The Title of Defender of the Faith given King Henry by the Apostolic See, and the Reason for This

When Henry was a young and powerful king, well beloved in his realm and esteemed and respected abroad, there arose the hellish madness of Luther, which came into the world for its destruction and the undermining of the Catholic Church, against which he immediately began to wage war. He wrote several books riddled with errors and blasphemies against the pope and the sacraments of the Church, disseminating his heresies and pestilential teachings, which scandalized and horrified the people not a little. Among the Christian princes who opposed this infernal insanity, the one who most distinguished himself was Henry, who not only strove to preserve the purity of our sacred Catholic faith in his kingdom, as other monarchs did, but also did what no one else had, which was to write a very learned and weighty book against Luther, publish it in his own name, and send it to Rome to His Holiness Pope Leo X (in whose pontificate Luther's diabolical sect was spawned). However, this book did not come from the quiver of the king, so much as from that of John, bishop of Rochester, an extremely erudite man, who assisted him and

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1 This chapter was added in the 1595 edition.
2 The Assertio septem sacramentorum was published in the summer of 1521 under Henry's name (precisely how much of the book the king actually wrote is open to dispute, but certainly much of the scholarly legwork was done by others). J.J. Scarisbrick opines, "The Defence of the Seven Sacraments is not a piece of theology of the highest order. Estimates of it have varied enormously, but the truth surely is that its erudition is unremarkable [...] its grasp of Lutheranism defective, its exposition of Catholic teaching on the sacraments unimpressive and undoubtedly shot through with that semi- or crypto-Pelagianism against which, essentially, Protestantism protested. [...] In short, it is unlikely to have moved many convinced, informed Lutherans. [...] But this is not to say that it was an ineffective book. On the contrary, it was one of the most successful pieces of Catholic polemics produced by the first generation of anti-Protestant writers." Scarisbrick, Henry VIII, 110–12, 116.

See Henry VIII, Assertio septem sacramentorum; or Defence of the seven sacraments, ed. Louis O'Donovan (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908).

The Assertio, dedicated to the pope, was an important (but not the only) reason for Leo X's grant of the title of Defensor Fidei in October 1521. Ludwig Pastor, The History of the Popes, from the Close of the Middle Ages, trans. Frederick Ignatius Antrobus, Ralph Francis Kerr, Ernest Graf, and E.F. Peeler, 40 vols. (London: J. Hodges, 1891–1953), 8:442–44.
was the principal author. This zeal of King Henry’s was wonderfully received by all the world, while the supreme pontiff, Leo x, was so pleased with the service done our Lord, the piety with which the king opposed this infernal monstrosity, the magnanimity and valor with which he had previously aided Pope Julius ii, and the submissiveness, devotion, and obedience he had shown to the Apostolic See in all things, that, with the advice of the sacred college of cardinals, he decided to honor King Henry by giving him the new and glorious title of “Defender of the Faith.” This he did, sending him a brief in which he bestowed this title and set out his reasons. I have thought it good to insert a Spanish translation of the Latin, for reasons I shall relate farther on. Accordingly, thus says Pope Leo x in his brief:

John Clerk, our beloved son and Your Majesty’s ambassador, having presented to us, in consistory and in the presence of our venerable brothers the cardinals of the holy Roman Church, the book that Your Majesty, afire with the Catholic faith and burning with the fervor and devotion you have for us and this Holy See, has composed against the errors of various heretics, repeatedly condemned by the Holy See and now recently revived by Martin Luther, so that we might have it examined and approve it with our authority; and having then also declared, in an elegant address, the ready will with which Your Majesty is furnished to persecute the followers and defenders of Luther’s errors, no less with all the arms and might of your kingdom as with the true and unanswerable arguments and authorities from Holy Writ and the holy Fathers by which you have confounded their fallacies, we, who are the successors to the prince of the Apostles, Saint Peter, to whom the Lord entrusted the supreme care of his flock, being seated upon this holy throne, whence spring all titles and dignities, having first carefully

3 The eminent theologian John Fisher served as bishop of Rochester from 1504 to his death. Though sixteenth-century editions of his works often included the Defence of the Seven Sacraments, and Fisher may have assisted Henry in its composition, it is unlikely he was the primary author. Maria Dowling, Fisher of Men: A Life of John Fisher, 1468–1535 (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 107.

4 In the first years of his reign, Henry had joined Julius’s Holy League (directed against France), in the latter stages of the War of the League of Cambrai. The king had led his armies to several notable—if somewhat inconsequential—victories, including the Battle of the Spurs (1513) and the capture of Tournai (1513). See Scarisbrick, Chapter 2.
