

PAPAL VISIT – ONE YEAR ON. REFLECTIONS BY ARCHBISHOP MARIO CONTI

Recently I attended the opening ceremony for a new seating area at Bellahouston Park in Glasgow which has been created to commemorate the visit last year of the Holy Father. I was delighted both with the installation itself, and with the warm friendship and respect shown by the Lord Provost, the Council Leader and so many councillors and officials who took evident pleasure in recalling the historic Papal visit of 2010.

In leaving this permanent memorial, Glasgow City Council in a sense completed in a gracious manner a page in the history of our great City which has brought great credit to it and to its Council not only from among our own people but internationally. We are justly proud of what was done in preparation for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI and his welcome.

All that was achieved was achieved with great efficiency and sensitive attention to detail. If as they say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, then the success of 16 September last year demonstrated the ability of the City to host a major event and to do it with great aplomb.

I think something of the character of the visit is reflected in the monumental seating area which is simple, dignified and worthy of what it commemorates.

Of course the significance of the visit itself was immense, not only for the Catholic community and the many of other faiths and none who joined us - whether at Bellahouston or, more likely, through their engagement in events via media reports.

It was only the second visit in 2,000 years of a reigning Pope to Scotland and prior to the visit before he was Pope of Pope Paul VI, we know of only one case in history when someone who subsequently became Pope had visited our country. That was Pius II, Aeneas Silvio Piccolomini, who came on an embassy of the Pope to the court of James I, an event which is beautifully portrayed in a series of paintings in the library of Siena Cathedral, from which city his family hailed.

The visits of Popes in recent years facilitated by the ease of modern means of transport, in part revived a very ancient tradition – the missionary journeys of the apostles disseminating the Christian faith throughout the then-Roman empire.

We read of some of these journeys in the Acts of the Apostles not least the significant journey made by Paul the Apostle which took him to Rome – the apostolic foundations of the faith of which were laid by Paul and Peter – whose successor came to visit us last September.

Immediately after that event, Cardinal Keith O'Brien and I issued a statement which included thanks which I would like to reiterate on this occasion. We said: "On behalf of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland, we wish to express our heartfelt gratitude to

all who made the visit of our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to our country such a happy and memorable day. Months of preparation and hard work involved countless agencies and thousands of individuals. To each and every one of you our sincere thanks are due for the contribution you made to the resounding success of the day.

“In a special way we wish to express our gratitude to Her Majesty the Queen who received the Holy Father so graciously as soon as he arrived in Scotland. We wish also to put on record our deep appreciation of the support of the UK Government, the Scottish Government, the City of Edinburgh Council and Glasgow City Council for their warm support and co-operation in the planning and delivery of a “day of days” which allowed 200,000 people to see the Holy Father in person during his day in our country.

“The planning, preparation and forethought which went into each step on this Apostolic journey were quite immense and it is thanks to the contributions of so many that the day was such a resounding success. The success of the visit is a success of which all Scotland can be proud. Scotland enjoyed a day in the sun last Thursday, we showed a spectacularly welcoming face to the Pope and the world and reminded all those watching that the Catholic faith in Scotland lives and flourishes even in these often faithless times”.

I noted my own impressions at the time as follows: “Sometimes a day or an event can be defined by a colour. The visit of Pope Benedict this week was one such occasion and the colour by which I will always remember it is gold.

“It was a golden day in every sense ... the Holy Father at the centre in his beautiful golden mitre and cloth-of-gold vestments; the gold coloured umbrellas which stretched out through the park marking the spots where priests took communion to people far and near, and that amazing golden glow which settled over the scene as the Mass drew to its close and the sun set in the west at the end of a momentous day.

“When it was all over, some members of the Papal entourage approached me to say that the Pope had been overwhelmed by how warm a welcome he had received and how well everything had gone. He said it was one of the warmest welcomes he had ever received. It was the final touch to a perfect day”.

May all who recall the visit of the Pope to Scotland at the time of this anniversary revive happy memories and ensure that they be recalled in the days to come.