

## Chapter Six

### Stephen Langton: Moulding the Model

After 1170 Thomas Becket became the model for every archbishop of Canterbury to follow in regards to relations with Rome and the English crown. Such was his effect on the archiepiscopate that many of his successors supported and attempted to bolster his sanctity, and constant allusions were made to his name and figure as a revered saint. Stephen Langton was one such successor to Becket's see and has been considered by Frederick Maurice Powicke as 'one of the best, and also one of the least known figures in English history'.<sup>1</sup> Langton had a long and varied career, he was a student and leading scholar at Paris, he became a cardinal and archbishop of Canterbury,<sup>2</sup> and perhaps most importantly the arrangement and division of the Bible as it appears today is credited to him,<sup>3</sup> yet this is sometimes ignored. What Stephen Langton is known for, however, is the Interdict of England in 1208 and the creation of Magna Carta in 1215. Yet Langton is the feature of no contemporary biographies or even hagiographies that have survived to this day, all that is left are the chronicles of Matthew Paris, Roger of Wendover and Gervase of Canterbury which contain letters and other information about him. Powicke's biography is the only modern work which focusses entirely on Langton and his policies, since many historians have glossed over his life, often preferring to study King John or Pope Innocent III. Accordingly there is very little is known about this archbishop apart from a few of his own scholarly writings that have survived.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Powicke, *Stephen Langton*, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Warren, *King John*, p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> Powicke, *Stephen Langton*, p. 1.

Langton's election to the see of Canterbury was to set the tone for his episcopate and his relations with both King John and Pope Innocent III.

Even after Becket's death the English crown retained the right to appoint bishops into their sees, and kept strict control over it, appointing trusted royal clerks into the bishoprics of England. In the case of monastic chapters like Canterbury, the monks usually wished to elect one of their own, but the king would often try to persuade the chapter to elect the king's ideal candidate. Richard Mortimer writes that:

It could be said that the canonical ideal of free election rested on the naïve expectations of the members of cathedral chapters, a good many of whom in secular cathedrals were themselves royal clerks, while chapters of monks were keen to elect a monk who might well be insufficiently skilled in legal and administrative work.<sup>5</sup>

When Archbishop Hubert Walter died in July 1205, 'there ensued a three-cornered fight between the king, the bishops of the province and the monks of Canterbury cathedral as to their respective rights in the election'.<sup>6</sup> The monks chose their sub-prior, Reginald, but John wanted the bishops and monks to accept the bishop of Norwich, John de Grey. The bishops, being torn between the two choices, appealed directly to the pope to intervene.<sup>7</sup> Using the jurisdictional power of the papacy Innocent sent fresh representatives with the power to confirm the election, yet the election split once again between John de Grey and sub-prior Reginald and no clear agreement could be reached. Innocent had a plan in place, however, and suggested that the parties consider Stephen

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<sup>5</sup> R. Mortimer, *Angevin England: 1154-1258* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 1994), p. 120.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120-1.

Langton, cardinal priest of St Chrysogonus,<sup>8</sup> electing and consecrating him using the *plenitudo potestatis*, plenary authority, of the papacy in June 1207.<sup>9</sup>

From the point of view of the papacy and the monastic chapter at Canterbury, Langton was the preferred candidate and would bring all the papal reforms that were expected with him; thus ‘the monks were satisfied, the pope was satisfied, propriety and canonical principle was satisfied; the king was furious’.<sup>10</sup> John immediately expelled the monks of Canterbury and became entrenched in his position of not accepting Langton into the archbishopric,<sup>11</sup> remembering what ‘his father had once said, when the bishop of Chichester told him that only the pope could depose a bishop, ‘It is quite true that a bishop cannot be deposed but he can be held out thus’ – and pushed out his hands’.<sup>12</sup> In order to try and reason with John, Innocent brought forth Becket’s image in his letters, writing:

To fight against God and the Church in this cause for which St Thomas, that glorious martyr and archbishop, recently shed his blood, would be dangerous for you – the more so, as your father and brother of illustrious memory, when they were kings of the English abjured that evil custom at the hands of legates of the Apostolic see.<sup>13</sup>

Langton himself wrote a letter to the bishops and higher clergy of England,<sup>14</sup> developing and elaborating upon this imagery, describing how *Ecclesia vero Anglicana tam miserabiliter cecidit in derisum* (the Church of England has so miserably become a

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<sup>8</sup> Warren, *King John*, p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> R. Turner, *King John* (London: Longman, 1994), p. 158; Innocent III, *Selected Letters of Pope Innocent III concerning England (1198-1216)*, ed. C. R. Cheney and W. H. Semple (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1953), pp. 86-8.

<sup>10</sup> Warren, *King John*, p. 162.

<sup>11</sup> Mortimer, *Angevin England*, p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 163; Cheney, *From Becket to Langton*, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> Innocent III, *Selected Letters of Pope Innocent III*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>14</sup> Gervase of Canterbury, *The Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury: Vol. II, The Minor Works Comprising the Gesta Regum with its Continuation, The Actus Pontificum, and the Mappa Mundi*, ed. W. Stubbs, Rolls Series (London: Longmans & Co., 1880), pp. lxxviii-lxxxvii.

laughing-stock),<sup>15</sup> and that ministers and other people had injured and attacked the church and its rights.<sup>16</sup> Langton compared himself directly to Becket and John to his father, Henry, perhaps seeing the start of his tenure as archbishop as ‘a re-enactment of Becket’s, and the glorious martyr was persecuted anew in his person’:<sup>17</sup>

*Immo cum orta sit haec tempestas occasione quarundam libertatum gloriosi martyris, patris et praedecessoris nostri, sanguine defensorum, et pro satisfactione mortis suae postmodum juratarum, non nos immo ipse in nobis potius infestatur*

In fact, that this storm began on the occasion of certain liberties with the glorious martyr, our father and predecessor, defended with his own blood, and for the satisfaction of his death, after a while a jury, not us, rather he is in us, or rather himself a martyr, it seems to go into exile rather than us.<sup>18</sup>

Comparisons such as this were picked up in the *Song on the Bishops*,<sup>19</sup> written sometime in the early 1200s, reiterating:

*Complange tui, Anglia,  
Melos suspendens organi;  
Et maxime tu, Cantia,  
De Mora tui Stephani.  
Thomam habes sed alterum,  
Secundum habes iterum  
Stephanum, qui trans hominem  
Induens fortitudinem  
Signa facit in populo.*

Complain, O England! And suspend the melody of thine organ, and more especially thou, Kent, for the delay of thy Stephen. But thou hast another Thomas; thou hast again a second Stephen, who putting on fortitude beyond that of man, performs signs among the people.<sup>20</sup>

Langton was well versed in the rhetoric of using Becket as his predecessor, propaganda and model after his consecration since ‘in a society accustomed to paradox,

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. lxxviii. (My Translation).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. lxxix. (My Translation).

<sup>17</sup> Duggan, ‘The Cult of Thomas Becket in the Thirteenth Century’, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Gervase of Canterbury, *The Historical Works*, p. lxxix. (My Translation).

<sup>19</sup> *Thomas Wright’s Political Songs of England*, pp. 6-14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 6-7.

symbolism and allegory, the portrayal of Becket's martyrdom was a most effective piece of visual propaganda';<sup>21</sup> for example, his seal contained an image of the martyrdom and a legend related to it,<sup>22</sup> and he used the phrase *salvo ordine nostro et ecclesie libertate* (order of our church freedom),<sup>23</sup> as a conscious allusion to Becket's rebuke during the Council of Westminster in 1163, where, when faced with the confrontation on 'criminous clerks', Becket replied to the king saying, 'I obey the royal customs of an earthly king, unless in every way saving my order'.<sup>24</sup> The letters of both the archbishop and the papacy fell on deaf ears and John continued to withhold entry to England from Langton, and so Langton consciously sought out the quiet cloisters of Pontigny in order to follow the example of Becket, and add a new example for Edmund of Abingdon to follow in 1240.<sup>25</sup> This 'six-year exile at Pontigny, all inclined Stephen to regard himself not only as the heir of Becket's see, but as the inheritor of his responsibility and his cause'.<sup>26</sup>

However John also utilised the hold that Becket still held over the mind in England during one 'dialogue' with papal legates. This dialogue claimed that it was a royal right to contribute to the appointment to an archbishop in the royal courts and that the pope should have consulted the king and his kingdom in his election of Langton,<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> 'The Cult of Thomas Becket in the Thirteenth Century', p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> MORS EXPRESSA FORIS SIT TIBI INTUS VITA AMORIS, Duggan, *Ibid*, p. 37, n. 93. Translation reads: 'May death squeezing you on the outside be for you the life of love within'.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37. (My Translation).

<sup>24</sup> *Lives*, p. 82.

<sup>25</sup> Powicke, *Stephen Langton*, p. 12; also see above p. 28, n. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Duggan, 'The Cult of Thomas Becket in the Thirteenth Century', p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> *Annales Monastici: Vol. I*, ed. H. R. Luard, Rolls Series (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864), p. 211: *Stephanum eligerunt, et Norwicensem episcopum refutaverunt, me inconsulto et regno meo. Praetera vobis ostendo, quod omnes praedecessores mei contulerunt archiepiscopatus, episcopatus, et abbas, in thalamis suis.* (They chose Stephen and rejected the bishop of Norwich,

and *Praeterea temporibus nostris pater meus Henricus Sancto Thomae contulit archiepiscopatum Cantuariae. Sed modo vult dominus Papa omnes libertates quas praedecessores mei habuerunt, mihi auferre pro voluntate sua; nec benefacit* (Besides, in our times, my father Henry, granted to St Thomas the archbishopric of Canterbury. But now the lord Pope wishes, of his own will, to take away from me all the liberties which my predecessors enjoyed, he will not prosper).<sup>28</sup> Despite being rebuked by the legate and compared to William the Bastard rather than Edward the Confessor to whom he has sympathised,<sup>29</sup> John did not give up the royal right to appoint the clergy and ecclesiastical officials of England.<sup>30</sup> It was not until the minority of Henry III that Langton managed to roll out a full-scale reform of the English episcopate;<sup>31</sup> perhaps unsurprisingly focussing on the morals within scripture and the canons of the Lateran Councils,<sup>32</sup> Langton's reforms revolved heavily around personal asceticism and in following Becket's example:

*Prelati moderni sedent sub umbra rampni. Per rampnum mundus intelligitur. Hii ergo sub umbra rampni sedent qui mundi illecebris delectantur. Beatus vero martyr sub umbra desiderati i.e. imitatione dominice passionis requieit, quando scil. in pontificatus sui apice constitutus repente mutates est in virum alterum; carnem suam maceravit ieiuniis, vigiliis, asperitate cilicii.*

Modern prelates sit under the shade of the bramble. By bramble we may understand the world. These, then, who enjoy the snares of the world, are sitting under the shadow of the bramble. But the blessed martyr rested under the shade of what he desired, that is, in imitation of the Passion of the Lord, when, that is, being at the height of his

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without reference to me and my realm. Moreover, I show you that all my predecessors bestowed the archbishoprics, bishoprics, and abbeys in their councils). (My Translation).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 211-212. (My Translation).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 212-213.

<sup>30</sup> C. R. Cheney, *Pope Innocent III and England* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1976), p. 159.

<sup>31</sup> Gibbs, *Bishops and Reform*, pp. 70-3.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Timothy 3: 1-6; Titus 1: 6-10.

pontificate, he was changed into another man; he castigated his flesh with fasts, vigils, and the bitterness of the hair shirt.<sup>33</sup>

Despite his relations with John, once Henry III was on the throne of England, Langton's reforms attempted to reconcile the Church to the Crown. The reconciliation of *Regnum et Sacerdotum* had almost been attempted in the issuing of the Magna Carta in 1215, when Clause 1 had listed that 'the English church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished and its liberties unimpaired';<sup>34</sup> showing clearly Langton's dedication still to the *libertas ecclesia* from royal and baronial prerogatives, and enshrining in English law what his favourite predecessor had fought and died for. Perhaps consciously for him, as it had previously been, and would continue to be, he held Becket in mind when writing and appealing to this clause. As such he enforced that the Magna Carta and the clauses within needed to be observed, especially during Henry's minority, and Henry acquiesced.<sup>35</sup> By 1223 Langton and the bishops of England were firmly in the king's camp, helping to diffuse the discord within the realm and mediating between the barons and the king.<sup>36</sup> Langton also worked to form an alliance in court with Hubert de Burgh,<sup>37</sup> the royal justiciar, and soon the court only consisted of the bishops of England and Hubert's supporters, with anyone else who challenged the peace of the realm becoming excommunicate.<sup>38</sup>

Langton finally finished moulding the cult and model of Thomas Becket when he translated the saint's remains in a solemn ceremony in Canterbury Cathedral, fifty

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<sup>33</sup> P. B. Roberts, 'Langton on Becket: a New Look and a New Text', *Mediaeval Studies*, 35 (1973), 38-48 (p. 44). (My Translation).

<sup>34</sup> Warren, *King John*, p. 266.

<sup>35</sup> D. Carpenter, *The Minority of Henry III* (California: California University Press, 1992), pp. 296-7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 319.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 323.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 323-4.

years after his canonization.<sup>39</sup> It was unusual that Becket had not been translated sooner after his canonization, but the plans for the ceremony had often been beset by misfortune such as fire, rebuilding, Richard I's crusade and the Interdict that King John faced.<sup>40</sup> It was a majestic ceremony, attended by young Henry III, his justiciar, the greater magnates and barons of England, and even the papal legate, Pandulf.<sup>41</sup> With peace restored in the realm, especially after Henry III's second coronation by Langton, liturgies were already being written dedicated to Becket: 'The year of peace is present,/ the terror of war is gone./ Peace grows in the world and / an abundance of things everywhere./ After the translation of Thomas / all prosperity follows'.<sup>42</sup> Langton effectively exploited his predecessor effectively in order to finally reconcile Church and Crown, with the *Sarum Breviary* holding up Becket as a model to bring *regnum et sacerdotum* together:

The blessed martyr is that stone which the builders condemned, and who was placed in the peak of the corner. Just as this cornerstone joined two walls coming from diverse directions into one, thus the glorious martyr, through his death, made kingship and priesthood, coming from different directions, harmonize into one [...] In the Translation of such a martyr, therefore, let all the race of the English rejoice in the Lord [...] so that one from the English would be placed among the angels, who would be the intercessor for the well-being of the people.<sup>43</sup>

In doing this Langton had transformed the Becket cult and model of sanctity from simple royal opposition,<sup>44</sup> reconciled the temporal role of a bishop with the spiritual, and turned it into a model based on royal cooperation and harmony. But some elements

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<sup>39</sup> Duggan, 'The Cult of Thomas Becket in the Thirteenth Century', p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38, n. 95.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.

<sup>42</sup> K. B. Slocum, *Liturgies in Honour of Thomas Becket* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 242.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 251.

<sup>44</sup> See above pp. 24-7.



of *libertas ecclesia* still remained, which is especially evident when, on 29 December 1220, Langton delivered a sermon stating:

Would those that are set up as prelates had zeal for the souls of their subjects in the manner of St Thomas, who did not flinch from challenging the tyrant's anger and uncovering his head to the butchers swords, in order to safeguard the church, to protect his people, and defend liberty.<sup>45</sup>

Clearly, for the bishops and clergy of England, the message was to work with the crown and within royal courts in order to enact justice and bring Church and State closer together, yet also to defend churches, their flocks, and their liberties from the encroachment of royal and baronial prerogatives should the need arise – working with the crown in order to better the realm, yet exhibiting *contemptus mundi* for the *libertas ecclesia*.

Despite all of Langton's posturing as a successor to Becket, with the early part of his episcopate a renewed persecution and enactment of his fight, his reforms based on personal asceticism, his resistance to royal prerogative and fight for the *liberta ecclesia* in the form of Magna Carta, and his role as an administrator in the court of Henry III, he never achieved saintly status. In life, Langton had exhibited, with pomp and circumstance, all the qualities needed of a bishop-saint for consideration to be canonized and he had moulded the Becket model of sanctity into something that the bishops of the thirteenth century could manipulate for themselves; however, in death, there were two features which condemned him. The first was that, according to Matthew Paris, he had been in purgatory since his death in 1228 until serving his penance in 1232:

*Gaudete omnes in Domino fratres, qui hic praesentes estis, scientes indubitanter, quod uno et eodem die exierunt de purgatorio rex quondam Anglorum Ricardus et Stephanus Cantuariensis archiepiscopus, cum uno capellano ejusdem archiepiscopi, ad conspectum divinae Majestatis.*

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<sup>45</sup> Duggan, 'The Cult of Thomas Becket in the Thirteenth Century', pp. 40-1.

Rejoice in the Lord, all the brothers, who are here present, you can know without any doubt that, in one and the same day out of purgatory went the former king of the English, Richard, and Stephen archbishop of Canterbury, with one chaplain to the same archbishop, into the sight of the divine majesty.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst indulgences granted by popes and bishops would have reduced the time spent in purgatory, saints would usually ascend to sit in divine grace immediately upon death, rather than serving penance. The second condemnation is that there is no evidence that any posthumous miracles ever occurred at Langton's tomb – one of the main prerequisites of sanctity. So whilst Langton in life was certainly 'holy' if we follow the definitions of the models, he fell short in death. Yet it is important to note that there was still the possibility that a cult could evolve around Langton after his death. Whilst no full *vita* survives to this day, between 1240 and 1250, Matthew Paris wrote the *Vita Stephani archiepiscopi Cantuariensis* which survives in three fragments featuring his journey to Rome in 1216, his meeting with Innocent III, preaching on his return and the translation of Thomas Becket.<sup>47</sup> Matthew Paris certainly felt that Stephen was a worthy saint as he 'charitably declared [him] the equal in theology of Augustine, Gregory, and Ambrose';<sup>48</sup> however, it was not to happen.

Overall, Langton's archiepiscopate seems to have ultimately been a battle over the rights to Becket. John wished to use him as a royal precedent for the rights that his predecessors had enjoyed with liberty, and even used other saints such as Wulfstan too as we shall see in the next chapter. Langton refused to cooperate since John was equally as stubborn; however, as soon as Henry III took the throne, Langton began to develop Becket's model into one based on royal cooperation rather than resistance,

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<sup>46</sup> Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora III*, 212. (My Translation).

<sup>47</sup> S. Lloyd and R. Reader, *Paris, Matthew (c. 1200-1259)*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography [Online]. Available at: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/article.jsp?articleid=21268&back> (Accessed: 8/3/2014).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

allowing for thirteenth-century bishops to utilise it in as many different contexts as they wished, whether it was by being close confidants of the king, or royal opposition. Ultimately one could argue that it was this transformation of the Becket model which damned Langton's posthumous reputation, and which left him in purgatory for six years. Another likelihood is that since John submitted to Innocent III, the papacy could not canonize someone who had been a thorn in the crown's side yet was not martyred. Certainly though, had Langton not been on the baronial side during the civil war and been a party to the drawing up of the Magna Carta, and they had martyred him, he would have certainly become a second Becket as he had aspired to be all through his episcopate.