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This lecture is one of a series commemorating William Urry, the distinguished medieval historian who at his death in 1981 was Fellow of St Edmund Hall and Reader in Latin Palaeography in the University of Oxford. Following the example of the two opening lectures by Sir Richard Southern and Professor Frank Barlow, Mr Franklin's deals with an aspect of the life of Thomas Becket, which was the subject of much of William Urry's own work.

Cover picture
Becket arguing with Henry II and Louis VII
(*From the Becket leaves, by courtesy of J. Paul Getty Jr., K.B.E.*)

THOMAS BECKET AND FRANCE

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The life and death of Thomas Becket form an uniquely dramatic episode in the relations between Church and State in Western Europe in the twelfth century. As a result, the obsessive attention the episode has received, at the time and since, has distorted understanding of what that relationship was. In drama, conflict is the norm; in the high middle ages, it was a deeply-deplored aberration from the natural comity of *regnum* and *sacerdotium*. Nowhere is this distortion more evident than in perceptions of Becket's dealings with the kingdom of France.

It is generally assumed, if only tacitly, that Louis VII was content to exploit the quarrel between Becket and Henry II for diplomatic advantage, rather than to use his influence to patch it up. This interpretation is over-simplified. I hope to show that he did both and that, in any case, the continuance of the quarrel inconvenienced him politically on more than one occasion. Louis was personally devout, and, for the most part, committed to the papacy and its policies, as his participation in the Second Crusade and its aftermath had shown.[1] Moreover, the increasing tension between Henry and Pope Alexander III over Becket exacerbated Louis' problems arising from the existence of a papal schism which was a permanent threat to the security of his kingdom.

The papacy had ultimate oversight over the whole system of homage, so schism faced Louis with the possibility of his rival Henry II '... taking the whole of Western France into the other obedience'.[2] This nightmare had determined his policy at the time of the double election, when he had been desperately

anxious not to get out of line with his brother-monarch. As the Becket dispute progressed, Henry made ill-defined threats to change his allegiance, extending to the blackmailing brinkmanship of John of Oxford's mission to Wurzburg. So Louis had no option but to support Alexander, whose open defeat by Henry would have vastly strengthened the schismatics. At the same time he was not prepared simply to follow the lines of policy laid down by Alexander. He had no doubt that he frequently perceived the best interests of the papacy better than the pope himself; he advised him, even hectored him. Becket's affairs throw light on the relationship of mutual help between Louis and the pope, and especially on the king's exasperated deference as he tried to convince Alexander of what he saw as the political realities of the situation.

As well as Louis himself, a good many of the lay nobility, the prelates and the religious houses of France were drawn into the Becket conflict in one way or another. There is not enough evidence for a full description of their attitudes and decisions, but sufficient to show the existence of very deep interest in, and concern about, Becket's fate through a wide segment of the French church and baronage. This emphasises yet again how misleading it is to treat England and France in isolation from one another, especially where ecclesiastical affairs are concerned. Not only the existence of the continental Angevin Empire but a multitude of contacts at a personal level bound the churches of England and France together. Many of Becket's entourage, including the archbishop himself, had studied in Paris. There was considerable interchange of personnel between the two churches. John of Salisbury, the one major exception to the rule that Becket's associates were passed over for preferment after the murder, received his bishopric in France. John was too distinguished a man in his own right for his election to Chartres to be ascribed simply to post-mortem devotion to his master.

But it was consistent with the favour the French church had generally shown Becket, and expressed through practical assistance.

Becket himself was well-known in France before he ever became archbishop. In 1159, as chancellor, he was charged with the negotiations for the marriage of Henry II's eldest son to Louis VII's daughter Margaret. His biographer William FitzStephen gives a rapturous account of the splendour of the embassy, and particularly stresses the good relations established between Becket and Louis, in spite of the chancellor's success in out-manoeuvring the king over payment for provisions for his train.[3] Becket had scattered largesse and gifts to all the most influential members of the French court and the academic and commercial community of Paris; not surprisingly, he was more favourably received than anyone else, and succeeded in all he came to do. Even earlier than this, though, he had received a mark of Louis' favour, being visited by the king of France, as well as Henry II, while lying ill at Rouen.[4] His next contact with France was of a very different kind, when he accompanied Henry II to the siege of Toulouse, taking a full part in the fighting. According to FitzStephen, he tried to dissuade Henry II from being deterred by feudal scruples from a direct assault on the city after Louis had reached it, to capture the king.[5] Henry later tried to use this against Becket. When his envoys first confronted Louis at Soissons in 1164, immediately after the archbishop's flight from Northampton, they urged him to expel Becket, as one of his most determined enemies, a man who had more than once planned his death, and had been responsible for subjecting much of his territory to the king of England. Louis replied simply that if a man had served him as well as Becket had Henry, he would not have been ungrateful. Apparently the chancellor's military exploits had not alienated the French, but won their admiration.[6]

Becket's own circle, however, had mixed feelings about Louis' attitude. At times, they were optimistic about his determination to support Becket; at others, they feared that considerations of self-interest would lure him into accommodation with Henry. In fact, Louis' policy can be understood only by tracing out the sequence of his contacts with Becket and positive decisions about him.

In the early days of Becket's pontificate, earlier friendly relations were maintained. Probably in 1163 Becket received a report that his messenger had been joyfully received at the French court, and that Louis had hastened to send messengers on to the papal curia to urge support for the archbishop. When Becket's messenger left, Louis

> ... held my hand in his, and promised, on the word of a king, that if you [sc. Becket] should ever happen to cross over into his territories, he would receive you not as a bishop or as an archbishop, but would treat you as a fellow-ruler in his realm. Likewise the count of Soissons swore with many oaths that he would hand over the county of Soissons, and all his revenues for your service ...[7]

Becket angered Henry by reciprocating this goodwill, and in 1164 was forced to write to Louis assuring him that rumours of a breach over the Constitutions of Clarendon were false, and begging Louis to clear him of the charge of slandering Henry II to him.[8]

Louis' first positive decision about Becket was forced on him by Henry's demand that he should not shelter a fugitive from justice, after Becket's flight from Northampton in 1164. The demand was couched in the most brutal terms, describing Becket as 'Thomas, who was archbishop of Canterbury', a man adjudged by Henry's court as a perjuror and traitor, and an

unmitigated enemy of Henry's.[9] Louis was asked to give him no help, and to allow none to be given him. This was quite the wrong tone. Louis reacted sharply against the personal animus Henry displayed, and against his implied attack on the rights of the church. He seized on the phrase 'qui Cantuariensis fuit archiepiscopus', and said that although he was as much king in France as Henry was in England, he had no authority to order the deposition of the most lowly clerk.[10] To a recital of the benefits Becket had had from Henry, he retorted that they had been amply repaid by his service as chancellor, and to the accusation that Becket had refused to accept judgment of the royal court he replied that it had been improperly constituted and that the archbishop had been under threat of violence. He refused to return Becket to Henry's jurisdiction, and told a papal familiar at his court that he would give Alexander no further help unless he supported Becket.[11] The whole tone of Louis' response was emotional – there was no sign that he took counsel what course to adopt, or was making a calculated political decision.

Shortly after this, in an interview with Becket's familiares, John of Salisbury and Herbert of Bosham, who had arrived at the French court only days after the royal envoys, Louis adopted the same tone. In reply to their tale of the archbishop's misfortunes, he said 'before the king of England treated so badly a man who had been so close a friend and was now archbishop and so great a prelate, he should have thought of this text, "Be ye angry, and sin not"'. He further revealed the emotional basis for his decision to succour Becket by saying that it was the first among the glories of his kingdom to aid exiles, especially clergy, and protect them from their persecutors.[12] Herbert of Bosham's claim that he and John had got their way with Louis where an embassy of great men had failed is clearly exaggerated, but it had undoubtedly been most convenient for Becket that they had been

able to place his version of events before the king so swiftly. Louis had decided to protect Becket, but had not yet worked out arrangements for his stay in France. His intentions became clear only after he had had a personal interview with the archbishop at Soissons. According to Herbert, Louis rushed to meet Becket, received him with all honour and with the profoundest sympathy for his sufferings, and immediately offered him peace and safety, as well as insisting that he should accept financial support from the royal treasury as long as he remained in France.[13]

The question of the provision of financial support for Becket revealed a little tension between him and Louis. He refused to accept more than the minimum required for his own and his companions' subsistence, though John of Poitiers urged him that Louis would be more likely to accept him into his inmost councils if he were beholden to him, or to endow him with the revenues of vacant bishoprics or abbacies to save money.[14] Such revenues would have formed a more regular and independent source of income than grants directly from the royal treasury, and a year later the pope, while thanking Louis for the gifts he had conferred on Becket 'at the promptings of piety alone' nonetheless begged him in the strongest terms to assign to the archbishop the revenues of any bishoprics or abbacies which should fall vacant in the near future.[15] The outcome of this friction between Becket's desire for financial independence and Louis' reluctance to concede it is uncertain, but in all probability Louis baulked at it.

From the same period of the exile comes another hint of tension. The biographers claim that Louis was eager to keep Becket near him, and that it was a papal decision that consigned him to the relative obscurity of Pontigny. Guernes de Pont St-Maxence even says that Louis was pleased when Henry's threats against the Cistercians drove Becket out of his first retreat, since it gave him the opportunity to take the archbishop more closely

under his own wing, as he had wished to do since the beginning of the exile.[16] However, in a letter from this period Master Arnulf told Becket that he had pressed Louis to the point of impropriety to find Becket lodgings at the site of the conference he was due to have with Henry on 19th April, 1165 at Pontoise (subsequently cancelled) but that Louis had refused to accommodate him nearer than Valle St. Mary Abbey.[17] Evidently, at this time, Louis was unwilling to have Becket actually in his entourage, presumably because he was still hopeful of reaching an accord with Henry, and feared that the archbishop's notorious intransigence would hinder its fulfilment. On the other hand, Louis was clearly concerned for Becket's interests and aware of Henry II's potential ruthlessness. Another of Becket's agents reported that the king had detained a man who came purporting to be from the archbishop's familia until he could be identified as such, in case he should actually be a spy for Henry.[18]

By the time that Louis was forced to take his next major decision about Becket, with the archbishop's expulsion from Pontigny in 1166 at Henry's behest, the political atmosphere had altered completely, as a result of the Wurzburg oath, taken by John of Oxford on Henry's behalf at Pentecost 1165, and the birth of Louis' son, which reduced his dependence on the marriage alliance between his daughter and Henry's son. In the early months of 1166, there were abortive negotiations for a further alliance between the two kings, conducted on Henry's side by the archbishop of Rouen. At this time Becket was closely in touch with Louis, for he heard about Rouen's embassy from the French king in person.[19] Then when the two kings met at Nogent-le-Rotrou, in April 1166,[20] according to Guernes, Louis took Becket with him, to effect a reconciliation. But Henry showed no interest, and asked Louis to stop raising the matter of the archbishop. To this Louis replied:

> I shall be glad to stop. Neither he nor his people are any trouble to me and I shall be very happy to be able to keep him. My kingdom benefits from his great wisdom, and yours is all the poorer for its loss – I daresay you will find your need greater than mine.

Louis then went on to confer with Thomas and said to him

> I shall never count any more on your being reconciled, though I had always hoped for it until now; but I have found the king of England altogether above himself. He refuses to listen to me, either privately or in public audience. I have often begged you to stay in St. Denis's kingdom – now I make over my kingdom and my country to you absolutely, Etampes and Orleans, Chartres and Paris. Your needs shall be supplied from my rents and my resources.[21]

Although this is obviously an imaginative reconstruction, it is in tune with other evidence of Louis' genuine concern for reconciliation, coupled with despair at Henry's obduracy.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Louis was unequivocal in his reaction to the archbishop's expulsion from Pontigny, by Henry's threats to confiscate the property of the entire Cistercian order. Both Louis and Becket seem to have regarded the expulsion as having a distinctively feudal significance, as being almost the equivalent of a *diffidatio*. When Louis was told of Becket's impending removal by the archbishop's messengers, he said: 'However much the king of England practises and schemes against him, even though the king is my own man, none the less I will receive him for the sake of God and because he is a man suffering from injustice'.[22] Certainly, the expulsion from Pontigny was an extra-legal step, a punishment inflicted without

judgment – in fact a characteristic instance of that *ira et malevolentia* which was so essential an element of Angevin statecraft. It freed Becket from further scruples about committing himself to the care and protection of Louis, of the kind which, according to Edward Grim, he had felt at the beginning of the exile.[23] Once again, Louis reacted emotionally to the expulsion. He inveighed against the monks of Pontigny as men who were supposedly dead to the world, yet allowed themselves to be intimidated by secular terrors, and assured the archbishop that he would never desert him, though he might be deserted by all the world, and those who were not properly of the world. None the less, he went to Pontigny to thank the monks for their earlier hospitality towards Becket, and then bore the archbishop off with him to Sens, where he lodged him in the abbey of St. Columba's.[24] Herbert of Bosham insists that the choice of St. Columba's was Becket's own, but he says the same about Pontigny, in contradiction to the other authorities. It is more likely that Louis selected it, for it was well-placed near the centre of his realm to facilitate easy contact with the archbishop. According to FitzStephen, Louis frequently honoured the archbishop's household with his presence, and when they thanked him for his kindness said only: 'Don't thank me; for it has never given me so much satisfaction to provide sustenance for anyone else'.[25] Quite apart from the convenience of Sens for Louis himself, it had the advantage that there Becket was under the immediate protection of one of the greatest men of France, Archbishop William of Sens, Louis' brother-in-law.

With Becket safely ensconced at Sens, Louis soon became involved in the long series of negotiations between Henry II and the papacy aimed at settling the dispute. By accepting responsibility for the archbishop's maintenance in France, which had aroused Henry to fury, Louis had effectively committed himself to the archbishop's cause. When the announcement came

that the pope had taken the initiative in making peace between Henry and Becket by despatching the legation of William of Pavia and Otto of Tusculum, Louis greeted it with the deepest displeasure. This was partly because he had been shocked by the English bishops' appeal against the censures pronounced by Becket at Vézelay at Pentecost 1166, appeals which were believed in France to be uncanonical, since Becket had been using his power as papal legate at Vézelay. Secondly, the arrival of the legates had been preceded by that of John of Oxford, who had made his way through France spreading the wildest rumours about the powers committed to the legates, their intentions with regard to Becket himself – John even implied that they had power to depose the archbishop and were prepared to use it – and claims for the authority committed to himself, including a commission to absolve all those excommunicated at Vézelay. Lombard of Piacenza reported to Alexander III as follows:

> When the king of France, who is the devoted son of yourself and the church, heard the rumours spread by John of Oxford, he was so deeply disturbed that he said he wished to send messengers to forbid your legates to enter his realm ... He said he intended to summon the bishops and archbishops of France to make it clear to them how the Roman church was exalting over himself those who offended it and sought to reduce his own status. He said 'Is he not seeking to dishonour me – is he not seeking to dishonour me – he who is seeking to spill the blood of the archbishop of Canterbury by stealth – the blood of an innocent man, an exile for justice and the liberty of the church, by wickedly handing him over to his enemies and persecutors.'[26]

Lombard went on to report that Louis said he regarded the

despatch of the legates as being as much against his own interests as an attempt to deprive him of his throne, and that the pope's action had thoroughly discredited the holy see in France. Once again, the emotional nature of Louis' response to Becket's predicament comes through clearly.

However, Louis recognised that a totally negative response to the legation would do Becket's cause no good. He did not carry out his threat to exclude the legates from France, though William of Canterbury believed that his letters to the pope, warning of the scandal to the church that the deposition of Becket would cause, were responsible for Alexander's decision to deprive William and Otto of full legatine powers.[27] But there is no suggestion that the king specifically demanded this, as Becket and his familia were doing. Even before his meeting with the legates, Becket wrote congratulating William on having obtained Louis' 'mere grace' which he had been striving to procure for the legates, and begging him to further his own cause to the best of his ability, for the sake of the king's favour.[28]

Once his initial irritation had subsided, Louis kept himself in the background during the legation, intervening only to smooth its path. FitzStephen claimed that he was responsible for arranging the meeting between Thomas and the legates between Gisors and Trie, against the opposition of Henry II, from a real zeal for the peace of the church.[29] Becket reported to the pope that Louis had been delighted with the outcome of a meeting with William and Otto, since they had convinced him that the rumours about their intentions were false, and that they were determined to work for the peace and liberty of the church in England. Louis gave more practical help, by sending emissaries to pay Becket's and his coexiles' expenses, when his enemies tried to embarrass him by so arranging the meeting as to cause him the maximum outlay.[30] Louis held aloof from the meeting itself, so as not to impede free discussion between Becket and the

legates or arouse the suspicions of Henry II. Nor did he send any other representatives of the French court. However, he was swift to rebut the charge that Becket had been instrumental in inciting him to make war on Henry II, made by the latter and repeated by the legates. In an audience with the legates, the day after their meeting with Becket, Louis swore that the archbishop was innocent of war-mongering, and had always advised him to preserve peace as far as was consistent with the honour of both kings.[31] Becket added that he had deliberately refrained from meetings with Louis, to avert accusations of this kind, and had approached him only when summoned, in connection with the business of the legation.[32]

Nothing in Louis' conduct before, during, or after this legation suggest that he was aiming at anything other than securing peace on reasonable terms. Yet this was a period of considerable tension between himself and Henry, when he might well have been tempted to prolong the dispute, as a means of embarrassing his rival. Nor should one doubt his assertion that Becket also favoured peace at this juncture: the archbishop was universally accepted as a close and influential adviser of his.

After the failure of the legation, there was a lull in the peace-making process, but Louis continued to exert diplomatic pressure on Becket's behalf. In 1168 John of Salisbury told Baldwin, archdeacon of Exeter, that Louis had commended the cause of the archbishop and cathedral of Canterbury to the archbishop-elect of Palermo as though it were his own, to forestall an attempt by the envoys of Henry II to use the influence of the king and queen of Sicily at the curia.[33] The lull probably resulted from Louis' overriding concern with direct negotiations for peace with Henry II. Halphen lists three meetings between the kings in June and July 1167,[34] and the *Draco Normannicus* of Stephen of Rouen squarely blames Becket for the failure of the first set of peace proposals:

> Thomas, the exiled archbishop of Canterbury was present, and disrupted the negotiations, being desirous only of strife. His grief for his lost archbishopric led him to say things whereby peace was destroyed.[35]

However, Robert of Torigni, a more reliable witness, says that it was the French magnates who overcame Louis' natural peaceableness.[36]

Louis' aim in all these negotiations was to put Henry in the wrong in formal, feudal, terms, and he therefore had to be most cautious about his relations with Becket, who was Henry's vassal. He could, however, continue to support the archbishop indirectly, by keeping up pressure on the papal curia on his behalf. During the negotiations, Henry had exhibited papal bulls which he claimed freed him altogether from Becket's power. Louis at once protested to the curia that, whereas he had always acceded to the pope's requests to succour Becket in every possible way, Alexander was undermining his position by favouring Henry, and leaving him with no answer to the emperor and the schismatics. He begged Alexander to justify his policy, to remember that he, Louis, had always approached him with requests rather than threats, and not to be diverted from the paths of right dealing by the evil influence of his entourage.[37]

This letter demonstrates Louis' conviction that he might perceive the interests of the papacy better than Alexander himself. As he put it:

> This most recent communication has been spread abroad and made notorious throughout our realm, and has given rise to grievous scandal. It is not for us to reprove you, who are our lord; but we cannot altogether remain silent about matters which we believe do harm to your reputation.

There is an implied threat in the point that Louis had not put pressure on the pope *in the past*, and the force of Louis' displeasure was made even clearer by a concerted campaign of letters to Alexander from leading French ecclesiastics. Stephen bishop of Meaux said that he feared to convey the full extent of the king's rage, lest he should incur the pope's displeasure as a bearer of bad tidings, and added that there were plenty of people ready to urge Louis to ignore the pope's interests, and pursue the realpolitik of negotiation with his enemies.[38] Matthew, treasurer of Sens, said Louis *had* given in to such voices:

> He added a comment which rings most bitterly in the ears of your faithful servants, that henceforward he would not refrain from seeking the profit of the realm, as seemed good to him, for the sake of the Roman church.[39]

Louis was imitating Henry II by writing directly to a cardinal (Humbald of Ostia)[40] and surrounding himself with a great cloud of witnesses at the curia – even his queen was pressed into service to detail the long succession of papal failings, and to beg Alexander '... not to despise the female sex in considering what I have to say, but to pay attention to the words of one who is sincerely devoted to you'.[41]

The whole episode is eloquent of Louis' understanding of curial intrigue, but even more revealing is his evident sense of the reciprocity of his relations with Becket. By failing to support the archbishop Alexander was weakening Louis' own position, since the king had identified himself so closely with his cause. All the letters to the curia stress that Louis' disapproval was shared by the whole church and the lay magnates of France. The repeated assertion that the pope had left Louis with no answer to the imperialists placed Becket's position firmly in the context of the schism. Louis clearly felt that the pope had exposed him to a

diplomatic setback, and this indicates how far Becket's presence in his realm could become an embarrassment, rather than an advantage, to his foreign policy.

The pope did his best to assuage Louis' irritation, by pointing out that if Henry's bulls were read in their entirety they would be seen to do Becket no harm, and promising that, in the last resort, the archbishop's powers would be restored to him.[42] This seems to have done something to satisfy public opinion in France, for the stream of complaint to Rome dried up for a while.

In any case, the whole context of Becket's relations with Louis was about to be radically altered by the conclusion of peace between the kings of England and France at Montmirail on 6th January, 1169. The encounter between Henry and Becket, which followed this peacemaking, and the squabble over formulae which ensued, took place only because the truce had put Louis in the position of being able to intercede for Becket, and was overshadowed by the broader negotiations. According to John of Salisbury, the public agreement between the kings at Montmirail had been preceded by secret pacts, a sure sign that the kings were genuinely on good terms.[43] The terms of the peace were well-balanced, though if they are examined in detail, it appears that Louis may have had slightly the better of the bargain. According to John of Salisbury, again:

> In this distribution of honours the French reckon to lie the greatest hope for their kingdom ...[44]

It was clearly in Louis' interests to maintain this accord as far as possible. Becket's continuing strife with Henry presented a real threat to it. Louis' protest over the bulls of exclusion had shown how far he identified himself with the archbishop's cause, and was identified with it by others. Henry would hardly look kindly on French support for a man he repeatedly asserted was a traitor,

so it is not surprising that Louis now took a far more active role in trying to reconcile the king and the archbishop than he had at the time of the legation of William and Otto, especially as he now had some hope of being accepted as an honest broker by both sides. The papal legates themselves, reporting on proceedings at Montmirail, stressed the pressure Louis had exerted on Becket:

> ... we advised and counselled the lord archbishop of Canterbury that he should humble himself before the king, and endeavour to overcome his rigidity by the submissiveness of his requests and a clear exhibition of his desire to serve him. The most Christian king of France, the archbishops and bishops and the great men who were present, were at one in joining us to urge the same thing upon him.[45]

Herbert of Bosham also regarded Louis as a mediator, and it was to him that Henry turned in rage when Becket insisted that the phrase '*salvo honore dei*' should be incorporated in the peace formula. Henry expostulated to Louis against the unreasonableness of Becket, and his claim that anything that displeased him was against the honour of God. He acknowledged that there had been lesser kings than himself, and greater archbishops of Canterbury than Becket. He professed that he would be satisfied if Becket behaved to him as the greatest of the archbishop's predecessors had to the least of his. Becket made no immediate reply, so Louis said simply: 'My lord of Canterbury, is it your wish to be holier than the saints, or greater than Peter? What are you hesitating for? Peace is on the very doorstep'. Becket's reply, made directly to Louis, was a thoroughly arrogant assertion that even his greater predecessors had failed to root out evil customs from the church, thus causing

the present trouble. He himself was determined to follow the example of the best of them, not to yield at all on the rights of the church.

This response to what had been the mildest of rebukes from Louis was ill-received. According to Alan of Tewkesbury, the magnates of both kingdoms were outraged, and one French count said openly: 'As he rejects the advice and desires of both realms, henceforward he will not be worthy of the help of either; France ought not to receive him when he has been expelled from England'.[46] Herbert of Bosham adds that Henry was particularly delighted at having drawn Louis into the position of rebuking Becket '... for he was always working and scheming to justify his own cause ... especially with the king of France; so as to turn the king's heart from us, who had been our safe and sole refuge from calamity ...'[47] Henry's success was real: Louis was intensely irritated by Becket's stand, and, for the first time, there seemed to be a chance that he would abandon the archbishop. When the Montmirail conference broke up, he left in Henry's company, and ostentatiously refrained from visiting Becket, as had been his custom whenever the two were in the same neighbourhood. The archbishop put a good face on the situation, but consternation reigned among his familia. They were afraid that if Louis did withdraw his protection, it would be impossible to find an alternative refuge suitable to Becket's status. He had certainly proved a sufficiently tiresome guest to deter other potential hosts. But Becket remained optimistic. He scouted the idea of going to Rome, lest the Romans took advantage of their poverty, but suggested that he would be welcomed in Burgundy or Provence, if he threw himself on their mercy. When Louis did eventually summon Becket to court, one of his followers expressed the common expectation that the king would announce his expulsion from the realm, especially as, to their horror, the king greeted him with downcast eyes and severe

aspect. Then, to the astonishment of all, Louis threw himself at Becket's feet and acknowledged amid sobs that he had been right all along about Henry II. He alone had understood his true intentions, while everyone else was blind to his duplicity. Louis begged his pardon, which was readily given, and promised that he would never again desert him, but would give him the freedom of his realm, and support him in every way.[48]

This scene of self-abasement has been adduced as evidence of Louis' undue subordination to the church, but Herbert of Bosham suggests, more plausibly, that Louis was reacting to signs of popular support for the archbishop. When he and his company passed through Chartres, on their way from Montmirail, the populace turned out to watch, murmuring: 'That is the archbishop who yesterday refused to deny God for the sake of kings'. Similar murmurings were heard elsewhere, and even some of those who had opposed Becket at the conference changed their minds and lauded his constancy.[49] In the later part of his reign, Louis was distinctly sensitive to manifestations of popular feelings, especially when they contained an element of criticism of himself. He had also experienced Henry's unwillingness to abide by the terms of the Montmirail agreement. That had guaranteed that Henry would keep the peace in Poitou and Brittany, which he signally failed to do. When Louis had felt that peace with Henry was in sight, he had been prepared to put pressure on the archbishop not to stand in its way; when he realised how fragile the foundations of that peace were, he naturally turned back to supporting him.

It is extremely difficult to disentangle the sequence of events between Montmirail and the next major meeting between Henry and Becket at Montmartre. Stephen of Rouen gives the most detailed accounts of events, but conflates two meetings, and even confuses them with that at Montmartre. Stephen was hostile to Becket, and asserts that when Louis pleaded for Becket, together

with other French nobles, Henry offered to have the differences between them arbitrated by the French court. At this point, according to Stephen, Louis openly sided with Henry. He swore by the three kings that Becket had no right to hold out against these conditions. He urged him to follow the footsteps of earlier archbishops, and return to England in peace. He pointed out that he himself, in his own realm, insisted on the very behaviour from his bishops that Henry required of Becket. According to Stephen of Rouen 'Thomas was silent, and considered the royal words. I do not know what he wanted, but he was afraid to return'.[50] The tone of this further outbreak of irritation on Louis' part rings true.

However, he was still prepared to protect the archbishop. Early in 1169, Henry invoked the Montmirail agreement that neither king would harbour the enemies of the other, in a repeated effort to persuade Louis to expel Becket. Louis refused to accept that this general accord should include so extraordinary a case as Becket's, unless expressly mentioned, and also insisted on the ancient privilege of the realm of France to succour those persecuted for religion, warning Henry not to try to undermine his hereditary privileges in the same way as he was attacking Becket's archiepiscopal rights.[51] An agent of Gilbert Foliot believed that this approach had resulted in Becket being offered the choice of leaving the realm of France or refraining from further excommunications and absolving those already excommunicated,[52] but Becket himself said Louis had behaved towards him more graciously than before. Possibly his suggestion that he might throw himself on the mercy of the nobility of Provence had been inspired by shrewd political judgment – it would have been embarrassing to Louis to have the semi-independence of the region thus stressed.

The next major conference between the two kings and Becket took place at Montmartre, in November 1169, with one of the

papal legates, Vivian, who had been sent on a mission of reconciliation also present. The other, Gratian, had withdrawn in disgust at the slipperiness of Henry II during their early negotiations with him, and this offered Louis a better opportunity to act as a conciliator. He had met both legates at Savigny on their arrival in France, and assisted them by warnings about the dangers of local conditions.[53] As at Montmirail, the immediate reason for the Montmartre conference was political – a further dispute between Louis and Henry over the latter's failure to hand over his son Richard to be brought up at the French court, as had been agreed earlier. Once again, Henry conceded this point, and also played upon Louis' emotions by insisting on his eagerness to see his young son. As a result, relations between the two kings were so much improved that Louis was able to play an unprecedentedly active part in the negotiations between Henry and Becket that followed. Indeed, it appears that he had put heavy pressure on Becket to attend. The archbishop told Alexander that Louis, Vivian, and 'other wise men' had 'compelled' him to be present in Paris to be on call for a meeting with Henry.[54]

At the conference itself, Louis went to and fro between Henry and the chapel a little way from the conference site, where Becket was staying, to convey proposals from each side to the other. When Henry offered to make peace if Becket made amends for all the wrongs he had done him, Louis said that peace would never come unless there was a degree of forgiving and forgetting, and when Henry offered to accept the decision of the clergy, Louis sent for clerks from Paris.[55] When they arrived, Henry reneged on his pledge, but Louis continued to badger him. His most important service was in achieving a compromise over financial matters. Becket insisted that he must be compensated for all the Canterbury property misappropriated during his exile, which he assessed at the extortionate figure of

30,000 marks. Louis impressed upon him the impropriety of a bishop refusing to return to his flock on financial grounds, and persuaded him to agree to a compromise whereby Henry agreed to return half his property and income, and abide by the judgment of the papal court for the remainder. This settlement was the result of heavy pressure on both sides.

However, the apparent success of the conference was ruined by the question of the kiss of peace. According to Guernes, Louis himself raised the question of Henry and Becket exchanging it, but when the legate Vivian urged him to put pressure on the king to retract his refusal to do so, replied that he was unwilling to take such a hostile measure against Henry while he was in his territory (and therefore, immediately, within his peace). However, he said to Becket, and to the legate, that he would be unwilling to advise his return to England without the kiss of peace for his own weight in gold, a judgment that was shared by his entourage, for count Theobald recalled the case of Robert de Silly, to whom the kiss of peace that had been given had been inadequate as a guarantee of peace and security.[56]

Louis' advice on this occasion might be interpreted as a change of policy – it was certainly the first time he had done anything that might hinder the reconciliation of the king and the archbishop. But in the context of his genuine attempts to make peace earlier in the conference, it appears rather as understandable caution in the face of Henry's untrustworthiness. Louis wanted peace, but he was unwilling to expose Becket to unnecessary danger. According to William of Canterbury, Louis followed up the Montmartre meeting by sending William of Sens to the curia to beg Alexander to brook no further delays on Henry's part, but to threaten immediate interdict unless he came to heel.

In spite of this hard line, Louis continued to negotiate with Henry, and John of Salisbury reported that they had agreed to

go on crusade together, though he believed this to be no more than a ruse of Henry's to distract Louis' attention from Becket's affairs.[57] However, the atmosphere was transformed by the coronation of Henry the Young King by the archbishop of York on 16th June, 1170. This was not only a direct derogation of Becket's rights, and disobedience to a papal order, but a severe affront to Louis, since his daughter Margaret, the wife of the Young King, was not crowned by his side. Louis was outraged – William of Sens told the pope that he regarded this latest misdeed as being one more in the long series which might have been prevented if Alexander had taken a firm line with Henry from the start.[58] Henry was sufficiently alarmed by his reaction to send instructions for preparations to be made to send Margaret to England as soon as she should be summoned, and to seek a meeting with Louis at Freteval, on 20th July, 1170.

Here, Becket's quarrel with Henry was to be patched up, by a personal interview with Henry, in which Louis took no part. Indeed, Becket was not initially summoned to the conference, went only at the urging of William of Sens, and was kept waiting for two days while the kings discussed politics. It would be easy to deduce from this that Louis had abandoned him at the last moment, but this is contradicted by a highly circumstantial account of events by William FitzStephen, which deserves to be quoted in full:

> On the same day [sc. 20 July] the king of England came to the lodgings of the king of France for a secret conversation, and in the course of it he said jokingly 'Tomorrow your bandit will get his peace, and it will certainly be a good one ...' The king of France replied: 'Who do you mean, my bandit, by the saints of France?' The king of England said 'That archbishop of Canterbury of yours'. At this the French king exclaimed: 'Would that

he were our archbishop as much as he is yours; you will have honour with God and with men if you make a good peace with him, as well as our gratitude.' These things were said in the hearing of others.[59]

FitzStephen goes on to attribute Louis' absence from the final interview between Henry and Becket to his desire to avoid the impression that Henry had made concessions only under coercion. This would have been consistent with Louis' earlier readiness to remain in the background, and use the most tactful means to achieve his end.

After Freteval, Henry urged Becket to follow him immediately to Normandy, but did give him leave to take formal leave of Louis and the French church, and express his gratitude.[60] Becket also received mounts, clothes, and all other supplies from the French, so that he should be able to return to England in fitting style. According to FitzStephen, after taking a most affectionate and loving leave of Louis, Becket said to him; 'We are going to England to gamble for our heads', to which Louis replied 'So it seems to me. Indeed, my lord archbishop, if you trust me, do not trust your king without having received the kiss of peace. Stay in France. While King Louis lives, you shall not lack for food or wine, or all the riches of France'. Becket said only 'God's will be done' and the two parted in floods of tears. There is no need to regard this, either, as a reversal of Louis' considered policy. It was no more than an impulsive generous gesture, fully justified by events.[61]

Once peace had been made between Henry and Becket, Alexander III used the archbishop as a diplomatic intermediary with Louis. He asked him to find the king's advice on those who were opposing the church in Macon[62] and Louis was also closely involved in the matter of the prelates censured by Alexander for the illicit coronation of the young king. Probably with reference

to this, Alexander begged Louis to observe all excommunications, which were the basis of ecclesiastical discipline, and to cause them to be observed throughout his kingdom.[63] The pope even went so far as to order Becket to act by Louis' advice over the censured prelates, and to publish or suppress papal bulls of excommunication as Louis thought best. The king, characteristically, gave advice designed to keep open as many options as possible, and avoid offending Henry.[64] .

The last episode in the relationship between Becket himself and Louis VII was the latter's reaction to the murder. It was prompt and unequivocal. From the pope he demanded immediate and condign vengeance on those who had 'stricken to the heart this child of Christ, and put out the light of the church of Canterbury not so much cruelly as obscenely'.[65] In this profoundly emotional letter, Louis speaks of the archbishop's martyrdom having already been confirmed, though the letter must have been written before 29th January, 1171.

The murder was a failure for Louis' policy, as well as an emotional shock. His biographer, M. Pacaut, sums up policy as a desire not to 'souffler sur le feu' of the conflict.[66] But this is hardly strong enough. Louis was more deeply committed to the peace of the church than was compatible with mere neutrality. All through the exile he made positive moves to end Becket's strife with his master. The intensity of those efforts was certainly affected by the state of his relations with Henry at any given moment, but it was rather the manner of his diplomacy than the policy that changed. True, the peace of the church served Louis' secular interests, but he sought it for his own sake. There is little in his conduct to justify the aspersions cast on his loyalty by various members of Becket's household, John of Salisbury in particular. They were right to doubt him only in so far as he considered the interests of the church as a whole, rather than the partisan line of the archbishop's entourage. It was entirely

appropriate that, as Mlle. Foreville has shown, Becket's cult became so closely associated with that of St. Denis, [67] and that Louis should have received the posthumous aid of the saint for his son's illness[68] when he visited England and the shrine in 1179, the only reigning king of France to do so voluntarily in the Middle Ages.

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THOMAS BECKET AND FRANCE

It is often assumed that in the struggle between Becket and Henry II, the role of the French king, Louis VII, was to seek diplomatic advantage rather than reconciliation.

In this lecture, one of the series given in honour of the late William Urry, Mr Franklin shows that the truth is both different and more complex. With the papacy in schism, Louis faced the possibility that Henry might cease his support for pope Alexander VII and take the whole of western France into the 'other obedience'. In this precarious situation, Becket often found himself, during the six years of exile in France that preceded his murder, at the focal point of contemporary statecraft.

Yet, as Mr Franklin convincingly demonstrates, Louis' attitude toward Becket was dictated by personal emotion as well as diplomatic calculation. He saw Becket as 'an exile for justice and the liberty of the church'. Louis' overmastering passion was to preserve the peace of the church – an objective which he believed he saw more clearly than the pope himself. In line with this concern and with his deep-rooted esteem for Becket, he strove continually to resolve the conflict between archbishop and king.

Skilfully as Mr Franklin unravels a tangled web of diplomacy, some readers will value this account primarily for the fascinating sidelights it throws on medieval personalities and society. We see, for instance, Louis at one moment suggesting to Becket that he is trying to be 'holier than the saints, and greater than Peter'; and then, only a little later, throwing himself at Becket's feet in self-abasement. The reason for this amazing reversal seems to be found in the murmurings of the populace, 'That is the archbishop who yesterday refused to deny God for the sake of kings'. At this point, as at others, this lecture reveals much about the nature and limits of power, whether of Church or State, in the middle ages.

Robert Franklin is a master at Eton College, and a former Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford.

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