

The *agnus dei*, Catholic devotion, and confessional politics in early modern England

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After 1571 Catholic sacred objects were outlawed in England, and the possession of such objects could be prosecuted under the statute of *praemunire*. Despite this prohibition sacred objects including rosaries, blessed beads, and the *agnus dei* (wax pendants blessed by the pope) remained a critical part of Catholic devotion. This article examines the role of the *agnus dei* in English Catholic communities and the unique political connotations it acquired during the reign of Elizabeth I. It assesses the uses of these sacramentals in Catholic missions to England, their reception amongst Catholics, and the political significance of the *agnus dei* in light of the papal excommunication of Elizabeth I in 1570.

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In 1571 the English parliament declared that the bringing of any tokens ‘by the name of *Agnus Dei*’ into the realm, ‘or any crosses, pictures, beads or suchlike ... things from the bishop or see of Rome, or from any persons or persons authorised or claiming authority by or from the said bishop or see of Rome to consecrate or hallow the same’, would henceforth incur the penalties of the statute of *praemunire*, including imprisonment and the loss of one’s property. Those caught wearing or using any such items would likewise suffer the penalties of the statute.¹ The outlawing of these objects was one part of legislation that considerably extended the treason laws and inhibited the practice of Catholicism in England. In addition to prohibiting the use and importation of sacred objects employed in Roman Catholic devotion, the statute declared that anyone who imported, used, or attempted to publish any bulls from Rome would be charged with treason, and their abettors would be charged with *praemunire*.²

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¹ 13 Eliz. I c.2. See *Statutes of the Realm*, 4 vols (London: HM Stationery Office, 1819), 4.1: 530-1. The statute of *praemunire*, as enacted during the reign of Richard II, forbade the recognition of any foreign power as having jurisdiction in England. See 16 Ric. II c.5, in *Statutes of the Realm* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1816), 2: 85-6.

² *Ibid.*

In spite of the new laws, Catholic communities in England continued to use blessed objects including rosaries, beads, blessed grains, and *agni dei* (the plural of *agnus dei*, wax tablets blessed by the pope) at great personal risk. Because it was consecrated by the pope, the *agnus dei* was a precious devotional object amongst Catholics in early modern Europe; but in England, it also assumed unusual political connotations after 1570 because of growing conflict between Elizabeth I and the papacy.³ Despite the formidable punishments they faced, English Catholics and priests in the English missions continued to keep and smuggle in *agni dei* after 1570, and they remained popular well into the seventeenth century.

Much of the scholarship on the materiality of Catholic devotions in post-Reformation England has focused on the cult of relics and the circulation of texts.⁴ As Alexandra Walsham has observed, the use of blessed objects and devotional books presented an alternative means of accessing the sacred, an especially important alternative for Catholics in England who could not always directly acquire the benefits of the sacraments.⁵ Anne Dillon has made similar observations about the use of the rosary in English Catholicism and the formation of confraternities devoted to it in the seventeenth century.⁶ Ironically, the severe curtailments which the new treason laws placed on access to the sacraments, and to priests who could administer them, may have increased the community's demand for the very sacramentals the government also hoped to eradicate.

At the same time, from the mid-1570s seminary priests trained in the English colleges in Europe, and later members of the Society of Jesus,

³ Alexandra Walsham, 'Beads, Books, and Bare Ruined Choirs: Transmutations of Catholic Ritual Life in Protestant England,' in Ben Kaplan, Bob Moore, Henk Van Neerop, and Judith Pollmann, eds., *Catholic Communities in Protestant States: Britain and the Netherlands 1570-1720* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 105-10.

⁴ See for instance Nancy Pollard Brown, 'Paperchase: The Dissemination of Catholic Texts in Elizabethan England', in *English Manuscript Studies*, 1 (1989): 120-43; Earle Havens and Elizabeth Patton, 'Underground Networks, Prisons, and the Circulation of Counter-Reformation Books in Elizabethan England', in James Kelly and Susan Royal, eds., *Early Modern English Catholicism: Identity, Memory, and Counter-Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 165-88; Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). On relics see for instance Anne Myers, 'Father John Gerard's Object Lessons: Relics and Devotional Objects in the Autobiography of a Hunted Priest', in Ronald Corthell, Frances Dolan, Christopher Highley, and Arthur Marotti, eds., *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216-35; Robyn Malo, 'Intimate Devotion: Recusant Martyrs and the Making of Relics in Post-Reformation England', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 44, no. 3 (2014), 531-48. James Kelly, 'Creating an English Catholic Identity: Relics, Martyrs, and English Women Religious in Counter-Reformation Europe', in Kelly and Royal, *Early Modern English Catholicism*, 41-59.

⁵ Walsham, 'Beads, Books, and Bare Ruined Choirs', 105-6.

⁶ Anne Dillon, "'To Seek Out Comforts and Companions of His Own Kind and Condition": The Benedictine Rosary Confraternity and the Chapel of Cardigan House, London', in Lowell Gallagher, ed., *Redrawing the Map of Early Modern English Catholicism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 272-308.

began returning to England to minister to Catholics, facilitating the revitalisation of the faith. These priests played a vital role in the circulation and distribution of devotional objects as part of these processes. Recent scholarship on the missions to England has produced fruitful debates about how missionary priests negotiated the difficult political and spiritual dilemmas placed upon them by the Elizabethan and Stuart regimes, and how they assisted the laity in navigating these dilemmas.⁷ Yet their role in the circulation of prohibited devotional objects, and the political significance of participating in this circulation, has received less attention.⁸ For those who returned to, or newly embraced, the Catholic faith after 1570, sacred objects could act as material aids for devotional practices which may have been new to them, but the objects also became potent symbols of resistance to the government and the established Protestant English Church.⁹

This article will assess the *agnus dei* in Catholic devotion and politics in early modern England, considering its uses in pre- and post-Reformation devotion, its role in Catholic missions to England in the late sixteenth century, and the particular political significance it assumed during the reign of Elizabeth I. It will examine how the possession of an *agnus dei* acted not only as a tool of personal faith, but also as a symbol of defiance against the Elizabethan regime and an acknowledgement of the supremacy of papal authority.

The agnus dei in late medieval and early modern religious culture: uses and survival

The *agnus dei* was a popular devotional aid in pre-Reformation England and Europe, and had been in use from at least the eleventh century.¹⁰

⁷ See Thomas McCoog's three volumes on the Society of Jesus in the British Isles: *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland, and England 1541-1588: 'Our Way of Proceeding?'* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland, and England 1589-1597: Building the Faith of Saint Peter Upon the King of Spain's Monarchy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), and *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland, and England, 1598-1606: 'Lest Our Lamp Be Entirely Extinguished'* (Leiden: Brill, 2017). See also Gerard Kilroy, *Edmund Campion: A Scholarly Life* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), Victor Houlston, *Catholic Resistance in Elizabethan England: Robert Persons's Jesuit Polemic, 1580-1610* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), and James Kelly, ed., 'The English Jesuit Mission', special issue of the *Journal of Jesuit Studies* (Hereafter, *JJS*) 1, 4 (2014): 511-636.

⁸ See, however, Hannah Thomas, 'The Society of Jesus in Wales, c. 1600-1679: Rediscovering the Cwm Jesuit Library at Hereford Cathedral', *JJS* 1, 4 (2014): 572-88. An exhibition of the collections of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire, which took place in Liverpool in 2008, featured some materials from the English missions and post-Reformation period, but here too the focus was primarily on relics, texts, and the Mass. See Maurice Whitehead, ed., *Held in Trust: 2008 Years of Sacred Culture* (Stonyhurst: St Omers Press, 2008), 35-88 and 196-8.

⁹ Sylvia Evangelisti, 'Material Culture,' in Alexandra Bamji, Geert Janssen, and Mary Laven, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Counter Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 399-413.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, 'Lambs, Coral, Teeth, and the Intimate Intersection of Religion and Magic in Renaissance Tuscany,' in Sally Cornelison and Scott Montgomery,

The *agnus dei* belonged to a special class of sacred objects called sacramentals: blessed objects which could exercise an effect over their possessor analogous to that of receiving the sacraments. Robert Scribner has described the widespread popularity of sacramentals in medieval and post-Reformation Europe as a means of gaining regular access to the sacred in daily life.¹¹ Unlike the sacraments, which the institutional church typically administered and controlled, the laity could use sacramental objects as they saw fit.¹² The *agnus dei*, however, occupied a special place amongst the sacramentals as an object consecrated by the pope. Its creation and distribution were subject to regulations that other objects did not receive.

Agni dei were conventionally made in the pontifical apothecary and consecrated by the pope during Holy Week in a special ceremony witnessed and assisted by the cardinals.¹³ The ceremony was conducted in the first year of a pope's election and once every seven years thereafter during his pontificate. Crafted from the wax of paschal candles, chrism oil, and holy water, the *agni dei* were stamped with the image of the Lamb of God on one side and the image of a saint or the name and arms of the consecrating pope on the other. They could be worn as pendants or preserved as devotional objects. The *agnus dei* was believed to possess many protective powers, including defence from storms, pestilence, fires, and floods, as well as the dangers of childbirth.¹⁴

Once consecrated the papacy typically distributed *agni dei* as gifts to cardinals, ambassadors, and other important figures in Rome, as well as to rulers throughout Europe. Following the initial distribution of the sacramentals, recipients might bestow *agni dei* upon other friends and relatives, or even share them with a wider social circle or community; in theory, they could not be bought and sold.¹⁵ Because the wax medallions were fragile, it was also common to break an *agnus dei* into smaller pieces to be shared amongst the faithful, and carried in cases for protection.¹⁶ Consequently, relatively few examples of *agni dei* from before the Reformation have survived intact, but many of the

eds., *Images, Relics, and Devotional Practices in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Tempe: Arizona State University Press, 2005), 143-51.

¹¹ R.W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London: Hambledon, 1987), 39-47.

¹² Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, 5-7; 'The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the "Disenchantment of the World",' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23 (1993): 479-80. Eamon Duffy has highlighted how consecrated salt, wax, and water could be used by the laity as spiritual weapons against the distresses of life in pre-Reformation England. See Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 281-2.

¹³ Maya Corry, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven, eds., *Madonnas and Miracles: The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum, 2017), 124-5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, see also GJC Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 296.

¹⁵ Musacchio, 'Lambs, Coral, Teeth', 144-7.

¹⁶ Corry et al., *Madonnas and Miracles*, 85, 123-5.



Figure 2. *Agnus Dei* Case, Italy, 15th Century, 1.6 cm x 1.6 cm, British Museum, London, 1902,0527.26. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

cases that were used to protect them have. Figure 2 shows an Italian example of a case from the fifteenth century, which is now held at the British Museum.

In England few *agni dei* have survived from before the eighteenth century, partly due to the fragility of the materials with which they were made, and partly because of the legal restrictions placed upon them in the late sixteenth century. A sixteenth-century *agnus dei* which was discovered at Lyford Grange in 1959, where the Jesuit Edmund Campion was captured in 1581, is now kept at Campion Hall in Oxford. This *agnus dei*, shown in Figure 3, bears the arms of Pope Gregory XIII, the pontiff who blessed it, and is thought to have belonged to Campion himself.¹⁷

Stonyhurst College in Lancashire has several *agni dei* in its collections which were consecrated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (see Figures 4 and 5), along with one known to be from the seventeenth century. This particular *agnus dei* (see Figure 6) is from the collections of the English College formerly at St Omer, and is

¹⁷ Kilroy, *Edmund Campion*, 395; see also Corry et al., *Madonnas and Miracles*, 124.



Figure 3. Lyford Grange *Agnus Dei*, 17 cm x 13.7 cm. By Courtesy of the Master and Community of Campion Hall, Oxford.

enclosed in the back of a reliquary case. The front of the case contains a miniature figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus, which is thought to be carved from the wood of a tree that once stood in the college courtyard at St Omer.

The *agni dei* shown above vary considerably in size. The medieval Italian example is circular in shape and approximately 1.6 cm in diameter, while the nineteenth-century *agnus dei* is oblong and 7 cm in length.¹⁸ The Lyford Grange *agnus dei* is considerably larger, with a length of 17 cm (See Figure 4). The St. Omer *agnus dei*, on the other hand, is oblong and approximately 2.5 cm in length. It also shows signs of being altered to fit into the reliquary case amongst papers that list the names of English Jesuits.

Despite the inconsistent survival of *agni dei*, other surviving evidence points to the part they played in pre-Reformation devotional culture. Probate records, for instance, indicate the significance of the *agnus dei* as

¹⁸ London, British Museum 1902,0527.26, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=44619&partId=1 (accessed 7 October 2017).



Figure 4. *Agnus Dei* fragments, ca. 19th century. By permission of the Governors of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire.

a bequest to friends and family in England, especially for women.¹⁹ Constance Despenser received an *agnus dei* encased in gold from her husband upon his death in 1400.²⁰ Similarly, the will drawn up by Henry,

¹⁹ In parts of Europe where the Reformation met with less success, this practice remained common throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The *agnus dei* appears frequently, for instance, in sixteenth-century Italian inventories. See Corry et al., *Madonnas and Miracles*, 125.

²⁰ *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, Henry IV*, 4 vols (London: HM Stationery Office, 1903), 1: 224. Constance Despenser was the daughter of Edmund of Langley, first duke of York. Her husband, Thomas Depsenser, was executed for rebelling against Henry IV, but his possessions were distributed in accordance with his will. She was briefly imprisoned and her lands and goods were seized in 1405 for conspiring against the crown, but these were later restored to her. See Rosemary Horrox, 'Despenser, Constance, Lady Despenser (c.1375–1416)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/57622> (accessed 30 Sept 2017).



Figure 5.1. *Agnus Dei* consecrated by Pope Leo XIII, *recto*, 7 cm x 5 cm. By permission of the Governors of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire.



Figure 5.2. *Agnus Dei* consecrated by Pope Leo XIII, *verso*. Image of St Joseph and the Infant Jesus. By permission of the Governors of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire.



Figure 6.1. *Agnus Dei* enclosed in a reliquary, 17th century, 7.5 cm x 5 cm. Around the disc are the names of English Jesuits, including Edmund Campion, Robert Southwell, Henry Garnet, Henry Walpole, and John Gerard. By permission of the Governors of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire.

Lord Scrope in 1415 dictated that an *agnus dei* be left to his kinswoman, Mathilda Skidmore, after he died.²¹ In 1524 William Peerson, an alderman and draper of Lincoln, bequeathed an *agnus dei* and a pair of red coral beads to his daughter Elizabeth.²² The *agnus dei* was particularly prized for the protection it supposedly accorded to mothers and children, and it is likely these associations that made it a

²¹ Thomas Rymer, ed., *Foedera, Conventiones, Literae, et Cuiuscunque Acta Publica Inter Reges Angliae*, 17 vols (London: A. Churchill, 1709), 9: 277. Henry Scrope served as treasurer for Henry V, but was executed for treason in 1415 because of connections with a plot to overthrow the king. See Brigette Vale, 'Scrope, Henry, third Baron Scrope of Masham (c.1376–1415)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) available from: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/24959> (accessed 30 Sept 2017).

²² C. W. Foster, ed., *Lincoln Wills*, 2 vols (London: Lincoln Record Society, 1914 and 1918), 1:144.



Figure 6.2. Carving of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Infant Jesus enclosed in a reliquary, 17th Century. By permission of the Governors of Stonyhurst College, Lancashire.

conventional bequest for women.²³ The papacy frequently sent boxes of *agni dei* as gifts to queens regnant and consort who were expecting or had just delivered children.²⁴

Priests and religious houses also kept *agni dei* for personal and communal use. An inventory of the possessions of Roger Kirkby, the vicar of Gainsford in County Durham from 1401 to 1412, included an *agnus dei* and a pair of blessed beads.²⁵ William Thornburgh, priest and

²³ Musacchio, 'Lambs, Coral, Teeth', 144-8.

²⁴ See for instance Kew, *The National Archives, State Papers* (Hereafter, TNA SP) 69/8 f. 154; JM Rigg, ed., *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs Preserved Principally at Rome in the Vatican Archives and Library*, 2 vols (London: HM Stationery Office, 1916), 1: 197.

²⁵ James Raine, William Greenwell, and John Hodgson, eds., *Wills and Inventories Illustrative of the History, Manners, Language, and Statistics of the Northern Counties of England*, 4 vols (London: Nichols and Son, 1835), 1: 56.

master of the College of St Mary-On-The-Sea, provided an *agnus dei* for the college chapel in his will in 1525, which was hung around the neck of a statue of the Blessed Virgin along with ‘certain relics’.²⁶ The abbey of Holme Cultram also kept an *agnus dei* pendant to assist women in childbirth before its dissolution in 1536.²⁷ The *agnus dei* was therefore a precious devotional object in pre-Reformation England, shared amongst family members and neighbours to ward off the many dangers posed by everyday life in this period. Its expansive protective powers made it an appealing gift for women, children, and men at multiple levels of society.²⁸

The agnus dei in post-Reformation England

In the aftermath of the Reformation and Henry VIII’s break with Rome, sacred objects such as relics and sacramentals were frowned upon by evangelical reformers in the new ecclesiastical establishment. Alexandra Walsham has examined how polemical attacks on Catholic devotional objects dismissed them as ‘trash’ and ‘trumpery’ in post-Reformation England, and suggested that this language has overshadowed the study of the material culture of Catholicism in early modern Britain.²⁹ Although evangelical reformers attacked the sacred materials of Catholicism as idolatrous, and many of these items were destroyed in the iconoclastic movements of the 1530s and 1540s, they were never formally outlawed by any act of parliament under either Henry VIII or Edward VI. Consequently, we still see traces of the sacramentals being used and passed between family members in this period. Roger Bellingham’s will, proved at York in 1541, for instance, left instructions for an *agnus dei* and a ring to be left to his daughter, Elizabeth Fitzthomas.³⁰ After the restoration of Catholicism under Mary I and the reparation of relations with Rome, sacramentals were again encouraged as devotional aids. In 1556 Sir Edward Carne, one of the English ambassadors in Rome, sent a box of *agni dei* to Queen Mary from Pope Paul IV, along with a small Italian book describing the ceremonies used in their production.³¹ However, with the accession of Elizabeth I and the settlement of religion in 1559, which re-established an official, Protestant English Church, sacramentals and other Catholic devotional objects once again became targets of

²⁶ L.F. Salzman, ed., *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely*, 10 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948-2002), 2: 312-14.

²⁷ TNA SP 1/102 f. 84-8.

²⁸ Corry et al., *Madonnas and Miracles*, 85, 123-5.

²⁹ Alexandra Walsham, ‘The Pope’s Merchandise and the Jesuits’ Trumpery: Catholic Relics and Protestant Polemic in Post-Reformation England’, in Jennifer Spinks and Dagmar Eichberger, eds., *Religion, the Supernatural, and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe: An Album Amicorum for Charles Zika* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 370-409.

³⁰ Francis Collins, ed., *Wills and Administrations from the Knaresborough Court Rolls*, 2 vols (Durham: Andrews and Co., 1902), 1: 81.

³¹ TNA SP 69/8 f. 164.

suspicion and ridicule, as the new, reformed establishment set about dismantling the Catholicism restored under Mary I.

The latest alteration of official worship brought with it the fresh destruction of altars, relics, vestments, plate, and other precious materials that had been replaced during Mary's reign.³² Years of religious rupture had also taken their toll: the remains of sacred sites and shrines destroyed in the 1530s and 1540s were left to decay by the new Protestant regime, which cut ties with the papacy. In this environment, as access to the Mass, sacraments, and holy sites became increasingly limited, English Catholics found different ways of maintaining spiritual connections with the Roman Church.³³ Anything that helped to uphold a physical or material link with the Church in Rome, such as a relic from the city's catacombs, or a sacramental blessed by the pope like the *agnus dei*, became critical to the preservation of the faith.³⁴ While portable devotional objects like relics and sacramentals were especially important to the repressive conditions in which English Catholics worshipped, they were highly prized throughout early modern Europe, serving as expressions of a community's connection to Rome and the early Christian Church.³⁵

Despite the change in established religion, parliament did not outlaw the importation and use of *agni dei* until 1571. The ban on *agni dei* was added to legislation that effectively equated several practices of Roman Catholicism, including the use of papal bulls, indulgences, and other consecrated materials, with treason. The expansion of treasonable offences to include the importation and use of hallowed objects was a direct response to the excommunication of Elizabeth I by Pope Pius V in 1570, and to the religious tensions which had precipitated the censure. The excommunication, pronounced in the bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, also declared that Elizabeth was deprived of the right to rule her kingdom, and that anyone who continued to obey her laws (civil or religious) or show her allegiance would likewise be excommunicated.³⁶ The pope

³² Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 565-93.

³³ See for instance Peter Davidson, 'Recusant Catholic Spaces in Early Modern England', in Corthell et al., *Catholic Culture in Early Modern England*, 19-51; Eamon Duffy, 'Praying the Counter-Reformation', in Kelly and Royal, *Early Modern English Catholicism*, 206-25; Lisa McClain, *Lest We Be Damned: Practical Innovation and Lived Experience Among Catholics in Protestant England, 1559-1642* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

³⁴ Alexandra Walsham, 'Skeletons in the Cupboard: Relics After the English Reformation', *Past & Present* 206, no. 5 (2010), 121-43; Kelly, 'Relics, Martyrs, and English Women Religious', 41-59; see also Walsham, 'Beads, Books, and Bare-Ruined Choirs', 103-22.

³⁵ Simon Ditchfield, 'Martyrs on the Move: Relics as Vindicators of Local Diversity in the Tridentine Church', in Diana Wood, ed., *Martyrs and Martyrologies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 283-94.

³⁶ An English translation of the bull is available in Ginevra Crosignani, Thomas McCoog, and Michael Questier, eds., *Recusancy and Conformity in Early Modern England: Manuscript and Printed Sources in Translation* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2010), 86-9. The language of the bull issued by Pius V does not specify that the queen's subjects could continue to obey her in civil matters. In translation, it states 'And we command and forbid all and sundry among the lords, subjects, peoples, and others aforesaid that they have not to obey her or her admonitions, orders, or laws. We shall bind those who do the contrary

published the excommunication in response to the Northern Rebellion of 1569, which had been led by the earls of Northumberland and Westmoreland. Surviving records indicate that over six thousand people joined the rebellion, and prominent amongst the rebels' grievances was discontent with the ways in which the Protestant religious settlement was being enforced in the northern counties. During the rebellion, the Mass was openly celebrated in Durham and married clerics were forcibly ejected from their livings in Yorkshire.³⁷ The papal excommunication of Elizabeth, issued in the wake of this resistance, provoked substantial concerns in the queen's government. For the queen and her ministers, the excommunication called into question the loyalties of everyone in England who considered themselves Catholic, because the papacy now expected them to resist the queen if they wished to avoid excommunication themselves.³⁸ The legislation passed by parliament in response to the papal censure of Elizabeth further complicated the situation of English Catholics. Those who defied the new laws risked prosecution for treason, while those who ignored the pope's demands risked the spiritual dangers of excommunication.

In post-Reformation England, the *agnus dei* therefore acquired new political connotations following the papal excommunication of Elizabeth I and the passage of laws that banned many sacred Catholic devotional materials in 1571. The acknowledgment of papal supremacy implicit in the possession of an *agnus dei* was one of the principal reasons it was outlawed as a treasonous object. As a sacramental that derived its powers directly from the pope, the *agnus dei* implicitly signified its owner's belief in the papacy's spiritual and temporal supremacy. In theory, Catholics who had not reconciled themselves to the Roman Church and acknowledged this supremacy could not benefit from sacramentals like the *agnus dei*.

As Lucy Underwood has noted, reconciliation had multiple meanings in English Catholicism. It could signify the bringing in of baptised persons, or the return of those who had formerly fallen into heresy, into membership of the Roman Catholic Church. Reconciliation could also refer to the absolution of one's sins as part of the sacrament of penance. As such, reconciliation was closely connected with processes of conversion to the Catholic faith, which involved receiving absolution from the sins of heresy.³⁹ Conversion could also occur internally within

with a similar sentence of excommunication'. For more on the implications of this language see Aislinn Muller, 'Queen Elizabeth's Excommunication and its Afterlife, ca. 1570-1603' (PhD Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2016), 15-26.

³⁷ Krista Kesselring, *The Northern Rebellion of 1569: Faith, Politics, and Protest in Elizabethan England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 45-90.

³⁸ Peter Marshall, *Reformation England, 1480-1642* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 193.

³⁹ See Lucy Underwood, 'Persuading the Queen's Majesty's Subjects from Their Allegiance: Treason, Reconciliation and Confessional Identity in Elizabethan England', *Historical Research* 89, 244 (2016): 246-67.

the Catholic faith, when an individual achieved a more perfect spiritual state.⁴⁰ In the English context, if one wished to reap the spiritual benefits of an *agnus dei*, this meant that the its possessor needed to have completely embraced the Roman Catholic faith and the beliefs in papal supremacy that came with it. The possession of such a sacramental could therefore also indicate that its owner may have undergone reconciliation in some form.

Reconciliation and conversion were central to the missions of Catholic priests who were sent into England to sustain the faith, and the circulation and distribution of sacramentals like the *agnus dei* became connected with these processes. Seminary priests smuggled these objects into England from the beginning of the mission in 1574, and the Jesuits began bringing sacramentals with them from the mid-1580s, distributing them to reconciled Catholics and to others they hoped to convert. Fearing the effects of the missions on the allegiances of English Catholics, in 1581 parliament added reconciliation by a priest to the list of treasonable offences, further entangling the practices of Catholicism with questions of fealty to the crown and kingdom.⁴¹ In order to enforce this new law for the purposes of identifying and, subsequently, prosecuting Catholics, Elizabethan authorities increasingly pointed to the possession of blessed objects such as rosaries and *agni dei* as evidence of someone's reconciliation.⁴² As precious a spiritual object as the *agnus dei* may have been, it could be equally as dangerous because of what it implied about its owner's beliefs concerning the queen's legitimacy as a ruler. From the Elizabethan government's perspective, the possession of sacred objects like the *agnus dei* signalled not only a change of religion, but also a change in loyalty and an inclination to resist the crown, all rooted in the implications of the papal excommunication of Elizabeth I.⁴³

Notes and observations of the *agnus dei* proliferate in English official records after 1570. It is difficult to tell if this reflects a renewed interest in the sacramentals amongst English Catholics, and an increase in attempts to circulate them, or if this phenomenon simply reflects an increase in attention paid to them because of the new laws that banned them. While the *agnus dei* functioned as a devotional and protective aid, it was not essential to the practice of Roman

⁴⁰ Lucy Underwood, *Childhood, Youth, and Religious Dissent in Post-Reformation England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), chapter 2.

⁴¹ *Statutes of the Realm*, 4 vols (London: HM Stationery Office, 1819), 4.1: 657-58.

⁴² See for instance TNA SP 12/238 f. 188b, a government memorandum entitled 'A Certain and infallible rule to know a reconciled papist', ca. 1591: 'Whosoever refuseth to go to church, wearth crucifixes and Agnus dei or grana benedicta is a reconciled papist for he is not admitted to have any of these until he be so reconciled'.

⁴³ Edmund Campion argued that this association was legally unsound during his trial in 1581, asserting that the reconciliation facilitated by priests was 'only due to god', and not to the pope. See Kilroy, *Edmund Campion*, 307-8.

Catholicism in the way that the Mass and the sacraments were.⁴⁴ Despite this and the statute prohibiting them, *agni dei* remained popular with English Catholics throughout the rest of Elizabeth's reign. Seeing the continued demand for the sacramentals, missionary priests smuggled them into England and distributed them to the families they visited, despite the increased dangers of their being recognised and captured by the Elizabethan authorities. This raises questions about the degrees to which Catholics were willing to defy the queen's government after 1570, and whether the missionaries played any role in persuading Catholics into more politically charged expressions of dissent. Where it is possible to trace those who kept and distributed *agni dei* in England, these practices may also illuminate processes of reconciliation and conversion at work within Catholic communities. It may be possible to discern whether these individuals would have been receptive to papal calls for resistance to the queen, and the ways in which English Catholics interpreted these demands for resistance.

The agnus dei in Catholic missions after 1571

The laws against the importation and use of *agni dei* were strictly enforced for the rest of Elizabeth's reign, and her ministers kept watch over those who circulated them along with other sacramentals. In 1572 government agents intercepted a letter written by Thomas Bailey, an English exile living in Louvain, in which he expressed a desire to send to his friend John Swinburn in England a number of books, beads, and *agni dei*. Bailey feared that Swinburn would not be allowed to keep them and that they would fall into the wrong hands.⁴⁵ In July of the same year Henry, Lord Hunsdon wrote to William Cecil, Lord Burghley from Berwick to report that he had arrested William Carr, a priest who served the exiled countess of Northumberland, trying to make his way into England from Scotland with 'a number of letters, beads, agnus deis, friars girdles for women in labour and such other' items.⁴⁶ Although no statement of Carr's intentions appeared in the report, it is likely that he intended to distribute the items amongst the English Catholics that he met during his travels. Many of the people caught smuggling and distributing the *agni dei* in England were in fact

⁴⁴ Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist*, 296; see also Scribner, 'The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the "Disenchantment of the World"', 479-80.

⁴⁵ TNA SP 15/21 f. 24.

⁴⁶ TNA SP 15/21 f. 133. Anne Percy, the countess of Northumberland, and her husband Thomas Percy fled to Scotland in 1569 after helping to lead the Northern Rebellion. Thomas Percy was later imprisoned by the Scottish and sent back to England to be tried and executed for treason in 1572. Anne Percy escaped to the Low Countries and spent the rest of her life in exile. See Jade Scott, 'Percy, Anne, countess of Northumberland (1536-1591)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/107539> (accessed 6 October 2017).

seminary priests, and the practice of carrying the sacramentals for distribution in England appears to have escalated from the late 1570s. The bishop of London arrested a priest named Jonas Meredith in March 1577 after finding him with ‘divers Agnus dei’ and beads. Meredith had already distributed several of these items in the city and in Lancashire, where he had previously ministered.⁴⁷ Cuthbert Mayne, who converted to Catholicism after Elizabeth I’s excommunication and trained for the priesthood at the English College in Douai, was carrying at least one when he was arrested in Cornwall in August 1577. At his trial Mayne was accused of giving an *agnus dei* to his patron, Francis Tregian, and another to a group of eleven people in 1576.⁴⁸ Thomas Wiles, another priest in London, was convicted of *praemunire* for having an *agnus dei* in March 1578.⁴⁹ Similarly, two priests named Henry Clark and Nicholas Bawdyn were arrested in Plymouth in Devon at the end of the year with ‘an Agnus Dei, popish books, and other papistical relics, with certain letters’ which they had intended to distribute in England.⁵⁰

The increased efforts to smuggle *agni dei* into England coincide approximately with the first year of Gregory XIII’s pontificate (1572), when the Vatican would have produced and consecrated *agni dei* according to the convention for new popes, and with the beginning of efforts to send seminary priests into England to minister to Catholics. Cases in the casuistry manuals for priests point to their importance in distributing the wax pendants. The manual written by William Allen and Robert Persons encouraged priests to bring *agni dei* and other blessed objects into England because ‘pious things were not to be neglected because of danger’.⁵¹ While they instructed the priests only to give *agni dei* to those who wanted them, Allen and Persons also suggested that such objects could be given to those in schism with the church, as long as there was no danger that they would abuse them.⁵² This points to the potential of the *agnus dei* as a tool of evangelisation, by which priests could encourage people to embrace or return to the Catholic faith. The use of sacred materials in this manner was common in other parts of early modern Europe. Howard Louthan’s work on the re-Catholicisation of Bohemia after

⁴⁷ London, British Library (Hereafter, BL), Lansdowne MS 25/30 f. 63.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, TNA Acts of the Privy Council (Hereafter, PC) PC 2/11 f. 225. Mayne attended St John’s College, Oxford with Edmund Campion and Gregory Martin, and was persuaded by them to convert to Catholicism. See Raymond Francis Trudgian, ‘Mayne, Cuthbert [St Cuthbert Mayne] (bap. 1544, d. 1577)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18440> (accessed 1 Oct 2017); Anne Dillon, *The Construction of Martyrdom in the English Catholic Community* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 1-17.

⁴⁹ TNA PC 2/12 f. 141.

⁵⁰ TNA PC 2/12 f. 341.

⁵¹ Peter Holmes, *Elizabethan Casuistry* (London: Catholic Record Society, 1981), 66-7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 91-2.

the Thirty Years' War illustrates how ecclesiastical authorities and missionaries employed a range of measures to encourage people to return to the faith, including public rituals, works of art, and the encouragement of the cult of saints through the translation of relics.⁵³ Similarly, Trevor Johnson's assessment of the religious transformation of the Upper Palatinate in the same period demonstrates the significance of a sacred economy of images, sacraments, and sacramental objects to the success of Catholic reforms in the region.⁵⁴

While seminary priests working in England were encouraged to bring sacred objects like the *agnus dei* to those to whom they ministered, Jesuits received mixed advice on the use of sacred objects in their mission to England after the enterprise was approved in 1580. The instructions given to Edmund Campion and Robert Persons, the first Jesuits in the mission, by the general of their Society in 1580 forbade them from bringing any devotional articles which had been proscribed under the treason laws, including *agni dei* and blessed grains of incense, and instructed the Jesuits not to carry or wear them for personal use.⁵⁵ This injunction may have stemmed from another order given by the Jesuit General in his instructions to Campion and Persons, that members of the Society should refrain from involvement in affairs of state.⁵⁶ However, given that the anti-Catholic treason laws in England made the mission a dangerous undertaking to begin with, the Jesuit ban on carrying outlawed sacred objects may also have been imposed as an extra safeguard in the event of their capture. The papal faculties for the Jesuit mission to England, compiled separately from those of the Jesuit General, gave no explicit instructions to the Jesuits concerning the dissemination of sacred objects.⁵⁷

The popularity of such items amongst lay Catholics in England, however, was so great that the Jesuit General subsequently relaxed the proscription on their use and circulation by members of the Society working in England. From the late 1580s, both Jesuit and seminary priests played an active role in the distribution of sacred objects to Catholic communities. At the end of 1586, the Jesuit Robert Southwell wrote to Robert Persons, who had left England in 1581 after Edmund Campion's capture and execution by the Elizabethan authorities,

⁵³ Howard Louthan, *Converting Bohemia: Force and Persuasion in the Catholic Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chapter 6.

⁵⁴ Trevor Johnson, *Magistrates, Madonnas, and Miracles: The Counter-Reformation in the Upper Palatinate* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), chapter 8.

⁵⁵ McCoog, *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland, and England, 1541-1588*, 133-40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁵⁷ I am grateful to Victor Houliston for allowing me to read his annotated transcript of the faculties for Campion and Persons, which appears in his new volume of Robert Persons's correspondence. Victor Houliston, Ginevra Crosignani, and Thomas McCoog, eds., *The Correspondence and Unpublished Papers of Robert Persons, SJ (1546-1610)*, vol. 1 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2017), 62-8.

requesting faculties to bless 2,000 rosaries and 6,000 grains of incense to address the demands of the laity for hallowed devotional aids.⁵⁸ In 1592 a priest named Andrew Clark and two other English recusants visited the houses of John Mosman, Thomas Levinson, and Henry Kerr near the border between England and Scotland, bringing *agni dei* with them as gifts.⁵⁹ In 1597 several captains apprehended a Jesuit in Berwick carrying crucifixes, beads, toy bulls, and *agni dei* which he had intended to distribute amongst the laity. The same priest had received faculties to dispense absolution to anyone who reconciled themselves to the Roman Church.⁶⁰ The *agnus dei* also continued to be prized for its protective powers. During the Jesuit John Gerard's mission to England in the 1590s, he gave an *agnus dei* embedded with a fragment of the true cross to Richard Burke, the baron of Dunkellin, when the young man begged him to hear his confessions before fighting a duel, saying to Burke 'you may hope that perhaps for its sake God will protect you from danger and give you time to repent'.⁶¹ Recalling the duel in his memoirs, Gerard noted that 'it so happened that God allowed his opponent to make a lunge at his heart; he pierced his [Burke's] shirt but did not touch the skin'.⁶²

The *agnus dei* and its distribution were therefore closely associated with missionary priests.⁶³ Attempts to smuggle the *agnus dei* and other devotional objects into England and Ireland persisted to the end of Elizabeth's reign, and continued to serve as links between missionary priests and Catholic laity. The efforts of priests to bring *agni dei* to the laity suggest that they encouraged resistance of a kind that enabled Catholics to comply, at least in part, with papal demands that they disobey Elizabeth. The involvement of Jesuit and seminary priests in distributing *agni dei* also sheds light on an aspect of the English mission and its relationship to material culture that merits further consideration.⁶⁴ Trevor Johnson has described the importance of sacramentals in attracting crowds to Jesuit missions in the Upper Palatinate.⁶⁵ Similarly, Liz Tingle has observed the popularity of portable,

⁵⁸ John Pollen, *Unpublished Documents Relating to the English Martyrs* (London: Catholic Record Society, 1908), 319.

⁵⁹ TNA SP 52/48 f. 70.

⁶⁰ *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Honourable Marquis of Salisbury, Preserved at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire*, 19 vols (London: HM Stationery Office, 1899), 7: 484.

⁶¹ John Gerard, *The Autobiography of an Elizabethan*, translated by Philip Caraman (London: Longmans, 1956), 177-8.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ See Figure 6, which is also suggestive of these connections.

⁶⁴ Thomas McCoog's two studies of the Society of Jesus in the British Isles, for instance, do not consider in detail the role of sacramentals in the missions. See McCoog, *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland, and England, 1541-1588* and *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland, and England, 1589-1597*.

⁶⁵ Trevor Johnson, 'Blood, Tears, and Xavier Water: Missionaries and Popular Religion in the Eighteenth-Century Upper Palatinate', in Robert Scribner and Trevor Johnson, eds., *Popular Religion in Germany and Central Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 183-202.

indulged objects such as medals, beads, and rosaries in Counter-Reformation France, especially those objects blessed by the pope.⁶⁶

In the English context, Alexandra Walsham has highlighted the significance of sacramentals to Catholic communities because of the indulgences often associated with them, especially in the absence of priests who could grant absolution of sins and facilitate reconciliation.⁶⁷ Indeed, the exiled English priest Gregory Martin wrote that one of the great attractions of visiting Rome was the prospect of acquiring papal-blessed sacramentals, which had also touched relics in the city and had pardons attached to them.⁶⁸ As a sacramental that carried a papal blessing and which was also popular for its healing and protective abilities, priests may have hoped that the *agnus dei* would draw greater numbers to the English mission, facilitating both reconciliation (in its multiple senses) and conversion.⁶⁹ The *agnus dei*'s protective powers, especially over mothers and children, would have made it an appealing gift, and one that might have helped to establish goodwill between the priests and the Catholics to whom they hoped to minister.⁷⁰ It could also, however, act as a mediator of benediction where access to the sacraments was scarce.

The *agni dei* that Jesuit and seminary priests distributed amongst English Catholics did not always remain with their original recipients. Cuthbert Mayne's distribution of the sacramentals shows how they could be passed amongst groups of people, and it was common for *agni dei* to be shared amongst family members. It is telling that many of the *agni dei* mentioned above and in the following section were circulated in the midlands, the northern counties, and the southwest of England, parts of the country that had strong recusant networks.⁷¹ Members of Catholic networks who received the sacramentals from missionary priests would also have been able

⁶⁶ Liz Tingle, *Indulgences After Luther: Pardons in Counter-Reformation France, 1520-1720* (London: Routledge, 2015), chapter 4.

⁶⁷ Alexandra Walsham, 'Miracles and the Counter-Reformation Mission to England', *Historical Journal* 46 (2003): 798.

⁶⁸ Gregory Martin, *Roma Sancta*, edited by George Parks (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1969), 236-8. Martin also studied with Edmund Campion at the English College in Douai. Campion tried to persuade Martin to join the Society of Jesus when he arrived in Rome for the establishment of the new English College there in 1576, but he returned to France at William Allen's request, possibly to begin work on the translation of the New Testament. See Thomas McCoog, 'Martin, Gregory (1542?-1582)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18183> (accessed 1 Oct 2017).

⁶⁹ Underwood, *Childhood, Youth, and Religious Dissent*, chapter 2.

⁷⁰ Laurence Lux-Sterritt has discussed some of these concepts with respect to the relationships between English Catholic laywomen and the missions. See Lux-Sterritt, "'Virgo Becomes Virago': Women in the Accounts of Seventeenth-Century English Catholic Missionaries", *Recusant History* 30 (2011): 537-53.

⁷¹ The accounts discussed in this article show the circulation of the *agnus dei* in Cornwall, Devon, Hampshire, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, Yorkshire, Lancashire, and Northumbria.

to assist in reconciling other members of their social circles. Distributing the *agnus dei* to a few members of English Catholic communities, who could then carry on circulating them, would have been a safer and more efficient method of dispersal for the missionaries, who would have increased risk of exposure by approaching recipients on an individual basis.

For Jesuits, this practice also accorded with the instructions of their superiors regarding how they should facilitate the reconciliation and conversion of others. Jesuits were directed to deal only with those who were already reconciled to the Church, and to encourage reconciled lay Catholics to take the leading role in persuading schismatic family members and neighbours to join the faith. When such schismatics were ‘ready to hear the truth’, then Jesuit priests could begin to give them more instruction.⁷² As we have seen, the casuist manuals allowed for the distribution of sacramentals like the *agnus dei* to schismatics and heretics, in the hope that the powers of these objects would move them to seek reconciliation and conversion. The sharing of sacramentals amongst the laity would have helped to achieve these ends. This method also engaged a greater number of English Catholics in an evangelising process that constituted an act of resistance and disobedience to the queen’s laws.⁷³ Circulation of the *agnus dei* in England was not simply part of the reconciliation process and renewed recognition of papal supremacy, the act of circulation itself served as resistance to the queen and a sign of obedience to the pope.

Confessional politics and the reception of the agnus dei, ca. 1570-1642

Surviving evidence indicates that the efforts of priests to distribute *agni dei* were well received and they became a potent symbol of confessional difference during the remainder of Elizabeth’s reign. In July 1577 Nicholas Sander received word of a ‘great miracle’ that transpired at a trial in Oxford, when a number of judges, jurors, and attendees at the court were suddenly struck with a mysterious illness during prosecutions of recusants for the veneration of crucifixes and *agni dei*. According to the report this illness, which Sander believed to

⁷² Houlston, Crosignani, and McCoog, eds., *Correspondence and Unpublished Papers of Robert Persons*, 1, 59: ‘Then, in the case of Catholics, let it be with the reconciled rather than with schismatics; with heretics they should have no direct dealings; but they will urge the Catholics each and all to strive for the conversion of the members of his family ... and when those ... are ready to hear the truth with equanimity, then will our Fathers themselves be able, with due regard for safety ... to confirm their purpose and give them fuller instruction’.

⁷³ See Molly Murray, ‘“Now I am a Catholique”: William Alabaster and the Early Modern Catholic Conversion Narrative’, in Corthell et al., *Catholic Culture*, 189-215, for similar stories of reconciliation and conversion; see also Rosamund Oates, ‘“For the lacke of true history”: Polemic, Conversion and Church History in Elizabethan England’, in Nadine Lewycky and Adam Morton, eds., *Getting Along? Religious Identities and Confessional Relations in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 133-52.

be sent by God, killed three hundred people, many of them puritans.⁷⁴ Such narratives highlight the importance of the spiritual disposition of those who handled the *agnus dei* and sacramentals more generally, but they also acted as a warning to those who threatened them with persecution.

In some cases *agni dei* were used in bold displays of resistance. The Middlesex session rolls for 1578 recorded the indictments of Eleanor Brome and Elizabeth Barram for wearing *agni dei* 'brought into this realm from the See of Rome'. Brome had received hers as a gift from her mother, but the source of Barram's *agnus dei* is unknown.⁷⁵ Interestingly, both of these women had been caught wearing the *agnus dei* in public. Their actions were a remarkably daring statement of their dissent from the established church and government, considering the punishments Brome and Barram faced when caught. Anne Dillon has noted that confraternities of the rosary operated in London with relative openness in the mid-seventeenth century and even held regular processions, albeit in private homes.⁷⁶ The public display of a sacramental known to be blessed by the pope, however, would have been incredibly risky in light of the tensions between Elizabeth I and the papacy throughout her reign.

The *agnus dei* could also be a mark of those who had been in contact with missionary priests. In 1581 an agent of Francis Walsingham reported a conversation with a man who 'had certain jewels of Edmund Campions' and 'conveyed over in to this Realm of late one Chapman a priest and landed him at Stokes Bay by Portsmouth'. This unidentified smuggler had also brought back 'three Agnus deis at his last being over, one for his wife, another for his mother, and the last for his sister'.⁷⁷ Here again the links between the *agnus dei* and the missionary priests may be observed, though it is unclear whether the smuggler obtained his *agni dei* independently or as a gesture of thanks from the priests he smuggled into England. A search of the Lady

⁷⁴ Martin Hume, ed., *Calendar of Letters and State Papers Relating to English Affairs, Preserved Principally in the Archives of Simancas*, 4 vols (London: HM Stationery Office, 1894), 2: 541-2. Accounts of the 'Black Assizes' of 1577, described here by Sander, appear in several sources. See for instance Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Ireland, and Scotland* (London: Henry Denham, 1587), 1270. For a summary of Protestant and Catholic accounts of the Black Assizes see Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 234-6.

⁷⁵ John Cordy Jeaffreson, ed. *Middlesex County Records, 1550-1603*, 4 vols (London: Middlesex County Record Society, 1886), 1: 111-16. Eleanor Brome (née Windsor) was married to Sir Christopher Brome, from the prominent recusant family based at Holton Hall in Oxfordshire. In the court record Eleanor Brome's mother, Catherine Brome (née Windsor), is referred to as Lady Paulet, which was the surname of her first husband. Elizabeth Barram was a servant in the Brome household. See John Fox, 'The Bromes of Holton Hall: A Forgotten Recusant Family', *Oxoniensa* 68 (2003): 70-4.

⁷⁶ Dillon, 'The Benedictine Rosary Confraternity', 272-308.

⁷⁷ TNA SP 12/151 f. 7. The agent in question is Maliverney Catlyn. See John Cooper, *The Queen's Agent: Francis Walsingham at the Court of Elizabeth I* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 180-2.

West's house near Winchester in Hampshire in December 1583 revealed a number of contraband devotional objects, including

wrapped in green silk two Agnus dei enclosed in satin broken in many pieces, yet one of them so joined together as the superscription is easy to be read. On the one side is written, *Ecce agnus dei qui tollit peccata mundi* with the printing of the Lamb, on the other side not altogether so plain seems to be written *Pius V papa pont: maximus*. And these great letters imprinted in the midst I.H.S.⁷⁸

The search was ordered by the bishop and mayor of Winchester when they received reports that a group of lay Catholics and priests was meeting to hear the Mass in the city.⁷⁹

It is more difficult to determine the extent to which English Catholics perceived the *agni dei* as political links to Rome, and whether they believed that the possession of an *agnus dei* constituted an act of resistance that signalled obedience to the papacy. It is certainly telling that many English Catholics chose to keep an *agnus dei* despite the harsh penalties they faced if caught. Perhaps some believed that the amulets would protect them from any harm the Elizabethan authorities tried to inflict: when John Somerville rode to London in 1583 intent on assassinating the queen, he wore an *agnus dei* about his neck 'to defend him from the danger that might ensue unto him upon the attempt'.⁸⁰ Details of the earl of Arundel's arrest in 1585 illustrate the *agnus dei's* potential political connections: at the time the earl was wearing an *agnus dei*, with a letter from the pope that declared him duke of Norfolk enclosed in its case.⁸¹ Mary Queen of Scots also seems to have been the recipient of quite a few *agni dei* in the 1580s. Her custodian, Sir Amias Paulet, was greatly disgruntled when Mary was allowed to receive 'a box full of abominable trash, as beads of all sorts, pictures in silk of all sorts, with some Agnus Dei' during her imprisonment at Chartley Hall in Staffordshire in April 1586, and Paulet found a number of *agni dei* concealed in a casket with pieces of silver in the chamber of her secretary, Claude Nau, during a search of his quarters in September.⁸² It is unclear whether Mary ever distributed *agni dei* as a token of her patronage, or whether people used them to mark their allegiance to her, but it is possible given the tradition within the wider Catholic community of passing *agni dei* amongst friends and relatives.

An incident that occurred later in 1586 indicates that Catholics were fully aware of the discs' political connotations even if they did not

⁷⁸ TNA SP 12/164 f. 24.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ TNA SP 12/163 f. 141.

⁸¹ TNA SP 94/2 f. 71.

⁸² TNA SP 53/17 f. 46, SP 53/19 f. 102. On Mary's political schemes and Nau's involvement see Stephen Alford, *The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), chapter 16.

necessarily embrace all of them. When the house of George, Bridget, and Elizabeth Brome in Oxfordshire was searched in August, officials found an *agnus dei* and a pair of blessed beads amongst the belongings of the sisters, which also included several crucifixes and a box of ‘massing cakes’.⁸³ Elizabeth Brome had actually tried to smuggle the *agnus dei* and the beads out of the house before officials found them, but the woman she engaged to carry them away was apprehended and searched at the gates.⁸⁴ The *agnus dei* was one of many incriminating items in the house: several Catholic devotional texts were found in the library and the sisters’ chambers, including a copy of Edmund Campion’s *Rationes Decem* and a catechism in English by Lawrence Vaux. The fact that the family tried to hide the *agnus dei* and beads is a testament both to their precious spiritual value and their highly dangerous political associations.

The potential for links between the possession of an *agnus dei* and a commitment to resisting Elizabeth and her government are also apparent in Ireland during this period. The *agnus dei* appears to have attracted comparable interest in Ireland, particularly with the rekindling of the Desmond Rebellion in the late 1570s. Led by James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald, the rebels made Elizabeth’s excommunication central to the justification of their resistance to English rule, declaring that they would be the ‘first and chief instruments’ in the enterprise to deprive Elizabeth of her kingdom.⁸⁵ In his recent biography of Edmund Campion, Gerard Kilroy has discussed how Elizabeth’s government worried that the religious zeal of the Irish rebels might inspire Catholics to instigate open rebellion in England, and how these concerns shaped the crown’s military response to the rising.⁸⁶ In February 1581, the Privy Council ordered the arrest of several Irish students in London in connection with the Desmond Rebellion, upon who were found several *agni dei*.⁸⁷ Surviving evidence indicates that some of the rebels wore *agni dei* to protect themselves in battle. In 1582, for instance, William Wendover reported that John Fitzgerald, kinsman and fellow rebel to James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald, went into combat without any armour, believing that the *agnus dei* he wore about his neck would protect him.⁸⁸ The English government certainly worried about the symbolic power of the *agnus dei* for the resistance in Ireland. Francis Tucker wrote to Lord Burghley in 1583 to warn him that the Irish bishop of

⁸³ BL Lansdowne MS 50/76 f. 164. Bridget, Elizabeth, and George Brome were the children of Eleanor and Christopher Brome, mentioned above. See Fox, ‘The Bromes of Holton Hall’, 70-4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ London, Lambeth Palace Library, Carew MS 607 f. 35.

⁸⁶ Kilroy, *Edmund Campion*, 145-6, 179-84.

⁸⁷ Hume, *Calendar of Letters and State Papers in the Archives of Simancas*, 3: 85-6.

⁸⁸ TNA SP 63/88 f. 32.

Ross had brought pardons and *agni dei* back to Ireland after his visit to Gregory XIII in April. They were intended as gifts for those who remained loyal to the pope.⁸⁹

The *agnus dei* also continued to act as a mark of reconciliation to the Roman Church to the end of Elizabeth's reign. A memorandum written for the Privy Council in 1591 noted that anyone wearing crucifixes, *agni dei*, or blessed grains must have been reconciled to the Catholic Church, because otherwise they would not have been permitted to have these things.⁹⁰ A man named Hilary Dakins was identified as a Catholic after he was seen, on several occasions, wearing an *agnus dei* about his neck. He began to wear the *agnus dei* after meeting with a seminary priest in 1594.⁹¹ At the turn of the century William Bowes, the English ambassador in Scotland, reported the activities of John Ogilvy at the Scottish court, calling him 'a dangerous instrument against God and his church' who 'professes himself a Roman Catholic'. Bowes affirmed that he was 'drawn to believe' this because he had seen Ogilvy's 'Agnus Dei, hosts, and such like Romish Trifles'.⁹²

The statute against the bringing of *agni dei* into the realm remained in place after the death of Elizabeth I in 1603. While notes on priests and agents, who were thought to be smuggling *agni dei* around England, appear frequently in the state papers of Elizabeth's reign, fewer appear in those of James VI and I or Charles I. The Stuart rulers had less hostile relationships with the papacy, and none of them were ever threatened with excommunication as Elizabeth had been. Indeed, an *agnus dei* given to James VI by his wife, Queen Anne, was thought to have saved him when a storm, supposedly orchestrated by witches, beset his ship; Pope Clement VIII, who related this story to the Spanish ambassador in Rome, hoped the incident might move the king to look more favourably on the Roman faith.⁹³ When Elizabeth died, the sentence of excommunication and deprivation pronounced against her by the Catholic Church expired. Although the *agnus dei* remained an important confessional marker and an object of scorn in Protestant polemic, the possession of the sacramental was not as politically dangerous for lay Catholics during the Stuart reigns as it had been in the late sixteenth century. On the other hand, because the *agnus dei* remained a popular devotional aid well into the seventeenth century, the

⁸⁹ BL Lansdowne MS 39/34 f. 158.

⁹⁰ TNA SP 12/238 f. 188b.

⁹¹ *Calendar of the Manuscripts Preserved at Hatfield House*, 5: 98.

⁹² TNA SP 59/40 f. 24. John Ogilvy worked in espionage from the late 1580s before the Scottish privy council declared him a traitor. He fled abroad and worked as an agent for Catholic exiles on the continent, becoming embroiled in a conspiracy for the possible conversion of James VI. He returned to Scotland briefly in 1600, when the incident above took place. See A.J. Loomie, 'Ogilvy, John (fl. 1587–1601)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20600> (accessed 1 Oct 2017).

⁹³ TNA SP 12/274 f. 181.

government continued to use the sacramentals to identify suspected priests in the English missions.⁹⁴

Records and letters from the missions to England in the seventeenth century are filled with accounts of *agni dei* being used to cure ailments and protect people from natural disasters. Their effectiveness in interactions between Catholics and Protestants was of particular interest to missionaries reporting back to their superiors. Annual letters compiled for 1623, for instance, noted that when a Puritan widow's house caught fire on the feast of St Andrew, a strong wind prevented her from extinguishing it until one of her Catholic neighbours threw an *agnus dei* into the flames and made the sign of the cross, which caused the wind to fall and allowed them time to put out the fire. The fire was attributed to divine displeasure at the woman's derision for Catholic feast days.⁹⁵ Another 'heretical' woman who found herself haunted by spirits in 1633 repaired to a local Catholic noblewoman for help, and upon receiving an *agnus dei* to wear was immediately cured of her visions.⁹⁶ Similarly, the Protestant parents of a twelve-year-old girl resorted to a missionary priest in the residence of St John in 1638, when the child was seized with a sudden illness which left her partially paralysed. The priest gave the girl a small piece of an *agnus dei* dissolved in water to drink and cured her paralysis.⁹⁷ In all of these cases, the afflicted first sought to repair damage by other means, but only succeeded when they turned to the sacramentals of the Catholic Church for help. In these accounts, the *agnus dei* acted as a marker of confessional difference, illustrating the failure of heretical, Protestant churches to provide adequate care for their parishioners. While the *agnus dei* lost some of its more dangerous associations after the death of Elizabeth I, it remained important as a symbol of confessional distinction and as an indicator of the success of the missions to England throughout the seventeenth century.

Conclusion

The *agnus dei* occupied a complex position in English Catholic life after 1570. Continuous efforts to import and distribute *agni dei* after 1571 not only point to the strength of English Catholicism, they also

⁹⁴ See for instance Captain William Turner's letter to Robert Cecil, earl of Salisbury, in 1605: 'For the more proof, I have delivered to Sir Thomas Parry a book of all the gentlemen's names of the countries in England that have sent many to the Jesuits, under colour of sending men to serve for soldiers. They come with great sums of money, and many are made priests, and carry agnus deis, and relics, and indulgences from Rome'. *Calendar of the Manuscripts Preserved at Hatfield House*, 17: 544.

⁹⁵ Accounts of these events appear in the annual letters of the Society. See Henry Foley, *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus*, 7 vols (London: Burns and Oates, 1875), 7.2: 1100.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1131.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1142.

suggest that it may have been more closely aligned with the papacy, both politically and spiritually. These efforts may also indicate a more receptive audience for Pius V's declaration against Elizabeth, and point to the gravity with which English Catholics considered the threat of excommunication against them in the bull. Preservation and veneration of the *agnus dei* may indeed have served as a spiritual and political connection to Rome, but it also constituted an act of resistance against Queen Elizabeth's laws of the kind that Pius V demanded when he pronounced her excommunicated and deposed. The apparent popularity of the *agnus dei* and other devotional objects amongst English Catholics therefore points not only to the vitality of the faith in England: it may also suggest that many within the faith believed the excommunication of their monarch to be legitimate, even if most chose not to make this view public through other means.

The possession and use of *agni dei* after 1570 acted as a pointed statement of defiance against the Elizabethan regime, if only because the government forced the issue by banning them and associating them with treason. The *agnus dei* was not the only sacred object targeted by the Elizabethan authorities: blessed rosaries, beads, and crucifixes also came under attack. The proscriptions imposed on these items by parliament in 1571 implicitly imbued them with a political significance with which they had never been associated in medieval or early modern Europe. In these circumstances, the motivations of English Catholics who chose to keep and circulate these items deserve fresh consideration. From the government's perspective, their actions constituted a symbolic display of resistance to the queen that pointed to the potential of all English Catholics to commit treason and attempt to overthrow her. It is significant that many Catholics continued to collect and employ sacred objects in light of this association. Some may simply have rejected the government's interpretation of the materials of Catholic devotion, but the *agnus dei*, at least, raises questions about the nature of political participation amongst Catholics in post-Reformation England, and the extent to which that participation was subversive.

The role of missionary priests in encouraging this culture of resistance through the distribution of sacred objects also merits further reflection. While the involvement of missionary priests in the circulation of prohibited religious books and the 'sacred economy' of masses and relics in early modern England has received considerable attention, they also played a central part in the circulation of other sacred objects like the *agnus dei*.⁹⁸ Although the *agnus dei* lost its more dangerous political meanings when Elizabeth I died, it remained a popular but illicit devotional object in the seventeenth century. Missionary priests

⁹⁸ See Luke Clossey, *Salvation and Globalization in the Early Jesuit Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 216-37.

continued to bring *agni dei* and other prohibited sacred items into England, and their possession remained a significant expression of dissent. From this perspective, the possibilities for political participation within Catholic communities diversify and expand considerably.

At the same time, this process shows continuities between Catholic missions to England and those operating in other parts of the early modern world. The employment of sacred objects like the *agnus dei* to attract converts and schismatic Catholics back to the Roman fold in England reflect a broader strategy used by missionaries in Europe, Asia, and South America in this period.⁹⁹ The spiritual importance of materials like the *agnus dei* to the sustenance and survival of Catholicism in England also supports a growing body of scholarship which has emphasised the intellectual, cultural, and devotional connections between members of the English Catholic faith and their counterparts in other regions.¹⁰⁰ The continued popularity of the *agnus dei* and other sacred materials in the late sixteenth century illustrates the resilience of ties between English Catholicism, the papacy, and the wider Catholic community, while the subversive significance it assumed during the reign of Elizabeth I embodies the wider political and confessional contexts which made English Catholicism distinct in early modern Europe.

⁹⁹ For an overview of Catholic missions in Southeast Asia and their uses of relics and sacred objects see Tara Alberts, *Conflict and Conversion: Catholicism in Southeast Asia, 1500-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 7. The work of Howard Louthan and Trevor Johnson on this phenomenon in Europe has been discussed earlier in this article. See also Ana Carolina Hosne, 'The "Art of Memory" in the Jesuit Missions in Peru and China in the Late 16th Century', *Material Culture Review* 76 (2012): 30-40; Ines Zupanov, 'Passage to India: Jesuit Spiritual Economy Between Martyrdom and Profit in the Seventeenth Century', *Journal of Early Modern History* 16 (2012): 121-59.

¹⁰⁰ See for instance Alexandra Walsham, 'Translating Trent? English Catholicism and the Counter Reformation', *Historical Research* 78 (2005): 288-310. This theme was also the topic of a conference sponsored by the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University and the University of Notre Dame in 2015.