

## Avatar of secularism faces blowback for pro-papal line

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 22, 2011 NCR Today

Lord Palmerston, the 19th century British Prime Minister, famously said that in politics there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests. Benedict XVI would probably concur on the strength of his experience in Madrid the last few days, where liberal and secular currents in Spanish society have voiced outrage over the blatantly pro-papal line emanating from -- of all places -- the government of Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.

Irony, thy name is Zapatero.

Since 2004, Zapatero has loomed as the Darth Vader -- or, for Harry Potter fans, the Voldemort -- of the European Catholic imagination. The grandson of a Republican revolutionary executed under Franco, Zapatero famously declared upon his election in 2004 that Spanish kids need "more exercise and less religion," and promptly went about tackling what Spanish leftists see as the unfinished business of the Civil War: easing restrictions on divorce and abortion, legalizing same-sex unions, and curbing public assistance to the church.

In Catholic conversation on the Old Continent, Zapatero has become an almost mythic figure, the avatar *par excellence* of secularism on steroids. In 2008, when Barack Obama was elected to the presidency of the United States, the nicest thing European Catholic commentators could find to say about him was that he did not seem a "global Zapatero."

Now, however, Zapatero has been significantly weakened both by Spain's economic mess and by perceptions of corruption in the country's political class. He's announced that he won't seek a third term, and has called early elections for November.

In terms of church/state relations, Zapatero seems to be going out with a whimper rather than a bang. World Youth Day organizers report that since Madrid was chosen as the host city three years ago, Zapatero's administration has been highly cooperative in every way short of bestowing public money on the event. Permission for use of public venues was easy to come by, logistics for security and movement were worked out with a minimum of fuss, and the government has trumpeted the event as a major coup.

During the four days Benedict was on the ground in Spain, that spirit of common cause was so extensive that it produced backlash among Zapatero's base.

Spanish state TV devoted wall-to-wall, saturation coverage to all of the events on the papal itinerary. Spanish police were also out in force, insulating World Youth Day pilgrims and the papal party from any direct contact with the smaller bands of protestors upset over both the cost of the event and at least some elements of the pope's message.

In an especially explosive twist in Spanish politics, there was a suggestion that Zapatero has reached out to the Vatican and the Spanish hierarchy to help resolve a long-simmering tension over the *Valle de los Ca'dos*, the "Valley of the Fallen," a Catholic basilica and memorial to the dead of the Spanish Civil War erected under

Franco. Leftists in Spain have long seen the complex as pro-Franco exhibitionism, in part because some 3,000 Republican political prisoners died constructing it.

The Zapatero government has said it wants to transform the site into a center of the "reconciliation of memory," without questioning its use as a basilica or jeopardizing the ongoing presence of Benedictine monks.

In secular circles, complaints about the red carpet rolled out for the pope percolated throughout the visit.

Public television has basically turned over its three networks to the pope," groused an editorial in the left-leaning daily *El País*, expressing astonishment that state TV assigned 300 journalists to cover an event officially defined as a "pastoral" visit rather than a state-to-state affair.

The popular on-line commentary site *El Confidencial* objected not only to the volume of coverage, but what the site saw as its uncritical tone "complaining, for instance, that TV images of young seminarians didn't square with the reality of an aging and shrinking corps of priests across Spain.

Various left-leaning groups also objected to the suggestion of collaboration between church and state over the *Valle de los Caídos*. The "Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory" blasted Zapatero for appearing to cut a deal with the church, without demanding that it pay compensation to Franco's victims, or at least apologize "for blessing thousands of murders" and for its "strict collaboration with the dictatorship."

Finally, the strong police presence prompted one leftist Spanish commentator to grumble that the "times of the Caudillo seem to have returned," a reference to the era of "National Catholicism" under Franco. Another said Zapatero seems to be turning into a "devout atheist," European jargon for a non-believer who cozies up to the church.

In reality, Zapatero is unlikely ever to go down as a great secular friend of the church; there's too much water under the bridge. Nevertheless, his red carpet treatment for Benedict XVI over the last few days illustrates the enduring truth that politics is a bit like the weather: If you don't like the climate today, just wait, for it will surely change.

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