

## Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and the Anticlericalism of the Early Second Republic

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Escrivá often described himself as “anticlerical” because his exalted conception of the priesthood led him to reject its use for temporal ends, and because his appreciation for the autonomy of the lay members of the Church led him to reject efforts by the clergy to dictate to them in areas that properly belong to their free choice. During the Second Spanish Republic (1931-39), however, he faced an anticlericalism entirely different from his own. This paper will focus on Escrivá’s experience of that anticlericalism during the early years of the Second Republic rather than during the Civil War and the years immediately preceding it.

The anticlericalism Escrivá faced during this period found expression in an atmosphere of hostility to the Church, particularly to priests and religious, in legislation designed to eliminate or at least lessen the Church’s influence in the public life of the country, and in violent attacks on church property and on priests and religious.

This type of anticlericalism had deep roots in Spanish history.<sup>1</sup> From the early 1800s, middle-class liberals, whose political ideology was rooted in the French Enlightenment, struggled to reduce the influence and power of the

<sup>1</sup> Extensive background in W. CALLAHAN, *Church, Politics, and Society in Spain, 1750-1874*, Cambridge, Mass. 1984, and *The Catholic Church in Spain, 1875-1998*, Washington, D.C., 2000. Selected documents in M. REVUELTA GONZÁLEZ, *El Anticlericalismo español en sus documentos*, Barcelona 1999.

Anticlericalism was tightly interwoven with political, economic, cultural and social developments. Cfr. J.R. MONTERO GIBERT, *La CEDA y la Iglesia en la Segunda República Española*, “Revista de Estudios Políticos” Nueva Época, 31-32 (1983), pp. 103-104. Limitations of space, however, force me to treat it largely as if it were a free-standing phenomenon.

Church in Spain. In the period between 1830 and 1860, liberal governments confiscated large amounts of Church-owned land which had been used to support the clergy and the members of religious orders. The confiscation of the Church's property made the clergy dependent on the inadequate stipends that the government agreed to pay in partial compensation for the confiscated property.

During the conservative resurgence that began in 1876 and continued until Spain's humiliating defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898, the Church regained some of its social position and influence, although not its property. The Church also flourished internally with a new growth of fervor and an increase in vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

The period was marked by tension over religious issues. Fervent Catholics saw society and religion endangered by the advance of a secular wave of liberal free-thinkers and Masons. Many considered liberalism a heresy and rejected altogether the constitutional parliamentary monarchy. Others accepted the constitutional regime as a lesser evil but yearned for a fully confessional state that would enforce Catholic unity. To liberals, the resurgence of the Church meant handing Spain over to the enemy of modern institutions and allowing the forces of the past to direct society.

Spain's disastrous defeat in the Spanish-American War moved Spaniards of all political persuasions to seek ways to "regenerate" the country. Conservatives focused on the reform of political institutions. Middle-class liberals and radicals sought to transform not merely politics but the entire society. They strove to reduce or eliminate the role of the Church in Spanish life, especially in education.

Among the working class, socialists saw the Church as a mainstay of the existing economic order that needed to be rooted out, although economic revolution was much more important to them than attacking the Church directly.<sup>2</sup> Anarchists, by contrast, aimed to create above all a new morality and a new culture. The elimination of religion would be a defining feature of the new order they hoped to inaugurate. For them, opposition to the Church, and more generally to religion, was not merely something that would facilitate economic revolution but a vital component of a new way of life.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In 1902 the Spanish Socialist leader Pablo Iglesias wrote: «[T]he principal enemy is not clericalism but capitalism. ... This does not mean that socialists will not do everything they can to oppose the preponderance of clericalism, which has become —more or less voluntarily depending on the country— a powerful ally of the exploiting classes.» Quoted in V. ARBELOA, *Socialismo y Anticlericalismo*, Madrid 1973, p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> See S. PAYNE, *Spanish Catholicism*, Madison 1984, pp. 125-126.

Anticlericalism turned violent during the Tragic Week in Barcelona in July 1909.<sup>4</sup> Massive draft riots, triggered by a decision to mobilize reserve units after a Spanish defeat in north Africa, led to the burning of monasteries, convents and schools and the profaning of tombs and religious images. By the time the riots had been put down, twenty-one of Barcelona's fifty-eight churches, thirty of its seventy-five convents and monasteries, and some thirty other church-related schools and buildings used for social services had gone up in flames. There were also numerous incidents of desecration of sacred objects and violation of tombs of religious. Two clergymen were murdered by rioters and another perished in a fire set by them.<sup>5</sup>

The violent anti-clerical propaganda that had been spread in Barcelona by the Radical Republicans for a number of years undoubtedly played some part in the events of the Tragic Week, but it is still far from clear why draft riots gave rise to widespread attacks on Church property and the desecration of religious objects. Whatever their cause, the Barcelona riots confirmed that sizeable numbers of urban workers had not only grown disaffected from the Church but had become violently hostile towards it.

During the next two decades there were no major outbreaks of anticlerical violence, although propaganda against the Church continued. The support prominent Catholics offered to the Primo de Rivera dictatorship deepened the conviction of many Republicans and other liberals that the Church was a major obstacle to their desires for reform. During the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the interlude that followed it, however, anticlerical forces were held in check by the government which prevented them from taking any overt action against the Church.

<sup>4</sup> There had been important outbreaks of anti-clerical violence in the past. The most important occurred in 1834 when rumors ran through Madrid that Jesuits and groups of friars had caused a cholera epidemic among the poor by poisoning the public water supply to punish the capital for its impiety. Between fifty and one hundred priests and monks lost their lives in the riots that ensued. The propaganda that triggered the riots was similar in tone and psychology to the crude anti-Semitism that routinely spread, in many parts of Europe, stories of ritual murders of children by Jews. Middle-class anticlerical propagandists from Masonic lodges and other secret societies that were a powerful force among Spanish liberals probably originated much of this propaganda. The fact that urban mobs believed the rumors and acted upon them, however, suggests that by the early nineteenth century a significant number of workers were already sufficiently disaffected from the Church to be open to such crude propaganda. S. PAYNE, *Spanish Catholicism*, p. 82. A. MOLINER PRADA, *El anticlericalismo popular durante el bienio 1834-1835*, "Hispania Sacra" 49 (1997), pp. 497-541.

<sup>5</sup> J. ULLMAN, *The Tragic Week: A Study of Anticlericalism in Spain 1875-1912*, Mass., Cambridge 1968.

In 1931, the monarchy was replaced by the Second Republic. Significant numbers of Catholics, especially in the larger cities, had voted for Republican candidates in the elections that led to the proclamation of the Second Republic, and many other Catholics were willing to give the new regime a chance. The provisional coalition government was headed by a Catholic and two other Catholics formed part of it. Most of the ministers of the new government were, however, more or less openly anti-Catholic. For them, the Republic represented not merely a different form of government, but a different, radically secular, vision of life and society.<sup>6</sup> One of the provisional government's first measures was a declaration of religious freedom and the separation of church and state, although it assured Catholics that it would not persecute any religion.<sup>7</sup>

Few Catholics welcomed the proclamation of religious freedom or the proposal to disestablish the Church, but the initial reaction both of the Catholic rank and file and of the hierarchy was restrained. The majority continued to accept the new regime, with misgivings but without overtly hostile acts. In a letter to the Nuncio, the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pacelli, urged Catholics not to give importance to the question of monarchy versus republic but to concentrate on the defense of social order and the rights of the Church. The Nuncio, in his turn, exhorted Catholics, and particularly the bishops, to accept the new regime and to remain united in defense of the Church.<sup>8</sup> The first sign of overt hostility of some members of the hierarchy toward the new regime came on May 1, 1931 when the Archbishop of Toledo and Primate of Spain, Cardinal Segura, published a pastoral letter praising the king.

On May 10, 1931, the playing of the monarchist hymn at a royalist club in Madrid provoked an attack by supporters of the republic that soon degenerated into three days of violence directed primarily against churches, monasteries and convents. Rioting soon spread from Madrid to other cities.

The provisional republican government did not provoke the burning of the convents, but it was very slow to react to the violence, at least partly because many of its members were more or less sympathetic to the rioters.<sup>9</sup> Manuel

<sup>6</sup> M. ÁLVAREZ TARDIO, *Fray Lazo: El anticlericalismo radical ante el debate constituyente de la Segunda República Española* (1931), "Hispania Sacra" 50 (1998), pp. 251-273.

<sup>7</sup> J.M. SÁNCHEZ, *Reform and Reaction: The Politico-Religious Background of the Spanish Civil War*, Chapel Hill 1964, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> A. FERNÁNDEZ GARCÍA, *La iglesia ante el establecimiento de la II República*, "Cuadernos de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea" 5 (1984), pp. 215-37.

<sup>9</sup> J. DE LA CUEVA MERINO, *El Anticlericalismo en la Segunda República y la Guerra Civil*, in E. LA PARRA LÓPEZ and M. SUÁREZ CORTINA (Eds.), *El Anticlericalismo español contemporáneo*, Madrid 1998, p. 221.

Azaña, who was rapidly becoming the most powerful political figure in the country, told his colleagues that «all the convents of Madrid are not worth the life of a single Republican;» and threatened to resign «if a single person is injured in Madrid because of this stupidity.»<sup>10</sup> For several days the government did nothing to control the riots. Once it did intervene the violence ended quickly, but by that time approximately a hundred churches and convents had been burnt throughout Spain, including 41 in Malaga.<sup>11</sup> The government's inaction during the early days of the rioting convinced Catholics throughout the country that the new regime was an implacable enemy of the Church.

## 1. ANTICLERICAL LEGISLATION OF THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT

The sense of the Republic's hostility to the Church soon increased as the provisional government issued a series of decrees and regulations that upset many Catholics. It established full freedom of conscience and cult, made religious instruction voluntary in state schools, dissolved the chaplain corps of the army and navy, substituted a promise for the traditional oath of office, deprived the Church of representation in the National Council on Education, and prohibited government officials from attending public religious acts. In a tolerant, religiously pluralistic society, many of these actions would seem acceptable. Most Spanish Catholics, reared in a society in which a large majority of the population was at least nominally Catholic and in which close cooperation between church and state had been the norm for centuries, viewed all of them as hostile to the Church.<sup>12</sup> Their sense of hostility was increased by the government's failure to negotiate with or even consult Church officials about changes in religious policy, despite a long tradition of handling religious affairs through treaties with the Holy See.

<sup>10</sup> S. PAYNE, *Spain's First Democracy. The Second Republic 1931-1936*, Madison 1993, p. 44-46.

<sup>11</sup> Escrivá was especially affected by the violence in Malaga since Isidoro Zorzano was living there at the time. For a detailed account of events in Malaga, A. GARCÍA SÁNCHEZ, *La Segunda República en Málaga*, Córdoba 1984, pp. 227-288.

<sup>12</sup> It was not only on the Catholic side that these measures were viewed as hostile to the Church. Many of their liberal proponents championed them precisely as ways of attacking the Church. In Spain in the 1930s, most people saw the only choices as laicism or a confessional state. Few people could conceive of a non-confessional state that respected religion and the church. M. D. GÓMEZ MOLLEDA, *Massoneria e anticlericalismo nella Spagna del XX secolo*, in A. MOLA, *Stato, Chiesa e Società in Italia, Francia, Belgio e Spagna nei secoli XIX-XX*, Foggia 1993, p. 311.

In May 1931, the government expelled the bishop of Vitoria. The next month it expelled Cardinal Segura, the highest ranking churchman in Spain, for anti-Republican statements and attitudes. Although both bishops had given Republican officials good grounds for considering them opponents of the new regime, their expulsion confirmed the conviction of many Catholics that the new government was an enemy of the Church.

## 2. THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY AND THE CONSTITUTION

In the elections for a constituent assembly in the summer of 1931, Catholics and conservatives were in disarray. They ran a strong second in many areas, but won only a small number of seats because the winner-take-all electoral law awarded each seat to the party that won the district.<sup>13</sup>

Parties hostile to the Church had an overwhelming majority in the constituent assembly. They were not interested in a bloody persecution like that going on at the time in Mexico or the Soviet Union, but their goals went well beyond turning Spain into a non-confessional country. They wanted it to become a modern society, and in their minds this meant a society in which religion might play a role in the individual lives of some people but would be absent from public life.

In light of their secularized vision of modernity, it is understandable that Republican leaders considered the Church, and particularly the religious orders that were so influential in Spanish education, the major obstacle to their plans for modernizing Spain. In order to reduce the Church's influence on society, they were bent on abolishing the Jesuits and restricting the activities of other religious orders. Above all, they were determined to eliminate Catholic influence in education by prohibiting priests and religious from running schools.

Like the changes already introduced by the Provisional Government, all of these goals struck most Spanish Catholics, many of whom drew no distinctions between their religious faith and their social and cultural traditionalism, as unjustified attacks on religion.

The Spanish bishops initially limited themselves to exhorting Spanish Catholics to accept peacefully the legitimate decrees of the government and to

<sup>13</sup> V. CÁRCEL ORTÍ, *La II República y la Guerra Civil (1931-39)*, in "Historia de la Iglesia en España," vol. V, Madrid 1989, p. 330. This electoral system, which is similar to the one used in the United States, gives parties that may garner a large number of votes nationwide, but fail to win a majority in many districts, much less of voice in government than systems of proportional representation.

remain united. In August, however, they prepared a collective pastoral letter criticizing not only the proposed provisions of the constitution but also «the so called ‘modern’ freedoms that are considered the most precious conquest of the French Revolution and the untouchable patrimony of the democracies hostile to the Church.»<sup>14</sup> The moderate members of the hierarchy and the Papal Nuncio considered the document inopportune, but the intransigent faction, headed by the Cardinal of Toledo, insisted successfully on its publication.

The draft of the constitution prepared by the constituent assembly during the summer and fall 1931 contained a number of provisions that directly affected the Church. The first important measure to be approved, Article 3, put an end to the union of Church and State that had characterized Spain for centuries. «The State,» Article 3 declared, «has no official religion.»<sup>15</sup>

On October 14, 1931 the Assembly approved what would become Article 26 of the Constitution, the principal provision dealing with Church affairs. It forbade the central, regional and local governments from favoring or supporting the Church in any way. Specifically, it called for eliminating within two years the subsidies the government had been paying to the clergy since it had confiscated Church property in the nineteenth century.

The most important provisions of Article 26 affected the religious orders. An early draft had called for the dissolution of all religious orders. The measure approved by the assembly did not go that far, but it did provide for the dissolution of the Jesuits and the confiscation of all their property. Other orders were subject to the threat of dissolution if the government felt their activities were a danger to the security of the state. In addition, religious orders were forbidden to own any property beyond what was strictly necessary for the maintenance of their members and the fulfillment of their specific aims.

The most damaging provision of Article 26 from the point of view of Spanish Catholics was one that forbade the orders that were permitted to continue working in Spain to engage in education. This sectarian provision demonstrates the determination of the anticlerical majority of the assembly to undermine the Church at any cost. Spain was suffering from a desperate lack of schools, and the members of the assembly listed education among their top priorities. Yet they were attempting to force the closing of schools that were educating a substantial portion of the country’s students because they hoped this would reduce the Church’s influence in the country.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> G. REDONDO, *Historia de la Iglesia en España*, Madrid 1993, vol. I, p 146.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 160, n. 7.

<sup>16</sup> S. PAYNE, *Spanish Catholicism*, p. 156.



### 3. ESCRIVÁ'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF GROWING ANTICLERICALISM

Professor Vázquez de Prada has given us a detailed treatment of Escrivá's personal experiences of hostility toward priests and the Church in the early 1930s.<sup>17</sup> My account relies heavily on his.

When the mob began to attack churches and convents in Madrid on May 11, 1931, Escrivá feared that the church of the Foundation for the Sick might be sacked and the Eucharist profaned. Dressed in borrowed lay clothes and accompanied by his younger brother, he slipped out the side door of the church "like a thief," carrying a ciborium full of consecrated hosts wrapped in a cassock and newspaper. As he hurried through the streets, he prayed with tears in his eyes, «Jesus, may each sacrilegious fire increase my fire of love and reparation!»<sup>18</sup> After depositing the Eucharist in the home of a friend, he observed in horror the smoke filling the sky of Madrid as churches and convents went up in flames.

On May 13, Escrivá heard rumors that the Foundation for the Sick might soon be attacked. He hurriedly located a few rooms on Viriato street and moved his family and their few belongings there. During the coming months, the family would crowd into a tiny apartment whose only windows were on an air shaft. Escrivá's room was so small there was no room for a chair so he had to write kneeling down, using the bed for a desk.

Escrivá, who continued to wear his cassock on the street, as had been the custom in Spain, found himself increasingly the object of insults. In earlier years he had occasionally encountered hostility simply because he was a priest, but after the proclamation of the Republic, the insults became more frequent and more aggressive. In the midst of this hostile environment, he struggled to control his temper and to "pelt with Hail Marys,"<sup>19</sup> his attackers. He was not always successful.

During the summer of 1931, Escrivá decided to make a novena to a recently deceased member of the Damas Apostolicas, Mercedes Reyna, visiting her tomb each day in a cemetery located in a poor neighborhood of Madrid. Every day of the novena brought with it new insults. Once on his way back from the cemetery, a bricklayer came at him shouting, «A cockroach! Step on it!» Despite

<sup>17</sup> A. VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei. The Life of Josemaría Escrivá*, vol. I, *The Early Years*, Princeton 2001. In many cases, I have translated directly from the Spanish. I will indicate where this happened with the annotation "Author's translation."

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 270.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 275.



his resolutions not to pay attention to such things, Escrivá was unable to contain himself. «What courage,» he retorted, «to pick a fight with someone who walks past without offending you!» The other workers told the bricklayer to shut up, and one of them tried to excuse his fellow worker's conduct. «It's not right,» he said with the air of someone giving a satisfactory explanation, «but you have to understand, it's that he hates priests.»<sup>20</sup> Another day a boy shouted to his friends, «A priest! Let's throw stones at him!» Escrivá recounts his reaction: «Without even thinking about it, I shut the breviary I had been reading, and faced them: 'You brats! Is that what your mothers teach you?'» «I added other words,» he concludes, without specifying what they were.<sup>21</sup> On several occasions Escrivá was hit by stones, and once a well-aimed soccer ball struck him full in the face.

By mid September, 1931, Escrivá was able to record in his notes:

I have to thank my God for a noteworthy change. Until recently the insults and jeers I received for being a priest (mostly since the coming of the Republic, before only rarely), made me angry. I made a resolution to entrust to Our Lady with a Hail Mary those from whom I heard vulgar and obscene expressions. I did it. It was hard. Now, when I hear that sort of ignoble words, I usually feel moved with pity, considering the misfortune of the poor people who do those things. They think they are doing something good, because people have taken advantage of their ignorance and passions to make them believe that priests are not only lazy parasites but their enemies, accomplices of the bourgeoisie that exploits them.<sup>22</sup>

Escrivá finished his note with a characteristic exclamation that reflected his conviction that God intended to do great things through Opus Dei: «Your Work, Lord,» he concluded, «will open their eyes!»<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 272. Author's translation.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 271-272. Author's translation.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, Author's translation.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*.

#### 4. ESCRIVÁ'S REACTION TO ANTICLERICAL LEGISLATION

Escrivá was saddened by the overtly anti-Catholic stance of many of the new leaders of the Second Republic and the harm they might do the Church. On April 20, 1931 he wrote in his personal notes:

May the Immaculate Virgin defend our poor Spain and may God confound the enemies of our Mother the Catholic Church. The Spanish Republic. For 24 hours, Madrid was one huge mad house... Things seem to have calmed down.. But the Masons do not sleep. ... The Heart of Jesus also keeps watch! This is my hope. How often these days, I have understood, I have heard the powerful cries of our Lord, that he loves his Work.<sup>24</sup>

When Escrivá learned of the decree of dissolution of the Jesuits, he was deeply distressed. He wrote:

Yesterday I suffered when I learned about the expulsion of the Jesuits and the other anti-Catholic measures adopted by the Parliament. My head ached and I felt sick until afternoon. In the afternoon, dressed as a layman, I went with Adolfo to Chamartin [where the Jesuits' house was located]. Fr. Sanchez and all the other Jesuits were delighted to suffer persecution [...] What serenely beautiful things he said to us!<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 269. Author's translation. The reference in this text to the activity of Masons seems to indicate that Escrivá attributed to Masonry much of the anticlericalism that was sweeping Spain. This inference finds support in other texts. It raises interesting questions about what other factors Escrivá saw as the explanation of opposition to the Church in Spain. In the early 1930s, large parts of pastoral activities were in the poorest parts of Madrid. He was acutely aware of the misery that afflicted many, and he understood that some of them saw the clergy as the allies of those who exploited them. (See text quoted above at note 22). His currently available writings do not indicate, however, whether he considered that their belief was in any way justified by the actions of members of the hierarchy and other Catholics. Nor do currently available texts permit drawing any conclusions about the extent to which Escrivá attributed widespread hostility to the Church among middle-class defenders of political, social and economic reform to their perception that the Church was a bulwark of conservatism.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 274. Author's translation.

Although Escrivá was extremely concerned about attacks on the Church, he took no part in the debate raging among Spanish Catholics over how best to defend the Church. Many believed that the only way was to overturn the Second Republic and bring back the monarchy. Other Catholics argued that the form of government was not an essential matter. Catholics, they said, could and should work within the republican framework to protect the Church's rights.<sup>26</sup> Passions ran high on both sides of the debate. Opposing views were often taken as a sign of wrong headedness or a lack of zeal in the service of the Church.<sup>27</sup>

From his seminary days when he had been repelled by the clericalism that characterized large parts of the Spanish Church, Escrivá had been convinced that priests should respect the right of lay Catholics to form their own political opinions and to join political parties of their own choice. He was also convinced that all Catholics should respect the choices of their fellow Catholics, even when they did not agree with them about how Catholic principles should be applied in a specific situation. Although he felt a lively interest in current events, due to of these convictions he made it an inflexible rule throughout his life not to express his political opinions. This attitude was not merely a personal one. It was intimately connected to his role as the founder of Opus Dei.

In Spain, as well as in many other countries, Catholics in the first third of the twentieth century promoted many organizations whose purpose was to mobilize Catholics for political action to protect the Church's position in public life.<sup>28</sup> Opus Dei, which Escrivá had founded less than three years before the proclamation of the Second Republic in Spain had different aims and goals. As he wrote in 1932, «The Work of God was not thought up by a man to remedy the lamentable situation of the Church in Spain since 1931 ... Nor have we come to meet the special needs of a particular time or country because from the very beginning Jesus has wanted his Work to have a universal heart.»<sup>29</sup>

Escrivá saw the aim of Opus Dei as promoting among Catholics of all walks of life an awareness of the fact that their baptismal vocation involves a call to personal sanctity and a desire to live out that truth in their daily lives. A sincere personal commitment to striving to model their lives on Christ's life would, Escrivá foresaw, lead the members of Opus Dei, and others who lived its spirit, to try to make their society more just and harmonious, more in keeping with Christ's teaching. Their active Christian presence in society would thus contribute to

<sup>26</sup> S. PAYNE, *Spanish Catholicism*, p. 157-161.

<sup>27</sup> G. REDONDO, *Historia de la Iglesia en España*, Madrid 1993, vol. I, p. 266.

<sup>28</sup> O. ALZAGA VILLAAMIL, *La primera democracia cristiana en España*, Barcelona 1973.

<sup>29</sup> J. ESCRIVÁ, *Instrucción*, 19-III-1934, n. 8 and 15.

making it more Christian. This would not be the result, however, of an effort by Opus Dei to organize Catholics for political activity. Rather, it would spring from the personal commitment of its individual members to putting Christ's teachings into practice in their personal lives and in their daily work and other activities, including their political activities.<sup>30</sup> The idea is captured in a point of *The Way*: «A secret. An open secret: these world crises are crises of saints. — God wants a handful of men 'of his own' in every human activity. Then ... 'pax Chrsti in regno Chrsti' — the peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ.»<sup>31</sup>

The fact that its aim was broader and more comprehensive than politics was not the only difference between Opus Dei and those organizations whose aim was to mobilize Catholics for political action. Such groups were often based on the supposition that all Catholics do, and should, agree on how best to organize society. Escrivá understood that although Catholics should agree on certain basic moral and religious values —such as the dignity of the human person, the sanctity of marriage, and the equality of all men and women before God—, they may legitimately differ on how to implement them here and now. In a letter to members of Opus Dei dated January 9, 1932, Escrivá urged them to avoid «the desire, contrary to man's licit independence, to force everyone to form a single group in things that are matters of opinion, converting temporal doctrines into dogmas...»<sup>32</sup>

Escrivá expected the members of Opus Dei to be guided in their political opinions and activities by Christ's teachings articulated by the Church,<sup>33</sup> but he respected their personal freedom in deciding how those teachings should be implemented in the concrete reality of the here and now.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> J.L. ILLANES, *Faith and Personal Freedom in Social and Political Conduct. Thoughts on some teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, "Romana" 31 (2000) pp. 300-324.

<sup>31</sup> *The Way*, n. 301.

<sup>32</sup> *Letter of January 9, 1932*, n. 1.

<sup>33</sup> «Nonsectarianism. Neutrality. Those old myths that always try to seem new. —Have you ever bothered to think how absurd it is to leave one's Catholicism aside on entering a university, or a professional association, or a scholarly meeting, or Congress, as if you were checking your hat at the door?» *The Way*, n. 61.

<sup>34</sup> Escrivá often spoke and wrote about the diversity of political opinions among the members of Opus Dei as a sign of good spirit and of a healthy respect for the freedom of others. People who approach the question from a less theological perspective than Escrivá may sometimes find it hard to reconcile his statements about the complete freedom of Opus Dei members to adopt any political position with the conspicuous absence of support from Opus Dei members for some positions that are championed by important political groups and parties. The solution to this apparent contradiction lies in the distinction Escrivá drew between "political" questions on which Catholics may freely form their own individual opinions (for

Escrivá adhered faithfully to this spirit even in the very difficult early years of the Republic. At a time when the Church was under attack and political passions were running extremely high, it would have been very easy to think that — whatever the value of personal political freedom and autonomy under normal circumstances — the time had come for all believers to join together in a single political front. Short of that, the circumstances would have seemed to justify Escrivá's making an effort to point out to his followers specific politically effective ways of implementing Christian principles in the circumstances of the moment. In fact, however, however, Escrivá did nothing of the sort.

Quite the contrary. The advice Escrivá gave his followers during the difficult early months of the Republic was so spiritual in its focus and so far removed from urging them to take a particular course of political action that it might have been misinterpreted as suggesting disengagement from social and political life.

Shortly after the proclamation of the Republic, for instance, he wrote to Isidoro Zorzano: «Don't worry one way or the other about the political changes. Be concerned only that they do not offend God.»<sup>35</sup> A few months later, in August, 1931, he wrote to him: «I suppose that all these attacks on our Christ will have served to inflame you even more in his service. Try to belong to him more each day..., with prayer. Offer him also each day, as expiation that is very pleasing in his divine eyes, the annoyances that life continually brings with it.»<sup>36</sup>

Standing alone, these texts might seem to suggest indifference to politics and concern only with religious matters. That was not the case. Escrivá encouraged an active interest in politics and seriousness in the fulfillment of civic responsibilities. In sharp contrast to the clerical one-party mentality that prevailed among Catholics at the time, however, he believed that it was up to individual Catholics to make their own choices about how to implement the Church's teaching in practice. Even in the intensely politicized atmosphere of the early

example, whether there should be a legal minimum wage and if so how much) and the moral and doctrinal teachings of the Church (for example, that workers are entitled to a living wage, and that employers have a moral obligation to pay just wages). He did not consider those moral and doctrinal teachings "political," even though as a sociological matter they might be hotly debated by political parties. If in a particular country one or more political groups supported the position that whatever wages are set by market forces are always just and that the government should never intervene in any way in labor markets, Opus Dei members would not join them in those positions. Their refusal to do so would be a result, however, not of their condition as members of Opus Dei but rather of the fact that they strive to be faithful to the social doctrine of the Church. Escrivá would classify their decision not as political but as religious, moral or ethical.

<sup>35</sup> J.M. PERO-SANZ, *Isidoro Zorzano*, Madrid 1996, p. 126.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

years of the Second Republic, he scrupulously refrained from expressing his own political preferences, limiting himself to encouraging all those who sought his advice to take seriously their civic duties and to exercise their rights as citizens in ways that would make the society more Christian.

## 5. CONCLUSION

On the personal level, the anticlericalism of the early Second Republic offered Escrivá many opportunities to grow in self control in the face of insults and attacks directed at him precisely because he was a priest. On the institutional level, it presented an occasion to affirm Opus Dei's determination to remain above the political fray and to concentrate on the spiritual and religious formation of its members and those involved in its apostolic activities, respecting the personal freedom of each of them to form their own political opinions and to act in consequence.