Editorial

Benedict and Newman

One week after the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Britain the dust has begun to settle and it is possible to start to take stock. Formally, the visit was a ‘state visit’. The invitation came from the former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Gordon Brown; the Pope was received by HM The Queen at the Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh; the Pope addressed an audience of politicians (including four past Prime Ministers) and civic leaders in Westminster Hall, the historic centre of governance. His major theme in the ‘state’ aspect of his tour was the vital contribution that Christianity makes to the common good of a nation. He came in humility as befits any Christian and any pastor, but particularly the overseer of a church that has been dragged through the mire by multiple revelations of sexual abuse by priests and misguided reactions by those in authority over them. Against this background, the Holy Father spoke gently but firmly; he did not hector and there was no finger-wagging at moral failure. Only in that way could he have carried it off and avoided the charge, ‘Physician, heal yourself!’. By striking the note of humility and loving concern the Pope’s ministry steadied Christians of all persuasions in the face of the noisy campaign of the militant atheists and secularists. The spiritual health of the kingdom received a boost.

Although it was formally a state visit, the Pope’s ministry in Britain was marked by a strong pastoral quality. His was a pastoral mission. He was welcomed as a pastor and teacher, not only by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and faithful, but by the leaders and other representatives of many churches. The Archbishop of Canterbury hosted a joint gathering of the diocesan bishops of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Conferences of England and Wales and of Scotland, in the Great Hall of Lambeth Palace Library. Both Primates gave magisterial addresses. The liturgy that followed in Westminster Abbey, where representatives of many churches were gathered, was a flawless exposition of the catholic character of Anglican worship and is said to have been an eye-opener for Vatican officials. Once again the Pope
struck just the right note: ‘I come as a pilgrim,’ he said, ‘to pray at the shrine of St Edward’ (King and Confessor and founder of the present Abbey). In a unifying symbol, the Archbishop and the Pope reverenced the St Augustine Gospels, which had been brought from Rome at around the time of St Augustine of Canterbury’s mission to the Anglo-Saxons of England at the end of the sixth century. The Dean of Westminster censed the High Altar, then the Primates together, then the officiating clergy and the congregation. The Pope and the Archbishop exchanged the Peace with warmth and smiles. The Archbishop carefully described the Pope as the chief pastor of the Roman Church, the church of St Peter and St Paul. At the end of the service Archbishop Rowan and Pope Benedict jointly gave the Trinitarian Blessing.

Where does all that leave Anglican – Roman Catholic relations? Where does it leave Apostolicae Curae (1896) with its condemnation of Anglican Orders as ‘absolutely null and utterly void’? And where does it leave the Pope’s overture to disaffected Anglicans and to former Anglicans in the Apostolic Constitution Anglicanorum Coetibus? It leaves a great deal up in the air, unresolved and perplexing – though one clear point is the agreement in principle between Archbishop and Pope, at their private meeting in Lambeth Palace, to progress the third round of the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC), with a focus on the relationship between the local (diocesan) and the universal Church, and the way in which moral teaching may be discerned by the Church so constituted.

In the interviews that I gave to the media, I found, as I expected, that they wanted to play up the differences between the two churches and the (supposed) exasperation of their leaders with each other and to exploit what these journalists saw as ‘bad blood’ over Anglicanorum Coetibus and the ordination of female priests and bishops. My answer was disarming: there were some cracks on the surface, but we were fundamentally united in faith; there was massive symmetry in belief and worship between the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions; the differences that receive so much attention were simply the tip on the iceberg of basic agreement. As we saw in Ecclesiology 6.1, this assessment is corroborated by Walter Cardinal Kasper’s verdict in Harvesting the Fruits. And in his address at Lambeth Palace the Pope gave thanks for ‘the remarkable progress that has been made in so many areas of dialogue during the forty years that have elapsed since the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission began its work’, and alluded to the Kasper volume in the words, ‘Let us entrust the fruits of that work to the Lord of the harvest, confident that he will bless our friendship with further significant growth.’ In the Abbey the Pope remarked that ‘what we share, in Christ, is greater than