

Spain's deputy premier raps Church influence

Madrid, Jan. 10, 2008 (CWNNews.com) - The deputy prime minister of Spain, Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega, has charged that Church leaders in the country are "falsifying the truth" with their criticism of government policies.

De la Vega-- whose government has demanded an apology from the Catholic hierarchy for a massive December 30 rally in defense of the family-- said that Church leaders have an unrealistic idea of their own authority in a secular state. The bishops have the right to "expression of opinions," and a "right to criticize," she acknowledged. But she said there are no special privileges accorded to the Catholic Church in the political sphere, and the government will not practice religious "discrimination" by deferring to the Catholic hierarchy.

"In our 1979 concordat with the Church," the deputy premier said, "there is no mention that the state must legislate in accordance with Christian ideals."

Participants in the December 30 rally were highly critical of government policies regarding family life. The bishops have insisted, however, that the rally was not designed to be a partisan political event.

Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega has been a focal point of tensions between the Catholic Church and the Socialist government that took control in Spain in 2004. During a drive for legal recognition of same-sex marriage she denounced the influence of the Catholic clergy as "sinister," and said that the Church had always been an opponent of positive change. But in February 2006 she traveled to Rome on a fence-mending mission, seeking to improve the frayed ties between her government and the Vatican.

In related news, opposition leader Mariano Rajoy of the Popular Party capitalized on the debate over family policy, announcing that if his party wins control in parliamentary elections scheduled for March 9, the new government will establish a ministry for the family.