

Celebrating catholicism in Britain

By RT HON LORD PATTEN OF BARNES CH

CHANCELLOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



CHRIS PATTEN was educated at St Benedict's School, Ealing and Balliol College, Oxford. He was elected as Member of Parliament in May 1979 and in September 1986 he became Minister for Overseas Development at the FCO. In July 1989 he became Secretary of State for the Environment. Lord Patten was Governor of Hong Kong between 1992-97 and from 1999-2004 he was European Commissioner for External Relations. In January 2005 he took his seat in the House of Lords. In 2006 he was appointed Co-Chair of the UK-India Round Table.

The Prime Minister, David Cameron, asked me in June to be his personal representative for the Papal Visit: before the election preparations were headed at Ministerial level by Jim Murphy, whose work I acknowledge gratefully. It has been clear from the moment I became involved that Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the UK in September is a visit unlike any other.

It is being described as "a Papal Visit with the status of a State Visit" to reflect its dual nature. As a Head of State – the State to whom England's first ever resident Ambassador was accredited in 1479 – the Pope is coming at the invitation of The Queen. He will be received by The Queen at the Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh. He will address an audience of Parliamentarians and civil society in Westminster Hall. And his accompanying delegation of senior prelates and officials will attend an official dinner with senior members of the British Government to discuss the range of areas where we work together – about which I will say more a little later.

But there will also be a series of large scale public events that reflect Pope Benedict's role not as Head of State but as the leader of a faith that numbers more than a billion people worldwide, including some six million – or nearly ten percent of the population – in the UK. Pope Benedict will preside over Masses in Bellahouston Park in Glasgow and in Westminster Cathedral, and a

prayer vigil in Hyde Park. And on 19 September he will lead a Beatification Mass for Cardinal Newman, a major figure in the intellectual life of this country in the late nineteenth century, a man of great moral integrity, and an important figure himself in the relationship between the United Kingdom and the Vatican.

Then there are other events that see Pope Benedict reaching out to other denominations and other faiths, in particular an ecumenical prayer service in Westminster Abbey and an inter-faith meeting earlier the same day at which the Pope will meet prominent people of faith from across the spectrum of religions represented in the UK.

All that constitutes a big organisational challenge for Government and for the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of England and Wales and of Scotland. But it also gives us a series of events that will be rich in meaning and in opportunities for practical outcomes. It will be a celebration of the place of Catholicism in Britain, and the role the Church plays in education, in charitable work, and as a moral guide. It will be a reminder of the part that Christian values have played in shaping our institutions – our systems of law and democracy, our values of fellowship and solidarity. It will be a reminder too of the positive role that faith can play in society, as a centre of gravity outside government, a focus for social initiative and action, a part of civil society in the best sense.

At the same time, I see the Papal Visit as a chance to



Right and far right: His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI

take our co-operation with the Holy See on international issues to a new level. Through the presence of the Church across the world, through Catholic aid organisations like CAFOD, SCIAF and Caritas, through its moral standing with Catholics and non-Catholics alike, the Church and the Holy See have a worldwide reach and influence that make them a valuable partner. They can exert a quiet influence, for example in helping to support democratic freedoms in parts of Latin America. And they can help mobilise the international community, for example in the present response to catastrophic flooding in Pakistan, where Pope Benedict has called for solidarity in support of the flood victims, and Caritas have launched a major appeal for emergency assistance.

We have worked closely with the Holy See in the past, for example on arms control issues and in seeking solutions to regional conflicts. We have welcomed Pope Benedict's thoughtful approach to issues arising from the problems of international financial institutions. We work with the Holy See and Catholic organisations on development issues: we share a commitment to the eradication of poverty and to addressing the scourges of hunger, illiteracy and disease. And we work with them on climate change: the Church, and Pope Benedict personally, have done much to highlight the urgency of the issue and to press for faster and stronger action, in the interests of the developing world, who are first and hardest hit by the impacts of climate change, and in the interests of future generations. It is an approach based on justice and on a vision of humanity as steward rather than exploiter of creation.

There will be those who oppose the visit, who object to particular teachings of the Catholic Church, or who argue that the Church – or all religion – has no role in the modern age. There are issues on which the British Government's position differs from the Holy See's. But those disagreements need not and do not affect our commonality of interests and our ability to work together in a range of important areas. And I would urge those who are against the visit to look at the big picture, and to listen to what Pope Benedict has to say before they condemn.

On top of its own significance in terms of the Church's place in British society and our international co-operation with the Holy See, this visit also has a symbolic meaning as the first official Papal Visit to the United Kingdom. This visit, which follows two State Visits to the Vatican by The Queen and Pope John Paul II's pastoral visit to the UK in 1982, is a mark of a mature relationship, that is not hostage to history and that is founded on shared interests and values. I hope it will be a joyful experience for the United Kingdom's Catholics and a memorable one for all involved in whatever way, and a chance to establish contacts on which we can build a still stronger relationship in future.

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