'Monks have been involved in politics throughout history'

Spain's traditionally conservative Church is alive and kicking. It is evident as soon as you go into Madrid's La Almudena cathedral, where there is a side chapel devoted to San Josemaría. This is Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, who was canonised in 2002 to the dismay of many liberals – not that they knew anything about him as a man, but they disliked what he stood for.

There is also a bust of Pope Benedict (upstairs, on the way up to the museum and the cupula), while Pope John Paul II, who canonised Escrivá, is commemorated by a bronze statue outside. It shows the Pope in his younger, more vigorous days, with both arms uplifted, and the wind stirring his robes: "I tried to make his gesture both gentle and vigorous," said the sculptor, Juan de Avalos. It was erected in 1998, during his lifetime, and on his death in 2005 it became a focal point where thousands of people gathered for prayer.

As for women, all the portrayals in the Cathedral seem to be either nuns in habits or the Virgin Mary. But there are some stunning modern works of art, especially a brightly painted geometrically designed ceiling by Jose Luis Galicia, whose artistic talent was admired by Picasso. With its vivid reds and blues, greens and yellows, it recalls something of the vibrant colours of medieval art. There was a mini-dispute when the seven big paintings around the apse were not given to Galicia, but rather than to Kiko Argüello, who is less known for his painting than for being the founder of another conservative movement, the Neocatechumenal Way.

At the other end of the ecclesial spectrum from Escrivá, we can place the surprising figure of José Antonio Vázquez, a former priest and Cistercian monk who left his monastery after nearly 20 years in order to devote his energies to the left-wing political grouping Podemos, which has been accused of "anti-Christian hatred". It does indeed gather together many anti-clerical activists, but it also attracts many Christians, and in the case of Vázquez, it is his faith – and even his monastic vocation – that led him to this commitment.

"Monks have been involved in politics throughout history," said Vázquez, in an interview with Religion Digital [Nov 2014]. "St Bernard, who is the teacher of the Cistercian order, was a man who always had a lot of interest in transforming the situation so that people's lives should be improved, and I believe that this is the desire of a monk: the monastic life in reality is a school for connecting a person

with his heart, with compassion; and, in some way, politics reminds us of this."

Vázquez was motivated by "the desire that my spiritual option should also have an ethical incarnation", and he decided that Podemos could be the instrument to achieve this. "There is a progressive sensitivity inside Podemos, but it's a movement that is difficult to classify". His best explanation is that it is a movement of those who "want the citizens to be empowered and move to act and control politics."

Leaving the monastery "was a personal and a community discernment," said Vázquez – "a very good, very beautiful, very respectful process". The discernment led the monks to decide "that if I was going to continue with this political action, it is better to protect the ambit of the community, so that they should not be seen to be implicated in that tension". But he will continue to make his retreats in the monastery, he said. He is heavily involved in the Circulo de Espiritualidad Progresista of Podemos, which has been criticised by conservatives for beginning meetings with 20 minutes of Tibetan bells and a meditative silence.

Another way of putting faith into radical practice is through small Christian communities, including the Comunidades de Jóvenes (Youth Communities) that flourished in Madrid in the seventies and eighties; amazingly many of them have kept going until today, united since 1996 in a network known as Encomún. The members believe that a parish should be "a community of communities" – a term used also of the Latin American basic ecclesial communities. Moreover, belonging to a Christian community "is a very important help today in the enormous struggle involved in being a critical and committed layperson in today's Church".

One of the youth communities that has survived is called Shekiná, attached to the Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe parish, in the Chamartín barrio of Madrid. Although community members spread both left and right on the political spectrum, within the church they veer to the left, and value critical thinking. "Encomún is a jet of hope for our community, showing that another way of being church is possible," says one member of Shekiná [Dominique]. "It's a very lively church experience that groups together communities that want to live out the Gospel in a simple but radical way."

The charismatic inspirer of the youth communities was Fr José Ramón Urbieta, who was put in charge of the ministry to young people when Vicente Enrique y Tarancón was Archbishop of Madrid (1971-83). The starting point was respect for young people with their "desires for political change and for a social utopia, their critical spirit, their yearning for freedom and their wish for a religious way of life that was more authentic and prophetic". The faith-sharing communities were founded through a rigorous process of catechesis, with the training of a huge team of young pastoral agents – Agentes de Pastoral Juvenil – and they were nourished by inspiring liturgies, particularly at Eastertide.

But when Bishop Angel Suquía succeeded Tarancón in 1983, he removed Urbieta and discredited his pastoral process, which for him smacked of liberation theology. The communities then struggled; many fell apart, while others went underground.

In the Shekiná community, nearly all the members are now in their fifties and it is their children, rather than themselves, who are students, but they told me "we only recently changed our name from a Youth Community". I thought it was a joke, but it turned out to be true: they went on calling themselves a

Youth Community right up to 2008. “I would like it still to be called a Youth Community”, piped up one of the student children.

And radical they are, although they laugh at how some of their more extreme initial ideas had their corners knocked off. “We began with four principles,” they told me: “praying together every day; taking all decisions in common; sharing all money; and living together. But we soon discovered it was impossible to live like that.”

All the same, after 34 years of community the majority of the members live in the same apartment block; they go away on an annual common holiday where they programme the course of the year ahead; they meet for prayer at 7.15am three times a week and for a longer meeting every other Saturday afternoon; and five of the families pool their income so they can divide it into six parts and set aside one part for charity. They admit to still living with “that blessed and radical young enthusiasm of those for whom following Jesus has become the fundamental premise of our life”.

Margaret Hebblethwaite - The Tablet