FROM CATHOLIC PRIESTS TO PROTESTANT MINISTERS:
PASTORAL EDUCATION IN THE DIOCESE OF YORK,
1520-1620

CLAIRE CROSS

Christian humanists believed that by raising educational standards they could reform the practice of the parochial clergy, that higher educational attainment would in effect produce more moral and more educated priests. This contribution traces the pursuit of this policy in one English diocese over the course of the sixteenth century.

1. Educational standards and attempts at improvement in the mid-sixteenth century

Before the government of Edward VI could proceed with its intention to abolish chantries throughout England and appropriate their revenues, it first needed to obtain precise details of their endowments. Royal commissioners visited York for this purpose in 1548, subsequently dispatching to Westminster in addition to the requisite economic information brief returns on the morality and education of the city’s chantry priests. One such cleric, Thomas Worrall, a stipendiary curate in the church of St Michael, Spurriergate, featured in their records as possessing “honest qualities and conditions and indifferent learning”. Ordained deacon and priest in York in 1512 at the age of 24, the earliest permissible date at canon law, he had been singing the Jesus mass at the Jesus altar every day from at least 1518 when he began compiling the churchwardens’ accounts, a task he had combined from 1538 with managing the parish estate.²

All this activity seems to have counted for little with the royal commissioners who with some justification would have seen him merely as a typical representative of the old order. One of the two sons of

² W. Page, ed., The Certificates of the Commissioners Appointed to Survey the Chantries, Guilds, Hospitals, etc., in the County of York, Publications of the Surtees Society 91-92, 2 vols. (Durham, 1894-95), 2: 460; C.C. Webb, ed., Churchwardens’ Accounts of St Michael, Spurriergate, York, 1518-1548, Borthwick Texts and Calendars 20 (York, 1997); the spelling in all quotations has been modernised.
John Wyrral, fishmonger, of St Michael, Spurriergate he had in all probability learnt both his letters and his musicianship as one of the children of the choir. To gain his knowledge of Latin he may have had to attend a grammar school elsewhere in the city, but it seems highly unlikely that he received any of his education outside York. To all intents and purposes he spent his entire life, his childhood and clerical career of almost forty years, within the parish of his birth.⁴

Measured according to humanist standards the two hundred or so chantry priests in the forty parish churches of York in 1548 seemed just as provincial as Worrall. The insatiable demand for masses for the dead in the late middle ages had resulted in a huge number of men entering the church in the north of England in the first two decades of the sixteenth century. Most years had seen the ordination of around 250 priests, the figure rising to 307 in 1503 and to a scarcely credible 446 in 1508. Out of a total of almost 5,000 admitted to the priesthood between 1500 and 1520 only 28 are definitely known to have been university men. While this should not be taken to imply that no northerners were studying at Oxford and Cambridge at this time it does mean that extremely few graduates were accepting parish livings in Yorkshire in the early Tudor period and that the parochial clergy had little direct contact with the ideals of Christian humanism which had been taking root in the two English universities well before the turn of the century.⁵

William Melton, chancellor of York Minster from 1498 until his death thirty years later, famously preached against the great discrepancy in education between the higher and lower clergy, but he and likeminded colleagues failed to implement any far reaching change before the break with Rome. The archiepiscopal admonitions of c. 1538 in consequence mark the first systematic attempt both to improve clerical learning and to disseminate some precepts

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