

The Pilgrimage of Grace: A Crusade for the One True Faith of England

James Moll

In 1536, King Henry VIII and Chief Secretary Thomas Cromwell attempted to pass legislation that dissolved monasteries and abbeys across the countryside of England. This proposed legislature upset many of the commoners in the parishes. Despite the plethora of Protestant movements, the population of England was still predominantly Catholic. Nobility, Gentry, and commoners alike were concerned about the consequences that would follow a dissolution of the monasteries and abbeys. These organizations did much for the parishioners, including charity for the poor and other such public affairs. Robert Aske, a gentry lawyer in Yorkshire during the 16th century, eventually would become the face for a series of uprisings that incited fear in the royalty and created stir among the commoners. Aske's crusade against the Crown's decisions on religion would forever be remembered as a threat to the King's throne. He traveled across Northern England collecting followers for his crusade. Aske and the people he met during the crusade made a list of what they wanted changed, and much of it revolves around religion. While socio-economic problems were still important, the passion of the people's religious beliefs kick started the uprisings across Northern England, and it continued to fuel said uprisings into the next year. The Pilgrimage of Grace was a crusade primarily focused on retaining the One True Faith of England by restoring the monasteries, getting rid of corrupt ecclesiastical elites, and confirming the succession of Princess Mary.

Lord Cromwell began the dissolution of the monasteries in 1532 by having the House of Commons come up with a list of crimes the clergy had committed. The Commons did as such, charging the clergy of mishandling money, making themselves seem above the King, and other like offenses. At first, the clergy denied such accusations, writing that they "repute and take [their] authority of making of laws to be grounded upon the Scripture of God and the determination of Holy Church."¹ Approved Church doctrine held that canon law must be based upon Scripture. However, since Henry and the pope were at odds, the King was furious that the Church was making laws for his people without him. Henry got angry and eventually the clergy submitted to him out of fear, hoping to spare their lives and livelihood.² Cromwell was not satisfied with the Clergy's cry for forgiveness, and, on June 8, 1536, Parliament passed the Act for abolishing the bishop of

¹ "Answer of the Ordinaries (1532)," London, in *Sources and Debates in English History: Second Edition*, by Newton Key and Robert Bucholz, (West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 59–60.

² "Submission of the Clergy (May 15, 1532)," London, in *Sources and Debates in English History: Second Edition*, by Newton Key and Robert Bucholz, (West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 60.

Rome's usurped authority.³ Parliament also planned to dissolve the monasteries and abbeys in this same year, confiscating their lands for the Crown.

The dissolution of the monasteries began with those monasteries and abbeys that made £200 or less a year.⁴ At first, the set standards put quite a few monks and nuns without work or housing, because the poorer areas could not keep up with the demands of the Crown. Many of these monks and nuns would proceed to wander the countryside, for they had nowhere else to go. This angered many commoners in the parishes and certain people in the government, especially Catholics. Eustace Chapuys, the Spanish Ambassador to England and also a representative of the pope, observed, "It is a lamentable thing to see a legion of monks and nuns who have been chased from their monasteries wandering miserably hither and thither seeking means to live . . . there were over 20,000 who knew not how to live."⁵ While Chapuys had little leverage with Cromwell, he did have influence in other European countries, which made his opinion somewhat important to Henry VIII. Chapuys relayed the affairs of the English Kingdom back to his superior, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who was also king of Spain. Fear of King Henry prevented such a direct complaint, at least from an onlooker like Eustace Chapuys. The monks, on the other hand, did not give in. At least two of the monasteries contested their decided worth, which led to small outbreaks of violence.⁶ These outbreaks were insignificant and promptly overshadowed by the more serious Pilgrimage of Grace.

In October of 1536, Robert Aske began mustering civilian soldiers in Lincolnshire for a crusade against the removal of the abbeys and monasteries and the restoration of Catholicism as the One True Faith. Not much is recorded about Aske before he went up against the Crown. The commoners willing to fight with Aske were in surplus; they felt their lives were being uprooted, all the way down to the church they went to on Sunday morning. The commoners joined mostly for ecclesiastical reasons, hoping to restore their preferred way of life.⁷ After gathering a stable number of soldiers and leaders, Aske traveled to York where he gathered more supporters. Eventually, Aske took over most of northern England, collecting a list of important grievances

³ "House of Lords Journal Volume 1: Note of acts," in *Journal of the House of Lords: Volume 1, 1509-1577*, *British History Online*, 102, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/lords-jrnl/vol1/p102>, (accessed November 22, 2020).

⁴ Martin Heale, *The Abbots and Priors of Late Medieval and Reformation England* (Oxford Scholarship Online, October 2016), 317.

⁵ "Henry VIII: July 1536, 6-10," *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 11, July-December 1536*, 19-20, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol11/pp19-29> (accessed November 24, 2020), 42.

⁶ Heale, *Abbots and Priors*, 317.

⁷ C. S. L. Davies, "The Pilgrimage of Grace Reconsidered," *Past & Present*, no. 41 (1968): 54-76 at 69.

along the way, including: “To have redress of the abbeys suppressed” and “Punishment of divers [sic] bishops, especially the bp. of Lincoln.”⁸ Not only did Aske and the commoners want the abbeys and monasteries back, but they wanted rid of the “corrupt” Catholic bishops that plagued the ecclesiastical hierarchy. While his endgame was unclear, Aske took Pomfret Castle, and eventually delivered the grievances to the duke of Norfolk.⁹ Norfolk proceeded to deliver said grievances to the King. First, however, Robert Aske was going to need the support of the Commons and the monasteries.

Arguably the most important assets of the Pilgrimage of Grace were the monasteries and convents and the ecclesiastical clergy who lived within them. Their support was obtained either by force of the leaders of the Pilgrimage of Grace or the Commons, or self-obligation. Many monastic superiors agreed to help the crusade through self-obligation or through obligation enforced by the Commons (some monasteries were threatened to be burned down by the Commons). These monasteries delivered food and provided what help they could from the comfort of their front door. Some superiors needed extra incentive to help the rebels in the form of threats and violence. However, the rebels wanted more than just help. One of the leaders, Sir Nicholas Fairfax, asserted that “the priours and abbotes and other men of the chirche shuld not only sende ayde unto theym but also goo forth in their owne persons.”¹⁰ Sir Fairfax figures that since this is a crusade against the dissolution of the monasteries, the monastic superiors should play a more physical role, taking up arms with the thousands of rebels. This was a tall order, however, and everyone involved settled for some of the monks and nuns traveling with this army, but not necessarily bearing arms. The monasteries served God in many ways, but were also important to the cause because of their supply of money, food, drink, and other provisions, as admitted by Robert Aske himself.¹¹

Henry VIII felt threatened by the insurrection in the North, and from the moment he learned about it he attempted to end its existence. As aforementioned, Henry was able to quell two insurrections already, one in Hexham and the other in Norton, but those were just the beginning of the Lincolnshire rebellions and the Pilgrimage of Grace. Henry was on them from the beginning, giving orders and sending troops. The rebels dispersed, and Henry thought he had won. Days later, however, he received a new message about the uprisings. Determined to reach their goal and now

⁸ “Henry VIII: January 1536, 1-5,” *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 12 Part 1, January-May 1537*, 1-16, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol12/no1/pp1-16> (accessed November 24, 2020), 6.

⁹ “Henry VIII: January 1536, 1-5,” 6.

¹⁰ Heale, *Abbots and Priors*, 317.

¹¹ “the suppression of the abbeys was the greatest cause of the said insurrection... [they] gave great alms to poor men and laudably served God.” G.W. Bernard, “The Dissolution of the Monasteries,” *History*, vol. 96, no. 4. (Wiley-Blackwell: Oct. 2004), 402.

numbering 30,000 to 50,000 soldiers, the Pilgrimage of Grace was unrelenting.¹² The king countered this by asking for “at least 100,000 men.”¹³ To one who is merely looking on, it might seem that the King was going overboard. The rebels’ defense of the monasteries, however, was a direct attack on the King’s and Cromwell’s plans to do away with papal power and Catholicism. After the King finished taking care of the Pilgrimage of Grace, he went after monks and monasteries individually, and eventually all monasteries in the realm.¹⁴ He finished dealing with this insurrection by early December 1536, with the help of the Duke of Norfolk.

The Duke of Norfolk was himself a Catholic, so his assignment to fight off the Catholic crusade, the Pilgrimage of Grace, was ill-fated. Norfolk met the rebels at Doncaster Bridge in Yorkshire in December of 1536, grossly outnumbered.¹⁵ He made a deal with them and took to the King what is now known as the Pontefract Articles. The rebels requested a full pardon as well, which was a common request of insurgents during this time.¹⁶ The Pontefract Articles, angrily dismissed by the King, directly addressed the main grievances of Robert Aske’s crusade. Beginning with the crusades’ most important grievances, the articles requested that “the supreme head of the Church. . . [should] be restored unto the see of Rome as before it was accustomed. . . to have the abbeys suppressed to be restored unto their houses, land, and goods. . . [and that] the Lady Mary may be made legitimate.”¹⁷ The crusade’s request to restore papal power in the ecclesiastical life of the commoners promoted Catholicism and thus threatened the authority of the Protestant King. If the pope were restored as a superior figure in England, a power struggle between King Henry VIII and the pope would ensue. Aske wanted the abbeys and monasteries reinstated for the good of the people as well as those who were once residents of these religious buildings. The restoration of jobs and the charities provided by the abbeys and monasteries were greatly needed by the people of England, and those a part of the crusade voiced as much.¹⁸ In regard to the restoration of Catholicism, Aske and his crusade requested that Princess Mary, a

¹² “Henry VIII: October 1536, 11-15,” *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 11, July-December 1536*, 257-284, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol11/pp257-284> (accessed November 24, 2020), 698.

¹³ “Henry VIII: October 1536, 11-15,” 700.

¹⁴ G.W. Bernard, “The Dissolution of the Monasteries,” 403.

¹⁵ Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England 1485–1714: Second Edition*, A Narrative History (West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 83.

¹⁶ G.W. Bernard, “The Dissolution of the Monasteries,” 401.

¹⁷ “Pontefract Articles (December 2–4, 1536),” London, in *Sources and Debates in English History: Second Edition*, by Newton Key and Robert Bucholz, (West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 61.

¹⁸ G.W. Bernard, “The Dissolution of the Monasteries,” 390.

devout Catholic, regain her legitimacy as heir to the throne. This would, in turn, ensure that Catholicism would stay in popularity and status across England.

Not only did the crusade demand the restoration of Catholicism in England, but they also wanted to be certain that their work would not be undone. Aske ensures the safety of the One True Faith in the Pontefract Articles, specifically in articles seven and eight, which request “to have the heretics, bishops and temporal, and their sect to have condign punishment by fire or such other, or else to try their quarrel with us [the crusaders] and our party takers in battle. . . [and] to have the Lord Cromwell, the Lord Chancellor, and Sir Richard Riche knight to have condign punishment.”¹⁹ Aske knew the best way to protect the future of Catholicism was to evict the corrupt from their offices. If accepted, these two articles would effectively remove the corrupt elite from their positions of power and subsequently sentence them to death. The crusaders knew that their faith and religion could not be intertwined with greed, which is why they singled out Cromwell and Riche. Lord Cromwell was the man who advised King Henry VIII to dissolve the monasteries and the abbeys, and Riche was singled out because of his position on the Privy Council.²⁰ Aske describes the men as “the subverters of the good laws of this realm and maintainers of the false sect of those heretics and the first inventors and bringing in of them.”²¹ This not only described Cromwell and Riche, but also the other corrupt elites in their circle.

The Pilgrimage of Grace was an armed rebellion dedicated to the restoration of the abbeys and the One True Faith, and even the daily life of the crusaders portrayed the dedication to their religion and their cause. Robert Aske took correct measures in making certain his crusade resembled a religious pilgrimage. Ethan Shagan describes one such procession in his *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*: “[Aske] processed through the city gates at the head of several thousand horsemen. . . by prior arrangement, [there was] another procession issued from York Minster consisting of all the Clerics of the cathedral in full vestments. . . he ‘made his oblation’. . . Aske nailed to the Minster door an order announcing the return of all regular clergy to their monasteries.”²² When he came to York, Aske staged the ending of an actual pilgrimage, something that the government had recently declared superstitious, thereby illegal. However, he did not raise a typical insurrection. Aske armed his followers, solidifying their position as crusaders; crusaders have long been defenders of the Catholic faith, which explains why Aske wanted them for the Pilgrimage of Grace. Aske’s religious display did not stop at his grand entrances and, in fact, moved inside the camps of the Pilgrimage itself. The oath taken by all who joined reads as follows:

¹⁹ “Pontefract Articles,” 61.

²⁰ Ethan H. Shagan, Anthony Fletcher, and John Guy, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, (Cambridge University Press, Oct. 2002), 99–100.

²¹ “Pontefract Articles,” 61.

²² Shagan, Fletcher, and Guy, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, 92.

Ye shall not enter to this our pilgrimage of Grace for the common wealth, but only for the maintenance of God's Faith and Church militant, preservation of the King's person and issue, and purifying the nobility of all villains' blood and evil counsellors; to the restitution of Christ's Church and suppression of heretics' opinions, by the holy contents of this book.²³

This oath makes certain of each individual that their purpose is to bring back the One True Faith and the Holy see of Rome to England, and that those corrupted and heretical leaders be condemned. This oath also confirmed their faith as Catholic—no Protestants would be joining the crusade unless they be insincere.

Aske made sure that his followers felt heard by their superiors, which is always important when running a government or mounting a rebellion. When he would go into a town for the purpose of mustering, he would call assembly in the marketplace and go over the articles as they were written to date. The people would then input their opinions on what needed to be changed within the articles and thus the articles would be reviewed and “the advice of the commons was given its due.”²⁴ This was much different and more agreeable than the King’s government, which did what it wanted when it wanted, despite the desires of the people. This liberating mechanic of the crusade thrilled “the commons”; given the stark contrast, however it was not the only mechanic that was different. The justice system within the camps of the Pilgrimage of Grace differed greatly from that of the King. In the camps, justice was built on mercy. This was so because it aligned with the Christian faith to be merciful and forgiving. When two men from the ranks of the crusade looted the surrounding countryside, they were arrested and made to think they were to die. The leaders “assigned a friar to them. . . advising them to make clean to God.”²⁵ However when it came down to the “execution,” it was a brief waterboarding for one man and the other “was ‘suffered to go unpunished.’”²⁶ Both men were subsequently banished from the premises and were not allowed to return to the Pilgrimage. The mercy shown by the leaders was not often shown by the King, but forgiveness came freely from God.

When looked upon from outside views, the Pilgrimage of Grace relays that religious core even still. Ambassadors from both Spain and Venice sent word back to their countries about the

²³ “Henry VIII: October 1536, 11-15,” 705.

²⁴ Shagan, Fletcher, and Guy, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, 96.

²⁵ Shagan, Fletcher, and Guy, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, 96.

²⁶ Shagan, Fletcher, and Guy, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, 96–97. This is not in the traditional sense of waterboarding with a rag and a water jug. This punishment is described in Shagan’s book, where the man punished “was tied by the middle with a rope to the end of the boat, and so held over the water and at several times put down with the oar over [his] head.”

insurgency of the northern counties of England, emphasizing the religious backing that it had.²⁷ When Eustace Chapuys first learned of the rebellion, he sent his nephew to relay the information to Isabella of Portugal, the wife of Spanish King and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. He knew as early as October 15th, sending a letter with more information on November 5, 1536.²⁸ In this letter he goes into great detail, most importantly stating that he believes Norfolk will try to cut a deal with the rebels because “all of them [are] good Christians.”²⁹ This is a useful point to make by Chapuys, so that if the Queen of Spain wanted to help a certain side of the rebellion and restore Princess Mary to the line of succession, she had sufficient information. Chapuys was not the only Spaniard to write to the Queen on this matter, though Dr. Ortiz was not nearly as tactful as Chapuys. Dr. Ortiz told the Empress how he really felt, stating in his letter that “The English king’s sin must already have reached their full measure, since God Almighty is now pouring down his ire on him and inciting his subjects to rebellion.”³⁰ Dr. Ortiz believed that the insurrection took place because King Henry VIII had forsaken God and the One True Faith, and he had it coming to him all along.

Word of insurrection made it to Venice as well as to Spain; however, the reaction was different. Chapuys kept the Empress up to date on the whereabouts of Princess Mary as well as all the details of the Catholic rebellion, however the Venetian ambassador, Lorenzo Bragadino, sent only a few letters to the Signory. The first letter merely described the situation and said that the pope excommunicated those who were in allegiance with the king of England. The Signory was then told that the rebels were more powerful than the Royal Army. It was not until December 29, 1536, that the pope decided that the papacy would support Scotland who “offers to march against the King of England with all his forces in favour of the Church”³¹ This helped offset the second round of uprisings in 1537, but it was not enough. King Henry VIII refused to be

²⁷ Keep in mind both of these countries (Spain and Italy) are traditionally Catholic, and Spain has an extra bias because of Queen Catherine. However, due to Henry VIII’s poor international relations, many countries do not have records of the goings on of England in 1536.

²⁸ “Spain: October 1536, 1-31,” *Calendar of State Papers, Spain, Volume 5 Part 2, 1536-1538*, 262-279, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/spain/vol5/no2/pp262-279> (accessed November 24, 2020), 111.

²⁹ “Spain: November 1536, 1-20,” *Calendar of State Papers, Spain, Volume 5 Part 2, 1536-1538*, 279-294, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/spain/vol5/no2/pp279-294> (accessed November 24, 2020), 114.

³⁰ “Spain: November 1536, 1–20,” 115.

³¹ “Venice: December 1536,” *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 5, 1534-1554*, 51-52, *British History Online*, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/venice/vol5/pp51-52> (accessed November 24, 2020), 131.

embarrassed and threatened again, squashing the rebellions and finally executing Robert Aske on July 12, 1537.

The Pilgrimage of Grace was a religious crusade focused on restoring the abbeys, monasteries, and the One True Faith to England, by removing the corrupt elites from power and confirming the succession of Princess Mary. Some historians argue that this view is narrow and short sighted, saying that while the religious aspect was essential, it was only surface level.³² Others claim still that the central piece is unknown. This brings about a need for continued research into the mystery of the Pilgrimage of Grace. While the first eight requests of the Pontefract Articles and the oath said by the crusaders provide considerable evidence, the current financial strife of the Commons and the remaining Pontefract Articles also warrant examination. It is important to continue this research because, with further knowledge, historians may be able to gain further insight into the mind of these commoners with regard to their religious affiliations, feelings towards the sovereign, and actions taken whenever their daily lives were threatened by new laws, and look past the actions of the kings of England. These actions could consist of keeping their true beliefs a secret or fueling a crusade to restore what they believe is right.

³² C. S. L. Davies, "The Pilgrimage of Grace Reconsidered," 74.

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