

# Comment

Why has everybody become so anxious to insist that, wherever he goes, the Pope must always be on a purely “pastoral” visit? Is it really plausible that moral and spiritual leadership such as people now almost universally expect from him can remain free of all political significance? Morals and politics can never be kept altogether apart. The very haste with which political leaders adopt the high moral tone when their policies slide towards national catastrophe itself suggests that the separation is hard to maintain. Does a pope who prays publicly in Argentina for the souls of people who have “disappeared” keep well clear of politics? The Junta would claim that such people were “subversives” and had to be put out of the way. Or consider the message that came over loud and clear on Pentecost at Coventry Airport: “Today, the scale and the horror of modern warfare – whether nuclear or not – makes it totally unacceptable as a means of settling differences between nations. War should belong to the tragic past, to history; it should find no place on humanity’s agenda for the future”. In the middle of the latest and by far the bloodiest phase of the long Anglo-Argentinian dispute over the Falkland Islands is that a purely “pastoral” pronouncement? In the world in which we now live it has become a political statement to say “Peace”.

Alexander VI, no doubt the most colourful and memorable monster (so far) to occupy the chair of St Peter, cannot be anybody’s favourite pope. His election was secured largely through bribing his fellow cardinals. The eleven years that he was pope were determined almost solely by nakedly political considerations, usually in favour of his son Cesare Borgia. Among his more notable acts was the division of the “New World” between Spain and Portugal (1493–4). Nobody at the time knew of the existence of an uninhabited archipelago in the South Atlantic, but the Argentinian claim to sovereignty over the Falkland Islands starts here.

According to the best British information the islands were first sighted in 1592 by John Davis. Others – guess who! – think that Esteban Gomez saw them in 1521. Nobody questions that Captain John Strong made the first recorded landing in 1690, naming the passage between the two main islands Falkland Sound. In the early

18th century the islands were frequented by fishermen from St Malo – hence the name Malouines or Malvinas. The French were the first to settle on the islands, in 1764, but withdrew three years later, having recognised Spanish sovereignty. In 1765, however, Commodore Byron took “formal possession” on behalf of Great Britain, apparently on the ground of prior discovery. In 1769–70 it nearly came to war between Britain and Spain over the Falkland Islands. In 1774 Britain abandoned the islands. In the wake of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution the Spanish empire collapsed. Argentina proclaimed itself an independent nation in 1816 and formally took possession of the Malvinas in 1820. The British returned in 1833 and evicted the governor and a small number of Argentinian settlers. The islands were re-settled gradually, mostly with migrants from Scotland. The Falkland Islands Company was set up in 1851.

Perhaps finding is keeping, and possession is nine tenths of the law. But however shrill Mrs Thatcher’s rhetoric becomes, nobody acquainted with the history of the Falkland Islands can imagine that the Argentinian claim is groundless. They protested to Britain in 1833 and have steadfastly maintained their claim ever since. No Argentinian government, of whatever political complexion, would ever abandon the claim to the Malvinas. Even the best-known surviving opponents of the present brutal military regime (such as Jacobo Timerman) support the claim. Indeed, everybody in Latin America, as well as in Spain, Italy, and many other places, takes it for granted that these islands belong to Argentina and must one day be restored to her.

Of course nobody thought these islands were so important – obviously the Junta didn’t – until Britain sent a force of 25,000 men to repossess them. The British dead, so we are being currently told, whether their bodies remain there or not, will make these islands consecrated British territory for ever. The problem is, however, that Latin America will never accept that – and, by the end of the century, according to all the forecasts, the majority of Catholics will be there. We may hope that they will see many far more urgent problems to solve – but the successors of Alexander VI and John Paul II, when they pray for a just and honourable solution to the dispute over the Malvinas, can really only be praying for one thing.

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