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Pope confronts the contradictions of Spain

by John L. Allen Jr.



People protest Nov. 6 in Barcelona during Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Spain. The pope arrived in Barcelona the following day to consecrate the Church of the Sagrada Familia. (CNS/Reuters/Albert Gea)

Spain is famously a land of great and contradictory passions, and certainly that's true of its love/hate relationship with Catholicism in the early 21st century.

Under Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain has become the mother ship of European secularism, embracing fast-track divorce, legalized abortion, and gay marriage. The country is officially 94 percent Catholic, yet only 76 percent of Spaniards identify as such, and only 15 percent attend Mass regularly.

Yet Spain is also the crucible for some of the most dynamic new movements in the church, from Opus Dei to the Neocatechumenal Way. The legendary pilgrimage site of Santiago de Compostela is enjoying a renaissance, with the number of pilgrims climbing every year since the mid-1980s. Today the annual estimate is 2.5 million, and in the holy year of 2010, it could reach 10 million.

The "best of times, worst of times" dynamic may help explain why Pope Benedict XVI has already

visited Spain twice, and is set to do so again next August for World Youth Day. That outing will make Spain the only country he's visited three times.

Benedict's most recent Spanish foray came Nov. 6-7, with a weekend trip to Compostela and Barcelona.

The country's tensions were on full public display, as a quarter-million faithful turned out to watch Benedict consecrate the famed Basilica of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, while at the same time 200 to 300 homosexual men and lesbians staged a "kiss-in" along the pope's route. Organizers dubbed the event a "queer kiss flash mob."

Aboard the papal plane, Benedict referred to Spain's mixed history.

Figures such as Sts. Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross "formed the physiognomy of modern Catholicism," the pope said. Yet Spain also produced "an anticlericalism, and a strong and aggressive secularism, like we saw in the 1930s" -- a reference to the Spanish Civil War.

Befitting those ambiguities, the pontiff offered a two-pronged message, composed of both criticism and outreach.

Benedict called on Spain and Europe to accept "the authentic truth about man," such as that the basis of marriage is "the generous and indissoluble love of a man and a woman" -- a clear swipe at both gay marriage and divorce. He also insisted that a child's life must be "sacred and inviolable from the moment of conception."

Yet Benedict vowed that the church wants to work with all elements of Spanish society to promote "justice for all, beginning with the poorest and most defenseless."

Reaching out to secularists who prize choice and tolerance, Benedict insisted that God is "the foundation and apex of our freedom, not its opponent."

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It's not clear whether his pitch changed any Spanish hearts and minds, but there may be some comfort for the pope at the level of realpolitik. Support for Zapatero's Socialist party has plummeted to around 29 percent, and many analysts think it's an open question whether he'll survive to the next elections in 2012.

Meanwhile, in *Forbes* magazine's recent annual rundown of the world's most powerful people, Benedict was in fifth place -- by far the highest finish for any religious leader on the planet.

The papal bully pulpit, in other words, seems to be alive and well.

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