

The Society for Ecumenical Studies

Peter strengthening his brethren: Reflections on the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Britain

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A quiet revolution has taken place. Even the *Tablet* headline proclaimed, “Four days that shook the UK.” The Holy Father was surprised too. He began intending to confront the “aggressive secularism” bent on dominating public life in this country for 13 years. But in his address to the bishops just before he departed, he said, “it has become clear to me how deep a thirst there is among the British people for the Good News”. Once home, he observed how “the Christian heritage is still strong and also active in all strata of society ... This apostolic journey confirmed a profound conviction in me: the old nations of Europe have a Christian soul.” From the Pope’s viewpoint, this visit was reconnaissance in advance of the defining objective of his pontificate – the struggle for the soul of Europe.

Speaking of our obscured Christian constitution, as much as from seeing us with him at prayer, he sees the vital importance of the evangelisation of culture. And, in the economic situation caused by the crisis of virtue in public life and commerce, he noted the shallowness beneath cultural and social assumptions in the West: they comprehensively fail to answer humanity’s deepest questions, or realise the aspirations that many sense but can hardly formulate. So he asked our bishops to make full use of the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelisation, expressly established to bring the gospel to societies that have forgotten how to be the disciples they instinctively want to be. Incidentally, the New Evangelisation is surely the true context in which to see *Anglicanorum Coetibus*.

There were six outstanding moments. First was the warmth of the Pope’s respect for the Queen. For nearly 60 years as Head of State she has borne consistent witness

to Christ and the service to which he calls his followers. In the political sphere, she has maintained this virtually alone, as a succession of ministers have played down the Church, until the preposterous Hazel Blears could advance the lie in 2009, “thank God, we are a secular society.” As a British Catholic, I felt proud that Pope Benedict recognised the fidelity of our monarchy to Christ for over 1000 years, and particularly the apostolate of our present Sovereign. Secondly, there was the sight of the First Minister of Scotland singing hymns at the top of his voice in Bellahouston Park. He later remarked that the visit was “a triumph of enthusiasm over cynicism.” So much for “We don’t do God, Tony.”

Third was the Pope’s riveting address to Parliament in Westminster Hall. While the culmination of the visit was the Beatification of Cardinal Newman, it is this event that will prove to be the most momentous. In just twenty minutes, he gently reset the terms of public discourse and enabled the re-entry of religion into the British public square in a way that was well and truly off the cards even a week before. He has established a rationale for faith and reason, religion and society, to be in relation, dialogue and mutual influence. No one in Britain since Cardinal Hume could have done this, not even the Chief Rabbi or the Archbishop of Canterbury, who has had to endure the sidelining manoeuvres of the last government’s spin doctors. It was a demanding speech, but it hit its mark. In comparison, the addresses of Mr Speaker Bercow and Lord Speaker Hayman were positive, yet thin. As many have been doing now for 13 years, they cited “the role of faith”. But this language has become a cliché, useful for avoiding acknowledgement of anything but private belief. They cannot bring themselves to mention the “role of religion”, or “the role of Christianity”, let alone to name Christ and his Church. But, recalling St Thomas More and the now Blessed John Henry Newman, the Pope explained the centrality of the Christian revelation, and the indispensable relationship of faith and reason for shaping a just and trustworthy society, before prophetically going to stand on the spot on which St Thomas was consigned by the state to martyrdom for his adherence to the Church of God.

Fourth was the Prayer Vigil in Hyde Park. The widespread protests, well aimed exposés in the papers and embarrassing drama-documentaries on the box, eagerly anticipated by the news media, failed to materialise. The demonstrators did their

worst but, instead of offering a sharp and reasoned critique, came across as prejudiced demagogues unconcerned with accuracy or allowing any voice to be heard but theirs. They ran out of things to say. Meanwhile, people made their own minds up about a civilised, intelligent and kind man of prayer. It is also dawning that, rather than covering up child abuse, Cardinal Ratzinger had insisted that all cases come to his own desk to ensure they were acted upon. He described them unequivocally as “crimes”, signifying that all offenders must be referred to the civil authorities too. While he has been concerned that the accused have rights to due process and the presumption of innocence, he realised that the Catholic authorities appeared to be protecting the abusers and the public image of the Church. So he apologised for their lack of openness and compassion towards victims. No Pope before has expressed penitence like this and he should be respected for his act of reparation. As it happened, on the Saturday 6,000 turned up to “Protest the Pope”. But 200,000 lined the streets to welcome him and 70,000 more were inside Hyde Park not for a rally, but to kneel in silent prayer with the Bishop of Rome at the heart of the most teeming of cities in the Western world.

Fifth was the tribute he paid to British Christianity and the fallen of the Battle of Britain, when it was left standing alone in Europe against the evil of Nazism, rescuing his own native land and very possibly the future of the Christian Church in Europe, including the freedom of the papacy itself and the life of a young aspirant for the priesthood named Joseph.

Sixth was the beatification of Cardinal Newman. In that mass, laden with Anglican patrimony as well as the paramount importance of the abiding truths presented in Catholic dogma, a whole dislocation in English Christian life was eased back in place. A long history was corrected with the beatification of a man that is increasingly seen as the most eminent nineteenth century Christian writer, preacher and thinker, integrating both his early Anglican concern for Christian truth with the Cardinal and father of Vatican II. As the implications of this are realised the effects will go deep. Pope Benedict has almost silently set the course for a new ecumenism between Anglicans and Catholics - not dwelling on the past, but taking up a common quest in the truth about God and humanity for the re-evangelisation of old Europe.

Finally, in a class of its own was the joyous Ecumenical Celebration of Evening Prayer at Westminster Abbey. A beautiful reflection from the Archbishop of Canterbury on the roots of English Christianity, recalled the evangelistic mission sent by St Gregory, a Benedictine monk, and thus the close links Christians in this country will always have with his successors (the latest of whom has taken St Benedict's name), as we deepen our desire to find again the fullness of communion we already partly share through our origins. The Pope called for our ecumenical perspective to be that of people in the wider world, to whom our divisions prevent a "convincing account" of the hope that lies within us. He attributed this not just to organisational differences, or even to the diversity in our histories, but to the weakening of our fundamental unity in the apostolic faith in the Risen Lord. He has reflected much elsewhere on the problems caused by "rupture" to the continuity of faith and Church life as it passes on the Gospel of Christ; and a new phenomenon that puts this at risk for the ecumenical movement in which the Catholic Church is involved is the emergence of theological liberalism and relativism. They take the Churches away from our shared sense of the one Truth that binds us, as conveyed in our confessional and dogmatic core expressions, towards an intensified and ever more complicated fragmentation in Christians' declarations of faith. This is true both within and between our respective Church communities. It affects the holding of integrity and order within whole denominations (as in recent Anglican experience), as well as efforts to overcome the disruption and division between them. Thus there are directions which other Christian traditions are taking that do not lie ahead for the Catholic Church.

Does that mean Catholic ecumenical disengagement? No; everything in what Pope Benedict says and feels is opposed to "rupture", of which we need less, not more. What I think he is saying is slightly wistful, but addresses realism: that the Western ecumenical dimension for Christians of post-Reformation traditions is not one where unity of faith is prior to Communion in the Church in the same way as it would be for the Catholic and Orthodox Churches; and that, while the Catholic Church must be nothing other than truthful to others and itself in its own identity and ecumenical principles, it nonetheless sees it has this universal duty, summed up in the office of the Bishop of Rome, to be the "servant of unity". If the other Churches of the West are to proceed on a hopeful project of "reconciled diversity" (or what David Gamble

has recently envisaged as “greater ... complementarity ... [and] interchangeability of ministries across the historical denominations”, as he said in his address to the Society of Ecumenical Studies, in the same week as the Pope’s visit), in which the Catholic Church and its principal ecumenical interlocutor, the Orthodox Church, cannot join, it is not for us to stand in the way of others’ rapprochement, which we can still encourage with fraternal love, support and hope. For, in our dialogue with our existing ecumenical partners, we will continue to hold together to the objective of the reintegration in the one People of God in full, organic, visible ecclesial communion, and explore ever more deeply the unity in the apostolic faith of which the Pope and the Archbishop, by his tribute to the value of *ressourcement*, called us. Thus we can pray that God will abundantly bless the growing possibility of the reconciliation of others and that he will bring it and us closer together in our life in Christ’s Body. From the Catholic side, we can continue to dismantle those barriers that history and estrangement have left us with, so that we may be ready when the Father perfects and reveals the miracle of unity. So that magnificent service and its two very thoughtful addresses possibly marked out some new terms for our Churches’ ecumenical witness and hence the steps we can take, trusting in Christ’s will and providence, towards the unity he thought was one of the most important things of all to pray for as his death approached.

Did these four days really shake Britain? 6,000 protested; 300,000 turned up on Saturday alone; 1 billion are said to have watched worldwide. But in a country of 60 million, most were nowhere to be seen. Of course, millions were watching on their television and the web; but many were indifferent, content that modern Britain leaves them free to be atheist. So we should not get carried away with delight at initial success. Instead, we should look for lasting indications that something has lodged itself in Britain’s imagination and spirit. For the first time in a generation, it may just be that the Pope has given us the permission we were looking for to be Christian again.