
Pope to preach in Westminster Hall

Pope Benedict XVI will preach in Westminster Hall, where Catholic martyrs including Sir Thomas More were condemned to die, when he visits England next September, it has emerged.

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He will make an address to MPs and peers from the spot where Sir Thomas was sentenced in 1535 for his opposing the adultery of King Henry VIII.

Details of the four-day state visit are being discussed in Rome between a delegation of Whitehall officials and their Vatican counterparts.

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A Vatican delegation has also visited London in an attempt to finalise the plans.

It is understood, however, that the visit will begin on September 16 and that it will end after the Pope has personally presided over the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman, possibly in Wembley stadium, on Sunday September 19.

The address in Westminster Hall will be one of two public speeches that the Pope will deliver during the trip. The other will be to academics at Oxford University.

Former Tory Minister Ann Widdecombe, a convert to Catholicism who will be standing down at the next General Election, said it was "marvellous" that the Pope will be able to address parliamentarianism from such an historic venue.

She said: "He should remind Parliamentarians of their duty to guarantee freedom and democracy and that includes Christians."

Westminster Hall was built in the 11th century and is the oldest part of the Palace of Westminster.

It is sacred to many Catholics because it was where many martyrs and saints were tried for High Treason during the Protestant Reformation.

Most notably it was the scene of the trial of Thomas More, the former Lord Chancellor canonised as a saint by Pope Pius XI in 1935 and made patron saint of politicians by Pope John Paul II.

More was beheaded after he refused to take an oath attached to the Act of Supremacy that made the King the supreme head of the Church in England.

A plaque marking the spot where the trial took place was kissed by Mother Teresa of Calcutta during one of her visits to Britain.

During the Elizabethan era, St Edmund Campion, the Jesuit missionary, was also tried in the hall and in the reign of James I it was the setting for the trial of Guy Fawkes, who had tried to blow up the building in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

In the same century dozens of innocent Catholic priests falsely accused by Titus Oates of plotting to kill King Charles II and put his Catholic brother James on the throne were tried and sentenced to death there. Samuel Pepys, the diarist and naval administrator, was implicated in the plot, was also tried but was acquitted.

An official announcement of the papal visit is not expected until well into the New Year.

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