

## Madrid in the age of austerity - Wise Men, flamenco dolls and old values



With Spain facing its toughest economic crisis for decades, this Christmas will be difficult for many families. But the festive season has inspired a certain wistfulness for simpler times and traditions, including the Catholic family of old. And with nearly two million seeking help from the Church, Catholic organisations are what stand between many people and destitution

It's early in December at one of Madrid's oldest and most popular squares, the Plaza Mayor, and the stalls filled with Nativity figurines are doing a brisk trade. At €50 (£40.56) for a shepherd or Roman soldier, and more than double that for a Virgin Mary or a St Joseph, prices are at the high end of the market. However, as shopkeeper Margarita explains, there are traditions that Spaniards find worth paying for amidst the worst crisis most of them can remember.

“Navidad, particularly Reyes [Epiphany] is as popular it ever was, perhaps more so now than it has been for some time; it's a time when families get together, and people are rediscovering the importance of families,” Margarita tells me. “Young adults remember their childhood and think of happier times,” she adds.

These Nativity figures have not changed much in appearance since my childhood days spent in Spain in the 1950s when a shopping expedition to the Plaza Mayor was an essential part of any madrileño's Advent season. It was a time when life, to me and my friends, seemed wonderfully simplified into good and bad. To have been a good boy or girl was to be rewarded by the Three Wise Men from the East with a Roman soldier's armour suit kit or a flamenco doll. To have been naughty was to run the risk of having a piece of coal deposited among the sweets.

Back then in Franco's time, Spain was still very Catholic, deeply scarred politically and economically by the Spanish Civil War, and struggling to feel part of post-war Europe. Madrid was still less a capital city than a provincial town, populated by old trams, women in black and gypsy carts collecting rubbish from the streets. A new middle class was nonetheless emerging after the "years of hunger" of the immediate post-war period.

Sixty years on, the Christmas market in the Plaza Mayor can prove deceptive, as I discover just a few blocks away, south of the Plaza Mayor, in Lavapiés, one of the most popular "villages" that make up the Spanish capital. Home once to the Jews before their expulsion in 1492, the neighbourhood has long attracted those on the edge of society – migrant labour from other parts of Spain, and in recent years Asian and North African immigrants, and young Spaniards trying to make an unconventional living away from their parents.

These days Lavapiés is just one of numerous neighbourhoods around the country where a majority of Spaniards are suffering the impact of the biggest economic downturn in living memory. This has spread from the immigrant and working-class communities to the middle classes, with young people particularly hit by a youth unemployment rate of over 50 per cent. For the first time since the end of the Spanish Civil War, most young Spaniards are now resigned to the fact that they face a tougher future than their parents.

Setting out from the Plaza Mayor on my way to Lavapiés, I come across a large group of students in a group near a fountain taking notes as a teacher lectures to them. Nearby, placards declare that this is an open-air sit-in on a day of strikes against cuts to state-funded education and the rising tide of youth unemployment. In fact not a day goes by in the capital without a demonstration by public-sector workers, even if this has so far generally stopped short of descending into major rioting.

Near Santo Cristo del Olivar, the parish church of Lavapiés, Fr Xabier, a young Basque Dominican priest who spends long days and nights administering to the capital's poor and destitute alongside volunteers from Caritas, explains why there is yet no major social uprising. The Catholic Church's charity organisation receives sums of money ranging from the rare philanthropic donations from rich men (an example is that of Amancio Ortega, the owner of the Zara clothing chain, who has donated €20 million – over £16m – to Caritas) and smaller individual donations from churchgoers, to running fund-raising stalls. It also provides soup kitchens and helps find temporary accommodation for those without money to buy a meal or pay for a roof over their heads.

Caritas, whose chairman, Rafael del Rio, is a retired police chief, estimates that 22 per cent of Spanish households are living under the poverty line with a further 30 per cent facing serious difficulties in making ends meet at the end of the month and 580,000 Spaniards, nearly 3.3 per cent of the - population, receiving no income whatsoever.

In a study published earlier this year, Caritas drew attention to the danger facing 11 million people who could fall below the poverty threshold, while confirming that there are around 30,000 homeless people across the country. Last year, Caritas helped and fed over one million, more than twice the number in 2007 when the first symptoms of the crisis began to emerge with lay-offs and debt repossessions. The figure has risen to a present rate of about 1.8 million so that Spain is among the European countries with the highest poverty rates, totalling up to 21.8 per cent of the population – over the EU average of 16.4 per cent. Only Romania and Latvia rank before Spain in the list.

“We are in a difficult situation of crisis, of cuts to public services, and widespread unemployment and debt, where we have ever increasing numbers of poor people, among them people who were not born poor but have become impoverished,” Fr Xabier tells me as he checks on one of the help points, where second-hand clothes are traded for food.

Near the site of a former synagogue, Santo Cristo del Olivar has a plaque dedicated to a group of priests who were executed during the Civil War by working-class militias and recently beatified. It is hard to imagine Fr Xabier meeting a similar fate as a victim of class warfare, immersed as he is in palliative care for deprivation that cuts across backgrounds. Nor does he see the present or future entirely in dark terms.

“Undoubtedly things would be far worse if the Catholic family had not ‘returned’ to the core of society to serve as a buffer against suffering,” Fr Xabier says. He tells me of divorce rates going down (partly because people cannot afford the legal costs) and of extended households that include not just young adults but grandparents (partly so that pensions – despite diminishing in value because they are no longer index-linked – can be used to pay the bills).

Further insights into the impact of the current crisis are shared at a meeting I have with Catholic lay workers kindly hosted by Juan Rubio, the editor of Vida Nueva, Spain’s leading Catholic weekly magazine. “There is a general air of pessimism, of uncertainty mixed with sadness but it’s a situation where the grandparents have become the backbone of the family, and the Catholic Church is having to get much more involved in fund-raising and care as social services are cut back and several charities that were over-dependent on state subsidies are being forced to close,” says psychotherapist Emilio Pinto.

Vida Nueva's young chief national reporter, 28-year-old Fran Otero, counts himself lucky to have a job, having moved from his native Galicia to Madrid. "Every night I see middle-class people from the block where I live, covertly going to the local supermarket after closing time to pick up food past its sell-by date from off-duty members of staff. Most of my friends are out of work, thinking of emigrating or have left already. My country is in a terrible state but while I have a job, I think it's my duty to stay here and try and help to lift things up, some way or another."

Otero nonetheless feels let down by the stance of the Spanish Episcopal Conference which, in contrast to a minority of individual bishops in Salamanca and the Basque country, has spoken out belatedly and rather pathetically on the crisis, choosing to focus only on encouraging the faithful to be more generous in their giving, and avoiding making any profound socioeconomic analysis of the crisis or any direct criticism of the Government's policies on the basis of Catholic Social Teaching.

Indeed, in recent weeks, the episcopal conference's only political criticism has been aimed at Catalan moves towards independence which have been contrasted with the "moral good" of the unity of Spain. For its part, the centre-right People's Party Government of Mariano Rajoy has sealed its good relations with the bishops by recently reversing the former socialist Government's attack on religious education in state schools, thus providing the Catholic Church with an early Christmas present.

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