The Triple Crown

Saint Robert Southwell, S.J. Poet, Priest, Martyr

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Robert Southwell was beatified in 1929 and canonized by Pope Paul VI as one of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales on 25 October 1970

In 1966 I wrote:

Interest in the English Martyrs has probably never been greater than it is at the moment, and hopes for their Canonization run high. Among that band of heroic souls who passed, as one of them put it, “through the terrible ‘Red Sea’ of death” were men and women of every condition of life: married and unmarried, layfolk and religious, secular priests and priests of a variety of religious orders, members of the nobility and commonfolk. All of them died, ultimately, for the unity of the Church which gives their blood a voice of appeal to which our day, more than any other since their death, is prepared to listen. All of those who died spoke our language and were formed in a way of life from which our own derives — which gives us an understanding of, and a nearness to them which is, perhaps, not so easily captured in regard to other Saints.

To represent this varied band, we have chosen St. Robert Southwell, Poet, Priest and Martyr. As a martyr he reminds us that what has drawn these so diverse men and women into a single band, united among themselves and separated from their contemporaries, is their common death in a common cause; as a priest he reminds us that it was around the very survival of the priesthood and the Sacrifice it offers that the conflict principally raged; as a poet he has not only enriched our literature but was able to give moving expression to the hopes and fears that like a fever shook the whole Catholic body of his day.

Family Fortunes

The fortunes of the Southwell family were firmly based on the spoils of Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries — the Benedictine priory at Horsham in Norfolk (ironically enough, called St. Faith’s) going to “the King’s true servant”, Sir Richard Southwell. Time was when the young Richard appeared to be anything but the King’s true servant, for he faltered in his duty as false accuser of St. Thomas More. He redeemed himself, however, by playing this role successfully in the case of the Earl of Surrey, the poet. This latter’s grandson, St. Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, was later to be supported in his long imprisonment by Sir Richard’s own grandson, St. Robert Southwell.

New Men, Wealth

Thus Sir Richard early learnt that in those days of new men and new wealth a too-sensitive conscience could leave a man impoverished, nay, impoverish him still further. Morals gave way to means. It is no surprise, therefore, to find him married to an heiress for the continuance of the

family fortunes, but preferring his wife's cousin as the mother of his children for the continuance of the family itself. He married her off to an already married dependant against the day when, his wife being dead, he would convict his henchman of bigamy, and marry his children's mother, having by her a last daughter.

In these philanderings we find the very human agency for the fulfillment of the so-called "Monks' Curse", supposed to fall on anyone who profited from the destruction of the monasteries. For, within a few years of St. Robert's death, litigation between the legitimate and illegitimate branches of the family soon reduced the family fortunes to a mere shadow of their former substance.

Conforming Family

With the restoration of Catholicism under Queen Mary, the Southwell family conformed gracefully enough, as they did later again in the changed circumstances under Queen Elizabeth. They did, it is true, even then retain a Marian priest as a sign of their attachment to the old ways, but he was not called to upset their accommodating consciences.

The father of the future martyr, Richard Southwell, conformed to the new religion. Not so his aunts, daughters of old Sir Richard, who have the distinction of being considered "very dangerous" by the informers among Walsingham's network of spies.

The Third Son

Robert, his father's third son, was born towards the end of 1561, and even as a child achieved a certain amount of local fame. While still an infant in the cradle he was stolen by a gypsy beguiled, as she confessed on being overtaken by the swift pursuit which followed, by the child's beauty. This was not mere flattery designed to soften whatever blows the irate father might have been disposed to deliver. Later, on the continent, Robert was generally referred to as "the beautiful English youth"; and at his trial, his fresh and youthful appearance was still so marked (despite years of imprisonment and 10 cruel rackings) that he was referred to (contemptuously it is true, but that is not the point) as the "boy priest". He was, in fact, then close on 33 years of age.

This kidnapping deeply impressed Robert, told of it no doubt a thousand times by his nurse. Later on, in his spiritual diary, he was to picture what his ready imagination presented to him as the probable outcome of this adventure had he not betimes been rescued. He is listing the more signal mercies shown by God:

"What if I had remained with the vagrant? How abject! How destitute of the knowledge or reverence of God! In what debasement of vice, in what great perils of crimes, in what indubitable risk of a miserable death and eternal punishment I would have been!"

In so sensitive and courteous a soul as his, it was but natural that gratitude to God for his rescue should have included gratitude to the old maidservant whose timely discovery of the kidnapping led to his being recovered. Her he sought out on his first arriving as a priest in England many years later and rewarded her in the way he knew best — reconciling her to the ancient Faith and providing for all the need of her old age.

His Nickname

For some obscure reason, Robert's father gave him the nickname "Father Robert". It is difficult to suggest a plausible reason why. It was certainly not that his father had destined him for the Church; priests were literally a dying race in Elizabethan England. Moreover, Robert was later to remind his

father of this nickname, pointing out that in giving it to him he had spoken more truly than he knew. It may have meant no more than that Robert was rather fond of the old monastery of St. Faith — his father had not yet sold it as he was later forced to do. It had also been suggested that the prophetic nickname referred to the quiet gravity of his disposition. It may be so; but certain it is that he was not always quiet nor always grave. Emulating, no doubt, the indominable spirit of that aunt of his whom he so much admired, he was caught out in some rather indiscreet irreverences uttered about the Queen's regime, and, at the age of 14, found himself carpeted before the, by now, thoroughly inquisitorial Court of Star Chamber. It was high time to leave England.

Illegal Departure

This step, which Robert took in 1576, was not one to be advertised as it was quite illegal. Consequently, how and from what point of the coast he departed for the continent is still a matter for conjecture. A poem he wrote in later life suggests that between the decision to go and the going there was little lapse of time — not even time to return to bid farewell to his mother and the ancestral home. For in the poem, "On the Loss of the Child", Our Lady complains:

How couldst thou go some other where to dwell

And make no stay to bid her once farewell?

The next two years of his life, 1576-1578, were spent attending the Jesuit school at Douai, with six months in Paris. During this period, he several times asked to be admitted into the Society of Jesus. He was deferred each time; perhaps because of some fear that his rather impressionable temperament did not fit him for the life, or perhaps because the unsettled condition of that part of Europe at the time made the future so uncertain. Probably, it was a combination of both circumstances.

Jesuit Novice

Like St. Stanislaus Kostka before him, he set out for Rome to obtain there what had been denied him elsewhere, and was admitted into the novitiate of the Order on 17 October, 1578, shortly before his seventeenth birthday. The two years noviceship ended with his taking vows in 1580 — the year in which St. Edmund Campion and Fr. Robert Parsons left to begin their heroic mission in England.

The landing of Parsons and Campion in England was, indeed, portentous of a new phase in the struggle of Catholicism for survival in England; and tales of accompanying portents on land and in the sky gained easy credence. Ever since, the shadowy figure of Parsons (enigmatic even to the understanding of many Catholics) has stood as the very incarnation of the jesuitical Jesuit; while Campion, in the blaze of his own glory and the aura of his martyrdom, is a glowing symbol of all the English Martyrs. "Jewel of England" as Elizabeth called him, his meteoric career flashed with a fiery brilliance. His elegance of person and urbanity of manner, his brilliance of mind and keenness of wit, the holy swagger of his Brag made him a legend even in his own lifetime.

Southwell was cast in a different mould. Sensitive, even excessively so, and retiring, he lived surrounded by an air more of dedication to sacrifice than by the zest which characterized Campion. He was a lamb led to the slaughter where Campion was an eagle.

Ordination

The years 1580 to 1585 Robert spent in study and in teaching at the English College, being ordained in 1584. During that period, the College passed through one of its great crises when disaffection

(nor the least of it being fomented by saboteurs planted there by Cecil) threatened the extinction of this creation of the genial Pope Gregory XIII. His leisure moments (too few for the task as his superiors eventually pointed out) were spent in compiling and publishing a regular news-letter of the heroic exploits of the Jesuits already in England — their extraordinary escapades and escapes, the good accomplished, the tortures endured, the crowns of martyrdom gained. Not the least exalted but probably the least exultant reader of these news-sheets was Cecil himself, to whom they were regularly sent by his satellites in Rome.

The English Mission

In 1586, Father Robert sought and obtained leave to go himself to the English mission from the Father General of the time, Claude Aquaviva. A man like Southwell was sadly needed in England at the time. Campion, four of his confreres and five secular priests, former pupils of the Jesuits in Rome, were already gloriously dead. With the death of these brilliant and cultured, as well as holy, men, the English Catholics were being starved not only of the Mass and the Sacraments and instruction in their Faith, but also of a native Catholic Literature. To them, no one could be more welcome than Father Southwell, priest and poet.

Father Weston

In the years between Campion's martyrdom and Southwell's arrival in 1586, the most glamorous figure in the English arena was Father William Weston, a man of great holiness and zeal with a positive genius for escaping from awkward situations. He was eventually to die peacefully in Spain; but meanwhile, in England, he endured 17 years imprisonment, including four years solitary confinement in the Tower. One of the greatest services he did the Catholics in England was to save Southwell and his companion, Fr. Henry Garnet, later martyred, from immediate capture on their arrival.

Father Weston is chiefly remembered for the alarming frequency with which he, for a few years, performed exorcisms — to the great distress of the Catholics and the delighted ridicule of the Protestants. Misguided though his practice was, exorcism was then the universal remedy for afflictions whose cause, being unknown, was readily attributed to the devil — especially as the illnesses were in no way physical, but were what we would now call hysteria, mental derangement, obsessions and the rest. Besides, as Father Weston himself said, "Something had to be attempted as much for the sake of those who suffered the affliction as from compassion towards the persons who had them in their houses." What he had in mind was the great likelihood of such sufferers' being hunted down and burnt as witches.

Arrival in England

The ship on which Fathers Garnet and Southwell sailed for England weighed anchor at two o'clock in the morning. Shortly after sunrise, off a lonely stretch of the coast between Dover and Folkstone, the ship's boat was lowered. Robert Southwell was back in England.

To their dismay, they saw their landing being observed with great interest by a man on the high bluff above the beach. He was however, as Father Garnet wrote, "some sort of shepherd and a very honest fellow. He described to us at great length the places round about and the right way to get to them; and he assured us that he felt towards us as if we were his own kith and kin, and this he affirmed with a great oath. So our first adventure was a merry one."

Southwell, too, was soon writing back to Rome:

“At the Queen’s Court they say there is a business in hand which, if it succeeds, will mean ruin for us; but if it fails, all will be well. To the Catholics, however, these are but bugs to frighten children; for they are driven so far already that there is no room left for further cruelty.”

As was so often the case with Southwell’s observations on the times, these words were a very apt description of the tortuous Babington conspiracy that was even then on the point of bursting wide open. How wrong he was in the second opinion he later learned by personal experience when he endured repeated rackings — each of which, he wrote, was worse than death.

Within a month of Southwell’s arrival in England, the Babington conspiracy broke; and Southwell, from the crowd at the foot of the gallows, gave absolution to the first of the butchered.

In Daily Peril

In another letter to his Superior in Rome, Robert has left us a brief but comprehensive picture of his life at this time. “I am devoting myself to sermons, hearing confessions and other priestly duties: hemmed in by daily perils, never safe for a moment.” Dramatic escapes from those human bloodhounds, the persuivants, became a common occurrence; but it was a unique experience to spend an entire week hidden in a priest’s hiding-place (those secret cells so artfully constructed in the wall or under the fireplaces of the great houses) while the persuivants took up residence and searched the place at their leisure.

Not the least important aspect of this subjection to constant stress through ever-present danger was the maturing effect it had on Robert’s own character. In the letter he wrote to Rome from the other side of the Channel when on the point of departing for England there is a note which may not be too strongly described as slightly hysterical. This edge of Europe he calls “death’s ante-room”. It is understandable, of course. He was, after all, not yet 25 years of age, only two years a priest, endowed with a highly sensitive nature and a vivid imagination, and was facing an adventure of enormous consequence. More, he was facing a certain and horrible death: not for nothing was Father General Aquaviva whose sadly heroic duty it was to send priests to the English Mission known in Rome as Lambs-to-the-slaughter Aquaviva. And St. Philip Neri, meeting students from the English College in Rome, would greet them with the first line of the Church’s hymn to the Holy Innocents: “Hail, flowers of martyrdom.”

Under the stress of danger, then, this characteristic in Robert disappears; but never the desire for martyrdom to which he aspired with a calm humility as the supreme opportunity of showing his great love for Christ who first died for love of him.

Countess of Arundel

A cluster of houses in a quiet corner of London presented at that time a miniature of the whole of England. There were to be found the great Protestant houses — that of the Earl of Leicester, Cecil House, Somerset House, and in the midst of them the house of the unhappy, staunchly Catholic, Countess of Arundel. Her husband, St. Philip Howard, still languished in the tower from which he was to find release only in death. The Countess, under the influence of St. Robert, threw off the too-personal grief which had hitherto enveloped her, and took more to heart the plight of the whole Catholic body of England. She invited Robert to live in her house in the midst of the enemy camp. So there came about a situation possible only in a persecuted country. The false witness of Southwell’s grandfather had sent Howard’s grandfather to the gallows. Wiser than their fathers, the

sons, poets both, gave each other all they had: Howard his house to Southwell, Southwell the power of his priesthood and his literary talent to Howard.

The Authentic Church

One of the great tasks of the mission in England was to ensure the continuity of the Church there with that first planted by St. Augustine of Canterbury. If ever the persecution were relaxed, the Church must be in a position to emerge from the catacombs of England as a newly blossoming native growth, not as an exotic transplant from foreign places. It must emerge as the authentic Church of the English tradition and, in its externals, clothed with an English garment as The Authentic Church

The Poet

Since the printing presses of Parson and Campion had been hunted down and destroyed, there had been no native Catholic literature in England; and the beleaguered Catholic body was being starved not only of the life of grace, but also of the graces of intellectual and cultural life. (The impact of Campion's writings. especially his Brag and the Ten Reasons should not be under-estimated.)The time was ripe for a repetition of Campion's and Parson's daring and invigorating experiment; and in the person of this talented poet there was on hand a worthy successor to Campion, one who could repeat, and perhaps surpass, the glories of the latter's.

Brag and Ten Reasons

To obtain and install, without arousing the least suspicion, the presses, type and paper needed for the venture was a Herculean labour. But it was done. In 1587 Robert's first work appeared: "An Epistle of Comfort for those restrained in Durance For the Catholic Faith." It was written primarily for St. Philip Howard in whose house it was composed. It has been praised by critics for "its clarity and rhythmic beauty, glowing with piety like a stained-glass window"; and in it the glory of death and martyrdom is matched with solid controversy.

The murder about this time of Mary, Queen of Scots, gave rise to a poem on one of Robert's favourite themes — "Decease, Release". In it, the Queen is made to say:

Alive a Queen, now dead I am a Saint;
Once Mary called, my name now Martyr is;
From earthly reign debarred by restraint,
In lieu whereof I reign in heavenly bliss.
Rue not my death, rejoice at my repose;
It was no death to me but to my woe;
The bud was opened to let out the rose,
The chains unloosed to let the captive go.

At the same time, the rapidly maturing poet was writing newsletters to Rome containing remarkably accurate and shrewd interpretations of the political scene.

His literary brilliance and attractive personality soon drew to his side a group of brilliant young men from the Universities and the Inns of Court. From them he learnt what he gleefully transmitted to his old friend St. Robert Bellarmine that the undergraduates at the Universities judged the success or failure of their ministers' sermons by whether or not they had the good sense not to try to refute Bellarmine's "Controversies".

Robert soon had plenty of matter for his newsletters; for, following the much-desired failure of the Armada came 33 martyrdoms, including that of Saint Margaret Ward — “a maid”, wrote Southwell, “among a thousand, in whose frail sex shone a courage hard to parallel.”

Missionary Tours

Meanwhile, the dangers of too-long continued residence in any one place and the needs of the Catholics throughout the country sent Robert on missionary tours of England. In them, the desire for Martyrdom, grown too vehement through the introspection pandered to by long confinement in the Arundel house, was moderated to a more controlled resignation.

Over these years, while Robert went about his priestly work, there had been rising to ever greater power the most notorious of the persuivants — Topcliffe, who had performed such sterling service in his chosen profession that he was permitted to maintain in his own house a private rack “for the more convenient examination of prisoners”. It was a variety of rack known as the manacles, and improved on its predecessors in two ways: it was far more painful, and yet left no visible wound or dislocation that would advertise the agony that had been endured upon it. Consequently, when at his “trial” Southwell protested against the barbarity of his torture, Topcliffe was able to challenge him to show the court the scars. “Ask a woman to show her throes (her birth pangs),” Southwell replied. Into the hands of this savage examiner and to the tender mercies of the manacles Robert was soon to be committed.

Proclamation

But before that, he had a final task to perform. In 1591 there appeared from the Queen’s Council a pamphlet called the Proclamation, consisting in the main of a diatribe against priests and Jesuits. In an attempt to rally again the patriotism that had flashed out on the occasion of the Armada, this Proclamation announced that the King of Spain and the Pope were busy at work preparing a new invasion of England. The forerunners of this invasion were the priests who were secretly at work in England. It was hoped, apparently, that a feeling of patriotism might succeed in doing what the persecution was signally failing to do.

Southwell’s answer to the Proclamation was entitled An Humble Supplication, and was addressed to his “Best-beloved Princess”, Queen Elizabeth. The Proclamation, he said, was so coarsely written that he feared the Queen’s name was being abused in being attached to it. She was surely ignorant of it as he was sure she was ignorant of the barbaric tortures inflicted on prisoners in her name. He complained that every incident (even a fire or a quarrel between the apprentices and their employers) was laid at the door of Catholics, without the least pretence at a just investigation, and even when the real agents of the incidents were well known. In refuting the calumnies of the Proclamation, Southwell was wasting his time, for he was mistaken in believing the Queen was not a party to it.

Supplication

But the writing of the Supplication itself was not a futile expense of energy. By acknowledging freely the Queen’s temporal power, Southwell was able to reassure the Catholics that it was indeed for their faith that they were suffering, and was able to show the viciousness of the Act of 1585 on which they were condemned to death. He gave clear evidence that the Catholic body was not responsible for plots against the Queen’s life; that these were, in fact, anti-Catholic forgeries. A voice crying in the wilderness of those bloody times, he makes an impassioned plea for tolerance.

If nothing else, the Supplication is a great piece of literature, rising to powerful heights when he exposes and protests against the sufferings inflicted on Catholics, or when, with powerful imagination he confronts Elizabeth with all her kingly predecessors who, being Catholics, were liable to the same penalties as those her government was inflicting on her loyal subjects who “daily in our lives, and always at our executions, unfeignedly pray for your Majesty.” Robert was a priest, and as a priest he struggled for Elizabeth’s soul:

“If our due care of our country be such that, to rear the least fallen soul among your Majesty’s subjects from a fatal lapse, we are contented to pay our lives for the ransom: how much better should we think them bestowed, if so high a pennyworth as your gracious self, or the whole Realm, might be the gain of our dear purchase.”

Death Warrant

But writing thus he was signing his own death warrant. The hunt for Southwell was intensified and, in the following year, 1592, he was taken. In February of that year, Fr. Garnet had written in desperation:

“There is simply nowhere left to hide.”

But it was not the thoroughness of the hunt that led to Southwell’s capture, but betrayal by a Catholic.

Among the many Catholic families to whom Southwell had ministered was that of the Bellamys in Middlesex. Their staunch adherence to the Faith was notorious, but the house seemed to bear a charmed existence and no priest was ever captured there.

One of the daughters of the house, Anne, a woman of 29, was committed to prison towards the end of January, and, soon afterwards, was found to be pregnant by Topcliffe. To cover his guilt, to capture Southwell and to provide an estate for the prison keeper (to whom he intended marrying Anne) Topcliffe wove a plot which would accomplish all three together. It proved successful at the cost of life to three men and two women, and the ruin of several others.

In June, Anne was sent back to her Father’s house from where she sent for Southwell to come in his capacity as a priest. Southwell duly arrived, said Mass and preached. He was to leave the following morning. At midnight the persuivants arrived, led by Topcliffe. With him was a young man named Fitzherbert who had offered Topcliffe three thousand pounds to eliminate all the members of the family who stood between him and the family estate. Three years later, Topcliffe was suing Fitzherbert for failure to keep the contract. Even in those days, stomachs were not strong enough for that, and it was the end of Topcliffe’s career — who rather ungraciously remarked that it was enough to make Father Southwell’s bones dance for joy.

Arrest

Realizing that the hunt was up, and to save his host’s property from destruction, Southwell left his hiding place and faced the old man. Topcliffe asked, “Who are you?” Southwell replied, “A gentleman.”

This was one thing Topcliffe was not and he hurled a stream of abuse at Southwell, ending with the words, “Priest! Traitor! Jesuit!” “Ah,” replied Southwell mildly, “but that is what you have to prove.” In a fury, Topcliffe drew his sword and rushed upon Southwell, but was restrained by his

henchmen. The arrest was made. “The Goliath of the Papists’ was taken to Topcliffe’s house, and the Queen heard the news “with unwonted merriment”.

Torture

In the few weeks that he was in the house, Southwell was put to the manacles 10 times. The pain is akin to that of crucifixion; and it is no surprise to hear him declare under oath that he would have found death preferable.

The purpose of the torture was to obtain incriminating evidence against suspected Catholics. It failed dismally.

Cecil, no sentimentalist, declared:

Let antiquity boast of its Roman heroes and the patience of captives in torments: our own age is not inferior to it, nor do the minds of the English cede to the Romans. There is at present confined one Southwell, a Jesuit, who. thirteen times most cruelly tortured, cannot be induced to confess anything, not even the colour of the horse whereon on a certain day he rode, lest from such indication his adversaries might conjecture in what house, or in company of what Catholics, he that day was.

Imprisonment

Southwell was then transferred to the Gatehouse prison, where he had for his keeper the husband of the woman who had betrayed him.

There for some weeks, exhausted and emaciated, he lay in his own filth, unable even to brush from his body the maggots which swarmed upon him.

By the end of July, his plight was such that his father (whom Robert had reconciled on his first coming to England) petitioned the Queen that he either suffer death if he were guilty of death, or else be better lodged.

Southwell was therefore moved to the Tower, the Queen remembering, perhaps, that his mother had been a childhood friend of hers.

Two and a half years of solitary confinement in the Tower, with the Bible and the works of St. Bernard as his only companions, were all that stood between Robert and his reward. They were long years to a man who had written:

Who lives in love loves least to live
And long delay doth rue
If Him he love by Whom he live
To Whom all love is due;
Who for our love did choose to live
And was content to die,
Who loved our love more than His life
And love with life did buy.
And again:
Not where I breathe but where I love, I live;
Not where I love but where I am, I die:

The life I wish must future glory give;
The death I feel in present dangers lie.

Without the Mass, without companions, Robert nevertheless had occasional visitors.

The tough Lieutenant of the Tower was charmed by the gentleness and gaiety of his prisoner, and ever afterwards spoke of him as “the saint, that blessed Father.”

On one occasion, St. Philip Howard’s pet dog strayed to his cell; Southwell gave the dog his blessing to carry back to his master. Less welcome guests were the members of the Privy Council who came again and again with their persistent questionings.

The thirty months that he lay in the Tower must have seemed an eternity to Southwell; and, indeed, there is little reason to suppose that they would have ended in any way but with his death in prison had not his own action provoked a different outcome. Southwell had learned patience, observing that Times go by Turns:

Not always fall of leaf nor ever spring,
Not endless night yet not eternal day;
The saddest birds a season find to sing,
The roughest storm a calm may soon allay;
Thus with succeeding turns God tempereth all,
That man may hope to rise yet fear to fall.

He had also learned to moderate his desire for martyrdom as long as he was performing a useful ministry with his writing, his secret press, his missionary journeys throughout England.

The Trial

But now he seemed to be suspended midway between earth and heaven. He determined to win the one or the other; and in 1594 asked to be brought to trial, Cecil replied that if he was in so much haste to be hanged he should have his desire.

Fortified with the first cup of wine he had tasted in two years, and “decayed in memory” as he said “from long imprisonment”, he faced his judges to give one of those exhibitions of gaiety, wit, shrewdness and courage which the martyrs on trial invariably turned on for the benefit of the real jury, the people of England. Asked would he be tried “by God and your country”, Robert replied: “By God and by you; for I would not lay upon my country the guilt of my condemnation.” Asked his age he replied: “I think I am near the age of Our Saviour who lived upon earth thirty-three years.” Topcliffe could not appreciate the subtlety of the answer, and accused Southwell of blasphemy, thereby unwittingly underlining the point of Southwell’s answer. Topcliffe’s interjections were unlucky; they gave Southwell the chance to raise the question of torture. Topcliffe blustered: “If he were racked, let me die for it.” “No,” replied Southwell,” but you have another kind of torture” (the manacles). Topcliffe: “Show the marks of your torture.” Southwell: “Ask a woman to show her throes (her birth pangs).” Topcliffe talked at great length, trying to clear himself. “Thou art a bad man,” said Southwell, and left it at that.

Topcliffe made one more interjection before being silenced by the judges. “I would blow you all to pieces,” he shouted. “What, ALL?” quirked Robert, “Soul and body too?” The smile that no doubt accompanied this sally which, among other things, neatly turned Topcliffe’s earlier accusation of blasphemy back on his own head, faded from Robert’s lips as he recognized his next accuser, Anne

Bellamy. Her evidence (which Robert could have discredited had he been willing to expose her infamy) was used in an attempt to show that Southwell had taught the lawfulness of perjury. His reply was, by a parable, to ensnare the Court into admitting his position or to appear disloyal subjects of the Queen.

The Verdict

The jury retired, and in a quarter of an hour returned with their verdict of guilty. While the judge paused to deliver his sentence, Topcliffe again become vocal, calling out to the crowded hall: “I found him hidden in the tylles (tiles).” With a fine blend of humility, humour and scorn, Southwell replied: “It was time to hide when Mr. Topcliffe came.” The expected sentence was passed; Southwell was to be hanged, drawn and quartered.

Dawn of the following day came at last. His keeper summoned Southwell who embraced him and gave him his cap — a souvenir the Protestant keeper valued highly, declining all Catholic offers to buy it.

As he was tied to the hurdle, on which he was to be dragged to the gallows, he exclaimed: “How great a preferment (promotion) for so base a servant”, as he thought of those who had gone this way before him.

A young woman, related to him, fell on her knees in the mud beside him and asked his blessing. He gave it, saying, “Dear cousin, I thank thee; and I pray thee, pray for me.” Arriving at the scaffold, and released from the hurdle, he wiped the mud from his face and flung the handkerchief as a parting gesture to Father Garnet whom he saw in the crowd below.

The Hanging

After he had spoken to the crowd, declaring his innocence and proclaiming his faith, he prayed, as did all the Martyrs, for the Queen. The noose was fitted around his neck. It slipped, was refitted and this time held. His last words as, slowly strangling, he made the sign of the Cross were, “Into thy hands, O Lord...” The butchering known as quartering was, by law, performed while the half-strangulated man was still alive and conscious. The Sergeant, therefore, stepped forward to cut him down and have the quartering proceeded with, but the powerful Protestant nobleman, Lord Mountjoy, who was standing by, waved him back, and the crowd roared its approval. Seeing the Sergeant hesitate, the Sheriff himself stepped forward drawing his sword to cut the rope; but he, too, stopped when the crowd roared its hostility. The hangman, taking his cue from the mood of the spectators, mercifully took the Martyr by the legs and leant with his full weight. When he felt the body go limp, he gently lowered it to the block.

The quarterer went to work. It is said that as the butcher held the Martyr’s heart aloft in his hand it seemed to jump from his grasp, as if anxious to join its fellow members of the Martyr’s body, already reeking in the cauldron.

The name of Blessed (now Saint) Robert Southwell headed the list of the 21 Jesuit priests and one brother who were among the 136 English Martyrs beatified by Pope Pius XI on 15 December, 1929. All of this great muster had suffered for the Faith between the years 1594 and 1679. Ten other martyrs, five Jesuit priests led by Blessed (now Saint) Edmund Campion and five secular priests, who died between the years 1573 and 1582 had already been beatified by Pope Leo XIII on 29

December, 1886. The only Catholic to suffer judicial execution for his faith during the Reformation period in Scotland was the Jesuit priest Blessed (now Saint, canonized in 1976,) John Ogilvie, Martyred at Glasgow in 1615 and beatified by Pius XI on 29 November, 1929. The Feast of Saint Robert Southwell and Companions is kept in Jesuit churches on 21 February; that of Saint Edmund Campion and Companions on 1 December. Both these Saints and their 38 companions are now remembered as the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales on 25 October.
