

Pope in Spain, Calls For a New Europe Of Peace and Justice

by Elisabeth Hellenbroich

Pope John Paul II's May 3-4 visit to Spain came at a crucial moment in that nation's history. In the weeks preceding the war in Iraq, Spanish society had been shaken by political turmoil. While Prime Minister José María Aznar was one of the staunchest European supporters of the war, Spain was the scene of the biggest anti-war demonstrations in all of Europe (indeed, the biggest demonstrations since World War II). Fully 92% of Spaniards opposed Aznar's policy.

The Pope's visit was his first to a foreign country in six months. On May 3, he addressed 1 million youth in Madrid, who engaged him in a dialogue for almost two hours. Then on May 4, more than a million people turned out to hear him speak in Madrid's Plaza Colón, where he canonized five Spaniards who had dedicated their lives to fighting against misery and poverty.

The Spanish political situation continues to be hot. There will be communal and legislative elections on May 25, and while it is not clear which way the vote will go, what is certain is that Aznar, who holds his Popular Party (PP) in an iron grip, is widely despised for his arrogant disregard of the views of his constituents. He began his political career as a member of the Falangist Youth Movement, and was later promoted by the Information Minister under Falangist dictator Francisco Franco, Manuel Fraga—the founder of the Popular Party. While Aznar speaks today about the coming "grandeur" of his nation, most citizens are suffering the consequences of his free-market economic policies, which follow the line, "less taxes means more security." In defiance of his own countrymen, Aznar rushed to Washington the day after the Pope's visit ended, to cement what he considers his "privileged relationship" with U.S. President Bush.

With his relentless efforts for world peace, both before and after the war in Iraq, the Pontiff has played and continues to play an outstanding role in the world. It is thanks in large part to him, that Europe stood up so firmly against the war, and that, despite the continuing actions of some opportunistic governments, strenuous efforts are being made not to let Europe become divided. Although he did not directly refer to the war in Iraq, the leitmotif in all the Pope's speeches in Madrid was, that people should "become architects of peace." But people will only "enjoy peace, when they follow the law of God; a peace that unites that make men and peoples feel

like brothers to one another."

The Pope made clear that his particular confidence is in the youth, "protagonists of the new times," whom he urged to lay the basis for "the consolidation of a United Europe . . . in which each nation is respected," and where a union of sovereign nations is created, "based on criteria and principles in which the common good of its citizens prevails."

His May 3 address to the youth must be viewed against the backdrop of the deep moral and economic crisis which Spanish society is living through. While 99% of the population is Roman Catholic, the daily life of most citizens stands in stark contrast to their nominal faith. High unemployment, combined with increasing criminality, drug addiction, as well as a creeping cultural pessimism, have thrown Spanish society into paralysis and a deep social crisis.

The Pope therefore addressed the tragedy that the "present culture lacks an inner-directedness, is characterized by an absence of contemplation." "Without inner-directedness, a culture lacks the essential," he said. "It is like a body that is trying to find its soul. What can humanity do without inner-directedness? Unfortunately, we know the response very well. Where there is a lack of spirit, there is no interest in defending life, and the human being degenerates. Without inner-directedness, the modern man endangers his own integrity."

The new Europe must be one which "is loyal to its Christian roots, not closed in upon itself, but one which is open to dialogue and collaboration with the most distant peoples on this Earth," the Pope said. A Europe which is conscious of being called "beacon of civilization and stimulus of progress for the world, determined to bring together the forces of creativity in the service of peace and solidarity among peoples."

From here, he turned the youths' attention to the question of peace. "Young people, you know well how much I am preoccupied with peace in the world," he said. "The spiral of violence, terrorism, and war causes, even in our days, hatred and death." But peace can only be built through a profound "inner conversion." "Therefore, you must commit yourself to be operators and architects of peace."

He called upon the young to engage in evangelization. "I give you my testimony. I was ordained a priest when I was 26 years old. Fifty-six years have passed since then. Looking back, recalling these years of my life, I can assure you that it is worthwhile to dedicate oneself to the cause of Christ." He joked that he is almost 83 years old, and yet so young!

On May 4, the Pope canonized five Spanish saints, who, he said, through their dedication to living a life in the imitation of Christ, set a model for the young people of today. He concluded his remarks at the ceremony: "We meet in the heart of Madrid, near great museums, libraries, and other centers of culture founded on the Christian faith, which Spain, which is part of Europe with its organization, was able to offer the Americas and later other parts of the world. Thus this place evokes the vocation of other Spanish Catholics, to be builders of Europe and to be in solidarity with the rest of the world."