



British Embassy Holy See

St. John Paul II visit to Britain, 1982

When St John Paul II visited the UK in 1982 he was the first reigning pontiff ever to set foot on British soil. His visit marked a historic moment in UK-Holy See diplomatic relations as a full diplomatic ties were re-established and our first ambassador since the sixteenth century, Sir Mark Evelyn Heath, was appointed. (The UK had had an envoy to the Holy See since 1914).

During his six-day visit, the Pope visited nine cities in England, Wales and Scotland and delivered 16 major addresses. His Holiness was received by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace. Huge crowds greeted the pontiff wherever he went – from London to Birmingham, Liverpool to Manchester and Leeds, Cardiff to Scotland. In Ninian Park, Cardiff, the Pope addressed 33,000 young people. In Murrayfield, Edinburgh, more than 30,000 young people gathered to hear him. The Pope responded magnificently. His words were constantly interrupted by applause and he visibly drew energy from the encounter.

In Glasgow, 300,000 attended a televised open-air mass at Bellahouston Park, perhaps the biggest assembly ever in the history of Scotland. The Pope gave a message of unity, saying: “For the future, cannot we make that that pilgrimage together hand in hand [...] doing all we can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds us together?”.

Ecumenism was central to his visit. At Canterbury Cathedral, the Pope and the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, walked out together to joyous applause. By attending the cathedral founded by St Augustine of Canterbury on his mission to England from Pope Gregory the Great in the sixth century, St John Paul II made a powerful statement of the churches' determination to walk forward together. This ecumenical dialogue has flourished ever since.

St John Paul II's visit was an extraordinary event in the life of the Catholic Church in the UK. It was an important precursor to the great moments that followed, especially Pope Benedict XVI's visit in 2010, and the Canonisation of St. John Henry Newman in 2019. Its legacy was the strengthening and deepening of the relationship between the UK and the Holy See that is bearing fruit today.

Sally Axworthy
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