

THE ENGLISH FRANCISCAN MARTYRS

The text of a talk given by Fr Nicholas Schofield, Archivist of the Archdiocese of Westminster, on Sunday, 24th June 2007, at Christ Church Greyfriars (the site of London's medieval Franciscan house).

If we were standing here in 1507 rather than 2007, the first thing you would have noticed was the smell. It's no accident that a nearby street was called Stinking Lane (now King Edward Street) because this was the butchers' quarter, and it was consequently considered a rather undesirable area.

Just the sort of place, you might think, for the humble sons of St Francis, who established a house here in 1225. They soon attracted the attention of many rich benefactors and a large church was built in the first quarter of the fourteenth century: 300 feet long and boasting at least eleven chapels. The rose garden, on the other side of the tower, roughly occupies the site of the choir of this church. Where we are standing now was the nave; so we would not have been in the open air but in a large gothic church, near the altars of the Holy Cross, St Mary and St Louis.

Two Queens of England were buried in the church: Marguerite of France, second wife of Edward I, and Isabella, widow of the unfortunate Edward II. These two Queens spent the princely sum of £2,100 on the choir of the church alone. The heart of Eleanor of Provence, wife of Henry III, was also interred here. This shows the great prestige that came to be attached to the London Greyfriars. And if we remember that this was just one of 73 Franciscan houses in pre-Reformation England, we can appreciate the Order's importance in this country.

Of course, the London Greyfriars has long disappeared. The friary was emptied at the Reformation and the great medieval church and much of the monastery buildings (later used by Christ's Hospital) were destroyed in the Great Fire of London (1666). Christopher Wren's smaller replacement church was itself destroyed in the Blitz of 1940 – its remains now form the walls of the rose garden. But, if the buildings and friars themselves have gone, the memories linger. For the next few minutes, I invite you to pause and listen to the voice of the past.

The community here at the London Greyfriars did not provide any martyrs at the time of Henry VIII's break with Rome. But it is worth remembering that the Franciscan Order provided perhaps the strongest opposition to the King's divorce. As early as 1534, just as the crisis was breaking, two friars, Richard Risby and Hugh Rich, were executed alongside the 'Holy Nun', Elizabeth Barton, a visionary who had attacked the King's divorce 'in the name and by the authority of God'.

Another Franciscan to suffer for the Faith, Blessed John Forest, belonged to the Observant friary at Greenwich and was placed here under house arrest for several years. His house was strict and also highly influential, since it was next door to the royal palace at Greenwich. It was in the Franciscan church there that the future Henry VIII was baptised; as were all three of his children, the future Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I. It was (probably) there that Henry married Catherine of Aragon. In 1513 the King had praised the Observants in a letter to Pope Leo X, saying that he could not sufficiently commend the Observant Friars' strict adherence to poverty, their sincerity, charity and devotion. How things would change!

It is little surprising that the Observants of Greenwich were so closely involved in opposing the

King's divorce. This placed them in grave danger. The Warden, William Peto, preached a sermon to the Court condemning the King's divorce and predicting that black dogs would lick the blood of Henry, like King Ahab in the Old Testament. This was supposedly fulfilled fifteen years later as the King's body was taken to Windsor. Peto, unsurprisingly, had to escape to the continent, though, it is worth mentioning, he returned in Mary Tudor's reign and was even named a Cardinal in 1557.

Blessed John Forest was less fortunate. He had acted as one of the confessors of Catherine of Aragon, who herself was a Franciscan Tertiary, and he was forthright in his opposition. After several years of imprisonment, he was tried for denying the Oath of Supremacy and condemned to death. On 22 May 1538 he was brought to Smithfield, not far from where we are standing now. A large crowd had gathered, including the bishop of London, the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk and the Lord Mayor. Forest made a brave confession of faith; according to one bystander:

That if an angel should come down from Heaven and show him any other thing than he had believed all his lifetime past he would not believe him, and that if his body should be cut joint after joint or member after member, burnt, hanged, or what pain soever might be done to his body, he would never turn from his old sect of this Bishop of Rome.

They hanged him from the gibbet, with a chain placed around his waist. They then lit a fire and placed on it a statue of a Welsh saint, Derfel Gadarn. Curiously, according to tradition, it had been predicted that this venerated statue would one day 'set a Forest on fire'. 'The holy man', we read, 'beat his breast with his right hand, and then raised both his hands to Heaven and said many prayers in Latin, his last spoken words being, Domine, miserere mei: and when the fire reached his breast he spoke no more and gave up his soul to God'.

Many other Franciscans were placed in prison at this time – as many as two hundred, fifty of whom died in captivity. A few of these have been recognised by the Church, including the Venerable Anthony Brookby, a former Oxford lecturer who spoke against the King's Supremacy and was imprisoned, tortured and eventually strangled in prison, the executioner using Brookby's Franciscan girdle.

The English Franciscans continued, based in houses overseas, and many of them returned to England as missionaries; some paid the ultimate price. Two of them were included among the Forty Martyrs: the Welshman, St John Jones, who suffered in Southwark in 1598, and St John Wall, martyred in 1679, a victim of the hysteria following the Titus Oates Plot.

There is no time to look at all the Franciscan Martyrs individually, but I thought we might look at the group of English Friars who suffered in the 1640s: Blessed Thomas Bullaker, Arthur Bell, Henry Heath and John Woodcock. All of these, except Bullaker, were members of the newly founded English Franciscan House at Douai.

This group of witnesses were captured in different ways. Blessed Thomas Bullaker was apprehended while saying Mass in London – he had just reached the Gloria and was taken away in his vestments. Blessed Arthur Bell was arrested in Stevenage, Hertfordshire. As he was being interrogated, one of the soldiers exclaimed: 'What! A Roman Catholic?', to which he replied, 'How do you mean Roman? I am an Englishman. There is but one Catholic Church, and of that I am a member'.

Blessed Henry Heath had just arrived in England, disguised as a sailor and had even concealed some Catholic literature in his cap. In the spirit of St Francis, Heath refused an offer of speedy transport to London and chose to walk, begging his way. On the night of his arrival he could find no accommodation and was forced to sleep on a doorstep near London Bridge. When the owner of the house found him sleeping on his property he called the local constable and he was taken into custody. The papers found in his cap betrayed his identity.

All of them met death bravely. As Bullaker was leaving the prison he met Blessed Arthur Bell, who said to him, 'Brother, I was professed before you. Why do you take precedence of me?' Bullaker answered, 'It is the will of God. But you will follow me'. When Bell's turn came a year later, he embraced the executioner. Indeed, he had sung the Te Deum as sentence was passed at court. Woodcock had to endure being hanged twice, because on the first occasion the rope snapped.

There is a beautiful story relating to the martyrdom of Blessed Henry Heath. Several years previously, his aged father, John, visited him in Douai. So impressed was he that he not only converted to Catholicism but decided to remain at Douai as a lay brother. On the day of his son's martyrdom, he saw a brilliant light ascending to Heaven and he knew at that moment that his son had paid the ultimate price. His premonition was proved some time later when the reports reached Douai of Heath's death.

Just as the Franciscans provided some of the first martyrs, such as Blessed John Forest, so they produced some of the last confessors of the Faith. We think not only of St John Wall but the Venerable Francis Levison, who died in prison in 1680 after fourteen months imprisonment; we remember Paul Atkinson, who was perpetually imprisoned for the Faith in Hurst Castle in 1700 and died, still in captivity, 29 years later; we also recall Germanus Holmes, who died in Lancaster Castle in 1746, after the Jacobite rising.

We honour these brave witnesses of the Faith today, as we make this pilgrimage and follow their footsteps, now almost entirely hidden beneath the modern, bustling, secular city.

I said at the beginning that where we now stand was once the smelliest part of London, because of the nearby abbatoir. But now this has been replaced by the powerful odour of the roses in the nearby Greyfriars garden, a place of calm oasis in the midst of this busy city. How appropriate this is, because the blood of the martyrs has sanctified this land and been the seed of the English Catholic Revival for the last 200 years, which we now so take for granted. We do not forget our Martyrs – and we pray that we will imitate their example by courageously bearing witness to the Faith in the face of indifference and open hostility. Let us end with the prayer of the Franciscan, Blessed Henry Heath: 'Jesus, convert England, Jesus, have mercy on this country; O England, be converted to the Lord thy God!'

The Franciscan Martyrs of England and Wales – pray for us!