

## Spain takes a page from the US pro-life playbook

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 13, 2009 All Things Catholic

Americans who have spent any time in Catholic circles in Europe have likely been subjected to some clucking about our alleged political myopia. Even the most doctrinally conservative European Catholics often lament what they see as an obsession in America with abortion, and an over-identification of the American church with the political right.

Case in point: Archbishop Reinhard Marx of Munich, an old friend of Benedict XVI who was tapped in 2007 to lead the pontiff's former archdiocese, recently gave an interview to the Italian magazine *30 Giorni* in which he complained that American neo-cons may be strong on the life issues, but they too often end up, in his words, "reducing Christianity to a religious ideology propping up the market economy."

However much truth there may be to such perceptions, it's still hard to digest them without some acid reflux.

That's because when Europeans dole out these judgments, a whole litany of stereotypes often lurks in the background -- about America as a cowboy culture, prone to enthusiasm and extremes, versus the allegedly deeper sophistication and greater balance of the European mind. Conveniently ignored is the fact that the church's political alignment in a given culture often depends on factors beyond its control. In both Europe and the States, one such variable is how open the political left is to pro-life sentiment. To put the point bluntly, if pro-lifers (including Catholics) can't find a home on the left, many of them are obviously going to end up on the right.

On both sides of the Atlantic, recent days have brought intriguing indications that the political plates may be shifting in opposite directions.

The American end of the equation came over the weekend, with passage of an amendment authored by Rep. Bart Stupak, a pro-life Democrat from Michigan, applying longstanding federal prohibitions on abortion funding to a new public insurance program and to new federal subsidies for private insurance. The amendment met the test the U.S. bishops had established to render health care reform, in their eyes, "abortion neutral."

After discussions with the bishops' conference, the Democratic leadership allowed the measure to come up for a vote. That decision outraged pro-choice advocates, who, in a back-handed tribute to the bishops, essentially accused them of dictating the result.

(So much, by the way, for predictions of the political "irrelevance" of the bishops in the wake of the sex abuse crisis. I've posted a blog entry on this point: [NCRonline.org/thefuturechurch](https://www.ncronline.org/thefuturechurch) [1].

A fair bit of the material for the book was first rolled out in this column, and in countless cases the presentation in the book was sharpened, fleshed out, or revised in light of reactions from "All Things Catholic" readers. I offer a note of gratitude in the book, but let me repeat it here: Thanks to all of you who put in your two cents. Even if I wasn't able to reply personally, rest assured your thoughts got my attention.

Whatever flaws the book has are my own, of course, but many of its strengths come from you.

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[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/15748>>So much for the 'irrelevance' of the bishops.</a></p></p><p>If the Stupack provision survives in the Senate -- by no means a slam-dunk -- the primary Catholic consequence will be that the bishops can shift from opponents of health care reform to 'enthusiastic backers,' in the language of Richard Doerflinger, their longtime expert on pro-life affairs. If so, the bishops will be more aligned with the Obama administration and the Democrats, despite deep Republican opposition. </p></p><p>If that is indeed how things develop, it could create momentum for partnerships with the Democrats on other issues -- including a looming national debate over immigration reform, another top-shelf priority for the bishops. </p></p><p>In Spain, meanwhile, Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodr'guez Zapatero is campaigning to further liberalize abortion in his once-solidly Catholic nation, cementing his image as the Darth Vader of the global Catholic imagination. </p></p><p>Spain's current law, which dates from 1985, allows abortion in the first 12 weeks in case of rape, 22 weeks in case of fetal malformation, and at any time if a psychiatrist certifies that the mother's physical or mental health is endangered. Critics say that provision amounts to a massive loophole, given that some 100,000 abortions are performed annually, most under the 'mental health' exception. For good or ill, the 1985 law seemed to represent a social consensus upheld by both the center-left government of Felipe González (who ruled from 1982 to 1996) and a center-right coalition under José Mar'a Aznar (1996 to 2004). </p></p><p>Now, however, Zapatero's Socialists are poised to ram through a bill that would declare abortion an unqualified right up to 14 weeks into pregnancy. Most controversially, it would permit girls aged 16 or 17 to have an abortion without parental consent. They're doing so despite polls showing that a solid majority of Spaniards, anywhere from 55 to 70 percent, are opposed.</p></p><p>That decision has aroused enormous Catholic ferment, much of it seemingly ripped from the American playbook. </p></p><p>The president of the Spanish bishops' conference, Auxiliary Bishop Juan Antonio Mart'nez Camino of Madrid, has raised the specter of excommunication for pro-choice Catholic politicians. Mart'nez warned politicians that the automatic excommunication in canon law for 'participation' in abortion applies not just to women and doctors, but to 'all those whose direct collaboration was necessary to carry out an abortion.' </p></p><p>At the same time, energized laity have taken to the streets. On Oct. 17, anywhere from 250,000 to two million people, depending upon which count you trust, poured into Madrid for a rally organized by a burgeoning galaxy of pro-life movements. Benigno Blanco, director of the 'Spanish Family Forum,' who served in Spain's last center-right government, has said that 'this debate won't end until there's not a single abortion.'</p></p><p>Up to now, the opposition center-right Popular Party has not played a lead role in the protests. Sensing which way the winds are blowing, however, some party leaders have begun to pick up the banner of the pro-life movement. A growing number of Spanish Catholics appear to be embracing the center-right, in part because they feel utterly alienated from Zapatero.</p></p><p>To sum up, Spain seems to be becoming more like America when it comes to Catholics and politics. In the States, meanwhile, passage of the Stupack Amendment hints at a possible line of development analogous to the rest of Europe, where a consensus in favor of the status quo, if it holds up, could to some extent take abortion off the table.</p></p><p>Underlying all this is a basic axiom of political life, almost as invariable as the laws of thermodynamics: Where the political left is open to the pro-life argument, Catholics will be able to do business with all parties, and the church will end up looking fairly balanced. Where the left is a closed shop -- as in Spain, where one of Zapatero's ministers has actually asserted that abortion carries no greater moral significance than a breast enlargement -- the result will be a radicalization of Catholics, both among the bishops and at the grassroots.</p></p><p>In politics, as in

most everything else, the genetic disposition of Catholicism is to seek the sane center. When the church careens away from the center, it's often because external circumstances have shoved it in that direction -- a point Spanish Catholics are now learning the hard way.

It is not, in other words, an "American problem."

A footnote to the foregoing: The Spanish Socialists won reelection in 2008, and their current mandate is not due to expire until 2012. Barring a collapse of Zapatero's government, therefore, he should still be in power during the next World Youth Day, scheduled for Madrid in August 2011. (This will be the second World Youth Day in Spain, after the 1989 edition in Santiago de Compostela.)

What's looming for summer 2011 is thus a showdown between more than a million pumped-up Catholic youth from all over the world -- probably the most ferociously pro-life assembly one could imagine -- and a Spanish prime minister who's earned a reputation as the most aggressively pro-choice political leader on the planet.

Given that context, this could well be the most overtly "political" World Youth Day in the history of the event.

As is typical during World Youth Day, the pope is expected to travel to Madrid for at least part of the week. Of course, Benedict XVI and Zapatero have met before on Spanish soil, in Valencia in 2006, and on that trip the Ali/Frazier slugfest that many expected never materialized. In fact, that outing occasioned Benedict's now-famous remark that it's important for the Catholic church to emphasize what it says "yes" to, rather than forever concentrating on its "no's."

That, however, came before the current row over abortion, a topic that stirs Catholic passion like no other. Zapatero's people may see the train wreck coming: World Youth Day organizers say that so far, they've had near-total cooperation from the Spanish government at all levels, in what may be partly an effort to blunt Catholic blowback. Organizers also say they'll do everything possible to keep the tone positive, cautioning against turning World Youth Day into an exercise in political street theatre.

Whatever happens, the prospect of watching how these young Catholics will react to Zapatero should lend the Madrid World Youth Day a compelling journalistic storyline. That will likely produce higher-than-normal levels of media interest -- creating a potential PR windfall for the church if all goes well.

If so, one might think of it as an ironic "Zapatero effect."

At the risk of a shameless bit of self-promotion, I'm happy to announce that my new book *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* went on sale this week from Doubleday. NCR is generously hosting a blog on the book, which can be found here: [a href=](#)