

Amid economic panic, pope heads for Spain

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 12, 2011



Demonstrators raise their arms in the Puerta del Sol square in central Madrid, Spain, May 20. Dubbed los indignados (the indignant), tens of thousands of protesters filled the main squares of Spain's cities in a wave of outrage over economic stagnation and government austerity. (CNS/Reuters/Paul Hanna)

Analysis

Under other circumstances, the story line heading into Pope Benedict XVI's Aug. 18-21 trip to Madrid for World Youth Day might be "Wounded pope seeks relief in Spain."

Just look around: China is brazenly ordaining bishops in defiance of the Vatican, Ireland is threatening to breach the sanctity of the confessional in outrage over the sex abuse crisis, and New York recently joined the seemingly inexorable march in the West toward gay marriage. In that light, one could argue that Benedict desperately needs the show of support that pumped-up Catholic youth will surely bestow on him in the Spanish capital, in the latest edition of this massive gathering that's one part liturgy and one part Lollapalooza.

Yet given the broader global narrative at the moment, the headlines are instead likely to be "Wounded Spain hopes for relief from pope."

As the world hovers on the brink of financial apocalypse, Spain represents one eye of the storm. A mounting debt crisis has raised fears that Italy and Spain, the third- and fourth-largest economies in the eurozone, may follow smaller nations such as Greece, Ireland and Portugal into possible bankruptcy.

Inside Spain, the crisis is felt especially keenly in the job market. Some 40 percent of the population under 30 is now unemployed, with few prospects of new job growth on the horizon. Add widespread perceptions of political corruption, and it's little wonder that the streets of Madrid lately have been clogged with a protest movement of the *indignados*, or "indignant ones," demanding a more effective response to the economic meltdown.

The question facing the pontiff is whether his arrival in the middle of this turmoil will come off as a valuable moment of spiritual uplift -- what Auxiliary Bishop César Franco Martínez, general coordinator of World Youth Day, has called "a gift to Spain by Pope Benedict" -- or whether it will seem an unhelpful distraction, if not an

exercise in denial.

That latter possibility was captured by a recent banner unfurled by *indignados* protestors in advance of the trip: ?Fewer crucifixes and more jobs!?

At the intellectual level, Benedict has already delivered his response to the unfolding ?Great Recession? in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, arguing that economic recovery is dependent upon moral and spiritual renewal. Structures won?t change for the better, he argued, unless individual hearts change first.

?Adhering to the values of Christianity is not merely useful, but essential for building a good society and for true integral development,? he wrote.

The drama of his trip to Spain may come down to how successfully the cerebral pontiff is able to bring that message home at a popular level -- which includes mobilizing the Catholic church to respond to the human cost of the crisis.

Conscious of the tough times, organizers of World Youth Day have taken pains to present the gathering as ?sober.? Yago de la Cierva, director of communications for the event, told *NCR* that no public funds are being spent on World Youth Day. Participant fees will cover 80 percent of costs (even though those fees have been cut 20 percent from the last edition in Australia), with private contributions making up the balance.

In that light, de la Cierva said that criticism of the event as a waste of money is rooted in either ?a lack of information or rancid prejudice.?

The head of Madrid?s Housing and Economy Office, Percival Manglano, recently estimated that the influx of visitors from around the world will pump \$143 million into the Spanish economy. Participants are also being asked to contribute 10 euros (\$14) to a ?Solidarity Fund? for poverty relief.



In some ways, the stars seem aligned to give Benedict the best possible shot at

success. For one thing, the specter of confrontation with Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero no longer hovers over the trip.

The grandson of a Republican revolutionary executed by Franco?s nationalists during the Spanish Civil War, Zapatero since his first election in 2004 has challenged the Catholic church on every imaginable front -- liberalizing abortion and divorce, promoting gay marriage, even trimming public funding for church institutions. One symbolic expression of the Zapatero spirit came in 2009, when Benedict famously said that condoms are not the solution to the AIDS crisis, and Spain promptly shipped a million condoms to Africa in protest.

The editor of Spain?s main leftist daily, *El País*, recently said that Zapatero?s victories over the church represent

the only unquestionable successes on his resumé as prime minister.

Yet in terms of political psychology, Spain is already living in a post-Zapatero world. Badly wounded by the economic crisis, Zapatero recently confirmed that he won't stand for a third term, and has called early elections for November.

To be sure, Spain's clash of civilizations is hardly resolved. In an interview with *L'Osservatore Romano*, Spanish historian Vicente Cárceles Ortí recently called the notion of Spain as a Catholic country a myth. He said the reality is that "there have always been two Spains, Catholic and anti-Catholic." That second current will make itself felt during Benedict's trip, as the government has recently approved two antipope rallies, including one by a gay and lesbian rights group.

By all accounts, however, cultural issues will take a decided back seat to the economic crisis. Perhaps reflecting his diminished political condition, Zapatero not only has avoided any suggestion of clash, but World Youth Day organizers say his government has proved surprisingly helpful. (It's a rare instance in which the Socialists and the Popular Party, their conservative rivals, are basically in sync.)

Indications also are that World Youth Day is likely to strike observers as a success, at least as measured by turnout and media interest. The Madrid edition has already surpassed previous records for advance online registration, with some 420,000, and requests for media credentials, with 4,300. Organizers expect at least 1.2 million people to turn out for Benedict's final Mass Aug. 21 outside Madrid's Cuatro Vientos airport.

Nevertheless, the challenges awaiting the pope are steep.

Although Spain's weekly Mass attendance rate of 26 percent is high by European standards, it's only 8.9 percent among Spaniards under the age of 29, and fully half of young Spanish Catholics identify themselves as "non-practicing." Those figures didn't change much in the wake of a massive youth rally with Pope John Paul II at Cuatro Vientos in 2003, and it's not clear whether to expect a rebound from Benedict's visit either.

Further, the local hierarchy has spent so much intellectual and political energy over the last decade fighting Zapatero that some observers wonder whether they can seize the opportunity created by the end of his regime to offer a positive vision for Spanish society heading into the election cycle. In that light, Benedict's Aug. 20 lunch with the bishops of Madrid and the surrounding area, and whatever guidance he offers about translating Catholic social teaching into the questions facing Europe today, could be especially important.

While in Madrid, Benedict is also scheduled to meet Spain's royal family and government officials, address groups of young Spanish nuns, seminarians and university teachers, and visit a foundation for the sick.

Of course, for the throngs of young Catholics from around the world making the journey to Madrid, the political and ecclesial subtext is mostly noise. For them, the drama is typically much simpler and more personal.

As 18-year-old Crystal Sandoval of San Bernardino, Calif., put it, explaining why she's willing to spend a week in a sleeping bag in Madrid's sweltering August weather: "It's a chance to be close to God."

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