

Archbishop Laud and the Restoration of Public Worship in the Church of England

by Steve Cavanaugh

This is the second article in a retrospective series examining the survival of Catholic faith and practices in the English Church after the Reformation.

The Puritan Fight against Catholic Worship

With the death of Henry VIII in 1547, all out war was unleashed against Catholic England. While Henry had wrested control of the English Church from the Pope, most of the traditional faith and practice of the nation was left unmolested. During Edward VI's short reign, however, "iconoclasm was the central sacrament of the Reform,"¹ and a thorough program of confiscating vestments, smashing statuary and stained glass, and tearing down altars ensued. Missals and primers were destroyed, and the Mass, rosary and prayers for the dead were banned by law.

At the death of Edward VI, his Catholic sister Mary ascended the British throne and from 1553 until 1558 the practice of the Catholic faith was restored under the Queen's protection. But following Mary's death, her sister Elizabeth, daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, was enthroned as Queen, and soon the practice of the Catholic faith was again proscribed.²

The official worship of the Church under Elizabeth was to be according to Cranmer's second *Book of Common Prayer*, which was amended slightly in 1559 so that the ritual retained certain Catholic elements: the faithful received communion kneeling, surplices were to be worn by clergy during services and copes during the administration of Holy Communion.³ These practices were considered by the minority, but vocal, Protestants of the realm

to be entirely too Roman Catholic, and the resulting Vestiarian Controversy, in which many ministers would lose their positions because of their conscientious refusal to wear the surplice, raged for years.⁴ Richard Hooker, in his monumental *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, had to address this controversy and asked “If a Bishop, a Priest, a Deacon...come to administer the usuall sacrifice in a white garment, are they thereby Gods adversaries?”⁵

The practical result of the Puritan fight over “Romish” practices was a gradually decaying liturgical life. The holy table, which replaced the altar, was typically moved into the nave of the church and was infrequently used, as most parishes held a communion service no more often than monthly; instead, Sunday morning worship consisted of Mattins, the Litany and the Ante-Communion (akin to the ancient Mass of the Catechumens or the modern Liturgy of the Word in Mass).⁶ The holy table was so little used that the ancient reverence toward the altar, which at first was maintained by the people toward the holy table, nearly vanished; the thoughtless laid their hats and coats on it, and it shared in the general neglect which a prevailing idea of the opposition between the spiritual and external worship had engendered.⁷

Hooker and the Defense against the Puritans

But the Catholic sense of worship, which remained in many churchmen, began to reassert itself in the 1580s and 1590s. Richard Hooker, quoting St. Jerome in his contentions with Pelagius, made sport of the Puritan assertion that only those practices explicitly ordered in the New Testament are allowed in Christian worship, and therefore that the use of special apparel by the minister is somehow unchristian, and in his argument brought forth the witness not only of St. Jerome but also that of St. John Chrysostom.⁸

Throughout these years, the position of the bishops was strengthened through royal backing, to counteract the presbyterian leanings of many of the Protestants and lower clergy.⁹ And with this reassertion of the bishops' authority, in both their juridical and sacramental roles, it was natural that the liturgical practice of the bishops' cathedrals, which had retained a more traditional form, should be imitated in the parishes. Hooker, in his same work which defended the use of priestly vestments, also defended antiphonal psalm singing, another "popish" practice the Puritans opposed.¹⁰

Archbishop William Laud and the Reassertion of Catholic Practice

With Hooker's learned refutation of the Puritan idea that all Church practice must be explicitly mandated in Scripture, the reassertion of Catholic practice could begin in earnest. The champion of this Catholic reform of Anglican worship was William Laud, who would rise from chaplain to Bishop Neil of Durham to be bishop of St. David's and ultimately, in 1625, to be Archbishop of Canterbury.

Building on the thought of his Oxford tutor Buckeridge and the thought of Lancelot Andrews, William Laud would abandon an early Calvinism to become a champion of Catholic ideas: the necessity of ordination by bishops, the centrality of the Eucharist and Holy Communion in the Church's life, and the necessity of external expression of spiritual worship, particularly in the beautification of the Church's ritual and the churches' fabric.

Laud and his followers asserted that the Church was the place on earth where God "most doth inhabit"¹¹ The logical consequence of this belief was that men should behave most reverently in the church, and so practices such as moving the holy table to the east end of the church and railing it off so as to prevent abuse, and bowing toward

the altar and at the mention of the name of Jesus were enforced.

Stressing that God must be worshipped with both body and soul,¹² the Laudian reformers in the Church of England asked, “How shall we hope to have our bodies glorified by God, if wee will not glorify God in our bodies?”¹³ The liturgy, with its prescribed ritual actions, was emphasized as the proper means to worship God. Unlike the Puritan emphasis on reading Scripture and hearing sermons, the Laudian program was closer to the emphasis on corporate prayer through the Office and Mass that had been the goal of Catholic reformers such as Erasmus a century before. Voicing a very Catholic sense of the centrality of the Eucharist, one of the writers among Laud’s followers noted that Holy Communion “is the greatest perfection and consummation of the Christian religion.”¹⁴

In Laud’s efforts to restore the beauty of holiness to the worship of the Church of England, he “proposed to recall the arts to the service of the Church, to beautify the altar, to restore the cross to the ritual and the surplice to the priest.”¹⁵

But Laud sought more than a restoration of former practices in liturgy. He also sought to restore the Church as a true estate within the kingdom, to restore its income and lands so that it could pursue its mission in society freed from the continual fiscal tyranny of King and Parliament.¹⁶ He saw the collapse of ecclesiastical authority in the previous century as injurious to the poor and sought to regain a measure of the Church’s independence so that it could help restore society. In this he was opposed by the mercantile and middle classes which had materially benefited from the social and religious changes of the 16th century.

The Impact of Laud’s Reforms

In the 1640s civil war broke out in England, with forces loyal to

the king and church clashing with the Parliamentary armies and their Scottish allies who backed a Presbyterian Calvinism. The decade saw the execution of the king's chief advisor Buckingham in 1643, of Archbishop Laud in 1645 and ultimately of King Charles himself in 1649. A Commonwealth was proclaimed, episcopacy and the *Book of Common Prayer* banished and Presbyterianism established as the religion of England. It certainly seemed as though the reforms which Archbishop Laud, backed by King Charles, had attempted were doomed to remain a mere footnote in English ecclesiastical history.

And yet, a mere 12 years after the execution of King Charles, his son Charles II was recalled to England and crowned king, the bishops and the *Book of Common Prayer* were restored, and the ritual practiced in English churches was that restored liturgy which had been championed by Archbishop Laud. The Church of England in restoration England was certainly more Catholic in appearance and practice, not only than the Presbyterian Church of the Commonwealth, but also than the English Church under Elizabeth I and James I. The "church papists", who held Catholic faith but who conformed as much as possible to the externals of the national Church's practice, had embraced the reforms instituted under Laud.¹⁷

The Catholic element in the English nation by this point certainly had been weakened; the recusants were greatly reduced in number after the constant attacks on them by the English monarchs¹⁸ and then the Presbyterians under Cromwell, and the "church papists" were also reduced, if only because so many had died in the war while fighting on the side of King and Church. Nevertheless, there were some survivals of Catholic faith in the English Church, especially in Yorkshire as well as in the Scottish Highlands, and in the Scottish Episcopal Church, which had been disestablished even before the

English Civil War, and which had always had a more Catholic liturgy and Eucharistic faith than most of the Laudian party.

Despite the efforts of Somerset, Cranmer, Elizabeth and Cromwell, the Catholic sense of and belief in the liturgy, the Real Presence and the necessity of the priestly ministry had survived to this point, even if no longer as the faith of the majority of English Christians. But these survivals would be seeds that awaited a more favorable season to bloom.

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