

# THE CHURCH THAT DID STAND UP TO FRANCOISM

by Professor Julián Casanova (translated by Paul Sharkey)

Wilberto Delso, the former priest who during Francoism's two final years was at the centre of a tough stand-off with the then archbishop of Zaragoza, Pedro Cantero Cuadrado, died just a few days ago.

From May 1968 on Wilberto Delso was parish priest of Fabara, a small Zaragoza village of some 1,500 souls. The quarrel began six years later in May 1974 when, prompted by a pastoral visit to the village, a group of residents forwarded to the archbishop some serious charges against their parish priest: he was using "crude and indecent language", promoting "violent class struggle", was contemptuous of Church authority and was preaching "sexual liberation" to the young. In the light of all these allegations, Cantero Cuadrado decided on 14 June to dismiss Wilberto Delso as Fabara's parish priest.

Wilberto Delso refused to comply with this decision and was backed by 24 priests from the diocese who also took the line that they were being stood down too and in a letter to the archbishop they were critical of his "authoritarianism" and his attempt to "drown out" a sector of the Church that was trying to "commit itself to the liberation of the oppressed". The diocesan hierarchy backed Cantero who also had the support of Fabara's Francoist town hall, while Delso enjoyed the support of a considerable number of residents and a range of Christian communities across Aragon.

The dispute lingered on: Cantero refused to give ground and never allowed Delso to return to his job as Fabara's parish priest. Some of the clergy, like Delso himself, resigned from the priesthood, starting families and earning a living as workers.

The defiance of the hierarchy by these priests mirrored a process of change under way within the Catholic Church during Francoism's final years. No longer was this the Church of the *Cruzada*, the church that had set its sights of making Spain Catholic again by means of repression, reactionary morality and traditional religious values. But the legacy left by a long golden age of privilege ran so deep that many of its representatives walked hand in hand with the Caudillo right to the very end. Cantero Cuadrado and Wilberto Delso stood for the opposite poles of a Church which, as Francoism's death throes began, was torn between authoritarianism and the protests of worker-priests.

Cantero Cuadrado had been a chaplain with the Cavalry during the civil war and national advisor to the Falangist institution *Auxilio Social* [Social Aid] in the early years of the dictatorship. He had studied Humanities, Philosophy, Theology and Law but placed everything he knew in the service of Franco, as procurator to the Cortes, Counsellor of the Realm and, at the time of Franco's death, a member of the Regency Council. Bishoprics in Barbastro (1952-54) and Huelva (1954-64) and an archbishopric in Zaragoza (1964-77) were not enough for him. A real leader of Franco's Church had a duty to take his commitment further and dabble in the "organic democracy" built up by the Caudillo-saviour. That was what they had waged their war for and what they had won the peace for. Cantero died in 1978, outliving his Generalissimo by three years. He was 76 at the time. A lifetime in the service of the Nation.

But the church hierarchy and clergy could not be unmoved by the socio-economic and cultural changes that posed a challenge to the Franco dictatorship's political apparatus from the beginnings of the 1960s onwards. The secularisation of Spanish society, an accompaniment to the rapid process of industrialisation and urbanisation, overlapped in time with the overall winds of change blowing from Vatican II. Catholic opinion and practice were starting to become more pluralistic, with young priests deserting the traditional ideology, workers joining the JOC (Catholic Worker Youth) and HOAC (Catholic Worker Brotherhood) as they agitated against Francoism and Christian groups joining the marxists in speculation about the society ahead once capitalism had been overthrown.

Priests and Catholics who talked of democracy and socialism and were critical of the dictatorship and its most repressive manifestations. This was new, very new, in Spain and it seems logical that it should have triggered a backlash from broad swathes of Francoism which were used to a servile Church enthusiastic about the Dictatorship. Because the Church did change a lot, if compared with that other mainstay of the dictatorship, the Army, which identified with Franco and with the regime with barely a crack and backed it right to the finish. But despite these changes the Franco dictatorship clung to its Catholic nationalist identity to its very last breath and the hierarchy and most clergy gave their blessing to the public authorities, bowed the knee to Franco and wanted no truck with forgiveness or reconciliation.

It is not a meaningless coincidence that that part of the Church, despite democracy and the kid-glove treatment received from governments in terms of education and funding, is today the dominant faction, entrenched in its privileges and in the evocation of its martyrs and its own historical truth, that being the only one it acknowledges. All that remains of that other Church, the one that stood up to the dictatorship and the Francoist hierarchs is the memory, the echoes of bygone rebelliousness. Like Wilberto Delso.

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