

Martyrs of England & Wales 2018

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Mass in honour of the martyrs of our Catholic faith.

We can think of the saints as having merited different crowns.
The Doctors, says St FdS, merited their crown by meditation.
The Martyrs, merited their crown by their constancy.

They all gave a clear demonstration of their authentic Christian charity when—on the scaffold—they prayed not only for fellow Catholics, but also for their executioners and for the King or Queen.

This constancy in the defence of the Holy Catholic faith particularly the Primacy of Peter and the Blessed Sacrament is identical in all the 40 Martyrs.

In every other respect, however, they are different as for example in their state in life, social position, education, culture, age, character and temperament,
The group is composed, in fact, of **13 priests of the secular clergy, 3 Benedictines, 3 Carthusians, 1 Brigittine, 2 Franciscans, 1 Augustinian, 10 Jesuits and 7 members of the laity, including 3 mothers.**

Before their execution the Martyrs were usually cruelly tortured, to make them reveal the names of any accomplices in their "crime", which was having celebrated Holy Mass, having attended it or having given shelter to priests.

The history of their martyrdom makes varied and stimulating reading not without a touch of typically English humour.

Despite all of the atrocious torments they surrendered themselves to God's will, and as a direct consequence they were filled with a holy joy a peace.

So that will be the theme of my sermon today: the joy of the martyrs, and how we should imitate their joy.

Cuthbert Mayne, a secular priest, replied to a jailor who came to tell him he would be executed three days later: "I wish I had something valuable to give you, for the good news you bring me...".

Edmund Campion, a Jesuit, was so pleased when taken to the place of execution that the people said about him and his companions: "But they're laughing! He doesn't care at all about dying...". His blood splattered on the coat of a bystander, **Henry Walpole**, who himself later one the crown of martyrdom.

Ralph Sherwin, the first of the martyrs from the English College in Rome had heavy chains round his ankles that rattled at every step he took. "*I have on my feet*—he wrote wittily to a

friend of his—*some bells that remind me, when I walk, who I am and to whom I belong. I have never heard sweeter music than this...*" He was executed immediately after Campion; he piously kissed the executioner's hands, still stained with the blood of his fellow martyr.

Alexander Briant—the diocesan priest who entered the Society of Jesus shortly before his death—had made himself a little wooden cross during his imprisonment, and held it clasped tightly between his hands all the time, even during the trial. It was then, however that they snatched it away from him. But he replied to the judge: "You can take it out of my hands, but not out of my heart".

Catholic priests managed to exercise the ministry thanks to the precious collaboration of the faithful, who welcomed them and kept them hidden in their homes and facilitated the celebration of Holy Mass. As can well be understood, now and again some one would betray them. The Jesuit laybrother, **Nicholas Owen**, was famous for the many hiding-places he built in numerous houses all over England. Arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London, he died while being brutally tortured.

What is most striking is the serenity with which they all met death. Some of them even made witty, humorous remarks.

Thus, for example the Benedictine; **John Roberts**, seeing that a fire was being lit to burn his entrails—after hanging and quartering—made the sally: "I see you are preparing us a hot breakfast!".

The martyrdom of **Margaret Clitherow** is particularly moving. She was accused "of having sheltered the Jesuits and priests of the secular clergy, traitors to Her Majesty the Queen"; but she retorted: "I have only helped the Queen's friends".

Her arms were stretched out in the shape of a cross, and her hands tightly bound to two stakes in the ground. The executioners put a sharp stone the size of a fist under her back and placed on her body a large slab onto which weights were gradually loaded up to over 800 pounds. Margaret whispered: "Jesus, have mercy on me". Her death agony lasted for fifteen minutes, then the moaning ceased, and all was quiet.

These brief remarks on some outstanding episodes of the martyrdom of the 40 Martyrs, and the quoting of some of the words they uttered at the gallows, are sufficient to show what was the ultimate reasons for their death and, at the same time, the sublimely Christian state of mind of these heroes of the faith.

So what can we draw from this?

Blessed are ye when they shall revile you and persecute you... be glad and rejoice.

Suffering yes, but not sadness – joy nonetheless.

A serene suffering for love of God does not equate to misery. Joy which comes from God.

Trust in Divine Providence. This of course does not exclude us doing our duty. Do our duty on the one hand, but Trust in God's Providence on the other.

Wherever God puts us, there is some good we can be doing.

Always something we can be doing well. Time is short. Let us use it well.

At home, in the church, in the workplace, with friends.

Even if we are in the world, we ultimately have God for master – and do everything in light of his commandments.

Like the martyrs, God's honour must be above all worldly honour: wealth, popularity, esteem, success

To conclude:

Their lives an example that sanctity can be obtained in every state in life.

And we all have the Sacred duty to love God above all things.

Whatever we have to suffer we can remain serene and at peace.

So in these troubled times, let us these 40 Holy Martyrs with all our intentions.

Faith of our fathers, holy faith, we will be true to thee till death.

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