

The Guest Column

Carla Powell

End this liberal hostility to the Pope

A fascinating event took place recently in Rome in a palazzo high up on Gianicolo, the hill overlooking the Vatican: the European premiere of a film about Pope John Paul II, presented by none other than Newt Gingrich, former speaker of the US House of Representatives and scourge of the Clinton administration. Since leaving the House, Gingrich has become a Catholic. Combining historical sensitivity with an acute political eye, *Nine Days That Changed the World* argues that the late pontiff's first visit as pope to Poland, in June 1979, set in motion a series of events that led to the overthrow of Soviet communism and the freeing of the enslaved peoples of Europe.

How so? The answer is simple: he engendered a moral awakening. The Polish pope alerted his fellow countrymen to their dignity as free people in a series of speeches and symbolic gestures. This stiffened their resolve against a tyrannical regime that seemed to hold all the cards and sought to control even the way they thought.

Nine Days assembles an impressive cast of witnesses, among them Polish academics and various founders of the Solidarity trade union, including Lech Walesa, as well as former communist ministers and a member of the CIA. Its footage of Pope John Paul reminded me of what I had almost forgotten: how handsome he once was, how rich his voice, how compelling his ability to ride the adulation of the crowd.

Signs of intent

The first state visit to the UK of David Cameron's premiership will be that of Pope Benedict XVI in mid-September. It will be packed with events that show how Britain has changed. Perhaps the most poignant moment will be the meeting between the Queen and the Pope in Edinburgh on 16 September, the first day of his visit. They are among the few world leaders left, after all, who personally experienced the Second World War. The following day – even before he visits Westminster Cathedral – the Pope will call at Lambeth Palace and also pray in Westminster Abbey, an act underscoring his admiration for Archbishop Rowan Williams's intellect and integrity.

Even more interesting, I think, will be the speech he makes to parliamentarians in Westminster Hall. That the spiritual leader of Britain's largest minority, Catholics, should stand



Man with a message: the Pope is "misunderstood"

where St Thomas More was condemned to death will make a powerful statement about modern British tolerance and inclusiveness. It will resonate around the world, beyond the fifth of the globe's population who are Catholic.

If it is true that the Prime Minister intends to send a senior political figure to succeed the remarkable Francis Campbell as British ambassador to the Holy See, this signals his intention to forge closer links with an organisation tiny in territory but huge in influence. It would be win-win for everyone, you might think – for Britain, the Catholic Church, the government and parliament. And yet, on recent visits to London, I have been shocked by the negative criticism of the Pope and the Catholic Church. Why are so many of the capital's liberal elite upset? Why is Pope Benedict, an 83-year-old retired university professor, causing such anxiety?

The child abuse scandals central to all this have been a stain on the Catholic Church. But it is important to remember that this is a problem the Pope has been working to resolve for at least a decade. Grave as it is, the scandal should not be allowed to obscure his core message.

The tabloids will always offer apparently easy solutions and those hostile to the robust moral teaching of my faith will jump on any bandwagon. But solving human problems is seldom

simple, as any social services department will tell you. It hurts me that those advocating the arrest of His Holiness are increasingly in danger of sounding like the Chinese government, which seeks to use its brute economic influence to silence the Dalai Lama whenever he travels abroad. So much for British freedom of speech.

Benedict is complex and much misunderstood. I have met him fleetingly three times, twice in the company of Tony and Cherie Blair and once with Margaret Thatcher. He comes across as shy, a little embarrassed by his position and, perhaps, as a man who hankers after the seclusion of the library. Behind the smile and exquisite manners, he radiates the air of All Souls: indeed, I was struck by how alike it was to meeting Isaiah Berlin in Oxford many years ago.

Dictating terms

Though he has none of John Paul's film-star charisma, Benedict is a man with a message. He was the late pontiff's closest friend, his intellectual soulmate and loyal colleague. In all his time in Rome as Pope, and on his travels around the world, he has argued against what he calls "the dictatorship of relativism".

Moral relativism has become a kind of intellectual disease, weakening the vitality and self-confidence of Europe and the west. Left unchecked, it will destroy us, because it removes our power to resist the distortion of our values, erosion of our liberty and, ultimately, threats to our democratic way of life.

To Britons, schooled in scepticism, this can seem alien, obscure, even threatening. Yet, as an intellectual, Pope Benedict believes that ideas have consequences and that bad ideas can lead to the crushing of the individual. These themes are central to his papacy and will, without question, inform what he says during his visit.

Speaking on the weekend when we officially celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain will be deeply symbolic. He knows that the triumph of British freedom assisted his liberation as a German. His message will be clear: the conscience of the individual is the foundation of democracy. Even those who are not Catholic should welcome the Pope's state visit to Britain and leave any unexamined anti-Catholic prejudice where it belongs – in the decayed ghettos of Glasgow or the dreary backstreet murals of Ulster. ●