As the 1989 bicentennial of the French Revolution approached, one of the most salient concerns to surface about France’s commemoration of that historic upheaval involved the necessity to redefine the very nature of what France would be celebrating. While the debate over that query has ranged across a broad spectrum of attitudes toward the Revolution which has led to various interpretations of that event, far too little attention has been focused on the legacy of that convulsion on the histories of other nations. Of utmost importance to students of religion, such seems to be especially true where the issue of the Revolution’s treatment of organized Christianity demands reassessment. The French nation can no longer justifiably acclaim that aspect of the Revolution which - in the name of liberty, equality, and fraternity - swept aside much of the country’s traditional Roman Catholic identity. In like manner, it will no longer do to couch the interaction between the Roman Catholic Church and the liberals of nineteenth-century Europe - the latter to a considerable extent being heirs of the French Revolution - almost exclusively in the terminology of utilitarianism, politics, economics, and social reform. Perhaps more so than with any other nation, that kind of interpretation has dominated the recent scholarship of Spain, particularly in studies written in the English language.

Although in Spain the liberal assault against the Catholic Church was not as devastating as in revolutionary France, it was nonetheless outrageously destructive of the centuries-old sacral character of that Iberian land. Nowhere was that more in evidence than in the Spanish liberals’ undermining of the Faith itself. During the First Carlist War (1833-1840) widespread anticlericalism in the form of rapine, clerical executions and assassinations, exilings, and other such attacks occurred with regularity. Added to that, commencing in January 1834 and lasting for four decades, liberals dominated the ministry and cortes at Madrid and the politics of the provinces, initiating at first moderate, then increasingly radical, measures against the Church. However, the main focus of this essay must be one which calls for a re-thinking of the nature of the interplay between the Spanish liberals and the Roman Catholic Church in respect to the impact of that development on the Catholic faith itself in Spain.

Turning to the French antecedents of the Spanish liberals’ assault on Roman Catholicism, Guillaume Bertier de Sauvigny, noted historian at the Catholic Institute of Paris, has shown in his recent studies of the Church during the French Revolution that during the years 1789 through 1795, France endured a devastating attack against not only Roman Catholicism, but Christianity in general. A brief summary of that anti-religious onslaught would highlight the following actions of various revolutionary factions, as the most significant ones relative to the undermining of the Catholic religion in France during that period.

In May 1789 all ecclesiastical properties in France were nationalized. That offensive, initiated before the
French Revolution actually broke out and carried out in the name of economic progress, undermined the historical fiscal independence of the Church in France. With its economic foundation seriously damaged, the French clergy and religious were later less able to resist additional revolutionary encroachments into ecclesiastical areas of concern. Following those initiatives, in February 1790 the French government outlawed all religious vows for both males and females, claiming that such oaths were contradictory to basic human liberties. By that act alone, the Revolution’s leaders revealed their disrespect for natural law as the basis for all jurisprudence: wherein human law must be promulgated in harmony with natural law, that aspect of the eternal law which, according to Etienne Gilson, is discovered inscribed in our own nature. The need for human law to be based on natural law, so thoroughly developed in Thomistic thought, had been central to Roman Catholic thinking and French legal tradition for centuries.

Continuing on with their aggressions, the revolutionaries then proclaimed the 1790 Civil Constitution of the Clergy: a set of decrees which effectively cut off the Church in France from the Holy See and threatened Roman Catholicism’s ecclesiastical and canonical structure in that country. Had the French clergy and Catholic laity universally accepted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, a state church might have emerged in France. Some scholars have argued that an organized attempt to dechristianize France began on 22 September 1792, when the National Convention substituted a revolutionary calendar in France for the long-accepted Gregorian Calendar, first used in Roman Catholic lands in 1582. Inasmuch as the new revolutionary calendar eliminated the schema of days, weeks, and months found in the Gregorian Calendar, Sundays were no longer recognized, subverting the Church’s Sunday Mass attendance requirement. Moreover, with its adoption of the new calendar, the revolutionaries expunged from the official national conscience of France any concept of the Sabbath, religious feast days, and holy days. Meanwhile, religious orders and congregations - both male and female - were suppressed throughout France. It was perhaps inevitable that, given the French acceptance of the ideas of the Enlightenment, promotion of a religion of reason would emerge. Within a short time “temples of reason” could be seen in several French cities, including the most famous which was erected in Notre Dame Cathedral.

As the bloodletting of the Reign of Terror was unleashed on French society from 1792 through 1794, thousands of “citizens” lost their lives, were imprisoned, exiled, or simply fled France for safe refuge in other lands. Much of that havoc was wrought on the people under the auspices of the Law of Suspects of 17 September 1793: a decree which mandated the arrest, imprisonment, or possible execution of any French man, woman, or child suspected of refusing to support the revolution. As a result of that statute an estimated 35,000 to 40,000 French persons were put to death, among them many Roman Catholic clergy and nuns. Bertier de Sauvigny estimates that an additional 300,000 people were incarcerated in prisons throughout France. Also, during that terrifying era thousands of priests, brothers, seminarians, nuns, and novices emigrated from France, many of them to “safe” Catholic nations such as Spain, Portugal, and Italy. Other religious emigres were to find their way to England, the United States, or one or another of the countries of Latin America.

The French Revolution’s onslaught against the Catholic faith pervaded French society even more completely than has been outlined here. The assault touched virtually every aspect of Catholic life in that land, even to the extreme of laying the groundwork for an attempt at “secularizing” the sacraments in the eyes of the revolutionary government of the First French Republic. Unfortunately, the people’s attraction for the words “liberty, equality, and fraternity” has often obscured the disastrous impact upon Roman Catholic France of the anti-religious crusade of the French revolutionaries.

Within two decades a similar historical develop-
ment surfaced in Catholic Spain, where with the dawn of the nineteenth century and the outbreak of the Napoleonic wars in Europe, the ideas associated with the French Revolution found their way into the Iberian Peninsula. According to William J. Callahan, Catholic Church historian at the University of Toronto, the form of Spanish liberalism that developed during that period found its origin in:

The utilitarian emphasis of state reform during the eighteenth century, the critical spirit that had swept through educated opinion from the 1780s on, the influence of the French revolutionary constitution of 1791, and more individual patterns of economic thought.11

During the French occupation of most of Spain in the Peninsular War (1808-1813), the Spanish cortes met at the city of Cadiz from 1810 to 1813 and fell under the influence of liberals. Seemingly more touched by the utilitarian nuances of early-nineteenth-century liberalism than by radically anti-religious attitudes, the Spanish liberals who dominated the Cadiz cortes were determined to alter the Roman Catholic Church’s traditional posture in society in the name of modernism. Committed to clerical reform and a diminution of ecclesiastical institutional wealth and political influence, the Cadiz cortes liberals offered no real challenge to Spain’s historical Roman Catholic heritage. And in fact the article on religion of the Cadiz Constitution of 1812, which those very same liberals helped to promulgate, stated that “the religion of the Spanish nation is and shall be perpetually, the Apostolic Roman Catholic, the only true religion. The nation protects it by wise and just laws and prohibits the exercise of any other whatsoever.”12

Once liberalism had made its appearance in Spain however, it became a mere matter of time until the movement assumed a more radical character. In power once again in 1820 - this time at Madrid as a result of the revolt led by Colonel Rafael de Riego - the Spanish liberals began an immediate attack on the Church.13 By 1822 the liberals themselves had split into moderate and radical factions. The latter group, commonly referred to as exaltados, was destined to take control of the Spanish cortes and initiate an aggressive campaign against the Church. This second liberal siege against Catholicism between 1820 and 1823, featured not only the usual utilitarian and “enlightened” ministerial and parliamentary efforts to alter Spain’s ecclesiastical institutional structure and economic base, but in the most extreme of the exaltados it introduced into that land a thrust toward secularization.

During that three-year period, attacks against the Church reminiscent of the darkest days of the French Revolution were common. The Inquisition was once again abolished, the Jesuits were expelled for the second time, monastic orders were suppressed, and the size of religious communities was so severely restricted that many were forced to close. In their anxiousness to “modernize” Spain’s ecclesiastical structure, the exaltados showed little appreciation for the sacral importance of the religious orders and congregations which they attacked. Again, in the name of reform, the exaltado-dominated Spanish cortes of 1822 prohibited any further ordinations to the priesthood until the cortes’ own clerical changes were put into place.14 In early 1823 those ecclesiastical measures were implemented throughout Spain, with the organizational and economic modifications which they imposed upon the Church patterned after French revolutionary precedents. Diocesan and parochial boundaries were redrawn to conform more closely with the political map of Spain, the Church tithe was set aside, a special tax was created ostensibly to pay the salaries of the clergy and nuns, secularization of male and female religious communities was vigorously pursued, and papal authority in that formerly “safe” Roman Catholic stronghold was systematically ignored.

Even though many liberal clergy supported the actions of the exaltados, others viewed them as aggressive acts of an irreligious government taken against the Church. Regarding the liberal ministerial and parliamentary attitude toward the Church, Stanley G. Payne recently wrote:

Though the more radical exaltados rejected Christian identity altogether, the great majority of Spanish liberals were formal, and in many cases practicing Catholics. At least one cardinal and four bishops, as well as hundreds of priests, directly supported the liberal cause. None of this prevented the liberal government from adopting a harsh policy toward opposition clerics. Eleven bishops were exiled and two imprisoned, along with numerous lesser clergy. The Bishop of Vich was murdered along a roadside, and fifty-four other ecclesiastics were executed or simply murdered in the province of Barcelona alone, where all convents and monasteries were closed.15
Callahan labeled the years 1820 through 1823 as a period of “the Church besieged.”

Before 1823 had passed a French army of King Louis XVIII, a part of the Holy Alliance of governments reacting against liberal revolutions in Europe, invaded Spain and helped Spanish traditionalists end their nation’s second experiment with a liberal government. But that three-year period foreboded even more serious threats to the sacral character. And history shows that the next assault was not long in coming.

In January 1834, a liberal ministry under Prime Minister Francisco Martinez de la Rosa surfaced at Madrid. From that point on, liberals dominated Spanish politics through to the latter years of the nineteenth century. They were especially influential between 1834 and 1874. During those years Spain experienced a complex political metamorphosis, in which the liberals fractioned into cabs varying from conservative moderates (moderados), to moderates, progressives (progresistas), democrats, and republicans (the latter making up the most radical grouping of the liberal camp). Characteristically, the first two factions pursued diverse courses of attack against the Church, aimed at adjusting noticeably the ecclesiastical configuration of Spain, as they each assumed to be consistent with the needs of a modern nation state. Those two moderate groups had not intended to challenge the sacral character of Spanish society; their clerical reforms were to have been accomplished without a serious threat being made to the Catholic faith of the Spaniards.

By way of contrast, the more extreme liberals - in particular the radical progressives, democrats, and republicans - had very different goals. Falling more, though not exclusively, under the influence of the eighteenth-century French thinkers, they were quite eager to contest the historical monolithic Roman Catholicism of Spain. In so doing, these ultraliberal intellectuals, politicians, businessmen, writers, and a smattering of other activists increasingly came to reject any teleological view of Spanish history based upon Roman Catholic ecclesiology. In their purview, Spain was to emulate other nineteenth-century societies in proclaiming, in the name of “liberty,” religious egalitarianism. Thus, these liberals saw their assault on Roman Catholicism as not merely a utilitarian-oriented political, social, and economic thrust aimed at adjusting the structure and position of an obscurantist Spanish institution to the demands of a modern society; theirs was to be an outright scuttling of the Roman Catholic Church’s religious hegemony in Spain. It is this aspect of the liberals’ defiance of Spain’s Roman Catholic heritage that many scholars, especially those writing in the English language, have ignored. Turning to the events which brought the moderate liberal Francisco Martinez de la Rosa to head the ministry at Madrid, on 10 October 1830, the royal court happily celebrated the birth of a daughter, Isabel Luisa, to King Fernando VII and his wife, Queen Maria Cristina. The Spanish monarch’s fourth marriage finally produced his first heir. However, the sovereign’s brother, Don Carlos, came forth to challenge the young infanta’s right to the throne and commenced to extract the customary oaths of loyalty to her from the ranking lay and ecclesiastical officials of the land.

From the very beginning of the struggle between the supporters of Isabel, led by her mother, Queen Regent Maria Cristina, and Don Carlos and his Carlists, the Spanish clergy were divided in their loyalties. Matters came to a head when on 29 September 1833 the king died, leaving Isabel as titular queen. As a result of those circumstances, on 20 May 1833, King Fernando VII formally proclaimed Isabel heiress to the throne. Subsequently, on 2 October 1833, the first Carlist War (1833-1840). Seeking support for her daughter’s claim to the crown from wherever it might be found, the queen regent approached the moderate liberals, offering the prime ministership to Martinez de la Rosa on 15 January 1834.

For the Church, the appearance of a liberal ministry once again at Madrid presaged a struggle. The combination of a civil war in which the Carlists favored the interests of the Church and clerical allegiances were divided, and the reappearance of liberals in the government who were bent upon “reforming” the ecclesiastical configuration of Spain, produced an explosive religious-political environment there. Yet, since the tension passed beyond the days of the First Carlist War and evolved into three and one-half decades of difficult struggle between the Church and the multifarious liberal parties, one focus of contemporary scholarship must be upon its impact on the Catholic faith of the Spaniards. In that context, careful distinctions need to be drawn between the conten-
tious issues ignited mainly by the friction between Queen Isabel II and her supporters and the Carlists over the succession and other political questions, as opposed to the antagonisms emanating from the Church-state battle. It was the latter conflict which most effected the Faith in traditional Roman Catholic Spain and thus needs serious study.

The liberals did not take long to build their campaign against the Church. On 22 April 1834 Maria Cristina, at the urging of Prime Minister Martinez de la Rosa, established the Real Junta Eclesiastica, a committee formed to recommend clerical reform initiatives to the government. Just a few months later, on 2 September, the first of the junta’s reform measures were enacted.22 Subsequently, manifold other changes were suggested regarding the composition of the ecclesiastical structure of Spain. This legislation erected the basic outline for church reform in Spain, which the crown gradually implemented throughout the rest of the nineteenth century: though often without the consultation of or approval by the Holy See, further challenging papal authority in that former Catholic stronghold.23

Foremost in the junta’s program were plans to reorganize the Spanish cathedral and collegial chapters, redefine diocesan and parish boundaries, and reduce in number chaplaincies and other clerical benefices (appointments which carried a living with them). Few historians would debate the point that nineteenth-century Spain had inherited a situation in which the Church suffered from having too many clergy living comfortable but relatively unproductive lives. Frequently ignored however is the point that the cathedral and collegial chapters housed a high percentage of Roman Catholicism’s finest Spanish scholars.24 Thus, the quality of Catholic scholarship in Spain, already in a state of serious decline from its high point during the period of the fifteenth through the early seventeenth centuries, suffered at the hands of the junta.

The royal government’s assailing of Spain’s monasteries and convents (both frequently called conventos) had a devastating impact upon the sacral nature of society. While it is true that the Real Junta Eclesiastica had several influential members of the Catholic hierarchy as members, none of the committee’s recommendations were sent to the Holy See. Moreover, in many cases the superiors of the religious orders were not consulted by the Junta about decisions which effected the very existence of the superiors’ own communities. Regarding the conventos, a broad reorganization was ordered which established minimum size limits for each religious house. Those conventos having less than twelve inhabitants were closed. It is true that such measures were initiated in the utilitarian sense of efficiency. But in a number of cases, Madrid paid little attention to the spiritual consequences of their actions on the religious orders of the nation. The liberals who influenced royal policy paid little attention to the essence of the desire for monasteries and convents in a Catholic land, and as a result, the Faith experienced a sustained loss of spiritual strength from which it never recovered.

Complicating matters further, many of the conventos closed during the period of the First Carlist war were actually singled out by the royal government because they were suspected of harboring Carlist sympathizers among their communities.

From 1834 on, numerous priests, nuns, brothers, and other religious were murdered, executed, imprisoned, or exiled because of the tensions of the Isabelline-Carlist struggle. But clearly much of the clerical slaughter and rapine of those times came as a direct or indirect result of the anguish stirred up by the actions of the royal government and its Real Junta Eclesiastica. In his recent study of the Church in Spain during that period, Professor Callahan offers an example of just such a situation, writing that:

“Hopes for a limited ecclesiastical reform came to an end on a hot summer day in 1834. On July 17 rioting mobs in Madrid left seventy-eight Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, and Mercedarians dead and their residences devastated. Never in Spanish history had there been such a savage, collective attack on the clergy. For generations of clerical historians, July 17 was a ’day of infamy’.25

“...and as a result, the Faith experienced a sustained loss of spiritual strength from which it never recovered.”
As the years passed, the liberal campaign against the Catholic faith in Spain intensified. Beginning in 1835 massive disentailment of ecclesiastical properties and lands took place. Once again carried out in the name of efficiency and utilitarianism, this seizure of income-producing property of the Church ultimately forced the Spanish clergy and other religious to economic dependency upon the state. Commencing in 1837, clerical incomes were debated in the cortes; and in 1841 the royal government created a special tax on incomes and commercial profit throughout the land, aimed at bringing funds into the state treasury to be used for paying clerical salaries.26 In the meantime, progressive liberals in the Spanish cortes wrote a new constitution for the nation (that of 1837) which began to chip away at Roman Catholicism’s religious hegemony. Veering drastically away from the traditional constitutional statements on religion, which always identified the Catholic faith as the official religion of Spain, the 1837 document merely stated that “the nation binds itself to support the Roman Catholic religion, which the people profess.”27

In the mid-1840s the more conservative elements in Spanish liberalism worked their way to dominant positions in both the ministry and the cortes, with General Ramon Narvaez being the most influential figure among them. Rejecting much of the aggressive antireligious thrust of the progressives whom they supplanted in power, the moderate liberals were successful in mollifying some of the ruinous effects of the progressive’s attack on the Catholic religion. While the moderates failed in their attempts to promulgate a convenio with the Holy See in 1845 (an agreement readjusting the relations between the Spanish royal government and the Church, though not an official concordat), they did stabilize church-state relations in Spain and lay the groundwork for a new concordat with Pope Pius IX to be signed in 1851.28

But in the meantime, what about the Faith? The actions of the liberals, especially the more radical factions, literally destroyed the religious communities (both male and female), historically centers of prayer life and deep spirituality in Catholic Spain. The population of regular clergy and nuns was devastated, their numbers being drastically reduced and their living conditions in many cases being cut back to bare subsistence. One estimate shows a decrease in the male religious communities from thirty-seven in 1820 to twenty-seven at the beginning of 1835, to twenty-three by the end of that year, to a mere eight in 1859. During that same period the total membership of the regular clergy plummeted from 46,000 to 719.29 Figures for orders and congregations of nuns do not reflect quite such a drastic reduction, but they were nonetheless dramatic.

The royal government’s promotion of secularization of religious establishments as well as clerical laicization, not only contributed substantially to the reduction in the number of religious (male and female), but it also led to confusion about the issue of respective authority boundaries between royal and Church jurisdictions. Originally, on 8 March 1836, the Crown issued decrees specifying the conditions under which members of the religious orders and congregations would be allowed to return to the lay state. In so doing, the Spanish government ignored papal authority. In 1836 those guidelines were meant only for the clergy and nuns not absorbed into other religious houses of their orders and congregations, as their own communities were being closed down. Later, however, Madrid made the process of laicization easier for all ecclesiastical personnel. Regular clerics and nuns who formed a part of a religious establishment being secularized, were placed under the authority of the local diocesan ordinary, rather than be allowed to remain subject to the jurisdiction of their own superiors. At the same time, ecclesiastics who had not been ordained as priests or deacons were reduced to the same civil status as all other Spaniards.30 Where in this process was there any consideration for the Faith as such?

In the meantime, Spanish radical liberals of the mid-1850s campaigned to subvert the substance of the Concordat of 1851 between Spain and the Holy See. That agreement, which was implemented article-by-article between 5 May 1851 and 3 December 1852, brought order to the Roman Catholic Church’s official position and operating status in Spain. The document also once again confirmed Roman Catholicism’s religious hegemony over the spiritual lives of the Spanish people. In 1856 the radical liberals attempted to introduce into Spanish society a quasi-religious liberty, where non-Catholics could profess their beliefs, but not worship publicly. The Constitution of 1856, which included that stipulation about religion, remained unpromulgated however.

In 1869, after Queen Isabel II fled Spain for France, a coalition provisional government of several radical liberal factions produced another Spanish constitution, one which guaranteed the right of public as well as private worship to all peoples, regardless of what
faith they professed. While the Constitution of 1869 reflected the combined efforts of a political coalition of radical progressives, liberal unionists, and democrats, the final constitutional assault on the Catholic faith came with the republican revolution of 1873. Ceasing any governmental pretense that a beneficial reform of the Catholic Church was their desire, the leaders of the Republican of 1873 attacked openly. They wrote into their Constitution of 1873 statements on religious liberty and complete separation of church and state. Fortunately, since the Republic of 1873 collapsed after a very brief time, the 1873 constitution too was never promulgated.

Ultimately, the fall of the republican government on 30 December 1874 and the resultant restoration of the Spanish Bourbon monarchy blunted the radical liberals’ aggressiveness toward Roman Catholicism in that nation. However, the Catholic Church was never again to enjoy the unquestioned religious paramountcy in Spanish society that it had prior to the nineteenth-century liberal ascendancy. For example, while the Bourbon restoration stemmed the radical liberal onslaught against Catholicism, that regime’s Constitution of 1876, in redefining the Roman Catholic Church as the religion of Spain, did allow for non-Catholics to worship privately.

While Roman Catholicism remained the official spiritual faith of Spain until after the death of Generalissimo Francisco Franco in 1975, the Catholic Church lost its monopoly over education. More and more, so-called progressive thinkers have associated Spain’s Catholic past with what they viewed as the obscurantist Old Regime Church. Endemic to the utilitarianism of the moderate liberals, and concomitant with the anti-Catholic religious hegemony thrust in Spain of the radical liberals, the state increasingly assumed a more visible role in the lives of the Spanish people, often expanding its activities at the expense of ecclesiastical institutions. Thus it became steadily more difficult for the Church to maintain throughout society an historical Roman Catholic teleological view of human existence, a design molded and formed in the sacral character of Spain as a nation. It is the significance of this aspect of the Spanish Catholic legacy which recent Hispanicists have ignored. Under the influence of such giants of Spanish historiography as the late Jaime Vicens Vivens and Gerald Brenan, as well as that of Raymond Carr and Richard Herr, each of whom presumed a secularistic purview of the Catholic Church’s position in the latter’s struggle with the Spanish liberals in the nineteenth-century, most contemporary historians writing in the English language show little concern for or understanding of the spiritual essence of Spain’s Roman Catholic heritage. Thus they have been unable to analyze the impact of that Catholic-liberal conflict on the Faith itself. But the time has now come to redress that fundamental weakness in scholarship, giving attention to the question of what about the Faith.

NOTES


14Payne, *Spanish Catholicism*, 77.

15Ibid., 77-78.

16Callahan, *Church, Politics, and Society*, 128.

17Francisco Martinez de la Rosa, a noted man of letters, first showed his moderate liberal views as a member of the liberal government which came to power at Madrid in 1820. He served as prime minister from 15 January 1834 through 7 June 1835. See Vicente Carcel Orti, *Política eclesiástica de los gobiernos liberales* (Pamplona: EUNSA, 1975), 222.


19A number of Spanish historians have written on various aspects of this issue, among them Carcel Orti, Melquiades Andres Martin, Manuel Revuelta Gonzalez, S.J., Jose Andres Gallego, Jose Manuel Cuenca y Toribio, Jose Longares Alonso, Miguel Angel Orcasitas, and Jose Orlandis.


22The official report of the *Real Junta Eclesiastica* was published as the *Exposición dirigida a S.M. el 25 de Febrero de 1836 por la Real Junta Eclesiastica encargada de preparar el arreglo del clero y trabajos hechas por la misma Junta Eclesiastica para este objeto* (Madrid: Imprenta de Don Miguel de Burgos, 1836).


24Callahan, *Church, Politics, and Society*, 149-52.

25Ibid., 153.


32Ibid., 78, Constitution of 1876, art. 11.