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QUEEN ISABELLA OF SPAIN - SAINT OR CRIMINAL?

by Marc M. Tanenbaum

A Spanish priest has petitioned the Vatican to beatify Queen Isabella of Spain (1451-1504) as a saint. The universal reaction in both the Jewish and Muslim communities has been shock and disbelief.

How can one comprehend the radical disparity in perceptions of Queen Isabella - and King Ferdinand (1452-1516) - between some Catholics and virtually all Jews? (Muslims will appropriately speak for themselves.)

There are apparent political-religious motives today on the part of some ultra-conservative clergy and their civic allies to ~~try~~ try to embarrass the socialist Spanish government and progressive Catholics who have advocated religious freedom for Jews and Protestants. But I am persuaded that this Queen Isabella sainthood project would not have been undertaken had there not existed a pervasive cultural image in Spanish society of this queen as a person of high moral virtue.

That idealized imagery mocks the painfully recorded details of Jewish (and Muslim) histories which for centuries have condemned Isabella as the mother of one of the cruelest reigns of terror in human experience.

Lest these comments be viewed as hyperbole or Catholic-bashing, let's look briefly at how representative Catholic and Jewish scholarship have differed in their portrayals of Queen Isabella, the Spanish Inquisition, and Tomás de Torquemada, the Inquisition's Inspector General.

The New Catholic Encyclopedia is an authoritative 14-volume work published in 1967 in the United States to wide critical acclaim. The Jewish Encyclopedia is a milestone 12-volume work published in 1903 (which, despite its

age, remains a classic.)

ON QUEEN ISABELLA: The Catholic Encyclopedia writes - "Isabella I, Queen of Castille...was devoted to the religious and political unity of Spain, the modern history of which begins with her reign. ... (She) united Castile with Aragon when Ferdinand V who she~~d~~ had married in 1469, succeeded to the throne of Aragon in 1479. Together the reyes catolicos (Catholic rulers) suppressed civil war and banditry; reformed the law, the judiciary, and the administration; built a regular army; reconquered Granada (1431-92) and strengthened the monarchy vis-a-vis the nobles, the cities, and the Church." (Vol. VII, p. 664)

ON THE SPANISH INQUISITION: "In 1480 the Inquisition was established for all of Spain, and under Tomas de Torquemada (1483-98) it investigated Marranos, whose conversion to Christianity was suspect. In 1492, Jews were required to become Christian - or leave Castile and Aragon, and in 1502 Moslems had to make the same choice."

ON THE INQUISITOR GENERAL, TOMÁS DE TORQUEMADA - "Legend has transformed Torquemada into a cruel monster, but he was actually an energetic, uncouth religious, utterly devoid of ambition, who succeeded in giving his own austere character to the new institution. He carried out his mission until his death (September 16, 1498.)

From these descriptions, one would conclude that Queen Isabella was a model ruler, of impeccable progressive achievements in statecraft and civility. The Spanish Inquisition appears as a somewhat uncomfortable Catholic-Jewish encounter which had little to do with terror, murder, and finally, cruel expulsion. And Torquemada was not "a monster" but simply "uncouth."

From Isabella's depiction, no Catholic reader would have a wisp of a notion of her brutality, her violence, and the inquisition's systematic destruction of the lives of maranos, faithful Jews, and Moslems.

Should such a purified image of Queen Isabella prevail in the Vatican, there would be few, if any, obstacles to bestowing sainthood on her royal person.

But there is another Isabella, another Spanish Inquisition, and another Torquemada. For those understandings one needs to examine reliable Jewish sources.

The Jewish scholarly literature on this period is vast. For reasons of brevity I confine myself to the Jewish Encyclopedia's account:

"In early September 1480, Isabella urged by ecclesiastical dignitaries, affixed her signature to the document which established the inquisition in her dominions.

"The Tribunals of the Inquisition were objects of fear and terror for nearly 300 years. ...The New or Spanish Inquisition, introduced into the united kingdoms of Castile, Aragon, and Navarre by Ferdinand and Isabella the Catholic was directed chiefly against converted Jews and against Jews and Moors. During the cruel persecutions, many thousands of Jewish families accepted baptism in order to save their lives. (JE, Vol VI, p. 588 ff.)

"As soon as the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella ascended their respective thrones, steps were taken to segregate the Jews both from the 'conversos' and from their fellow countrymen. At the Cortes of Toledo, in 1480, all Jews were ordered to be separated in special 'barrios' and, at the Cortes of Fraga, two years later, the same law was enforced. In Navarre, they were ordered to be confined in Jewries at night."

On February 6, 1481, the first auto de fé at Seville was held with solemn procession at Tablada. Six men and women were burned at the stake accused of desecration of the image of Jesus.

At Seville, there were at least one auto de fé every month. Seventeen Maranos were burned at the "Quemadero" (the stake) on March 26, 1481. Many were burned a few weeks later. By the following November nearly 300 had perished at the stakes, while 79 were condemned to imprisonment for life.

Before the end of the fifteenth century, there were nearly a dozen tribunals in Spain/ which inflicted inhuman torture, suffering and death, as well as depriving their victims of their property.

Significant for the Vatican's present considerations, the inquisitions at Seville and in other cities were so cruel that complaints were made to Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484). On January 23, 1483, this Renaissance Pope sent to Queen Isabella "a brief" in which he wrote:

"It seems to us that the Queen is urged to institute and confirm the Inquisition by ambition and greed for earthly possessions rather than by zeal for the faith and true fear of God." (Llorente, "Histoire Critique de L'Inquisition d'Espagne," p. 165.)

While sanctioning the Spanish Inquisition, the Pope repeatedly endeavored in 1482 and 1483 to check its fanatic zeal. He protested the cruelty and illegality of the inquisition of Seville, and insisted on appointing a man of his own choice to whom maranos might appeal.

Ferdinand and Isabella rejected the Pope's urgent recommendation to treat maranos more humanely, and they still more strongly disapproved his giving absolution to heretics condemned by the tribunal.

Isabella not only endeavored to exterminate the Jewish people from her own kingdom, but also compelled Italian princes to do the same. She demanded that Henry VIII promise not to allow the Spanish Jews to stay in England. She offered the hand of her daughter to Dom Manuel of Portugal only on the condition that he would expel both the Spanish maranos and immigrants and the native Portuguese Jews. (Prescott, "History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.

In addition to Pope Sixtus' repudiation of their cruelty and inhumanity, there was violent opposition to Isabella ^{and} ~~by~~ Ferdinand's inquisition throughout Aragon and Catalonia. The spontaneous reaction came not only from conversos and their relatives but also from Catholics who considered the

inquisition destructive of their liberties. Catalonian cities also strongly opposed it, and riots broke out at Bardelona, Valencia, Teruel, and Lerida. There was so much opposition that the assembled Cortes sent a deputation to protest to Isabella and Ferdinand, who remained inflexible.

In order to assure greater efficiency and rigor in pursuing their victims, Isabella and Ferdinand established a Supreme Council of the Inquisition. On~~th~~ October 17, 1483, they appointed the Dominican, Tomas de Torquemada as Inquisitor General. (He was then 63 years old and prior of a monastery at Segovia, his native city.)

To give uniformity to the tribunals, Torquemada drafted an inquisitorial constitution, "Compilacion de ~~las~~ Instruccion~~es~~,^{es}" ~~containing~~ containing some 28 / ~~28~~ articles. Among its instructions were the order that if a marano remained impenitent, the condemned was to be tied to the stake and burned alive. If penitent, he was to be strangled before being placed on the pile.

Torquemada, during his term of fifteen years, condemned more than 8,000 Jews and maranos to be burned alive, and more than 6,000 dead were destroyed in effigy.

Adding insult to all this pain and suffering, Ferdinand and Isabella engaged in one moral betrayal after another.

In their early years as Queen and King, they were surrounded by baptized Jews or their sons who were their trusted confidential advisers and secretaries. The queen's confessor, Fernando de Telavera, was of Jewish descent on his mother's side. He was persecuted as a marano by the inquisition despite his ~~high office~~ trusted office. Even avowed Jews, foremost among them Don Isaac Abravanel, enjoyed Isabella's confidence ~~and~~ until excluded by pressure from the Dominicans.

Ferdinand was the great-grandson of a Jewish woman, the reputedly beautiful Paloma of Toledo. While still heir to the throne, he had many friendly dealings with numerous maranos. Pedro de la Caballera, a rich and respected marano of Saragossa, donated to Ferdinand some 40,000 ducats for a ~~xxxx~~ costly necklace that was Ferdinand's bridal gift to Isabella. He made ~~Dr~~ Francisco Sanchez his major domo, and appointed his son-in-law as governor of Aragon.

Nevertheless, under the powerful influence of the Dominicans, they showed the greatest intolerance to Jews, whether converted or otherwise.

Their ultimate betrayal of maranos and Jews came two years before the expulsion of "the heretics and infidels." Isabella and Ferdinand promised the Jews of the Moorish kingdom of Granada all the rights they possess^{ed} if they would assist the Spanish Christians in overthrowing the existing Muslim rule. Their promise was dated February 11, 1490, only two years before ~~x~~ it was publicly repudiated by the decree of expulsion.

Several months after the fall of Granada, an edict of expulsion was issued against the Jews of Spain by Isabella and Ferdinand on March 31, 1492. It ordered all ~~the~~ Jews of whatever age to leave the kingdom by the last day of July. Scholars testify that at least 200,000 had fled the country leaving behind the gloriously rich culture of the Golden Age and a large number of relatives who had been forced to convert.

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EPILOGUE - There are a number of basic considerations which, I believe, emerge from confronting the disparate Catholic and Jewish understandings of Queen Isabella, the Spanish Inquisition, and its Inspector-General Torquemada.

First, it would be inconceivable for the Vatican to proceed one step further on the beatification process of Queen Isabella without taking fully

and seriously into account the most responsible Jewish - and Muslim - scholarship on the murderous role of the queen in the Spanish Inquisition. Put plainly, she is no more deserving of sainthood than was Adolf Eichmann.

Second, if anything useful is to come out of this Isabella controversy - and before it needlessly inflames Catholic-Jewish relations throughout the world - the Vatican should consider convening a conference of the most competent Catholic, Jewish and Muslim scholars of the period of the Spanish Inquisition. This could help finally close the gap between the idealized and false treatment of Queen Isabella and this entire era in much Catholic teaching and the more realistic and truthful accounts that emerge from the victims' knowledge and experience.

Finally, on a moral and spiritual plane, to beatify Queen Isabella the criminal would make a standing mockery of Vatican Council II and Pope John Paul II's teachings of freedom of religious conscience and human rights.

On January 1, 1991, the World Day of Peace proclaimed by the Vatican, Pope John Paul II preached these words urbi ^{et} ~~et~~ orbi (to the city and the world):

"Today, the many peoples that make up the one human family are increasingly concerned that freedom of conscience, which is essential for the freedom of every human being, be recognized in practice and safeguarded by law.

"...a person ^{may} ~~may~~ not be treated as a kind of object governed solely by forces outside of his or her control...No human authority has the right to interfere with a person's conscience...Each individual's conscience (must) be respected by everyone else; people must not attempt to impose their own truth on others. The right to profess the truth must always be upheld, but not in a way which involves contempt for those who may think differently...Truth imposes itself solely by the force of its truth. To deny an individual complete freedom of conscience - and in particular the freedom to seek the truth - or ~~to~~ attempt to impose a particular way of seeing the truth, constitutes a violation of that individual's most personal rights

Rabbi Tanenbaum, for thirty years the director of international and interreligious relations of the American Jewish Committee, and past chairman of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, has retired to write a book on "The Vatican, the Jews, and Israel."