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Europe's Catholics react to election drama in France, Greece

Jonathan Luxmoore | May. 17, 2012

France's newly elected President Francois Hollande waves from a balcony at his campaign headquarters in Paris on May 7, the day after his election. (CNS/Reuters/Jean-Paul Pelissier)

When voters in France and Greece went to the polls in early May, the outcome caused consternation by threatening to deepen the crisis currently engulfing the continent.

Although reflecting social and economic discontent, the election results have wide implications -- not least for churches, who operate in different circumstances but also face some common challenges.

"Church leaders are worried that citizens are growing disillusioned about the effectiveness of the political process in solving current problems," Dominique Greiner, religion editor at France's Catholic *La Croix* daily, told *NCR*.

"Most Church members would object to being described as conservative or progressive Catholics -- they simply want to be Christians and vote according to their consciences. But many have been confused about the real values being proposed by today's politicians."

France's incumbent center-right president, Nicolas Sarkozy, was convincingly defeated after just one term in office by his Socialist challenger, Francois Hollande, whose victory, 52 percent to 48 percent, could signal a leftward shift in European politics and a move away from the harsh austerity programs adopted after the 2008 economic crash.

In Greece, the two parties responsible for enforcing a harsh fiscal stability plan imposed by the European Union, New Democracy and Pasok, were trounced by smaller and newer radical groupings, though no party won more than a fifth of votes and none has been able to form a coalition government.

In both countries, the election campaigns were bitter and personal, showing the strength of feeling running high all over Europe. While France's new head of state has pledged to renegotiate a fiscal pact agreed by the EU's 27 member-states, Greece could now default on its debts and be forced to pull out of the EU's much-vaunted euro single currency. The future looks uncertain and is worrying chancelleries and ministries everywhere.

France's Catholic church has been tight-lipped about Hollande's election triumph. However, Fr. Bernard Podvin, who speaks for the country's bishops' conference, injected a note of caution as the results were confirmed, urging Hollande to be "humble in victory" and attentive to the "lack of cohesion" in French society.

He added that the church's views were well-known on the new Socialist president's accompanying promises to back gay marriage and euthanasia and vowed the church would speak out "even if this leads it to oppose the new majority."

"It isn't a question of some ideological position by the church, but of our conviction that there are choices which belong in the intimate sphere rather than in legislation," the church spokesman told Vatican Radio.

"People voted according to what the crisis dictated to them, and all key questions were avoided in the populistic election campaign. In this situation, such reforms would merely force a cleavage in our country when it really doesn't need this."

Catholics traditionally make up two-thirds of France's 60 million inhabitants, though fewer than one in 10 attends Sunday Mass and 40 percent of the population denies any faith. Poll evidence suggested church members voted overwhelmingly for Sarkozy, a divorced and remarried Catholic, who pledged to improve ties with religious communities before his original May 2007 election and later called for France's guiding secular ethic of laïcité, set out in a 1905 church-state separation law, to be interpreted "more positively."

In January, he praised the national patron, St. Joan of Arc (1412-31), for helping "forge the national conscience" and assured the Catholic bishops' conference president, Cardinal André Vingt-Trois, and other religious leaders at a Paris meeting that nothing could "prohibit the idea of transcendence from being present in our society."

Yet if Sarkozy's conspicuous defense of family values and France's Christian heritage accorded with Catholic teaching, critics pointed out, other aspects of his policies conflicted with them, such as his tough treatment of asylum-seekers and immigrants, and his vigorous backing for the mass deportation of Roma in summer 2010.

Hollande, by contrast, has called for a stricter application of laïcité, and for the 1905 law to be written into France's constitution.

In an April letter to France's National Committee for Lay Action, he insisted secularity was "more indispensable than ever" in the 21st century, as an "excellent synthesis" of France's cherished principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, and attacked Sarkozy for endangering the republican consensus by showing too much favor to religions.

Among other pledges, the new Socialist president plans to strengthen France's secular public schools and renegotiate a 2009 accord with the Vatican giving equal state recognition to Catholic diplomas.

Yet Greiner, the Catholic editor, thinks Hollande's defense of the secular ethic has more to do with the rise of Islam in France than with any hostility to Christianity.

Talk of restricting Catholic schools will naturally alarm church leaders, Greiner concedes. But the new president will have trouble tampering with the 1905 law, which consists in practice of hundreds of legal measures adopted over decades. It would make no sense to use the law ideologically as a tool against public religious expressions.

In Greece, the predominant Orthodox church has been sparing in its comments too.

In February, its leader, Archbishop Ieronymos II of Athens, warned of a social explosion as poverty, unemployment and homelessness "escalate into nightmarish proportions."

"The unprecedented patience of Greeks is running out," the archbishop told Greece's interim premier, Lucas Papademos.

"People are disappointed, desperate and worried -- they are asking for responsible, sincere and convincing answers. At such difficult and decisive times, insecurity, desperation and depression have crept into the homes of all Greeks."

In May, the church's governing Holy Synod confirmed that it had disbursed 96 million euros in 2001 for the relief of "suffering and distress," adding that its Athens archdiocese alone was currently providing food to 50,000 people daily at 700 soup kitchens.

The minority Catholic church, whose four archdioceses have 50,000 ethnic Greek members and around 150,000 foreign adherents, has had to curtail much of its own social and charitable work.

Speaking after the election, the president of Greece's bishops' conference, Bishop Fragiskos Papamanolis of Syros and Santorini, disclosed that taxes on the Catholic church had risen 48 percent in the past year under the draconian fiscal plan, which requires deep cuts in pay, pensions and public-sector jobs in return for two early 2012 EU-IMF bailouts of 240 billion euros.

He added that most Catholic dioceses were now unable to pay, let alone to provide further aid to the "sick and starving."

In an *NCR* interview, Archbishop Nikolaos Foskolos of Athens said Greek politicians had mismanaged the economy since democracy was restored in 1974 after a military dictatorship, leaving ordinary Greeks "living in a state of falsehood."

"We're only a small minority here, with few properties and resources, and we've been burdened by Catholics coming here from poor countries, using us as Europe's eastern gateway," said the 76-year-old Athens archbishop, whose church has often complained of discrimination in Greece, a European Union and NATO member-state.

"Since we joined the EU in 1981, we've received no help from other Western churches, since we're considered a rich country ourselves. But we now have parts of the Third World here in Greece itself."

For all the contrasts, observers say current developments in France and Greece highlight a general malaise overshadowing Europe, as well as the need for a better balance between the austerity measures to cut debts and deficits, and policies to stimulate growth and confidence.

They could also highlight the role of the Catholic church in speaking up for the poor and marginalized.

In a pastoral statement in October, France's Catholic bishops said "elements of discernment" in the election should include protection of family life and help for the handicapped and dying, but also urged Catholics to consider what presidential candidates were offering to improve France's depressed city suburbs and secure economic justice.

That message has been spelled out by other church leaders around the continent, including the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) which represents more than 1000 Catholic bishops from the EU's 27 member-states.

In a statement last autumn, COMECE said the Catholic church could be "a force for cohesion and hope" in societies corrupted by "credit-financed consumerism" and "threatened by populism and division."

As the French prepare for their first center-left president since the 1980s and the Greeks grapple with finding a government to stave off their country's economic meltdown, that summons to "cohesion and hope" will be a major challenge.

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