

Spain: new capitulation by the Socialist Party to the Catholic Church

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On September 22, Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE) Vice President María Teresa Fernández de la Vega put the finishing touches on an agreement that continues state financing for the Catholic Church, despite the 1978 Spanish constitution formally separating church from state. Earlier Socialist Party President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero gave his "full understanding and support" to Pope Benedict XVI, whose September 12 speech in Germany asserted that Christianity was based on reason, whereas Islam was spread by violent means.

The pope, who has repeatedly argued that Europe is a Christian civilisation and opposed Turkish membership in the European Union, provocatively quoted 14th-century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus: "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

On September 20, Zapatero came to the pope's defence, insisting that Muslim societies around the world should calm down and allow "understanding to prevail."

He said, "I am absolutely convinced that the pope at no time wanted to cause controversy, confrontation or criticism of the Islamic confession or the people who practise it."

Right-wing commentators expressed surprise at Zapatero's rapprochement with the Vatican. However, it is consistent with the PSOE's efforts to placate rightist threats to democratic rights that have been given the full support of the Vatican.

In July, the pope addressed the Fifth World Meeting of Families in Valencia, using it as a platform to attack PSOE government policies such as the legalisation of same-sex marriage that has featured prominently in the propaganda campaigns of the right-wing Popular Party (PP). He told reporters before landing in Spain that "according to human nature, it is a man and a woman who are made for each other" and urged bishops to hold firm "at a time of rapid secularisation."

His address stated that the meeting "provides a new impetus for proclaiming the gospel of the family,"

The PSOE's secular measures and its moves to curtail the influence of the Catholic Church have won widespread support. A survey by Fundacion Santa Maria found that the church is seen as the most distrusted and out-of-touch institution. It

predicted that within a generation, Spain would no longer be a Catholic country. The PSOE could have won popular support for severing all political and financial relations with the Catholic Church, but instead it did the opposite.

After a cabinet meeting, the government announced a hike in the "Catholic tax" from 0.52 percent to 0.70 percent. The Catholic tax is a voluntary scheme whereby an individual instructs the tax office to divert a percentage of his or her income tax to the Church's coffers.

The shift to a voluntary tax increase is supposed to replace the additional 30 million euro (US\$38 million) fund the government puts aside each year to cover any shortfall in the Church's finances.

This still leaves a guaranteed 3.5 billion euros (US\$4.4 billion) of government funding for religious institutions. And in a more detailed study of state subsidies, this estimate rises to 5.06 billion euros (US\$6.38 billion).

The Church is now also obliged to pay VAT (value-added tax) on new sales and acquisitions (a requirement of European Union law, not a provision imposed by the PSOE) and to present a yearly report to the government on how it spends the state subsidy.

Prior to the negotiations, PSOE officials had hinted at a significant reduction in state funding that would force the Church to depend more on popular support. It therefore tried to promote the significance of the small shift away from direct state subsidies to increased voluntary taxation as having linked "the Catholic Church's income in a direct way to the will of tax payers."

But no amount of bluster can hide the Church's satisfaction with the deal.

Although Church officials had demanded a rise to 0.8 percent, Church spokesman Juan Antonio Martinez Camino told a news conference, "Everyone wins. The government does because it solves a problem; the Church does because it's freer, and contributors do because they can voluntarily choose to whom they give their money."

Close supporters of the PSOE are concerned over how such a blatant capitulation to the Church's demands will be received by the population. An editorial in *El Pais* on September 22 stated, "The government may have its reasons to seek an

agreement that satisfied the Church, and thus patch up the situation without resolving the underlying problem. It would be deplorable were it to do this only as a political price to pay so that the Catholic hierarchy eases the pressure it is exerting on the government.”

Since the PSOE was elected based on a popular revolt against the PP government in March 2004, the Bishops Conference has for the first time since the 1930s led its congregations in public demonstrations against government policies on gay marriage, quicker divorces and stem cell research.

After initial concerns amongst Spanish bishops over making such an overt intervention into political life, they soon threw themselves behind the Vatican-inspired campaign urging priests to boycott the laws even if it meant prison.

This extraparliamentary mobilisation was initiated from his deathbed by the late Pope John Paul II. Speaking to Spanish clergy visiting the Vatican, he demanded a struggle to reverse the “weakening” of the “imprint of Catholic faith in Spanish culture.”

His successor, Pope Benedict, has continued in the same spirit.

The Vatican has historically regarded Spain as a fortress and is engaged in a concerted campaign alongside the PP (and with other right-wing parties throughout Europe) in a struggle against any and all manifestations of secularism and left-wing thought. The PSOE government is seen as a prime target, not merely because of its policies on gay rights and similar issues, but because it came to power as a result of a pronounced radicalisation of the working class.

John L. Allen, Madrid correspondent of the *National Catholic Reporter*, commented:

“Observers across the Catholic world have been waiting to see if this crisis might stimulate Spanish Catholics to invent a new model of resistance, a new battle plan.... Spain is key to Pope Benedict’s desire to re-awaken the Christian roots of Europe.... What is coming into focus in Spain may therefore hint at a broader political and cultural strategy of the Catholic Church under Benedict XVI and the tensions inside and outside the church that strategy might generate.”

The Vatican hopes to use threats and mass protests not only to achieve its immediate demands, but in alliance with the PP to destabilise and, if possible, bring down the PSOE government.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Catholic Church participated in the suppression of popular democratic revolts and workers’ struggles and resisted all forms of progress. Throughout Spanish history, it has been the main axis of reaction, and any progressive movement has of necessity taken on an anti-clerical character.

During the revolutionary struggles of the 1930s, Spain’s Church hierarchy and Pope Pius XI together called for a “holy crusade for the integral restoration of the Church’s rights” against the “Red Antichrists.” When Spain’s Civil War erupted, Catholic bishops joined Franco’s fascist forces and,

with his victory, Catholicism became a state religion charged with censoring all books, newspapers and magazines, cinema, radio, television and education.

Before the collapse of the dictatorship in 1975-1978, tensions emerged between Franco and the Vatican. Sections of the Church began to distance themselves from Franco, becoming part of the opposition when the inevitable collapse of the regime took place. They were allowed to escape justice thanks to this alliance with the Spanish Communist Party and the PSOE.

When Franco died in 1975 and a parliamentary monarchy was established in 1978, the Church not only survived intact but—through the 1979 Church-state accords—retained a privileged position. Although the new constitution declared that there was no longer a state religion, Article Sixteen, Clause Three stated that it would take into account “the religious beliefs of Spanish society” and maintain “the consequent relations of cooperation with the Catholic Church and other denominations.”

Victorino Mayoral, a PSOE deputy, admitted that the accords meant that Spain was “a secular society, on the one hand, but remained a Catholic state, on the other.”

Under the PP government (1997-2004), the Church worked with former president Jose Maria Aznar to recapture many of the powers it lost after the fall of Franco, particularly in education, where the PP planned to reintroduce compulsory religious studies. These plans were thwarted by the popular revolt that drove the PP from power.

Up to now, the PP’s education plans have been suspended by the PSOE. But the last thing the PSOE wants is a head-on confrontation with the Church. The government has insisted that it will not threaten Church-state relations by overturning the 1979 accords. Instead of exposing the relationship between Church-sponsored protests and PP provocations, Zapatero has now come forward to bolster the authority of the Vatican and to provide the Church in Spain with continued financial support.



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