

Pope talks of freedom to convert in 'multicultural' Britain talk

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London, 17 September (ENI)--Pope Benedict XVI, on a visit to Britain, has reached out to leaders of other faiths, saying the Roman Catholic Church wants to build bridges of friendship but also insists on the freedom for converts to practise their new religion.

Addressing religious leaders on 17 September in London, Pope Benedict referred to, "situations in some parts of the world, where cooperation and dialogue between religions calls for mutual respect, the freedom to practise one's religion and to engage in acts of public worship".

This includes, said the pontiff, "the freedom to follow one's conscience without suffering ostracism or persecution, even after conversion from one religion to another".

Radio and television coverage on the second day of the four-day visit focussed on the arrests of five non-British nationals linked to a possible terror plot aimed at the Pope, though police said his agenda would remain unchanged. It is the first State visit by a pope to Britain.

Benedict referred again to interfaith relations when he met the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, the spiritual leader of the (Anglican) Church of England and head of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

"The increasingly multicultural dimension of society, particularly marked in this country, brings with it the opportunity to encounter other religions," the Pope said, in the first visit by a pontiff to Lambeth Palace, the London residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

This offered to Christians an opportunity to explore with members of other religious traditions ways of demonstrating, "the transcendent dimension of the human

person".

At the same time, Benedict said, "We Christians must never hesitate to proclaim our faith in the uniqueness of the salvation won for us by Christ."

Relations between Anglican and Catholic churches have in recent years sometimes strained over issues such as the ordination of women as priests by Anglican churches and the consecration of openly homosexual bishops by the Episcopal (Anglican) Church in the United States.

Pope Benedict said he did not want to refer to the "well known" difficulties in relations but rather give thanks for the, "remarkable progress that has been made in so many areas of dialogue".

In his remarks, Williams said, "Perhaps we shall not quickly overcome the remaining obstacles to full, restored communion," but this should not prevent "closer friendship" between the two traditions.

After the meeting with the Anglican leader, Benedict addressed a gathering in Westminster Hall, in Britain's Houses of Parliament, where Thomas More, a political advisor and English Catholic martyr, was sentenced to death in 1535 for treason after refusing to swear an oath of succession repudiating the pope.

In his speech, the pontiff urged efforts to counter the effects of secularism, and warned of the, "increasing marginalisation of religion, particularly of Christianity, that is taking place in some quarters, even in nations which place a great emphasis on tolerance".

On 19 September, he travels to Birmingham in central England to attend what the Catholic Church says is the highlight of his visit, the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890). Beatification is often seen as a step towards sainthood.

Newman was an Anglican priest who initially sought to bring the Church of England back to what he saw as its Catholic roots. Still, in 1845, after a period of self-questioning, he was received into the Catholic Church.

Meanwhile, critics of the pontiff including atheists and gay rights activists were preparing to hold a "Protest the Pope" rally in London, saying the Pope opposes universal equality and human rights.

Pope Benedict had arrived in Scotland on 16 September where he met Queen Elizabeth II in Edinburgh and addressed Catholic faithful at an open-air Mass in Glasgow before travelling to London.

Meeting more than 3000 children and young people on 17 September at St Mary's University College in Twickenham, in outer London, Pope Benedict urged them to become saints not celebrities and to live good lives with God at the centre of everything.

About 10 percent of all children in Britain and Northern Ireland attend Catholic-run schools.

"This is the greatest day of my life," said one schoolboy on a radio programme.
"Pope Benedict is the father of us all and this is a once in a lifetime event."