England's Catholic Reformation
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Welcome to this series of lectures on England's Reformations and their legacies. It's a subject which is both too easy and too difficult to talk about it. The basic stories we all learned at school are all too familiar. Bluff King Hal and his six wives. It is a story which we keep going back to, if not quite a founding national myth then a shared moment of national trauma. Who are the heroes and who the villains? Our best literary recreations of the subject cannot agree: in these cases, indeed, they are openly at each others' throats. The subject can still raise strong passions, given that the principals have all been dead for well over four hundred years. A lot of us feel strongly about which of these or other portrayals capture the spirit of the time best. For me, the most compelling of the films is still this one, from 1969. Genevieve Bujold received an Oscar nomination for her portrayal of Anne Boleyn. She's in her 70s now, and a few years ago she was interviewed by a historian I know who, at the end of the interview, asked her which actress at work today she'd like to see playing Anne Boleyn. Bujold leaned forward and with steel in her eyes said: 'Nobody. Anne is mine.' – These are, as I say, stories that many of us feel invested in.

Which is as much as to say: there is and there can be no such thing as 'the English Reformation'. A 'Reformation' is a composite event which is only made visible by being framed the right way. It is like a 'war': a label we put on to a particular set of events, while we decide that other – equally violent – acts are not part of that or of any 'war'. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English people knew that they were living through an age of religious upheaval, but they did not know that it was 'the English Reformation', any more than the soldiers at the battle of Agincourt knew that they were fighting in 'the Hundred Years' War'.

I am not, in these lectures, going to rehearse the main narrative of events. That story is one whose scaffolding is high politics, though as we'll see that is by no means the only way to tell the story. In very brief: during the reign of Henry VIII, king from 1509–47, England broke away from the papacy and embraced some aspects of the Protestant Reformation that had been unfolding on the Continent since Martin Luther first openly defied the Church in 1517. During the short reign of Henry's son Edward VI, from 1547–53, England moved in a much more decisively Protestant direction, and briefly looked like it would embrace the version of the Reformation put forward by the Swiss radicals. That was promptly reversed by the Catholic restoration under Queen Mary from 1553–8, which was itself overturned by a Protestant restoration under Queen Elizabeth, whose much longer reign was from 1558–1603. Not least because of Elizabeth's longevity, her so-called religious 'settlement' – it's a questionable label – stuck. It was Protestant, but of a more idiosyncratic kind. Versions of it were maintained by her successors James I and Charles I – at least until civil war swept King Charles from power, cost him his head, and pitched England's religious life into turmoil once again.

There's no doubting the importance of these religious upheavals. They permanently changed England and, by extension, the many other countries on which English culture has made its mark. But what does it mean? How can we best tell the story? Or the stories? There is no single master

narrative of all this turmoil. How could there be? It was played out at every level of an increasingly diverse society, as highly visible political changes and shifts in public religion shaped, and were shaped by, the lives of millions of people. The way you choose to tell the story is governed by what you think is important and what is trivial, by whether there are heroes or villains you want to celebrate or condemn, and by the legacies and lessons which you think matter. Once you have chosen your frame, it will give you the story you want.

So these lectures are not going to tell 'the story' of 'the English Reformation'. They will tell the stories of six English Reformations: six stories of religious change in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. The stories are parallel and overlapping, but each has a somewhat different chronological frame, cast of characters and set of pivotal events, and has left a different legacy.

I leave it to you to make the choice between them. Certainly none of the stories I am going to be telling you is the whole truth, though I think I can promise you that they will be more accurate than some of the versions which have been around in recent years. That will, I promise, be the last film reference. The best I can offer is to say that these stories are as accurate as over twenty years working on different aspects of this subject can make them. What I am not going to tell you is which of them is closest to my heart, though if you'd like to guess, feel free. The only prejudice I will admit to here is my dislike of the living forcing our stories too high-handedly on the dead: they may be dead, but that does not mean that they should dance to our tune.

And so to the first of our stories, the one which might seem the most unlikely of all: the story of England's Catholic Reformation.

Christianity first came to the country we now call England in Roman times. In the sixteenth century, the age of the Reformation, not everyone believed the legend that Joseph of Arimathea had brought the gospel to Britannia in the first century, and planted a thorn on Glastonbury Tor; but the equally legendary tale of how Pope Eleutherius had converted King Lucius of the Britons to Christianity in the second century was common knowledge. Moreover, Constantine, the first Christian Roman emperor, was claimed as an honorary Briton on the basis that he had begun his reign in York. Still, all this was only prelude. The collapse of Roman rule and a wave of pagan Anglo-Saxon settlement in the fifth century pushed Romano-British Christianity to the island's western fringes, and above all to Ireland. The incomers had to be converted afresh. In the year 597 a far from legendary missionary named Augustine, sent by the equally real Pope Gregory the Great, persuaded King Ethelbert of Kent that he and his kingdom ought to become Christian. Augustine became England's first archbishop at Canterbury, Ethelbert's capital. His successors down to the present have sat on his throne in the cathedral established there.

So sixteenth-century English Christians could look back on nearly a millennium of unbroken history. And whether they thanked Eleutherius or Gregory, they could and did take particular pride in being the first nation to be converted at the hands of a pope. For a country at almost the farthest edge of Christendom, this connection to the Apostolic See of Rome was a point of pride. A cynic might say that it cost England very little to be ostentatiously loyal to the pope, since Rome was too far away to make much of a nuisance of itself – but equally, this meant that England's voice was under-represented in the Church's councils. There has as yet only been a single English pope (Adrian IV, 1154–9), although as we will see, in the sixteenth century there were a couple of near-misses.

Nevertheless, a strong Anglo-papal axis was a recurring fact of medieval English life. Duke William of Normandy legitimized his conquest of England in 1066 with a papal endorsement. King Henry II was made lord of Ireland by a grant of that sole English pope in 1155. King John, who was the closest medieval England came to having an antipapal ruler, had by the end of his reign reversed

his position so dramatically that he formally granted sovereignty over the entire realm to Pope Innocent III. During the great schism of 1378–1417, when western Christendom was divided between two and then three popes, England was stoutly loyal to the popes in Rome, rejecting the rival claimants in Avignon. In 1485, Pope Innocent VIII gave the newly and precariously crowned King Henry VII a much-needed endorsement by blessing his tenuous claims to the English throne and permitting him to marry his royal cousin Elizabeth of York. King Henry, an invariably sharp-eyed propagandist, had the papal bull translated into English and printed for general circulation. The logic was the same as it had been for centuries. Kings and popes both had far more to gain from working together than they could ever win from confrontation. They knew that when the relationship broke down, the result was a crisis like the one which led to Thomas Becket being murdered and his king being forced into a humiliating penitence; in bust-ups like that, there were no winners. And while church and crown did not need to love each other, they did genuinely recognise each others' legitimacy; most kings had at least a streak of genuine piety, and most clergymen at least a streak of national loyalty.

This long history has helped to foster the myth of the Middle Ages as an undifferentiated 'Age of Faith', whether depicted as an Eden of Catholic innocence or as a thousand years of Babylonian captivity. Of course, this is not so. Neither in England nor elsewhere in Europe could Catholic Christendom flourish as it did for so long by remaining static. The Catholic world's astonishing durability testifies to its power to reinvent itself. Throughout the Middle Ages, established patterns of religious life were challenged by movements of 'reform' – some consciously led from Rome, but many more bubbling up as local initiatives, often in the form of new or reformed orders of monks, nuns, friars or canons. The Church's hierarchy suppressed or even persecuted initiatives which posed an unacceptable challenge, but it much preferred, where it could, to tolerate, tame or co-opt them. They were its engine of renewal.

If there was a single pattern to these myriad reforming initiatives, it was a cycle in which formality, laxity, habit and corruption was periodically challenged by new or revived movements of invigorated discipline and holiness. For example, in the early thirteenth century St Francis of Assisi founded a new kind of religious order: not enclosed monks but itinerant friars, living amongst the people and committed to lives of absolute poverty, deliberately choosing to depend on the day-to-day gifts they received from the people. Yet as the Franciscans grew and institutionalised they settled into less rigorous patterns of living and made compromises. Until they were challenged afresh from within their own ranks by a so-called 'Observant' movement which sprang up to oppose this laxity, and was formalized in the fifteenth century. Henry VII, with his ready eye for branding opportunities, made himself patron of a new English province of the Observants: the numbers of Franciscan Observants in England were never very large, but their moral authority was out of all proportion to their numbers.

But this cycle of holiness and laxity was a spiral, not a circle. With each turn, its scope widened from the clerical and monastic elite to the population at large. The Franciscans, unlike their monastic predecessors, set out to live among and minister to the common people. Many fourteenth- and fifteenth-century innovations abandoned formal religious orders altogether, allowing lay men and women to live in quasi-monastic communities, sometimes only temporarily rather than as a lifelong vocation. This early fifteenth-century Flemish altarpiece, typically enough, depicts the Virgin Mary as an ordinary Dutch woman in a domestic setting: this is where holiness is to be found. And she is reading: the slow spread of literacy, accelerated by the development of printing with movable type in the mid-fifteenth century, symbolized and facilitated a change in how lay Christians related to their Church. No longer simply the passive consumers of its sacramental services and the subjects of its prayers, they were beginning to participate. Books of hours, written so that lay people could pray as monks did within the fabric of their everyday lives, became a staple of the late medieval book trade. Once the monasteries had been a refuge for holiness in a

godless world. Now that reservoir of holiness was overflowing into that world and soaking into it.

So, the English Church in the early sixteenth century was hungry for reform, but that was neither an unusual nor an alarming condition. Loyal and earnestly pious churchmen were painfully aware that the English Church fell short of its high ideals – even though, compared realistically both to its own past and to the rest of Latin Christendom, it was in pretty good shape. Its bishops were a remarkably impressive body of men. In most European countries the bishops were drawn almost exclusively from the high nobility, and their spiritual qualifications were, let us say, variable, but the English and Welsh bishops were a remarkable meritocratic bunch: most of them men of middling or even relatively humble birth, who had risen up through England's two substantial universities. Not many of them were great theologians – although there were some, such as John Fisher, the bishop of Rochester, the most internationally celebrated theologian which sixteenth-century England produced; but many of them were able lawyers and administrators, equal to the task of managing their vast institution and to furthering and strengthening its discipline. The parish clergy, too, were unusually well-educated and well-disciplined by European standards: to take one simple, easy-to-measure disciplinary question, Catholic priests are of course supposed to be celibate. In many regions this rule was widely flouted: in parts of Switzerland, attempts to enforce celibacy by levying fines on misbehaving priests had evolved into a system whereby, in effect, priests paid an annual fee to the bishop to be allowed to have a common-law wife, and the bishop's finances depended on a regular flow of such fees. In most of England, by contrast, the law was genuinely enforced. And maybe most importantly of all, England's lay people, or many of them, were hungry to be brought deeper into the Church's life: they wanted the spiral to widen out to include them. The plainest sign of success in England was that a dissident movement offering more radical lay empowerment, the diffuse sect known as the 'Lollards', never won any kind of mass following after its brief flowering in the late fourteenth century. We'll come back to them in the last lecture of this series. As historians, then, we can look with realistic eyes at the late medieval English church, and we can say, fair's fair: it's in decent shape.

But for the Church's most ambitious leaders, and for the most zealous and earnest lay people, 'good enough' was not good enough. Modest successes only underlined how much more there was to be done. There has been a lot of talk about *anticlericalism*, hatred and contempt for priests, in the Middle Ages, and it was certainly a widespread phenomenon – corrupt priests were the butt of jokes from Sicily to the Shetlands. But that does not mean that the jokers rejected the Church. Everyone nowadays jokes about corrupt politicians, but that does not mean we reject representative democracy. It's useful to break anticlericalism down into two distinct variants. One is antisacerdotalism – the scornful rejection of the priesthood as a body, irredeemably corrupt and grounded on self-serving theological error: this is the view of disgusted non-participants and of revolutionaries, and it was of course to become one of the driving forces of the Protestant Reformation. But it was not terribly widespread, especially in England, and even within that camp there was more non-participation than there was revolution. The other variety is hyperclericalism – this is the conviction that the priesthood is a high and holy vocation, and that priests hold and transmit an awesome responsibility. If you start with that idealistic view and then measure actual priests against it, the only response is going to be disappointment and indeed anger. We as historians can look at the late medieval priesthood and say, well, the glass is half full, even nine-tenths full, but for the hyperclericalists no degree of falling short was acceptable. They did not want to overthrow the Church: they wanted to perfect it, to make it what it should be, and this made them its most unstinting, loving critics. So, the most damning assessments of the late medieval church came from churchmen, from insiders. They had spent so long gazing at the stars that wherever they were seemed like a gutter. And their determination to pursue their glorious vision was not a sign of the Church's weakness, but of its strengths.

By the early sixteenth century, these restless ambitions had begun to merge with a new movement

for reform that was sweeping Christendom, and which put down particularly deep roots in England. 'Christian humanism', as historians call it, was the latest turn of the medieval spiral of reform. It drew on the movement of scholarly renewal which we call the Renaissance, that is, in very brief, a movement in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italy to rediscover the literary and artistic heritage of the Greek and Roman world, to measure their own culture against that ancient heritage, and to find them wanting. This was a more or less secular movement in its beginnings – hence the title 'humanism', which did not mean secular atheism in the modern sense, but rather the study of the humanities, which they contrasted to the study of divinity, the queen of the sciences. But the same method – to recover the lost past, to weigh it in the balance against the present, and then to act accordingly – was all too easy to apply to the life of the Church too. The most important prophet of this Christian humanism was the Dutch monk Desiderius Erasmus, a sharp-tongued, peripatetic, penny-pinching and brilliantly entrepreneurial scholar who could switch in a moment from scabrous satire into soaring spiritual visions. Erasmus spent some years in England and inspired a generation of English scholars. Partly thanks to him, his closest English friend, Thomas More, won a Continent-wide reputation in his own right. Fittingly enough, More was a layman, not a priest, and his teasing vision of an ideal society in *Utopia* (1516) summed up the Christian humanists' dreams. In this imagined land, the actual priests were very few and very holy, but the entire population lived in such simplicity and purity that the island of Utopia amounted to a giant monastery. They despised wealth, lived in common, and prized learning, justice and charity over rites and superstitions. In Utopia, the spiral of reform had reached its limit, and had included everyone. The book's opening chapter made explicit the contrast with More's home island, where the rich and powerful claimed to be Christians but had forgotten peace, mercy and the needs of the poor.

Utopia was a satire, but the Christian humanists did more than offer impossible counsels of perfection from the side-lines. In the book More discussed whether it was better to preserve your innocence by steering clear of power politics, or to get your hands dirty in the hope of doing something good. It was not a theoretical discussion. More himself reluctantly entered King Henry VIII's service and paid dearly for it. Another far more compromised but far more powerful reformer was already pressing this agenda forward. I am thinking of Cardinal-Archbishop Thomas Wolsey, the butcher's son from Ipswich whose career embodies the meritocratic possibilities of the English Church. Wolsey's administrative omnicompetence made him effective ruler of England on Henry VIII's behalf from *c.* 1514 to 1529, has been remembered more for ambition and corruption than for reform and idealism. Yet this was a man who turned a narcissistic, warmongering king's diplomatic difficulties into a hard-nosed scheme for universal, perpetual peace between the European powers, with England and the papacy acting as the guarantors. Nothing quite like the 1518 Treaty of London had ever been attempted before. The failure of this impossible project, this first draft of the League of Nations, is hardly surprising. What is astonishing is that Wolsey secured broad international agreement to it, and that for a few mirage-like months it seemed to be working. In this context, his own perfectly realistic ambitions to be elected pope look less ignoble.

England was in the end too weak a power, and Henry VIII too capricious a king, for Wolsey to use them to leverage humanist dreams into existence. But there was nothing to stop his ambition, cunning and idealism from reshaping his own country. If England's Catholic Reformation had a start date, it was 1518, when Wolsey was made a papal legate with sweeping powers to reshape the English Church. It was almost the first time that England's Church, divided as it was between the two provinces of Canterbury and York, had been treated as a single entity. The flagship project Wolsey launched with these new powers was a sign of what might be to come. A huge amount of the English Church's considerable wealth was tied up in monastic houses: communities whose cloistered piety was of course laudable but was several turns of the spiral behind the times. Moreover, not all of the monks fully lived up to their orders' ideals. Wolsey used his new powers to close down a swathe of problematic or inconvenient houses, redirecting the funds to a much more

fashionably pious purpose: education. A splendid new school in his hometown of Ipswich would feed into a splendid new college at his old university of Oxford, which you can see behind him in this portrait. But this was only the first wave. Wolsey was laying plans for a much wider reshaping of the monastic estate to rebuild the English Church into a humanist powerhouse, its resources serving the people rather than itself, placing England at the forefront of the budding renewal of the whole Catholic world.

Wolsey's project manager for this tricky enterprise was another compromised Catholic reformer. What made Thomas Cromwell stand out from London's crowd of ambitious jobbing lawyers was his years spent in Italy as a soldier, merchant and all-purpose man on the make. As Diarmaid MacCulloch's biography of a couple of years ago shows us, Cromwell's Italian contacts made him the man to find the sculptors and artists Wolsey wanted to employ – these are some of the statues he commissioned for Wolsey's tomb, now in the V&A – but Cromwell had picked up more in Italy than an ear for languages and an eye for marble. Like many northern Europeans who visited Rome at the height of the Renaissance papacy's decadence, he left with a hunch that the pope was part of the problem, not part of the solution, and that the cutting edge of the spiral of reform was now a long way from the old centre. It also gave him a very Italian sense of what reform might mean. England's Catholic Reformation, that beckoning mirage, would have been a version of the Italian Reformation.

The Italian Reformation is a story now so thoroughly forgotten that the phrase sounds like a contradiction, but during the 1520s and 1530s it seemed like a real possibility. Much of the structure of the Church in Italy was genuinely corrupt or dysfunctional, so reformers worked around it, creating new orders and fraternities which explored patterns of simplified piety. In Germany, when a dispute about the doctrine of salvation triggered by a friar called Martin Luther flared up in 1517–18, it quickly turned into a slanging-match in which all the talk was of obedience, submission and heresy. In Italy, idealistic, loyal churchmen, the people who called themselves the *spirituali*, preferred to avoid such confrontational talk. They were keen to do with Luther what had been done with so many other disruptive reformers over the centuries: absorb, co-opt and house-train his insights, views which pushed Catholic orthodoxy in a particular direction but did not, yet, contradict it.

Now, to be sure, the 'Reformation' which Italy's *spirituali* championed did not come to pass. They spent a couple of decades trying to forge creative compromises, until they found that in their polarised age that only won them suspicion from both sides, and eventually, after the failure of a last attempt at a constructive religious peace in 1541, they were forced to choose sides or to retire into obscurity. But we can easily imagine that, if Tudor marriage politics had not intervened, the Reformation of the *spirituali* is the kind of Reformation that England would have had. Such an England would have held proudly on to its thousand-year tradition of loyal papalism, but the result would not have been a simple extension of the medieval Church, frozen in time. In that alternative history, England's monasteries would not have been suppressed systematically as they were in the 1530s, but nor would they have sailed on into the modern era untouched. Eager Catholic reformers, keen to build a nation of earnest believers and wary of the formalism and superstition that accreted around monastic life, would have continued where Wolsey and Cromwell had begun, systematically redirecting the monasteries' enormous wealth to more modish purposes like education, missionary work and the relief of the poor. England's two heavyweight and energetic universities – especially Erasmus' Cambridge, by far the more daring of the two at this date – would have incubated scholarly innovations that would have turned the radical insights of the Christian humanists into practical programmes of reform. The long-delayed publication of a Bible in English, which even as fiercely loyal a Catholic as Thomas More recognised was both inevitable and right, would have followed before very much longer. Nor is it all just a matter of doctrines. In a century of rapid economic change, with populations rising, wages falling and landowners driving

their tenants off the land and into destitution, a reforming Catholic Church would have pushed back against this new economy and its consequences. It would not have been very effective in this pushback – deep economic changes are hard to stop with moralising denunciations – but it would have certainly burnished its own moral authority in the process. As it turned out, defending the 'commonwealth' against depredations such as the enclosure of land and the blocking of rivers with fish-weirs became a Protestant cause in the 1540s and 1550s, but there is no doctrinal reason why it should have been so. Reforming Catholic bishops such as Erasmus' friend Cuthbert Tunstall, bishop of London and Durham, found this moral case as compelling as did evangelicals like Thomas Cromwell.

Now you were promised a history lecture, and I have just served you up a steaming plateful of imagination, but I do think there are reasons to take this fantasy seriously. One of those reasons is named Reginald Pole. Pole was a man to conjure with: a young cousin of Henry VIII whose family had a dangerously strong claim to the throne in their own right, and whose decision to spend the early 1530s studying in Italy was political as well as academic. He did not approve of the king's marital adventures, and in 1536 broke a long and ominous silence to denounce them in strident terms. Henry VIII's propagandists called him a traitor. He replied that 'Rome is my country'. In response Henry tried to have him assassinated, and judicially murdered most of his family, including his aged mother, for the unpardonable crime of having Pole blood in their veins. Pope Paul III compounded matters by making Pole a cardinal. He became the English government's favourite bogeyman, an icon of treachery.

But Pole's Catholicism was reforming as well as unstinting. Rome was his country, but so was Italy. He became intimately involved with the *spirituali*, especially as they found some cautious favour at the papal court. He was fully supportive of one of the great might-have-been projects of the Reformation era: the summit conference at the German city of Regensburg in 1541 between leading Catholic and Protestant theologians which successfully thrashed out an agreed formula for understanding the doctrine of salvation, the issue which had sparked the Protestant schism to begin with. Agonizingly, however, the summit then foundered on the authority of the pope and the nature of the mass. Pole was one of those who jumped towards Rome and Catholic orthodoxy when the middle ground gave way under him, so much so that in 1542 Pope Paul III made Pole one of three legates who were to preside over the planned General Council of the Catholic Church, which eventually assembled at the northern Italian city of Trento, or Trent, in 1545. But if Pole's loyalties were never in question, nor did he forget his old ideals.

At the Council of Trent, he lost the argument, and his Lutheran-inflected views of salvation were rejected in favour of a more robustly traditional formulation. But Pole and the surviving *spirituali* were not out of the game yet. When Paul III died in 1549, the 49-year-old Pole was the early favourite to succeed him. In one early tally, the conclave came within a single vote of the two-thirds majority which would have elected the second English pope. It is another tantalizing might-have-been: a young, idealistic and energetically reforming pontiff, determined both to hold the centre and also to widen the circle in an effort to bring home as many of the sundered Protestant brethren as possible. In the event, Pole's candidacy failed partly because he himself was reluctant to press his case: that idealism again. He was happy instead to agree on a compromise candidate. His candidacy also failed because Cardinal Carafa, one of Pole's former brethren among the *spirituali*, accused him of straying from an innocent wish for reunion into a dalliance with heresy.

This would be merely the tale of one eccentric expatriate's near-misses if not for the second reason to imagine England's Catholic Reformation, the greatest might-have-been of all. For in 1553, England's young, Protestant king Edward VI – whom we will meet properly in later lectures – died, and his inept attempts to rig the succession failed. The throne fell to his eldest sister Mary, a committed Catholic whose firm intention from the beginning was to end her native land's twenty-

year nightmare of schism and heresy and return it to its historic role as a bastion of the Church of Rome. To that end, she and Pope Julius III immediately agreed that the obvious person to negotiate this Catholic restoration, and then to serve as archbishop of Canterbury, was none other than Reginald Pole.

As it turned out, England's Catholic restoration was short-lived. On 17 November 1558 Queen Mary and Cardinal Pole succumbed to quite different diseases within hours of each other, and the new Queen Elizabeth led the country back into schism. But as historians have dug into this brief episode in recent years, it has become unmistakable that the Catholicism of Mary's reign was neither doomed nor a medieval throwback. It was, rather, a taste of what England's Catholic Reformation might have been. One key to this is that it was a coalition. It brought a few exiled idealists like Pole together with the majority of English churchmen who had gone reluctantly along with Henry VIII's desires. Those two parties did not entirely trust each other and had subtly different agendas, but – at least for as long as the queen lived – the result was a creative and constructive tension rather than a damaging rivalry.

So the queen restored a few dissolved monasteries, but on nothing like the huge scale that some of her Protestant subjects had expected and feared. And most of those refoundations – especially her flagship foundation at Westminster Abbey, the only restored monastery to be given a substantial endowment – were not mere revivals: they were a blueprint for a new, slimmed-down monastic estate that would be at the rest of the nation's service. England had not taken the route to this point that Wolsey had imagined, but the destination was remarkably similar. And it shows that the energies of this new regime were focused not on a handful of elite institutions, but on the Church's coalface in the parishes.

England's parish churches had, in Catholic eyes, been devastated by the reforms and the asset-stripping under Henry VIII and Edward VI. Now the population were instructed to rebuild, and remarkably, despite the fact that successive regimes had plundered their pious donations, they dug into their pockets again. A comprehensive study of all the surviving parish account-books from the reign has demonstrated almost universal compliance with the minimum level of repair which the regime required, and in many cases much more. There was still an enormous amount to be done. Rebuilding takes far longer and costs much more than destruction, and in the asymmetric warfare between Catholic and Protestant which was fought out in church buildings across the continent, the Catholics, whose worship needed physical furnishings and paraphernalia, were at a systematic disadvantage. Still, the scale of the effort in the 1550s bodes well for the Church's ability to regenerate itself. The pious ingenuity of the short-cuts that were employed – painted canvases instead of carved crucifix, gravestones cannibalised to make altars – testify to the earnest impatience of England's Catholic majority to put the past behind them.

But buildings and furnishings were only a means to an end. The real purpose of Mary's Catholic Reformation was the rebuilding of the faith. In this case, the effort was not simply to turn back the clock, but to harness and redirect some of the changes her father and brother's regimes had made. In the front rank of this effort was Edmund Bonner, the bishop of London. – This is the closest we have to a contemporary portrait of him, though it's a bit problematic: he may look as if he is doing some sort of charming rustic dance, but he is actually whipping a prisoner, and this is a hostile caricature. But it was made during his lifetime, and he is said to have commented angrily that it was a good likeness. Anyway: Bonner was a tough-minded, energetic administrator who in the 1530s had been a protégé of Thomas Cromwell's, but whose increasingly plain religious conservatism had led to his deprivation in 1549. Restored in 1553, he quickly set about re-Catholicising a city which was a hotbed of reformism. In 1554 Bonner began a full-scale visitation of his diocese, a process which lasted fully a year and involved preaching and careful inquiry after heresy and laxity in every parish. In preparation for Easter 1555, he ordered every person

individually to confess and be absolved for participating in the twenty-year schism and the accompanying heresies, which included being specifically quizzed on their faith in the Mass and in the Pope. When the visitation finally concluded, Bonner, who had always been an enthusiast for the power of print to support his ministry, rounded it off by publishing a book which all clergy in the diocese were required to use. This book, *A Profitable and Necessary Doctrine*, was a summary of the Christian faith which drew on a similar formulary published under Henry VIII's authority a decade earlier, and also contained a set of pro-forma sermons which drew heavily on a similar set issued by Edward VI's government: exactly the sort of creative assimilation of the best reformist thought that the Italian *spirituali* would have recognised. Over ten thousand copies were printed: enough in theory for every parish in England to own one.

Bonner's project provides important clues to the regime's strategy. Printed books were a part of that strategy, but, as in London, they played only a supporting role. The heart, again, was the parish church, and the priest within it. Mary's government had to work with the priests it had, not those it might ideally have liked to have, but she did do what she could to purge the clergy of the most serious troublemakers. She used that old shibboleth of a well-disciplined church, priestly celibacy. Back in 1549, Edward VI's government had allowed priests to marry, and a minority of them – around a sixth – had done so. They were now summarily dismissed; those who abandoned their wives and came crawling back were permitted to seek priestly employment again. It was the most sweeping clerical purge carried out by any English government in the sixteenth century.

It was priests who were the target audience for Bishop Bonner's books. The primary means by which Cardinal Pole and his allies wanted to rebuild English Catholicism was not the book, but the sermon. The common assertion that he was wary of preaching is quite mistaken. So too is the claim that he barred the Jesuits, the up-and-coming vanguard of Catholic reform, from sending a mission to England: he simply wanted to coordinate their efforts with his own. All in all, it was a shrewd approach. Books are inherently discursive and disputatious, a cacophony of voices competing for the book buyer's loyalty. By contrast, the sermon as a medium is inherently authoritative: a single voice speaking for the Church, six feet above contradiction. It allowed Catholic doctrine to be taught without issuing an invitation for its merits to be discussed. Pole wanted to avoid getting into public debates with his Protestant critics, on the old principle that wrestling in the mud taints the winners and the losers alike.

Which is a hint that, for all that I have been rather sunny about it, England's Catholic Reformation always and of necessity had another face to it. Orthodoxy's boundaries might be inclusive, generous, progressive and imaginative, but in the end, there did have to be boundaries, and the need to enforce them had explicitly been part of the Catholic Reformation from the beginning. England's greatest Christian humanist, Thomas More, was also its most pitiless hammer of heretics. As Lord Chancellor, head of the kingdom's secular courts, he worked with rare energy alongside like-minded bishops to arrest suspected heretics and to roll up their networks. He was involved in half a dozen burnings, although there is no hard evidence to support the persistent rumours that he had prisoners tortured. To modern eyes, it is hard to reconcile Thomas More the principled reformer with Thomas More the merciless persecutor, and Robert Bolt and Hilary Mantel each chose to emphasise one of those two facets to the exclusion of the other. But More himself did not see the contradiction. Reform and repression depend on one another: the more gently the Catholic Reformers tended their sheep and the more freely they let them roam, the more fiercely they needed to fight against the wolves who threatened to tear them from the true faith. More's purge ended when he was forced out of office in 1532, but (as we shall see) trials and executions for heresy would continue apace through Henry VIII's reign, abating only under Edward VI. When Mary restored Catholicism, she also restored the old persecutory apparatus.

The scale of the burnings during her reign – 298 known executions, plus 20 deaths in prison – had

no precedent in England and few in Europe, although we have to admit that by modern standards of mass killing it looks positively amateurish. It was, in an important sense, unintended. Mary and her bishops expected that most of those charged with heresy would give way, and recant their beliefs to save their lives, as had usually been the case in the past. The new mettle of these Protestants was a surprise to everyone, including themselves. But when the regime's bluff was called, it chose to follow through. The result was a four-year purge that began with the most prominent bishops and preachers and spread out to entire clandestine Protestant congregations.

It was not simply an English phenomenon. Persecution of Protestantism was simultaneously ramping up in France and the Netherlands. And in 1555, two years into Mary's restoration, Cardinal Pole's old colleague and rival Cardinal Carafa was elected Pope Paul IV. His reformism had now taken a grim turn. Having purged Rome of infidels by creating the city's first ghetto for Jews, he now set out to purge Catholic Christendom of error. In 1559 he would promulgate the first modern index of prohibited books. But before that he renewed his feud with Pole, whom he was now convinced was a crypto-Protestant. Farcically, by 1558 the most serious opponent of Pole's mission to rebuild English Catholicism was the pope, who was refusing to allow any English bishops to be appointed and had begun inquisitorial proceedings against Pole himself.

To modern eyes all this repression looks like a betrayal of the energetic creativity of Catholic reform, just as Thomas More's humane sophistication seems to sit ill with his merciless pursuit of heresy. That was not how it seemed at the time. Drawing ever more Christians into the Church's circle of holiness was one thing; standing by while a handful of heretics tried to pull the whole structure down was another. And, we should note, it works. More's campaign was well on the way to throttling English Protestantism when it was interrupted. In Mary's reign, the Protestant leaders were either arrested and executed, or forced into exile. The process of breaking up their wider networks of support was well under way. The Italian *spirituali* had been suppressed by Cardinal Carafa in much the same way, when he had revived the Inquisition in Italy in 1542; and the Spanish Inquisition put a stop to the Protestant Reformation there before it had properly begun. So make no mistake: England could have had a Catholic Reformation; in fact it nearly did. It would in many ways have been a fine thing, far richer and more creative and almost certainly less bloody than what actually happened. But there would have been a price.