

PAPAL U.K. TRIP TOUCHES NERVE; RESPONSES VARY WILDLY

The consensus was that Pope Benedict XVI scored mightily in impressing the British. Judging from the size of the crowds that turned out to greet him, September 16-19, as well as the intensity of the response, it was clear that he won over not only Catholics, but even many of his former critics. The protesters were there, but they did not win the day. The Holy Father did.

At the conclusion of the trip, Prime Minister David Cameron praised the pope for the “searching questions” he posed. Media coverage proved to be a surprise as the BBC, a long-time hyper critic of the Catholic Church, showed a different side. “A pope who had previously been regarded as someone rather cold, professional, aloof and authoritarian,” wrote David Willey, “had suddenly been perceived as a rather kindly and gentle grandfather figure.” Not only that, but the pope’s speech at Westminster was dubbed a “triumph,” moving one British notable to say his performance was “sheer magic.”

Given the general euphoria over the pope’s visit, it made papal haters like Richard Dawkins look foolish by comparison; the famous atheist wanted the pope arrested for “crimes against humanity.” Supporting him in denouncing the Holy Father were such groups as “Protest the Pope,” Atheism UK and the National Secular Society. The infamous Catholic basher, Rev. Ian Paisley, also showed up to condemn the pope. To read some of their delirious hate speech, see pp. 4-5.

The Catholic League challenged the atheists to issue an apology for the crimes of Hitler, Stalin and Mao. We did this following remarks by the pope who cited Hitler as an example of “atheist extremism” in the 20th century. We thought it only fair that since these atheists demand that the pope apologize

for the misconduct of some priests, they should apologize for the over 150 million innocent persons murdered in the name of atheism.

In the U.S., media coverage was mixed. Of the three major evening news programs, ABC was mostly fair; NBC was dismissive; and CBS was patently unfair. CNN and the *New York Times* were the most unbalanced: CNN could not stop reporting on excommunicated women who pretend they're priests, and the *Times* could not concentrate on anything but the abuse issue. In other words, they reacted like ideologues, not journalists.

The pope broke some new ground, and he clearly touched a nerve. Media coverage was varied, but in general it was not bad. In a day and age of Catholic bashing, we're satisfied.