The ideology of the Franco regime was based on a strict identification between Church and State known as National Catholicism. Under the dictatorship the Church enjoyed a vast array of privileges, ranging from financial support to control of the education system, as well as the adaptation of legislation to Catholic teaching. These privileges were confirmed in the 1953 Concordat signed between the Spanish state and the Vatican, which made Spain a confessional state, the only one of its kind in Europe. The concept of “National Catholicism” is, however, a contradiction in terms, and the strict identification of the Church with the regime severely compromised its position. By 1953 the cracks were already beginning to show and a section of the clergy was beginning to express its opposition to the Church’s collaboration with the political power. These members of clergy were to play a leading role in the opposition to the dictatorship. This was particularly true in the case of the Basque Country and Catalonia, where the clergy were actively involved in regional nationalism, and also for those priests from Catholic worker organisations who took up the defence of striking workers. This opposition became more prominent in the 1960s, particularly after the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65, which marked a change in direction for the universal Church in favour of the mutual independence of Church and State, and declared the defence of human rights to be a duty of the Church. The implications for the Spanish situation were obvious and from this point onward there was a growing threat of open confrontation between Church and State.

Anabella Barroso has rightly stated that the 1953 Concordat worked well when there were no problems in the area of Church-State relations, but failed when difficulties arose.1 This was certainly true in the case of Article XVI, which gave certain juridical privileges to the clergy: paragraph four stated that members of the clergy could only be tried for criminal offences with the permission of their superior, while paragraph five stipulated that priests who received custodial sentences had to serve their confinement in religious establishments. Or, where this was not possible, in other locations agreed with the bishops, which were to be separate from those used for lay prisoners.2 Article XVI was to be the cause of much controversy; interpretations of its terms varied, and both Church and State would accuse the other of abusing its provisions.

Priests Against the Regime
Although not all the Catholic clergy had supported General Franco in the Civil War, the regime had managed to exile a significant number of its opponents, thereby giving
the illusion of unanimous support from the Church. The patronage rights over Episcopal appointments conceded to Franco by the Vatican also helped ensure a hierarchy loyal to the regime. The 1960s, however, saw the emergence of a new generation of priests that had not participated in the Civil War. Influenced by ideas from countries such as France and Germany, where many of them had studied, and encouraged by the declarations of the Second Vatican Council, these priests began to question the legitimacy of the Franco regime. Impatient with the reluctance of the hierarchy to assert the independence of the Church from the State, as called for in the Council document *Gaudium et spes*, some members of the clergy began to act independently, removing symbols of the regime from their churches, omitting the prayers for General Franco from religious services and, in some cases, even openly criticising the regime from the pulpit. As Stanley Payne has observed: “hundreds of clergy were involved in political activities that a quarter-century earlier would have brought immediate imprisonment, beatings, and long prison terms to laymen.”

Clearly, from the government’s point of view, the situation could not be tolerated. The authorities, however, were aware of the negative impact any large-scale repression of the clergy would have on the regime’s image on both a national and international level. Punishment of the clergy was also a complicated matter, due to the provisions of Article XVI. Seditious sermons and other actions deemed to be offensive to the government or the military or damaging to the unity of Spain, would not be tolerated and priests accused of these offences would find themselves before a “Tribunal de Orden Público” (TOP). The regime attempted to deter priests from acts of opposition through the imposition of heavy fines, but in many cases priests did not pay and the authorities were forced to resort to other forms of punishment.

The first inmate to be housed in the special prison for priests in Zamora came from the diocese of Bilbao. Here, clerical opposition to the regime was particularly prevalent. Between 1965 and 1968 the civil authorities for the region had received 367 police reports regarding members of the clergy. These reports implicated 196 priests, 24.5% of the total number of diocesan clergy. The bishop, Monsignor Gúrpide, was a loyal supporter of the regime and was engaged in constant efforts to keep the most radical sector of his clergy in check. In January 1968 he defended the right of the civil authorities to take action against priests who committed crimes.

In February 1968 Alberto Gabicagogeascoa, co-adjutor of Ibárruri, was sentenced to three months and one day in prison for a sermon in which he called for freedom of expression for all and denounced the use of torture by police. His trial had been the scene of clerical protests that were censored in the accounts of the Francoist press. The authorities applied to the bishop for the name of a convent or monastery where Gabicagogeascoa might be confined for the duration of his sentence. The bishop indicated that he might be sent to the Convento de Dueñas in Palencia. However, following complaints from the Abbot, Gabicagogeascoa had to be removed.

On 26 July 1968 the President of the TOP informed the bishop that
Gabigagogeascao was to be moved to the Provincial Prison of Zamora, with the application of the necessary measures as stipulated in the Concordat. Three days later Bishop Gúrpide informed the Civil Governor that since he had been unsuccessful in his efforts to find a religious institution for several other members of his clergy, facing imprisonment for non-payment of fines, they too could be sent to Zamora.⁷

From this point onward, priests found guilty of offences were automatically sent to Zamora without the consent of the bishop of the diocese concerned. Basque priests would make up the majority of those who would pass through this prison, which would remain in existence until 1976, by which time approximately one hundred priests had been imprisoned there. Gabigagogeascao would once again be returned to the prison in 1969 for the much longer sentence of twelve years, along with four other Basque priests serving similar sentences, for a hunger strike they had carried out in the diocesan offices in Bilbao. Other Basque prisoners included two Franciscans found guilty at a military tribunal of “insolence to the forces of order” following the celebration of Masses in memory of the dead Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) activist Txabi Etxebarrineta.⁸

Besides Basques, priests from Catalonia, Galicia and Asturias were also imprisoned in Zamora, together with others such as Fr. Mariano Gamo from Madrid, imprisoned for criticising the State of Exception declared by the government in 1968.⁹ Fr. Gamo’s case was an interesting one since he had begun his career as a supporter of the Falange, the fascist party that supported the regime. His father had died fighting for Franco and he was viewed by the regime as a promising individual, destined for a position of authority.¹⁰ His contacts with the working classes had caused him to distance himself from the dictatorship, and his case was emblematic of what was happening in a large section of the lower clergy at this time.¹¹ A group of Gamo’s supporters occupied the Church of San Miguel in protest at his trial where he was sentenced to three years imprisonment.¹²

Those serving the longest sentences were the Jesuit priest Francisco García Salve, sentenced to 19 years at the famous Trial 1001 for involvement in the illegal communist-led worker organisation “Commisiones Obreras” (CC OO), and two Basque priests, Jon Etxabe and Julen Kalzada, serving fifty years and twelve years respectively for involvement with ETA. They had been sentenced at the Burgos trial of December 1970. At this trial the regime had once again attempted to use the judicial privileges provided for priests in the Concordat to its own advantage by holding the trial in camera, but its efforts had been thwarted by the bishops of Bilbao and San Sebastián, who demanded a public trial. The presence of foreign journalists meant that the declarations of these two priests, outlining their reasons for supporting ETA and describing how they had been tortured in police custody, were transmitted around the world.¹³

The difficulties involved in imprisoning the clergy meant that only the most conspicuous opponents of the regime were sent to Zamora.¹⁴ The problem with this practice, however, was that the high level of publicity surrounding their trials, and the
media interest aroused by protests and demonstrations organised in support of their cause, meant that their imprisonment in Zamora provided the opposite of the quiet solution the authorities were hoping for. In fact, as the historian Fernando García de Cortazar has rightly concluded:

> the Franco regime was very much mistaken if it believed that clerical opposition could be stifled between the walls of the prison in Zamora. On the contrary, the Concordat prison was converted into something more than a symbol of Francoist repression: it was a true laboratory of acts of resistance and an authentic nightmare for the civil and ecclesiastical bosses.\(^\text{15}\)

**The Priests Reject the Privileges of the Concordat**

All the clerical inmates of Zamora resented their segregation from the rest of the prison community, and while some were prepared to accept transfer to religious establishments, others demanded the right to serve their sentence in the same conditions as their fellow citizens. Inside the prison, priests adopted an attitude of non-cooperation that led to daily clashes with the prison authorities. The imprisoned priests became engaged in a propaganda war with the regime, using protests such as hunger strikes in an attempt to draw attention to their particular situation, and also to the wider effects of the repressive measures employed by the Franco dictatorship.

The Zamora inmates were determined that the regime would not conceal their situation. Clandestine documents were smuggled out of the prison naming the priests, and describing the reason for their imprisonment and the treatment they were receiving. In one document the priests described their condition as one of “total isolation.”\(^\text{16}\) In another they complained of the treatment received from the prison’s director and stated that the conditions in Zamora did not even meet the standards of a regular prison: it was impossible to sleep or have any privacy, owing to rigorous supervision by the prison authorities, and there was no opportunity for physical exercise.\(^\text{17}\) In September 1970 the prisoners sent a letter describing their situation to an international assembly of priests that was taking place in Amsterdam.\(^\text{18}\)

The priests also wrote letters to Church and civil authorities. In one such letter, signed by thirteen priests, including Gabicagogeascoa, Gamo, Etxabe and Kalzada, and addressed to the Minister for Justice, the Nuncio and other civil and religious authorities, they rejected the possibility of a special pardon that would apply only to priests. The letter stated that although the priests wished to end their imprisonment, they felt no remorse for the actions that had caused it, and if released would continue to be active in the struggle of the Basque people and the working classes. The priests refused any special treatment that would differentiate them from the rest of the prison population, declaring that they would not allow themselves to be manipulated for political purposes. The letter called for the closure of the Zamora prison and a general amnesty for all political prisoners. The imprisoned priests also stated that they felt
abandoned by the hierarchy and institutions of the Catholic Church. The attitude of the Zamora priests towards the hierarchy was to grow increasingly hostile over the next few years and, on numerous occasions, the inmates would refuse to see the bishops who visited the prison.

In 1972 the priests sent a report to the Spanish Episcopal Conference that demonstrated their awareness of the anomalous situation created by the existence of the Concordat prison, the only one of its kind in the world. The report outlined the priests’ complaints regarding conditions in the prison, such as lack of both fresh air and heat. They also complained about the censorship of their correspondence, claiming that letters addressed to their bishops did not reach their destination but were sent instead to the Ministry of Justice. The report denounced the role of the Catholic hierarchy as an ally of the regime and declared the priests’ objective to be the suppression of the prison and the transfer of the present inmates to regular prisons or religious establishments, as a matter of free choice. The document concluded by indicating three options for the Episcopal Conference: negotiation, an ultimatum from the Vatican to the Spanish government regarding the application of the Concordat, and denunciation of the Concordat.

Several of the imprisoned priests were secularised during their time in Zamora. This was the case of Felipe Izaguirre, a Franciscan, sentenced to ten years for illegal propaganda. After three years in Zamora he decided to leave the order, stating as his reason that he had become a priest in order to evangelise the people, but now, because of his position as a priest, he was segregated from them. He received a transfer to the prison of Jaén in the south of Spain, and claimed that the Concordat had forced him to leave the priesthood.

Behind the scenes several priests were working on a more dramatic means of escaping from Zamora. In 1971 prison authorities discovered a tunnel that had been dug by the prisoners, apparently using only their fingers and teeth! The discovery came just as they had reached the final stages, narrowly averting what would have been an extremely embarrassing situation for both Church and State. Details of the incident were, however, leaked to the international press and the Times of 18 October ran a story under the bizarre headline “Spanish Priests Caught Digging Way Out of Jail.” the Times reported that the tunnel would have taken nearly two years to construct. As a result of his involvement Jon Etxabe was transferred to Cartagena prison.

On 6 November 1973 the priests took the more drastic action of setting fire to the altar and destroying the furniture in their wing of the prison. The action had been carefully planned and a statement had been prepared and smuggled out of the prison in advance. The priests were about to go on hunger strike and used the fire to draw attention to their protest. It was claimed in the press that foreign journalists had been given prior warning of what was to take place. This would appear to be true since the following day the Times carried a detailed article on the incident that included a summary of the priests’ statement.
In this statement the priests declared that they had resorted to burning the prison after their attempts to rectify the situation by legal means proved ineffective. They denounced in the strongest possible terms the existence of a prison that was “nothing more than the bastard fruit of the relations of mutual interest between the Church and the State.” The statement firmly situated the Zamora issue within the context of the wider repression experienced by the population as a whole under the Franco regime. Finally, the priests announced the beginning of their hunger strike and made two demands: of the State they demanded a transfer to a different prison, and of the Church they demanded the closure of the “cárcel concordatoria.”

After thirteen days on hunger strike the priests were transferred to a prison hospital in Carabanchel in Madrid, sparking rumours that the Zamora prison was to be closed. Just seven days later, however, they were returned to Zamora where they restarted the hunger strike, which only ended on 11 December, when they were forced to accept injections of glucose. The imprisoned priests would continue to campaign for the closure of the prison right to the end in 1976, when the last two remaining inmates were transferred to religious establishments.

The various forms of protest employed by the priests in Zamora not only challenged the authority of the government, but also expressed a rejection of the official Church, especially the leadership of the hierarchy. Alarmingly for the leaders of both Church and State these protests were echoed in the wider population.

## Solidarity With the Imprisoned Priests
During the 1960s the increasing militancy of the opposition to the regime had resulted in brutal government repression: constitutional guarantees were suspended, and arrests, detentions and long prison sentences were widespread. Priests had begun to protest against these measures from the pulpit, drawing attention to the torture and ill-treatment of prisoners. From 1968 onwards these sermons also made reference to the conditions experienced by the priests in Zamora. Some priests went further and organised protests, such as the occupation of buildings, in solidarity with the Zamora inmates. The activities of the clergy gave a moral boost to the anti-Franco opposition, which had long been campaigning for the rights of political prisoners.

External protests connected with the situation of the priests in Zamora made it difficult for the Church authorities to ignore the issue. A group of priests organised two sit-in protests in the Episcopal offices in Bilbao during the summer of 1968 in order to put pressure on Monsignor Gúrpide to make a declaration on the repression of the Basque people. One of the demands put to the bishop was that the priests in Zamora be transferred to the prison of Basauri to serve their sentences with lay prisoners. As a result of the protest a letter was sent by the Apostolic Delegate *ad tempus*, Fr. José Angel Ubieta, to the Minister for Justice in support of the request by the imprisoned priests.

The hunger strikes of 1973 had a particularly powerful effect on public opinion and prompted a wave of protests across Spain. 51 priests occupied the Episcopal...
offices in Bilbao, a further 128 occupied the Seminary in San Sebastián, and a group of approximately 120 people, representing both the clergy and laity, occupied the Nunciature in Madrid. All three groups of protestors declared their support for the priests of Zamora and made appeals to the Vatican and the hierarchy. A statement issued by the priests involved in the Bilbao occupation was read in numerous Churches in the province of Vizcaya on Sunday 11 November. The Madrid protest prompted an announcement from the capital’s auxiliary bishops in support of an amnesty for Spanish political prisoners and the abolition of the special prison for the clergy. On 14 November a group of theology students from the Universidad de Deusto, Bilbao, staged a sit-in protest in their faculty, which lasted five days, and released a statement declaring their solidarity with the imprisoned priests and all those suffering oppression under the Spanish state. On learning that the priests had been transferred to Carabanchel the students ended their protest.

Solidarity protests continued in December, even extending beyond the Spanish borders. A group of Spanish emigrants occupied the Papal Nunciature in Paris on 7 December at 7 pm and remained there for almost twenty-four hours. The occupants released a statement that not only expressed their support for the priests on hunger strike, but also denounced the role of the Spanish hierarchy and the Vatican as accomplices in the establishment of the prison. The letter criticised the lack of courage from the Spanish bishops in their failure to show active solidarity with the imprisoned priests and with the rest of Spain’s political prisoners. Significantly the letter linked the priests’ struggle with that of a number of other individuals awaiting trial in Spain at the time, such as members of CC OO or the clandestine trade unions “Union Sindical Obrera” and “Union General de Trabajadores,” members of the “Asamblea de Cataluña” and the Basque group “Herriko Batasuna” and militants of ETA and the radical left-wing organisation FRAP.

That same month, signatures were sought for a letter to the Pope, calling on the Vatican to denounce the Concordat, or at least to suppress Article XVI. The letter claimed that the Concordat was being manipulated unilaterally by the State and used as a further weapon in its oppression of the people. The recent disturbances in the Zamora prison, and the case of two priests who chose to be secularised in order to avoid being sent there, were cited as evidence of the lengths the clergy would go to in their opposition to segregation.

The occupation of church buildings, particularly in the Basque Country led to increasing conflict between the Church and the authorities. The authorities wished to break up the demonstrations by force, but the bishops, determined to avoid any further disorder in the region, declared the occupations to be an ecclesiastical matter.

**Efforts of the Hierarchy to Avert a Crisis**

Following the disturbances of November 1973 the bishops of Bilbao, San Sebastián and Segovia felt the need to defend themselves against the accusations of complicity and inactivity with regard to the Zamora prison. In a document addressed to their
priests, the bishops outlined, year by year since 1969 the various measures undertaken by the hierarchy in an effort to resolve the Zamora issue.

The majority of the bishops’ interventions involved letters and petitions to the civil authorities, including the Minister for Justice, the President of the Supreme Court, Provincial authorities and the Military Commander for the Sixth Region, concerning the transfer of priests from Zamora to religious institutions. The bishops clearly preferred priests to serve their sentences in religious establishments. Despite the difficulty involved, the hierarchy put great effort into negotiating alternative arrangements with the authorities and with the religious orders. In 1969 Monsignor Cirarda, Apostolic Administrator of the Bilbao diocese, made arrangements for those confined in Zamora to complete their sentences in premises belonging to the Jesuit order. Although a number of the inmates did accept his offer, six priests refused to accept any kind of privilege. The document also described the repeated efforts of the bishops of San Sebastián and Bilbao, beginning in 1970, to arrange the transfer of Etxabe and Kalzada to religious institutions, which had been continually blocked by the regime.

The bishops categorically declared that they had not given consent for their priests to serve their sentences in Zamora. The hierarchy was never in favour of the creation of a prison for priests, and statements from bishops distancing themselves from the prison often involved a clear contradiction of the version of facts presented by the regime. The time when the bishops were seen as officials of the State had clearly come to an end. In 1970 Monsignor Cirarda released a statement condemning the detention of nine priests from the diocese who had been taken to Zamora without his permission. In Cirarda’s view the detention of the priests, for offences committed during the exercise of their pastoral ministry (all nine were accused of offending the military authorities in sermons preached in 1969, ironically in defence of priests on hunger-strike in Zamora), called into question the freedom of the Church. Furthermore, the arrest and trial of the priests without prior permission from their bishop represented an infraction of the Concordat.

On 20 November 1972 the Spanish hierarchy as a whole became involved in the conflict. The Episcopal Conference formed a special commission, at the request of the bishops of San Sebastián and Bilbao, to cooperate with the government on the issue of Zamora prison. The commission members were Cardinal Bueno y Monreal, the bishops of San Sebastián and Bilbao and the bishop of Zamora. They visited the Minister for Justice and the Director General of Religious Affairs and made the following four requests:

1. the closure of the special prison for priests in Zamora
2. that priests should be allowed to serve sentences with lay prisoners
3. that the government observe Article XVI of the Concordat that allowed priests to choose whether to serve their sentence in a convent or a prison
4. some act of amnesty for all political prisoners
The Minister replied to the Commission that the government did not maintain the prison for priests at Zamora out of self interest, but that the Concordat prohibited the confinement of priests with lay prisoners. In relation to religious establishments the Minister stated that the government had to take the due security precautions, as it considered some of these priests to be dangerous.  

Although the bishops were unsuccessful in their petition to the government, their requests demonstrated a growing identification and solidarity with the demands of the imprisoned priests. This solidarity was now being conveyed in their sermons and pastoral letters, creating a worrying situation for the government. In 1971 the new bishop of Zamora was reprimanded by the Subsecretary of the Ministry of Justice for expressing, in his opening address to the people of the diocese, the hope that the imprisoned priests might soon be freed. The regime was even more concerned by the Pastoral Letters of Monsignor Añoveros, Bishop of Bilbao, who, following the disturbances of November 1973, appealed for understanding for the imprisoned priests in view of the difficult circumstances and “disproportionate” sentences they faced, and in December 1973 called for a revision of the sentences inflicted on the priests.

During this last decade of the dictatorship the bishops became increasingly vocal in the defence of their clergy and of the freedom of the Church. They publicly objected to the State’s use of the term “cárcel concordatoria” as prejudicial to the Church and repeatedly called for the closure of the prison.  

The attitude of their superiors in Rome, however, was more ambiguous.

The Silence of the Vatican
Since the Second Vatican Council ended in 1965, it was clear that the 1953 Concordat with Spain could no longer be maintained. An outright denunciation of the Concordat, however, would have had damaging implications that both the Spanish government and the Vatican were anxious to avoid. From 1968 onwards the Vatican endeavoured to negotiate with the Franco regime a revision of the Concordat, or its replacement with a series of agreements on specific issues.

The use of the Concordat to justify the existence of the Zamora prison clearly implicated the Vatican, and yet Rome maintained a strict silence on the issue. This attitude greatly angered the imprisoned priests who felt that the Vatican had a duty to challenge the State’s one-sided interpretation of the Concordat. In their report to the Spanish Episcopal Conference, the priests complained of the reluctance of the Nuncio to visit the prison, despite visits of family members and ex-prisoners to the Nunciature and letters to the Nuncio and to Rome from the prisoners themselves.

Even when the protests became more militant and attracted the attention of the international media, Rome refused to clarify its position on the issue of the prison. There was no comment from the Vatican on the fire and hunger strikes of 6 November 1973 and its first statement to the press came a week later in the form of a brief
condemnation of the occupation of the Nunciature in Madrid as “inconsistent” and “out of proportion.”

In December 1973 the Vatican press officer, Professor Federico Alessandrini, condemned the occupation of Nunciatures, stating that the episodes represented “an unjustified form of pressure judged reprehensible by public opinion,” and went on to say that Papal representatives never refused access to the Nunciature to those who followed the due procedures. Significantly, he refused to comment on the intentions that motivated the protestors in their chosen course of action and added that the Vatican had been following the case of the priests imprisoned in Zamora and was concerned with arriving at a satisfactory solution, not necessarily within the framework of the Concordat, but even beyond the norms it provided for.

Conclusion
Opposition from the Catholic Church was arguably the most serious problem facing the Franco regime in the final decade of the dictatorship. The loss of its primary source of legitimacy was a powerful indication of the growing weakness of the regime’s foundations. Clerical dissent therefore had to be dealt with as quickly and quietly as possible. The creation of the prison at Zamora has been cited by Rafael Cruz as an example of anti-clericalism by the Franco regime. Although traditionally associated with the left-wing in Spanish politics, Cruz points out that the term “anti-clericalism” refers to the rejection of and confrontation with the Church and can be applied to any side of the political spectrum. During the later years of the dictatorship the Spanish authorities increasingly rejected the authority of the bishops, who perceived in this attitude an attack on the freedom of the Church. The fire in the prison at Zamora did considerable damage to the edifice of National Catholicism. Although few priests were involved in the protests, the symbolic value of their contribution far exceeded their numbers. Aware of the wider significance of their situation, the priests used their protests to expose to the world the repressive measures employed by the dictatorship and forced the Catholic hierarchy to publicly challenge the government on the issue.

Notes
6 For details of the Gabicagogeascoa affair see Barroso, Sacerdotes, 161-166.
8 Barroso, Sacerdotes, 264.
11 Ibid., p. 309.
12 Ibid., p. 310.
16 “Para Que Tengas Una Idea de Aqí (sic)—Cárcel Concordatoria—y se Enteren Hasta Los Sordos,” in Euskal Biblioteka Labayru, Manterola Archive, “Cárcel Concordatoria,” Caja 1, Carpeta 1, [date unknown].
18 Barroso, Sacerdotes, 355.
19 “Carta Dirigida al Ministro de Justicia, al Nuncio y otras Autoridades Civiles y Religiosas,” Manterola Archive, [date unknown].
20 “Informe Enviado a la Conferencia Episcopal Española sobre la Cárcel Concordatoria de Zamora el,” Manterola Archive, 3 November 1972.
22 Comunicado de los Sacerdotes Presos en Zamora,” Manterola Archive, [date unknown].
27 “Comunicado de Los Sacerdotes Presos en Zamora,” Manterola Archive, [date unknown].
29 Barroso, Sacerdotes, 279.
30 “Los Sacerdotes Reunidos en el Obispado de Bilbao ante el Motín y la Huelga de Hambre en la Cárcel de Zamora,” Manterola Archive, 10 November 1973.
35Copy in *Manterola Archive*.
47Ibid., p. 197.