Between mediation and commitment: The Catholic Church and the Basque conflict

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Abstract:

The Basque conflict is one of the last violent ethno-territorial struggles in Western Europe. The political process initiated by the ceasefire announced by ETA in March 2006 had raised hopes for a peaceful and permanent solution but came to an abrupt end with the Madrid bomb attacks on 30th December, 2006. Pro-peace associations from civil society have joined forces and fought against persistent violence since the late 1980s, both in the Spanish and, to a lesser extent, in the French Basque Country. The Roman Catholic Church has played a prominent role in these new forms of pro-peace action. In the present paper, we propose to approach the Church’s activism from three complementary perspectives.

First, the Catholic Church has some specific features that differentiate it from other actors of civil society. Unlike the new “peacemaking professionals”, the Church has buttressed its action by a theological and ideological principle of subsidiarity conducive to popular mediation and peace-keeping initiatives. Even in the secularized Basque society, or perhaps thanks to this secularization, the Catholic institution is still favourably thought of by a large majority of the population who sees it as both deeply immersed in local reality and uninvolved in the political debate. From an empirical perspective, the Church acts as a mediator, in both meanings of the word. As a generalist (médiateur généraliste) the mediator tries to bring together institutional milieus which do not share the same knowledge or the same representations (the cognitive dimension of mediation). As a broker (médiateur courtier) the mediator is looking for acceptable solutions between very different groups who have to find an interest in cooperating, while pursuing different aims and defending different interests (the strategic dimension of mediation). The Catholic Church has played this double role in the Basque Country until now, achieving better results in terms of cognitive mediation than in strategic mediation.

The Catholic Church has also revealed its own internal pluralism. First, as a religious organization, the Catholic Church has maintained a double relation with the public authorities, acting both as a cause group, rallying around general causes, and a sectional group mobilized for its own interests. The Church has thus been perceived by the public authorities both as an actor for the defence of peace and dialogue, and as a negotiator on issues such as education, social services, public regulation of religion, etc… The Church in the Basque Country has also been fraught with internal fragmentation – opposition between the Basque bishops and the rest of the Spanish Episcopal Conference, and internal cleavage within the Basque-Navarre clergy. In that respect, the various positions of the Spanish Episcopal Conference on the Basque question have to be carefully analysed, since they have evolved according to changing equilibriums within the Church. Some sectors of the Church have assumed this impossible neutrality by tentatively reducing the scope of the conflict.

Finally, the empirical analysis of the role played by the Catholic Church raises more general questions about the interaction between Catholicism, the public sphere and democracy in Southern Europe (Itçaina, 2007b). The political involvement of the Church is also somewhat linked to its relativist approach to the majority-based, constitutionalist conception of democracy, as it rather advocates a more deliberative conception that would better defend the rights of the minority. For the Church, the very nature of a norm may, under certain circumstances, be more important than the way it has been adopted. A legal norm lacks legitimacy if there is no consensus on its values, even if the law is endorsed by the majority. Such a conception may lead either to a depoliticized conception of collective identities or, conversely, to highly politicized commitments and to new forms of religious regulation of politics.

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The new relationship between religion and political power in Western societies offers three fields of research for political specialists. The first one hinges on the political regulation of religion. Drawing their inspiration from a legal and sociological tradition – which has regularly been updated (Madeley, Enyedi, 2003) -, specialists have adopted an institutional approach and addressed this issue in a classical but axiomatic way. Indeed the analysis of the legal status of religion, far from being purely descriptive, sheds light on the various forms of political legacy and culture. The second approach focuses on the religious regulation of politics, mainly through the study of two important forms of religious prevalence in the public sphere (Itçaina, Palard, 2006) – mediation, and the individual (religion and voting), median (religion and activism) and collective (economic religious and ethnic matrices) effects of religious socialization. Such an approach is very interesting but offers indecisive conclusions. Should traces of the “religious factor” be looked for at the level of the State, within associations or among individuals? The third field of research centres on the analysis of the role of politics in religious institutions, and tests the validity of the politico-institutional metaphor (Lagroye, 2006).

The three analytical approaches somewhat tend to merge into a singular and empirical object, the ethno-nationalist conflict in the Basque Country in France and, more significantly, in Spain. It is first necessary to study each approach in order to assess the exact role of religion in one of the last zones of violent conflict in Western Europe. The political regulation of religion has indeed offered a renewed form of activism for religious institutions – limited to the Roman Catholic Church in the present article. The end of the Concordat that dated back to General Franco’s regime has limited the institutional clout of the Church while offering it new freedom. It has been obliged to adjust its praxis to the new political and democratic regime since 1997 and to the rapid secularization of Spanish society, whereas in France it had already adapted to the secular regime of laïcité which had proved to be a guarantee for its autonomy. This new arrangement did not mean that the Church had disappeared from the public sphere, quite the opposite. The religious regulation of politics has been at work in the Church’s attempt at moralizing the public sphere, especially on ethic questions. The problem of ethno-territorial identities has been one of the main stakes in Spain – and to a lesser extent in France – as an organizing principle in regional and national political life. Basque nationalism has only recently freed itself from the hold of religion (Itçaina, 2007a). The ideological tenets of the Basque nationalist party (PNV, Partido Nacionalista Vasco), founded in 1894 in Bilbao, were indeed based on a strong Christian identity, thus relaying the anti-revolutionary mobilisation movement in defence of provincial privileges that marked 19th
century Spain (the Carlist wars) (MacClancy, 2000) (Payne, 1986). If we except the Acción Nacionalista Vasca, a marginal secular nationalist movement in the 1930s, it was only in 1959 when ETA was founded in the Spanish Basque Country, and in 1960 with the creation of Enbata in France, that the first secular forms of Basque nationalism emerged. However this secularization process was not complete, as exemplified by the continued activism of some Christian groups within the Basque associations. But some forty years after its creation, Basque nationalism eventually became a secular movement, the only implicit reference to religious affiliation being the Democratic-Christian tenets of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) though officially secular since 1977. Interaction with religion did not totally disappear though, since political activism revealed the internal divide within the Catholic Church, through the debate on Basque identity. In addition, the Church also deeply committed itself to a new form of political regulation – mediation.

In that respect, the Church regained some legitimacy as a social actor, thus symbolically distancing itself from its heavy historical past. In the Spanish Basque Country, this change accompanied a more pronounced secularization process within society than in the rest of the country. There were indeed fewer and fewer seminarians in the Basque-Navarre region along with a regular but significant drop in church attendance – although it had been the highest in Spain in the 1960s (Iztueta, 1981). The hypothesis developed by Alfonso Pérez-Agote (Pérez-Agote, 1986) at the end of Franco’s regime, who contended that the central role of religion was been replaced by politics, was thus confirmed. Confronted with this phenomenon – somewhat less pronounced in France -, the Church was forced to reconsider its political and social positioning. It is a well-known fact that the massive support of the Spanish Catholic Church, in its vast majority, was one of the main factors in the emergence and consolidation of the new democratic regime, as it made it possible to rally social groups which had so far been opposed to change. It also illustrated the radical estrangement of the Church from political power in the last years of the authoritarian regime (Pérez-Díaz, 1993) (Itçaina, 2004). In a tenser context than in the rest of the country, the political transition in the Basque Country urged the Church to progressively replace its leadership and adjust its rhetoric to the new political environment. It was indeed in its capacity as mediator that the Basque Church was given the opportunity of regaining its legitimacy as a social and functional actor.

Vincent de Briant and Yves Palau (Briant, Palau, 1999: 36) consider that religious mediation is one of the “traditional” or “unnamed” forms of mediation. As in all other types of mediation (Faget, 2005), it implies that a connection is established between two persons through

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2 In 1968, 12.2% of all seminarians came from the Basque-Navarre region. They were only 5.9% in 1975 and 4.4% in 1990 (Andrés-Gallego, Pazos, 1998, p. 230).
a third one, but in a specific and often informal way which is not openly called mediation while the actors concerned do not claim to be mediators. Theologically founded on the figure of Christ in the Christian tradition, “religious mediation” is, in the view of the authors, “the perfect illustration of the act of faith – which mediation fundamentally is -, a belief that individuals can overcome their differences of opinion, can see the other as their neighbour, especially the mediator, can listen to the other, but also can hold to their word and grin and bear it” (Briant, Palau, 1999, p.40). In an institution intrinsically predisposed to mediation, the Catholic Church’s interventionism was naturally adapted to a territory in which founding political cleavage had historically been shaped by religion. In such a theological and memorial context, the Church played, and is still playing, an important role in its attempt at settling the conflict in the Basque Country. This activism in the Spanish Basque Country\(^3\) may be analysed from two different but complementary angles. First, it was precisely the persistence of uncompromising attitudes in the conflict that conferred on the Church its legitimate and social role as a mediator, even if the results remained inconclusive. But the acknowledgement of this social role also influenced the religious institution itself. We may here speak of a multi-level form of mediation, as the necessary conditions for a true dialogue have always seemed to depend on the actors concerned and the specific environment.

**Political Intransigence and the Church’s mediating efforts**

The persistence of uncompromising attitudes offered an unexpected opportunity for the Catholic Church. Through their absolute and intransigent claims in the identity crisis, some political actors contributed to bringing the political debate to a deadlock. The political arena (the locus where decisions are made) being totally paralysed, some institutions originating in the forum (the debating locus)\(^4\) were called on by default. The Catholic Church thus found itself involved in the emergence of a peaceful third way, through peace movements and mediating action between the two most radical actors. In a way, the Church’s interventionism and legitimacy by default illustrated the failure of democracy to stabilise the political debate on identity. The action of the Church became political in as much as it substituted for the political actors either unable to break this deadlock or willing to maintain the status quo. As a political mediator, the Church acted both as a generalist (médiateur généraliste) and as a broker (médiateur courtier) (Nay, Smith, 2002). As a generalist the mediator tries to bring together institutional milieus which do not share the same

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\(^3\) For a contemporary analysis of the “Basque issue” and Catholicism in France, see (Elgoyhen, 2001) and (Itçaina, 1997).

\(^4\) For the distinction between arena and forum, see (Jobert, 1995: 21)
knowledge or the same representations (the cognitive dimension of mediation). As a broker the mediator is looking for acceptable solutions between very different groups which have to find an interest in cooperating, while pursuing different aims and defending different interests (the strategic dimension of mediation). The Catholic Church played, and is still playing, this double role in the Basque Country, achieving better results in terms of cognitive mediation than in strategic mediation.

A Generalist Mediator: the Church and Social Construction of Peace

All the public mobilization movements for peace, encouraged by the Church, belong to the first type of mediation. The emergence of the peace issue as a major political stake in the 1990s furthered the Church’s involvement in the identity crisis. The urgent need to settle the conflict and restore peace created a new political locus, saturated with specialized institutions both in the Spanish and, to a lesser extent, in the French Basque Country. The institutionalisation of social movements within non-partisan structures led to the emergence of a third locus where the Church in its capacity as peace-making expert was called on to play an active role. It offered the Church the opportunity of reinvesting the public sphere on account of its socially recognized competences, without the least hegemonic objective. The Catholic Church and its agents were appealed to because of their expertise in conflict resolution and deliberation. We may here see the illustration of the persistent and commonly-held view in society that the Catholic Church can intrinsically create the necessary conditions for consensus-building and conflict-solving. According to Ramón Zallo (Zallo, 1998), Basque society is a deeply-divided society that may be envisioned from two different perspectives. For a first group of political parties and social movements (“constitutionalist” parties and the nationalist movement), Basque society is mainly composed of two loci (nationalist/ non nationalist) which are in constant opposition. For the second group (PNV, pacifist movements, the ELA and LAB trade unions), there are three loci in the Basque society, with a mix of confrontation, negotiation and cooperation. The abertzale (Basque nationalist)/non abertzale divide was thus attenuated by the emergence of a third way, a social movement for peace which could not be reduced to any of the two groups. There was a close link between the new form of interventionism from the Church, including not only the religious institution but also individual initiatives, and the emergence of a specific collective

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5 For an approach in social psychology to the representations of peace, see (Reizabal Arruabarrene, 1996).
6 The ELA-STV (Solidaridad de trabajadores vascos) was historically close to PNV. LAB had closer ties with the radical nationalists. The rapprochement of the two unions was one of the matrices that brought together the two nationalist movements, that was to lead eventually to the Estella-Garazi agreement and the ceasefire decreed by ETA in September 1998.
action. The third way, which was traditional for the Christians, thus enhanced the action of the Church, both within and without the institution.

**Internal Generalist Mediation**

Some religious groups reorganized themselves with a view to achieving this objective. This evidenced the real, though hardly perceptible, influence of the public debate on the peace issue on the very organization of the Church. The best illustration may be found in Guipuzcoa, a province where nationalist radicalism was firmly rooted. Within the Diocesan structure, the social Secretariat created when Monsignor Setién became bishop of San Sebastian in 1979 gave top priority not only to the nagging problem of unemployment but also to the restoration of peace. From 1992 onwards, the Gentza committee led both a reflective and symbolical action on this issue, through the organization of highly publicized operations such as the March for Peace to the Arantzazu sanctuary that gathered nearly 10,000 people. Likewise, the Rally for Peace asked ETA to lay down arms, and urged politicians to open negotiations that led to the Armentia (Alava) talks on 13th January 2001 under the aegis of the four Basque and Navarre bishops. The leadership of the San Sebastian bishops, Monsignor Setién (1979-2000) and Monsignor Uriarte (since 2000), played an essential role in mobilizing people and neighbouring dioceses.

In the more utopian groups within the Catholic Church, the same commitment for the cause of peace was most perceptible in the religious orders. The Franciscan community in Arantzazu, that had contributed so much to the promotion of Basque culture since the 1950s, was particularly active. In an attempt at restructuring its pastoral project around the question of peace, the pastoral council – which regrouped both priests and laypersons – started in 1992 to take training and advisory initiatives on this theme, with the help and support of the Diocesan authorities. The sanctuary regularly became an arena where representatives of the peace movements and political parties convened – as for example a debate organized between a member of Elkarri and a PNV official. Together with symbolical moves such as prayers for each violent death or Marches for Peace, the Franciscan community mainly contributed to the emergence of new loci where each party could express their views, in spite of the methodological differences that occasionally cropped up between the Church and the peace movements. Its action rested on the belief that intermediary bodies were presumably more efficient. As expressed by a friar from the Arantzazu community, “we must not leave it to politicians to find the

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7 For an exhaustive presentation of Monsignor Setién’s writings and declarations, see (SETIÉN J.M., 1998)
8 Elkarri (dialogue) which was founded in January 1995, took the relay of the Lurraldea (territory) collective group created in 1986 to oppose the planned Irurtzun-Andoain motorway.
solution, we must show them the way, hence the importance of pardon”\(^9\). This vocation was confirmed by the creation of *Batetik* (of/through peace), a research centre for peace and conflict-solving, in April 2006 under the aegis of the Arantzazu Franciscans.

*External Generalist Mediation*

Outside the structure of the Church, the Catholic actors actively contributed to structuring the pacifist “third sector” in the Basque Country. These actors belonged to many different groups, composed of trade unions, forums and committees, who did not make an homogenous entity and were still under the control of the main Basque political groups. In addition to the traditional opposition between the nationalist movement and the committees who not only criticized the use of violence but also the very foundations of Basque nationalism (*Basta Ya*, Associations of the victims of terrorism), there was also an internal cleavage between the committees composed of leftist nationalist dissidents (*Elkarri*), groups of prisoners’ families, more moderate committees, etc... The autonomist organizations also took an active part in the process, thus fragilizing the local balance of power\(^10\). Some Christian groups got involved, in a variety of ways. Some committed themselves openly in the name of their religious affiliation. Others were less outspoken and joined non-denominational groups. An organization such as *Gesto por la Paz* was discreetly supported by the Bilbao diocese in its logistics\(^11\) and through the participation of diocesan groups of young Christians. There were “mutual consultations” between organizations such as *Elkarri* and the Church\(^12\).

There was also another instance of informal cooperation between Christians, priests and religious figures within the pacifist organizations. Most *abertzale* peace movements and the associations of the victims of terrorism, especially after *ETA* broke the ceasefire in 1999, constantly appealed to the Church. It was particularly the case of the *Senideak* (the families) associations of prisoners’ families and the *Gestoras pro-amnistia*, close to the *abertzale* left, who regularly invited the Church to air its views on the problem of political prisoners, either by staging hunger strikes, with the support of some priests, or by directly questioning the Diocesan authorities. That was the main motive behind the action undertaken by *Senideak* and the *Gestoras*

\(^9\) Interview with Brother E., Arantzazu.

\(^10\) The rejection by the PP and PSOE elected representatives of the peace plan proposed by José Antonio Ardanza, the president of the Basque Autonomous Community, in April 1998 invalidated the pact of government in Vitoria and plunged the Basque Country into a profound political crisis.


\(^12\) For a classification of the Basque pacifist movements, see ((Mansvelt-Beck, 2005 : 214).
in Arantzazu in September 1997 or in churches and cathedrals in June 1998, or the symbolical fast of Herri Batasuna, the nationalist group in Arantzazu in May 1998. Senideak also took part in a meeting with the Communities and EHAK in Arantzazu March 1997, to talk about the situation of the prisoners. In the view of the committees, the appeal to the Church was justified for strategic reasons. “We think that the Church has a lot of power in our society”, declared one of the spokespersons at the June 1998 rallies. The site of Arantzazu was regularly used as a meeting point.

By resorting to hunger strikes in churches, the nationalist organizations perpetuated a traditional means of action frequently used in the last years of Franco’s regime. Appealing for a more active political involvement of the Church meant for them that the situation was far from normalized, that is limited to a competition between well-defined and accepted organizations and political actors. The functionalist approach of the Franco years was invigorated, as the Church substituted for a political regime whose democratic legitimacy was questioned. The Church was called upon not in the name of its recognized Christian affiliation, but by default, thus revealing the deficiencies of political competition. The question of the prisoners fuelled this tension and furthered the specific interaction between the peace movements, the nationalist organizations and the religious groups. The Church was not only appealed to by the abertzale left or the committees of prisoners’ families, but also by the associations of the victims of terrorism who regularly asked the Diocesan authorities to express clearly their opposition to nationalist violence. ETA took due note of this new trend. When it openly criticized the Basque Catholic Church in April 2001, it was precisely the new concerns of the Church towards the victims of terrorism that were the butt of ETA’s attacks, as there was a risk, in the nationalists’ view, that “if the Church follows this path, it will lose in the future the role of intermediary that it has traditionally had”. All these examples show that the Church has had to tread a difficult path between the various activist groups who could hardly hide their differences behind a superficially common rhetoric of peace.

**A Broker: the Church and Impossible Negotiations**

The real social impact of the Church’s commitment for peace calls for a mitigated appraisal of its talents as a broker. Several times since the establishment of the Autonomous

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13 On the occasion of a religious feast celebrated in Arantzazu, the Gestoras pro-Amnistia urged Monsignor Setién to clarify the position of the Church on the problem of political prisoners («Setienen aurrean kexu» (angry against Setién), Egunkaria, 10th September 1997).
14 Egunkaria, 12th June 1998.
16 Egunkaria, 18th March 1997.
17 «Senideak pide la implicación de la Iglesia vasca. Los familiares de los presos realizaron concentraciones ante las catedrales» (Egin, 15th June 1998).
Region, members of the Catholic Church have been called or have proposed to act as intermediaries between the most antagonistic parties. Their mediation efforts have mainly, but not exclusively, concerned the Spanish government and ETA, thus bypassing the elected authorities of the Basque Country. Carlos Garaikoetxea, the former president of the Basque Autonomous Community (1980-1985) and now a member of the moderate nationalist party Eusko Alkartasuna, mentions in his memoirs an initiative undertaken by the Society of Jesus in 1984 with a view to initiating new negotiations (Garaikoetxea, 2002: 179-180). The Basque Episcopal authorities have also regularly proposed their help, as for instance the bishop of San Sebastian, Monsignor Setién, in 1986-87\(^{19}\), then in November 1997\(^{20}\) or the bishop of Bilbao in October 1996. After a failed attempt at resuming negotiations, ETA made public the names of four intermediaries who had taken part in the organization of meetings with the Spanish government. Under the Socialist government, it was Adolfo Perez Esquivel, a Nobel prize for peace – whom ETA accused of having relinquished his role as “intermediary” (bitartekari) for a role of counsellor (abolkulari) – who was in charge. When the Popular Party came to office in 1996, a member of the Carter Foundation played the role of intermediary. According to ETA, the executive power was reluctant about this kind of mediation, which turned the conflict into an international one. The extradition of two ETA representatives from Santo Domingo to Spain put an end to negotiations in August 1997. The Roman Catholic community of Sant’ Egidio offered its mediation services. Specialized in conflict management, as for instance in Mozambique\(^{21}\), the community allegedly held secret meetings with ETA and the Spanish Minister of the Interior. The rumour of a potential police operation ended these talks. During the ETA ceasefire in 1998-99, Monsignor Uriarte, then bishop of Zamora before becoming the bishop of San Sebastian, was also said to have taken part – unsuccessfully – in negotiations between the armed organization and the Popular Party government\(^{22}\).

Some representatives of the Church did not limit their mediation efforts to bilateral contacts between ETA and the Spanish government, but also acted in order to further dialogue between the moderate nationalists and the Spanish executive, and between moderate and radical nationalists. The initiative was in that case taken by the high Catholic hierarchy. In late September 2000, on the occasion of the canonization of María Josefa del Corazón de Jesús Sancho de Guerra Maria, talks were held between the head of Vatican diplomacy, Monsignor Tauran, and the President of the Basque government, Juan José Ibarretxe, on the one hand, and the Spanish

\(^{19}\) “Entrevista realizada por Francisco Mora a Mons. Setién», *Interviú*, 569, 9 de abril de 1987, pp.19-23.


\(^{21}\) See Pierre Anouilh’s contribution to this workshop.

\(^{22}\) Gara, 1st May 2000.
Minister of the Interior, Jaime Mayor Oreja (Popular Party) on the other in order to analyse “the present and future prospects of a peaceful solution […] together with the potential contribution that the Catholic Church can offer”\textsuperscript{23}. For the Spanish Foreign Affairs Minister, Josep Piqué, this proposed “collaboration” did not mean that the Church proposed to act as a mediator, as “nobody can serve as a mediator between a democratic State and murderers”\textsuperscript{24}. Beyond the inevitable political controversy, the Vatican acted in its capacity as expert in pacification, which it had already done in other circumstances\textsuperscript{25}.

The new political context after the banning of the radical nationalist party Batasuna (Unity) in June 2002 in Spain favoured the emergence of a new form of mediation. Negotiations took place within the nationalist camp between the moderate PNV and EA parties, the ELA and LAB trade unions, the “environment”\textsuperscript{26} of Batasuna, the association of Udalbiltza municipalities, and some abertzale lawyers. These talks were symbolically initiated and conducted by Alec Reid, an Irish Redemptorist priest who had played a significant part in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland\textsuperscript{26}. He proposed a “tactical ceasefire” to ETA in order to put forward a common proposal for the resumption of negotiations with the Spanish State. He was helped in his task by members of the Bilbao Diocese and supported by the Bishop of San Sebastian. Alec Reid had previously taken part in the peace conference organized by Elkarrí in October 2001 and 2002, as a guest expert, together with a member of the Sant’Egidio community\textsuperscript{27}.

Three partial conclusions may be drawn from these brokering mediation efforts.

It is first rather difficult to explain why the Catholic actors were seen as legitimate mediators. They indeed benefited from their relative neutrality and could exploit their in-depth knowledge of the situation – some of them had family ties with political leaders or had taken an active part in the socializing process of some political actors, … The Church was one of the very few organizations which had managed to win and keep everybody’s trust.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{25} A Basque religious personality best embodies the vocation of the Vatican. Born in San Sebastian, Monsignor Laboa acted as a mediator in several conflicts in Uruguay, Libya and Panama where, as an apostolic nuncio, he was an intermediary between General Noriega and the US government. According to El País (15th October 2000), Monsignor Laboa was also active in the late 1980s in the complex case of the extradition of alleged ETA members between France, Cuba and Panama.
\textsuperscript{26} Resumen diario de prensa, Arzobispado de Pamplona, 28 de mayo de 2003.
\textsuperscript{27} In the last stage of the Conference for Peace, in June-October 2002, Elkarrí staged another seminar gathering international experts in conflict resolution, with A. Bartoli, head of the International Centre of Conflict Resolution, Columbia University and a member of the Sant’Egidio community; W. D. Weisberg, member of the Programme for the Resolution of International Conflicts, Harvard; H. Barnes, former head of the conflict resolution programme in the Carter Centre, and Alec Reid.
Secondly, mediation failed, with hardly any concrete results in the resolution of the conflict. Since the end of the ceasefire with ETA in November 1999\textsuperscript{28}, the nationalist conflict had become more radical and the response from the Spanish State had showed the limits of mediation efforts. The intermediary acknowledged the limited impact of his action, reduced as he was to the role of a mere go-between trying to reconcile two parties which could hinder any progress if they refused to make compromises.

Catholic mediation must finally be apprehended within the more general framework of the bilateral relations at play behind the institutional and democratic political scene in the Basque Country. The Church’s legitimacy was different from the democratic legitimacy guaranteed by elections, and the religious actors assumed the role of “recognized moral authorities” (Pace, 1998: 157), sufficiently remote from the conflict to remain neutral, and committed enough in Basque society to be trusted. If we consider the total failure of the institutional response to the conflict, an unexpected opportunity was thus offered to the Church.

**The Backlash: Internal Polarization and Relations with the Public Sphere**

The mediation efforts carried out by the Church also had a significant impact in terms of internal polarization and, more globally, in its relation with the public sphere. The Church could hardly hide its internal cleavages behind its unitarian rhetoric. The question of its commitment for peace revealed the complex relationship between the Catholic authorities and the loci of public deliberation in a modern democracy.

*Multi-level Mediation*

As a religious institution, the Catholic Church entertained a double relation with political power. It was both a cause group, committed to the defence of great causes, and a sectional pressure group. In addition to its universalist mission, the Church defended the interests of a part of the population who adhered to its beliefs and practices. Its legitimacy rested on its capacity for turning the interests of these factions —denominational schools, social services, the status of the clergy, evangelization, etc… - into political claims. At the same time, the Church was able to mobilize beyond the limited circle of Christians on greater social causes. The support from a wider part of the population did not mean that these people adhered to the values of the Catholic institution. In other terms, the mediation action of the Church on the Basque question did not originate in a neutral structure which had only recently relinquished its dominant position in

\textsuperscript{28} The failure of the new ceasefire declared by ETA between March and December 2006, in a radically different context from the years 1998-99, is a good illustration of the uncompromising positions of the political actors.
Basque society. Moreover the recent but effective secularization of the Basque socio-political space helped the Church ward off any accusation of proselytism or hegemony. Perceived as an institution which could be trusted, the Church was still a sufficiently committed social actor to be recognized as a legitimate mediator in the pursuit of peace.

In a more significant way, the Church suffered from the backlash of political competition. The Church of the Basque Country – a better expression than the questionable “Basque Church” – had to face up to a double source of internal tension. On the one hand, the Basque bishops opposed the majority of the Spanish Episcopal College, and on the other hand, the Basque clergy was divided on the problem of Basque identity. Such a double cleavage weakened the superficial unity of the Spanish Episcopal College. The core-periphery divide added to the more traditional opposition between conservative and progressive bishops, on sensitive issues such as family or education. In spite of the apparent unity within the College, the analysis of the positions taken by the Episcopal Conference of Spain revealed profound differences. There was no real consensus, though no position became dominant. Much hyped in the press, these internal divisions showed how fragile the institution was.

The Church’s unity was further weakened by the internal divide within the Basque-Navarre clergy. Since the democratic transition, the clergy had indeed been divided over the question of identity and its territorial consequences. In Guipuzcoa, the Church was much active in its mediation action whereas, conversely, the Navarre clergy had adopted a more moderate position on the very concept of joint territoriality shared between the Basque and Navarre provinces. These diverging opinions only mirrored the distinctive nature of the political debate within each province. For their part, the clergy and the Christian organizations split into different groups. The abertzale tendency was most perceptible in three organizations, which were both close to each other but quite distinct: the Coordination of the priests of the Basque Country (Euskal Herriko Apaizen Koordinaketa, EHAK), the popular Christian Communities and the magazine Herria 2000 Eliza (people/country 2000 Church). Created in 1976 by some priests from the North, the Coordination of the priests of the Basque Country took up the clerical rhetoric of

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29 In February 2002, the Spanish Episcopal Conference publicly expressed its opinion relative to the lack of support by the Spanish bishops on the anti-terror plan jointly defended by the Popular Party (PP) and the Socialist Party (PSOE), in order to spare the Basque bishops (El País, 20th February 2001). In May 2002, the three bishops of the Autonomous Community of Euskadi published a pastoral letter in which they criticized the Spanish law on political parties, which was passed in order to ban the nationalist party Batasuna. 338 Basque priests issued a critical manifesto against this law. This statement, justified by the bishops on account of the risk of mounting divisions that this law would trigger, caused an outcry in the whole country. In June 2002, the Episcopal Conference refused to condemn the Basque bishops. In November 2002, however, the Conference published a memorandum condemning infra-territorial separatism, thus aligning itself with the position of the government, which immediately led to an official declaration by the bishop of San Sebastian who refused to condemn any form of nationalism a priori.
anti-Franco rebellion. But its vision of the territory was different, as it transformed an essentially Biscayan and Guipuzcoan movement during Franco’s dictatorial regime into a wider organization that gathered priests from the seven provinces, thus recreating in its very structure the territorial unity of the Basque Country. The higher number of Navarre and French Basque members in early 2000 illustrated the prevalence of provinces in which Basque nationalism was in the minority and dominated by the most nationalistic factions. The coordination of the delegations was made by an inter-diocesan commission composed of representatives elected by the priests and accountable to the assembly. From the beginning, the Coordination wanted to adopt a prophetic pastoral of liberation in favour of the Basque population freed from any form of oppression, beyond the capitalist class society, but was not intent on creating a parallel Church. Twenty years later, the theoretical references have little changed: EHAK still abides by a liberation theology adapted to the European and Basque context; it does not see itself at odds with the Church hierarchy, but rather wants to promote grassroots activists. Its aspiration for an incarnated Church is the same: “We are a herri, and this reality must shape our evangelizing action.” Such diverging opinions and interpretations between this movement and the Episcopate regularly crystallize on recurrent issues such as the creation of a unified Basque ecclesiastical province (Itçaina, 1998) or during elections.

The Coordination was joined by some associations, the Popular Christian Communities (CCPs) which started coordinating their action in 1976-77. Drawing their inspiration from the Chilean model of the Cristianos para el socialismo, they progressively organized themselves, with a strong influence exerted by the Navarrese, as in the case of the Coordination. The magazine Herria 2000 Eliza (Herria-Church) was first the mouthpiece of the CCPs, but soon created its own collective. In his doctoral thesis of theology, Felix Placer, a member of EHAK, contends that the political commitment and religious belief of these groups can be seen as an alternative way to live and express their Christian identity within the Church of the Basque Country (Placer Ugarte, 1998: 25). The CCPs and EHAK, from different backgrounds but with a common desire to promote grassroots activism, developed an ecclesiastical alternative which was regarded as a

30 Interview with a Guipuzcoan member of EHAK, San Sebastian.
32 Interview with a Guipuzcoan member of EHAK, San Sebastian.
33 The Basque word herri means “people”, “country” or “village”, according to the context, as does the Spanish word pueblo.
34 Ibidem.
35 In 1993, there were 15 communities in Navarre, 5 in Biscaye, 4 in Guipuzcoa and 3 in Alava.
36 Contrary to EHAK which belongs to the protest movement of the clergy, the CCPs were rather inspired by the national and international context for the promotion and restoration of the Christian communities, after Vatican II.
popular Basque Church. There were obvious links with the socio-political situation “which made it possible for the hopeful emergence of a popular process in the Basque Country, at the social, political and cultural level, in which CCPs and EHAK wanted to participate on account of their specific liberation and Christian choices” (Placer Ugarte, 1998: 178). Much like the clergy in the 1960s, EHAK defended avant-gardist intra-ecclesiastical claims. It took a particularly active part in the social forum for peace. In 2003, Herria 2000 Eliza managed to organize a meeting with J. I. Ibarretxe, the president of the Autonomous Basque Community, some academics, trade union members and political actors from various origins, in order to debate on the presidential project of sovereignty-association. The title given to the book which was then published, Tiempo de soluciones (Herria 2000 Eliza, 2003), much similar to the Time for Peace in Ireland, clearly showed their will to promote mediation and their desire to have a Basque herri recognized.

It is also necessary to mention the recent developments of Catholic mediation. Many Christian actors have decided to diversify their mediation efforts, in the face of mounting tension and continued violence. We may quote the active role played by the Church in the French Mission de la mer, in an attempt at defusing the crisis between French and Spanish Basque fishermen, or the role of the Cáritas in favour of the new non-European immigrants. These actions in social matters are complementary to the political mediation efforts of the Church, often with more effective results in spite of their low visibility.

The Church, the Public Sphere, Democracy and Mediation

What is really at play in the mediation efforts of the Church is its place in the public sphere and its relation to politics. Acknowledging the political dimension of a problem means turning it into a conflicting issue that might be solved through “conversations” within the public sphere. The Church’s commitment in the peace process is buttressed by its adherence to the principle of subsidiarity. It legitimates the role of the intermediary bodies in conflict resolution, especially as the so-called political actors and institutions have proved unable to propose any effective solution. Christians are also deeply motivated by their refusal of violence and politicization. The enduring conflict and persistent uncompromising attitudes may have shaken Christians out of their apolitical positions, which did not induce them to get involved in politics (Braud, 1998: 39-40). The Church’s reluctance to commit itself in the political arena has influenced the various mediation efforts carried out by the Clergy and the peace movements. According to a Franciscan from the Arantzazu community, there is a specific Christian approach to peace: “In our reflection group on peace, there are two tendencies: for some, we must work with Herri Batasuna, with Elkarri. Elkarri is active in 200 villages and organizes extensive debates.
It is not always successful. Their method consists of bringing out the differences between people. On the contrary, the method of the Church is to smooth away the differences. Elkarri has developed a specific methodology: first everybody speaks, then there are explanations, and finally the discussion really starts. For the other group, we should rather turn towards Monsignor Setién’s speech and the methodology of the vicar-general on the peace process, in addition to the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi."

In his work, L. Mees highlights the fact that the diverging opinions on the political sphere as a conflicting issue may account for the differences among the peace movements. Contrary to Gesto por la paz, Elkarri considers that the debate is political, not ethical (Mees, 2003: 97). In that respect, the source of violence must be found in the conflicting opposition between a significant part of the population and the Spanish State on issues such as power-sharing and self-determination. L. Mees also points out that there is a double risk in the openly political dimension of Elkarri’s action, since its efficiency depends on the support of the political parties. Elkarri may also be criticized by all those who feel reluctant about the intervention of non-elected organizations.

In addition to these diverging interpretations that go beyond the restricted circle of people who are close to the Church, the Catholic actors have finally been submitted to a double and paradoxical process of politicization – both internal through the emergence of factions, and external with the arrival of a third sector for peace, which is also politically divided. The impossibility for the Christians to adopt a neutral stance is probably much to the liking of the most polarized actors in the conflict. For instance ETA criticized the rally for peace organized in April 2001 by the Basque-Navarre bishops in Armentia, accusing the Church of trying to “depoliticize the conflict” to go back to the period “before the Lizarra pact”, while recalling the mediating role of the Church during the 1998-99 ceasefire. The discrepancy between the interests of the various parties and the mediation objectives has led to contradictions and to a deadlock.

If we reduce this theory *ad absurdum*, we might be tempted to find some parallel – which we shall immediately refute – between the democratic approaches of the religious actors and the most radical party. Both institutions buttress their action by a relative conception of democratic rule. The armed organization refuses the democratic system established by the Spanish government after Franco’s regime. The autonomous status is regarded as an illusion. The Church’s approach to democracy is much more complex. Politically committed Christians are confronted with the task of surmounting the contradiction between the logic of democratic public deliberation – laws are made from the collective will of the citizens – and the absolute

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37 Interview with Brother E., Arantzazu, *op. cit.*, translated from Basque.
primacy of the binding religious law for everybody, whether they adhere to it or not (Hervieu-Léger, 1996: 367). There are superior Christian values that cannot be reduced to the majority rule. For the Church, the nature of the law has often been more important than its form, in accordance with its conformity to the Catholic conception of common good. Some values of democratic governance such as tolerance and acceptation of the Other are encouraged by the Church, but other aspects may be ethically challenged in spite of their institutional ratification (Anderson, 2003). What applies to family policies, ethical questions (Barreiro, 2001) or immigration (Itçaina, 2006; 2007b) is also valid on the question of identity. In a sense, compromises and negotiations which are inherent in a democratic regime may have had destabilizing effects on the Church. Of course, this parallelism is negated as soon as it is formulated. The means and objectives of an armed organization are by essence totally opposed to the Christian doctrine. The fact remains that some form of common scepticism towards a purely institutional response may bring diametrically opposed actors round to adopting similar views in their attempt at creating a new political space for deliberation. Then it often does not take long before diverging interpretations and practices reappear.

Sociologists and political specialists in religion use two sets of variables to apprehend the relations between religion and politics (Bréchon, 2000). In their view, the strategies adopted by the Church have alternated between withdrawal (radical eremitic monachism), consent (conformism towards power) and protest (worker priests, for example). But, in all cases, the action of the religious institutions within the public sphere has been either discreet or visible. The rallies for peace organized by the Basque bishops are good illustrations of such a “visible” strategy. Conversely, the bilateral talks organized by some religious figures - acting as brokers - with the Spanish Minister of the Interior and ETA representatives have been carried out in the strictest secrecy. In strategic terms, the mediating efforts made by the Catholic Church in the Basque Country have evidenced its refusal to withdraw within itself and adopt a purely religious and non-political approach to the peace process. It should be noted that the regular clergy - the religious institution which is supposedly the most cut off from the rest of the world - has also taken an active part in mediation. The Arantzazu Franciscans, for instance, have justified their political commitment on the grounds of their own theological references. But it is much more difficult to determine whether the Church’s action is a sign of consent or protest. It all depends of course on the perspectives respectively adopted by the various actors and the religious groups concerned or the initial positions of the peace movements. Mediation efforts carried out by the defenders of Basque identity are marked by a strong but implicit criticism of the Basque territorial entity and of its autonomous status. The strategy adopted by the Bishops cannot be understood as part of a
wider protest movement against the prevailing institutional arrangement. It is therefore impossible to determine in a clear and definite way the relations between religion and politics, because of the importance of each actor’s position on the local political scene.

It is therefore necessary to size up the real impact of Catholic mediation. Unquestionably the Church has significantly contributed to structuring public deliberation (the forum) on the peace process. Nevertheless such activism does not necessarily mean that the Church has been present in the political arena – the locus of negotiation and decision-making. Can we thus say that all mediation efforts made by the Church have been vain? It is much too early to know if these efforts will not eventually be instrumental in the emergence of a real debate between the actors concerned. The radicalism of the separatist movement or the excessively repressive positions adopted by the Spanish authorities in a general context of political violence bode ill for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The Church may well seize such an opportunity to recover some social legitimacy even if it is not part of a deliberate strategy on its part. It is much more doubtful whether it will effectively contribute to finding a durable solution, i.e. the stabilization of competing interpretations of the identity question in an appeased political game.
The Basque question
Recent chronology (1998-2007)

- 1988-1998: Ajuria-Enea Agreement. Presented by the president of the Basque Autonomous Community and accepted by all the political parties represented in the Basque parliament, with the exception of Herri Batasuna. Agreement on the development of the statute of autonomy and the end of violence. In the mid’1990s, the agreement loses its credibility due to the exclusion of radical nationalists, and the predominance of anti-terrorist goals.


- 1997, July 17: kidnapping and assassination of Miguel Angel Blanco, a young local councillor of Ermua (Vizcaya) by ETA. Huge mobilization against ETA.


- 1998, September: Lizarra-Garazi agreement, continuing the Foro de Irlanda. The Lizarra-Garazi is an agreement between Basque nationalist parties (PNV, EA, Ezker Batua, Herri Batasuna), trade-unions and social movements. The Basque conflict is identified as involving the French and the Spanish states. The agreement bets on dialogue and negotiation to put an end to the conflict. The Lizarra-Garazi is perceived as a sovereignist agreement and rejected by non-basque nationalist formations.

- 1998, September 18: announce of ceasefire by ETA.


- 2000, January: killings by ETA.

- 2000-2005: Acuerdo por las Libertades y contra el Terrorismo, anti-terrorist agreement between Partido Popular-PSOE at the Spanish level, which will lead to a series of measures against Basque radical nationalism and its political, cultural and social environment.


- 2002 June: new law on political parties in Spain.

- 2003: Batasuna becomes illegal, in application of the new law.

- 2004, March 11: islamist bombings in Madrid. 191 people are killed, and 1500 are wounded.


- November 2004: Batasuna Anoeta proposal “Orain herreria, orain bakea” (the Country/People now, peace now).

- December 2004: the Ibarretxe (president of the Basque Autonomous Community) Proposal for the Reform of the Political Status of the Autonomous Community of Euskadi (“Ibarretxe plan”) is approved.
by the Basque parliament (absolute majority of voters thanks to the three votes by Sozialista Abertzaleak, parliamentary representation of radical nationalist).


- 2006, March: ceasefire of ETA


- 2006, 30th December: Madrid bomb attacks by ETA. Calling off of the ceasefire.
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