

NOTE FOR THE RECORDPapal Visit : Service at Canterbury

The Archbishop of Canterbury saw the Prime Minister yesterday evening (following his letter of 24 March) to urge her to re-consider her decision not to attend the ecumenical Service at Canterbury Cathedral on Saturday, 29 May.

The Prime Minister said that the Papal visit was already assuming semblances of a State visit - which it was not - and she was anxious to avoid doing anything to enhance this impression. The Government would be represented at the Canterbury Service in the persons of the Lord Chancellor and the Home Secretary, and she felt very disinclined to go herself. She also questioned whether the form of service (with the use of candles and more generally) - and the setting chosen for it - would not be very likely to earn the strong disapproval of sections of the public who might otherwise be willing to let the Pope's visit pass without comment.

The Archbishop countered by saying that this was an ecumenical Service in an Anglican Cathedral in which the Pope would be sharing (along with leaders of other Churches) at his - the Archbishop's - invitation. It was not a Roman Catholic service in Canterbury Cathedral. Votive candles would not be used. The Prince of Wales would be present and the Archbishop felt strongly that it was desirable to demonstrate Government approval for this the only occasion during the visit when the Pope would be received by the Established Church. He wanted the Canterbury Service to be a national and not merely an ecclesiastical event.

The Prime Minister said she accepted that the occasion was unique in the way the Archbishop had described it, and that she would be prepared to attend if the Archbishop felt it to be essential and if, nearer the time, she judged it right to do so. At the conclusion of the meeting, and after discussing other matters, the Prime Minister repeated that she would be considering very carefully what the Archbishop had told her.

In conversation with me afterwards the Archbishop said he hoped he had not pressed the Prime Minister unfairly, particularly on a

day when she was under much stress. I seized on this to say that clearly the Prime Minister would want time to reflect before reaching a final decision, and although she had been impressed by the points he had made she nonetheless still had reservations about attending.

As the event is still more than seven weeks away the Archbishop is not now expecting an immediate decision. I checked with him that it was not the intention to announce a guest-list for some time. He added that the Prince of Wales' intention to be there had not yet been made public.

AK

6 April 1982