

Portugal's first lady

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Portugal's first woman prime minister is a committed Catholic and socialist whose beliefs have determined her public involvement in both political and church affairs.

When Maria de Lurdes Pintasilgo was recently appointed as Portugal's new Prime Minister, a leading Lisbon journalist greeted the news with the exclamation: "The Church returns to power." It was at first sight an inaccurate judgment. Five years after the revolution Portugal continues to be, as it has always been, a Catholic country — a fact reflected less in the size of congregations attending church on Sundays (extremely small compared to neighbouring Spain) than in the official religion of the country's political class. Examination of the background of Portugal's political leaders will reveal that the majority of them belonged to the Catholic university youth movement, *Accção Católica*, during the old regime. That they afterwards joined diverse political forces ranging from the extreme left People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) to the Opus Dei-inclined Christian Democrats (CDS) is proof of both the scope and depth of the gospel message. The point is of course that few of these leaders have kept their Catholicism in the public eye and in this respect Dra Pintasilgo must be counted among those few.

A brief examination of her *curriculum vitae* will confirm the extent of the Prime Minister's life-long Catholic involvement. From being the leader of Portugal's young university women, she joined the executive committee of *Pax Romana*, the international association of Catholic intellectuals and became president in 1956. She subsequently helped found in Portugal a national branch of the International Grail, through which she spearheaded a number of literacy and self-help projects in the poorer areas of northern Portugal. Appointed by the Vatican, from 1966 to 1970 she headed a committee which coordinated reports and opinions passing between the Catholic hierarchy and the Ecumenical Council of Churches. She has remained ecumenical in spirit ever since. When asked in a recent interview to define her Christianity, Dra Pintasilgo answered: "Unity among those who belong to Jesus Christ is more important than the divisions between the different denominations."

Her unorthodox views have extended to an outspoken defence of women's rights. Her involvement with the International Grail confirmed her belief that women not only could but also should make a more useful contribution to Portuguese society than the blinkered role marked out for them by tradition. The Portuguese constitution under the Salazar regime based itself on the primitive principle that all animals are equal and classified women accordingly. It stated that all Portuguese are equal before the law "except for women," the

differences being defined in terms of their nature or the interests of the family. The 1966 civil code stated: "The husband is the head of the family and as such he is to decide and direct on all matters concerning marital life." Legislation charting this blatant discrimination between the sexes was endless and Dra Pintasilgo made it one of her life-long ambitions to change it.

When, following the 1974 revolution, she was made minister for social affairs Dra Pintasilgo wrote a study paper in which her priorities were clearly expressed. "Within the context of revolution women must become dynamic elements in the reconstruction of the country, not simply by following the road opened up by men but rather by breaking entirely new ground." In retrospect her words are prophetic. Her appointment as Prime Minister follows a period of five years during which democracy has gradually made women's rights in Portugal a reality. The new Civil Code, which came into force in April last year, confirmed women's equal rights within the family. An equal opportunities act based on the British law is now under consideration. Portugal's constitution lays down that no person can be discriminated against because of her sex. "I see my appointment as largely symbolic. It will show other women in Portugal that it is no longer impossible to get this far. But I do not believe that simply by virtue of my appointment discrimination against women will end overnight," Dra Pintasilgo said recently, hinting that the battle was only half won.

The Prime Minister sees no contradiction between her religion and her left-wing views. She has said that her defence of women's rights springs naturally from her Catholic belief that "all humanity, men and women, are made to be free and equal in dignity." She denies that she is a Marxist, or rather refuses to admit that the term is altogether relevant: "I see society as a social fabric that needs continuous understanding and change so that people can live in a happier and more just way. Equality of opportunity is for me a key question."

Her humanist approach was clearly reflected in her government programme which has somehow managed to avoid mentioning in great detail any of the more practical issues facing the country — such as how and when an agreement should be signed with the International Monetary Fund. Instead the programme talks bravely of the need to fill the gap between "those whose purchasing power is so large that they overspend and those who have so little that they live below the subsistence level." For the first time in Portugal's recent political history health and social security is

given as much space in the programme as the government's economic policies.

The nagging question, though, is whether Dra Pintasilgo's style is quite appropriate for the caretaker role she has been asked to play in the delicate run-up to the autumn election. Despite her public avowal of neutrality, her left-wing concepts have already incensed those on the right of the political spectrum. Both the centre right Social Democrats (PSD) and the conservative Christian Democrats (CDS) have accused her of promoting a third-world type militarism and of *neogoncalvismo*. The latter is a reference to the so-called "hot summer" of 1975 when the extreme left made an all-out bid for power in Portugal under the auspices of the pro-Communist Prime Minister Vasco Gonçalves. The right is also unhappy about Dra Pintasilgo's links with some left-wing army officers. These include Major Ernesto Melo Antunes, a leading member of the military Council of the Revolution. The latter is a hang-over from Portugal's military coup in 1974, and although its powers have been greatly reduced, it still has a veto over parliamentary legislation and advises the President on constitutional matters. Finally, there is a fear that Dra Pintasilgo's caretaker minister of information may be tempted to purge the media which has taken on a remarkably right-wing tinge in the past few months. The view is that the government may use its few months in office to manipulate the largely state-owned media in favour of the left-wing parties fighting in the next election.

Right-wing fears are probably exaggerated. Accusations of *neogoncalvismo* fade in the light of history. For Dra Pintasilgo was herself one of the many Portuguese to be victimised by the Communists during the summer of 1975, and was forced to abandon the ministry of social affairs as a result. Major Melo Antunes was one of the main signatories of the famous "document of the nine" in 1975, the first open attack on the undemocratic methods of the pro-Communist officers to be written from within the armed forces movement in the months following the revolution. The virulent attacks from the right have probably more to do with the more subtle threat of Dra Pintasilgo's particular brand of Catholicism.

Until now both the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats have regarded themselves as the leading representatives of the Catholic vote in Portugal. They have cultivated their links with the hierarchy and promoted the deep-rooted religious feelings of conservative sectors of the population whenever Communism has reared its head. For the first time since the revolution, Portugal has a Prime Minister firmly committed to the social programme of the post-conciliar Church who yet manages to steer clear of the dogma of party politics. Dra Pintasilgo has after all been asked to play a caretaker role until the autumn election so she can afford to be staunchly independent.

It will be interesting to see to what extent her style and her vision will play havoc with the Catholic vote at the next poll.