

# History of the Catholic Church from the Renaissance to the French Revolution Volume 2

by Rev. James MacCaffrey

Lic. Theol. (Maynooth), Ph.D. (Freiburg i. B.) Professor of  
Ecclesiastical History, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth

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HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

## From the Renaissance to the French Revolution

# CHAPTER I

## RELIGIOUS CONDITION OF ENGLAND BEFORE THE REFORMATION

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With the advent of Henry VII. to the throne (1485) a new era opened in the history of England. The English nation, weakened by the Wars of the Roses and tired of a contest that possessed little interest for the masses, was not unwilling to submit itself without reserve to the guidance

of a strong ruler provided he could guarantee peace both at home and abroad. Practically speaking, hitherto absolutism had been unknown. The rights that had been won by the barons on the plains of Runnymede were guarded jealously by their descendants, and as a result the power of the king, more especially in regard to taxation, was hedged round by several restrictions. But during the long struggle between the houses of Lancaster and York many of the great feudal barons had fallen on the field of battle or by the hands of the executioner, and the power of the nobles as a body had been undermined. While the Lords could muster their own retainers under their standard and put into the field a strong army almost at a moment's notice, it was impossible for the sovereign to rule as an absolute monarch. It was because he recognised this fact that Henry VII. took steps to enforce the Statute of Liveries passed by one of his predecessors, and to provide that armies could be levied only in the king's name.

The day of government by the aristocracy had passed for ever to be succeeded by the rule of the people, but in the interval between the sinking of one and the rise of the other Tudor absolutism was established firmly in England. In selecting his ministers Henry VII. passed over the nobles in favour of the middle classes, which were gaining ground rapidly in the country, but which had not yet realised their strength as they did later in the days of the Stuarts. He obtained grants of tonnage and poundage enjoyed by some of his Yorkist predecessors, had recourse to the system of forced grants known as benevolences, set up the Star Chamber nominally to preserve order but in reality to repress his most dangerous opponents, and treated Parliament as a mere machine, whose only work was to register the wishes of the sovereign. In brief, Henry VII., acting according to the spirit of the age, removed the elements that might make for national disunion, consolidated his own power at the expense of the nobility, won over to his side the middle and lower classes whose interests were promoted and from whom no danger

was to be feared, and laid the foundations of that absolute government, which was carried to its logical conclusions by his son and successor, Henry VIII.

By nature Henry VII. was neither overbearing nor devoid of tact, and from the doubtful character of his title to the throne he was obliged to be circumspect in his dealings with the nation. It was not so, however, with Henry VIII. He was a young, impulsive, self-willed ruler, freed from nearly all the dangers that had acted as a restraint upon his father, surrounded for the most part by upstarts who had no will except to please their master, and intensely popular with the merchants, farmers, and labourers, whose welfare was consulted, and who were removed so far from court that they knew little of royal policy or royal oppression. The House of Lords, comprising as it did representatives of the clergy and nobles, felt itself entirely at the mercy of the king, and its members, alarmed by the fate of all those who had ventured to oppose his wishes, would have decreed the abolition of their privileges rather

than incur his displeasure, had they been called upon to do so. The House of Commons was composed to a great extent of the nominees of the Crown, whose names were forwarded to the sheriffs for formal confirmation. The Parliament of 1523 did show some resistance to the financial demands necessitated by the war with France, but the king's answer was to dissolve it, and to govern England by royal decrees for a space of six years. Fearing for the results of the divorce proceedings and anxious to carry the country with him in his campaign against the Pope, Henry VIII. convoked another Parliament (1529), but he took careful measures to ensure that the new House of Commons would not run counter to his wishes. Lists of persons who were known to be jealous of the powers of the Church and to be sympathetic towards any movement that might limit the pretensions of the clergy were forwarded to the sheriffs, and in due course reliable men were returned. That the majority of the members of the lower House were hostile to the privileges of the Church is clear enough, but there is no evidence that any

important section desired a reformation which would involve a change of doctrine or separation from Rome. The legislation directed against the rights of the Pope sanctioned by this Parliament was accepted solely through the influence of royal threats and blandishments, and because the Parliament had no will of its own. Were the members free to speak and act according to their own sentiments it is impossible to believe that they would have confirmed and annulled the successive marriages of the king, altered and realtered the succession to meet every new matrimonial fancy of his, and proved themselves such negligent guardians of the rights of the English nation as to allow him to dispose of the crown of England by will as he might dispose of his private possessions. Henry VIII. was undisputed master of England, of its nobles, clergy, and people, of its Convocation, and Parliament. His will was the law. Unless this outstanding fact, royal absolutism and dictatorship be realised, it is impossible to understand how a whole nation, which till that time had accepted the Pope as the Head of the Church, could have been torn

against its will from the centre of unity, separated from the rest of the Catholic world, and subjected to the spiritual jurisdiction of a sovereign, whose primary motive in effecting such a revolution was the gratification of his own unbridled passions.

It is not true to assert, as some writers have asserted, that before the Reformation England was a land shrouded in the mists of ignorance; that there were no schools or colleges for imparting secular education till the days of Edward VI.; that apart from practices such as pilgrimages, indulgences, and invocation of the saints, there was no real religion among the masses; that both secular and regular clergy lived after a manner more likely to scandalise than to edify the faithful; that the people were up in arms against the exactions and privileges of the clergy, and that all parties only awaited the advent of a strong leader to throw off the yoke of Rome. These are sweeping generalisations based upon isolated abuses put forward merely to discredit the English mediaeval Church,

but wholly unacceptable to those who are best acquainted with the history of the period. On the other side it would be equally wrong to state that everything was so perfect in England that no reforms were required. Many abuses, undoubtedly, had arisen in various departments of religious life, but these abuses were of such a kind that they might have been removed had the Convocations of the clergy been free to pursue their course, nor do they justify an indiscriminate condemnation of the entire ecclesiastical body.

It is true that the Renaissance movement had made great progress on the other side of the Alps before its influence could be felt even in educated circles in England, but once the attention of the English scholars was drawn to the revival of classical studies many of them made their way to the great masters of Italy, and returned to utilise the knowledge they had acquired for the improvement of the educational system of their country. Selling and Hadley, both monks, Linacre, one of the leaders of medical science

in his own time, Dean Colet of Westminster whose direction of St. Paul's College did so much to improve the curriculum of the schools,[1] Bishop Fisher of Rochester described by Erasmus as "a man without equal at this time both as to integrity of life, learning, or broadminded sympathies" with the possible exception of Archbishop Warham of Canterbury,[2] and Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England and one of the earliest martyrs for the faith in the reign of Henry VIII., were but a few of the prominent men in a movement that made itself felt throughout the entire country. Nowhere did Erasmus find a more enthusiastic welcome or more generous patrons and nowhere were his writings more thoroughly appreciated than in England.

Nor is it true to say that the advocates of classical learning were animated by hostility to the Catholic Church in their demand for an improvement in educational methods. Some murmurs were, indeed, heard in certain quarters, and charges of unorthodoxy were formulated vaguely

against Colet and others of his party, but these were but the criticisms levelled in all ages against those who are in advance of their time, nor do they require serious refutation. The English Humanists had nothing in common with the neo-pagan writers of the Italian Renaissance as regards religion, and they gave no indication of hostility to Rome. Whatever other influences may have contributed to bring about the religious revolution in England, it was certainly not due to the Renaissance, for to a man its disciples were as loyal to the Catholic Church as were their two greatest leaders Fisher and More, who laid down their lives rather than prove disloyal to the successor of St. Peter.

Nor was education generally neglected in the country. The lists of students attending Oxford and Cambridge[3] in so far as they have been preserved point to the fact that in the days immediately preceding the Reformation these great seats of learning were in a most flourishing condition, and that for them the religious revolt fell little short of proving

disastrous. The explanation of the sudden drop in the number of students attending the universities is to be found partially at least in the disturbed condition of the country, but more particularly in the destruction of the religious houses, which sent up many of their members to Oxford and Cambridge, and which prepared a great number of pupils in their schools for university matriculation, as well as in the confiscation of the funds out of which bishops, chapters, monasteries, religious confraternities, and religious guilds, presented exhibitions to enable the children of the poor to avail themselves of the advantages of higher education. Nor was England of the fifteenth century without a good system of secondary schools. It is a common belief that Edward VI. was the founder of English secondary colleges, and that during the first fifty years after the Reformation more was done for this department of education than had been done in the preceding three hundred years. That such a belief is entirely erroneous may be proved from the records of the commissions held in the reigns of Henry VIII. and Edward

VI., from which it appears that there were close on three hundred secondary schools in England before 1549, and that Henry VIII. and particularly Edward VI. ought to be regarded as the despoilers rather than as the patrons of the English colleges. Distinct from the universities and from the mere primary schools there were in existence at the beginning of the reign of Henry VIII. seven classes of educational establishments, namely, cathedral, collegiate, and monastic colleges, colleges in connexion with hospitals, guilds, chantries, and independent institutions. These were worked in perfect co-ordination with the universities, and in most cases exhibitions were provided for the poorer scholars. "The Grammar Schools which existed," says a reliable authority, "were not mere monkish schools or choristers' schools or elementary schools. Many of them were the same schools which now live and thrive. All were schools of exactly the same type, and performing precisely the same sort of functions as the public schools and grammar schools of to-day. There were indeed also choristers' schools and elementary

schools. There were scholarships at schools and exhibitions thence to the universities, and the whole paraphernalia of secondary education. Nor was secondary education understood in any different sense to that in which it was understood up to fifty years ago. It was conducted on the same lines and in the main by instruments of the same kind, if not identically the same, as those in use till the present generation." [4]

It cannot be said with justice that the English people at the time were either badly instructed in the principles of their religion or indifferent to the practices of the Church to which they belonged. The decrees of the Synod of Oxford (1281), commanding the clergy who had care of souls to explain regularly in simple language, intelligible to their hearers the articles of the creed, the commandments, the sacraments, the seven deadly sins and the seven works of mercy, were renewed more than once, and presumably were enforced by the bishops. The books published for the instruction of the faithful as for example, /The Work for

Householders/, /Dives et Pauper/, /The Interpretation and Signification of the Mass/, /The Art of Good Living/, etc., emphasise very strongly the duty of attending the religious instruction given by the clergy, while the manuals written for the guidance of the clergy make it very clear that preaching was a portion of their duties that should not be neglected. The fact that religious books of this kind were multiplied so quickly, once the art of printing had been discovered, affords strong evidence that neither priests nor people were unmindful of the need for a thorough understanding of the truths of their religion. The visitations of the parishes, during which some of the prominent parishioners were summoned to give evidence about the manner in which the priests performed their duty of instructing the people, were in themselves a great safeguard against pastoral negligence, and so far as they have been published they afford no grounds for the statement that the people were left in ignorance regarding the doctrines and practices of their religion. Apart entirely from the work done by the clergy in the pulpits and