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The Origin of Catholic Unity in Spain

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“WE had rather have ten million Communists in Spain than one million Protestants. The worst thing that could happen to our country would be a religious division.”¹ This statement in a Barcelona newspaper in 1949 reflects the centuries-old determination of influential elements in Spain to prevent the growth of Protestantism and to preserve the Catholic unity of the nation.

Non-Catholic religions enjoy only a very limited toleration in Spain today. Protestant worship has been authorised in certain chapels, but they can have no signs on them, and there can be no preaching or religious services in streets or other public places. With only three or four exceptions, permits to open new chapels have not been given since the latter part of 1947. Proselytism and evangelism are officially forbidden, though not fully suppressed. The Bible and other religious literature cannot be published legally by Protestants, and such literature sent from abroad often does not pass the censor.

Spanish Protestants are not permitted to have their own schools, and their children are generally subject to Catholic instruction in the state and parochial schools. Members of the armed services are required to participate in public religious functions unless excused by their officers, and Protestants are denied the right to serve as army officers. Burial with Protestant rites is sometimes forbidden, and marriage outside the Roman Catholic Church is often impossible for those baptized in that Church even though they have become members of another.

After years of broad religious toleration and even brief periods of full religious liberty, Spain has turned back towards Catholic unity, which became a characteristic feature of Spanish national life in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is the basis of much Spanish legislation and of the 1953 Concordat between Spain and the Holy See. The bloody persecution which characterised earlier centuries is not present today, but the adherence to the principle of

¹ *El correo catalan*, Barcelona, May 29, 1949.

Catholic unity by Spain's religious and political leaders results in many restrictions upon the activities of religious minorities. This principle is rooted in religion and patriotism.

Many Spaniards are loyal Catholics deeply interested in the welfare and progress of their Church. They regard their country as eminently Catholic and as obligated, therefore, to further the cause of the Catholic Church and to follow its teachings in all of their implications. A defender of the present regime says: "The Spain of Franco . . . is Catholic Spain, the only country in the world that at the present time has known how to crystallize in its laws and its life the full ideal of state Christianity, without the slightest concession to the religious errors of recent centuries; the only country in the world that practises officially and openly the only true religion with all its agreeable and disagreeable, convenient and inconvenient, consequences."² No other Spanish government since 1868 has sensed so keenly as the present one the obligation to make the country thoroughly Catholic, but there have always been Spaniards who wanted to follow "the full ideal of state Christianity."

A CATHOLIC STATE

This ideal points back to the religious unity which prevailed in the later Roman Empire and in medieval times, when the states of Christendom were what would be called today Catholic states. A Catholic state has been defined in recent years as "a community which is composed exclusively of Catholic subjects and which recognises Catholicism as the only true religion,"³ and as "a political community that is exclusively, or almost exclusively, made up of Catholics."⁴ In such a state, as Pope Leo XIII pointed out, the Catholic Church considers it "unlawful to place the various forms of worship on the same footing as the true religion" or to tolerate other religions except "for the sake of securing some great good or hindering some great evil."⁵ Advocates of an official policy of Catholic unity in Spain have believed that their country was or could be a truly Catholic state.

Closely tied up with the religious opposition to non-Catholic religions in Spain is opposition inspired by a certain type of nationalism or patriotism. National unity has been regarded by many Spaniards as founded upon and dependent upon religious unity.

² Domingo de Arrese, *La España de Franco* (Madrid: Publicaciones Españolas, 1946), p. 18.

³ Joseph Poble, "Toleration, Religious," *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, XIV, 771.

⁴ John A. Ryan and Moorhouse F. X. Millar, *The State and the Church* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), p. 37.

⁵ Pope Leo XIII, "The Christian Constitution of States. Encyclical Letter *Immortale Dei*, November 1, 1885," in Ryan and Millar, *op cit*, p. 19.

Well known in Spain is the argument that the Catholic religion in early times overcame the geographical and racial barriers that separated the inhabitants of Spanish soil, later on inspired the struggle for freedom from the Moors, and then guided Ferdinand and Isabella in the unification of Spain and the creation of a great nation.⁶ When Charles V made Spain the centre of a great empire and Philip II ruled over a mighty and prosperous nation, Catholicism was an all-important factor in Spanish life. Spain's era of national greatness coincided with a period of intolerance and religious zeal, and intolerance and greatness have been equated by many Spaniards. Towards the latter part of the nineteenth century a distinguished Spanish scholar wrote: "Spain, evangeliser of half the planet; Spain, hammer of heretics, light of Trent, sword of Rome, cradle of Saint Ignatius—this is our greatness and our glory: we have no other."⁷

There can be no doubt that the occupation of Spain by Mohammedan Moors and the slow and painful reconquest of the country by Spaniards who professed Christianity gave rise to a fusion of religion and patriotism. It is worthy of note, however, that the period of the Moorish occupation was, on the whole, one of at least limited religious toleration. Christians and Jews lived with a large degree of freedom and tranquility under Mohammedan rule. During the centuries of the Reconquest, Christian and Moorish kings sometimes forgot their enmities and formed friendships and alliances. In the Christian kingdoms, Christians, Moors and Jews lived on better terms than would have been possible in most of the rest of Europe. From the thirteenth century on, however, intolerance on the part of people and governments grew in the Spanish kingdoms, and by the latter part of the fifteenth century it had become an integral part of national policy.⁸ At that time such a policy was not peculiar to Spain. The singularity of the Spanish nation in this respect rests upon the deep root which the policy took and its continued vigour long after most of the world had forsaken it.

The new national policy of intolerance received clear expression in the establishment of the Inquisition by Ferdinand and Isabella. To this institution, says one writer, the modern Spaniard owes as much, "whether by attraction or by repulsion, as Britain does to her parliamentary constitution."⁹ The Spanish rulers did not, of

⁶ Vicente de la Fuente, *La pluralidad de cultos y sus inconvenientes* (Puebla: Imprenta de Narciso Bassols, Editor, 1868), pp. 200ff.

⁷ Marcelino Menéndez Pelayo, *Historia de los heterodoxos españoles* (Madrid: Librería Católica de San José, 1880-1881), III, 834.

⁸ Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition in Spain* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906-1907), I, 52-71.

⁹ G. G. Coulton, *Inquisition and Liberty* (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1938), p. 283.

course, invent the Inquisition; they only revived it for Spain and gave it a somewhat different form. They began it as a means of dealing with Jews who had falsely professed conversion to Christianity. In 1478 they requested and received a papal Bull authorising them to set up the Inquisition in their kingdoms, and within a few years the Holy Office was fully organised, with Torquemada as inquisitor general for Aragon and Castile.¹⁰

The secret procedure of the Inquisition, its use of torture to obtain confessions and incriminations, and its severe penalties made it a dreaded institution. The worst penalty was death by burning (which was executed by civil officials after trial by the Inquisition), but the penances, the floggings, the loss of property, and the long imprisonments were also greatly feared. The Spanish Inquisition presented an impressive combination of the authority of the Church and the power of the Crown, since it represented both Pope and King. In later reigns it was sometimes an instrument of the king's will and sometimes an almost sovereign and all-powerful organisation.¹¹

In establishing the Inquisition, Ferdinand and Isabella were doubtless moved by both religious and political considerations. Many Jews had professed conversion to the Catholic faith in order to obtain security and privilege, and others had been swept into the Church by persuasive evangelists. Many of these converted Jews and their descendants became prominent in government and even in the Church; but there lingered strong suspicions of their sincerity, and without doubt there were many who made false professions of conversion or of loyalty to the Catholic faith. These false Christians were considered a reproach to the Church and an impediment to the national unity which was being achieved. It was believed that it would help the Church and the State to bring them into conformity, or to eliminate them.¹²

The Holy Office dealt effectively with the Jews who had accepted baptism, but it had no jurisdiction over the others, unless they had committed some offence against the faith such as proselytism. The peninsula was being unified, and it was regarded as necessary to find some means of removing the Jewish hindrance to national uniformity. Other nations—France and England, for example—had expelled the Jews centuries earlier, and this was the solution decided upon by the rulers of Spain. In 1492, following the conquest of Granada and, therefore, the completion of the Reconquest, the Jews were given the alternative of accepting baptism or leaving the country. This meant, of course, that the way for them to become Spaniards was to be converted to the Catholic

¹⁰ Lea, *op cit*, I, 156-173

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 289.

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 89-130.

religion. Some accepted baptism and remained in Spain, but thousands emigrated, amid scenes of terror and misery. When the Pope granted to Ferdinand and Isabella the title of "Catholic sovereigns" (which was passed on to their successors), the expulsion of the Jews was listed among the services to the faith entitling them to this honour. Without doubt, however, their reasons were political as well as religious—probably more political than religious.¹³

There remained one great barrier to Catholic unity—and to national unity, so it was believed—the presence of the Moors in Spain. Early in the sixteenth century they began to be faced with the alternative which had faced the Jews: baptism or emigration. Some left the country, but others accepted baptism and remained, though in many cases they continued to hold more or less secretly to their old religion. Eventually all people of Moorish descent, including many who were genuine Catholics, were expelled from the country. To such extremes was the Spanish nation willing to go for the sake of unity.¹⁴

THE SPANISH REFORMATION

A new threat to Catholic unity arose in the sixteenth century when a Protestant Reformation started in Spain. One author states that there were probably one thousand Protestants in Seville, one thousand in Valladolid, and one thousand in other parts of Spain,¹⁵ but the number might have been smaller. The significance of the Spanish Reformation does not lie in the number of people involved but rather in their strategic position in Spanish society and the influence which in time they might have exerted upon the Spanish state and the life and culture of the nation. The Catholic writer Balmes declared: "Distinguished ecclesiastics, members of the clergy, nuns, important laymen, in a word, individuals of the most influential classes, were found infected by the new errors."¹⁶ It should be added that there were also people of humble station who became Protestants.

It was in the late 1550s that significant Protestant communities were discovered in Valladolid and Seville. By that time the Roman Catholic Church was in full action against the Reformation in Europe, and the liberty of thought which within limits had been allowed a few years earlier was no longer permitted. Dogma was being rigidly defined in the Council of Trent, and debatable ground

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-143.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 318-406.

¹⁵ Frederick Meyrick, *The Church in Spain* (New York: James Pott and Company, 1892), p. 423.

¹⁶ Jaime Balmes, *El protestantismo comparado con el catolicismo en sus relaciones con la civilización europea* (5th ed.; Paris: Librería de Rosa y Bouret, 1854), I, 466.

was being reduced. The Society of Jesus had been organised by the Spaniard, Ignatius Loyola, and had begun its work in support of the papacy. It was an aroused Church which faced the little Protestant movement of Spain.

The powers of the State were also aroused. Charles V had had much trouble with Protestantism in Germany, and he was determined that it should not create divisions in Spain. He and others of his realm had earlier followed a policy of conciliation and had evidently hoped for unity within Christendom. For this reason he had insisted on a Church Council which would reform the Church and thus remove some of the grounds of rebellion. Then he lost hope of a reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants and gave himself wholly to the cause of the Counter Reformation. From his retirement in a monastery, shortly before his death, he urged that heresy be stamped out in Spain as a service to God and country.¹⁷ Philip II accepted as one of the chief responsibilities of his reign the combating of Protestantism at home and abroad. Arms, diplomacy, and the Inquisition were the instruments he used. The Holy Office, which had become quiescent, took on new life.

In four great autos de fe held in Valladolid and Seville in 1559-1560, sixty-two people, most of them Protestants, were handed over to the secular authorities to be burned at the stake, some of them (the repentant) having been first strangled; and a large number received lesser penalties. Autos de fe were common in subsequent years, and Protestants were among the victims, though becoming fewer and fewer.¹⁸ The severity of the Inquisition was sufficient to cause Protestantism to disappear a short time after its inception. The Protestants, says one writer, "were all burnt, or driven by the fear of being burnt into professing themselves Roman Catholics."¹⁹ The combined power of Church and State prevented a religious division.

The ideal of Catholic unity, which thus gained such clear and forceful expression at the beginning of the modern era, has continued through the years and has profoundly affected the policies of Spanish governments. It was unchallenged during the long period of decadence following Philip II. Since then it has been challenged, and religious toleration and even religious freedom have been practised, but the ideal of Catholic unity has never been lost. Some Spaniards have regarded themselves as inheritors of the spirit and mission of the Inquisition. Others have wished to avoid the violence of the Inquisition but still have found in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries their standard for the Spanish nation. The following words spoken by the present head of the Spanish state to

¹⁷Lea, *op cit*, III, 434f.

¹⁸*Ibid*, 437-448.

¹⁹Meyrick, *op cit*, p. 423.

a group of Catholic pilgrims from South America in 1950 indicate that he has not forgotten the ideal of Catholic unity :

You have wished to come to the place from which your ancestors went to carry the gospel to America, and you find the same Spain . . . of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the same noble and intransigent Spain—intransigent, yes, for in the things of the spirit and of the true faith there must be a noble and holy intransigence. . . . When nations have received the divine blessing of a single faith and are living under the true religion, concessions cannot be made to error. . . . We do not want in our country Masons who come to destroy our spiritual unity and our eternal destiny.²⁰

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²⁰ *Diario de Barcelona*, June 8, 1950, pp. 5f.

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