitely a man of the Holy Father, loyal to the Holy Father theologically, but on the other hand, he is extremely pastoral. Anybody who is expecting him to come in as a flamethrower or something like that is wrong. That’s not his style.”

Cardinal Mahony led the Los Angeles Archdiocese for 25 years and is considered one of the last remaining prominent prelates of the American bishops’ “social justice” era, when the bishops mounted major political initiatives to encourage economic equality and the rights of farmworkers and unions. He marched with César Chávez and championed immigrant rights, and last month joined a large rally in Washington for changes in immigration policy.

But his leadership was tarnished by accusations that he failed to report abusive priests to civil authorities and kept them working in parishes without informing parishioners. After more than 500 victims came forward with allegations of abuse by priests in Los Angeles, Cardinal Mahony signed a \$600 million settlement in 2007 — more than any other diocese has paid to settle abuse claims.

Archbishop Gomez was born in Monterrey, Mexico, and studied accounting there before receiving a doctorate in theology at the University of Navarra in Spain. In Spain he was ordained as a priest of Opus Dei, an elite Catholic organization founded in Spain that teaches that an ardent work ethic and devotion to demanding spiritual practices can lead to personal holiness.

Archbishop Gomez served as the senior official for Opus Dei in Texas before he was named an auxiliary bishop in Denver in 2001. He is the first Opus Dei priest to become an American bishop, said Brian Finnerty, the United States communications director for [Opus Dei](#). Four other American bishops are members of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, an Opus Dei affiliate.

There are 28 Hispanic bishops active in the United States, making up only 9 percent of the bishops, although Hispanics make up more than 35 percent of all American Catholics, according to the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#).

In San Antonio, Archbishop Gomez sometimes tangled with Catholic liberals who insisted that the church was expansive enough to accommodate dissenting views on such issues as abortion and gay rights.

But people who have worked with Archbishop Gomez describe him as more interested in practical matters than ideology.

On Olvera Street, just a few blocks from the cathedral in Los Angeles, where tourists and locals, many of them Mexican-Americans, gather in a festive market setting, Evelyn Rodriguez, 31, said she was cheered by the appointment.

“I think it’s important for people to feel connected to the church,” said Ms. Rodriguez, a cashier, who said she was an active Catholic. “Someone who speaks the language and understands the culture is going to be different. I think he is going to pick up the pieces here.”

But Bernabe Velarde, who owns a fruit stand in the market, was more cynical.

“Because the Latino community is the strongest faith group here,” he said, “it is in the business interest of the church to appoint a Latino. It keeps the parishioners happy.”

Laurie Goodstein reported from New York, and Jennifer Steinhauer from Los Angeles.

Source:

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