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Expert background

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

For context on the Spanish situation, I turned to Dr. Mary Vincent, an expert on Spanish history at the University of Sheffield in England. She's the author of the *Cultural Atlas of Spain and Portugal* (Checkmark Books).

Are the clashes between Zapatero and the church the continuation of tensions that go back to the Civil War?

They're in continuity with conflicts surrounding the emergence of democracy in Spain in the 1970s. Especially under Cardinal Manuel Joaquín Tarancón y Morón, the church was hugely important in creating a new model of Spanish society. Lay Catholics had been active leading up to the transition, inspired by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The days of the confessional state were over, and that was accepted by Spanish Catholics.

For the left and for many secular commentators, this meant the church would exercise strict political neutrality, and concentrate on saving souls. For Catholics, their understanding was that the church would always have a public role, but the country was no longer a confessional state, and Spanish law would not necessarily be formed by Catholic morals. These are complicated issues, and what it means has never been spelled out.

I would be hesitant to trace the conflict back before that, to the Civil War or the Second Republic (1931-39), because the church changed so

fundamentally in the 1960s and 1970s. They realized that the confessional state under Franco did not accomplish what it was supposed to accomplish. It didn't manage to get people back to church, it didn't evangelize the working classes and other disaffected groups that had been lost in the early 20th century. All that became apparent, and it triggered an extraordinary examination of conscience within the Spanish church.

It's probably true that Zapatero, and certainly the people around Zapatero, see these issues as the completion of a truly secular state. The difference, however, is that the old protagonist, a church seeking protection and privilege like it had under Franco, just isn't there anymore. There's a kind of grandeur to seeing all this as completing the Republican project, but changes within the church make such talk a bit hollow.

Given that history, what real influence does the church have?

The church has moral authority when it appears to be speaking in a non-partisan way. If the church is seen as taking a political position, on the other hand, it is easily compromised because of the historical association with the Franco regime.

For example?

When the church speaks on human rights, it is taken seriously. The church has made effective moral pronouncements on the welfare of ethnic minorities, on inter-faith relations, on the treatment of prisoners, and on the situation of the Catalan and Basque communities. When it speaks on questions of human dignity and the worth of the human person, it carries weight.

On the other hand, the debate over teaching religion in public schools is an example where church pronouncements do not meet with the same reception. Many Spaniards see it as an attempt to retain a privileged position within society.

What about the family?

The family still has a very robust role in Spanish culture. Spain has one of the lowest divorce rates in Europe, and it has the largest average household size of any European Union nation. [This despite historically low birth rates]. The family is regarded as a very important unit culturally, socially, and morally. It's not that Spaniards want divorce to be illegal. It's accepted, but the great majority of Spaniards have a stable experience of family life that is culturally valued. Hence the church's position that there's something wrong with divorce strikes a chord. Abortion is a more divisive issue. In general, I think Spaniards broadly see religion as a matter of private conscience, and there is great tolerance of individual moral difficulties.

Have you been surprised by how far and how fast Zapatero has moved on the culture wars?

I was, and I still am. In part, it may just be a question of the political moment. He was not expected to be elected, and it happened under extraordinary circumstances. There was a political need to make a quick difference, to revive socialism in Spain, which had been dormant after a decade in the wilderness. The Partido Popular has become much more a real political force, with a support base and a clear political agenda, something like the old Christian Democrats in Europe. Under Gonzales, there really wasn't an effective opposition. Zapatero needed to distinguish the left from the right quickly.

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But there are other ways of doing that.

Part of it may also

be personal. Zapatero's grandfather was shot by Franco's forces at the end of the civil war, and Zapatero has pushed the issue of the memory of the civil war and the Franco regime. For example, the last remaining statue of Franco in Madrid was pulled down, and the government has supported efforts to identify the bodies of victims of the early Franco regime who were executed and placed in unmarked graves. All this has surprised many people, who thought these issues had been laid to rest.

There may also be a question of generational change. Gonzales grew up under Franco, and although he was not personally Catholic, he was heavily involved in the Catholic opposition in Seville because it was the only opposition that existed. Thus he knew the Catholic church well. Zapatero doesn't have the same experience. Democracy is functioning well in Spain, and perhaps his generation believes the time has come to make these changes.

As a historian, how do you see the significance of the meeting between Benedict and Zapatero?

The symbolism is that while there are differences between church and state, they can be worked out, that dialogue is always possible. This is the whole democratic discourse in Spain since the 1970s. You have an antagonist, but you don't have an enemy.

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For an additional set of eyes, I turned to Robert Duncan, an American who has lived in Spain for the last 17 years. He is the vice-president of the Ibero-American press association, Organización de Periodismo y Comunicación Ibero-Americana, and was for years an ombudsman for the foreign press in Spain, including a stretch with *The Wall Street Journal*. He also directs the much-trafficked "Spero News" Web site at

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When Zapatero took power in 2004, clashes with the church were immediate. In the two years since, have things calmed down?

It depends upon what newspaper you read. My general impression is that the division is still there, but it's not getting the front-page press that it was. ?

There have been articles in papers closer to the government that claim relations between the government and the church are improving. Interestingly, stories of this nature seem to be more frequent as the pope's visit draws closer. If you read some of the other press you see that the old divisions are still there, and of late are centered around religious education.

Has Zapatero paid any political price for positions that run afoul of the church?

If you believe the rumor-mill in journalist circles, there are many Socialists who are shaking their head at some of Zapatero's policies, and he's alienating some of the more center-left party members -- many of whom are practicing Catholics. ?

That said, the opposition party, Partido Popular, still would probably lose a general election despite recent polls showing the Socialist lead has been cut. That's because Spain historically is more center-left than right when it comes to politics.

How are the new policies working?

? Take gay marriage. The Socialists claimed this was the equivalent of a basic human right, and that there was a huge demand for it. The fact is, according to the government's own figures, after a year there have only been around 1,275 gay marriages in Spain, or 0.6 percent of all the marriages held in the same period.

As a side-note, Spain is in the process of celebrating its first gay divorce. The couple is citing irreconcilable differences, and it's reported they are battling over the custody of their dogs.

What needs to happen for the pope's visit to be judged a "success"?

I think it would be a major success if somehow the Spanish government follows through on its promises to really help families. It would be nice to see the government push through laws that cut back on housing speculation, making the purchase of a home affordable, offering decent tax breaks for families and day-care alternatives, as well as backing down from its religious education plans.

Those are things that I think even this Socialist government could support, and that wouldn't be all that controversial.

Of course there are other more spiritual things that I'd love to add, such as a grass-roots movement on the part of Catholics to learn more about their faith, and to discover the value of family as the domestic church. That's where real change would happen.

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