Some 75 years ago—long ago and far away—there occurred an event almost totally forgotten today but that at its time and for decades thereafter captured the attention and haunted the memory of most of the Western world—the Spanish Civil War. The war began on July 18, 1936, when General Francisco Franco proclaimed a military uprising to overthrow the Spanish Second Republic and in particular its Popular Front government. The Spanish Civil War went on for three terrible years (almost three hundred thousand Spaniards were killed), with the Franco forces being aided by both Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany and with the Republican forces being aided by the Soviet Union and the legendary “International Brigades.” It was out of this epic conflict that Ernest Hemingway wrote his moving and memorable novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), about an American academic who fought on the Republican side (and who was played by Gary Cooper in the equally moving and memorable film version of the book).

The Spanish Civil War came to an end with Franco’s decisive victory in March 1939, and it was followed almost immediately by the outbreak of that even greater epic conflict, the Second World War, in September 1939. That war brought about the equally decisive defeat of Fascist Italy and also Nazi Germany, and for a couple of years after 1945, it seemed that Franco’s Spain would also soon be swept away. But the Franco regime—confounding the hopes and expectations of liberals, democrats, and socialists throughout the West—survived and even thrived in Spain for another 30 years, ending only with Franco’s peaceful death in November 1975.

Whatever the great and obvious problems of contemporary Spain, most Western liberals and socialists take it for granted that the Franco regime was an altogether reprehensible system, a dictatorship that was not only politically repressive, economically exploitative, and culturally retrograde, but also one that can properly be identified as fascist to boot. The grand consensus of liberals and socialists has

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always been that nothing good can be said about the Franco regime and certainly that there is nothing positive that can be learned from it. On the contrary, the regime was so terrible that it is now an object of scorn, so much so that the Socialist Party, during its rule from 2004 to 2011, engaged in the systematic destruction of virtually all the many monuments and artifacts of the Franco era, which were once so common throughout Spain.2

Even contemporary conservatives and Catholics today find little positive about the Franco regime. They know that their counterparts in previous generations once supported and praised Franco and his system, but now they find this view of earlier conservatives and Catholics to be an embarrassment, and so they have accepted the liberal-socialist consensus. Franco and his supporters may have decisively won on the actual battlefields of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, but they have certainly lost on the mental battlefields of the memory and history of Spain since the 1990s.

This essay will present a view different from this long-standing and now widely held liberal and socialist consensus, a consensus that now includes most contemporary conservatives and Catholics as well. Our view is one that has much in common with that of the conservatives and Catholics of earlier generations, but it also takes into account how Spain has evolved and changed during the more than thirty-five years since the end of the Franco era, arriving finally at its troubled condition today.

Any contemporary evaluation of the Franco era must address three charges that have been central and prevalent in Western opinion about Franco and his regime, ever since its origins in the Spanish Civil War seventy-five years ago:

1. Franco and his regime were fascist;
2. Franco was an ally of Hitler during the Second World War; and
3. Franco’s regime was economically exploitative, politically repressive, culturally retrograde, and altogether bad for Spain.

On the contrary, we argue that:

1. Franco was a traditional authoritarian ruler, and his regime was characterized by many pluralist features. These limited the Franco dictatorship in a way similar to the way traditional monarchies were once limited, particularly those whose legitimacy was grounded in Catholic tradition.3 Indeed, Franco himself consciously and effectively limited and contained the one clearly fascist element in his conservative coalition—the Falange movement founded by José Antonio Primo de Rivera—so that it played only a minor role in his regime and in its policies;
2. Franco was effectively neutral during the Second World War. Indeed, his de facto cooperation with Britain and the United States allowed them to exercise sea and air control over the Western Mediterranean theater throughout the war; and
3. Franco’s regime promoted economic growth, which became especially vigorous and widespread after 1958. This in turn kept unemployment rates very low (less than 5 percent) for most of the Franco era. Indeed, through his system of workers’ syndicates, he provided the Spanish working class with basic protections and benefits, which were equivalent to those secured by workers in those liberal-democratic political systems that were then at levels of economic development similar to Spain’s (for example, Italy, Greece, and Chile).4

Furthermore, the economic vitality of Franco’s Spain was reflected in its demographic vitality. The low unemployment rate and the substantial worker protections facilitated a healthy birth rate, which in
turn facilitated economic growth, that is, an economic-demographic virtuous cycle. (This virtuous cycle of the Franco era is in sharp contrast to the high unemployment rates and low birth rates of contemporary Spain, which have produced a vicious cycle.)

When liberals and socialists initially leveled their charges against Franco and his regime, they conveniently evaded the charges that conservatives and Catholics, and not just Francoists, could and did make against them. For the truth of the matter is that the leftist political movements that dominated the Spanish Second Republic (1931–39)—liberals and socialists and also anarchists and communists—were fiercely and fanatically anti-Catholic and guilty of massacres and murders that killed tens of thousands of Catholics and other conservatives. In the spring of 1936, a coalition of these leftist movements won the general election and established a Popular Front government. Anti-Catholics took this as a signal that they could now do anything they wished against the church, and, aided and abetted by the new government, in June and July 1936 they began burning churches and convents and murdering priests and nuns. They also assassinated leaders of the Christian Democratic and other conservative political parties. These atrocities were the precipitating cause of Franco’s proclaiming a military uprising on July 18. However, the uprising failed to take immediate control of most of the country. Instead, Spain split into two, roughly equal regions, with much of the south controlled by the Francoist or Nationalist forces, and with Madrid and much of the north controlled by the Republican or Loyalist forces. The consequence was a terrible civil war that ground on for almost three years. Moreover, in the summer and autumn of 1936, the civil war was reproduced in microcosm in numerous towns and villages, as the two sides vied for local supremacy by murdering their opponents. This included 12 Catholic bishops and more than 5,200 priests, 2,500 monks, and 280 nuns killed by leftists. This was not a case of ethnic cleansing but of religious cleansing.

Moreover, as the war progressed, it was the Communist Party that became the dominant power within the Republic’s government. Being better organized than their rivals on the Left and also receiving direct aid and advice from the Soviet Union, they systematically marginalized, and often persecuted, their fellow leftists and anti-Catholics, especially the anarchists. This process was famously and memorably described in George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* (1938).

The murderous acts of the anti-Catholic Left and the powerful threat from the Communist Party were the background for what was the most murderous, and the least defensible, act of the Franco forces. Even after they had achieved total victory in the civil war, they were still bent on revenge, and in 1939–40 they executed more than thirty thousand Loyalist prisoners. This, in turn, confirmed liberals and socialists around the world in their hatred of the Franco forces. They continued to detest the Franco regime for decades thereafter and will never admit that it was something other than fascist.

It is true that the regime was not good for liberals and socialists. However, it was good for Spain at the time. First, had a liberal or socialist regime (namely, the Spanish Second Republic) won the Spanish Civil War, it would have been invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany after its conquest of France in 1940. This would have in turn necessitated an Allied invasion and occupation of Spain sometime in the course of the Second World
War. In other words, had a liberal or socialist regime ruled Spain at the end of the Civil War, Spain would have suffered three devastating wars between 1936 and 1945 (or 1946 or whenever), instead of only one.

Second, a liberal or socialist regime almost certainly would not have been able to pursue the very coherent and effective economic policies that the Franco regime did from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. These policies were opposed by powerful economic interests, particularly traditional agrarian elites and business cartels. Only a Franco-type regime could have had both the power and the legitimacy to push these interests aside in order to establish a stronger and healthier Spanish economy for the future.

Of course, a liberal or socialist regime would have enabled and encouraged the full spectrum of expressive individualism and cultural anarchy that has become so common and pervasive in the West. And for decades, the cultural scene in Franco’s Spain was characterized by the cultural sobriety, dignity, and gravity that characterizes (or once characterized) the Catholic Church. However, in the last decade of the Franco regime, Spain experienced a vigorous upsurge of artistic creativity and innovation. I visited Spain several times during the mid-1970s and was amazed at the cultural energy and imagination that I saw, particularly in regard to graphic design and the visual arts. It has often been the case that some of the greatest periods of cultural vitality have developed within the creative tension between a declining political authority and a growing cultural freedom.

The Franco regime was a prime example of a particular kind of political system constructed in several Catholic countries in the middle decades of the twentieth century—Catholic Integralism. In the Integralist conception, there was a very close connection, a sort of marriage, between the Catholic Church and the national state. The state was led by practicing Catholics, respected Catholic doctrine and culture, and devolved authority over significant sectors of society, particularly education and welfare, to the church. Catholic Integralism obviously could exist in authoritarian political systems, not only in Spain under Franco but also in Portugal under Antonio de Oliveira Salazar (1932–1970). However, there were also examples of Catholic Integralism in democratic political systems—for example, Ireland under Eamon de Valera (1932–1973) and Québec under Maurice Duplessis (1936–1959).

Catholic Integralism developed in Catholic countries where the church faced or had faced a very great and grave threat from secular forces, including from a secular state. In some cases the threat came from militant and fanatical leftist movements, including the Communist Party. This was the case in Spain and Portugal. Indeed, where the Communists actually took over the state and imposed severe oppression on the Catholic population for a long period of time, a kind of counterstate Integralism developed, in which the Catholic community became so integrated that the church itself could carry out some state-like activities, in opposition to the official state. This was the case in Poland and, to a lesser extent, in Croatia. In other cases, Catholics had experienced a history of repression and discrimination by a Protestant regime (a kind of Protestant integralism), for example, the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland and the British rule in Canada.

The golden age of Catholic Integralism was the 1950s, which was a time of prosperous peace after the turmoil of the Second World War but also a time of Cold War against the massive Communist threat posed by
the Soviet Union. In this environment, the Catholic Church had to be a church militant, even a fortress church—solid, strong, and united against its very real and very threatening enemies. Pope Pius XII fully understood this necessity and fully embodied and expressed the church’s response. Moreover, the very architecture of many Catholic churches built during this era also embodied and expressed this response. They were solid, massive, and severe, almost like fortresses. Indeed, they almost resembled Mont St.-Michel in France (966) or Monte Cassino in Italy (529), both of which had been built to provide strong protection for the faithful against marauding barbarians.

The era of Catholic Integralism came to an end with the Second Vatican Council of the early 1960s, which promulgated a new attitude of openness of the church to modernity and to the world. Openness was the opposite of a fortress. Moreover, it was also the case that during the Cold War, the Catholic Church had come under the protection of that new worldly superpower, the United States. American power, providing not only protection but also promoting (and sometimes pushing) the values of liberalism and pluralism, was a major cause of the Catholic Church’s move from a fortress mentality to openness.

Catholic Integralism had been at the core of the identity and legitimacy of the Franco regime. When Integralism came to an end in the early 1960s, the very core of the regime also came to an end. Henceforth the Franco regime would also have to become less like a fortress and more open. And, as it turned out by the early 1970s, it would even have to become more liberal and more pluralist.

O f course, if the Franco regime or the system that he set up was so good for Spain, why did so many Spaniards—a robust electoral majority—join in dismantling it so quickly after Franco’s death in 1975? A new and very different constitution was promulgated as early as 1978. And in 1981 the Socialist Party in Spain amazingly became the governing party, albeit the then very moderate and centrist Socialists led by Prime Minister Felipe González. His government brought Spain into both the European Union and NATO and consolidated the new democratic system. The transition from the Franco regime to a European-style liberal democracy was now complete, and it had been remarkably smooth, in contradiction to the somber expectations that most political analysts of Spain had held in 1975. Moreover, the transition governments, including that of the Socialists under González, had achieved this transformation without insulting or humiliating the many supporters of Franco who had embraced his system and who still honored his memory. This smooth transition was facilitated by the reassuring role played by the young King Juan Carlos, the very man whom Franco had chosen to be his successor as the formal chief of state but who turned out to be very supportive of liberal democracy. The success of the new liberal-democratic Spain was fully recognized and celebrated by the rest of the world in 1992 with the success of both the Barcelona Olympics and the Seville World’s Fair, which commemorated the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s discovery of the New World.

Thus, in the two decades after Franco’s death and the end of his regime, Spain underwent an extraordinary transition into being a typical Western European liberal democracy, fully integrated into the European Union and NATO. This transition was all the more extraordinary because it was so peaceful, in sharp contrast to the characteristic violence of previous regime transitions.
in Spain. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, Spain and its transition seemed to provide the very model for what a peaceful transition from a long-standing authoritarian regime to a stable liberal-democratic system should be. It certainly was a model for many Eastern Europeans when they made their own peaceful transition from a Communist regime to a liberal democracy during 1989 and the next few years.

However, the political success of the new liberal-democratic system was attended by ominous developments in the economic and the demographic fields. In the 1980s the Spanish unemployment rate reached 20 percent, the highest in Europe, and by the 1990s the Spanish birth rate had declined to one of the lowest in Europe (a reproduction rate of 1.3, far below the 2.1 that maintains a population at a steady level). There was also a sharp rise in the Spanish crime rate, particularly in the large cities. It seems that when Spain became a European-style liberal democracy, it acquired not only the good features of that system, but its bad habits as well. Indeed, these bad features were even more bad or extreme than in the rest of liberal-democratic Europe. Thus, the realities of the new Spain raised questions—as early as the mid-1990s and in an especially pronounced form—about the long-term viability of the European model of liberal democracy.

It is almost another two decades after the mid-1990s, and the state of European liberal democracy in general—and of Spanish liberal democracy in particular—looks very different than it did back then. We are now in the midst of the deepest and longest economic crisis in the West since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and several European liberal democracies are beginning to experience a serious political crisis as well. This has especially been the case with the countries on the southern periphery of Europe—specifically, Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Indeed, with its unemployment rate of 25 percent (50 percent among the young)—the highest in Europe—and its large insolvent banking sector—the most unstable and destabilizing in Europe—Spain is experiencing the most serious and threatening economic crisis in the West. The Socialist government of 2004–11 led by Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, like so many other European governments, not only pursued policies that greatly inflated the Spanish housing and banking bubble of the late 2000s but also proved feckless and ineffective in picking up the pieces of the ensuing bust. Unfortunately, when the Popular Party, which won the parliamentary elections of 2011, had been in power in the early 2000s, its own economic policies also contributed to the bubble, and its current economic program under Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has done nothing to alleviate the bust.

In addition, the Socialist government under Zapatero pursued social and cultural policies that exacerbated political divisions and antagonisms and that have left Spain with no sense of coherent and confident national identity. These include not only the relentless destruction of public monuments and symbols of the Franco era—insulting many conservatives—but also radical new laws implementing abortion and gay marriage—alarming many Catholics.

Moreover, the current deep economic crisis has metastasized into deep political divisions. This obviously includes divisions between social classes but also those between geographical regions. In particular, the wealthier and culturally distinct regions of Catalonia and the Basque Country now greatly resent the central government redistributing funds from their coffers to Madrid (and Castile) and to the poorer regions of
Spain. The prospects of Catalan and Basque separatism or even secession now loom larger in Spain than at any time since the civil war.  

In short, the economic, cultural, and political conditions of Spain today are far removed from the conditions of the 1990s, which in retrospect might seem to be a lost golden age of Spanish liberal democracy. And, as the Spanish economic and political crisis deepens and lengthens, Spain seems to be moving closer to some of the conditions of the Spanish Second Republic in the early 1930s. Indeed, although Spain is technically still a monarchy under King Juan Carlos, in reality it has become a kind of Spanish Third Republic.

In light of the crisis of the Spanish liberal-democratic system, how then should we now interpret its predecessor, the Franco regime? Perhaps a liberal-democratic system works well under some conditions but poorly under different ones. And perhaps a Franco-type regime works poorly under some conditions but well under different ones. And what kind of system would work best for Spain under the conditions of today?

Franco’s Spain (and also Salazar’s Portugal) was one of the least pronounced versions of the authoritarian dictatorships that had come into being during the crises that wracked Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. The Franco regime was so different from Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy that it readily survived the debacle of the Fascist regimes at the end of the Second World War, and it enjoyed a remarkable stability for the next thirty years. This was because the regime seemed to fit very well the economic and social conditions—including the level of economic development and the size of a middle class—of Spain from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s.

This period corresponded to what in the more advanced economies of Europe became known as the “thirty glorious years.” For such advanced economies, characterized by both a large industrial sector and a large middle class, a liberal-democratic political system provided the best fit, as opposed to an authoritarian regime. But by the early 1970s, the Franco regime had brought Spain up to an economic level equivalent to that which much of Western (and liberal-democratic) Europe was at in the late 1940s after rebuilding from the destruction of the Second World War. The rapid but peaceful dismantling of the Franco regime shows clearly that by 1975 it no longer fit the new and more advanced economic and social conditions—particularly a modern industrial structure and a substantial middle class—that the regime itself had done so much to bring into being during the previous two decades.

Thirty-five years later, however, the liberal-democratic regime in Spain has developed its own economic and social disorders, indeed—given its high unemployment rates and low birth rates—a sort of morbidity or even, in the words of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, a “culture of death.” Since the Franco regime was a moderate example of an authoritarian government, and since contemporary Spain is an extreme example of its liberal-democratic counterpart, one might conclude that the golden mean would be a moderate liberal-democratic regime—rather like the moderate liberal-democratic regimes that existed in Western Europe during the thirty glorious years.

What was the actual character of these moderate liberal-democratic regimes? We get a clue by identifying some prime—and successful—examples: West Germany under the leadership of Konrad Adenauer (1949–1963), Italy under Alcide de Gasperi (1945–1953), and France
under Charles de Gaulle (1959–1969). More basically, these were regimes whose dominant party and prevailing ideology were Christian Democratic (West Germany and Italy) or close to it (France). They also happened to be regimes supported by the Catholic Church and more or less consistent with the body of Catholic teaching known as Catholic social thought. Of course, these regimes were eventually replaced by more secular—that is, more liberal or social-democratic—regimes (West Germany after 1969, Italy after 1963, and France after 1970), and, being democratic political systems, this was done by the votes of the majority of the electorate. This could suggest that the Christian Democratic regimes, like the quite different Franco regime, also once fit the then existing economic and social conditions of these countries; that is, that they were right for a historical moment, but eventually that moment would pass, and they too would become obsolescent.

However, Christian Democratic regimes were the obvious best alternative after the debacle of the Fascist regimes in Germany and Italy in 1945. And, given the rather feckless history of the Fourth Republic in France (1946–58), de Gaulle’s Fifth Republic turned out to be the best kind of regime for France in the same era. Why, then, did a Christian Democratic regime not become the best alternative in Spain after 1975?

This raises the complex question of how the Catholicism of 1975 was different from the Catholicism of 1945. Perhaps the Catholic Church no longer had a confident belief that it could work closely with popular political forces and mass political parties to shape an entire political regime in its own image. This could have resulted from changes internal to the church (such as those following Vatican II), or it could have resulted from changes external to it (such as the growth of secular views and values among the once-Catholic population). In any event, in the Spain of the mid-1970s, there was little serious and substantive discussion of a Christian Democratic political alternative.

But looking at the Spanish reality of 2013, it is obvious that there would now be a far healthier society and culture, and probably a healthier politics and economy, if Spain over the past thirty-five years had been shaped and guided by something like Catholic social thought. This obviously would have resulted in public policies far more supportive of families (and therefore of an adequate birth rate). But it also would have resulted in policies more supportive of productive work (and therefore of an adequate employment rate). And Catholic social thought has been very insistent upon constraining a financial sector so that it clearly and directly serves the purposes of the wider society. This would have prevented the speculative boom and spectacular bust in the Spanish real estate and banking sectors. Instead, Spain has been shaped and guided by two variations on a secular theme—socialist bureaucratic interventionism with respect to economic matters and liberal expressive individualism with respect to social and cultural ones. Both these secular projects—the socialist and the liberal—have been explicitly and consistently criticized in a long line of papal encyclicals, stretching from Leo XIII to Benedict XVI, that have put forward an alternative Catholic social project, which is at once more spiritual and more human than either the socialist or the liberal one.

It is obvious that Spain cannot solve its very real contemporary problems by going back to something like the Franco regime and Catholic Integralism. Even if it should wish to do so, the economic and social base for such a regime is no longer there, particularly a large agrarian sector. (This
sector can be composed not only of large estates but also of small family farms.) It is less obvious, but still probably the case, that Spain also cannot solve its problems by now adopting something like a Christian Democratic political system. Here, too, the economic and social base for such a system is simply not there, particularly a large but still-Catholic middle class. The most fitting time for a Christian Democratic system in Spain was probably from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, but that was a road not taken.

Nevertheless, in the wreckage being wrought by the current economic and demographic crisis, Spain will once again have to consider and choose a new road. The current version of the liberal-democratic system has proved its inadequacy, as indeed it has in much of contemporary Europe. This liberal-democratic system will have to be either reinvented or replaced, perhaps by something that would prove to be far worse. And at this juncture it would be useful to once again consider the resources of Catholic social thought.

The Franco regime claimed to represent the “eternal Spain”—the Spain of “Their Most Catholic Majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella,” the Spain of strong families, strong local communities, and a strong nation, all inspired and guided by a strong Catholic Church. This claim was an exaggeration, but in truth each of these elements—family, community, nation, and church—were more healthy and vital in Franco’s Spain than they are in the liberal-democratic, even socialist Spain of today. But, as it happens, family, community, nation, and church are also the central elements of the social order long proposed by Catholic social thought.

Catholic Integralism was a system bound to the economic and social conditions of a particular time, and that time is past. Similarly, Christian Democracy was also a system bound to its own—albeit more advanced—economic and social conditions, and its time has also past. However, Catholic social thought represents a project that transcends any particular level of economic and social development. It advances a conception and vision that can fit a wide range of economic and social conditions—stretching from largely agrarian societies, through industrial ones, to those of the information age—and a wide range of political systems, including authoritarian and democratic regimes. However, the Catholic social conception and vision are definitely not liberal, and definitely not socialist. This means that if Spanish liberal democracy is to be reinvented to better address the real problems of contemporary Spain and to represent better the real elements of enduring Spain, it will have to become less liberal and less socialist and will have to become, in some ways, more Catholic.

What is true of Spain is probably also true of the other once-Catholic countries of Europe. They too are now seeing their liberal and socialist projects collapsing into ruin, and they too are approaching a crossroads, with some roads leading either to paralysis or to disintegration, or to some kind of bureaucratic and nondemocratic rule. But there is also another road leading to some contemporary version of the Catholic social project.

When Hemingway wrote his novel about the Spanish Civil War, he had in mind the famous lines by the poet John Donne (1624): “Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.”

For Hemingway, it was the death of the Spanish Second Republic for whom the bell tolled in 1939, but it was also tolling for the rest of the democratic West.
In our own time, a different Spain has been dying, under the assault of the militant liberalism and socialism of what has become in effect a Spanish Third Republic. This is Catholic Spain—the Spain of strong families, communities, nation, and church. And if the bell should toll for once-Catholic Spain, it will also toll, for many of the same reasons, for the rest of once-Catholic Europe and for much of what was once the West. But today, in the current economic and social crisis, liberal and socialist Spain is itself dying, due in part to its own extremes and excesses. And if the bell should toll for this Spain, it too will toll, for many of the same reasons, for the rest of liberal and socialist Europe and the West. For when the bell tolls for Spain, it tolls for thee.


2 A vivid account of what is happening to the greatest Franco monument of all, the Valley of the Fallen, is given by Jonathan Freedland, “Spain and the Lingering Legacy of Franco,” *Guardian*, March 27, 2011.


5 Thomas, *Spanish Civil War*, ch. 20.