

Enunciating the ‘antagonist truth’

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The state visit of a reigning pope, undertaken at the invitation of a British Prime Minister who is also the son of a minister of the Kirk of Scotland, marks something of an epoch. Anti-Catholic “no-popery” has been a core element in British national identity for four centuries. It is embedded constitutionally in the formal exclusion of any Roman Catholic, or even the spouse of a Roman Catholic, from succession to the throne. And it is reflected in popular culture in a multitude of ways, from the sometimes violent sporting rivalry between Rangers and Celtic, to the annual Guy Fawkes celebrations.

The notion of a state visit by a religious leader may in itself seem an anomaly. Till the French Revolution of 1789 bishops who were also heads of state – prince-bishops – were commonplace in Europe. The Pope is now unique in that respect, his sovereignty over the Vatican City State a means of safeguarding his spiritual

independence as leader of a world religion. The problems and delicacies of that role were very much to the fore in 1982, when John Paul II considered cancelling his pastoral visit to Britain, then at war with Catholic Argentina in the Falklands. Despite the miniscule territory in which it is based, the Holy See maintains diplomatic missions in almost 180 countries, and since 1815 the Papal Nuncio has been ex officio Dean (senior member) of the diplomatic corps in every country. In political terms, therefore, the papacy punches many times above its weight. This extraordinary situation reflects international recognition not merely of the Pope’s moral influence as religious leader of more than a billion members of the human race, but also of the Catholic Church’s unique role in world development and humanitarian activity. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, Catholic organisations contribute more than a quarter of all educational and medical provision.

The Church’s commitment to development was certainly one of the reasons for Prime Minister Brown’s invitation to Pope Benedict. But the social and political influence of the Papacy has often (understandably) alarmed politicians. In the weeks leading up to the First Vatican Council’s definition of Papal infallibility in 1870, the British Cabinet under Prime Minister Gladstone (a devout High Church Anglican) debated joining the other European Powers in a bid to disband the Council, by force if necessary. Gladstone was even rumoured to favour sending British gun-boats to prevent the definition. The then Pope, Blessed Pius IX, a kindly but excitable and frankly not very clever man, was implacably opposed to the emergence of the secular democratic State, which he saw (with some cause) as fostering moral and religious relativism, and usurping the traditional role of the Church and the Christian family in the formation of hearts and consciences. In 1864 the Pope had issued a ferocious “Syllabus of Errors” denouncing religious pluralism and a free press, and ending with a resounding denial that “the Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile himself with progress, liberalism and modern civilisation”. Politicians like Gladstone were convinced that Papal Infallibility would turn Catholics everywhere into a fifth column of bad citizens, the mindless puppets of an international power which rejected the very foundations of the modern state.



His Holiness
Pope Benedict XVI

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Of course, it did not happen: the definition left Catholics with their common-sense, intellects and consciences (and their national allegiances) intact. The Papacy accommodated itself to modern democracy, as it had accommodated itself to other political systems through its two millennia of history. Yet the Church and her message remain inevitably strongly counter-cultural. In a society increasingly dogmatic in its denial of objective moral standards, increasingly intolerant of dissent from the new orthodoxy of relativism, Catholicism in these islands has become once more the target of widespread liberal vilification.

Some of this new anti-Catholicism the Church has brought upon itself. Many inside as well as outside the Church have been dismayed by the sorry revelations of betrayal of trust, complacency and institutional dishonesty which have emerged in recent revelations about the handling of cases of sexual and physical abuse by clergy and religious. But at the root of much of this hostility is a rejection of the Church's core message, that human flourishing comes not from the hedonistic exaltation of individual choice as the absolute and only value, but from the attempt to live our lives together according to a divinely-given pattern of love, self-giving, and care for the helpless. That confrontation has displayed itself over a wide range of issues, from

questions of nuclear deterrence and economic development, to "life" issues such as abortion and the limits and legitimacy of new practices in biological and medical sciences.

The Christian message may be fundamentally life-affirming, but there is no doubt that it can often appear to others as a joyless and obscurantist puritanism, Holy Mother Church in the role of Mrs Grundy, happiest when commanding NO. Catholics themselves have not always been very good at dispelling – or escaping – such perceptions. But the fact that the Pope has been invited to address representatives of "Civil Society", including members of both Houses of Parliament, in Westminster Hall during the visit, suggests that there is still a widespread recognition that institutional Christianity has something vital to say to modern society.

The Pope could do worse than take Cardinal John Henry Newman as his guide both to what he says and how he says it. Newman, the great Victorian writer and theologian whom Pope Benedict will set on the road to sainthood at a "beatification" ceremony in Birmingham on September 19th, was the most English of saints. A devout convert to Catholicism, he nevertheless deplored both the lush religious emotion and the overbearing exercise of centralising authority which were features of the nineteenth-century Church. Himself a robust literary warrior against Victorian anti-Catholicism, he was also conscious that the church of his day had brought many of its troubles on its own head, by the intransigent obscurantism of some of the most vocal supporters of the papacy. Since the French Revolution, he thought, "a sort of centralisation had been established at head-quarters" which had stifled legitimate debate and discussion within the Church, thereby reducing its ability to provide honest and credible responses to the spiritual, moral and intellectual needs of its day.

Pope Benedict, as is well known, believes that Western society is in the grip of a corrosive relativism and in danger of cutting itself adrift from the Christian values which gave Europe and the West their distinctive religious, moral and aesthetic character. He will no doubt use his speeches in Edinburgh and London to spell out how he sees that process unfolding in these islands. Newman identified the same dangers at an earlier stage in Victorian Britain. But Newman believed that the slide into relativism could not be halted by mere denunciation. If Christian values were to prevail, they must commend themselves by their intrinsic power and attractiveness. Modern materialism, he wrote, must be met "not by refutation so much as by a powerful counter-argument ...overcoming error not by refutation so much as by an antagonist truth". It is no small challenge for the Pope to enunciate that "antagonist truth" to British audiences: but he will be sure of an attentive hearing. **F**



This *prie dieu* was used frequently by Newman when making his thanksgiving after Holy Communion