

Catholic Church to construct monument to clergy killed during Spanish Civil War

By Paul Stuart
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Valencia City Hall, controlled by the right-wing Popular Party (PP), has granted the Catholic Church the right to build a new church covering 3,000 square metres, topped with a 28-metre-high bell tower, in the former dockside warehouse district of El Grau.

The new church will be a memorial to the “martyrs of 1936,” those clergy killed during the Civil War. The Catholic Church enthusiastically supported the fascist dictator Francisco Franco.

In March 2004, the Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) was elected to office, the undeserving beneficiaries of a wave of mass popular struggle that ousted the right-wing government of Jose Maria Aznar’s Popular Party (PP). Ever since, the Catholic Church has intervened aggressively into Spanish politics in a way not seen since the 1930s. Alongside the military and the PP, the Church has mobilised rightist forces to destabilise and bring down the PSOE government.

Popular comparisons are already being made between the “Valley of the Fallen,” constructed in the hills outside Madrid by slave labour to commemorate the nationalists killed during Franco’s bloody rise to power. It contains the tomb of Franco.

The driving force behind the new church project is Archbishop Agustin Garcia-Gasco. Two years ago, he launched a campaign to have a further 250 members of the clergy who were killed between 1936 and 1939 beatified, a step before sainthood, enabling them to be publicly venerated. Garcia-Gasco declared they were “martyrs” from the Civil War, and the new church was to honour the memory of all those who died “under the same religious persecution and who were formerly beatified.”

According to an article in *El Pais*, the Catholic Church exclude from their lists of “martyrs” those priests who resisted Franco and were killed by his fascist troops (estimated at around 7,000, although this figure keeps changing—significantly fewer than the 20,000 claimed by Franco and the Church at the time). According to historian Anthony Beevor, author of *The Spanish Civil War* (Orbis

Publishing, London, 1982), the Spanish Church made no protest at the time or to this day about Franco’s execution of 16 members of the Basque clergy, including the arch-priest of Mondragon. He adds that in the Basque region, the clergy remained virtually untouched during the Civil War.

The PP mayor has collaborated closely with the archbishop on his project whilst aggressively blocking every demand of those associations campaigning for the examination of the mass graves in and around the city. It is estimated that 30,000 opponents of Franco were summarily executed and dumped in unmarked graves situated outside most major towns and cities. Last April, in Malaga, a mass grave was uncovered estimated to contain 5,000 bodies.

Last April, campaigners from the Forum for the Historical Memory of Valencia discovered a number of mass graves in the cemetery in Valencia. PP Mayor Rita Berbera dismissed their findings and ordered the bulldozers in to create over this site another 1,000 burial plots. They rejected all appeals until bulldozers disturbed a mass of human bones. The courts ordered a permanent cessation of work and gave the site over to archeologists.

The Catholic Church is attempting to compare the systematic slaughter by the fascists with the elemental outbursts of popular anger against the clergy’s support for fascism. The need to document the mass graves, who died in them, and how they were killed and who killed them is now a burning necessity due to the right-wing campaign to deny the genocidal scale of Franco’s repression or that mass graves even exist, as is the case in Valencia.

The new beatifications are only the latest in a series over the last decade. On March 11, 2001, the former Pope John Paul II beatified 233 “martyrs,” the largest ever in a single ceremony. The Vatican has specifically targeted Spain—the group beatified on March 11 represented one fifth of all those beatified during Pope John Paul II’s reign. The purpose of these beatifications is to provide the clergy with “focus,” glorify those who lived and died as radical political Catholics, and stiffen the resolve of its right-wing base as popular hostility to the church grows.

Some prominent Catholics have complained that such an overt political stance against the masses is compromising the Church, threatening its very survival. John L. Allen, Jr., writer for the *National Catholic Reporter*, urges the church to confront the part it played in the rise to power of Franco. Allen, interviewed historian George Richard Esenwein, who teaches at the University of Florida and is the author of *Spain at War: The Spanish Civil War in Context, 1931-39* (Addison-Wesley, 1995), on March 15, 2001.

Esenwein goes on to make a number of important admissions about the reasons for the death toll of the clergy during the revolution. Allen explains “[T]he church bears a measure of responsibility for creating a social climate in which such acts were possible, largely through its identification with the Nationalist cause. For example, Catholic worker movements in 1930s Spain were largely seen as fronts for the capitalist managerial elite, Esenwein said. They were known as ‘yellow unions,’ in distinction from the ‘red unions’ run by leftists that took a more aggressive pro-labour stance.

“The Catholic political party of the era, CEDA, was the leading voice of the traditionalist reaction against progressive change. Its rhetoric, Esenwein said, was quite close to fascist movements in Italy, Austria and Germany. ‘Over the years there was a shift from a perception of priests as protectors of the poor to priests as part of a defensive, embattled regime clinging to power,’ Esenwein said. ‘The clergy became identified with the corruption of the political system and the backwardness of Spanish society.’

“‘Some priests were so passionate about the Nationalist cause that they actually allowed snipers to use parish bell towers to fire on Republican troops. There were plenty of eyewitnesses to document this,’ Esenwein said. ‘The Spanish bishops issued pastoral letters in support of the Nationalists.’”

El Pais on July 5 noted, for example, “Enrique Pla Y Daniel, bishop of Salamanca in 1936, gave his blessing to the killing of those who opposed Franco in several sermons. Isidro Gomá, the cardinal of Toledo, spoke in 1937 of the ‘Christian sense of the war.’”

The content of one such blessing is cited by a report in *Deutsche-Welle*: “It was thus with great joy that it [the Catholic Church] watched Franco take power in 1939. The newly ordained pope Pius XII congratulated the victorious dictator Franco with enthusiasm. Pius XII said, ‘By lifting our hearts to God we together with your Excellency give thanks for the much desired victory of Catholic Spain. We hope that this precious land, now that peace has finally been attained, will return to the old Catholic traditions that made it so great. We grant your Excellency and the entire noble

Spanish people our apostolic blessing.’ ”

The Catholic Church’s campaign of beatifications in Spain began immediately after Franco’s victory in 1939. During the next 36 years of dictatorship, the Catholic Church was an integral part of the fascist state and justified its actions as a necessary purification of Spain of the red Antichrists. This relationship was formalised in 1953 with the signing of a church-state accord making Catholicism the state religion and according it enormous privileges.

In the years prior to Franco’s death in 1975 and the collapse of his regime, the Church sought to distance itself from Franco’s state. The Church positioned itself in the camp of opposition to Franco as a revolutionary crisis broke out. It made public statements regretting having taken sides and of becoming part of the dictatorship. The church secured an agreement with the Communist Party and the PSOE that in the event of the collapse of Franco’s regime, the Church, while formally separated from the state, would retain virtually all the powers it had under Franco. One casualty of this tactical retreat was its campaign of beatifications.

Under the last pope, John Paul II, and the new pope, Benedict XVI, the demand for beatifications has escalated.

The beatifications are part of a systematic campaign to rehabilitate the Franco dictatorship, under conditions where sections of the church, the military and the PP are abandoning their tenuous commitment to the 1978 constitution.

In response to the PSOE’s recent draft Law for the Recovery of Historical Memory (which purported to finally provide justice for the victims of Franco, but which refused to name or prosecute those guilty of massacring the Spanish workers’ movement), the Synod of Bishops described the Republican-Socialist Party governments of 1931-1939 as heralding a period of “religious persecution.” This is despite the fact that these governments rejected a struggle against the powerful and reactionary institutions of the Church, and despite an overwhelming popular mandate to do so because of its active support for fascism and the counter-revolutionary role it has played throughout Spanish history.

The PSOE today is repeating the same pattern of betrayal. Last September, the government signed an accord pledging to continue state financing for the Catholic Church, despite the 1978 constitution formally separating church from state.

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