

Priests in Portugal Helping Rightist Alliance

By JAMES M. MARKHAM

Special to The New York Times

FATIMA, Portugal, Nov. 29 — An eminent Socialist calls it, half-jokingly, "the biggest political party in Portugal." The Roman Catholic Church is not running in Sunday's parliamentary election, but for the first time since the 1974 revolution priests and even some bishops are actively lobbying against both the Communist and Socialist Parties and in favor of a right-wing electoral alliance.

The church's campaign style is far removed from the brightly colored posters, banners, noisy meetings and sound trucks that are found all across the country. Not a single piece of party propaganda is visible in this austere village, which has become a beacon for millions of Catholic pilgrims since 1917 when three young shepherds had visions of the Virgin Mary on its barren tableland.

But along the twisting roads that pilgrims follow to Fátima, a quiet political message is being put across. "The Portuguese people must decide whether they want a Marxist society, with all that implies for Christian values, or a more humane society with the conservation of the church's values," a young priest explains patiently in the 17th-century sacristy of a towering church in São João. "It is one bloc against another."

Political Role Opposed

A visitor asks the priest about the Socialist Party, which in 1975 was allied with the church in beating back a Communist attempt to take power. "The Socialist Party," counters the priest, "is a Marxist party and, have no doubt, they are being dishonest in exploiting justified aspirations for social justice."

He adds ominously that the Socialists plan to add atheism to school curriculums if they win.

This kind of partisan counsel is a virtual endorsement of the right-wing Democratic Alliance, which aims at winning an outright parliamentary majority Sunday. It is also against the public position of Portugal's Episcopal Conference, which has said that the church should "not move in the terrain of party politics."

But even some bishops have not felt bound by the Episcopal Conference. Pamphlets distributed by the Democratic Alliance cite the Archbishop of Viana do Castelo as having said that it is "illicit" for Catholics to vote for "certain political parties."

In Lisbon, politicians take this newfound activism of the church extremely seriously, and Mário Soares, the embattled Socialist leader, has paid conspicuous visits to churchmen to be assured of their neutrality. In an election that many expect to be very close, the engagement of hundreds of village priests could provide a decisive margin, especially in the conservative north.

The zeal of the clergy in the north has been redoubled because of the perception that the Communist Party is making inroads for the first time. One piece of Communist propaganda said that Jews would vote Communist were he alive today.

"They've been in this game for 2,000 years," said a well-placed military officer, wryly noting how the church backed Mr. Soares when he was defending its interests, but now, in a changed climate, has shifted to the Democratic Alliance. "They know how to do these things."

Appointment Splits Hierarchy

One reason for the church's return to the political scene was the appointment in July of a lay Catholic militant, Maria de Lurdes Pintassilgo, as caretaker Prime Minister to oversee the elections. A liberal on many questions — she has spoken in favor of abortion — Miss Pintassilgo split the church hierarchy, particularly after both the Communists and Socialists gave her unspoken backing in her nonparty role.

Her vision of Catholicism is not widely shared by the conservative Portuguese priesthood, which has been little touched by the left-wing brands of theology that have had great impact in Spain and Latin America.

The true reach of the church will only be gauged after the votes are in, and even around sacred Fátima, in rough fields and pastel-colored farmhouses, the clergy's voice is not always heeded. "Let the priests sing all they want," said a jolly rough-hewn man, halting his tractor to talk politics. "Nobody listens to them."

But strains of clericalism run as strong as those of anticlericalism in Portugal, and one Democratic Alliance candidate from the north confessed that he goes up to his constituency from Lisbon only on weekends. "During the week," he said, "the priests do the rest."



United Press International

Maria de Lurdes Pintassilgo, caretaker Prime Minister of Portugal, is a lay Catholic militant. A liberal on many questions, she has split the church hierarchy.