



THE VALLE DE LOS CAÍDOS: PLACE OF MEMORY, FAITH, AND POLEMIC

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The Basilica of Santa Cruz del Valle de los Caídos (Holy Cross of the Valley of the Fallen in Combat), inaugurated by Franco in 1959 and consecrated by Pope John XXIII in 1960, is regularly the subject of severe criticism by Spanish politicians and journalists. The controversies grew and reached peak intensity in 2019, following the decision by the Spanish government to proceed with the exhumation of Franco's body.

The Vice President of the socialist government of [José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero](#) (President from 2004 to 2011) had wanted, many years ago, to make it "a museum of the dictatorship." The president of the Forum for Remembrance had wanted it to be converted into a museum "of the horrors of repression." More radical still, the Irish-born socialist writer, Ian Gibson, no doubt unconsciously following the example of the Islamist demolishers of the [Bamiyan Buddhas](#), suggested destroying the monument by dynamiting it.

It seemed the Law of Historical Memory, of December 26, 2007, had provisionally settled things: the Basilica of the Valley of the Fallen in Combat was to continue to be a place of Catholic worship, but political gatherings were prohibited there. This solution seemed reasonable, after all, because this monument, which is the most visited in Spain after the royal palace and the Escorial, is part of Spanish heritage.

But under the guise of justice, the fight against hatred and the fight against "fascism," the so-called "good-guys," embodied by a large part of the political caste, is now calling for reform and extension of the Law of Historical Memory and implicitly the generalized, official teaching of only their vision of history. The spirit of the Democratic Transition (spirit of reciprocal forgiveness and consultation between government and opposition), which had so beneficially dominated the years 1976 to 1982, and which the international press then unanimously praised, has now seen better days.

Most of the Spanish media seem to see this no longer as a shameless manipulation of justice and history, as an unacceptable cowardice. The nation, the family, and religion (Catholicism of course, but also Christianity more generally) have once again become privileged targets of subversive political propaganda. The coalition government of President [Pedro Sánchez](#) (a socialist at odds, like [Zapatero](#) was, with the cultural moderatism of [Felipe González](#)) and Vice President [Pablo Iglesias](#) (the leader of [Podemos](#), a party shared between supporters of Marxism-Leninism and followers of "Bolivarian" or "Venezuelan" populism) has not ceased to rekindle the ideological battle, or even to foment social

unrest with the shameful aim of maintaining power, no matter what the cost.

Over the years, the Valle de los Caídos has become one of the pillars of "progressive-leftist" mythology, and one of the main symbols of the struggle for freedom of expression and worship in Spain. Located 58 kilometers from Madrid, the imposing mausoleum of the Sierra de Guadarrama, where the remains of 33,847 nationals and republicans (including more than 21,000 identified and more than 12,000 unknown) rest alongside each other, was originally designed by Franco and the Francoists as a monument to perpetuate the memory of the "glorious Crusade." This was, moreover, the point of view of the Church and in particular that of the Catalan cardinal and Primate of Spain, [Plá y Deniel](#), in 1945.



The religious component had been, let us remember, decisive during the uprising of July 1936. During the Spanish Civil War, in the Popular Front area of Spain, nearly 7,000 priests and nuns were killed (not counting the thousands of lay people, eliminated because of their faith), religious worship was prohibited, and the destruction of religious buildings was systematic.

But from the end of the 1950s, on the eve of the inauguration of the monument, once spirits had partly calmed down, the architectural complex had been presented “in the name of reconciliation,” as a tribute to the combatants of the two camps of the Civil War. To this end, the decree-law of August 23, 1957 clearly ordered: “Consequently, it will be the Monument to all those killed in combat, over whose sacrifice the peaceful arms of the Cross will triumph.”

The construction of this colossal temple, sheltered by the mountain and crowned on the outside with a monumental cross, took place between 1940 and 1958. It was entrusted first to the Basque architect, [Pedro Muguruza](#), then to [Diego Mendez](#). The basilica, of pharaonic dimensions, has a capacity of 24,000 people. The nave measures no less than 262 meters. The maximum height at the transept is 41 meters. On the outer plaza 200,000 people can gather. The cross, designed by Muguruza, rises 150 meters, to which must be added the 1400 meters of altitude of the Risco de la Nava. Two cars can pass each other along the arms of the cross, which are each 45 meters long.



[Juan de Avalos](#) is the creator of the Valle sculptures, in particular the gigantic heads of the evangelists

at the foot of the cross. Before the Civil War, he was active in the ranks of the socialist youth and held the membership card number 7 of the Socialist Party of Mérida. Another interesting detail, the figure of Christ that dominates the main altar and that rests on a cross, whose juniper wood was cut by Franco, is the work of a Basque nationalist, the sculptor [Julio Beobide](#), disciple of the famous painter [Ignacio Zuloaga](#).



Above the altar, the impressive mosaic-covered cupola is the work of Catalan artist, [Santiago Padrós y Elías](#). With a diameter of over 33 meters, it contains no less than 5 million tesserae. The central figure is

Christ in Majesty, surrounded by angels, saints and martyrs.



This religious building includes not only a monumental church - elevated to the rank of basilica by Pope John XXIII - but also a Benedictine abbey. Until the Democratic Transition, there was also a Center for Social Studies (Centro de estudios sociales del Valle de los Caídos), the objective of which was to study, collect and disseminate the social doctrine of the Church, so that it inspired laws, and the actions of businessmen and the unions. The ideology of the Franco regime was marked - let us not forget - by

the desire to rebuild a state which was to be above all Catholic. And it was for this reason that [Pope Pius XII](#) had conferred on the Generalissimo the Supreme Order of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the highest distinction of the Holy See.

The actual information on the construction of the structure was rarely published in the press. The media took the opportunity to report often extravagant figures. Thus, the number of political prisoners who worked there was not 14 or 20,000 (or even 200,000), as was repeated following the rants of the socialist [Léo Brincat](#), responsible for the draft recommendation condemning the Franco regime to the Council of Europe (November 4, 2005). In fact, the number of worker-prisoners never exceeded 800 to 1000 men, or less than half of all workers (prisoners and free employees). At the end of 1943, the Spanish press even reported a total of 600 workers.



In a [book](#) published by the architect, and director of the work, Diego Mendez, it is stated that 2000 men worked in the Valle from 1940 to 1958. One of the very few researchers, if not the only one, who took the trouble to methodically analyze the documentary evidence ("Valle de los Caídos"), in the General Archives of the Royal Palace of Madrid (General Administrations Section) is professor of history at the CEU San Pablo University, in Madrid, Alberto Bárcena Pérez, author of [La redención de penas en el Valle de los Caídos](#) (*The Reduction of Sentences at Valle de los Caídos*), and a 2015 book, [Los presos del Valle de los Caídos](#) (*The Prisoners of the Valle de los Caídos*). The archival material is housed in 69 boxes, and the thousands of documents they contain completely demolish the caricatured and fraudulent image claimed by politicians, journalists and academics in the service of power.

The archives of the former Centro de estudios sociales del Valle de los Caídos (Center for Social Studies of the Valle de los Caídos) show 2,643 workers, including a minority of political prisoners who, in principle, "had to be volunteers who freely chose the system of reduction of sentence by work;" or, first, two days of reduction of the sentence for one day of work, then, six days of reduction for one day of work.

Alberto Barcena specifies that the prisoners carried out the same work as the free workers and under identical conditions (wages, hours and food). The detainees were also employed by the companies responsible for the work. They had to submit their request through the Patronato de Nuestra Señora de la Merced or National Center for the Redemption of Sentences, which had been created for this purpose and which had its seat at the Ministry of Justice.

The main part of the salaries of the detainees (fixed according to their family responsibilities) was sent directly to the families through the "local pro-prisoners committees," which covered most of the national territory. Another part was placed in a booklet, the full amount of which was paid back when the detainee was released. Finally, a third part was given by hand. Political prisoners did not receive 0.5 or 1 peseta a day as it has often been written, but 7, then 10 pesetas, plus bonuses for hazardous work. Their families could reside in the barracks in the Valle, provided for this purpose. The working conditions were of course very harsh and the salary more than modest but, it must be remembered that at that time the standard of living in Spain was very low and that the average salary of a university assistant at the highest was barely 300 pesetas per month.

In 1950, nine years before the construction was completed, under the remission system, there was no longer a single political prisoner in the Valle. According to the testimonies of the doctor, chief physician,

Angel Lausin, and the nurse, Luis Orejas, two proven supporters of the Popular Front, who arrived at the start of the worksite as political prisoners, and who remained there, after serving their sentence - in nineteen years of work, there were between fourteen and eighteen deaths (to which must be added more than fifty victims who died due to silicosis). Finally, the monument was not financed by the Spanish taxpayer, but by private donations and by the profits of annual lotteries.

The ultimate avatar of history: the last will of the old dictator, Francisco Franco, who died on November 20, 1975, was not respected. The Caudillo wanted to be buried in the cemetery of Pardo like other figures of the regime. But the head of the first government of the transition, [Arias Navarro](#), and the new head of state, Juan Carlos (proclaimed King on November 22, 1975) decided otherwise. The King asked the Benedictine community, guardians of the Valle and of the Basilica, for authorization to bury the body of Francisco Franco at the foot of the altar, in front of the burial place of [José Antonio Primo de Rivera](#), which was done with great fanfare on November 23, 1975.

Forty-three years later, on February 15, 2019, the day after his arrival at the Moncloa Palace, President Pedro Sánchez pledged to have the remains of dictator Franco exhumed as quickly as possible from the Basilica of Valle de los Caídos. This resulted in an endless legal battle. For a whole series of reasons, the Basilica is a place of worship whose inviolability is guaranteed by an international treaty on religious freedom, signed between Spain and the Holy See in 1979. The Benedictines, responsible for the monument, do not depend on the Vatican, but are under the authority of their abbot and that of the superior of their order, the abbot of the [Abbey of Solesmes](#).

The Franco family demanded that the remains of the Caudillo be transferred to the family vault of the [Cathedral of Almudena](#) (Madrid), a proposal unacceptable to the socialist government. Finally, the improvised drafting of the royal decree-law ordering the exhumation was also to be a source of complications. Its strict application could indeed result in the immediate exhumation of 19 Benedictine monks as well as that of 172 other people who died after the end of the Civil War, and who are all buried in the Valle.



Finally, after the Supreme Court gave its approval, the political will of the government was imposed and the exhumation was carried out by the police on September 24, 2019. Since then, more or less authorized voices have been calling for the exhumation of José Antonio Primo de Rivera, who is, however, also a [victim](#) of the Civil War. But at this stage, we cannot say whether, in the near or distant future, the authorities intend to give a new meaning to the monument, to desecrate the Basilica, or even to demolish the monumental Cross. These different options are in any case openly considered in the mainstream media.

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The [photo](#) shows the Pieta of the Valle de los Caídos, sculpted between 1952 and 1959 by Juan de Avalos.

Translated from the original French by N. Dass.

