



Introduction by
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The Papal Visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI will be an important and welcome event. This historic Visit, the first such State Visit of a reigning Pope, will help to foster a greater understanding of the positive nature of religious faith in world affairs.

This Visit will also ensure that the Catholic Community in the United Kingdom and other faith communities will have the opportunity to relate closely to His Holiness the Pope at pastoral and interfaith events and demonstrate that the Government of a largely non-Catholic country has an important and comprehensive agenda of co-operation with the Catholic Church. There are a number of key topics where we have common purpose with the Catholic Church including overseas development, the Millennium Development Goals, global equity, climate change, environmental sustainability and issues around disarmament.

Until recently we have been tempted to regard faith and diplomacy as two different compartments of human activity. But our anxiety about terrorist attacks based on religious fanaticism has changed the scene. At the same time as we worry about terrorism we have begun to realise the crucial role of religion in tackling the evils which hold up human progress. We see how in the promotion of human rights, the stewardship of the environment and the assault on world poverty religious faith, and in this context the efforts of the Catholic Church in particular, play an essential part. Religion is now at the centre of political debate, no longer a complication without relevance to most human lives.

The Vatican has been a successful advocate of faith based diplomacy. This important Papal Visit will draw attention to the multilateral diplomacy of the Holy See which maintains diplomatic ties with 178 States and has extraordinary access at the highest political level in

most Catholic countries. The Holy See is one of the oldest, largest and many would argue one of the few truly global organisations.

Our bilateral relationship is therefore significant. Our overseas post is the oldest Ambassadorial post dating from when the Crown sent the first ambassador abroad in 1479. This long-standing relationship has developed to cover many issues and in particular – climate change, international development, disarmament, interfaith dialogue, country cohesion, migration, conflict resolution and prevention and human rights.

The Catholic Church is a major global player in many of these areas. For example, it is recognised to be the world's second largest international development organisation after the United Nations. In Africa, the Catholic Church is responsible for a quarter of health care provision – including over 25 per cent of HIV care worldwide. The Catholic Church also provides places in schools for some 12 million children each year.

In the financial sector the Holy See has also worked with the United Kingdom in developing the International Finance Facility – using the capital markets to finance development spending. In November 2006, Pope Benedict XVI bought the first bond, raising over US\$1.6 billion thereby helping to accelerate the availability of funds to be used for health immunisation programmes in seventy of the poorest countries. These are just a few examples of practical support.

The Papal Visit, while providing the opportunity for private discussions, will give us all the opportunity to study the role of the Catholic Church and to weigh carefully the opportunities for further co-operation. We at FIRST are delighted to have been asked to produce this official publication and hope that it contributes, in a small way, to the success of the Visit and the further development of the bilateral relationship with a vital partner for the United Kingdom. **F**