

Bishops pledge cooperation with Socialist government

OXFORD, England – Spain's Catholic bishops have pledged to cooperate with the newly re-elected Socialist government, but a cardinal warned the church would oppose secularizing reforms.

In a March 10 statement, the bishops' conference said its president, Cardinal Antonio Rouco Varela of Madrid, and secretary-general, Auxiliary Bishop Juan Martinez Camino of Madrid, had written to congratulate Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero on his March 9 election victory.

"We assure you of our prayers that the Lord will grant you his light and strength in carrying out the important responsibilities commended to you by the Spanish people in the service of peace, justice, freedom and the common good of all citizens," they said. "Likewise, we express our personal willingness and that of the bishops' conference to collaborate sincerely with the legitimate state authorities in order better to serve the common good."

The Madrid-based bishops' conference press office told Catholic News Service March 12 there would be no further church statements or declarations after the elections, in which Zapatero's Socialist Party gained nearly 44 percent of the votes.

But in an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Cardinal Antonio Canizares Llovera of Toledo accused Zapatero's government of being "against democracy" and "leading the country to disaster," and warned the church would oppose further secularizing reforms.

"The church wants to collaborate to build a society of cohabitation and peace," the cardinal said March 11. "But what kind of cohabitation can there be if it means eliminating God from social life? What kind of cohabitation is possible if it means denying the right to life?"

Cardinal Canizares said Spain represented "a more advanced point" in a "cultural revolution" sweeping Western society, adding that church leaders would go on

defending “endangered values” and opposing Zapatero’s policies on abortion, euthanasia and other practices.

“We are ready to collaborate with him, provided he acts within the constitution and pursues the common good – we are not against this government,” he said. “I have nothing against him personally – he has said he does not want to repeat his mistakes, and I pray that he will follow the right path. But without this, there can be no new season in church-government relations.”

In remarks March 9, Cardinal Canizares said he also hoped to “correct the mistakes,” and wanted “a new era without bitterness, that excludes confrontation, that will seek agreement in major national issues.”

Meanwhile, El Pais daily reported March 12 that Zapatero had pledged to “put the bishops in their place” after his party’s victory and predicted the March 4 election of Cardinal Rouco as bishops’ conference president would accelerate a church-government confrontation.

“Supporters of the Madrid cardinal appreciate his pastoral strategy is to return to the church of the catacombs, the church of the authentic few,” El Pais commented. “A church without martyrs is a lost church. So the bishops should be grateful that their anti-clerical opponents are offering them the glory they so much desire.”

The Catholic Church has clashed repeatedly with the Socialist-led government over reforms in family life and education. In recent statements, the bishops deplored a sharp rise in abortions and defended Spain’s Catholic schools, some of which could face closure after planned government budget cuts.