Chapter 2

Bishops, Synods, and Diocesan Clergy

Let them see to the observance of these things...publishing them in episcopal synods...

—Lateran IV

The years surrounding the Fourth Lateran Council saw the work of the Parisian moral theologians enshrined into the common law of the Church. Those same years, however, were less than auspicious for the Church in England. The island had endured a papal interdict from 1208 to 1213, and a civil war that lasted well into 1217, a war whose aftershocks continued well into Henry III’s minority. In addition to their pastoral responsibilities, the men of the English episcopate had the task of holding together the institutions of the kingdom of England in the face of the fractious political infighting of the minority of King Henry III. Under the vigorous supervision of the papal legates Guala and Pandulf, the bishops of the time set to the restoration of physical and spiritual damages with a will. Four new bishops were appointed in the first two years of the minority, and Archbishop Langton returned to England and was reconciled with those churchmen with whom he had fallen out as a consequence of split loyalties in the civil war.

An Episcopal Program of (Moral and Dogmatic) Reform

Seven English bishops (and two bishops elect) had been present at the Fourth Lateran Council, and upon their return and the filling of the vacant bishoprics, they took up a program of moral, dogmatic, and administrative reform. Eighty years ago, Marion Gibbs and Jane Lang argued that although the Fourth Lateran Council had reflected a theological movement with the goal of reforming the Church throughout western Christendom, it did not necessarily result in something like a unified reform program among England’s bishops: their efforts,

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2 Vincent, Peter des Roches, 165–8.
according to Gibbs and Lang, fell far short of a concentrated push for moral reform. They further remarked that the episcopate’s “decrees relating to dogma...call for a very special study, and as this would have only very slight bearing on the reformation of the Church in England...we shall not attempt it.” As the preceding chapter has shown, however, in the school-based moral theology that had such wide-ranging influence, the dogmas underlying morals were crucial to the entire project. So we should address their assertion that all that resulted was “a certain effort...too tentative to bring about a fundamental and spiritual reformation in the English Church.” In light of the intervening eight decades of scholarship, we ought to at least tentatively re-examine whether the judgment of Gibbs and Lang still stands as to the ultimate failure of the English episcopate to follow through on a program of moral reform.

In discussing such a program, we ought to raise first the question as to whether we can speak of a single English episcopate during the period of 1215 to 1281. When speaking of nearly ninety men spread out over seventy years, two provinces, and seventeen dioceses, is there enough commonality among the program of its members to speak of it in any kind of broad terms? The character of the various bishops between the years around Lateran IV and Pecham’s Lambeth constitutions varied immensely: saints, magistri, and a few monks jostled with curiales and Lusignans. We can nevertheless follow a skein of interest in ecclesiastical reform throughout the period. There were obviously saints and men of known personal sanctity—three bishops of the period, Thomas Cantilupe, Edmund of Abingdon, and Richard of Droitwich all were officially canonized. In addition, there were bishops of reforming zeal, such as Stephen Langton, Robert Grosseteste, Walter Cantilupe, and of course Robert

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3 Marion Gibbs and Jane Lang, Bishops and Reform, 1215–1272: With Special Reference to the Lateran Council of 1215 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 130.
4 Ibid., 137.
5 Ibid.
6 Although also in the province of Canterbury, Wales's four dioceses do not appear in this study.
7 Gibbs and Lang, Bishops and Reform, 185–99 has what is still a useful overview of the backgrounds of the English bishops during the reign of Henry III.