CHAPTER SIX
“L’EVESQUE EN SOIT ADVERTY:”
EXCOMMUNICATION IN THE EXILE CONGREGATIONS

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Summary
When the exile churches were established in London in 1550 by letters patent granted by Edward VI, the church order drawn up by the Polish Reformer Johannes à Lasco instituted a system of ecclesiastical discipline in order to maintain the sanctity of the Lord’s Supper, in which the ultimate sanction was excommunication. During the 1560s, this power came to rest with the local diocesan bishops who acted as the Superintendents of these churches. This essay considers how the system of excommunication evolved and came to be exercised by the episcopate, as well as the extent to which the sentence was used in the disciplinary procedures of the exile churches during the later sixteenth century.

Like other Reformed congregations, the exile communities established in England during the second half of the sixteenth century sought to ensure the sanctity of the Lord’s Supper through the exercise of religious discipline so that only the godly were permitted to participate in its administration. The churches confronted those who had erred in either their private or public lives with their misdemeanors and sought, after due repentance, their reconciliation with the Church. The ultimate sanction for those who repeatedly failed to acknowledge their fault was excommunication. Within the exile churches, the procedures for excommunicating a member of the congregation evolved in the mid-sixteenth century from the congregational model which had been adopted at the time of their establishment in 1550 to one which was more akin to the system that operated in Geneva. This was in stark
contrast to the situation in the English dioceses and parish churches where attempts during Edward VI’s reign to establish a new system of disciplinary courts and a liturgy of public penance had been thwarted by political events. When Protestantism was restored under Elizabeth I, religious discipline continued to be exercised through the medieval system of ecclesiastical courts and at a parish and less official level by the minister and his churchwardens. It is therefore surprising that English diocesan bishops came to play an important part in the implementation of excommunication within the exile congregations. While historians have noted the close links between certain bishops and the exile congregations, which reflected their sympathetic religious outlook, this seemingly anomalous role has not received close scrutiny and will therefore be the focus of this essay.

The van Haemstede affair is fairly well-known but it provides a relatively detailed case study of the involvement of the Bishop of London in the disciplinary procedures of the Reformed Dutch and French congregations in the city. On 16 November 1560, Edmund Grindal, Bishop of London, ordered the excommunication of the Dutch minister Adriaan Cornelis van Haemstede. Van Haemstede had been condemned by the consistory of the Dutch church for meeting a group of Anabaptists in London and extending the hand of friendship towards them. The minister recognized that Anabaptists were in doctrinal error but rejected the notion that they should be condemned for this and in fact sought a rapprochement. The Dutch consistory attempted to make van Haemstede acknowledge that he had been at fault through his actions but he refused. The disciplinary process against the minister culminated in the sentence of excommunication being issued by

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