

Pope confirms UK visit for 2010

Pope Benedict XVI has confirmed he will this year make the first papal visit to the UK since John Paul II's of 1982.

He is expected to visit Birmingham - as part of the planned beatification of Cardinal John Newman - and Scotland. Dates for the trip have not been set.

The Pope spoke of the UK's "commitment to equality of opportunity" for all.

But he criticised equality legislation which imposed "unjust limitations on the freedom of religious communities to act in accordance with their beliefs".

No official itinerary has yet been drawn up but officials at the Vatican and in the UK told the BBC the visit was likely to take place in September.

Further details are expected early in March, a spokesman for the Catholic Communications Network said.

The Pope was formally invited to visit the UK by Prime Minister Gordon Brown last February. Scottish Secretary Jim Murphy also invited him to visit Scotland.

" Your country is well-known for its firm commitment to equality of opportunity for all members of society "
Pope Benedict XVI

Delivering a speech to Roman Catholic bishops from England and Wales who had made a pilgrimage to Rome, the pontiff asked that they ensure their faithful knew he "holds them in his heart".

Pope Benedict offered his "warmest good wishes and prayers" for the bishops and all the faithful entrusted to their care.

He urged them warmly to welcome disaffected Anglicans who wanted to join the Catholic Church.

It has offered Anglicans the prospect of their own hierarchies - ordinariates - within the Catholic system, leading to predictions that whole congregations opposed to plans for women bishops may transfer from the Church of England.

Despite this, Anglican Archbishop of York John Sentamu said the Pope would be "very welcome".

He told BBC News: "I've met him in Rome. We had wonderful conversations and whatever people may think about the ordinariate, they shouldn't use that as a reason for not accepting one of our great Christian leaders."

Protest petition

The Pope's remarks about equality legislation in the UK have been interpreted as a reference to legislation forcing religious adoption agencies to accept gay clients.

Religious leaders have also voiced concern about the government's flagship Equality Bill, saying it may force churches to employ sexually active gay people and transsexuals when hiring staff other than priests or ministers.

During his address, the Pope urged the bishops to ensure the Church's moral teaching was always presented in its "entirety" and "convincingly defended".

He said: "Your country is well-known for its firm commitment to equality of opportunity for all members of society.

"Yet, as you have rightly pointed out, the effect of some of the legislation designed to achieve this goal has been to impose unjust limitations on the freedom of religious communities to act in accordance with their beliefs.

" The taxpayer in this country is going to be faced with a bill of some £20m for the visit of the Pope. A visit in which he has already indicated, he will attack equal rights and promote discrimination "
Terry Sanderson National Secular Society

"In some respects it actually violates the natural law upon which the equality of all human beings is grounded and by which it is guaranteed."

He also urged the bishops to continue to insist upon their right to participate in national debate through "respectful dialogue with other elements in society".

By doing so, the Pope said, they would be "maintaining long-standing British traditions of freedom of expression and honest exchange of opinion" as well as "giving voice to the convictions of many people who lack the means to express them".

A spokesperson from the Government Equalities Office said the Pope had acknowledged the UK's "firm commitment to equality for all members of society".

"We believe everyone should have a fair chance in life and not be discriminated against. The Equality Bill will make Britain a fairer and more equal place," the spokesperson added.

The National Secular Society (NSS) said it would mount a protest campaign made up of gay groups, victims of clerical abuse, feminists, family planning organisations and pro-abortion groups, among others.

President Terry Sanderson said: "The taxpayer in this country is going to be faced with a bill of some £20m for the visit of the Pope.

"A visit in which he has already indicated, he will attack equal rights and promote discrimination.

"We have a petition online where people can make clear their opposition to the state funding of this visit. If the Catholic Church wishes its leader to come here, it should pay for the visit itself."

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