

Reflection by Archbishop Conti on Papal Visit – September 2010

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.

I felt so privileged to be the one who welcomed the Pope on behalf of the Church to Glasgow, to Scotland and to the UK. As he arrived by car at the space behind the altar I stepped forward to meet him. It was a private moment but one I will never forget for the intensity of his look and the sense of peace which he radiated.

As soon as I had arrived at Bellahouston Park, a little ahead of the Pope, I knew that all would be well. The atmosphere was wonderful – happy, prayerful, supportive ... all I could have hoped for. Later as we both stood high on that sanctuary in the park I stepped forward to read my formal message of welcome. I had spent a long time preparing my speech and I hoped it would provide a suitable introduction to the Mass and the visit.

The last few words of Gaelic proved tricky as I bid him a hundred thousand welcomes. But I was amazed to hear the Holy Father himself had been practising Scotland's native tongue to deliver the final message of his sermon – again a sign of his thoughtfulness.

How gentle and kindly I found the Pope to be as he toured round the park in his Popemobile, his eyes twinkling with joy. It was lovely for me to be there with him among my own people, recognising the faces of so many good people who were overjoyed that the Pope had come to visit them. During the Mass itself it fell to me to recite the prayer, in Latin, for the Pope, which continues "and for me, your unworthy servant". It was surely the largest gathering in which I had ever spoken these words – and standing beside the successor of St Peter as I prayed for him was a very special experience for me.

Later, when the Mass was over, I marvelled at the Holy Father's patience as he was introduced to so many people who helped make the visit possible. For each he had a lovely smile and word of encouragement.

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.