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TO : Department of State

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INFO : MADRID, ROME

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 ANALYSIS & DISTRIBUTION
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FROM : Amconsul BARCELONA

DATE: May 18, 1966

 SUBJECT : Spanish Police Attack 120 Catholic Priests in Barcelona
 May 11 During Protest March on Police Headquarters for

REF : Alleged Mistreatment of Student.

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 Authority NND 959 000
 By [Signature] NARA Date 2014

SUMMARY

Spanish police clubbed and beat a group of about 120 Catholic priests and monks in Barcelona on May 11 before astonished lunch-hour onlookers. The group, composed mainly of younger clergy, had walked from the Barcelona Cathedral to the nearby police headquarters to deliver a letter protesting the alleged brutal beating of a university student whom police arrested on May 6. The student, reportedly of leftist orientation, is a leader in the independent student association formed in Barcelona in defiance of government and academic regulations. (See Barcelona's A-44, November 24, 1965.)

Barcelona's Civil Governor visited the Archbishop of Barcelona on the morning of May 12, but the details of their conversation are not known. Various prominent priests and laymen called upon the Archbishop that same day to ask that he protest the beating and that, in accordance with Article 2343 of Canon Law, those who were responsible be excommunicated. The Archbishop reportedly gave no indication that he would take any action.

On May 14 about 150 priests gathered at the Archbishop's Palace to present a letter to him deploring the violence and asking for a declaration of excommunication against those responsible. The Archbishop promised to study the facts, but made no promises and generally appeared not to favor the plea. That evening he issued a prepared sermon

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to be read at Sunday Mass (May 15) in all churches in the diocese. The sermon called for Church unity but did not address itself directly to the events of May 11. In several churches, priests are reported to have violated the Archbishop's order that no comment be made apart from the prepared sermon; several strong attacks against the Church hierarchy and the Spanish Government were apparently made.

The Spanish Government has launched a campaign to turn public opinion against the priests involved in the May 11 affair and through intimidation has prevented any mention of the beatings in the press. Early indications are that this campaign has met with success, particularly outside of Barcelona. The government has raised the spectre of Catalan nationalism in connection with the priests' action in an effort to mobilize opinion unfavorable to them elsewhere in Spain.

The priests who took part in the event of May 11 are part of a growing segment of the Barcelona clergy which has been highly critical of Church hierarchy here for its alleged failure to support the doctrines of political liberty and human rights which emanated from the Vatican Council. They appear to be anxious to erase the image of the Catholic Church as the ally of the Franco regime and wish the Church to support increased political and social reform in Spain.

As of this writing the reaction of the ecclesiastical and civil authorities to the event of May 11 apparently has done nothing to reduce the seriousness of the tensions in the Church in Barcelona. The dissident priests, who have widespread sympathy and support within Barcelona, are reportedly planning to make a direct appeal to the Vatican asking that the Spanish hierarchy be overruled. The full extent of the repercussions of the May 11 beating and of the subsequent position of the Spanish Government and hierarchy cannot be evaluated fully at this point. It can be said, however, that considerable impact has been caused here which in all probability will influence future church and political events in the Barcelona region.

The priests and monks, some 120 in number, largely included younger members of the secular clergy. About 20 belonged to religious orders, including about 10 Jesuits, four or five Capuchins, and several others. They had walked from the Barcelona Cathedral to the central police headquarters, some three blocks distant, to present a letter to the police chief protesting the alleged beating of a university student who had been arrested on May 6.

The student, Joaquin BOIX Lluch, of the School of Engineering of the University of Barcelona, is a leader in the independent student association which was formed in that university despite the government's strong efforts to establish a single government-controlled student organization. (See Barcelona's A-44, November 24, 1965.) According to students, he was "tortured" and "beaten for several hours" during police interrogations and subsequently was hospitalized. Government statements deny that Boix was maltreated. Boix is reported by many sources to be extremely left-wing, but is thought not to be an actual member of the communist party.

(Comment: In a conversation with the Civil Governor and officers of the Consulate General on May 17, the Governor denied that Boix had been mistreated; he stated that Boix had been given a physical examination which disclosed no evidence of the alleged mistreatment. The Governor found the situation incomprehensible--priests marching to the police headquarters to protest the alleged mistreatment of a "communist" student.)

The priests gathered in the Barcelona Cathedral shortly before 1:00 p.m. on May 11, where they read and signed the letter protesting police brutality. Several Land-Rovers full of uniformed police were stationed alongside the Cathedral, but the police made no move as the priests left through the main door of the Cathedral at about 1:05 p.m. Several plainclothesmen who were present at that point unsuccessfully attempted to dissuade the priests from continuing the march. The priests, in quiet fashion, scarcely speaking among themselves, continued toward central police headquarters on nearby Via Layetana. As they reached the front of the building, they were met by several plainclothesmen and about ten uniformed police who prevented them from approaching the main door. The priests, forced back, were tightly grouped together in the middle of the street in front of the building. The police pushed them and shouted at them in an effort to make them disperse.

Suddenly, almost within two minutes from the time the priests arrived at the police station, about 50 members of the police "Mobile Brigade" ran out from the building and from a nearby police bus. With billy-clubs drawn, they attacked the priests furiously, driving them to the opposite side of Via Layetana from police headquarters and up an adjacent side street. The priests appeared not to fight back, but many of them raised their arms to defend themselves from the blows. Plainclothesmen joined in the attack, beating the priests and, in many instances, kicking them in the groin. The priests dispersed in various directions, in some cases pursued for short distances by the police. About 30 took refuge in the Jesuit residence on Lauria Street, about three blocks uptown. Jesuit sources report that the pursuing police waited outside the door to the Jesuit residence for several hours after the priests had entered.

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Many priests apparently suffered severe bruises and blood-blisters. One Capuchin monk was cut across the scalp, and another priest was reportedly knocked unconscious. No major injuries, however, seem to have occurred.

The incident has publicized and aggravated an already existing breach between a large liberal element of the Barcelona clergy and the Church hierarchy. This element, which is composed principally (although not exclusively) of younger priests, has been highly critical of the aging Archbishop of Barcelona, Gregorio MODREGO Casaus, for his failure to take a stand supporting the doctrines of political liberties and human rights which emerged from the Vatican Council. During the past year, they have scored him also for his failure to make protests when a visiting Belgian priest, Rev. Louis EVELY, S.J., was beaten by a gang of Falangist-Carlist toughs in November 1965 (see Barcelona's A-37, November 9, 1965), and when a professor of theology, Rev. Alvarez Bolado, S.J., was beaten by Spanish police on April 27, 1966, when they entered the university to disperse a student meeting. This dissident sector of the clergy in Barcelona is also apparently motivated by a strong desire to erase the image of the Catholic Church as the ally of the Franco regime and wishes the Church to support increased political and social reform in Spain.

All during the day following the incident, May 12, the Archbishop of Barcelona received visits by important persons in connection with the situation. The Civil Governor of Barcelona Province, Antonio IBANEZ Freire, called at the Archbishop's Palace at about 11:00 a.m., but the details of their conversation are not known. Other callers came to ask that the Archbishop protest the beatings. Among those received were the Rev. J. BONET, president of the Barcelona Association of Parish Priests; Capuchin Father Superior Salvador de las Borjas; and a leading layman Christian Democratic opposition leader. These three persons reportedly demanded that the Archbishop apply Article 2343 of Canon Law, which prescribes excommunication for any person who physically attacks a priest or a nun, regardless of the circumstances. According to Father Bonet, the Archbishop did not respond favorably to their appeal.

On May 14 about 150 priests gathered in the courtyard of the Archbishop's Palace, and the Archbishop received a delegation of six of them at about 1:30 p.m. They presented him a letter which deplored the violence committed against the priests and reiterated the demand for excommunication of those guilty of the act. The Archbishop reportedly promised to study the facts of the case, but gave no indication nor promise that any action would be taken. Fearing to leave the courtyard at first, the priests left in small groups of two and three in order not to provoke the interference of the police, who were stationed near the building.

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The same evening, the Archbishop published a sermon which was required to be read at Sunday Mass in all churches the following morning, May 15. The sermon called for conciliation and unity within the Church and contained only one vague reference to the use of violence. Accompanying the sermon were instructions that no other comments be made during the Sunday sermons in the diocese. Several priests disobeyed the order, however, and in one church the reporting officer heard a sermon couched in the strongest terms which criticized the Spanish regime and the Church hierarchy. Clandestine leaflets have also been circulated in many churches which criticize the Archbishop and give an account of the background and occurrences of May 11.

The Spanish Government's response has been to launch a strong public opinion campaign against the priests. Government newspapers have published daily articles and editorials critical of the priests who took part in the "demonstration" saying that they were acting in a manner unbecoming their clerical status. The national radio reported that the priests demonstrated "in tumultuous fashion" and that they were "shouting and running through the streets." Communist influence has been insinuated as a motivating factor in their behavior. Catalan separatism has also been cited repeatedly as a force which influenced the priests to "demonstrate." The accounts in the independent press have been notably non-committal, with the exception of a few articles unfavorable to the dissident priests. In no case has any mention of the beating been seen in the press.

Comment: The reaction of the ecclesiastical and civil authorities to the event of May 11 apparently has done nothing to reduce the seriousness of the crisis in the Church in Barcelona created by that dramatic incident. Support for the priests who were involved seems to be extremely high in Barcelona and includes the superiors of numerous orders, including the Jesuits. It is reported that a direct appeal will be made to the Vatican to take "appropriate action," meaning the overruling of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy. Such an appeal would undoubtedly have very strong backing from Barcelona clergy.

The Catalan separatist issue is being given full play by the government propaganda in an effort to align opinion in the rest of the country against the Barcelona priests. Early indications are that this policy has been successful.

The net effect of the affair in Barcelona seems to have been the polarization of a larger segment of the clergy than ever before into a political and ecclesiastical opposition status. The sentiment of this element

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appears to be strong and determined. Whereas the eventual results of the Church crisis cannot be seen clearly at this moment, it is evident that an extremely delicate situation persists within the Church which contains strong political overtones and which is likely to influence future political events in the Barcelona region.



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