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SUBJECT: POPE AVOIDS CONFRONTATION IN SPAIN

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, CDA, Vatican, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Pope Benedict XVI promoted traditional Catholic doctrine on the family and bioethics during his recent visit to Spain, but opted for respectful dialogue over open attacks against the Spanish government's policies on gay marriage, divorce and abortion. The pope aimed to pitch his message to the entire Western world and not just the Spanish. Vatican-based media and others commented on Spanish PM Zapatero's "snub" of a papal mass, but the Holy See took no offense at his absence. Holy See officials told us that from their perspective the visit was a success, even if challenges remain in Vatican - Spain relations. End Summary.

Calls to Strengthen Family and Morals

¶2. (SBU) Pope Benedict XVI traveled to Spain in early July for the Vatican's World Meeting of Families, setting the stage for potential conflict between the Holy See and a Spanish government that has irritated the Vatican with its positions on some "life and family issues" (reftel). In the event, Benedict did not shy away from comments on same-sex marriage, abortion, and genetic research, but the comments were not so much finger-wagging at the Spanish government, as a message aimed at the Western world in general. Benedict has prioritized a battle against what he sees as the Western world's embrace of relativism and radical secularism, charging that the West has forgotten the social adhesion provided by traditional Christian/moral values.

New Compendium

¶3. (SBU) The pope's visit coincided with the release of a new compendium of Catholic doctrine on the family. Issued by the Pontifical Council for the Family (this year celebrating its 25th anniversary), the document encourages traditional family life centered on a married heterosexual couple and their children, and condemns same-sex marriage, divorce, abortion and artificial contraception.

¶4. (SBU) More aggressive proponents of the lines reinforced by the document include Council for the Family President Cardinal Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, who recently sounded off against embryonic stem-cell research, threatening excommunication for the researchers, health professionals and women involved. American Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Vatican's theological body, has urged lawmakers to stand firm on issues such as same-sex marriage and the liberalization of legislation on abortion and divorce.

Pope Tries to Persuade - Not Confront

¶5. (C) In this context, the pope's tack in Spain was milder than some expected. While making his points on the relevant "family" issues clear, Benedict himself was keen to accent the positive during the conference. When asked by reporters about the legalization of gay marriage in Spain, the pontiff said he preferred to encourage heterosexual families, while at the same time offering help and respect to homosexuals. Monsignor Paolo Gualtieri (protect throughout), Vatican MFA Country Director for Spain, told us Benedict wanted to avoid direct criticism of the

Spanish government. In addition, he addressed, but did not emphasize the hot-button family issues in his private meeting with Spanish PM Zapatero. The pope asked for greater cooperation on those issues (and the teaching of religion in schools), Gualtieri said, but put more emphasis on issues such as immigration, international conflicts and Africa.

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Is Spain Worth a Mass?

¶6. (C) Vatican-based media and others reported "controversy" over PM Zapatero's decision not to attend the conference's concluding mass celebrated by the pope. Gualtieri told us that the pope was not miffed by Zapatero's absence. If anything, Gualtieri said, Zapatero stayed home to "save the Holy Father potential embarrassment" due to protests or other controversy that may well have occurred had he attended the mass. The conference as a whole had the fingerprints of conservative Catholic group Opus Dei and several right-leaning Spanish politicians - few of whom, our contacts emphasized to us, could be counted among Zapatero's greatest admirers.

¶7. (C) Media contacts told us privately that outgoing Vatican press office chief Joaquin Navarro-Valls (septel) purposely played up the "snub" angle. Vatican officials confirmed that Navarro-Valls was on his own on this one, and hinted that as a Spaniard and Opus Dei member himself, he had become too personally involved in the story. Gualtieri noted that the government was in fact represented by two cabinet ministers. "There really was no problem [regarding the mass]," he concluded.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) Continuing to surprise those who expected him to be a heavy-handed enforcer in the papacy, Benedict has used tact and persuasion rather than fire and brimstone in his battle against relativism and secularism. This may not be a fight that the pope can win in Spain or the rest of Western Europe, but his current approach may have greater long-term impact than the alternative.

MARTIN