
The role of the Catholic Church in the Spanish Civil War has generated controversy that continues to this day. Father Hilari Raguer has devoted a scholarly career of nearly half a century to the study of the subject. His knowledge of the vast literature and archival sources on the topic provides a solid foundation for this impressive synthesis and interpretation of a church confronted with the greatest crisis of its modern history. His fundamental thesis is that “the Spanish Church did not light the fires of war but heated up the atmosphere before it started and added fuel to the flames afterwards” (p. 209). He stresses the necessity of studying the Church’s role in the conflict within the context of the complexities of Spain’s twentieth-century history, rejecting a simple black or white interpretation that lingers still in the literature.

Although recognizing the extent of the massive assassination of clergy and religious carried out in Republican Spain following the rising of the generals on July 18, 1936, he argues that clerical reaction to persecution led the Church to elevate a conflict rooted in decades of social and political struggle into a religious crusade fully identified with support for the military dictatorship of Francisco Franco. The generals, who in their initial proclamations made no mention of defense of religion as a motive for the insurrection, naturally welcomed the cloak of legitimacy provided by the bishops, notably by Bishop Pla y Deniel of Salamanca in his controversial pastoral letter, The Two Cities published on September 30, 1936 and, in the following year, The Collective Letter of the Spanish episcopacy to the bishops of the world.

The author provides a detailed analysis of these and other documents exalting the religious purpose of the war. He notes, for example, that Cardinal Isodor Gomá y Tomás, archbishop of Toledo and primate of Spain, the author of the Collective Letter, initially rejected the idea of such a document as counterproductive but yielded in the end to pressure from Franco, stung by the hostility of progressive Catholics elsewhere in Europe, especially in France, to his regime. There is also extensive discussion of the complex and, at times, ambiguous relations between the Franco government and Pope Pius XI who, fearful of fascist tendencies emerging in Franco’s Spain, proceeded cautiously. In fact, the Vatican did not extend full diplomatic recognition until May 1938, much to the irritation of the regime. It is interesting that the pope never endorsed
the Collective Letter nor did the Vatican’s unofficial newspaper, L’Osservatore Romano publish it.

The author provides a cogent assessment of all the controversial issues arising from the Church’s role during the Civil War including the ‘sacralization’ of the conflict by clerical apologists, civil-ecclesiastical relations in both the Republic and the Franco regime, and the scale and character of the persecution that took place in Republican Spain, particularly in the six months following July 18. In these discussions, Father Raguer is especially concerned with calling attention to the attitudes of an admittedly small group of bishops, priests, and Catholic laypeople who, to a greater or lesser degree, viewed the war and its protagonists from a more complex and nuanced perspective than did the vast majority of clergy and laity. It is not accidental that Raguer has dedicated this book to Cardinal Francisco Vidal y Barraquer who, as archbishop of Tarragona and head of the hierarchy between 1931 and 1933, pursued a moderate course in ecclesiastical efforts to reach an accommodation with the Second Republic. Thanks to the autonomous government of Catalonia, the Generalitat, in 1936 the cardinal was able to escape the rising wave of persecution in Catalonia. Vidal y Barraquer was not unsympathetic to the rising against the Republic, but he viewed the bishops’ close and uncritical identification with the new Nationalist regime as dangerous and counter-productive to the Church’s religious mission. Hence, he refused to sign the Collective Letter of 1937 and from his Italian exile urged the Vatican to proceed cautiously in its relations with the Franco government. For these activities, he was regarded with open hostility by the regime which kept him in permanent exile until his death in 1943 and used every stratagem at its disposal to persuade Pius XI and Pius XII to remove the cardinal as archbishop of Tarragona, which they refused to do.

The discussion of Vidal y Barraquer is placed within the framework of an original and perceptive analysis of the role of the clergy of Catalonia within Spanish Catholicism. The author, himself a Catalan, argues that the clergy of the region was historically more open to the renovating currents of modern European Catholicism that produced a clerical culture less concerned than their counterparts elsewhere in the country with the idea that Spanish Catholicism must be a fortress, protected by a confessional state, against the secular world. Raguer also provides a remarkable account of how the Catalan Church survived in the face of persecution during the years of the war.

The individuals and groups whose views on the question of religion and war differed from those prevailing within the Spanish Church did not form a unified front by any means. But in one form or another, they formed what the author has called “The Third Spain” which rejected the messianic identification