

Global role of the Catholic church

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The significance of this State Papal Visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United Kingdom is best understood from a global perspective.

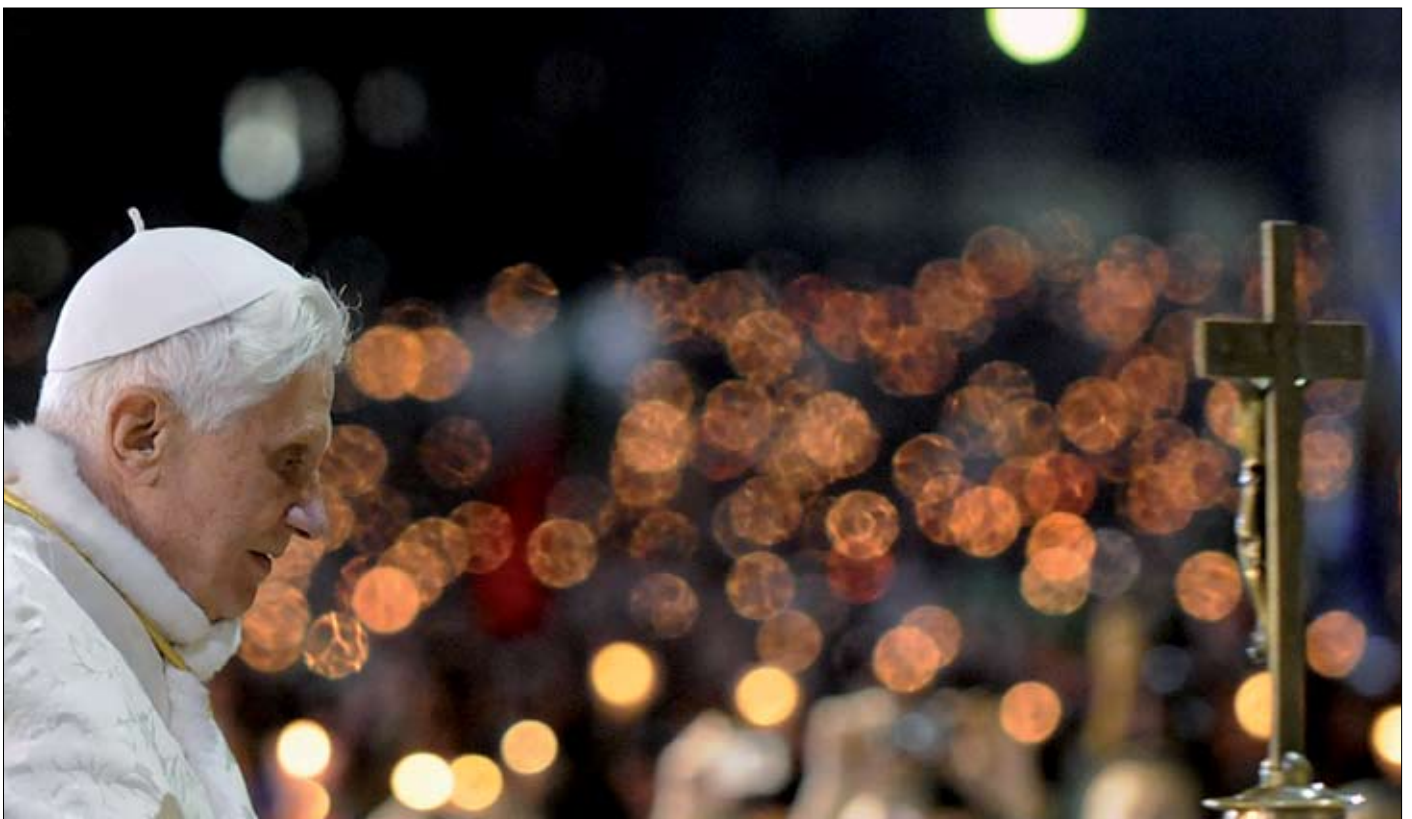
Undoubtedly this Visit has considerable repercussions for the history of this country, being the first time the Pope has come to this land as a guest of Her Majesty the Queen. The formal ceremonies involving Queen and Pontiff, which mark the opening of the Visit, will set the tone for these four days. The events which follow will create unforgettable scenes: at Lambeth Palace, in Westminster Hall, in Westminster Abbey at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and at the tomb of St Edward the Confessor, on the streets of London, in Hyde Park and, finally, at the ceremony of the Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman.

Yet it is the global perspectives which also reveal much of the significance of this visit. Since his election as Pontiff in 2005, Pope Benedict has made 16 international visits. These journeys are carefully chosen and illustrate very clearly the international role of the Papacy and the

mission which the Pope has set for himself. The journeys have taken him to so many of the most sensitive and neuralgic places in our world today.

His first journey was to Poland and included a visit to Auschwitz where he called for reconciliation and forgiveness and emphasised the importance of Christian-Jewish relations. Later, in 2006, he went to the University in Regensburg and, in a much misunderstood address, explored the crucial relationship between faith in God and reason. This address has resulted in in-depth discussion between the Holy See and Muslim scholars about the role of reason in our understanding of God, a theme which is crucial for our response to religious fundamentalism. His next journey was, in fact, to Turkey, his first visit to an Islamic country in which he sought to further that dialogue with Islam.

Pope Benedict has also visited Brazil (in 2007) and Angola (in 2009) and spoke in both places of violence, war and poverty. These are applications of an underlying insistence of Catholic Social Teaching that progress is to



be measured by the degree to which societies promote an integral human development, embracing all aspects of a true understanding of human nature.

In 2008, his journeys took him to the United States to address the General Assembly of the United Nations and to Australia where he spoke about the risk we face of squandering the world's resources in our attempts to satisfy unrestrained consumer demands. In 2009, Pope Benedict went to Jordan, Israel and Palestine, entering into that arena in which so many of the tensions and problems of global affairs have such a vivid expression. He called for dialogue between the religious faiths, asserting that the Holocaust must never be forgotten and voicing support for the establishment of a Palestinian homeland.

In the Czech Republic in 2009, he faced the realities of the Catholic Church emerging from the period of Communist domination and called for a true openness in the building of the future. In 2010, during his visit to Malta, the Pope called attention to the needs of migrants and refugees, particularly those coming into Europe from the African continent. These visits illustrate the attention given by Pope Benedict to the reality of the challenges faced in our world today.

Now he comes to the United Kingdom, perhaps one of the most secularised cultures in the world and certainly one which is facing a time of challenge to its prosperity and cohesiveness. I believe that central to the message of the Pope on this journey will be an invitation to us to see that faith in God is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be discovered afresh. Pope Benedict recognises the importance of secular institutions in pluralist societies and often speaks about 'a positive and open secularity'. By this he means that such institutions and society in general, is best served by a positive and open attitude to religious faiths and their communities. Faith in God is a source of commitment, goodwill and compassion. If his visit can help to release these resources in the service of the common good then it will be very significant for our societies.

The second global perspective necessary to appreciate the importance of this Papal Visit is that of seeing the contribution made by the Catholic Church worldwide to the work of human flourishing. The presence of the Catholic Church is not just one of words and ceremonies, but also of the practical expression of faith in service, especially of those in most need.

The Catholic Church is the world's second largest international development body after the UN. The Catholic Church is one of the biggest global health care providers. It runs 5,246 hospitals, 17,530 dispensaries, 577 leprosy clinics, 15,208 houses for the elderly, the chronically ill and people with disabilities worldwide. More than 50 per cent of the hospitals in Africa are operated under the auspices of faith-based organisations with the Catholic Church in Africa being responsible for nearly

one quarter of all health care provisions. It provides one quarter of all HIV care in Africa and around 12 million school places in Sub Saharan Africa each year, thereby helping many to get out of poverty. The Holy See also works closely with the UK Government. Cooperation was considerable in the development of the International Finance Facility in which Pope Benedict bought the first Immunisation Bond in an effort which raised over US\$1.6 billion to spend on health care and immunisation programmes in 70 of the world's poorest countries.

The Holy See also plays its part in other arenas. It contributed a crucial part in achieving the international consensus for the Treaty on Cluster Munitions in 2008 which over 100 states have now signed. It has strongly supported the UN in its work for an Arms Trade Treaty. A similar profile can be drawn up of the contribution made to British society by the Catholic Church here, highlighting the millions of unpaid hours contributed by volunteers, the work of Catholic organisations with the homeless, with sea-farers and the poor, the work of Catholic education within the overall provision, and the £51.6 million given by Catholics to Catholic Aid agencies last year for overseas aid programmes.

As Pope Benedict visits the United Kingdom these are perspectives that will help to sharpen appreciation of all that he represents and to highlight the crucial role of the Catholic faith and indeed of faith more generally in the world today.

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Below and left: His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI

