



**As long as I can remember, as a life-long Episcopalian, I have always been taught emphatically that Henry VIII did not found the Anglican Church. However, all of my non-Episcopalian friends – both Roman Catholic and Protestant – believe that he did create it. Why do they say that Henry VIII did and we maintain that he did not?**

All church historians agree that Christianity came to Roman Britain in the earliest days of the Church, at the same time the new faith was spreading all through Rome's Empire. The first documentation of the British Church as a permanently established and recognized self-governing regional Catholic Church was the attendance of three of its Bishops at the Council of Arles in A.D. 314.

In the succeeding century this native Celtic Catholic Church continued to grow and to develop its distinct spirituality and culture, spreading to Ireland. However, the withdrawal of the Roman legions in the early A.D. 400's from what today is England-proper left a military vacuum which was filled by aggressive pagan Angles and Saxons from Germany. The Celtic Church survived only in the remote reaches of western Cornwall and Wales and on the even more remote island of Ireland.

The Irish Church was monastic in structure, with the local abbey and always-lay abbot/abbess functioning as the "diocese" and Ordinary. It had a vital, dynamic culture with a strong spirit of evangelization. After the conversion of Ireland, Celtic monks in A.D. 563 crossed the Irish Sea at its narrowest point to settle on the western isles of Scotland. As the decades passed these missionaries moved eastward to the North Sea and then southward down the coast of northeast England. Despite its vigorous life, however, this self-governing Celtic Catholic Church was completely isolated from continental Europe.

In A.D. 597, not realizing that the native Catholic Church had survived the Anglo-Saxon barbarian invasion, an equally missionary-minded group of European Benedictine monks, led by Bishop (St) Augustine, landed in Kent – at the narrowest point between England and the continent – and began the evangelization of the southeastern Anglo-Saxons centered in Canterbury. The Benedictine monks then moved up the east coast as the Celtic monks were moving down the coast, and the two groups met in the mid-600's in Northumbria. Neither had known of the existence of the other; but when they met, recognizing each other as fully valid authentic parts of the Catholic Church, they held a council at Whitby in A.D. 664 to unite their life and mission.

The resulting united regional Catholic Church was self-governing but in Full Communion with the whole undivided Universal Church, which itself was made up of autocephalous (self-governing) regional Churches both East and West, all of which were in Full Communion with each other. (There was no "universal primate" with jurisdiction over the whole Church.)

This was the beginning of a "golden age" in the life of the English Church with great statesmen-archbishops, scholars, and missionaries (e.g. St Theodore, St Bede the Venerable, Alcuin, St Boniface), a period which lasted over 200 years. While it remained an independent regional Catholic Church, the English Church underwent several shifts from its earlier Celtic spirituality and culture to a more international continental European culture and structure:

- the adoption of the continental pattern of church organization made up of secular (non-monastic) dioceses with Bishops as Ordinary as well as such customs as using the continental method of reckoning the date of Easter
- the decline of Celtic monasticism and the growth and eventual predominant influence of Benedictinism, not only in English monasticism but throughout the secular Church as well
- the adoption of the Roman form of Canon Law in place of a code based on English Common Law

While these shifts made its spirituality and structure more congruent with that of the continental national Churches,

the English Church remained unmistakably autocephalous. Though it was in Full Communion with the whole Western Church, it was in no sense governed from Rome nor was the Bishop of Rome ever understood to be the head of the English Church.

The temporal power of the Bishops of Rome first grew beyond the Italian peninsula in 1077 as a result of the Investiture Controversy. Pope Gregory VII demanded that the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV turn over to the Bishop of Rome the Emperor's rights to confirm the appointment of Bishops and collect some ecclesiastical taxes in continental Europe (only). Because of the prevailing feudal political structure Gregory was able to organize a "rent strike" among Henry's vassals and force Henry to cede this temporal authority.

In 1213 the despotic and unpopular King John signed a document giving the Bishop of Rome *for the first time* same right to confirm the appointment of Bishops and collect some ecclesiastical taxes in England that he now had on the continent. This was not for theological reasons but purely political ones, in order to provide King John with an international foil to the hostile English nobles' growing demands for power (which they achieved constitutionally two years later when they forced "wicked King John" to sign the Magna Carta in 1215 legally limiting the power of the Crown and ceding power to them). In addition the 1213 document was strictly temporal in nature; in no way was the Bishop of Rome made the spiritual head of the English Church. Thus it was only in 1213 that the Bishop of Rome first had any legal authority whatsoever in England, and that was of an extremely limited political nature which only lasted 321 years.

In 1534 when the English parliament passed the Act of Supremacy reaffirming that the English Church was supreme in its own self-governance, all it did was rescind that one prerogative granted to the Bishop of Rome in 1213. Though always in Full Communion with the Western (continental European) Church, the English Church had never ceased to be self-governing, and the very minor temporal power that was given to the Bishop of Rome in 1213 had only existed for 321 years. Furthermore, though the Bishop of Rome punitively declared in 1534 that he was no longer in Communion with Henry VIII, the Roman Pontiff remained in Full Communion with the English Church as a whole!

After the death of Henry VIII in 1548, England entered a period of political turmoil that affected all aspects of national life. The child-king Edward VI reigned from 1547 to 1553. Queen ("Bloody") Mary then came to the throne and ruled until her death in 1558. In order to assert her legitimacy (she had been declared a bastard by her father) Mary attempted to establish – for the first time in its history – the Bishop of Rome as the head of the English Church. However, as she died soon after, the attempt came to very little.

With the accession of Elizabeth in 1558 the whole national agenda changed immediately. The highest priority, the new Queen believed (and history has proven her right), was the creation of a strong stable nation: politically, economically, and militarily. Everything else in national life had to take a secondary or tertiary place; there was no room for divisive internal controversy.

In 1566 Pius V became Bishop of Rome. In 1570 in an attempt to gain control of the English Church, Pius declared he was no longer in Communion with the State Church or with anyone who remained a part of it. In addition, he very foolishly decreed that anyone in England who claimed allegiance to him was excommunicate from the Roman Church unless he/she actively worked for the overthrow of the monarch. In so doing he made anyone who wished to be in Communion with the Roman Church legally a traitor/terrorist who would be executed if discovered. This created widespread deep anti-Roman animosity among the English that tragically has lasted in some quarters until the present day.

It was Pius V's declaration 1570 – a full 36 years after the Act of Supremacy, years during which the two Churches remained in Full Communion – that actually was the break in Communion between the English Church and the Roman Church. Anglicans emphatically declare that Henry VIII did not found the Anglican Church because (1) the always self-governing English national Catholic Church continued in essence unchanged, merely undergoing in the 16th century the same type of often-contentious Patristic renewal that the Roman Church itself underwent at the Second Vatican Council; and (2) the break in Communion was instituted by the Bishop of Rome, not the English monarch, 23 years after Henry's death. Now, however, both Churches are praying and working diligently for the restoration of Full Communion.