

Anti-Catholicism persists

Some years ago, I was invited to address a seminar at the Palace of Westminster for members of the House of Lords and House of Commons interested in Catholic social doctrine. As Lord Alton of Liverpool was introducing me, a gray head thrust itself inside the door to see what was afoot. Alas, before I could seize the microphone and say, “Do come in, Dr. Paisley, and see what the Whore of Babylon is up to,” David Alton finished his introduction and invited me to begin my presentation – for which, alas, the Rev. Ian Paisley did not tarry.

It was something of a disappointment, for I was eager to get to grips with the old anti-Catholic firebrand from Northern Ireland. An exchange of polemics is unlikely now, though, for Dr. Paisley is so far gone in respectability as to have been raised to the peerage as Lord Bannside. Yet a few embers of anti-Catholic bigotry still smolder within his lordship’s breast: during Pope Benedict’s recent visit to the United Kingdom, Dr. Paisley told the Telegraph that “I don’t want his blessing” and then claimed, absurdly, that “I just got a notice from their website that if you pay 25 pounds and go to Mass today, you’ll get out of purgatory quicker.”

There’s something a bit shopworn about Ian Paisley’s complaints. He’s engaged in anti-Catholic bombast for so long that whatever notes he manages to coax from his tarnished trumpet sound muted and flat.

The serious anti-Catholic antics prior to the pope’s pilgrimage to Scotland and England came, not from Ian Paisley, but from “new atheists” like Richard Dawkins and Stephen Fry, their allies in the British media (generally vicious in the run-up to Benedict’s arrival), and their legal show-pony, Geoffrey Robinson, Q.C., a transplanted Australian seeking to export the joys of American liability law to the U.K., as a base from which to plunder the Vatican of what he imagines to be its Croesus-like wealth. These people came unglued in anticipation of the pope’s arrival: Dawkins & Co. originally proposed having the pope arrested as an abettor of child-rap.

As a courageous Scottish bishop, Philip Tartaglia, put it to me during the visit, “the Pope’s grace and intelligence” won the day, to the point where even the BBC – which

had disgraced itself with forays into the Paisleyan fever swamps of anti-Catholicism in recent months – was providing reasonably balanced, and occasionally even positive, coverage of papal events in Glasgow and London. The hyper-secularist chattering classes had had their innings; the people turned out in droves anyway, to be with the Bishop of Rome and to give him the kind of cordial and respectful welcome first extended to him on his arrival by the ever-impressive Queen Elizabeth II. By the time Benedict left, even Prime Minister David Cameron, not previously noted for his enthusiasm about Joseph Ratzinger, was telling the pope that he had given all Britons important things to think about.

Benedict XVI's success in the U.K. challenges the often-supine British hierarchy to be as humanly compelling and intellectually forceful as the pope. If the bishops of the U.K. gather their nerve, they may eventually recognize that the new atheists are in danger of becoming Paisley 2.0: people so perfervid, so over-the-top, in their antipathies as to be dismissed as fundamentally unserious. The virulence of the new atheists' pre-papal visit commentary suggests they may fear this fate for themselves. In which case, to use another local phrase, it's time to put in the boot.

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