

Spain: Catholic Church renews offensive against abortion rights

Paul Stewart
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The PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party) has removed the extension of abortion rights in its manifesto for the March national elections.

The PSOE has once again capitulated to the Catholic Church and the right-wing opposition Popular Party (PP). Its decision came after a protest in Madrid on March 31 organised by the Bishops' Conference in which speaker after speaker denounced government policy on abortion and toward the family as a breach of the consensus of the "transition" from the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1939-1975) to parliamentary forms of rule in 1978. One of its key arrangements was the Church State Accords agreed in 1979.

Unlike the PSOE, the Church has steadily abandoned the cautious approach it adopted in its relations with political parties since the fall of Franco. Over the last four years, the Catholic Church has stepped up its public attacks on the PSOE, which came to power on the back of mass popular opposition to the PP's support for the invasion of Iraq and the so-called "war on terror."

The PSOE has sought to mend the rift and reestablish consensus of the post-Franco era to stabilise bourgeois rule, but this has proven impossible.

Since the anti-abortion demonstration, the PSOE has demanded that the Bishops Conference apologise to the government and retract its public accusations. PSOE Secretary of Organisation José Blanco declared of the demonstration, "I had the impression that it was a PP rally run by cardinals," and accused the Church of "moving away from the essential foundations of democracy."

The bishops' criticism of the PSOE constituted an "extremely serious attack" by the Church on the democratic institutions of the state, he added, something "unprecedented" since Spain's transition to democracy three decades ago. Blanco asserted, "We will stand up to this offensive by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which constitutes the first act of the PP's election campaign," and "will not take one step back on legislation that has extended the rights of Spaniards."

PSOE Vice President María Teresa Fernández de la Vega urged her colleagues to pass some legislation before the election that does not expand abortion rights but strengthens existing rights to protect the anonymity of patients, combined with a verbal promise to extend abortion rights if re-elected. Such a proposal was contained in its March 2004 election manifesto but was quietly dropped.

Blanco's remarks do not signify that the PSOE is preparing to confront the Church, but are an appeal to the Church hierarchy to recognise the destabilising consequences of its campaign.

The bishops should "re-read the gospel," Blanco said, urging the church to "evolve." His comments were echoed in a statement released by the *Christian Network*, an association of approximately 150 Catholic organisations, challenging the Bishops' Conference for ignoring the deeper problems confronting families. The statement read, "They have ignored the reality of many Catholics who with different visions live and experience family life, but according to the same values of the Gospel."

Raquel Mallavibarrena Martínez de Castro, spokeswoman for *Somos Iglesia* (We are the Church), stated, "It seems that this issue of family has only been centered on abortion, divorce and homosexual marriage," instead of work and equality.

The PSOE has united with a section of the Catholic Church to change the political stance of the Bishops' Conference. The *Redes Cristianans* group urged the church to return to its supposedly traditional campaigns for equality between men and women, for "democracy," and they lamented the new vision of the family being promoted by the Church as something "monolithic" and in agreement with the beliefs of only certain sections of the Church. That section embraces the senior officials of both the Bishops' Conference and the Vatican, including the Pope.

The fracturing in the ranks of the clergy is only a pale reflection of the profound popular hostility to the Church's present political stance and its role in society. The Bishops' Conference and the Vatican responded to these appeals by

raising the spectre of a socialist Masonic plot, denouncing sections of the Church for being influenced by secularism, and resurrecting the slogans the Church used when it supported Franco's fascist national movement in 1936.

In an interview with the Polish *Sunday Catholic Weekly* January 11, entitled "The spectre of Spanish revolution," Archbishop of Toledo Antonio Canizares Llovera denounced Zapatero for "implementing a secular programme, its foundation being laicistic ideology. You can see that phenomenon all over Europe." He went on, "Sometimes people do not realise how powerful this influence is, and they are enslaved by this ideology. Therefore, the Spanish Church has been intensively carrying out the mission of new evangelisation. We agree with John Paul II's statement that Spain is to be evangelised and has to evangelise."

The interview concluded with an assault on the influence of Freemasonry within the PSOE government, "The secularisation of the society and culture also embraced the Church, which caused us to have little energy to evangelise.... In Spain, a new book of the Protestant writer Cesar Vidal has just been published. Its title is *Los masones: la historia de la sociedad secreta mas poderosa* [*The Freemasons: History of the Most Powerful Secret Society*], published by Planeta. Among other things, the book addresses the Masonic influence in the most important events of recent Spanish history, especially since the election last March of the Spanish Socialist Labour Party... Freemasonry is responsible for spreading laicism because it claims that God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ cannot be taken into account. Thanks to the means Freemasons have at their disposal, they managed to penetrate the environments of state administration and culture."

Why is the Catholic Church resurrecting its pro-fascist slogans, and what are the deeper social impulses they are reacting against? This was summed up by Pope Benedict XVI on November 30 in his *Spe Salvi* (*Saved by Hope*), the second part of a triptych of encyclicals in which he declared that humanity would not be saved by science or social revolution but only through Christ.

"A world which has to create its own justice is a world without hope," he said. Poverty could not be banished from the earth. "We must do all we can to overcome suffering, but to banish it from the world is not in our power," the Pope wrote. "Only God is able to do this." He admitted that the modern world was shaped by the 1789 French Revolution and the 1917 Russian Revolution, and inspired by the work of Marx, and essentially called on all religions to join in the fight against the growth of new movements, particularly amongst the youth, inspired by these enlightened and scientific conceptions.

Prime Minister Jose Zapatero has attempted to restore the Church's rapidly declining authority. When the Church State Accords came up for renewal last autumn, the PSOE had the opportunity to sever state financial support to the Catholic Church but instead renewed the thrust of the accords. Instead of opposing the Vatican's unprecedented beatifications of 498 Catholic priests killed when the Church supported fascism in the civil war from 1936 to 1939, it legitimised the ceremony by sending government representatives who were distant relatives of two of those beatified.

Last December, Zapatero announced the return to politics of José Bono Martínez, who retired as minister of defence last year. He was appointed the head of the PSOE's March election campaign. Bono is the PSOE's most prominent conservative Catholic, who has spent decades reconciling PSOE policies with biblical teachings. Not long after the PSOE came to power in 2004, Bono declared that a "war" between the Catholic Church and the government would only benefit the PP and that such a conflict was a fight the PSOE did not want. These statements were in response to threats made by the right wing that secularism should not be used against believers.

The PSOE's retreat on abortion rights has only emboldened the right wing, which, according to an article on January 17 in *El Pais*, is preparing a major pre-election rally against abortion. "The inquisitorial persecution in recent weeks against abortion clinics that have supposedly infringed the terms of the Criminal Code has exceeded the limits of administrative and judicial zeal, entering the terrain of religious fundamentalism, ethical particularism and sectarian politics.... Several Catholic associations, known for their belligerence in the campaign against the abortion clinics, are preparing for late February, only a few days before the elections, a mass demonstration 'for life and against abortion.'"

On January 30, the Spanish Bishops' Conference issued a statement intervening publicly in the elections. The statement urged Catholics not to vote for political parties in the March national elections that deal with terrorists or advocate gay marriage. The statement declared that although "Catholics may support and join different parties, it is also true that not all [electoral] programmes are equally compatible with the faith and Christian demands in life."



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