CHAPTER SIX

THE EUCHARIST: DEMANDING A DREADFUL PEACE

Through a wide array of media, from didactic texts to pax rituals, the mass was heralded as the most significant opportunity for parishioners to commune with the divine. Through the miracle of transubstantiation, the priest transformed the bread and wine into Christ’s own body and blood. In order to worthily witnesses, or, on some days, receive their Lord and Savior, parishioners had to not only attend the divine service but also assume a humble and charitable demeanor, which, of course, entailed an appreciation for forgiveness and self-restraint. An investigation of court rolls and letter collections reveals that parishioners did emphasize restrained comportment and acceptance of charity before the host and during the liturgy of the mass. Though violence before the Eucharist or during divine services was not unprecedented, parishioners’ words and deeds illuminate a marked anxiety over such events. Their concern for expressions of charity and restraint, so as to view or receive the host fittingly, shines through in their specific indication of the timing and setting of violence, their avoidance of disturbance and desecration, as well as in their efforts to make peace and restore charity among fellow parishioners.

Respecting the Liturgy of the Eucharist

While many acts of violence receive little elaboration in the court rolls as to their timing or location, aggression which took place during mass was specifically singled out by plaintiffs and presenting jurors. The author of *Dives et Pauper* argued that Sundays were “days of the devil” when lechery, gluttony, manslaughter, robbery, backbiting, perjury and other sins ruled. Though medieval parishioners might not have been as sensitive to sin as the anonymous author of *Dives*, they too showed an anxiety over disturbance of the mass. This anxiety stemmed from their

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2 For some of the many examples of citation for disturbing divine service through aggression, see, Hale, *Precedents*, pp. 26, 43, 71, 80; *Visitations in the Diocese of Lincoln*, i,
recognition that violence jeopardized the spiritual health of the parish by offending God, consequently alienating him from the church and goading him to reject the sacrifice of the mass. Even if they did not articulate fully or not know all the theological reasons why violence was prohibited during the mass, parishioners still feared God and thus abhorred disruptions of the sacred sacrifice of the altar. For example, when an affray broke out in Bromholm church during the liturgy, the vicar, Sir Robert Williamson, expressed his horror in a plaintive letter to Agnes Paston: “And the great fray that they made in the time of mass it ravished my wits and made me full heavily disposed; I pray Jesu give them grace to repent them therof, that they caused it may stand out of peril of soul”. In this lament, Williamson indirectly illuminates a solid consensus between clergy and laity about the need for physical restraint and charitable demeanor during mass by his assumption that Agnes Paston would be as horrified as he was by the belligerent disruption of divine service. For priests, like Williamson, and ‘reputable’ parishioners, like the Pastons, violence during the mass was impudent, sinful and shameful. Though the act itself could not always be prevented, future recollections could still denigrate the deed and stigmatize the offenders.

With similar intent, though with less eloquence than the latter cleric, lay parishioners also singled out and censured disturbers of divine service. Thomas Nash was presented before the consistory of the bishop of London in 1491 for interrupting mass with his slander, while in 1493 John Smyth was presented for quarreling during divine service and consequently disrupting it. At the episcopal visitation of 1519, parishioners of Althorpe, Lincolnshire presented John Davy and Alexander Nelson for quarreling in the cemetery during divine service while two others parishioners from Gainesborough were also presented by their wardens for arguing during mass. Likewise, Thomas Lake mentioned in his plea to Star Chamber that Richard Sandford had assaulted him in church during “high mass tyme”. Such statements reflect not the quirks of one or two men but rather, the concerns of the parish community for they