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Blast From the Past: Clement VII

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 22, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

As Pope Benedict XVI reached the sanctuary at Westminster Abbey for the ecumenical prayer service, I knew he would not say the one thing I most wanted him to say. In my heart of hearts, I wanted him to look around at the magnificent abbey and ask if we might not have it back.

Westminster Abbey and all of England was, of course, lost to Rome because of Henry VIII's desire to annul his marriage. Parts of Germany, Switzerland and France had all been overcome by Protestantism, but not England: It departed from the Roman Church for reasons of state, both in Britain and in Rome. Because the issue was not only that Catherine was barren; the issue was also decided by the Sack of Rome in 1527. Here is Eamon Duffy's account:

"One country which had seemed impregnable to the new doctrines was England. Henry VIII was ardently orthodox, and had rapidly mobilised the best theologians in England to confute Luther and his associates...Henry, however, had no son, and wanted to set aside his Spanish wife Catherine of Aragon in order to marry one of the court ladies, Ann Boleyn. The current marriage was a dynastic one, designed to unite Spain and England, and Catherine was the widow of Henry's older brother Arthur. Canon law forbade marriage to a deceased brother's widow, so to marry her Henry had needed a papal dispensation, which he got from Julius II. There were, however, conlficting biblical texts, some of which seemed to forbid a man from marrying his brother's widow, others which seemed to allow it. If scripture did indeed forbid such a marriage, could the Pope permit it?...The case was a knotty one, though on balance the best theological opinion was against the King. Henry, however, seemed to have believed sincerely what he said, and popes had accommodated princes on thinner grounds than this before. Through the 1520s Cardinal Wolsey worked to get Henry his divorce, and the Vatican must have considered it, for the archives contain a draft papal bull granting it. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the matter, however, the Sack of Rome changed everything. After 1527 Clement was the Emperor's prisoner, and Charles was the favorite nephew of Catherine of Aragon. There was now no question of granting Henry what he wanted. Rome first stalled, then refused. Henry turned on the Church in England, asserted his own supremacy over it, and repudiated the papacy. England, still, outside London and a feew provincial cities, relatively untouched by Protestant ideas, was lost to the papacy."

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