

The role of the Catholic hierarchy in the rise to power of General Franco¹

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Max Weber defined power as “the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a command action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action.”² The preceding description could well be applied to the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, who, in the words of the historian Paul Preston, governed Spain “as if it were a country occupied by a victorious foreign army.”³ During the first few months of the civil war, General Franco, although not the intended leader of the military rebellion, rose to become *Generalísimo* of the armed forces, and *Caudillo*, or supreme ruler of the Spanish state. At the conclusion of the conflict Franco went on to establish a personal dictatorship of almost forty years’ duration. This paper will examine the contribution of the Catholic hierarchy to the establishment of the dictatorship, from the ideological support provided through the interpretation of the war as a religious crusade, to the conferral of legitimacy on the emerging regime, both within Spain and internationally.

Of the three different ‘bases’ for authority identified by Weber -- charismatic, traditional and legal -- Franco’s ascension of the military ranks in 1936 owed much to the former. Charisma, defined by Weber as “an extraordinary quality

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² From Max Weber: *Essays in Sociology* edited and translated by Hans H. Gerth and Charles W. Mills, 2nd edn, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1991), p. 180.

³ Paul Preston, *The Politics of Revenge: Fascism and the Military in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 42.

of a person, regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged, or presumed,”⁴ made General Franco the prime contender for the leadership of Nationalist Spain.⁵ His subsequent ability to consolidate that power and obtain international recognition as leader of the Spanish nation was facilitated by his alliance with the ‘traditional’ authority of the Catholic Church. According to Stanley Payne, during the Civil War, when the foundations of the Franco dictatorship were established,

Catholic backing in terms of political support, military volunteers, financial assistance, and perhaps above all, spiritual motivation and cultural legitimization became the most important single domestic pillar of the Nationalist movement.⁶

Contrary to Franco’s claim that the bishops were “deeply convinced from the first of the genuinely Catholic nature of [the] national rising,”⁷ the primary motive for the hierarchy’s support of the rebellion was not ideological; although the Catholic bishops clearly shared the counter-revolutionary goals of the rebels, the Church had played no part in the conspiracy that led to the military insurrection against the Popular Front government on 18 July 1936. Nevertheless, the Church became a scapegoat for the frustration of left-wing extremists, who responded to the rising by burning churches and massacring the clergy. It has been estimated that 6832 members of the Catholic clergy were killed in this outbreak of anti-clerical violence, including 13 Bishops.⁸

⁴ *From Max Weber*, p. 295.

⁵ Other factors did of course contribute to Franco’s rise to power, notably the death of several of his principle military and civilian rivals, such as General Sanjurjo in July 1936 and José Antonio Primo de Rivera the following November. Furthermore, Franco’s position as commander of the forces in Morocco made him an influential figure, since the necessity of obtaining a means of transporting his troops to the mainland involved him in negotiations with Hitler and Mussolini.

⁶ Stanley Payne, *The Franco Regime 1936-1975* (Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 198.

⁷ “Message of H.E. the Head of State to the Spanish Cortes on Sending Them the Text of the Concordat between Spain and the Holy See for Ratification 26 October 1953” in *The Concordat Between Spain and the Holy See (27 August 1953)* (Madrid: Diplomatic Information Office, 1953), p. 66.

⁸ Antonio Montero Moreno, *Historia de la persecución religiosa en España 1936-1939* (Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1999), pp. 761-4.

The inaction of the Republican government left the clergy with no other alternative than to seek protection from the Nationalists, and the bishops were thus, ironically, driven to collaborate with the rebels by the persecution inflicted on them for a conspiracy of which they were innocent.

In Weber's definition, traditional authority refers to "piety for what actually, allegedly, or presumably has always existed."⁹ The rebel leaders, although considerably more concerned with issues of public order, were quick to grasp the ideological value of Catholic support for their cause. Having expected a swift victory, they found themselves in need of a coherent ideology as the rising evolved into a war. The proclamation that announced the military rebellion had only established what the rebels were fighting against, and so attracted the allegiance of a variety of factions with seemingly incompatible political agendas.¹⁰ Catholicism proved invaluable as a unifying factor, surmounting both political differences and regional loyalties, and was declared an intrinsic element of Spanish nationalism. It was, in the words of one historian, "ideological cement."¹¹ A symbolic link between the rebels and the hierarchy was established early in the conflict when the Archbishop's residence in Salamanca became Franco's headquarters, the centre of control for the Nationalist zone.

⁹ From Max Weber, p. 296.

¹⁰ In addition to right-wing Republicans, the National Movement comprised Monarchists, Carlists (in favour of regional privileges and opposed to state centralism) and the Fascists of the Falange.

¹¹ José M. Sánchez, *The Spanish Civil War as a Religious Tragedy* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), p. 116.

The powerful propaganda of the religious crusade was however, in its origins, a creation of the hierarchy. The Bishop of Pamplona was the first to baptize the war a religious crusade in a sermon on 15 August 1936, in which he argued that by siding with the Crusaders the Church could help avoid further bloodshed.¹² In September, the Archbishop, Enrique Pla y Deniel, published a Pastoral entitled 'The Two Cities,' which declared the war to be a crusade for the defence of Christian civilisation. This, the first printed reference to the Crusade, was followed two months later by a pastoral from the Primate, Cardinal Isidro Gomá, which echoed the interpretation of the war as a religious crusade in defence of Catholicism. It was not a class war, but a war of principles and doctrines, of one civilisation against another. This Pastoral offered a retrospective justification of the military insurrection, stating that whatever its origins, the course of events that followed demonstrated that it had been motivated by profound feelings of love for the Spanish homeland.¹³ Similar declarations from other bishops followed, providing theological justifications that enabled the Nationalists, who had taken up arms against a democratically elected government, to present their struggle as the legitimate defence of their homeland.

Franco took control of the Military Junta on 1 October 1936, simultaneously declaring himself Head of State, a move which met with the immediate approval of the hierarchy. Having secured Catholic support for his leadership

¹² *Boletín Oficial Eclesiástico de Pamplona*, 15 de septiembre de 1936, pp. 352-3 quoted in Hilari Ragner, *La pólvora y el incienso: la Iglesia y la guerra civil española (1936-1939)* (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, [2001]), p. 206.

¹³ For an analysis of the main arguments of the Pastoral with a critical commentary by a Basque priest see: Angel de Zumeta, *Un Cardenal español y los católicos vascos* (Bilbao: Publicaciones Minerva, 1937).

in a national context, Franco now turned his attentions abroad, where the civil war was perceived as the great clash between fascism and communism. The General proposed to Gomá the drafting of an ecclesiastical document, destined for an international audience, which would correct the ‘false’ interpretations of the Spanish conflict. This suggestion met with a favourable response from the Cardinal and resulted in the famous Collective Letter of the Spanish bishops of July 1937.¹⁴

Addressed to bishops throughout the world, the letter described the war as an “armed plebiscite”, driven by patriotic and religious motives. Rather than a civil war, the Spanish conflict was declared to be a war of self-defence against the forces of international communism. Significantly, the letter denied that the goal of the Nationalists was to impose a dictatorship on a defeated nation.¹⁵ The letter must be regarded as success in light of the favourable response from the international Catholic community: bishops from other nations made declarations in support of the Spanish hierarchy and asked their followers to support Franco’s cause with donations and prayers, while urging their governments to support him politically.¹⁶ Conspicuous by its absence however, was an endorsement from the Vatican. The bishops’ Collective Letter was not published, nor even mentioned in the *Osservatore*

¹⁴ This letter was signed by all of the bishops resident in Spain at the time of its preparation; of the four who were absent from their dioceses only two – the Bishop of Vitoria and the Cardinal Archbishop of Tarragona – expressed reservations with regard to the document.

¹⁵ Text in *Documentos colectivos del episcopado español 1870-1974* ed. by Jesús Iribarren (Madrid: BAC, 1974), pp. 219-242.

¹⁶ The extent of the diffusion of the document and the virtually unanimous positive response from Ecclesiastical leaders around the world (with the notable exception of France, where the response was decidedly cooler) can be gauged from the volume of letters received by Cardinal Gomá in the wake of its publication. These have been published in *Archivo Gomá. Documentos de la Guerra Civil* ed. by José Andrés-Gallego and Antón M. Pazos 8 vols. (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2001-2005) VII and VIII.

Romano, the Vatican's semi-official newspaper, leading to speculation that the Pope disapproved of the content.¹⁷ Although Cardinal Gomá, appointed confidential representative of the Holy See to the Nationalist government in December 1936, had endeavoured to secure Vatican recognition for the Franco regime,¹⁸ this was not achieved until 1938, as Rome, unlike the Spanish hierarchy, recognised the Catholic interest on the Republican side.

The bishops' interpretation of the war as an "armed plebiscite" ignored the position of those Catholics who supported the Republic, and their endorsement of Franco was reinforced by the parallel denial of legitimacy to the Republican government. Moreover, the Catholic hierarchy was unequivocal in its condemnation of the decision of Basque nationalists to support the Republic in defence of their regional autonomy. Renowned both within and outside Spain for their devotion to the Catholic Church, the refusal of the Basques to join Franco challenged the myth of the Crusade. The hierarchy's first public reaction to the war was a joint Pastoral from the bishops of Vitoria and Pamplona on 6 August 1936, which declared that it was not licit for Basques to divide the Catholic forces in the face of a common enemy, or join forces with left-wing, anti-clerical elements in spite of shared political aims.¹⁹ The letter had been written by Cardinal Gomá, who repeated his appeal the following January in an open letter to the Basque

¹⁷ Sánchez, p. 100.

¹⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of the Cardinal's diplomatic efforts on Franco's behalf see Antonio Marquina Barrio, *La diplomacia vaticana y la España de Franco (1936-1945)* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1983).

¹⁹ Text of the letter in Anastasio Granados, *El Cardenal Gomá Primado de España* (Madrid: Espasa – Calpe, 1969), pp. 127-131.

nationalist leader José Antonio Aguirre.²⁰ On Franco's orders this letter to Aguirre was reproduced and distributed throughout the autonomous Basque region by the air force.²¹

Even before the war ended the repressive nature of Franco's regime was becoming apparent; and yet the bishops, through their silence, legitimized the brutal retaliations carried out against the enemies of the Crusade. There was no protest at the mass executions of supporters of the Republic, or of the degrading treatment meted out to their female relatives.²² Cardinal Gomá, in a report to the Vatican Secretary of State as early as August 1936, acknowledged that perhaps some reproach should be made to the Falange for the severity of the reprisals,²³ but no such reproach was ever made. While the Pope condemned Nazism in his 1937 encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*, the Spanish hierarchy turned a blind eye to the Fascist elements within the Franco regime, the exaltation of the state in its ideology and Franco's choice of allies. The Cardinal even complied with the suppression of the encyclical in the Nationalist zone to avoid embarrassment to the regime.

On 29 May 1939, Franco presented his sword to Cardinal Gomá in the Church of Santa Bárbara, Madrid; a symbolic representation of the victory shared by State and Church. The civil authorities restored the privileged position of the

²⁰ Text of this letter in *Ibid*, pp. 333-341.

²¹ Fernando García de Cortázar, "Mateo Múgica, la Iglesia y la guerra civil en el país vasco," *Letras de Deusto* 35 (May-August, 1986): 5-32 (p. 27).

²² The one notable exception was an appeal from the Bishop of Pamplona in a sermon of November 1936 for "No more bloodshed," but even this asked only for an end to irregular or unofficial executions. Copy of this sermon in Ragner, *La pólvora y el incienso*, pp. 416-7

²³ "Informe del Cardenal Gomá acerca del levantamiento cívico-militar de España en julio de 1936 al Cardenal Pacelli. 13 VIII 1936" in *Archivo Gomá*, I p. 87.

Church and established institutionalised mechanisms for the exercise of its power and influence.²⁴ A uniquely symbiotic model of Church-State relations, known as National Catholicism, emerged, as Franco sought to establish the 'legal' base for his authority -- the third type identified by Weber, which, he argues, "is fixed by rationally established norms, by enactments, decrees, and regulation, in such a manner that the legitimacy of the authority becomes the legality of the general rule."²⁵ Faced with a choice between the Catholic Church and the Falange as the foundation of his regime, Franco opted for the Church. Norman Cooper has suggested, by way of explanation, that Catholicism was an older ideology than Falangism "and likely to stay the course longer."²⁶ While political nationalism in Spain had always been weak, Catholicism's long and glorious history made it infinitely more suited to Franco's programme of 'regeneration', with its inherent notion of the return to an idealised past. Under National Catholicism the dividing lines between religious and political authority became blurred: the Church placed its influence at the disposal of the State, allowing Catholic symbols of devotion to become associated with the regime, while promoting its ideology from the pulpit and through religious ceremonies.

State recognition of the authority of the Church however was far from unconditional. The radio message from Pope Pius XII congratulating Franco on the "Catholic victory of Spain"²⁷ was censored in the Spanish media to

²⁴ Victor M. Pérez Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 124.

²⁵ *From Max Weber*, p. 299.

²⁶ Norman Cooper, *Catholicism and the Franco Regime* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1975), p. 13.

²⁷ Quoted in Fernando García de Cortázar, "La Iglesia que Franco no quiso: Religión y Política en el País Vasco (1936-1975)" *Saioak* 5 (1983): 49-76 (p. 50).

exclude the final paragraph in which he urged compassion towards the defeated, and a Pastoral Letter from Cardinal Gomá entitled “The Lessons of War and the Obligations of Peace” (August 1939) suffered the same fate. The Christian message of reconciliation had no place in Franco’s Spain since the uneasy alliance of the various factions that made up his ‘Movimiento Nacional’ made the preservation of the civil war divisions a necessity.²⁸ Lamentably, the partisan attitude adopted by the Catholic hierarchy helped cement the division of the Spanish people into victors and vanquished: those killed fighting for Franco became martyrs for Spain; monuments were dedicated to them in politico-religious ceremonies and commemorative plaques were erected in churches. Those who had supported the Republic were called upon to repent for their sins and accept their guilt for the suffering caused by the war.²⁹

National Catholicism reached its pinnacle with the signing of the Vatican Concordat on 27 August 1953, a crucial step in ending the isolation that befell the Franco regime at the end of the World War II. Described by the French newspaper *Le Monde* as “the greatest victory for General Franco’s regime since the end of the Civil War,”³⁰ the Concordat was a crippling blow to the independence of the Church. Under its terms, Franco was granted patronage rights over ecclesiastical appointments and bishops were required to swear an

²⁸ Preston, pp. 37-8.

²⁹ The most salient illustration of how the hierarchy placed the symbols and institutions of the Church at the disposal of the State is the experience of National Catholicism in the Basque provinces, where, as has been noted, a section of the Catholic population refused to support Franco. For details see: Javier Sánchez Erauskin, *Por Dios hacia el imperio. Nacional catolicismo en las vascongadas del primer franquismo 1936-1945*. (Donstia: Graficas Indauchu, 1994).

³⁰ «Caution morale?» *Le Monde* 29 August 1953 [n.p.n.] quoted in *La Documentation Catholique* 250 (1953), p. 1169.

oath of allegiance to the regime. With this Concordat Franco had effectively bound the Church to his regime, and subordinated ecclesiastical leaders to his authority.

According to Weber, in the majority of cases, a study of authority will reveal “a combination or a state of transition” among the three types: charismatic, traditional and legal.³¹ In the case of the Franco dictatorship, the General’s personal charisma, combined with his military achievements, ensured his emergence as leader of Nationalist Spain on 1 October 1936. The alliance of this charismatic personality with the traditional authority of the Catholic hierarchy produced the powerful myth of the Crusade, which permeated all aspects of the nascent dictatorship. Catholicism is commonly referred to as one of the “pillars” of the Franco regime, but in the aftermath of the Civil War it could perhaps more accurately be described as the framework that held together the disparate elements of Franco’s ‘Movimiento Nacional.’ Catholicism could not have been exploited in this manner without the assent of the hierarchy, but the role of the Spanish bishops went far beyond mere compliance as they became enthusiastic champions and ideologues of the Franco regime. With the signing of the 1953 Vatican Concordat, Franco consolidated the legal base for his authority, achieving international recognition from the Catholic Church.

The Spanish hierarchy’s decision to support Franco, in spite of the considerable material gains thus secured, ultimately cost the Church its

³¹ *From Max Weber, pp. 299-300.*

freedom and compromised its position, making it an accomplice to the brutal repression of a section of the Spanish nation. In 1971 this fact was acknowledged by the Joint Assembly of Priests and Bishops, which approved a motion to ask the Spanish people for pardon. The statement read:

We humbly recognize and ask forgiveness for the fact that we failed to act at the opportune time as true ministers of reconciliation among our people who were divided by a war between brothers.³²

Although the statement did not receive the two-thirds majority necessary for publication in the final report of the Assembly, it represented the beginning of a period of critical self-examination by the Spanish Church, culminating in its effective withdrawal from the political sphere.

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