

On Her Majesty's Service

WASC 1790

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CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL

THE word "brief," or in the Latin tongue *breve*, was formerly used in so many divers senses that it is necessary at the outset to define the meaning attached to it in this book. From the time of the Reformation it meant a Royal Warrant authorising a collection in places of worship, and sometimes from house to house, for a specified charitable object. It was also called a King's Letter or a Church Brief, sometimes also a King's Brief.¹

The papal brief from which this church brief was descended is an authoritative letter issued by the Pontiff, of less importance than a bull. It is written upon white paper or thin parchment, in modern cursive characters, and is sometimes sent open and sometimes closed. It is sealed with red wax, stamped with the signet called "the fisherman's ring," which dates from the thirteenth century, and bears a representation of St. Peter fishing from a boat, together with the name and number of the Pope.² It is not signed by the Pope, but by an officer of the Papal Chancery, called "Segretario dei Brevi."³

Dean Hook in his *Church Dictionary* gives the following explanation:—

"1. Briefs are issued by the apostolic secretary, and sealed with the 'fisherman's ring' in red wax; bulls are

¹ See Murray's *Dictionary* and Hook's *Church Dictionary*, etc.

² *Encyclop. Brit.*

³ *Penny Cycl.*

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issued by the apostolic chancellor under a seal of lead impressed on one side with the likeness of St. Peter and St. Paul, and on the other with the name of the Pope.

"2. Briefs are written on fine and white skins; bulls on those which are thick, coarse, and rude.

"3. Briefs are written in Roman characters, in a legible and elegant manner; bulls are written [in Latin] in old Gothic characters, without punctuation and without that regard to spelling which is observed in briefs.

"4. Briefs are dated *de die nativitatibus*; bulls *a die incarnationis*.

"5. Briefs have the date abbreviated; bulls have it given at length.

"6. Briefs issue in the personal name of the Pope; bulls in his official title.

"7. Briefs are issued before the Pope's coronation; bulls not until after it."

Among the Letters and Papers (Foreign and Domestic) of Henry VIII.¹ is a *précis* of a notarial attestation, made at the request of Sir George Casalis, the English ambassador at Rome, of the mode adopted by the Apostolic Chancery for the dating of breves, viz. that the year is computed from Christmas Day. This attestation is dated Tuesday, 18th January 1530, 7 Clement VII. Sealed with the seal of the College of the Archives of Rome.

Ducange in his *Glossarium* gives the following definitions: "Brevia, Summorum Pontificum Epistolae quae in cera rubra sub annulo Piscatoris obsignantur. Annulus Piscatoris: Dicitur, quod illo S. Petrus, qui piscator erat, primus usus fuisse a vulgo existimetur: at revera quod ejusdem divi piscatoris imaginem insculptam habeat. Vox ante 400 annos minime nota."

The most accessible copy of a papal brief is one which may be found in Dodd's *Church History of England*, vol. ii. App. 335. It was issued by Gregory the Thirteenth to authorise collections on behalf of the English College at

¹ Vol. iv. p. 2744.

Rheims. One granted by Celestinus V. on 22nd May 1285, for the repair of the church of Ripon, is in *Surtees*, vol. lxxiv. p. 116.

Besides papal briefs there were briefs issued by the archbishops and bishops in their respective provinces and dioceses authorising collections in churches. These lingered long amongst us, as may be seen from the Vestry Books of Houghton-le-Spring, Durham, among other authorities, where a collection, the last of many, is entered in September of 1683.—*Surtees*, vol. lxxxiv. 328.

In the General Index of Bishop Bronescombe's Register¹ is a list of briefs dating from 1259 to 1262, being for St. David's Cathedral, the Hospitallers of London, Exeter Cathedral, to be collected in Exeter; for the Brotherhood of the Sacred Trinity granted by the bishop, another granted by him for the Brotherhood of the Hospital de Alto Passu, to be collected in the diocese "absque convocacione et voce predicationis"; another to be collected in the diocese for the Hospital of St. Thomas the Martyr in Acon (Acre), also granted by the bishop; one for the Hospital Sancti Ascentii de Avagnia, for the Church of St. Mary of Bethlehem at Horsley, for Warwick church; one in the hands of a friar of St. Anthony granted by the Archdeacon of Canterbury; one for the Hospital of St. James de Alto Passu, for the Hospital of the Holy Spirit at Rome; another granted by the "Dominus" for the Hospital "Rosceivalli," and the last "pro Ecclesia Bethleemittana." These were mostly for one year, but one was for three years, and in one instance no time was limited.

In the *Calendar of Papal Registers*, vol. i. p. 147, A.D. 1233, 7 Kal. Nov., is mentioned a papal mandate to the Abbot of St. Albans, to compel those who detain alms collected for the Hospital of Altopascio (Altipassus) to give them up to the brethren, and to order those who seize or withhold the goods of the hospital, or who hinder their agents sent to England to collect alms, to desist from doing so. Also to exhort the archbishops and bishops of

¹ *Episcopal Registers of Exeter*, by Rev. F. C. Hingston-Randolph, pp. 36, 37.

England to license the said agents to collect alms for the hospital.

In the same Calendar, pp. 247, 248, is a similar mandate with reference to the collectors for the church at Bethlehem, and "a relaxation addressed to all prelates and the faithful in England, of a year and forty days, for ten years, of enjoined penances to those who help to repair the church of Bethlehem, now almost entirely destroyed by those who know not the way of God," urging them to receive the agents sent, and advising the archbishops and bishops to grant indulgences so that the church may be repaired by the people's alms.

Any one who desires to inspect a bishop's brief can find one among the Collection of Broad sides in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries. On p. 27 of Mr. Lemon's Catalogue we read: "15 Sept. 1586. Brief of John [Aylmer], Bishop of London, for collections for the relief of the bearer, Thomas Butler of Colchester, Gunpowder Maker, who being at his work for the making of gunpowder, by sudden misfortune was pittifully burnt, and spoyled of his eyes and armes apparent yet to behold."

The earliest instance of a brief in the form of Letters Patent by the Crown is one which is noticed in Mr. Staveley's work on *The History of Churches in England*,¹ where, after speaking of the building of churches by money raised from indulgences, and particularly of the founding of Crowland Abbey² in 1112 by "Joffrid" the Abbot, he mentions that the prior and monks at Kirkby Belers, in the county of Leicester, not only obtained money from Leo the Tenth, but that "King Henry the Eighth granted them his Letters Patents, under the Broad Seal, for collecting money upon the same; with Briefs whereof, the monks were sent up and down the country, like collectors for losses by fire, to gather the contributions of well-disposed people; one of which Briefs I have now in my hands; it is in one large

¹ 1st ed. 1712; 2nd, 1773.

² For the ancient history of the foundation, endowments, and abbots of Crowland or Croyland, see Stevens' *History of Abbeys, etc.*, p. 354.