

Background

On February 25, 1570, Pope Pius V promulgated the bull *Regnans in Excelsis*, excommunicating Queen Elizabeth I of England and absolving her subjects of allegiance to her. This bull, issued with the intention of bringing down what was already seen as an unstable regime by officials within the Roman Curia, had widespread repercussions and ill effects. Although *Regnans in Excelsis* was by no means the starting point of Catholic attempts to undermine the Tudor Dynasty, the bull paved the way for efforts to paint English Catholics as unloyal subjects and marginalize them. Catholic operatives reacted to this marginalization in two different ways. First, those emboldened by the political message of the bull launched attempts to depose Elizabeth and install Mary, Queen of Scots. Second, other operatives, including Jesuit priests such as Edmund Campion, led efforts to provide spiritual sustenance to recusant Catholics. These two spheres, and their interactions with the Elizabethan intelligence services, produced a unique geopolitical situation and ushered in a new period in the history of England, which is ripe for historical examination.



Edmund Campion, S.J.
Executed 1581 — Clandestine
Catholic Ministry



Queen Elizabeth I
Queen from 1558 to 1603 —
Remained Protestant



Pope Pius V
Pope from 1566 to 1572 —
Against Elizabeth

Research Goals & Summary

While some scholars have studied the espionage of the period from the Catholic perspective, it has yet to be studied through the perspective of the foreign policy of the Holy See. The overwhelming majority of extant research focuses primarily on the counter-espionage efforts of Elizabeth's secret service, led by Francis Walsingham, which was immensely successful in thwarting numerous foreign and domestic plots to depose her. Furthermore, until recently, much scholarship on this era has tended to view the papacy as a foreign force in Elizabethan England, lurking in the shadows while making feeble attempts to consolidate its power in the wake of Henry VIII's break from Rome and the disastrous aftermath of Mary's reign. Scholarship, however, has failed to take into account a number of factors such as the lively nature of popular Catholicism in England during these years and what effect this might have had on the efforts of the Pope to restore a Catholic monarch to the English throne. The goal of this project is to study this period through the lens of Vatican diplomacy, and to produce a senior thesis that explains the key elements of the Vatican's diplomatic efforts to support and restore the Catholic Church in England in light of its motivations, intended objectives, and results. Preliminary findings have yielded a number of insights, particularly relating to Papal knowledge of the political situation in England. Ultimately, it seems increasingly reasonable to conclude that the espionage efforts of English Catholics were certainly not as pathetic or ineffective as they may seem to the modern observer, and were motivated by serious and seemingly achievable aims.



Elizabeth I and spymasters William Cecil, 1st Baron Burghley and Sir Francis Walsingham.