New Blackfriars

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Comment: *The Visit*

So, for all the animosity predicted and incited by the media, the miniscule though amply reported protests, and especially the discouragingly protracted procedures required by security screening, the State visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United Kingdom went off extremely well. On the first day, Dr Ian Paisley, now Lord Bannside, flew into Edinburgh with some Free Presbyterian ministers to tell people the visit was 'nonsense'. The police kept him and entourage to a corner of Grassmarket and Cowgate, a mile from the route taken by the popemobile.

The visit went well from the start, as anyone saw who watched on television, let alone participated in the enthusiasm of the 125,000 people lining Princes Street. Thursday 16 September, as it turned out, was St Ninian's day, which few previously knew (apart from the children from schools under his patronage, not all Catholic either). Cardinal O'Brien had arranged for 1000 kilted bagpipers to lead the procession, the creation of a special papal tartan, and for ensuring that the hors d'oeuvres at the Pope's lunch was haggis, neeps and tatties (a delicacy for which the Archbishop of Glasgow reportedly assured a fellow guest there is no word in Italian).

As the Queen ushered this famously heavyweight German academic into the Palace of Holyroodhouse he was overheard doing his best to make small talk (she commiserated with him for having to travel from the airport in such a small car). A delegation of theologians from the Catholic Studies Centre at Durham University was at the State reception, though the Queen did not steer the Pope in their direction (recognizing the Duke of Norfolk she propelled the Pope towards him). At no point was he scheduled to hold discussions with professional theologians. At Lambeth Palace, of course, he was welcomed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, by some distance the finest theologian in Britain; it seems unlikely that they discussed much theology. In Edinburgh, anyway, it was with the scores of children and young people who crowded round him affectionately that the Pope immediately came across unaffectedly as a gentle soul. It was all the more impressive since, on the major public occasions, he was to offer his strongest critique yet of the Church's dismal handling of the child abuse scandals, expressing his deep sorrow and shame at the 'crimes' (not just 'sins') committed against youngsters over decades. Privately the Pope met representative victims of molestation

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as well as (for the first time) a group of professionals and volunteers who work to safeguard youngsters in church environments. Everywhere he went, paradoxically and consolingly, it was clearly by ordinary people and especially children that he was at once greeted and accepted.

Of course there are aspects of the visit that might trouble Catholics. Of the £10m that Catholics were expected to provide to finance the explicitly religious side of the visit, not much more than £1m was raised by the nation-wide Sunday collection, or so reports say. Far more has been contributed by a handful of extremely wealthy donors, not all of whom are Catholics, who were privileged to meet the Pope privately, such as Anthony Bamford (chairman of JCB), Peter Sutherland (ex BP chairman), the Swiss businessman Urs Schwarzenbach and John Studzinski (lately of HSBC). After his audience James Murdoch, Chief Executive of News Corporation, Europe and Asia, reportedly went along to the Westminster Cathedral Mass. (But then Rupert, his father, gave $10m for the new Cathedral in Los Angeles, and has been a Knight in the Pontifical Order of St Gregory since 1998.)

Among many memorable episodes none was more impressive than the composure with which the deacon proclaimed the gospel at the beatification Mass of John Henry Newman: Deacon Jack Sullivan, from Massachusetts, whose training for the diaconate was interrupted by debilitating back trouble which was cured by praying for Newman's intercession.

Whether Catholics in the United Kingdom are now likely to abandon the caricature that many entertain of Newman as a cold fish, too intellectual, thin-skinned and even somewhat feline, remains to be seen. On 2 October 2008 his grave at Rednal was opened up in order to transfer the remains to a marble tomb in the Birmingham Oratory church. It turned out that nothing remained. This should not have been a surprise. As the *Birmingham Daily Post* Wednesday August 20 1890 reported, the coffin was lowered into the grave and covered with mulch — 'in studious and affectionate fulfilment of a desire of Dr Newman's which some may deem fanciful, but which sprang from his reverence for the letter of the Divine Word; which, as he conceived, enjoins us to facilitate rather than impede the operation of the law '*Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return*'.

He would never have expected beatification. He might well have worried that, as a Cardinal, his remains would eventually be removed to a supposedly more fitting place. That he took this precaution will surely endear Blessed John Henry Newman to many people who otherwise have never had much interest in his life and work.

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