

The Pope and the Catholic Church mobilise against the Spanish government

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The Fifth World Meeting of Families took place in the seaside town of Valencia, Spain in the first week of July. The event provided Pope Benedict XVI with the perfect platform from which to attack the Socialist Party (PSOE) government's social reforms, which include the legalization of same-sex marriage. The government has also made it easier for Spaniards to divorce, eased the ability to conduct stem-cell research, and halted a plan by the previous right-wing Popular Party (PP) government to make religion classes mandatory in public schools.

The Pope had been invited in September 2005 by the King and Queen of Spain and the prime minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, to visit Spain. However, the choice of time and place was not theirs to make.

"It is a gift for the Pope," declared Austen Ivereigh, a top aide to Cormac Cardinal Murphy O'Connor, Archbishop of Westminster, England, commenting on the gathering. "He can say, 'Look at Zapatero, this is what really underlines European secularism.' In Spain he will look like he is articulating what he sees as being close to the heart of the mass of Europeans."

The event in Valencia was expected to gather one and a half million people from all over the world. But witnesses and news reports put the numbers attending at half that figure. The Pope stayed just over 24 hours, but the briefness of his visit did nothing to diminish the pomp and ceremony surrounding it. More than 8,000 policemen looked after his security and two army jets accompanied Benedict XVI's private airplane.

A NATO AWAC plane overflew the venue during the whole visit and 200 members of the army, snipers on roofs and 10,000 volunteers also took part in the security operation. When he spoke from the platform the Pope was surrounded by 50 cardinals, 450 bishops and 3,000 priests. Hundreds of thousands of candles, rosaries and other paraphernalia were distributed. Fifty police vehicles guarded the Pope during his tour, isolated inside his bubble "Papamobil."

"There are certain things that Christian life says 'No' to," the Pope told reporters on his plane from Rome to Spain, adding, "We want to make people understand that according to human nature, it is a man and a woman who are made for each other and made to give humanity a future."

He paid tribute to historical Spain, once ruled by the Catholic

kings, and urged bishops to hold firm "at a time of rapid secularization." "Acting as if [God] did not exist or relegating faith to the purely private sphere undermines the truth about man and compromises the future of culture and society," he declared.

"This meeting provides a new impetus for proclaiming the gospel of the family," the Pope told the gathering.

The Pope and the Catholic Church have in fact begun a political campaign in an alliance with right-wing forces in Europe under the banner of a battle against "the dictatorship of relativism."

Since coming to office, he has made repeated denunciations of abortion, stem-cell research and IVF treatment, often directly coordinated with the conservative parties.

The Pope indicated his support for the bid by Italy's health minister under Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia, Francesco Storace, to allow an anti-abortion group access to centres that counsel women seeking abortions. The issue was a prominent feature of Forza Italia's general election campaign in April, though Storace was forced to resign as the result of a scandal before it took place.

On the day before the elections took place, the Pope denounced same-sex marriage in a speech to representatives of the European People's Party, a coalition of more than three dozen right-wing parties in Europe that includes Forza Italia and Spain's Peoples Party. The Pope said that the Church would oppose any efforts to make other types of relationships "juridically equivalent" to marriage.

In June, Cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo, who heads the group that proposes family-related policy for the church, threatened that scientists who engage in stem-cell research using human embryos should be subject to ex-communication.

Spain occupies a special place in this campaign because the PSOE government was elected in 2004 as a result of the eruption of a mass movement against the militarist and economic policies of its predecessor, the PP.

Whether directly or by innuendo, every aspect of the Pope's visit and the meeting in Valencia was an attack on the PSOE government and its reforms.

Economically the PSOE government has been right-wing from the start. This was a dangerous course given that its

predecessor was driven from office by a militant and politically aroused working class—angered at the PP’s support for the Iraq war and galvanized into action by the lies blaming the March 11, 2004, Madrid terror bombings on the Basque separatist group ETA.

The PSOE has sought to maintain a popular base of support by combining its economically conservative agenda with the implementation of certain liberal reforms as regards divorce and sexuality.

Contraception, divorce, abortion and homosexuality were all outlawed under General Francisco Franco. Today Spain is among the most permissive countries in Europe. Indeed, the depiction of Spain as a fiercely religious country is a myth of the right wing. Historically it has always been deeply anti-clerical and today surveys show that only 18 percent of the population attends mass every Sunday.

But the PSOE’s reforms have enraged the Church and have been made into a political battleground by the PP. The meeting in Valencia and the attacks by Pope Benedict XVI have seen the PP attempting to whip up its own base of support. An op-ed in *El Pais* July 10 commented, “The papal journey has been surrounded by an exaggerated politicisation on the part of civil and religious groups who seem more interested in emphasising the confrontation than the respect between the state and the Catholic Church in Spain.”

The function’s organising committee was composed in the main by PP militants, who also dominate the Valencia autonomous regional government, and members of Opus Dei. For months preparations for the meeting had been dominated by political controversy and vitriol. Both the Generalitat (regional government) and the Valencia Archbishopric had been working to isolate the PSOE from any participation in the organization of the event, to the point of closing down meetings in which some PSOE members had managed to take part and evicting them from the PP-dominated local government buildings.

The Pope’s arrival was preceded by virulent anti-government statements by high-ranking Church authorities. One Spanish bishop gave an interview referring to the “gay empire” controlling the Spanish government’s agenda. Ricardo Blázquez, the head of Spain’s Episcopal Conference, also said in an interview with the Italian newspaper *Famiglia Cristiana*, “Spanish society is spent; it’s in its death throes and doesn’t feel responsible for its own future.”

Speaking at the World Meeting of Families before the Pope’s arrival, Cardinal Antonio Cañizares, vice-president of the Episcopal Conference, attacked Zapatero for endangering the future of the family. He remarked that the government’s reforms had resulted in “a serious degradation of the family in Spain.” He added that the presence of the Pope “will encourage families and show them that they’re not alone, that the Pope is with them.”

Although Zapatero was part of the welcoming party that

received the Pope at the airport, he did not attend the closing high mass. He and the vice-president, María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, had a brief 15-minute meeting with the Pope during which they were reported to have discussed African immigration, European integration, family policy and education. Zapatero was booed by onlookers as he went in.

The media was full of praise for the fact that the Pope did not openly castigate Zapatero from the pulpit. His comments, however, were littered with scarcely veiled criticisms. The task of openly attacking the prime minister by name was assigned to the Vatican spokesman, the Spaniard Joaquin Navarro-Valls, who compared Zapatero unfavourably to “dictators” like Fidel Castro of Cuba, Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and General Jaruzelski of Poland, who had attended masses by the late Pope John Paul II when he had visited their countries. *El Pais* commented that many citizens were grateful for Zapatero’s gesture “with which he wanted to reaffirm the laicism of the State.”

The Catholic Church has once more decided to directly intervene in the politics of Spain in alliance with the PP. It has called for, and its bishops have taken part in, demonstrations opposing the government’s law on same-sex marriage and the end of teaching of the catechism in schools. It has called on its followers to disobey the laws of the country by extra parliamentary means.

The Catholic Church was a close collaborator of the fascist military uprising against the Republican government in 1936, one of whose limited reforms had been to end the link between church and state—although it continued subsidizing it. During General Franco’s 36 years of dictatorship, the Catholic Church was in charge of ideology, vetting and censoring everything and blessing every act of savagery committed by the regime.

Today, its promotion of cultural issues follows the pattern set by the alliance between fundamentalist Christian groups and the Republican Party in the United States, with the aim of whipping up reactionary sentiment as the basis of a right-wing political movement.



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