Translating Trent? English Catholicism and the Counter Reformation*

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Abstract
This article offers a series of reflections on some aspects of the historiography of English Catholicism, set within the context of recent developments in research on the Continental Counter Reformation. Focusing on the question of how far the reforms ordered by the Council of Trent could be pursued and implemented by a missionary priesthood against the backdrop of Protestant persecution, it suggests that the relationship between post-Reformation Catholicism in England and the wider European and extra-European movement for Catholic renewal may be more complex and interesting than the existing literature implies. In particular, it argues that the condition of repression and prescription had contradictory effects: in certain contexts it facilitated the process of evangelical and pastoral rejuvenation, while in other respects it operated as a significant inhibitor to it.

In 1596, shortly before departing from Seville for Rome, the Jesuit Robert Persons laid down on paper a remarkably detailed and illuminating blueprint for the renewal of Catholicism in England – an England restored once more by God’s mercy to formal communion with the Church of Rome. The product of nearly two decades of reflection, this manuscript ‘Memorial’ did not concern itself with the political processes by which the demise of the current Protestant regime would be achieved: it assumed the success of a crusading invasionary force from Spain or the providential accession on Elizabeth I’s death of a Catholic claimant to the throne. Instead, Persons’s text comprised a series of concrete and practical proposals for the ‘perfect, full and compleat’ Reformation of a country suddenly released from the heavy yoke of heresy and liberated from the ‘fiery Furnace’ of persecution. Overseen by a council of bishops and lesser clerics working in tandem with a pious

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prince and a supportive parliament, the implementation of this ‘holy desigment’ would make England ‘the Spectacle of all the World’, ‘a Light and a Lantern to other Nations near unto it’, a shining example to the rest of Europe of the apostolic purity and fervour which had infused the primitive Church.¹

Persons believed that, by way of concession to the general corruption of the age, the Fathers of the Council of Trent had been obliged to compromise and to omit many points of rigour necessary to purge Christianity of the creeping malaise by which it had been overtaken. Nevertheless, he recommended that the decrees of this body be enacted ‘without Limitation or Restraint’ and his bold vision bears all the hallmarks of the brand of ecclesiastical discipline which is now synonymous with the word ‘Tridentine’. Its keynotes were the establishment of seminaries, in conjunction with an overhaul of the entire education system; the elimination of abuses and repression of profanation, disorder and superstition; and the cultivation at parish level of a religious culture of greater intensity, doctrinal awareness and moral austerity, assisted by remodelled confraternities closely supervised by the parochial clergy. Above all it pivoted upon the rejuvenation of the episcopal hierarchy and the development of a properly-trained priesthood imbued with a renewed awareness of its central pastoral vocation. Bishops were to be diligent shepherds as well as efficient administrators, men of frugal and sober demeanour who meticulously visited their dioceses and instructed their flocks, while the lives of lesser clerics with cure of souls were to be characterized by a dignity, virtue and zeal which truly befitted their role as ‘the dispensers of the mysteries of God’, opening and shutting ‘the Gates of Heaven’ to the laity through the sacrament of penance.²

Persons’s scheme, of course, was never to be put to the test. Despite his firm conviction that the realm would one day return to the embrace of the Holy Mother Church, Catholicism in England remained a Church under the cross, a community which in time reconciled itself to the status of a dissident minority sect and became what John Bossy has called ‘a branch of the English nonconforming tradition’.³ Although it circulated scribally throughout the seventeenth century and was presented to the

¹ [Robert Persons], The Jesuit’s Memorial for the Intended Reformation of England, under their First Popish Prince... with an Introduction, and some Animadversions, ed. Edward Gee (1690) (hereafter Jesuit’s Memorial), at pp. 13, 12, sig. A4r, p. 3; and see also p. 15.


Catholic King James II, the ‘Memorial’ remained unpublished until 1690, when it was printed by the Protestant Edward Gee to expose to his co-religionists the grim fate that they had narrowly escaped as a consequence of the Glorious Revolution and to inspire fresh gratitude for this divine deliverance from the evils of ‘naked Jesuitism’ and popery.\(^4\) No opportunity arose to put into practice the Counter Reformation so carefully outlined in this controversial and provocative document, to realize Persons’s plans for a reformed Catholic commonwealth which, in his eyes, would mark a dramatic new chapter in the history of the Church in England, and go beyond the merely ‘external reconciliation’ accomplished under Mary I between 1553 and 1558. This he disdained as a deeply flawed enterprise which had been ‘shuffled up with ... negligence’ and which had merely ‘plastered’ over ‘the external part without remedying the Root’.\(^5\) It may be suspected that this unflattering characterization of the Marian restoration owed something to the fact that Cardinal Reginald Pole had rebuffed offers of help extended by the founder of Persons’s own order, Ignatius Loyola.\(^6\)

Indeed, in the light of recent research, Persons’s programme for ‘Reformation’ seems increasingly less like a novel departure than a continuation of initiatives which were already manifesting themselves in England before the Henrician break with Rome. It accorded with the priorities of a new breed of proto-Borromean bishops like John Fisher of Rochester and John Longland of Lincoln, who anticipated many of the decrees which issued from Trent between 1545 and 1563 in the reforms which they sought to introduce in their dioceses in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.\(^7\) New studies by Eamon Duffy, Thomas Mayer, Lucy Wooding and William Wizeman have likewise begun to transform our understanding of Marian Catholicism. It is now apparent that scholars who insisted upon the sterile and reactionary nature of this short-lived experiment were somewhat misguided. Ever more evidence is emerging that, led by Cardinal Pole, the regime pursued a progressive strategy of creative reconstruction which revolved around parochial visitation, preaching, catechetical instruction and the inculcation of a spirituality orientated towards Christ’s redemptive suffering. Side-stepping the current

\(^4\) Gee thought that by publishing the book he was ‘doing a greater service to the Protestant Interest against Popery, than I was ever able to do by any thing I wrote against Popery during the Controversie in the late Reign’ (Edward Gee, ‘Dedication’, in Jesuit’s Memorial, sig. A3v).

\(^5\) Jesuit’s Memorial, pp. 2–3, 20.


debate about the origin of and inspiration behind these reforms, whether indigenous or international, Erasmian or Tridentine, it may safely be stated that these policies paralleled and coincided with trends which were reinvigorating early modern Catholicism as a whole.\(^8\)

This article, however, will focus on the period after 1559 and, against the backdrop of historiographical developments over the last twenty-five years, offer a series of speculative reflections on the nature of the relationship between the Elizabethan and early Stuart Catholic community and the impulses for Catholic reform and renewal on the Continent and beyond. In particular it will revisit the key issue of how far it was possible to implement the objectives embodied in the Tridentine decrees in a country in which Catholicism had been dispossessed of the institutional framework of parishes, synods and ecclesiastical courts, and deprived of the state backing and sponsorship upon which the effectiveness of this legislation in practice depended. To what extent could a reformed Catholic piety be nurtured and entrenched in a context of official proscription – in an environment in which there was a severe shortage of the very personnel whom the Council’s delegates identified as the chief agents of religious regeneration, as a sacred caste without which the laity could never hope to achieve eternal salvation? Could Trent be successfully translated into a climate in which adherence to the Church of Rome was hedged about with financial hardship, if not extreme danger and peril, and in which, from 1585, the mere presence of a priest on English soil constituted a capital crime? These are hardly new questions, but it may be timely to reconsider and perhaps to modify some of the traditional answers that have been offered in response to them. It will be argued here that, if in some respects persecution inevitably inhibited and militated against the realization of Tridentine ideals, in others, paradoxically, it aided and assisted the process of evangelical and pastoral renewal.

It should be made clear at the outset that the ‘Trent’ in the title of this article is a convenient but, as John O’Malley has recently reminded us, lazy and inadequate shorthand for a movement which was in fact far more diverse and multidimensional, a movement which long predated the drawn-out sessions of the Council and which possessed many different

faces and divergent, if not contradictory, tendencies.\textsuperscript{9} The present discussion will work with an encompassing definition of early modern Catholicism, which is sensitive not only to the intolerant, moralistic, coercive and acculturating aspects emphasized by such scholars as Jean Delumeau, Robert Muchembled and John Bossy,\textsuperscript{10} but also to the fresh insights emerging from studies by historians like Philip Soergel, David Gentilcore, Trevor Johnson and Marc Forster, who stress the continuities instead of the divergences between medieval and Counter Reformation religiosity and highlight the ways in which clerical reformers catered for the continuing thirst of the laity for the magical and miraculous, successfully harnessing and subtly adapting, rather than simply suppressing, traditional devotional practices. In turn, Catholic lay people have begun to emerge not merely as either passive recipients or fierce opponents of Tridentine reforms but as active participants in a dynamic process of cultural negotiation and interaction.\textsuperscript{11} This article will also seek to insert the English Catholic community into a historiography which is increasingly alive to the vital role played by missions conducted by the regular clergy in the refashioning of Catholicism in rural Europe and to the manner in which a confessionally self-conscious, baroque piety could emerge in regions characterized by the absence both of a strong episcopal bureaucracy and of a militant centralizing state intent upon enforcing religious conformity and political order.\textsuperscript{12}


The first observation that needs to be made is that the experience of being reduced to a repressed and hunted minority provided a powerful incentive for the precocious development of seminaries for training the new species of priest. The conservative and Fabian strategy for Reformation embodied in the Elizabethan Settlement very effectively assimilated much of the Marian parish clergy into the ranks of the new, nominally ‘Protestant’ ministry. By modifying the prayer book rubrics to meet the desires of the laity for the traditional liturgy these vicars and curates may have helped in the short term to sustain a residual Catholicism inside the Church of England, but their conformity simultaneously deprived stalwart followers of the outlawed faith of much clerical guidance and leadership. As Christopher Haigh and Patrick McGrath have stressed, the small rump of priests who refused to subscribe supplied an important element of continuity between the mid-Tudor Church and the recusant community which evolved more clearly into view in the second decade of Elizabeth’s reign. Yet, the fact remains that the near-mass attrition of the Marian priesthood left a glaring gap in the provision of pastoral care which it became urgent and imperative to fill.

In many Catholic countries on the European mainland, insufficient funding and administrative inertia combined to hinder and delay for more than a century the implementation of the Tridentine decree of 1563 concerning the establishment of diocesan seminaries; not until after 1700 did the effects of this educational revolution bear much fruit at the grassroots. In the case of England, as in other contexts like Germany, Hungary and the northern Netherlands where the Catholic Church had to take rapid action to resist the Protestant onslaught, institutions dedicated to grooming a zealous, professional ministry sprang up much more quickly. Founded for largely academic purposes in 1568, William Allen’s college at Douai soon transformed itself into a missionary factory, sending its first batch of priests across the Channel in 1574. Two years later the English College at Rome opened its doors and by 1580, under the governance of the Society of Jesus, it too had become an agency for


14 Hsia, World of Catholic Renewal, pp. 116–17; Bireley, pp. 139–43. See also Hoffman, p. 5; Mullet, p. 157.
training Catholic evangelists to return to their native country. The establishment of other seminaries followed in Seville and Valladolid, the latter financed by Philip II himself, and the numbers of regular clergy operating in England were supplemented in the early seventeenth century by the launching of Benedictine and Franciscan missions in 1619 and 1625 respectively.\(^\text{15}\)

Space does not permit an extended analysis of the fractious disputes within the ranks of this diverse priesthood surrounding the appointments of the Archpriest George Blackwell in 1598 and the bishop of Chalcedon in 1623, which revolved in large part around the issue of how far a national Church could implement the Tridentine decrees in the absence of a hierarchy of bishops.\(^\text{16}\) However, it may be remarked that they represent variations on a wider theme of rivalry and conflict between secular clergy who, with the delegates at Trent, saw the revival of episcopacy as the key to Catholic renewal, and members of religious orders whose evangelical activities cut across parochial boundaries and transcended diocesan structures of jurisdiction and discipline – a theme played out in many arenas in Europe and the New World as well as in England.\(^\text{17}\) The point to be underlined here is that persecution provided the stimulus for the unusually early emergence of a high quality reformed Catholic clergy: some 440 were sent over from Douai between 1574 and 1603. At the end of Elizabeth’s reign around 300 were in operation and on the eve of the Long Parliament the figure stood at approximately 750. The number of Jesuits working in England rose dramatically from eighteen in 1598 to some 120 in 1623, when a separate English Province was formed, and 193 in 1639.\(^\text{18}\)

Nevertheless, throughout the pre-Civil War period, the ratio of priests to English laypeople remained very low. However we calculate the actual, let alone the potential, size of the Catholic community, it remains true that, in a population of 2.5 to three million, the mission was always undermanned.\(^\text{19}\) The problem of scarcity was compounded by one of uneven distribution, by a bias away from the north and the west toward the south and the east, and by the growing tendency of the Catholic


\(^{16}\) A new and detailed study of these controversies is urgently needed. In the interim, see A. Pritchard, *Catholic Loyalism in Elizabethan England* (1979), chs. 7–9.


\(^{19}\) For one attempt to estimate, see Bossy, *English Catholic Community*, ch. 8.

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clergy to settle in the homes of recusant nobility and gentry. Some lived very privately and quietly, ‘like sparrows upon the housetop’, in the attics and garrets of their hosts, concealed from the view of inquisitive servants and visitors. Others, protected by powerful Catholic lords who dominated their neighbourhoods, enjoyed rather more mobility and liberty. To explain why this pattern of clerical activity emerged it is not necessary, following Christopher Haigh, to accuse these priests of selfishly neglecting the poor and preferring the relative safety and comfort of a manor house over the physical and psychological rigours of itinerant rural evangelism in the darker corners of the land; nor to allege that the wealthy laity selfishly arrogated to themselves an inappropriate share of clerical resources. While such claims do find a basis in contemporary comment, it should be noted that they were often a function of factional conflict: they frequently arose in the context of polemical debates between the various clerical factions about the best method of tackling the difficult pastoral task of reclaiming the realm as a whole to the bosom of Rome. More probably, to echo Patrick McGrath, the unequal spread of the clergy simply reflected the very real risks of arrest and execution, and a belief that securing the support of the élite was the most effective method of bringing about the conversion of those social inferiors over whom they exercised political and seigneurial influence.

As Thomas McCoog has recently emphasized, the Jesuits’ concentration upon the moral, intellectual and spiritual formation of the upper classes was a strategic decision rooted in the Society’s original constitutions and recommended by Ignatius Loyola himself. If this came at the price of the sometimes ‘suffocating embrace of the gentry’, we should not overlook the attempts of many priests to evade and obviate this, by rotating personnel from one household to the next and by the setting up, from the fifteen-nineties onwards, of independent residences.

More importantly, the heated debate on this topic has served to eclipse the fact that the peripatetic missionary remained a long-term feature of English Catholic history. Bossy suggests that in the mid Jacobean period resident chaplaincy was still the privilege of a few and that perhaps the majority still circulated on foot or on horseback. Not until the end of

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20 As described in the Jesuit memorandum ‘Modus vivendi hominum Societatis’ (1616), pr. in *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*, ed. H. Foley (7 vols. in 8, 1877–84), ii. 6; also in vii, pt. 1, p. xvii.


the seventeenth century did the perpetually travelling priest disappear. Arguably, moreover, too sharp a contrast has been drawn between family chaplains and mobile evangelists and pastors. Rich households could become magnets for the recusants and church papists of the district. Lady Magadalene Browne, Viscountess Montague, for instance, employed a priest in her town house in Southwark specifically to minister to the spiritual needs of the faithful who resorted thither, and so many flocked to the family mansion at Battle in Sussex to attend mass and receive the sacraments from the three fathers she maintained there that ‘even the heretics’ referred to it as ‘Little Rome’. As recommended by Robert Persons and Edmund Campion, such men frequently used their residences as a base for a wider perambulating ministry to Catholics living in the vicinity. This article will now look briefly at these two modes of operation in turn and consider the implications which each had for the character of the Catholicism practised by the constituencies that they served.

Let us turn first to those priests who resided permanently or for long periods in the homes of gentlemen and noblemen. At first sight this arrangement would seem quite inimical to the entrenchment of Tridentine ideals. The role of the private chaplain was hard to reconcile with a body of decrees that sought to shift the focus of devotion from family and voluntary fraternal societies towards the well-ordered parish and which, according to John Bossy, enshrined the assumption that ‘household religion was a seed-bed of subversion’. Priests found themselves in an environment in which there were ostensibly many obstacles to the reinforcement of their sacerdotal authority. The deference that the laity owed to the clergy (a separate and superior race which, in the words of Robert Persons, was the ‘peculiar Inheritance, Lot, or Portion of God’) was inevitably compromised, if not turned topsy-turvy, by the patron-client relationship that pertained between them, by the financial dependence of priests upon their gentry or noble sponsors, by their status – and indeed their external appearance – as servants and retainers. The Jesuits stressed that the secular roles which priests assumed to disguise their real identity should never be allowed to interfere with the work of their calling, but in practice it was undoubtedly difficult to uphold this principle. The power wielded by matriarchal figures within

24 Bossy, English Catholic Community, pp. 251–2. See the Jesuit memorandum cited in n. 20 above (Foley, ii. 3–6; also in vii, pt. 1, pp. xvi–xvii).
26 See George Gilbert’s memorandum, ‘A way to deal with persons of all sorts so as to convert them and bring them back to a better way of life’ (1583), pr. in Letters and Memorials of Father Robert Persons, ed. L. Hicks (Catholic Record Soc., xxxix, 1942), p. 332.
27 Bossy, ‘Counter Reformation’, p. 68.
28 Jesuit’s Memorial, p. 193.
these households may have been an additional complicating factor.\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, the domestication of the mass that was the inevitable consequence of the attachment of priests to Catholic magnates and their wives ran directly contrary to the reforms inaugurated at Trent, which had explicitly banned the celebration of the Eucharist in private, non-ecclesiastical contexts in an attempt to prevent the intermingling of the sacred and the profane and to preserve the majesty and dignity of this holy sacrifice.\textsuperscript{31}

And yet, in other respects, it may be argued that resident Jesuits and seminarians had an unparalleled opportunity to exercise precisely the kind of intense and close pastoral care which Counter Reformation leaders believed was the key to the religious renewal of the laity. Within these domestic settings it was possible to direct and supervise lay devotion to a degree which it was beyond the capacity of even the most diligent parish priests of Catholic Spain, Italy or France to achieve. It might be suggested that it was here, in the inward-looking households of upper-class recusants, rather than in meticulously reformed, model dioceses like Giberti’s Verona or Borromeo’s Milan, that the early modern Catholic clergy had the best chance of successfully effecting what Bossy describes as the transformation of communal Christians into individual ones. It was in these contexts that the missionary priesthood was able to devote itself to the task of cultivating a doctrinally self-conscious, interior religion which revolved around regular reception of the sacrament, careful perusal of devotional literature and constant, searching scrutiny of conscience. They provided the perfect arena for inculcating a culture of moral discipline and for pursuing a programme of frequent confession and systematic catechetical instruction – in short, for enforcing a quasi-parochial conformity. In a very real sense, to echo the excuse that Lord Vaux offered for his recusancy in 1581, such households were indeed parishes in and of themselves.\textsuperscript{32}

Taking due account of hagiographical convention and propagandist intention, missionary memoirs and biographical remains of the committed Elizabethan and early Stuart Catholic laity supply much evidence in support of these suggestions. At Battle, the secular priest Richard Smith sought to divert the penitential zeal of Viscountess Montague away from practices like excessive fasting which smacked of superstition and empty externalism. Although she grumbled that ‘she never met a confessor that would enjoin her sufficient satisfaction’ in appointing penances, even on her deathbed this ‘humble and obedient lady’ apparently deferred to the admonition of her chaplain rather than insist upon ‘her own will and her


\textsuperscript{31} See Schroeder, p. 151. Very similar problems were experienced in Ireland (see R. Gillespie, \textit{Devoted People: Belief and Religion in Early Modern Ireland} (Manchester, 1997), pp. 27–8).

most ancient and religious custom’. Upon his arrival at the home of the Wisemans at Braddocks in the early fifteen-nineties, John Gerard set about establishing a new devotional regime: weekly mass replaced quarterly reception of the holy sacrament; sermons were delivered on Sundays and feast days; members of the family were taught Ignatian techniques of religious introspection; and the practice of reading ascetical books aloud at meal times was also established. He effected a similar revolution in the household of Elizabeth Vaux in Northamptonshire, where, as well as nurturing the quasi-monastic devotion of the widow herself, he gradually eradicated the abuses of her servants by means of private conferences and public preaching. Gerard’s ministry to Sir Francis Fortescue and his wife led both to make ‘continuous progress towards perfection’, to devote their lives to prayer, meditation and improving reading, and eventually to dedicate their home to the Counter Reformation Marian cult of Our Lady of Loreto. The culmination of Gerard’s pastoral endeavours was often the leading of fervent laypeople through the Spiritual Exercises.

By the sixteen-twenties, under the guidance of Father James Pollard, the household of the Babthorpes at Osgodby in the South Riding of Yorkshire had become a similar epitome of reformed Catholic piety, and at North Kilvington, employees of the Meynells were likewise catechized and incorporated into the daily round of worship following the liturgical cycle. For seven years following 1625, William Palmes supervised the equally fervent domestic piety practised by Dorothy Lawson and her children and servants at St. Anthony’s near Newcastle-upon-Tyne: here, too, regular confession and mass were combined with solitary mental prayer and examination of conscience. The end gable of her house bore the sacred name of Jesus and each room was consecrated to a separate saint. The same was true for each day of the week: on Monday the widow prayed to St. Ignatius and St. Teresa; on Tuesday to the Guardian Angel; on Wednesday to St. Xavier and St. Monica. The Ignatian flavour of her devotions is also evident in her membership of the sodality of the Immaculate Conception and her dedication to the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary: ‘if she took but a walk for recreation she premized the Litanies of Loretto, which were said publickly if the liberty of company permitted’ or silently if in the presence of zealous Protestants.

33 Smith, An Elizabethan Recusant House, pp. 37, 47–50.
36 W. Palmes, Life of Mrs. Dorothy Lawson, of St. Anthony’s, near Newcastle-upon-Tyne in Northumberland, ed. G. Bouchier Richardson (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1851), pp. 27, 33–5, 42–44.
Such recusants frequently decorated their private chapels with Jesuit symbols like the IHS, equipping them with the latest in elaborate baroque vestments and plate, ‘according to the fashion in Catholick countrys’. At Rushton Hall, Northamptonshire, Sir Thomas Tresham commissioned a large plaster reredos of the Crucifixion in 1577, while at Harrowden the altar was adorned with a large gold crucifix topped by the figures of a pelican, eagle and phoenix on feast days and an extravagantly bejewelled ornament in the form of the holy monogram surrounded by rays. At Battle, worship was conducted in an even more sumptuous setting, with an elevated altar enclosed by rails, as well as a separately carved pulpit and choir.

Suffused by the siege mentality that surrounded adherence to a forbidden creed, the homes of such gentry and nobility were humid hothouses in which Tridentine spirituality seems to have flourished exuberantly. The residence within them of clerical personnel whose presence was at once essential for the health of their souls and, simultaneously, legal grounds on which laymen and women could themselves be executed as felons, must have fostered an atmosphere of peculiar intensity. It is hardly surprising that they proved such fertile breeding grounds for male and female religious vocations. Here, in the scattered manor houses and landed estates of rural England, we may just find early examples of Louis Chatellier’s eighteenth-century ‘Europe of the devout’ in miniature.

Outside the privileged domain of the rich gentry and noble household, English historians have been sceptical about the ability of Roman Catholicism to survive, let alone to thrive. They have tended to presuppose that it was virtually impossible to nurture a Tridentine-style piety in contexts in which the laity had only intermittent and limited contact with priests. Christopher Haigh has argued that, starved of the spiritual lifeblood of the mass and deprived of clerical absolution, much survivalist sympathy for the Old Religion ‘degenerated into crude superstition’ before slowly but surely withering away. John Bossy likewise suggests that, ‘short of instruction and sacramental provision’, the religion of poorer Catholics ‘was allowed to tick over at the level of traditionalist

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39 Smith, An Elizabethan Recusant House, p. 43.


41 Haigh, ‘Continuity’, pp. 200, 207.
practice suitable to a pre-literate mentality’. Both emphasize the existence of an immense gulf between the vibrant new brand of piety which the seminary-trained priests and Jesuits imported from the Continent and the vestigial Catholicism of the rural masses – between the austere spirituality practised in recusant households and an essentially medieval religious culture rooted in rote-learned prayers, pilgrimages, relics and protective magic. They assume that Tridentine Catholicism represented a profound break with traditional Christianity and that, as such, it was no less alien and alienating to the unlearned populace than Protestantism itself. Hence the rapid contraction of the English Catholic community into a largely upper-class sect.

However, recent work has begun to question received wisdom about both the speed and the extent of this process. It has begun to suggest that we need to revise the all-too-common assumption that Catholicism invariably perished in the absence of regular access to the clerical dispensers of supernatural grace. The existence of a lively seam of non-gentry Catholicism in Elizabethan and early Stuart England has been one of the more important discoveries of recent research by Marie Rowlands and other scholars – an urban and rural, artisan, peasant and plebeian Catholicism whose partially conformist or church papist character has all too often allowed it to fall into the shadows. In the light of these findings, Christopher Haigh’s claim that the English mission was less an evangelical movement than a pastoral organization, that it concentrated on stiffening the faith of wealthy schismatics and largely ignored the task of converting peasants and heretics, seems increasingly mistaken. The activities of the clergy who played a key role in succouring and promoting the notable growth of this segment of the Catholic community in the early part of the seventeenth century thus deserve a fresh look.

We must not, then, lose sight of the many Jesuit and secular missionaries who continued to rove the countryside, moving from village to village to escape detection, preaching in barns and celebrating mass in the outbuildings of farmhouses – men like William Freeman, who worked diligently in the West Midlands for some years after his arrival in England in 1587, ‘travailinge ordinarily on foote to comforte the meaner sorte in wearinesse of body and sundry perrilles’, and the Jesuits and

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Franciscans of Northumberland and Durham, who, in the sixteen-twenties and thirties, undertook long journeys on foot to instruct local people. The Appellant Roger Cadwallader likewise spent sixteen years tramping the uplands of Monmouthshire and adjacent parts of Wales, while in Elizabethan Flintshire, Denbighshire and Caernarvonshire, John Bennett exhibited ‘exceeding zeale & labour confirming such as he found sound in true faith, and reconciling others that were fallen from it’. Captured, imprisoned and banished, he later returned to his native county to spend the rest of his life ‘with greate paines & diligence in the continuall exercise of his Apostolicall function, assistance for the most part the poore, & meaner sort of people . . . whom flocked to him in such multitudes to receive the Spirituall Cordials & Divine food wch he freely & copiously ministred to them’. Bennet’s followers were so devoted to him that they called him ‘the Saint’. Nor can we afford to ignore individuals like the Benedictine Ambrose Barlow who lived a humble existence among the poor Catholics of Lancashire for more than two decades prior to his execution in 1641, or Nicholas Postgate, whose evangelical efforts, centred on the moorland village of Egton, yielded many conversions, as revealed by Bill Sheils.

Equally important are priests like Henry Morse, who succoured afflicted Londoners during outbreaks of plague, and those who continued their missionary activities while locked up in gaol. William Whittingham was a celebrated metropolitan evangelist before perishing in the ‘fatall vesper’ in Blackfriars in 1623: commonly known as sacerdos pauperum, ‘the Priest of the Poor’, he was renowned as a catechist of children and was said to have converted 150 people to the Catholic faith in the year of his death alone.

More work is urgently needed on this sector of the post-Reformation priesthood, whose historiographical neglect parallels that of the lay people to whom it must have ministered. The significance, not to say size, of the wider penumbra of individuals who only occasionally and temporarily fell within the orbit of Jesuits and seminarians has been eclipsed by a persistent tendency to define the term ‘Catholicism’ narrowly, and to

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apply it exclusively to forms of devotional belief and practice directly led and supervised by the clergy.

Undoubtedly the perilous and precarious conditions in which the missionaries worked necessitated some modifications to and dispensations from prescribed Tridentine practice. The cases of conscience which clerical trainees studied in the seminaries provide us with a revealing glimpse of some of these adjustments. They imply that the clergy were commonly excused from reciting the hours; that they were often obliged to celebrate the mass on unconsecrated portable altars in unusual locations and to administer the sacraments without proper vestments or chalices; and that where the revised Roman breviary and missal were unavailable, medieval versions could still be used, provided the 'superstitious' rubrics were carefully deleted.49 There were other ways in which the Counter Reformation clergy had to adapt their evangelism to suit the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves. As has been argued elsewhere, to compensate for the infrequency of their contact with the laity, the Counter Reformation English priesthood made adept use of the manuscript tract and printed book as surrogates and locums for face-to-face catechetical instruction, disseminating small devotional books and prints which could act as ‘dumb preachers’ to the sub- and semi-literate.50

In seeking to reassess both the strategies and the impact of this strand of English missionary activity, moreover, we need to take account of the striking new insights that are emerging from recent work on Catholic renewal on the Continent. First, led by Louis Chatellier, scholars are coming to recognize the important part played by the itinerant rural mission in the renewal of early modern Catholicism as a whole. Across Europe, short but intense campaigns of preaching and revival conducted by the regular orders, especially the Capuchins and Jesuits, were vital in re-igniting zeal and intensifying and spiritualizing personal piety.51 As Eamon Duffy has commented, there is a deep irony in the fact that the most effective Counter Reformation engine and mechanism for the renewal of parochial life was in essence non-parochial in character.52

49 Elizabethan Casuistry, ed. P. J. Holmes (Catholic Record Soc., lxvii, 1981), pp. 17, 21, 23, 24–5, 26, 67–9, 78–84, 86, 87, 92, 93–4. Some casuists took a harsher line on such accommodations than others. In Ireland, similar dispensations were permitted by the constitutions of the Synod of Dublin of 1614 and by special faculties granted by the superior of the Dominican order (Ryan, ii. 215, 231).
51 Chatellier, Religion of the Poor.
Without the emotion unleashed by these occasional crusading initiatives, the quotidian pastoral endeavours of vicars and curates alone could never have transformed the religious outlook of the rural laity. In France, such missions helped to bridge the long chronological gap between the foundation of seminaries and the emergence of professional clergy; in the southern kingdom of Naples, they helped to compensate for the inherent weaknesses of the episcopal hierarchy and the lamentable defects of the parish system; and in re-Catholicized parts of the Holy Roman Empire like Bavaria, Austria and the Upper Palatinate they were essential in assisting the state to rebuild enthusiasm for the Church of Rome after many years of Protestant domination. It may be suggested that the fact of ecclesiastical dis-establishment made the *modus operandi* of the Society of Jesus uniquely well-suited to its endeavours in England. As in America and Asia, the absence of an episcopal hierarchy gave the Jesuits a freedom of movement and activity not enjoyed by those of their colleagues who conducted rural missions as a supplement to the services offered by a still inadequate parish clergy, in a manner which implicitly conflicted with the jurisdiction of local bishops. Hence the fierce resistance of the Jesuits to the proposals championed by the secular clergy which eventually resulted in Richard Smith’s elevation to the see of Chalcedon.

Second, such studies have highlighted the flexibility and creativity exhibited by Continental Catholic evangelists in their attempts to make an impression upon the wider populace. They have drawn attention to the ways in which Jesuits and other regular clergy in these regions sought to adapt themselves to the people’s capacities and, to borrow a phrase from David Gentilcore, ‘meet popular culture half way’. Rather than seeking to suppress traditional rituals and practices, they mobilized and subtly remoulded them as instruments of confessionalization. Using strategies of accommodation and ‘counterfeiting’ similar to those employed by their counterparts in the Far East, they sought to replace dubious customs with streamlined forms of devotion. The work of Phillip Soergel and Trevor Johnson in particular has emphasized how energetically reformers in the Holy Roman Empire tapped into a vast appetite for the miraculous and magical, and worked to divert fascination with saints, relics, pilgrimages

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54 In such contexts, conflict between mission and parish was often acute: allegations of interference and usurpation in this area were used in the propaganda wars which culminated in the suppression of the Society of Jesus by Pope Clement XIV in 1773 (see Chatellier, *Religion of the Poor*, ch. 11). For the parallels between the English mission and missions beyond Europe, see Wright, pp. 144–6.

55 Gentilcore, ‘“Adapt Yourselves to the People’s Capabilities”’, p. 274. See also Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch*, pp. 2–7, 70 and passim.
and sacramentals into orthodox channels. Backed by powerful princes like Maximilian I, they utilized the existing ‘economy’ or ‘system of the sacred’ as a powerful springboard in their attempts to counteract Protestantism and imbue the laity with a clear sense of their distinctive Catholic identity.  

Historians of English Catholicism have been slow to appreciate the fact that the priests, and especially Jesuits, sent over to England from the mid-fifteen-seventies onwards employed equally imaginative and theatrical techniques in their efforts not merely to rally the faithful but also to bring heretics into the fold. Although they lacked the political and bureaucratic support enjoyed by reformers abroad, there is much to suggest that they, too, exploited the numinous and supernatural as a missionary tool. Thus, in the cells of their prisons, as Peter Lake and Michael Questier have shown, the clergy systematically evangelized convicted felons, turning the repentance that they expressed in their last dying speeches into a dramatic demonstration of the salvific power of the Catholic religion. Even in their final hours on the scaffold and gallows, they sought to transform the state’s theatre of punishment into a spectacle of superhuman bravery and courage which could induce members of the curious crowds to embrace the Romanist faith. Recent research by Brad Gregory and Anne Dillon highlights how they condoned, not to say actively fostered, the cults which sprang up around priest and recusant martyrs, circulating inspiring hagiographical narratives about the prodigious signs and tokens which had accompanied their deaths and the providential punishments which befell ungodly persecutors and vicious heretics, adapting them to serve the ends of anti-Protestant controversy, and promoting the proliferating relics of these instant saints as a potent thaumaturgic resource. At root, they shared with the laity a deep-seated conviction that those who took up the cross of Christ and made the ultimate sacrifice earned themselves a place in heaven at the right hand of God and acquired thereby unique intercessory power.  


Like their counterparts on the Continent, English missionaries also catered for the continuing lay need for magical protection and healing by importing in large quantities reformed sacramentals – crucifixes, *agnus dei* and ampules of water consecrated by contact with a medal or relic of St. Ignatius Loyola. The Jesuit ‘Annual letters’ from the early seventeenth century are full of remarkable cures, rescues and conversions wrought by these sacred objects. Pilgrimage to holy sites was much harder to revive against the backdrop of continuing Protestant iconoclasm, although close examination of the post-Reformation history of the wonder-working spring of St. Winifred at Holywell in North Wales yields some surprising points of comparison with baroque shrines such as Scherpenheuvel in the Spanish Netherlands and Altötting in Bavaria. Here, too, the clergy were enterprising in their efforts to create a tangible physical focus and locus for Counter Reformation fervour and militancy. Robert Southwell, for example, sought to counteract the consequences of Catholicism’s ejection from the cathedrals and churches which had been its ancient patrimony by encouraging the laity to consecrate domestic and natural spaces to spiritual use – from the rooms of their houses to barns, fields and woods. Ritual expulsion of demons was a further instrument by which priests repeatedly sought to reconcile schismatics and convince Protestants that Catholicism was the single true religion: exorcism was at once a powerful metaphor and a practical mechanism for the expulsion of heresy and it is increasingly clear that the celebrated episode at Denham involving William Weston and twelve other priests in 1585–6 was not the only occasion on which the clergy tried to transform these compelling but unstable spectacles into propaganda for the Tridentine cause. News of miraculous visions of the Virgin Mary and other saints was similarly harnessed in support of contested doctrinal tenets like transubstantiation and purgatory. By such means, Jesuits and seminary priests did their best to turn survivalist sentiment to their own advantage and to rehabilitate popular piety in a reformed and purified guise.

One final example of missionary ingenuity may be cited, and this is the evidence which has recently been uncovered of the attempts of the Jesuit Henry Garnet and other Elizabethan priests to foster Marian sodalities and to regenerate the familiar and well-loved devotion of the rosary, both as a symbol of loyalty to an outlawed creed and as a vehicle for bringing Counter Reformation dogma and practice into the heart of the

60 See A. Walsham, ‘Holywell: contesting sacred space in post-Reformation Wales’, in Coster and Spicer. On Altötting, see Soergel, chs. 4–6; on Scherpenheuvel, see Harline and Put, pp. 93–108.
62 See Walsham, ‘Miracles’.
beleaguered English Catholic community. Such confraternities, Anne Dillon argues, were encouraged as cells of communal solidarity, frameworks within which the laity, in the absence of regular contact with the clergy, could find spiritual sustenance and comfort and gain access to the benefits of indulgence and the Blessed Virgin’s intercession. These voluntary societies not only offered a substitute of sorts for the liturgy of the mass but also functioned as a safe haven for men and women who might have to wait weeks to receive sacramental absolution from a priest. The Rosary was ‘a subtle piece of Counter Reformation social and spiritual engineering’, skilfully adapted to the particular circumstances of the English mission.\(^63\)

Ultimately it remains difficult to evaluate the success of these pastoral and evangelical strategies, to assess how far an itinerant Tridentine priesthood was indeed able to inculcate in the middling- and lower-class laity an interiorized piety marked by a fuller comprehension of Catholic dogma. But the religious culture which grew up in this social milieu can surely no longer be written off as merely an amalgam of superstition and traditionalist nostalgia: here too, perhaps, the experience of persecution and proscription helped the clergy to foster a strong, even baroque consciousness of the community’s confessional antagonism towards its Protestant enemies. It may also be argued that the very scarcity of priests enhanced their status as conduits and funnels of sacramental grace. The charisma which surrounded men who daily risked their lives to sustain a prohibited faith probably did more to encourage lay reverence for the clergy as a sanctified race than any directive from Trent. No amount of seminary training or studied ascetic retreat from worldly vanities could buttress sacerdotal authority more effectively than the glamour of martyrdom.

At the same time, the missionary condition of the English priesthood was far from conducive to the strict assertion of clerical control over the holy that was such a central objective of the Catholic Reformation as a whole. Negotiation between centre and periphery, popular and élite, was a keynote of the movement for Catholic renewal everywhere in Europe. But England was a context in which the tension between priestly regulation and lay independence must have been especially acute. The realities of operating in a Protestant country thwarted the attempts of the clergy to police tightly the boundary between the sacred and profane and facilitated the development of piety in somewhat unorthodox directions. Persecution also nourished the spontaneous growth of dozens of unofficial saints’ cults in a manner which permitted a powerful resurgence of what William Christian calls ‘local religion’.\(^64\)


In a context in which clerical gatekeepers were scattered and scarce, it was undoubtedly difficult to prevent the laity from appropriating and misusing holy objects in what Tridentine reformers would have regarded as a ‘superstitious’ fashion. Sacramentals were apt to be used not as aids to inner contemplation, but as automatically efficacious magical amulets, and particular concerns arose around the permissibility of distributing them to schismatics. The missionary memoirs of John Gerard and William Weston attest to the vain attempts of the Jesuits to gather images and relics into the hands of the Church and it is evident that many lay people retained possession of medieval sacred remains and ecclesiastical vestments long after the upheavals of the fifteen-forties and fifties. The Staffordshire yeoman Henry Hodgetts kept the relics of St. Chad in his bed-head and invoked the saint in his final hours in 1615, and visitation articles repeatedly enquired about parishioners who were ‘noted, knowne, or suspected to conceale or keepe hidden in their houses . . . challices, copes, vestments, albes, or other ornaments of superstition, uncancelled or undefaced, which it is to be conjectured, they doe keep for a day’. As in Ireland, where clerical manpower was similarly limited, it proved exceptionally difficult to exercise control over ritual objects and to supervise effectively their use.

Other devotional practices which the Tridentine decrees strenuously sought to refocus upon the parish were similarly domesticated and redirected into private spaces. Thus, the Protestant preacher Richard Sheldon commented disparagingly on Catholics who set up tiny carved images made of wood from the Marian shrine of Scherpenheuvel in their gardens and orchards and made daily visitations to them. Detached from the rich visual settings which had shaped it in the late medieval period, eucharistic devotion, too, seems to have become increasingly individualistic, focused less on the elevation of the host in the mass than on the mental images that the laity conjured up as they meditated on spiritual manuals and guides in preparation for receiving the sacrament. As a result, the body of Christ was in danger of becoming the personal possession of the devout. Jan Rhodes argues that this trend may have been a consequence as much of the growth of literacy as it was of English

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66 The casuists argued that this was acceptable, as long as there was no danger that they would abuse them (Holmes, pp. 17, 91–2).
Catholicism’s condition of proscription, but repression surely helped to exacerbate it.\(^69\) In this and other respects, even the clergy’s attempts to use books as instruments of silent instruction could backfire against them. In the hands of the laity texts had the potential to become agents of liberation from clerical mediation and it may be commented that the decision to publish a vernacular translation of the New Testament in 1582 carried a particularly high risk of promoting a challenge to the ecclesiastical monopoly on biblical exegesis.\(^70\) There was a tendency, too, for the unlearned populace to use books as magical talismans: by the late sixteen-thirties so many cures had been wrought by Pedro Ribadeneira’s *Life of Ignatius Loyola* in Lancashire that even illiterate persons were apparently eager to purchase it.\(^71\)

In short, the straitened circumstances in which English Catholicism found itself after 1559 conspired greatly to empower the laity. Formal and informal confraternal groups which operated as a kind of surrogate for the parish are one further manifestation of this development. Although they hide in the dim recesses of our sources, such fellowships seem to have flourished in a context chronically deprived of ecclesiastical leadership and largely immune to the forms of episcopal intervention which elsewhere in Europe were seeking to regulate the autonomy of associations perceived as presenting ‘an obstacle to uniform parochial observance’ and a tacit threat to clerical authority. In England, sometimes these brotherhoods must necessarily have become a kind of *ad hoc* priesthood of all believers. Even those sodalities which owed their establishment to the missionary clergy could all too easily take on a life of their own and become less a substitute for ecclesiastical supervision than a rival to it, a form of religious voluntarism which frustrated, even as it supplemented, the efforts of the Jesuits.\(^72\)

As in the northern Protestant Netherlands, the same set of conditions also fostered the creation of a kind of lay deaconate. It encouraged ordinary men and women to take upon themselves a quasi-sacerdotal role – to baptize infants in danger of death, to lead improvised meetings for

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worship between irregular celebrations of the mass, and, like John Finch of Eccleston and Dorothy Lawson of St. Anthony’s near Newcastle-upon-Tyne, to catechize the vulgar sort and instruct and edify their servants. Like their Dutch counterparts, the klopjes, and the Flemish beguines before them, pious women like Mistress Anne Line took voluntary vows of chastity, even while their husbands were still living. The philanthropic and proselytizing activities of these devout females bear comparison with those of the members of Mary Ward’s ill-fated Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, suppressed by the pope in 1630, as well as of organizations like St. Vincent de Paul’s ‘Daughters of Charity’. They, too, defied and tested the Roman hierarchy’s emphatic insistence on the need for clausuration, as well as exacerbating the frictions and tensions over ecclesiastical organization that continued to rupture the Catholic community in the Jacobean and Caroline period.\footnote{For lay people involved in baptism, see Holmes, p. 15; for Finch, see Foley, ii. 144; for Dorothy Lawson, see Palmes, p. 40; for Mistress Line, see Gerard, pp. 82–6; Spiertz, esp. pp. 297–301. Mary Chambers, Life of Mary Ward, ed. H. J. Coleridge (2 vols., 1882–5); H. Peters, Mary Ward: a World in Contemplation, trans. H. Butterworth (Leominster, 1994), esp. pp. 3–57; E. Rapley, The Dévotes: Women and Church in 17th-Century France (Montreal, 1990). In Ireland, the Jesuits actively enlisted the laity as auxiliary catechists (Ryan, ii. 240–2).} In various senses, then, the conditions of the English mission might be seen as positively subversive of the priorities enshrined in the decrees of the Council of Trent.

It is not possible to resolve the many diverse and contradictory threads of argument embedded in this article, but a few key points and themes may be underlined with the aim of setting an agenda for future research. First, we need to discard the ingrained assumption that it was impossible to carry out a Counter Reformation in a country denuded of an episcopal hierarchy and parochial clergy. It has been endeavoured here to draw attention to some of the paradoxical consequences of official intolerance, to the ways in which persecution simultaneously obstructed and assisted the attempt to pursue a programme of Catholic reform and renewal. Within the claustrophobic sphere of the gentry household, it was perhaps uniquely possible to institute a quasi-parochial regime of sacramental conformity and spiritual introspection. This article has also sought to emphasize both the creative manner in which Jesuits and secular priests tried to adapt policies formulated for contexts in which Roman Catholicism was dominant to an environment in which it was reduced to a proscribed minority, and their active attempts to graft fresh meaning onto traditional religious practices that were under Protestant attack. Further examination of these strategies may reveal that the relationship between the vestigial popery practised in outlying areas and the spirituality espoused by clergy trained on the Continent is far more intricate and intimate than has often been presumed. It may also suggest that, just as the distinction between resident chaplains and itinerant evangelists has
often been overstated, so too has the contrast between the piety practised in upper-class households and the religious culture of the rural and artisan laity. In turn, this may add a new twist to the now nearly stagnant debate about the relative roles played by survivalism and seminarism, continuity and missionary conversion, in the making of the Elizabethan and early Stuart recusant community.\textsuperscript{74}