

Cardinal Vincent Nichols, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, looks back with great fondness on Pope Benedict XVI's historic visit to the UK in 2010. Describing Pope Benedict as a pastor, a scholar, a gentlemen, and "though and through a man of God," Cardinal Nichols recalls a visit that "shifted the presence of the Catholic Church in this country."

It was a remarkable event. Remarkable in many, many ways. The first decision that the Pope made after accepting the invitation, which of course came from the government – from Gordon Brown. He was no longer in office when the Papal Visit took place. It was David Cameron. But the first decision the Pope made was to go to Scotland because the first thing he wanted to do was to greet The Queen. And it was a very, very wise decision because it put the whole visit in this light that if here is a visitor to this country, warmly welcomed by Her Majesty the Queen, then that warmth of welcome should spread throughout the land.

Everyone's favourite grandfather

The two weeks of criticism, rancour and distress expressed by some at this visit, dissipated. And then we saw in the person of Pope Benedict, nothing to do with the name that he'd been given of "God's Rottweiler," but at the end of the visit, as one commentator said, he appeared as everybody's favourite grandfather. We saw his courtesy, his gentleness, the perceptiveness of his mind and the openness of his welcome to everybody that he met.

To me, there are many highlights that stand out in my mind. One was the drive down the great road, approaching Buckingham Palace, down The Mall, decorated on either side with papal flags and Union Jacks – packed with people on both sides. And it was a sight I thought I would never see. A warm, rapturous welcome to the Pope of Rome in this country, which has for the last 400 years, struggled a bit with its understanding of its relationship to the Catholic Church.

Music is prayer

I remember on that trip saying to the Holy Father, we're going to Hyde Park and we're going to use the platform, the stage, which a week before was used for The Proms, for the music. So I said, "Tonight, it's not music, but it's prayer." And he said to me, "Music is prayer, you know, music is prayer too." And it was that kind of breadth of his understanding of the human spirit that whenever we are moved by music, then we're moved towards God.

Young people

That was so lovely to hear, up-close. Obviously, the moment he came to this cathedral was stunning and the celebration of the Mass was very beautiful. And then he walked to the main doors of the cathedral and met the piazza full of young people who were patient, they had waited a long time, but were rapturous in their applause and they're welcome for the Holy Father.

Christian unity

I think, about his presence in Westminster Abbey, standing there with the Archbishop of Canterbury. Again, in an echo of that great visit of his predecessor, Pope St John Paul II in Canterbury Cathedral, signalling a great healing of an ancient wound.

The elderly

Then, of course, there was his visit to St Peter's Home in Vauxhall, where he literally sat among the elderly and didn't shy away from identifying himself as somebody in that same phase of life. And he talked about the treasure of the elderly and protecting and nurturing that treasure of elderly people in our lives.

Meeting Politicians and Civic Leaders

Then there was his visit to Westminster Hall, which I think still resonates – certainly his message to us – when he called for a proper dialogue between the world of reason, and therefore politics, and the world of religion – of faith. In fact, he explained in that speech how faith needs reason and reason needs faith, echoing that phrase again of his predecessor that faith and reason are the two wings on which the human spirit soars.

He appealed, there, to the great parliamentary, democratic tradition of this country which has always been rooted in rational and measured discourse. And I think of those words today, and think of how shrill so much political discourse has become. How that potential, profound dialogue between faith and reason is undermined by a use of social media which seems to demand that policies are reduced to tweets – that's undermining so much of what's best in our traditions here and, indeed, the traditions of Catholic theology and discourse and the whole of European civilisation.

Redefining the Catholic presence in England and Wales

Pope Benedict built on the impact of the visit of Pope St John Paul II which shifted the presence of the Catholic Church in this country. That visit, especially the visit to Westminster Hall, still resonates – it still gives Catholic politicians a platform and a continuing respect. Even though, as I say, the more popular public discourse is difficult to enter because it wants so much in short sound bites, in aphorisms, in kind of slogans, rather than in measured discourse.

Pastor, scholar, gentleman

Pope Benedict was through and through a gentleman, through and through a scholar, through and through a pastor, through and through a man of God – close to the Lord and always, always his humble servant.