

Changing Hearts in SPAIN

Best known as the pleasure capital of Europe, Spain is beginning to shake off years of religious tradition for a life-giving faith.

To the hundreds of thousands of tourists who come to the coast of Spain in unceasing waves, Alicante and the other world-famous resorts that line the Mediterranean Sea from Barcelona to Gibraltar offer some of the greatest sensual pleasures in life: lavish amounts of sea, sun, culinary delights and a generally carefree way of life.

To a youthful Epi Limiñana, a native of coastal Spain, the pleasure capital represented rejection and a daily taste of death. His father was a drunkard who was either absent or abusive. As a young boy, Limiñana caught his mother in bed with another man and decided he had better run away, or he would—in his own words—“kill Mama.”

He left home at age 7, and for 10 years lived in the streets, fighting his way through life by intimidation, domination, fist and knife among the criminals and drug dealers of the Alicante underworld. At 17 Limiñana entered the local Baptist church for the first time, only to find the Christians shrunk back in fear of his dirty appearance, even dirtier language and frightening reputation for violence.

Since then, his reputation has changed dramatically.

Today, Limiñana, 44, is seen by many charismatics in Spain as the man who will bring the first-ever revival to the southern European country. In April of last year he prayed for the sick at the first healing campaign ever held at Madrid's Plaza de

Toros, one of the city's bullfighting rings.

Limiñana represents what some Christians here say has come to Spain—a revival marked by New Testament-style “power evangelism” in which signs and wonders follow the preaching of God's Word. Some are claiming that the country will be the embarkation point of a move of God's Holy Spirit that will spread to the rest of Europe. Opinions aside, one thing is certain: Spaniards are beginning to shake off years of religious tradition, intellectualism and national machismo to embrace a life-giving faith in Jesus Christ.

Groundwork for Revival

It was, in a small way, a historic occasion when Limiñana held his healing campaign in a bullfighting arena in Madrid, the national capital. That's because in Spain bullfighting is more than a sport. It is a symbol of Spanish culture and mentality, which, according to many pastors Charisma interviewed, is charged with a measure of violence and pride—the modern residues of Spain's history as a conquering nation.

It seemed historically fitting, then, that to conquer Spain for Jesus Christ members of God's “army” would first “invade” a symbol of the heart of the country.

The concrete stadium buzzed with excitement during Limiñana's healing service when an elderly woman and a young girl rose from their wheelchairs and started to limp across the sand at center court. A young man, who later testified that he had been injured in a car crash, threw away his crutches and ran hard—around and around—tears of joy streaming down his cheeks.

There was no time for preaching. Instead, Limiñana kept praying for the crippled and the sick while pastor friends assisted him and lively worship accompanied his prayers.

His face shining, pastor and evangelist Paco García, 43—the initiator of annual conferences in Spain with U.S. intercessory leaders Cindy Jacobs, C. Peter Wagner and others—told Charisma amid the ear-deafening commotion that he had just prayed for two deaf-mute children, and that they had both spoken after he prayed, demonstrating their healing.

Long lines of people testified at a microphone that they had received jewels in their watches or gold fillings in their teeth. Although these individual claims were unconfirmed, dental surgeon Jaime Peralta of Madrid told Charisma that his own 14-year-old son had received a dental miracle during a Limiñana campaign in January.

“My son had four fillings, and after prayer they were all gone and replaced by new teeth,” Peralta said. “Although I had heard of such miracles, I had remained very skeptical. But there it was.”

The pastors participating in the healing campaign told Charisma that Limiñana’s “miracle anointing” is new to Spain and that they believe it will trigger revival in the country. García says Spain has never experienced revival but that “now the Lord is using Limiñana [to bring it about].”

Pablo Vasquez, the Trinity Broadcasting Network’s (TBN) director for Spain and the man behind the Limiñana campaigns, believes strongly in Limiñana and wants to help his ministry touch all of Spain.

“TBN plans to run evangelistic campaigns with Epi four times a year in Madrid and eventually to run monthly campaigns all over Spain,” Vasquez told Charisma.

The campaigns have the potential of reaching 50,000 households in the Madrid area, but Vasquez’s vision for Limiñana’s ministry is being tested. After the healing campaign at the Plaza de Toros, the leadership of the Spanish Gypsy Church publicly accused Limiñana of sexually abusive behavior and ordered their members to boycott his meetings. With the Gypsies accounting for some 90 percent of Limiñana’s attendees, the rift was serious, and it has not yet been mended.

Vasquez’s confidence in Limiñana is unbroken, however. He told Charisma that he has “known few men with such integrity as Epi.” The allegations against him have not altered the plans for further campaigns in Spain.

Evangelism One-on-One

Other Christian leaders in Spain, however, are less confident that large-scale evangelism efforts such as Limiñana’s and Vasquez’s will reach all Spaniards. They emphasize other ways to target the more than 99 percent of Spaniards who are unreached by the charismatic and evangelical churches. Differences aside, however, they all agree the spiritual tide in Spain has turned.

Greg Jacob, an American who has been a missionary to Spain for 21 years and now pastors a 250-member charismatic church in Madrid, told Charisma that the “growth of the charismatic churches since the death of [Francisco] Franco—the former

dictator—in 1975 has been significant.” Jacob’s own congregation grew by 25 percent last year alone.

Jacob differs in his evangelistic approach, however, saying that he personally “would never take a middle-class payo [a non-Gypsy Spaniard] to a campaign where the evangelist blows through the microphone to impart spiritual power,” as sometimes is done in the large charismatic meetings.

“The middle-class payos need and desire the supernatural, but the blowing is [offensive to them],” he explains. Large evangelism rallies “will [possibly] impact mainstream Spain later on when the society has softened up spiritually,” he says, but he believes that currently the events reach “only the Gypsies and the uneducated.”

According to Jacob, most of the church growth in Spain is the result of two factors: friendship evangelism and immigration from Latin America.

Jacob’s opinion is echoed by Marcos Vidal, an internationally renowned and award-winning singer and the senior pastor of a rapidly growing Pentecostal network in Spain. Vidal’s ministry emphasis is small, home-based evangelism efforts among relatives, friends and colleagues. On the day he met with Charisma, Vidal’s Madrid church—his primary congregation—baptized 19 converts, most of them Latin American immigrants.

“The Latinos are different, and much more open. They are less rude and proud than the typical Spaniards. I think [God brings them to] make my people jealous!” he exclaims.

Most Spaniards, Vidal explains, still associate Christian faith with the Catholicism of Francisco Franco, the fascist dictator who ruled Spain from 1936 to 1975 and professed to be a pious Catholic.

“In those days you were forced to be a Catholic,” Vidal says. “And with the exception of a handful of the very rich, being Catholic also meant being poor. To the prospering new middle-class, Christianity still represents poverty and dictatorship.” Vidal says it is crucial to find “a language that communicates the gospel to these people, just like Jesus spoke to His contemporaries in a language that was meaningful to them.”

Vidal’s music has proved to be such a language. “I have given concerts in government circles, and I have seen power-holders cry in response,” he says. “I half expect the secular Spanish TV to open up to my music ministry some day soon. There is a saying: ‘The songs a nation sings make it.’”

Making the Gospel Relevant

Contra Corriente (“against the stream”), the country’s fastest growing Christian youth movement, is reaching a different cultural context—Spain’s young people. It works hard to challenge young believers to break free from inhibiting church traditions and present a gospel that’s relevant to their peers.

A coordinator of the ministry, Carlota Verdura, 33—a Mexican-American who’s been a missionary to Spain for a decade—explained that today’s “teen- and ‘tween-agers’” make up the first generation in Spain that isn’t “automatically

Catholic.”

“The vast majority of these kids have zero interest in traditional religion,” she notes, but adds: “They are spiritually hungry, not necessarily for the gospel, but for whatever. It is a matter of getting to them first.”

At last year’s Contra Corriente annual conference, where the theme was “Dare!” the young Christians were challenged to introduce their friends to Jesus. The conferences—characterized by distinctly nonreligious jargon, outspokenness and contemporary music—are attractive to young people. In five years the attendance has grown from 150 to 950 participants.

“At the last conference there was a heavier presence of God than ever before,” Verdura notes. “All we wanted to do was to worship God with all our hearts, from the first minute on.

“There were tears of repentance and joy,” she adds. “Many confessed their sins publicly, in front of [almost] a thousand people! Many came back to the Father, some decided to follow Jesus for the first time, and others went deeper into the river of God.”

One young believer who is impacting Spain’s youth with the gospel is Kesia, a half-Spanish, half-Brazilian 17-year-old Christian recording artist. Kesia made the pop charts last year with a funky version of “Amazing Grace”—another first-ever event in modern Spain. Never before had a Christian song reached the secular charts.

Since then, Kesia has been busy touring, particularly in

discos, which is “where you have to go if you want to reach young people in Spain,” according to Curtis Clewett, a longtime Youth With A Mission (YWAM) worker in Barcelona, and a mentor to Kesia.

Clewett says that although “Christians cannot be culturally relevant in the sense that we adapt to worldly standards and styles, we have to be culturally present. We have to go where the people are.”

“[Discos] may seem an unlikely setting for the Christian message, but Kesia’s songs are explicit, and you can tell that she touches people’s hearts,” he says.

Some church leaders have criticized Kesia’s concerts, but Clewett responds by pointing out that her style of ministry is needed because Spanish youth are not accepted into the churches unless they adopt the traditional evangelical culture, which they will not do.

In the Barcelona youth center that Clewett started, teen-agers flock in to listen to Comisión, a Spanish band much like Britain’s Delirious, and to attend dance courses or seminars on drug addiction. It is managed largely by the young for the young. In one room the walls are covered with scribbled notes that consist of Bible verses, prophecies and prayer requests.

“This is where they gather for 24/7 prayer,” Clewett explains. “It was their own initiative, not mine. That is an important aspect. Under Franco, the Spanish church got used to being on the defensive. We challenge the kids to go for it, and they do.”

The diversity of ministry occurring in Spain today underscores Paco García's conviction that God not only wants revival in Spain but also a key role for the Spanish church in bringing revival to the rest of Europe.

"The revival in South America is coming to Europe—with Spain as the bridge," he says. "One of its characteristics is power evangelism, as represented by Epi Limiñana. I believe that the Lord wants to deal a blow to European intellectualism by pouring out an anointing of extravagance, things like gold dust, gold teeth."

In the meantime, he adds, Spain still suffers from the influence of a historical "spirit of death" that has to be dealt with in prayer. He says the condition stems from the fact that both Catholicism and Islam, the prevalent forces in Spanish history, established their dominions through war and institutionalized killing—the Spanish Catholics primarily during the Inquisition, against the Jews, and during the conquest of Latin America, against the Indians.

Also lacking in Spain, he points out, are apostolic ministries and bold, church-planting strategies that are needed for revival. Still, he firmly believes the historical tide has turned and that God's day for Spain has arrived.

"The Spaniards are conquerors," he says. "In the past we conquered by the sword, bringing death. In future we will conquer by the Word, bringing life."

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Regional Statistics: Europe

Country with largest percentage Christian population*: Poland (96.7 percent)

Country with smallest Christian population: Gibraltar (21,000)

Country with smallest percentage of Christians in population: Czech Republic (47 percent)

Largest denomination: Russian Orthodox Church (73.9 million)

Largest Protestant or independent denomination: Evangelische Kirche,
Germany (29 million)

Country with largest Christian growth over last five years: Estonia (from 78 percent to 85 percent)

Fastest growing denomination or movement: Gypsy Evangelical Movement, Romania (24 percent)

Percentage of Pentecostals and charismatics in Christian population: 5 percent (37.4 million)

Largest non-Christian population: Nonreligious (92 million)

Most dangerous country for Christians:** Albania

Country with most evangelistic efforts per person: Norway

Country with most evangelistic efforts for size of population:
Russia

Country with highest Christian income: Germany

Country with lowest Christian income: Gibraltar

All statistics in this special issue are based on research from the latest edition of the World Christian Encyclopedia, published in two volumes by Oxford University Press.

** The overall Christian population may include Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox believers, nominal Christians, and members of other non-evangelical groups.*

*** Based on issues such as level of religious liberty and murder rate.*

Spain's Power Evangelist

Epi Limiñana's style of ministry is new to this traditional country, but it's changing lives.

From the very beginning of his Christian life, Epi Limiñana—the evangelist whose gift of miracles is currently

breaking new spiritual ground in Spain and causing division among church leaders—was marked for power-filled evangelism.

“When I gave my life to Jesus in 1976 I was the first convert in the Baptist church in Alicante in six years. One month after my conversion 200 people had been saved,” Limiñana told Charisma over a cup of coffee in a Madrid hotel.

What brought the then-17-year-old street fighter and drug addict to the church was a three-word greeting through a young gypsy preacher who passed by him in the street.

“He said, ‘Jesus loves you,’ and my first impulse was to knife him,” Limiñana remembers. “But seven months later I went to the Baptist church.”

A week later Limiñana returned and came under the power of the Holy Spirit.

“I started to tremble and plead with God for forgiveness,” he says. “Then I saw a light by the ceiling. It came closer, hurting my eyes, and entered my body. I fell to the floor and began speaking in strange tongues. I did not have a clue what was going on—nor did the dear Baptists—but I felt an overwhelming peace. From that moment on I never ever touched drugs or booze, and picked up preaching the gospel.”

Twelve years later Limiñana had another experience that involved light. The evangelist had planted a church and traveled the country for years. He was successful but intrigued that “thousands were delivered from demons, but when I prayed for healing, nothing happened.”

Says Limiñana: "This time I was speaking at a conference. My plan was to preach on deliverance, as usual. But then the Holy Spirit showed Himself to me as a silhouette of intense light. He threw balls of light into me. For the first time I heard His voice.

"I put away my message, and said only: 'The Holy Spirit is here.' I heard a bang, and the entire congregation of a thousand was lying on the floor. My first thought was, Are they all demonized?"

A 45-year-old deaf-mute man started to speak and hear. One man's teeth were fixed. People said they saw "balls of light" coming out of Limiñana's hands.

Limiñana was, as he puts it, "caught by the anointing," and his life and ministry changed drastically. In the 1990s he ministered mainly in Latin America and saw "numerous healings, jewels appearing, and even clinically dead people being awakened to life."

Spain was "difficult," and church leaders "told lies about me," Limiñana told Charisma. But last year Pablo Vasquez of Trinity Broadcasting Network-Spain engaged the evangelist, and a new chapter of ministry opened.

"Even at the first campaign in October 2000 there were dental miracles and gold dust on people's hands," Limiñana says.

"The spiritual atmosphere over Spain has changed," he concludes. "And remember, every single miracle is shown on TV. People watch and come to the meetings craving for the supernatural."