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Pope's Spain trip promises drama

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 7, 2006 All Things Catholic

Tomorrow Benedict XVI
travels to Valencia, Spain, for one of the briefest papal trips of recent memory -- just 26 hours from his arrival at 11:30 am Saturday to wheels-up again at 1:30 pm Sunday.

Those 26 hours, however, promise to be packed with drama.

The highlight, at least in terms of press interest, is likely to come at 6:30 p.m. Saturday local time, when Pope Benedict meets José Luis Rodr'guez Zapatero, the Socialist Prime Minister and bête noire of European Catholicism. Since taking office in 2004, Zapatero's government has either adopted or discussed legislation in favor of:

- Same-sex marriage legislation;
- Fast-track divorces;
- Curbing religious education in state schools;
- Supporting embryonic stem-cell research;
- Easing abortion laws;
- Reducing or eliminating public funding for the church.

The latest such move came just a month ago, when the government proposed allowing transsexuals to legally change their gender without undergoing surgery.

To add insult to injury, the government has chosen moments to move on this agenda seemingly designed to maximize Catholic irritation. The law on same-sex marriage, for example, was adopted two days before the inaugural Mass of Benedict XVI, an act that even the country's ambassador to the Holy See described as "sticking a finger in the church's eye."

In a country where 94 percent of the population is officially Catholic, that sort of thing gets noticed.

This time around, just days before Benedict's visit for the close of a Vatican-sponsored World Meeting of Families, Zapatero's government funded a rival event organized by the Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Transsexuals and Bisexuals, also in Valencia. In a press statement, the organizer said

it shows "the church has to accept that it doesn't have a monopoly on family."

Cumulatively, the impact of all this has been to make Spain the front line in the battle against what Benedict XVI has called the "dictatorship of relativism." The stakes are doubly high, from the Vatican's point of view, because not only is Spain a traditional Catholic stronghold in Europe, but it exercises a strong gravitational pull on Latin America, home to almost one-half of the 1.1 billion Catholics in the world.

It was not supposed to be like this.

When Zapatero was elected just three days after the March 11, 2004, terrorist attacks in Madrid, he attracted support even from practicing Catholics. Many thought his government would be akin to former Socialist Prime Minister Felipe Gonzales -- cautious on social questions, albeit officially committed to progressive positions, and respectful of the church. Prior to the election, almost no one predicted a serious church/state clash. Zapatero campaigned in favor of dialogue, and he was actually closer to the church on what was the election's deciding issue, the war in Iraq.

Once in office, however, Zapatero let loose the dogs of cultural war.

The
result has been what many observers see as the most serious crisis to confront the Spanish church since the civil war in the 1930s. Media commentators will be anticipating something akin to the Ali-Frazier prizefight when Zapatero and Benedict meet, the first encounter between the two men.

Even the setting beckons images of holy war. In the minds of many Spaniards, Valencia is linked to the *reconquista*, the retaking of Spain from the Muslims. The Valencia cathedral was once a mosque, converted when the Moors were pushed out, and dedicated to the Virgin Mary by El Cid himself.

In fact, expectations of a rhetorical clash between the pope and prime minister are almost certain to be disappointed. Zapatero narrowly won election in 2004, and has every incentive to appear respectful of the pope. Benedict, for his part, is a gracious figure who likes to accent the spiritual and pastoral dimension of his travels, not the political.

Yet beyond such niceties, the reality is that Zapatero and Benedict XVI incarnate radically different cultural options -- one the avatar of "tolerance," the other of "truth." The European outcome of Benedict's struggle against relativism, at least in the short term, may well turn on

whether Spaniards are more persuaded by his or by Zapatero's, vision.

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The trip to Valencia comes just days after a tragic accident in which 41 people died when an underground train crashed in the eastern part of the city. The pope sent a telegram of condolence, and the Spanish press has reported that Benedict will stop at the "Jesus" station where the accident occurred in order to pray for the victims and their families.

Archbishop Santiago Garcia Aracil of Merida-Badajoz said that the tragedy has "dressed a city that was prepared for celebration in mourning instead."

The families of those who died have been invited to join the pope at the cathedral at 1:00 pm.

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