

Letter from Rome

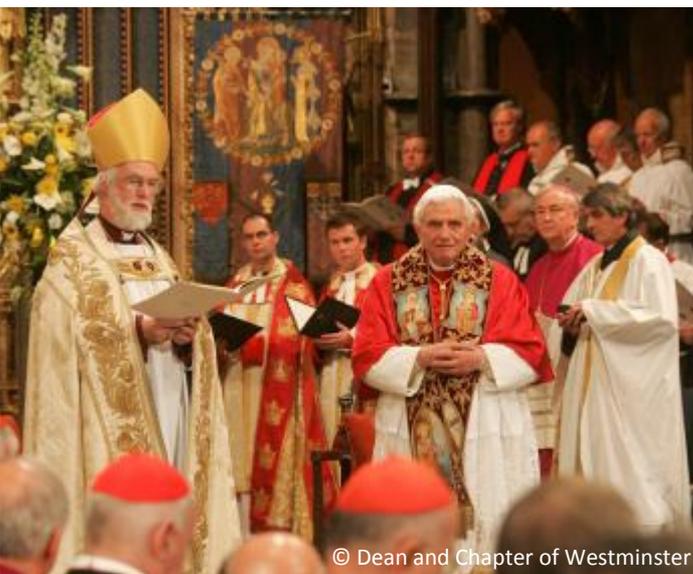
The Very Revd Canon David Richardson, Director of the Anglican Centre

The four days of the Papal visit to Britain were a whirl of activity. From Edinburgh to Birmingham via Glasgow and London, event trod on the heels of event and the 83 year-old Pontiff spoke many words: of encouragement and kindness, of sadness and apology, a word of warning regarding the march of secularism and a word of hope.

He spoke to Church and State, to children and to bishops, to Christians and non-Christians; everywhere the gloomy prognostications of the popular press were confounded by the reality which saw a surge of support and gratefulness.

At Lambeth Palace, the official London home of the Archbishops of Canterbury since about 1200, Anglican and Roman Catholic diocesan bishops from England, Scotland and Wales gathered to greet the Pope and to hear from him and Archbishop Rowan. The two Church leaders then held a private conversation, the first such encounter away from the Papal Apartments in Rome, touching upon many issues of mutual concern to Anglicans as well as Roman Catholics. Later the same afternoon, following a gathering in the Great Hall in the Palace of Westminster at which the Pope spoke to British Government and civic leaders, there was a truly splendid ecumenical service of Evening Prayer at Westminster Abbey. Archbishop and Pope knelt in prayer at the tomb of Edward the Confessor.

All this is common knowledge and now the stuff of history so why rehearse it here? The business of the Anglican Centre is ecumenism. The Pope's visit, assessed on the basis of the body language alone, seems to give the lie to the widely held and reported view that the gulf between the Anglican Communion and Roman Catholic Church has become a yawning chasm; the two communities are, it is said, drifting inexorably further apart.



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l. to r., the Archbishop of Canterbury, Minor Canons Revd Michael Macey and Revd Jamie Hawkey (a former Venerable English College exchange student), Pope Benedict, the Archbishop of Westminster, David Richardson

In that context it is especially significant that, in his final words to his own bishops before he left England, the Pope spoke of the importance of contributing positively to the “developing relations” between Anglicans and (Roman) Catholics and of “setting our sights on the ultimate goal of all ecumenical activity: the restoration of full ecclesial communion in the context of which the mutual exchange of gifts from our respective spiritual patrimonies serves as an enrichment to all.” Here surely is an echo of the language of Paul Murray’s ‘receptive ecumenism’ about which we wrote in the Eastertide 2009 edition of *Centro* though that deals in structural receptivity as well as spiritual. The Pope bade his bishops “pray and work unceasingly in order to hasten the joyful day when the goal (of unity) can be accomplished”.

“the joyful day when the goal of unity will be achieved”

The Pope also touched on the Apostolic Constitution, *Anglicanorum Coetibus*, describing it as a “prophetic gesture that can contribute positively to the developing relations between Anglicans and Catholics.” Predictably he did not – it was not the occasion for it - articulate how this pastoral provision, a response by the Holy See to a number of individual approaches, largely from former Anglicans, might serve the unity of our two ecclesial communities as an ecumenical instrument, nor in what sense it is ‘prophetic’. Many Anglicans have seen it as divisive rather than unitive both in its content and in the manner of its introduction.

Pope and Archbishop have already declared their commitment to another round of ARCIC conversations: there is much prayer and work ahead. The Apostolic Constitution’s ecumenical credentials need to be examined in the ARCIC forum, or in some other space where the generosity of spirit which typified this Papal visit prevails. Meanwhile we may rejoice that the prophets of doom, so sceptical that there would be value in this visit, have been proven wrong and that the Pope himself, on his first encounter with Anglican Patrimony on English shores was able to speak so encouragingly of ‘the goal of full ecclesial communion’.

David Richardson