

Pope steps up right-wing crusade in Spain

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Pope Benedict XVI visited Spain last week to attend the World Youth Day 2011 (WYD), held in Madrid. Vatican officials said the Pope was returning because the nation needed “a deeper evangelisation”.

A huge stage was erected in Plaza de Cibeles, at the centre of Madrid, and 200 confessional boxes placed next to the Retiropark for the estimated 1.5 million pilgrims. Nine major highways and all roads going through the centre of Madrid were closed for long periods during the four-day tour.

In his first speech, the Pope chose to condemn “the prevailing superficiality, consumerism and hedonism, the widespread banalisation of sexuality, the lack of solidarity, the corruption,” which he blames on secularism and left-wing thought. King Juan Carlos, in his welcoming speech at Madrid’s Barajas airport, echoed the Pontiff’s message, saying the time had come for society to redress “a profound crisis of values”.

Since his appointment as Pope in 2005, Josef Ratzinger has visited Spain three times, more than any other country. The Vatican falsely portrays Spain as a bastion of Catholicism, chosen as a target by the forces of Marxism, liberalism, secularism, science and virtually all things modern. But the Church is an increasingly unpopular and discredited institution, particularly among the youth. Today only 73 percent of Spaniards describe themselves as Roman Catholic, but of these two thirds either seldom go to church or never do so. Some surveys indicate that 25 percent of Spaniards describe themselves as atheist. Almost half the churches have no priest and the seminaries are largely empty.

On the eve of the visit, thousands of people, organised by 150 secular associations, demonstrated in the centre of Madrid against financing of the event by the government. The protest was violently dispersed by the police.

Ratzinger’s first visit to Spain took place in July 2006. During his second visit in November 2010, Ratzinger accused the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government of promoting “aggressive secularism”. He declared that “modern Catholicism comes mostly thanks to

Spain. But it is also true that laicism, a strong and aggressive secularism, was born in Spain, as we saw in the 1930s.”

This is a reference to the Second Republic when the monarchy was abolished, church and state separated, religious orders dissolved, education secularised and autonomy granted to the nationalities. These modest democratic measures threatened the power and wealth of the Church, the landowners and the financial and business elite who sought to reverse them. Faced with working class and peasant resistance, they turned to fascism.

The Church fully supported Franco’s coup in 1936, describing it as “a crusade” against “Antichrists”, and the subsequent 36-year dictatorship during which strikes were illegal, all organisations of the working class were driven underground or destroyed, and all opposition political parties banned.

When Franco died in 1975, and a parliamentary monarchy was established in 1978, the Church not only survived intact but retained a privileged position, thanks to the PSOE and Communist Party.

Under the Popular Party (PP) government (1997-2004), the Church worked with then-president José Maria Aznar to recapture many of the powers it lost after the fall of Franco. But these plans were thwarted by the popular revolt that drove the PP from power.

An important factor in the PSOE’s 2004 victory was its social policies and its moves to curtail the influence of the Catholic Church, which, according to opinion polls, was viewed as the most distrusted and out-of-touch institution.

When the new government started to pass legislation on same-sex marriage, adoption rights for homosexuals, easier divorce and abortion and eliminating compulsory religious education in schools, the Church set out—in alliance with the PP—to destabilise it. It called on its followers to disobey the laws of the country by extra parliamentary means if necessary. The PSOE government was seen as a prime target, not merely because of its social policies, but because it came to power as a result of a radical movement of the working class.

Writing at the time 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."

The PSOE could have won popular support for curtailing the influence of the Church and ending its financial support from the state, but instead attempted to mend the rift with the Vatican by passing a "Catholic tax", whereby an individual can divert a percentage of his or her income tax to the Church. This, along with different forms of direct government funding, means that Church coffers receive around €9 billion from the government. Its privileged position is further reflected in the fact that the Church is the second largest property owner in Spain.

Electoral promises such as stopping Catholic state funerals for victims of terrorism (even when they are not Catholic), the display of crucifixes when ministers are sworn into office, the continued presence of religious symbols in public buildings and a reform of the 1980 law on religious freedom have been abandoned. The PSOE government has also retreated on its promise to do something about the continued existence of the huge mausoleum to Franco in the Valley of the Fallen and is believed to be in discussions with the Vatican to transform the site into "a place of reconciliation".

The Historical Memory Association, which campaigns for the recognition of victims of the dictatorship, has condemned such a move, saying, "The Catholic Church has no place within discussions over the future of the site" and that the Vatican should "publicly apologise for the role the Catholic Church played in supporting and participating at the forefront of suppression during the Franco dictatorship."

At first the PSOE government even refused to authorise the demonstration against the Pope's visit and only allowed it on Wednesday—one day before his arrival. Another protest organized for Thursday by atheist associations in Madrid was banned.

The right-wing media, along with the PP, initiated a campaign against the demonstrators. Ana Botella, deputy mayor of the Madrid City Council and outgoing PP leader José María Aznar's wife, called the protest a "provocation". The PP Madrid regional president, Esperanza Aguirre, said it was "offensive to Catholics". Juan Antonio Martínez Camino, spokesman for the General Synod of Bishops, called the organizers of the demonstration "parasites."

The PSOE legitimised these attacks. PSOE leader José Bono, president of the Spanish Congress, referred to Benedict XVI as "one of the most important moral leaders of the planet" and considered his visit as "very satisfactory".

The nature of the social forces being mobilised by the Church and the right-wing was indicated by the arrest

immediately prior to the Pope's visit of Mexican chemistry student José Pérez Bautista, who had threatened to attack counter-demonstrators with "suffocating gases" and other chemicals.

Bautista was a volunteer helping pilgrims arriving for World Youth Week and had made his threats on the Internet, echoing the Norwegian fascist mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik who made similar boasts before shooting 77 mainly young social democrats.

Organisers of the World Youth Day claim that there was no public money involved in the Pope's visit and that 70 percent of the costs were paid by those participating and the rest by donations and business sponsors. This is a lie. According to the "Who Pays the WYD?" blog article by bocaextra, active public financing was given to the Church that included the use of 12,000 civil servants (cleaners, policemen, etc.) and 693 public facilities including schools, sports centres and shelters, 40,000 yellow and white flowers, confetti, balloons and flags, 600 uniformed soldiers marching in a procession, an air display, receptions in Barajas, Cibeles and Puerta del Sol, special lighting in Madrid's important buildings; installation of 2,000 taps in the Cuatro Vientos by a public company and leasing Cuatro Vientos aerodrome, the Sports Palace and the Town Hall.

The government also subsidised the visit by reducing transport tickets by 80 percent for adults and making them free for youth. National museums and monuments were free. Companies that sponsored the event will be able to claim tax deductions of 40 to 90 percent.

Most private entities who sponsored the World Youth Day belong to the Fundación Madrid Vivo (Madrid Lives Foundation), headed by the Archbishop of Madrid Antonio María Rouco Varela. This foundation includes a whole number of heads of Spanish corporations and organizations who have spearheaded the attacks on the living conditions of the Spanish working class since the financial crisis erupted—including Iñigo de Oriol (Iberdrola), Gerardo Díaz Ferran (former president of the Spanish Confederation of Employers' Organizations), Emilio Botín (Banco Santander), Francisco González (BBVA), Isidro Fainé (La Caixa), César Alierta (Telefónica—currently laying off 6,400 workers), and other individuals linked with the right-wing and extreme right-wing media.



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