

# The Divisions Among the English Catholics: 1580-1610

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This article covers those years from the entry of the Jesuits and seminary priests into England until the death of the Jesuit Robert Persons—a crucial period which determined the main lines that recusant history would follow until the beginning of Catholic emancipation in England at the end of the 18th century.

An important background factor in recusant divisions, which recent historians have tended to ignore or play down but which had a considerable influence on recusant attitudes toward the State and toward one another, was the continuance of a rigorous persecution.<sup>1</sup> This was scarcely expected by the 1580 mission since it entered the country with every intention of recognizing the political and religious status quo as it had been established by the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity of 1559. So when Persons published his *opuscule* to dissuade Catholics from attending Protestant services, he addressed it to the “High and Mighty Princess Elizabeth.” But from the first, the regime refused any kind of negotiation. There could be no question of tolerating two religions in the same country. Burghley himself, in a celebrated memorandum, pointed out to the Queen that Spain was a great power precisely because it allowed only one religion,<sup>2</sup> and if she desired the same kind of greatness for her own country, she must do the same. It could be maintained that the Church by Law Established even in these early days had men of sufficient caliber<sup>3</sup> to face Edmund Campion and his fellow Jesuits, men of indisputable learning, but the regime was taking no chances; and had no intention of encouraging disobedience. It reacted swiftly. This same year, 1580, proclamations were read out everywhere against those, including gentlemen and even noblemen, who had consorted with the Jesuits. They were summoned to London and committed to prison.<sup>4</sup> The harsh acts of 1581 and 1583 were accompanied by savage acts of cruelty, especially against priests. Alexander Bryant, for instance, was stretched on the rack and had needles thrust under his fingernails.<sup>5</sup> Somewhat

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*Francis Edwards, SJ, has just published a biography of Robert Persons.*

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later, Richard Topcliffe was allowed to carry on torture in his own house.<sup>6</sup> The degree of barbarity, indeed of intensity, of the persecution varied throughout the period, but it was always there at least in the background to inspire fear. It was this fear which seems to have driven some of the recusants at times to become almost hysterical in their denunciation of their co-religionists who came to disagree with them, and to indulge in expressions of positive loathing, while they used almost fawning language to persuade the civil government to tolerate themselves even if it could not like them.<sup>7</sup> But the differences at first were never about doctrine, only about procedures and ways of relating to the Protestant regime. Loyalty to the Pope as the head of the Church was taken almost for granted, but one could appeal from a Pope badly informed to one better informed.

The undeniably savage reaction of the Queen's government to the first group of new martyrs executed at Tyburn on December 1, 1581, persuaded many who became exiles for their faith that the only solution to the English challenge was by way of force; that is, by way of invasion from the Continent, probably through Scotland, with the help of the French and Spanish. At the beginning, the morale of the Catholics in England, in spite of persecution, remained high, and they found sympathy even among some of the Protestants. But the resort to foreign arms on the part of some of the papists abroad, and more particularly the Jesuits, especially Robert Persons, however much it might be justified by expediency and even reason, represented a remedy which could only be justified by success. It failed early and went on failing until the end of the century. Its initial failure was evident by the summer of 1582; a failure sealed by the Ruthven raid of August 22, which made it impossible to arrange a diversion by way of Scotland, at any rate at that time.

The earliest, most obvious and fundamental division among the Catholics was between those who continued to favor the forceful solution and those who did not and perhaps never had. The basic assumption of the former was that the English regime was implacable in its hostility to their faith and would bow to no other argument. In fact they were right, but only the opening of archives in a future as yet unforeseeable could fully prove them so.

Meanwhile a body of opinion gathering strength throughout the period believed that the way of force would never succeed: that the only practicable way forward was to come to whatever terms the English government was prepared to offer. What was offered was never at any time a guarantee of toleration, but only a vague hope held out that was defined by those who accepted it rather than by those who were taken as offering it. Certainly, recusants must show their good faith toward Elizabeth's State by denouncing Jesuits and Hispanophiles even to the point of revealing them by name and the families in England that sheltered them. Those that rose to this bait thus

became virtual spies for William Cecil and his son Robert. Others, such as Sledd, simply abandoned their faith and became spies tout court. Others simply broke down under pressure, such as the Franciscan priest Edward Osborne, who very early on revealed houses and hosts.<sup>8</sup> This established a precedent that divided the recusant laity into those who were not prepared to take further chances in sheltering priests who might not be trusted, and those who were so prepared. Most, and especially the Jesuits, proved trustworthy, but the most dangerous to the recusants of those who turned right round was Christopher Perkins, an ex-Jesuit who achieved a knighthood and apparently had much to do with devising the oath of allegiance of 1606 in such a way that more was involved than temporal allegiances. Thus, a conscientious Catholic could not take it.<sup>9</sup> Thomas Wright was another ex-Jesuit who caused his former colleagues no little embarrassment after his departure from the Order.

But there were a number of secular priests who tried to face both ways at once, retain their priesthood and become informers for the government, not with any formal intention of betraying their own cause, but simply to show their willingness to cooperate to the fullest extent possible with the Anglican regime. Perhaps the most intelligent and effective of these was the priest John Cecil. He was ordained in Spain and had considerable experience of the embryo seminary in exile at Valladolid. Robert Persons trusted him completely, and indeed was happy to recruit his assistance in helping to establish the seminaries on a firm footing. Whether one condemns Mr. John Cecil for duplicity or commend him for political skill, certainly he was able to keep Persons in the dark for a number of years as to his true role. John Cecil returned to England in 1591 to hand over vital names and information to Lord Burghley, hoping in return that he and his like-minded friends would be rewarded with toleration and some kind of recognition.<sup>10</sup> As we would expect, this Cecil was only welcome to the others as a source of division.

A further division fostered by Charles Paget, his brother Lord Paget, Thomas Morgan and William Gifford added to formal opposition to Persons and his Jesuit brethren the further notion that politics and statecraft were not proper subjects for priests and religious. Further, political activity should be confined not merely to laymen but to the aristocracy, whose natural gift, right and privilege it was to deal in such matters.<sup>11</sup> Such an idea was by no means absurd according to the ethical and social philosophy of the time. It is significant that it found support with the eminent Belgian Jesuit, Oliver Mannaerts. Mannaerts was quite prepared to side with Paget and his friends against his English brothers led by Persons, and even to denounce him to the Jesuit general, Claud Aquaviva.<sup>12</sup> In another context, Mannaerts was totally opposed to the idea of Persons becoming a cardinal. It is not unlikely that a

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certain element of jealousy entered into this attitude. Jesuits, too, were usually very human; and Mannaerts was the grand old man who had been suspected in his youth of ambition, a serious sin in Jesuit eyes.

Nor was division in the ranks of the Jesuits confined to Flanders. Some of the foreign Jesuits, Flemish and Spanish more particularly, who for obvious reasons felt the challenge more directly, could resent the presence among them of people who felt they needed to be so different that they had to have their own educational and training institutions. It was not always taken kindly that the English (and for that matter the Irish and Scots seminarists and ordinands) felt that what was offered them in continental seminaries was so unacceptable as to make it necessary to found their own. There was also the important consideration that such institutions needed to be funded, and the funding had to come at least in large part from the generosity of the host countries. This meant that alms which were never in plentiful supply, coming as they did for the most part from the Spanish authorities in Flanders as well as Spain, had to be shared with foreign emigres. In the circumstances, it would have been surprising if there was not a good deal of resentment at the prospect of people who were technically citizens of a nation at war with Spain until 1604, and in effect hostile for long after 1604, taking money which left indigenous institutions that much more impoverished.<sup>13</sup>

A further difficulty which made for friction between Jesuits and their foreign hosts was the fact that, under Claud Aquaviva, there was a considerable expansion of the Society of Jesus in order to find men to meet as many of the demands as possible made on the Society for works in education, the missions and elsewhere. The policy was successful in that more demands could be met by the burgeoning Society. The less fortunate result was that the elitist character of the Jesuit Order, which had guaranteed excellence, was now often lost. Many joined the Society, in the Catholic countries of course, in the spirit of men jumping on the bandwagon, ready to take advantage of the prestige and influence which the Order had hitherto enjoyed.<sup>14</sup> This had its effect on the relations between the Spanish and English Jesuits in the Peninsula in the later years of the 16th century, after the foundations of the colleges in Valladolid and Seville. At first, the Spanish provincials appointed first-rate men to run the English institutions in exile—since it was always understood that the superiors of English institutions abroad would be of the nationality of the host country, whether Spanish in Spain or Flemish in Flanders. But as the extension of Spanish foundations proceeded the point was reached where men of the highest caliber could not be spared from native works so that only men of secondary capacity could be spared to supervise the foreigners. A Peralts might be succeeded by a del Rio.<sup>15</sup>

From the 1590s onward, a new area of contention arose between a faction

of the English secular priests and the Jesuits and the rest of the seculars, by far the majority, regarding the way in which the Catholic body in England should be organized and governed. The first attempt to provide local supervision was carried out by a group of priests who divided the country into north and south, each with its local supervisor.<sup>16</sup> Rome, however, unaware of indigenous efforts, had been studying the problem and in 1597 set up an archpriest to supervise priests throughout the country, but having no direct jurisdiction over the laity or religious. The priests who had set up their own incipient organization were dissatisfied with this and wanted nothing less than the appointment of bishops. William Bishop and Richard Charnock conducted an appeal to Rome to protest against the setting up of the archpriest on the sole authority, as they claimed, of Cardinal Cajetan, the Protector of the English nation.<sup>17</sup> They received short shrift and were sent back with the assurance that the present arrangement was not only according to the mind of Cardinal Cajetan but also according to that of the Holy See.

Only slightly daunted and altogether unabashed, they organized a second appeal. An important pretext for not accepting the Roman decision was provided by the fiction that almost the only reason for the failure of the first appeal, and for the continuing refusal to grant bishops to the English Catholic community, lay in the baneful and obstinate opposition of Robert Persons, the Jesuit. His influence almost alone was taken to be mainly responsible for the previous failure. In fact, at no time did Persons oppose the appointment of bishops; rather, the contrary.<sup>18</sup> However, as a good Jesuit he felt bound at all times to uphold and defend the decisions of the Holy See, and if the Holy See decided against, and there were good reasons for this, then he was bound to vindicate this decision.

Before the Appellants set out on their second appeal, which arrived in Rome in 1602, they were careful to prepare the ground much more carefully than for the first appeal. They obtained the tacit approval of the English State, which saw in it a procedure to be encouraged as tending to promote division and disunity. The Appellants also successfully sought the support of France through the French ambassador in Rome, Philippe de Bethume. This was an extremely clever and effective move, and while it owed something possibly to Robert Cecil, it bore the unmistakable handiwork of John Cecil.<sup>19</sup> Certainly, the results were much more favorable for the Appellants than on the previous occasion. The papal brief of October 5, 1602, introduced important modifications in the system as it had operated hitherto. George Blackwell, the archpriest, although confirmed in his office, was virtually censured—not altogether unjustly—for being less than fatherly in his approach to his subjects. Most important, he was forbidden, or thought he was, to take any advice from the Jesuits not only in the administration of his office but even in other matters,

such as doctrinal. Not a man of notable intellect or ability, Blackwell came very much under the influence of the Appelants so that, by 1606, when a new oath of allegiance was devised after the Gunpowder Plot, he and a number of his priestly colleagues agreed to take it. Thus, a new source of division was successfully engineered and exploited by James I's government. Not even when the oath was condemned by Rome as demanding more than temporal allegiance did Blackwell see fit to submit. He was never formally censured by the Pope since he felt that any kind of pursuit or persecution of the recusants, even the disobedient, came more properly from the English State than from himself, although he could not do less than depose the former archpriest.<sup>20</sup>

It was made clear to his successor, another archpriest, George Birkhead, that it was only in matters of his government of the secular priests that he was not allowed to approach the Jesuits for advice or information.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, by this time the anti-Jesuit tradition among many of the secular priests, especially the more politically influential, was so strong that the man who went to Rome in 1609, officially as a pilgrim, but unofficially to solicit the creation of bishops, was Richard Smith. Smith went as Birkhead's clergy agent. He was intended to replace Thomas Fitzherbert, a man who worked in the closest co-operation with Robert Persons, and later became a Jesuit. From the first, Smith did his best to avoid all but superficial social contacts with Persons and resolutely refused to take his advice or that of Fitzherbert on the most effective ways of proceeding according to Roman protocol.

The irony was that Persons himself had suggested how Smith might come to Rome without violating the papal prohibition of any further deputations or appeals from the benighted land to the north.<sup>22</sup> Smith insisted on doing things his own way, and showed no discretion in some of his opinions, such as his poor opinion of the religious in general. The Pope, who was genuinely anxious for peace among the recusants, and loath to do anything that would promote discord, could only conclude that the creation of bishops would, in fact, do precisely this. Smith behaved in Rome as his worst enemy. But he could not bring himself, or for that matter, Birkhead, to believe otherwise than that Persons and Fitzherbert had opposed him throughout and were the villains responsible for the failure of his mission. Persons wrote a double series of letters to Birkhead, the first intended for general dissemination and leaving out indications of disagreement and friction. The second, intended for Birkhead's eyes alone, informed him frankly of Smith's gaucheries and tactlessness, urging him to bring his agent to heel. Birkhead, however, resenting Persons's efforts to keep him informed as to the true situation, chose to regard it as an attempt to come between him and his chosen mouthpiece. Indeed, Persons was asked to write no more letters of the kind.<sup>23</sup> Birkhead's loyalty to his agent could be commended but hardly his wisdom in appointing him in the first place.

Certainly, Smith came away from Rome with nothing that he went for, and used his failure not to question his own behavior but merely to confirm Birkhead in his suspicion that Persons was the sole obstacle to progress.

A later antagonism we may consider was a certain rivalry which sprang up for a time between the Order of St. Benedict and the Jesuits. As in the case of differences between the Jesuits and certain seculars, there can be little doubt that the Earl of Salisbury did his best to exacerbate if he did not initiate the dissension. Potentialities for rivalry were there when the Benedictine mission began in England in 1603. The English Benedictines experienced a reflowering and growth after the relative torpor following the setbacks of the Reformation and the loss of their English houses. English members of the Spanish and Cassinese Congregations both came to England and began to work successfully with all the happiness of a country without past history.<sup>24</sup> Witnessing at first hand the troubles in the English colleges run by the Jesuits in Rome and Spain, and much influenced by the anti-Jesuit stance of the Paget party and later of the Appelants, some of the students decided to try their vocation with the Order of St. Benedict. Nineteen joined from the English College, Rome, and by 1607 the mission was well established in England.<sup>25</sup> This same year there was student trouble at Douai; and on May 12 a Benedictine house was set up in the city which however lofty its purpose, could only rival other enterprises in the city for alms and public support. As one would expect, the authorities at the head of both Orders and the Vatican could only deprecate these seethings among the lower echelons. Peace was sufficiently restored by a papal decree issued on December 12, 1608.<sup>26</sup>

The astonishing thing is that the recusant cause continued to survive and even make progress in the midst of external persecution and inner dissension. One could conclude, perhaps, that the divisions were not so serious as they seemed. Certainly, beneath them all was a unity of purpose in keeping the Catholic faith alive, and at no time was there notable dissent as to basic doctrine. However, some aspects of the papal prerogative came up for questioning, especially after the new oath of allegiance was applied after 1606. The oath had been devised not merely to ensure Catholic civil obedience, but to force important concessions touching the spiritual authority of the papacy. It was not done without subtlety, as we might expect from the contribution of an ex-Jesuit to its formulation. If it did not bring about a split, it certainly succeeded in producing a significant and vociferous minority among whom were some of the Appelants. These considered it was time to abandon not only the practice but the theory that the Pope had no right to excommunicate and depose princes. The Pope made it clear that he had no intention of excommunicating James I or any monarch at that time but he stood firmly by his authority in general terms to discipline even kings if the situation seemed to call for it.

Richard Smith, who went to Rome as George Birkhead's new Roman agent in the spring of 1609, defended Catholic doctrine against the published works of Thomas Bell, a priest who had apostatized in 1593, in his book, *An Answer to Thomas Bell's Challenge....* It was noted that Smith made no reference to Bell's attack on the papal deposing power. The archpriest, George Blackwell, took the oath on July 7, 1607, for which he was deposed on February 1, 1608. Roger Widdrington, O.S.B., alias Thomas Preston, between 1611 and 1619 published nine works in which he vindicated taking the oath, an issue closely bound up with the other.<sup>27</sup> Much of the noise of excursions and alarums may well have been produced to convince the English government not only that the recusant cause could be broken by division artificially induced from outside, but that its efforts to disrupt and dismay was enjoying no little success.

Meanwhile, the recusants themselves, behind their noisy denunciations of one another, understood the true situation and continued their clamor to stave off persecution by persuading the government that they were best left to themselves to destroy themselves. But they continued at quieter levels the real task of maintaining the faith. In a word, they disliked or even hated one another much less than appeared on the surface and as it came through their words alone. Their aim thus was not, one may suppose, the conscious result of any special leadership or policy but rather the innate instinct of a community doing its best to save itself. Certainly, in spite of all the odds against, the recusants survived. Moreover, their basic conviction as to the truth of their faith was sufficient to produce martyrs for as long as governments saw fit to impose the ultimate penalty: which was until the end of the Oats Plot era. Perhaps a real decline in recusancy began when persecution was removed.

### Notes

1. Francis Edwards, S.J. *The Elizabethan Jesuits*. London, 1981. 4, 50, 62-3, 94, 142, 157-8, 160, 276.
2. "An antidote against Jesuitism written by the Lord Treasurer Burleigh: concerning a pretended peace with Spain." Inner Temple, Petyt MSS, series 538, vol. 43. ff. 304 & seq; cf. *ibid.*, vol. 37, f. 171 & seq.
3. John Strype, *Annals of the Reformation and Establishment of Religion*. 4 vols. London, 1709-31. Vol. II, 159.
4. Catholic Record Society. Vol. II. Miscellanea II, 1906. 177.
5. Godfrey Anstruther, *The Seminary Priests*, 4 vols., 1968-77, vol. 1, Catholic Record Society, vol. 39, London, 1942, p. 81, n. 31, p. 88.
6. Christobel M. Hood, *The Book of Robert Southwell*, Oxford, 1926, pp. 47-51.
7. William Watson, *A Decchordon of Ten Quodlibeticall Questions concerning*



*Religion and State...* London, 1602. Perhaps this was the most extreme of the Appellant effusions.

8. Catholic Record Society, vol. 39, p. 141, n. 2.

9. George Conn's dispatches: transcript in British Province S.J. Archives. 46/23/8, p. 50. Charles I admits Perkins's part in devising the oath.

10. Public Record Office, SP12, vol. 238, Nos. 160, 180, 181, vol. 239, No. 46.

11. R. Persons, S.J., to Charles Paget; Stonyhurst MSS, Christopher Grenc, Collectanea P. f. 452. Partly printed in T.F. Knox, *The Letters and Memorials of William Cardinal Allen 1553-94*, London, 1882, p. 391.

12. Archivum Romanum Societatis Jesu, Germania 177, f. 192 r/v, and f.79 r/v.

13. R. Persons to Aquaviva, 12.vi.1595; abid, Hispania 138, f.299.

14. Thomas H. Clancy, S.J., *An Introduction to Jesuit Life*, St. Louis 1976, pp. 121, 138-42.

15. R. Persons to Gonzalez del Rio, 12.v.1595; Archives of the English College, Valladolid, Serie II, Legajo 1.

16. R. Persons to Juan de Idiaquez, 12.vii.1597; Biblioteca del Vaticano, Vat. Lat. 6227, f.165.

17. The most learned defense of the Appellant viewpoint was probably John Colleton's, *A Just Defence of the Slandered Priests...* London, 1602.

18. R. Persons to de Pena, n.d. (vii.1597?); Biblioteca del Vaticano, Vat. Lat. 6227, f.183. *Letters of Thomas Fitzherbert 1608-10*, Catholic Record Society, vol. 41 (1948), No. 14, n.4.

19. J. Bossy, "Henry IV, the Appellants and the Jesuits," *Recusant History*, vol. 8, pp. 80-122.

20. George Birkhead to Richard Smith, 8.i.1610 (O.S.?), Archives of the Archbishop of Westminster, Old Series, vol. 9, no. 2.

21. R. Persons to Chamberlayne vere Birkhead, 18.v.1608, Berkshire Record Office, Milton House Collection (on microfiche), No. 4; M.A. Tierney, *Dodd's Church History of England*, vol. v, pp. xxvii and vol. iv, note on pp. 76-79. Tierney/Dodd often omits important passages without indication.

22. R. Persons to Birkhead, 12.x.1608, Milton House Collection, no. 15.

23. Birkhead to Persons, 19.x.1609, Tierney/Dodd, *Church History...* vol. v, p. lxxxii.

24. For an overall account of the Benedictine mission at this time, see David Lunn, *The English Benectines 1540-1688*, London, 1980.

25. Ibid. See also, Frederic Fabre, "The Settling of the English Benedictines at Douai... 1607-11," *Downside Review*, vol. 52 (1934), pp. 1-64: unpublished documents on pp. 3, 54-64.

26. Peter Guilday, *The English Catholic Refugees on the Continent 1559-1795*,

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London, 1914, p. 224.

27. For Preston/Widdrington, see W.K.L. Webb, S.J., *Recusant History (Biographical Studies)*, vol. 2, pp. 216-68 and Anne M.C. Forster, *ibid.*, vol. 11, pp. 196-205.