

The Catholicism of Henry VIII

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WITHIN a few short years of Martin Luther's revolt against the Pope, the contest for the faith and ecclesial loyalty of English Christians had been joined. Even before Henry VIII's assumption of control of the English Church, a rising tide of iconoclasm and attacks on traditional doctrine affected the parishes of England, inflamed by newly minted Protestants and other proponents of the Renaissance humanists' "new learning."

With the rupture of ecclesiastical union between the Church of England and the Catholic Church, the unity of Catholic faith in the English Church also began to break apart. The seamless garment of the faith was cut in pieces, and a long and haphazard mending of this faith has been required, and is still not yet finished. Yet elements of Catholic faith, like dormant seeds, have remained in the Church of England, sprouting under the right conditions, that have tended toward unity with the Catholic Church.

This centuries-long contest for the faith has seen periods where Catholic faith and practice within the Church of England has been ascendant and other eras where it was nearly annihilated. *The Book of Common Prayer* has been alternately used as both a hammer against Catholics and as a bulwark to protect Catholic practice.¹ In what will be a series of articles, we will examine the survival of Catholic faith within the Church of England. I will not be looking at those Catholics, known as recusants, who remained in communion with Rome and thus outside of the Church of England, a history well worth its own study. Rather, we will look at the history of those responses to God's gracious call, those sproutings of the dormant seeds of the Faith, which have yielded both an institutional response and a change of heart in individuals that frequently issued forth in the return of English Christians to the practice of Catholic faith, and for many, to return to their birthright of communion with the Holy See.

The Sacramentalism of Henry VIII

It may seem strange to begin a study of the survival of Catholic faith with the man responsible for the breaking of communion between England and Rome, but Henry VIII's schism was not primarily a breaking of faith, as much as it was a disruption of order and unity in the Church. Unfortunately, given the historical context of Protestantism raging in Germany, the Low Countries, and Geneva, there was bound to be an influx of heresy.

A Short History of Henry VIII

When Henry Tudor became King of England as Henry VIII in 1509, he inherited a kingdom only recently reunited, under his father Henry VII, after 50 years of the civil war known as the War of the Roses. A brief outline of his first 15 years of rule sounds like something out of one of the biographies of one of the many royal saints of the Middle Ages. A man learned in both secular and theological science, Henry allied himself with Spain against France to prevent an invasion by Louis XII in 1513² of Italy and the Papal States. When Luther began to assail the doctrines of the Church, Henry composed his *Assertion of the Seven Sacraments* against Martin Luther, for which Pope Leo X conferred on Henry and his heirs the title *Defensor Fidei* (Defender of the Faith),³ a title still claimed by the English monarch. He frequented the Mass his whole life, and in his will made provision for two Masses to be said for him daily in perpetuity.

When Henry beheld the rapidly increasing disunity in the Church of England in the late 1530s, he responded by a combination of public celebration of the traditional rites of the Church⁴ and on June 10, 1539, the enactment of the *Six Articles*,^{4, 5} in which the doctrines and disciplines of transubstantiation, communion under one species, clerical celibacy, vows of chastity, private Masses and auricular confession were all defended and upheld.⁶ While historians have customarily speculated that the *Six Articles* reflected the ascendancy of a conservative element in the government having won the king's favor, recent scholarship points to the *Six Articles* as reflective of the personal belief and policy of the King.⁷

And yet, these Catholic beliefs, held and enforced by a king who “thought to replace the pope while leaving unchanged the old faith”⁶ were put in peril by that same king, for “his secularization of the government so weakened ecclesiastical prestige and authority as to invite the theological changes that followed in the reigns of Edward and Elizabeth.”⁸ How could a man who had benefited from the best learning in England and showed an abiding Catholic faith in the Mass and sacraments his whole life, have also gone on not only to declare himself head of the Church in England, but also to suppress every single monastery, convent and friary in England, sending dozens of religious to the scaffold and stake, meanwhile abolishing pilgrimages, chantries and allowing rampant iconoclasm? The unfortunate answer is that “the defense and maintenance of the royal supremacy were the foundation of Henry’s religious policy.”⁸ The maintenance of the royal supremacy, of course, depended on an heir to the throne being secured, and it was this lack of a male heir by his first Queen, Catherine of Aragon, that led to the impasse between the king’s Catholic instincts and his dynastic aspirations.

The King’s Divorce

Queen Catherine had been married to Henry’s brother Arthur. Upon Arthur’s death, the reigning King, Henry VII decided that Catherine should be married to his heir, Henry, for diplomatic reasons. Although the marriage was forbidden by Church law, a dispensation was obtained from Pope Julius II in 1503.⁹ Henry acquiesced in the marriage, and the nuptials were celebrated in 1509.¹⁰

However, Henry’s hopes for an heir went unfulfilled. The only child of the many Catherine bore who survived was Mary, and Henry longed for a son who would be recognized by all as the legitimate heir. The fear of another civil war should an heir not be agreed upon by all was not an unfounded one, given the history of England only a few decades before. Henry began to doubt the legitimacy of his marriage to Catherine, in part because of their failure to produce a son.^{10, 11}

Much time was spent in the late 1520s trying to obtain an annulment of the marriage with Catherine, but the combination of Pope Clement VII’s reluctance to overturn a previous papal decision,

along with his wariness of Catherine's nephew, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, who was the most powerful ruler in Italy, led to the denial of the annulment. The frustration with this decision allowed Henry to see the attractions of an English Church court's decision of annulment;¹² but for that to happen, the English Church would need to assert its independence of Rome on this matter, and thus the old laws against Praemunire and appeals beyond the English monarch were dusted off and given new meaning. And ultimately, the Parliament passed the laws which established Henry as the supreme governor of the Church of England.

Catholic Life under Henry VIII

What was the religious life of an Englishman under Henry? The daily service continued to be the traditional Mass, in Latin, offered by celibate priests. In most parishes the special ceremonies of bearing candles on Candlemas, receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday, bearing palms on Palm Sunday, creeping to the Cross on Good Friday and setting up the sepulcher on Easter Sunday continued, as did the use of holy water and holy bread¹³ (taken most Sundays in lieu of Holy Communion, which was still most commonly received once per year). The people continued to confess their sins to the priests, and concern for the dead was still expressed by making offerings to have Mass said for the repose of the souls in purgatory.¹⁴

This is not to say that there were no changes. The Bible was translated and placed in every parish church, and in 1544 an English Exhortation and Litany was published for use during processions, especially on rogation days. Pilgrimages were banned; the "Pilgrimage of Grace" which was really an uprising of the Catholics of Yorkshire and the Northern counties against the rupture with Rome, was savagely put down. And the rulers took note that further pilgrimages could lead to the same gathering of anti-government forces.¹⁵ In particular, the veneration of St. Thomas à Becket, martyred by King Henry II's soldiers in 1170, and therefore an inspiration for those who would uphold the rights of the Church against the King, was odious to Henry; the pilgrimage to Becket's shrine in Canterbury was banned, his name ordered removed from all service books, and his tomb destroyed.

The monasteries, some of which were no doubt in need of reform, were targeted as well, and by 1539, all of the monasteries were closed, following a series of visitations.¹⁶ The property belonging to the monasteries was confiscated, some of the wealth going to the King and some to his nobles.¹⁷ Some of the friars and monks found a place as priests in the parishes of the kingdom; many of the religious, though, fled to their order's houses on the Continent¹⁸ while others were assimilated into the general body of the people. Despite these attacks on Catholic institutions and practices, parish life continued much as it always had.

It was following Henry's death, during the regency of Edward VI, that the anti-Catholic forces of Protestantism were unleashed against the English parishes.¹⁹ The first act of Parliament after Henry's death was to repeal his *Six Articles*. In 1547 there followed the abolition of chantries and chapels (with the concomitant destruction not only of the livelihoods of these priests, but also of the schools which they frequently ran); in 1548 the use of any but two candles on the altar in a church were prohibited, and then the use of blessed candles, ashes, palms and processions were prohibited, and all images were commanded to be destroyed, even those depicted in stained glass windows.¹⁹

Conclusion

As a ruler, Henry VIII sought absolute obedience from all his subjects, including his bishops, and so used the power of Parliament to override the Church's own ruling body of Convocation, to repudiate the authority of the Pope over the English hierarchy, and subject it to himself. In order to consolidate that authority and to finance his imperial ambitions, he closed the monasteries. The properties of the monasteries were dispersed among his nobility, assuring their loyalty and scattering the monks, nuns and friars who were the most loyal among to Rome.

Henry VIII's personal faith in the efficacy of the sacramental system, and especially that of the Mass, however, remained that of a traditional Catholic. Following his death, when the regency council under the Duke of Somerset began the radical Protestantization of the Church and imposed *The Book of Common Prayer*, many of the

people rebelled, especially in the North and in the West, specifically citing the authority and laws of Henry as justification for their resistance to the new services.²⁰ Henry's revolution in the Church was not so much a reformation as an imposition of an extreme Caeseropapism that had been nourished in the Conciliar movement of the 15th century and which would reappear later in the Catholic world in the form of Gallicanism.

Henry's reverence for the Sacrament of the Altar, long a keystone of the Catholic faith, remained after his death, a dormant seed in the English Church. Passed down quietly from parent to child in many an English home, this seed would sprout among the Laudians, Nonjurors, Tractarians and Anglo-Catholics of the subsequent centuries. The irony is that this seed was planted by the very man who first ruptured the Catholic unity of the Church in England.

The next installment of this series will be Archbishop Laud and the restoration of public worship.