

**CTBI Networking Conference 2010**

## **Proclaiming the Christian Mystery in the Public Square**

**Archbishop Vincent Nichols**

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this Conference of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland on the theme of 'The Church in the Public Square'. I am only sorry that my participation is so constrained by other commitments.

My contribution centres on the proclamation of the Christian mystery – that overall invitation of God made visible in Christ to the fullness of life – in the public square. And I hope this adds something to the networking between you, which is of course, the main thrust of your time together.

In developing this theme I wish to draw on the recent experience of the Visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United Kingdom. I am sure you are not surprised at that. After all I am still filled by the joy – for many the surprising joy – of those days. I think they are worthy of our deeper reflection for they illustrate well points involved in the presentation of the Christian mystery in the public square.

There are several aspects of this visit on which I could dwell. I could start with an account of the media build-up to those days in September. But you all witnessed that and do not need my reminders. I could dwell on the practical side of things and tell lots of stories about the difficulties involved in planning for a unique event with a set of tools designed for state visits of entirely different natures. But I want to keep the focus fairly narrow and will, therefore, concentrate on just these themes: firstly, the power of presence and prayer in the public square and, secondly, the witness to Word and dialogue in the public square. Then there might be time for a few words about feedback and opportunity.

Christian presence and prayer:

Many people will cherish their own memories of the four days of this Papal Visit. I would like to call on the reflections of one priest and, in turn, his account of the reactions of others to these events. So these now are the words of Fr Mark Woodruff, spoken a few weeks ago:

'This afternoon I met with two of the most remarkable servants of Jesus Christ in our country. They are two Pentecostal ministers who have hidden themselves deep in the most dangerous reaches of society, working for Christ at the heart of the drug and gun gangs in the West Midlands with their hardcore leaders to find the catalyst that can slowly begin to break them free. They spoke of the effect of the Pope's arrival on the streets of Birmingham, the areas his car drove through and what was lurking in the streets behind. They spoke of the West Midlands media which had campaigned about the expense of the State Visit and the moral non-credibility of the Catholic Church; and they remarked how in a few short hours in that weekend the media had run out of things to say. They spoke of the astonishing effect of the Prayer Vigil in Hyde Park and the sense of expectation before the imminent Mass of Beatification and how, without words, local people had known they should emerge and line the Pope's route, because his prayerful presence had already touched them. They spoke of how – at last - after so many years of having to apologise for being witnesses of faith, and ministers of the Gospel where no secular intervention was having anything other than the most baleful effects, Pope Benedict quietly and firmly restored public faith, the corporate faith of the Christian Church, back to the heart of national discourse. They said to me, "He told us to be proud of our faith and not to be ashamed in England. And he told England that it excludes the Christian faith and the Christian people at its peril". These were two Pentecostal ministers who were telling me how much all Christians rely on the faithful ministry and the gospel-proclaiming witness of the leader of the world's Catholics – unthinkable 10 years ago, perhaps. And these were two Pentecostal ministers who saw in the coming of the Pope to England what they thought had truly been going on: the English people had an experience of the faith they actually still believe in and that came alive for a moment; and what triggered that experience was an encounter with holiness, with the depth of prayer, with glory from Christ Jesus.

Let us call them Philip and James. Philip and James are two ministers who welcome sinners and eat with them. Daily they leave the ninety-and-nine to go in search of lost sheep and for years they have been working and waiting – and will work and wait some more - until they can say, "Rejoice with me, for I have found what was lost".

To them, the Holy Father's fleeting presence past some perilous streets and neighbourhoods of Birmingham was a profoundly important encouragement in some of the most frightening work for the Kingdom of God in England at the moment. And in the midst of all this loss rejection and abandonment of God, they saw that – even if

just for a moment - some hard hearts were touched, some dark recesses in our society stirred themselves and peered into the glory that comes from Christ, and something in the soul of a troubled, but still Christian nation, responded with goodness and a desire to worship in the Spirit of God.'

I could illustrate Fr Mark's narrative with one of my own. I was in the Papal motorcade on the trip towards Cofton Park from the helicopter landing point. Among those who came out to greet the Pope was a man with one side of his face cleanly shaven and the other half still covered in shaving foam! This was a moment not to be missed!

So here is the first challenge: the importance of visible presence; the powerful echoes created by a public image; the need to be visible. Of course, the presence of a Pope is fairly unique. But other things count, too. A few days after the Visit, I wrote to all our parishes and in my letter asked people to be confident in showing their faith in public. I heard one story the other day of a young man, Kevin, who took me at my word. He bought a kebab, but before he began to eat it, he made the sign of the cross and said a silent prayer. The chap behind the counter challenged him, saying: 'What was that all about then?' Kevin explained that before he ate he wanted to thank God for the food. The other chap thanked him and said that he had long since given up the practice of his faith but now, having seen what Kevin did, would try to take it up again.

Such acts of witness are not confrontational; they are invitational. They do not seek to convert, but just testify. They do not seek a response for they are formed out of an awareness of God, not an awareness of an audience. They are a genuine expression of faith and trust in the Lord, not a piece of PR or of advertising.

That is why this type of presence is often intertwined with prayer. For many people the most powerful moments of the Papal Visit were the moments of silent prayer in the Vigil in Hyde Park. It was a remarkable event. 85,000 people, or more, gathered in the centre of London, kneeling in silent prayer before the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Those who were there in that crowd told me that you could hear a child cry one hundred yards away. They experienced a shared prayer that was so profound. One mother wrote to tell me that the sight of her two sons, aged 13 and 15, kneeling on the grass in prayer filled her with unutterable joy for she knew they were living and learning something beyond price.

It is not easy to find the right pattern and content for public acts of worship and prayer. Yet they must be an important part of what we take into the public square. Here are my two thoughts in this regard: prayer in the public square must appeal directly to the inner spiritual dimension of our humanity, and it must be marked by beauty.

I have these two priorities because each is a point of hunger in our society today. There is a growing awareness that the purely material/scientific explanation of our human reality is not sufficient. The simplest expression of this is the decision to try to measure the success of our efforts in terms of happiness or satisfaction. The deeper expression came in the response of so many people to this aspect of the actions and words of Pope Benedict.

His insistence, with young people, that they seek happiness not in the celebrity model of our modern idiom, nor in the acquisition of wealth or status, has found a solid response. There is a growing responsiveness to the things of the spirit and I believe we do well to put this in first place when seeking to express our prayer in the public square.

My second priority concerns the language of the spiritual. How do we point to the things of the spirit? How do we raise minds and hearts into that realm? By things and moments of beauty.

In our overall planning for the Visit, we knew that our most costly exercise would be the beatification of Cardinal Newman. We knew this would have a vast international audience and a lasting effect. So we spent in order to achieve something that had beauty: beauty of sight and sound; beauty of movement and setting. It was expensive, but it was correct.

People have written to tell me that the stage setting for the Mass in Cofton Park, when seen in the very early morning light, had an ethereal beauty to it. They said the same of the way in which the natural amphitheatre of the park became an outdoor cathedral. They praised the sound system which carried the beauty of the music faithfully throughout the whole assembly.

Hyde Park, too, had its own beauty: the beauty of the glimpse of holiness. One comment I was offered was that the sight of the Pope in silent prayer for so long was the surest and most powerful expression of his office as the visible focal point of unity in the Church.

Open our hearts to the spiritual and do so through all that is beautiful: in my view this is the recipe for presence and prayer in the public square today.

The second theme I would like to address is that of word and dialogue.

So far, in these reflections I have not quoted a single word spoken by Pope Benedict. Yet his words, too, were important.

A moment of great drama in the Visit was the speech given in Westminster Hall. I was astonished at the warmth of the prolonged applause that greeted the Pope both before and after he had spoken. There was a quality of welcome in that applause which, quite honestly, I did not expect.

And his words matched it.

Having pointed directly to the issue he wanted to address, the Pope chose his words carefully. The issue was this: how, in a democracy such as ours, do we arrive at fundamental ethical principles to guide our life and governance? The Pope said: 'If the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident – herein lies the real challenge for democracy.....Where is the ethical foundation for political choices to be found?'

In response he did not suggest recourse to Biblical based principles, nor to a dominant position for any Church or creed. Rather he said: 'The Catholic tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason...According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers – still less to propose concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion – but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles.' Without a corrective role of religion, he said, reason can 'fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by

ideology, or applied in a partial way. Such misuse of reason was what gave rise to the slave trade in the first place and ...not least to the totalitarian ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.' But he also insisted that religion needs 'the purifying and structuring role of reason' if it is not to fall prey to sectarianism and fundamentalism.

So here is his proclamation in word: and it is a call to dialogue. He concludes: 'This is why I would suggest that the world of reason and the world of faith – the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief – need one another and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue for the good of our civilisation.'

He gave the same message in his meeting with a wide range of society's leaders who are people of every different faith. Indeed a vivid sense of the importance of dialogue was one of the gifts of the Papal visit. True dialogue requires an open heart and a committed will that always seeks what is best in those whom we meet and that looks always to build the common good. This stance and attitude of dialogue – of the mutual and reciprocal need that exists between faith and reason – is, I would suggest, one of the crucial characteristics of the task of bringing a proclamation of the Christian mystery into the public square. There is much to think about here.

Feedback on the Papal visit has been quite extraordinary. It has come from all over the world, for the events had a truly global audience. Many of them express a renewed sense of hope and joy in a shared Christian faith which emerged, somewhat like a underground stream breaking the surface, with a sparkle and surprising vigour. Of course, such a stream will shortly plunge back to its subterranean course, but we will know for sure of its existence and of the source which waters so many of the flowers and fruits of compassion and generosity to be seen in our stony landscape. I am sure that many of you have your own memories and feedback to offer, and I hope you have time to do so in the course of your days here.

The opportunities offered to us can be highlighted on many different stages. For the Catholic community there is fresh heart and a surprising clarity of identity. For every disciple and messenger of the Gospel there are, I believe, causes for hope and indications of the pathways we can take with some hope of response. For our wider society there is a glimpse of some solid foundations - in shared aspirations, in shared values and in shared anxieties – on which to build. There are openings with regard to the present Government, which seems to recognise that the marginalisation of

religious faith goes against the best of the traditions of these nations. Mr Cameron's address to the Pope at Birmingham Airport contained a clear expression of the Government's aim of creating 'a new culture of social responsibility' and of seeing people of religious faith among its main architects. His choice of the word 'architect' is interesting, as the architect is one whom you call in when you want to move from ideas to concrete plans, from a vision to a project, when you are looking for a structure in which to express your hopes. This may indeed be a crucial moment in which the Churches can contribute to the architecture of a culture of social responsibility, and, undoubtedly the way in which we will do so is the pathway of dialogue.

I hope that in these reflections there is a useful contribution to your on-going work. Again, I apologise for not being able to take part in it more fully. But I thank you for all that you do throughout your networks and I assure you of my prayers and best wishes.

+ Vincent Nichols