

36. SS. Edmund Campion, Robert Southwell and Companions

Of the ten martyr saints whose feast is celebrated on this day, the first eight are Englishmen, the other two Welshmen. All ten of them were hanged, drawn and quartered, except Bro. Nicholas Owen, who died under torture. All except Frs. Campion and Briant were condemned under the Statutory Act, passed by Elizabeth I in 1585 A.D., which made it high treason for a priest (and specifically for a Jesuit) to be within the Queen's Dominions. Campion and Briant died under the shadow of the Acts of Persuasion of 1581, which declared it high treason (always punishable by death) to reconcile or be reconciled to the Catholic Faith.

The Jesuit mission to England began with the arrival of Edmund Campion and Robert Persons in 1580; and it was Campion, in his famous *Brag* or manifesto to the Queen's Privy Council circulated within a month of his arrival, who described succinctly 'the scope of our vocation' in terms of the English mission:

And touching our Society, be it known to you that we have made a league – all the Jesuits in the world, whose succession and multitude must overreach all the practices of England – cheerfully to carry the cross you shall lay upon us, and never to despair your recovery, while we have a man left to enjoy your Tyburn, or to be racked with your torments or consumed with your prisons. The expense is reckoned, the enterprise is begun; it is of God, it cannot be withstood. So the faith was planted; so it must be restored'.

Almost a hundred years separates the martyrdoms of St. Edmund Campion (1581) and St. David Lewis (1679), the first and the last Jesuits to be executed during the long persecution known as the English Reformation. (Six other Jesuits, imprisoned for their priesthood, died through ill-treatment between 1679 and 1692.) What unites them along with their common vocation is the cause and constancy of their witness

unto blood. Let David Lewis, speaking from the scaffold, speak for all:

'A Roman Catholic I am; a Roman Catholic priest I am: a Roman Catholic priest of that religious Order called the Society of Jesus I am; and I bless the hour in which I was first called both unto faith and function. Please now to observe, I was condemned for saying Mass, hearing Confessions, administering the Sacraments.'

The reality of apostolic community

They were united, too, in their deep understanding of apostolic religious life. Though each of them was endowed with outstanding qualities of leadership – such was the influence of Bro. Nicholas Owen on Catholic laymen that his entry into the Society had to be kept secret, lest the Provincial be inundated by enthusiastic but unsuitable applications to join the Society as brothers – their high sense of personal responsibility and initiative depended on the obdiential relationship to give it true definition. When Edmund Campion parted from his superior Robert Persons for the last time (he had made his manifestation of conscience and renewed his vows), he asked Persons to make Bro. Ralph Emerson his superior during a journey to Norfolk. (It was Emerson's reluctant agreement to the insistence of the family at Lyford Grange that he and Campion should extend their stay which resulted in Campion's capture.) Nothing was allowed to interfere with their six-monthly meetings – a time of withdrawal for prayer and contemplation, for general confession and manifestation, for planning together the strategy and tactics of the apostolate – not even the terrible priest-hunts started after the arrival of the Spanish Armada (1588) and after the Gunpowder Plot (November, 1605). Sometimes these community meetings were even held in prison, as on the occasion when St. Henry Morse made his final profession in London's Newgate Gaol. It would be hard to conceive of anyone lasting on the English Mission without a highly developed sense of self-preservation and personal initiative; and yet, as John Gerard (fellow-missioner

with Robert Southwell, Thomas Garnet, Henry Walpole and Nicholas Owen) testifies:

'Regularly twice every year all of us come together to give him (the superior) our six-monthly account of conscience and offer our Lord Jesus the renewal of our vows. As I can bear witness, this good custom of the Society was a great help to the others . . . I never found anything that did me more good. It braced my soul to meet all the obligations of my life as a Jesuit and meet all the demands made of a priest on the mission.'

Robert Southwell himself writes in similar vein:

'We have all together, with much comfort, renewed the vows of the Society according to our custom, spending some days in exhortations and spiritual colloquy. *Aperimus ora et attraximus spiritum.*'

The formation of the Jesuit apostle

Southwell saw in these community meetings 'the beginnings of a religious life set on foot in England'. And indeed, men like Henry Morse, David Lewis and Philip Evans had experience of this life in its maturity. Though Philip Evans was only 35 when he was martyred, he had been a Jesuit for 15 years. David Lewis worked on the Welsh mission for 31 years, and for the last 10 was the Superior of a community of twelve Jesuit priests. St. Henry Morse lived for 21 years as a Jesuit. His novitiate seems to have been the ideal combination of periods of withdrawal and 'formative activity'. Already a priest with mission experience, he spent the first months in a Newcastle 'retreat-house', organised for the Jesuits by the Catholics of the district: study and quiet were interspersed with ministering to the Catholics of the neighbourhood. Then his Superior decided that he should finish his novitiate abroad – a period of complete withdrawal. The Superior's command was obeyed, but not in the way intended. At the start of the journey, Henry Morse was captured, and he finished his novitiate in the seclusion of a Newcastle prison – with a Jesuit fellow-prisoner appointed as his novice-master.

Schola Affectus

The foul English prisons of the 16th and 17th centuries proved ideal novitiates, both for entry into the Society and into the Kingdom of Heaven. It was there that these ten men, one after the other, became apt scholars in the *schola affectus*, where they enjoyed their most intense consolations and achieved that personal union with Christ Our Lord of which martyrdom is the supreme sign. So Alexander Briant, who suffered and died a novice, tortured more severely perhaps than any other martyr, learned in prison the meaning of the motto *sub vexillo crucis Deo militare*. After his torture and during long days in solitary confinement, he made himself a little wooden cross and sketched on it in charcoal the image of his crucified Lord. When asked to put it aside at his trial, he replied: 'Never will I do so, for I am a soldier of the Cross, nor will I henceforth desert this standard until death.'

Prison was the obvious place to make and to direct the *Spiritual Exercises*, as John Gerard testifies frequently in his *Autobiography*. Briant contemplated the Passion of his Master on the rack; and so powerful was the sweetness and consolation of the Spirit that his body for a time ceased to feel any pain. Edmund Arrowsmith also entered the Society in prison; and his earliest biographer, writing two years after his death, says of him in this context: 'He was resolved to make a full sacrifice of himself, he determined to reserve nothing of himself, not even his own will, offering himself to God by religious vows, making the self-denial, which the perfection of the religious state required, a preparation for his future martyrdom'. It is Arrowsmith, too (he took the name 'Edmund' at his confirmation out of his devoted love for Edmund Campion), who offered his own paraphrase of the *Sume et Suscipe* on the scaffold:

'O Jesus, my life and my glory, I cheerfully restore the life which I have received from thee, and were it not thy gift, would not be mine to return. I have ever desired, O God of my soul, to resign my life to thee and for thee. The loss of life for thy sake, I own my advantage . . . I die for the love of thee'.

John Gerard, imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1597, speaks of this same love-longing in the heart of Henry Walpole, who had occupied the same cell two years previously and had laboriously inscribed the names of Jesus, Mary and the nine angelic choirs on the wall: Walpole, the courtier, huntsman and poet, who had written:

The falconer seeks to see a flight,
The hunter seeks to see his game.
Long thou, my soul, to see that sight
And labour to enjoy the same.

Contemplation and action

This love of God, this longing to spend oneself totally for him, is the special characteristic of all these Jesuit martyrs. It is, perhaps, the only satisfactory explanation of how the seemingly impossible Jesuit ideal – *contemplativus usque ad actionem* – can be lived in practice. It finds its most exquisite expression in these lines from Robert Southwell's poem on *The Nativity*:

Gift better than himself God doth not know,
Gift better than his God no man can see;
This gift doth here the giver given bestow,
Gift to this gift let each receiver be.
God is my gift, himself he freely gave me,
God's gift am I, and none but God shall have me.

The apostolic love wedded to affective contemplation (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5) must be for the Jesuit a discerning love. The access of the prison-cell was the Spirit's own introduction to this discernment. So Thomas Garnet wrote to his Superior from gaol, begging him to dissuade a group of friends who were planning to secure his escape. Thomas had for a while entertained this idea – there was so much to do for God and for men's salvation. But there seemed to be an inner voice urging him to the contrary: 'no, endure, persevere, do not yield to so unprofitable an exchange. In one hour, by dying, more will be achieved for the common good than in many years of labour'. From this love-longing flows the *hilaritas* so dear to the

heart of Ignatius. The martyrs of the English Reformation are famed for their joy and humour. None typifies this spirit better than the Welsh Jesuit, St. Philip Evans, who, on hearing the news of his execution, sat down to the harp his gaoler had lent him to express his joy in song. A huge crowd assembled to see him 'turned off', and he remarked cheerfully that the gallows was the best pulpit a man ever had to preach from.

These ten Jesuits saints were amongst a group of forty English and Welsh martyrs canonized by Pope Paul VI on 25 October 1970. In his homily the Holy Father said:

'The Church and the world of today have a consummate need of men and women like these in every state and walk of life: priests, religious and lay folk. It is only persons of this calibre, this holiness, who are capable of transforming our tormented world, of giving it that peace, that truly spiritual and Christian direction, which every man so longs for in his heart, even when he is unaware of it: the peace and true direction which we all desire so much.'

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