Saint John Fisher

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DURING his long reign, King Henry VIII had no nobler subject than John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester. In that Renaissance age of elaborate compliments, when the turn of a phrase was thought more important than its truth, John Fisher's speech sounds by comparison direct, almost brusque. It seems natural that he should have come from Yorkshire, from Beverley in the heart of the plain, which stretches eastward to the broad waters of the Humber.

To this day, the old town, clustering round the mass of its lovely Minster, retains much of the appearance it wore in 1469, when a son was born to Robert and Agnes Fisher. His father soon died, and he was brought up by his mother and her second husband, Thomas White, a merchant. They gave him the best education Beverley could provide and the boy proved himself a brilliant pupil at the local grammar school; so much so, that when he was fourteen he was sent to Cambridge, a lanky lad with a serious face. We have no contemporary description of him at this age, but his later writings show that he was already more than a precocious book-worm. When he was a prisoner in the Tower, after years at the University, in the household of the greatest lady in the land, as Bishop and member of the King's Council, none of these experiences seem to have made so deep an impression on his mind as the sight of a blackthorn blossoming in May, of parched grass springing green again with the first heavy shower, of a huntsman treading the fallows, running over hedges and creeping through thick bushes while he calls all the day long upon his dogs.

To the end of his life, John Fisher was a countryman as well as a scholar. And, since the child is father of the man, we may endow him, even so early, with another quality, that of straightforwardness, an almost childlike consistency, a sturdy honesty, which the Scriptures call single-eyed. It would have made him harsh, or at least hard, had it not been allied to the tenderest piety towards Our Lord and Our Lady and God's poor. Of Our Lady, he could write: "Therefore let us go into this mild morning, with our Blessed Lady, the Virgin Mary." (Note: The English of these quotations has been modernized wherever it seemed advisable.) And his words are always full of understanding when they treat of the life of the poor: "The labourer when he is at plough tilling his ground, and when he goes to his pastures to see his cattle, or when he is sitting at home by the fireside, or else when he lies in bed waking and cannot sleep... And the poor women also in their business, when they be spinning of their staffs or serving of their poultry (are still beloved of God)."

Such was the youth who set out southwards along the Roman road in 1483, making for Cambridge through Lincoln and Peterborough and Ely. His career in the University was all that the most optimistic of his grammar school masters could have hoped. During the fag-end of a futile civil-war, he busied himself with his prayers and his studies in complete calm, taking his degrees with distinction, rising in the Sacrament of Orders to the priesthood, until at the age of thirty-four he was already Vice-Chancellor of the University, after having been elected Master of Michael House and Proctor.

Cambridge owes him an immense debt for those years of service. Nor did the service cease with his appointment to the See of Rochester. Compared with the University life of Oxford at the beginning of the Sixteenth century, Cambridge was neglected and almost a backwater. But John Fisher influenced Royal patronage to establish Christ's College on the old foundation of God's House, to implement the revenues of Queen's College, and of King's, and to found Saint John's. He used the opportunity of framing their statutes to quicken the pace and change the direction of scholarship in Cambridge. By persuading Erasmus to teach Greek there and by inducing the Lady Margaret to establish a professorship in divinity, he infused new life into the University. And to its credit, Cambridge was grateful. The King and his courts might thunder against Bishop Fisher, they might confiscate his goods and confine his person to the Tower. But until they killed him, he remained Chancellor of the University. It was a rare example of courageous loyalty in an age of time-servers.

Henry VII had met this young don while he was acting as chaplain to the King's mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort. The first Tudor was impressed by what he saw as well as by what his mother told him; and when the See of Rochester came vacant, he decided to nominate as its bishop, not the man who deserved best of him, but the man who deserved best of God. It was a novel criterion, and raised a storm among the courtiers, who could only see it as an example of petticoat influence.

They were wrong. The King confessed that in his days he had "promoted many a man unadvisedly and would now make some recompense to promote some good and virtuous men." The first of these was John Fisher, consecrated Bishop of Rochester at the age of thirty-five.

It was a small diocese and a poor one, but it occupied a strategic position, which was to have its effect upon the Bishop's development. The little, walled town, dominated by the massive block of the castle on its hill, lay beside a bridge over the Medway, straight in the path of all who would travel from the coast to London. Kings rode that way, and gorgeous embassies, and foreign merchants and poor scholars. The bishop was constantly called away from his big library, which smelt of seaweed and salt and old vellum, to do the honours to visiting strangers.

And so he came to hear talk of high politics and of the surge of ideas, which were working revolution upon the Continent. And some of the ideas revolted him to his soul. It was not that he was incapable of assimilating new ideas; his work for Cambridge gave the lie to that. But these things he learned from the lips of travellers and from the books they brought, were treason to the Faith and poison to the souls of simple men.

His duty as a bishop, his inclination as an honest man, both urged on him to fight the spreading of such a plague. There, in Rochester, on the highway from the Continent, he stood like Horatius at the bridge-head, defending all Britain behind him. The books he wrote in his library, the sermons he preached in his own diocese, in London at Saint Paul's Cross and in Cambridge, carried his challenge to Luther, to Melancthon and Oecolampadius, and made his name famous across the narrow seas. John Fisher became the master theologian of England to all contemporary scholars, though he only set foot once outside the realm and rarely travelled further from home than to Cambridge, where he would watch the building of Saint John's. Although the tenor of his day might seem tranquil enough, he was in the thick of a fight, which raged from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Baltic, and from the rocks of Brittany to the great plains of Poland. His library was his battlefield and the sound of his name was in everyone's mouth.

But he waged war on other sins besides heresy. His constant journeys about his diocese were undertaken for the discovery of abuses as well as for the consolation and help of the unfortunate.

We should not expect him to be mealy-mouthed when he lit upon injustice or idleness or avarice. Nor was he. He had nothing but scorn for those who so wrapped up their words that the people failed to catch their meaning. "Bishops," he wrote, "be absent from their dioceses and parsons from their churches... We use by-paths and circumlocutions in rebuking. We go nothing nigh to the matter and so in the mean season the people perish with their sins." Any clergy with a guilty conscience trembled at his coming. As he said himself: "All fear of God, also the contempt of God comes and is founded of the clergy." He never hesitated to apply canonical penalties even to those with friends at Court.

Everywhere he went, he would preach to the people. And then he would visit the sick in their homes, often mere hovels, where the smoke drove his gasping attendants out into the fresh air, while he remained inside, giving all his time and his attention to the affairs of these poorest of his flock. For thirty years, he went among his people until his gaunt figure was a familiar sight in the countryside. Men knew that if his eyes were always sad, his expression was seldom stern. It was pity for souls, which drove him to engage in the heart of the battle, pity for these very souls who were entrusted to his care and who relied on him to be taught God's truth.

He could not bear to think of Our Lord's sacrifice on Calvary being wasted, even in one individual case. His long prayers during the silent night were often dedicated to pleading for the victory of truth and virtue. "Good Lord," he wrote, "without Your help, the name of Christian men shall be utterly destroyed and fordone... Merciful Lord, exercise Your mercy... Set in Your church strong and mighty pillars, that may suffer and endure great labours — watching, poverty, thirst, hunger, cold, and heat — which also shall not fear the threatenings of princes, persecution, neither death, but always persuade and think with themselves to suffer, with a good will, slanders, shame, and all kinds of torments, for the glory and laud of Your Holy Name." In that passage, little though he might think it, he painted his own portrait.

He had always lived an austere life, eating little and that of the plainest, taking only four hours' sleep on a hard bed. There was no luxury in the furnishing of his great, damp palace, save perhaps in the number of books it housed. And towards the end of his episcopate, he became a weak old man, racked with rheumatism. But even then, he would never give up his preaching and taught the people as he sat in a big, upright chair.

But now the time had come to serve God by the royal road of suffering, and with the matter of the King's marriage, his own persecution began. There can be no need to retell here the familiar story of Henry VIII's matrimonial tangles with Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn. We are not concerned with the King's motives, whether passion were the sole cause of his actions or the desire for a legitimate male heir or both. Bishop Fisher comes into the story only when Henry had decided to have his marriage with Catherine declared invalid. Wolsey wrote to Rochester on the King's behalf asking Saint John's opinion. He answered in June 1527 that he had weighed "impartially over and over again the reasons on both sides" and the decision he had come to was that Henry and Catherine were truly man and wife. From that position he never moved. When eventually a Legatine Court was set up in the great hall at Blackfriars, the Bishop of Rochester was named among the Queen's advisers. Henry had not wanted it to come to an open trial between Catherine and himself; his agents had tried to persuade her to enter a convent, but Saint John had counselled and supported her in her quiet refusal. Some, at least, of his letters to the Queen were seized and read.

It was the beginning of the rift between him and his royal master. Catherine only appeared once before the Court, when she made her dramatic appeal to Henry's conscience. Twice he tried to raise her from her knees before him; he did not deny the truth of what she said. But she could read no hope of justice in his harassed eyes. So, abruptly she stood up and told her judges she must send messengers to the Emperor, her nephew, and to the Pope. Then she was gone, and the Court broke up in confusion. Next day, the Bishops of Rochester and Bath rose in their places ready to defend the Queen's rights and to show that she was the King's lawful wife and their own liege lady. It was at the fifth session that Saint John made his notable speech. Hitherto the time of the Court had been taken up with witnesses to scraps of palace gossip and tittle-tattle, unsavoury and inconclusive anecdotes. The bishop declared that he had given two year's diligent study to this question, and he immediately raised the tone of the whole trial to the level of principle, arguing that the marriage between Henry and Catherine could be dissolved by no power upon earth. His words were meant as a challenge to every temporizing cleric who sat there uncomfortably listening to him. He was calling on them to act the part of men and Christians, to rally to the defence of a Sacrament. For that cause, he said emphatically, he was prepared to lay down his life, as had done John the Baptist of olden times.

Men gasped to hear Henry so openly compared to Herod Antipas, and in his written reply, the King did not ignore the comparison. Naturally enough he was furious, for it struck to the bone. The trial dragged on into July. Then the Court was prorogued and never met again, since the Pope recalled the case to Rome. But Saint John had made an implacable enemy of Anne Boleyn and henceforth he was a marked man. If he likened Henry to Herod, he must think of her as Herodias. He was trying to deny her the crown of England, and that she would never forgive. In October of the same year, 1529, the Reformation Parliament met. It was packed, like most, if not all, of the Tudor Parliaments, and immediately the Court party showed its hand. If the Pope chose to recall the King's suit to Rome, he should be made to realize the consequences and the Commons were hounded on to bait the clergy.

It is important to realize that this Parliament which established the Church of England, "did not begin with any heroic assertion of spiritual freedom or the rights of conscience."' Instead, it fastened on excessive fees and fines and exactions on the part of the clergy, abuses to which Saint John had shown himself very much alive in his pastoral visitations, and which he would not tolerate whenever he discovered them. So, he was in a strong position when he stood up in the Lords to defend the Church.

Never in his life was he a nobler figure than during these debates. His battle for Queen Catherine had been a popular battle; the common people were on her side. They cheered the Spanish Queen in the streets and met the procession of Henry and Anne with surly silence. But the fight, which Saint John was now to captain, made no such clear-cut appeal, because there were real abuses, as everyone knew, abuses from which poor folk had suffered much more than the rich. Yet the Bishop of Rochester put his finger on the true issue in his very first speech: "These men now among us seem to reprove the life and doings of the clergy... But if the truth were known, you all shall find that they rather hunger and thirst after the riches and possessions of the clergy, than after amendment of their faults and abuses." How right he proved!

It was not the poor of England but the King's favourites who benefited by the dissolution of the monasteries and the alienation of Church property. Even so, it was not in the character of Saint John to fight for wealth and position. Long before, in a Synod of Bishops summoned by Cardinal Wolsey,

he had asked: "Who can willingly suffer and bear with us in whom (preaching humility, sobriety, and contempt of the world) they may evidently perceive haughtiness in mind, pride in gesture, sumptuousness in apparel, and damnable excess in all worldly delicacies?" His battle in Parliament was not to perpetuate such a state of things, but because he saw "this violent heap of mischief, offered by the Commons," as an attack on the outworks of the Church's freedom. And he told the Lords that unless they resisted manfully they would be instrumental in bringing the Church "into servile thralldom like a bondmaid, or rather by little and little to be clean banished and driven out of our confines and dwelling-places." In this, subsequent history again justified his foresight. He was summoned before Henry to explain his words, but he kept up the struggle in Parliament and won the Lords over to rejecting the bills, which had come up to them from the Commons.

A joint meeting of the two Houses gave way to the King, and promptly Saint John appealed over their heads to the Pope. For this, he was arrested in October 1530 with his brother Bishops of Bath and Ely. But the Pope's writ still ran in England and they were shortly afterwards released. Henry's next move was to threaten the clergy with prosecution for accepting Wolsey's legatine authority, against the statute of Praemunire. It made no difference that the King himself had encouraged and accepted this authority, that it had been conferred with the greatest pomp in his own palace at Greenwich. The clergy were in a panic and the Province at Canterbury offered to buy its pardon with the grant of £100,000 to the royal exchequer. Henry rubbed his hands with glee, and while fear kept them malleable, he determined to strike still harder and demanded the insertion of a clause naming himself the only supreme head (on earth) of the Church and Clergy in England. Frightened though they were, this new phrase gave them pause. Immediately the Court party swarmed about them, insisting that no offer of money would avail without the concession of this title to the King.

Fear was like to win the day when Saint John threw the whole weight of his influence into the other scale. The King might have money, but this new-fangled title — never! Henry saw he had ridden them too hard. He also saw that but for the Bishop of Rochester he would have succeeded. He called the Bishops to Westminster, protesting that he meant nothing new by the title, promising he would assume no authority, which his predecessors had not claimed. Nevertheless, Saint John persisted in his gallant resistance. If the King meant nothing new by this title, it was hard to see why he coveted it so tenaciously. So, the courtiers had to try a new line of attack. If the clergy would not believe the word of their King, they could hardly be loyal-minded subjects. Saint John had just witnessed the worth of Henry's word to poor Catherine of Aragon. Boldly he called their bluff: "What if (the King) should shortly change his mind and exercise in deed the supremacy over the Church of this realm?" The debate went on for days, the claims of religion growing feebler with each repetition, the threat of the King's anger coming nearer with every mention. And at last, Saint John sat somberly silent while Convocation voted to admit the title "and to credit his princely word so faithfully and solemnly promised unto them."

Even now, the champion of Christian liberty could not suffer such a defeat in silence. He sprang to his feet; he besought them with all his force not to weaken. It was of no avail. Whatever price had to be paid for safety, that price they would pay and wrench their consciences afterwards to justify it. So, he made one last despairing effort. They were paying a higher price than they need. On the high word of a King, they knew this title was to be interpreted "according to the law of God." Then let them add the phrase. So at least they should not betray their trust nor deny their jurisdiction and the Apostles from whom it came. Despite the courtiers, who tried to block even this concession, Convocation jumped at the qualification: it was a salve to their bruised consciences, and on

February 11, 1531, they hailed Henry as supreme head of the English Church and Clergy, ‘so far as the law of Christ allowed’. It was a hollow compromise; Saint John was well aware how hollow. But, at least, it had averted open capitulation. And now, Henry was his enemy as much as Anne.

In the Parliamentary session of 1532 Henry showed what he understood by Christ's law, making three demands which completely subordinated the Bishops' authority in spirituals to his own will. Saint John was ill in his house at Lambeth. Convocation felt the lack of his intrepid leadership, and in their dismay adjourned for three days while a deputation was to interview the Bishop of Rochester and seek his counsel. But without him in his place, the result was a foregone conclusion and in May, the Submission of Clergy was passed by convocation.

Next year the farce of repudiating Queen Catherine was the King's main concern. Saint John fought tooth and nail against the Act prohibiting all appeals to Rome in cases of wills, marriages, and tithes; but it was rushed through Parliament. He was arrested for the second time in April, and kept out of London until everything was safely accomplished, Anne married and crowned Queen. Then they let him go home to Rochester. He knew it would not be for long and he prepared himself against the supreme crisis of his life. When his household were celebrating the greater feasts at table, he would soon excuse himself, saying that one so near to death had much to do and little time to do it, and begging that they would not allow his absence to mar their enjoyment. He was ill too, most of the winter, with a persistent cough and a fever and aches and swellings in his legs and feet.

But when the expected summons came, shortly after Easter, he was sufficiently improved in health to be able to obey it. He heartened his weeping servants, making provision for them and for the poor of Rochester, reserving something for himself "to defend his necessity in prison", nor forgetting Michael House and Saint John's at Cambridge. Next morning, when he came out of the palace to mount his horse, he found that crowds had flocked in from the countryside to bid him farewell. They knew his constancy of character, which meant that this would be the last time they should see him. He rode bareheaded through the little city; men, women, and children pressing round him to receive his blessing. The babies were lifted up to his saddlebow that he might put his hand upon their heads. He was so familiar with them all, their names, their histories, their tasks in life. It was a heart-rending tribute from his flock to one whom they recognized as a true shepherd of souls. "Woe worth they that are the cause of his trouble." Such was the cry in Rochester on that early April morning. The journey was almost too much for his strength. Once he fell from the saddle in a faint, and it was only the anxiety of his companions, which made them quick enough to catch him before he hit the ground. Come to Shooters Hill, he dismounted wearily and sat down by the roadside to rest. They brought him food, and stood watching sadly while he ate it, slowly and calmly, in the open air. Would it not be better if he never reached London but died on the way as Wolsey had died at Leicester? But he made an end of his eating, said his quiet grace, lay back awhile, his eyes peacefully shut, and then gave the word to remount. So, at last light they came to his house in Lambeth Marsh.

Monday, April 13th, was a hot day when the bishop was summoned before the Council and told to take the Oath of Succession. This oath not only acknowledged Anne as Queen and her children as heirs to the Crown, disinheriting the Lady Mary, which was in Parliament's competence and could safely be accepted; it also contained a clause repudiating any authority of the Pope in England and no Catholic Bishop could agree to that. Saint John asked for time to consider the oath, which he now saw for the first time. It was only on Tuesday, April 21st, that the die was cast, when he told the Council that while he could swear to the Succession, he could not in conscience accept the

formula as it stood. There was nothing more to be said, and he was sent to the Tower to await the King's pleasure. His imprisonment lasted fourteen months, almost to the day. They put him in an upper storey of the Bell Tower, which was airy and spacious as cells go, but no housing for a feeble invalid. His worst trial was to be deprived of Mass and the Sacraments, a barbarous custom in a Christian country, and his long loneliness weighed on his spirits. Cardinal Reginald Pole (who was in self-imposed exile at the time) was amazed that he survived; "who that considered his age, the delicacy of health which belonged to him, and the leanness of his body, could have believed that he could last even a month in prison?"

By December, he was brought so low that he wrote a pitiful letter to Thomas Cromwell: "I have neither shirt nor suit, nor yet other clothes, that are necessary for me to wear, but that be ragged and rent shamefully. Notwithstanding I might easily suffer that, if they would keep my body warm. But my diet also, God knows how slender it is at many times, and now in mine age my stomach may not away but with a few kinds of meats, which if I lack I decay forthwith, and fall into coughs and diseases of my body, and cannot keep myself in health." When the Bishop of Coventry saw him in the spring, he reported to Cromwell: "Truly the man is nigh gone... for the body cannot bear the cloth on the back."

In November 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, which dethroned the Pope and substituted the King as "the only supreme head on earth of the Church of England." Saint John realized that here was the instrument of his death. Despite his physical weakness, despite his lowness of spirit, he could not contemplate taking such an oath or consenting in any way to the Royal Supremacy in spirituals. Twice at least the Council came to his prison to interview him, but when at length they left, he said with quiet relish that they had gone as they came. Then, in May 1535, the Pope intervened dramatically by creating him Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church. Paul III had more than one reason for his action; he could hardly have chosen a worthier man in Christendom to be a member of the Sacred College. And certainly, he hoped that this elevation would protect the bishop's life. If it had any effect at all on Henry's resolution, it was only to harden his will and to hasten Saint John's condemnation.

The commission for his trial was issued on June 1st, and during the early part of the month, he was subjected to repeated examinations at the hands of the Council. He was so ill at this time that there could be no question of his answering in court. But by June 17th, the doctors had patched him up enough to make the journey to Westminster Hall. So, for the first time since his imprisonment, he came out of the Tower, clad in a black cloth gown, and riding on a horse "with a huge number of halberts, bills, and other weapons about him." But his escort soon saw he was too weak even to ride, and they turned aside to the Thames and brought him the rest of the way by water. It was a corpse, says Reginald Pole, rather than the body of a living man, which they delivered to the Commissioners. His trial seemed to revive him. Rich, the Solicitor-General, was the main witness for the prosecution, and admitted to having played the part of an agent provocateur. He had come to the prisoner with a pretended secret message from the King, who was supposed to be tormented with doubts about the Supremacy, and who appealed to his old friend and councillor for what he knew would be a sincere, independent opinion. Saint John was justly indignant at this treacherous conduct.

When Audley, the Chancellor, told him he was not there "to dispute, but to hear his sentence of death for transgressing maliciously the statutes of the Kingdom, by which the King was head of the English Church", he threw back his head and made a brave, straightforward answer: "That he had

not contradicted those statutes maliciously, but with truth and holy intention, as they were opposed to Scriptures and to our Faith." There was no equivocation, no beating about the bush in that reply. Indeed, it had never been a habit of his to hide his mind. As he listened to the dreadful sentence, which condemned him to a traitor's death, he stood erect and the colour rushed into his sunken cheeks. His escort closed around him, to take him back to the Tower. But he still had something to say. With head high and shining eyes, he told the Court "that his Grace cannot justly claim any such supremacy over the Church of God as he now takes upon him; neither has (it) been seen or heard of, that any temporal prince before his days has presumed to that dignity." This was giving the lie direct to Henry, who had promised the Bishops that he would claim no authority, which his predecessors had not exercised. His bearing was so gallant that it was a relief, even to his judges, when the pikes-men closed round him and led him away. And his new-found strength was such that they did not need to return by the river; he walked some of the way and rode the rest.

And when they came to the Tower moat, a crowd of grieving men and women were following behind, making a triumphal procession of his return. They begged his blessing as if they had been his own people of Rochester, and smilingly he gave it. This was his Palm Sunday and now there remained only his Calvary. But the last four days of his life were sunshine. All his depression of soul had left him, so that his jailors marvelled at the joy and sense of freedom, which possessed him.

At five o'clock of the morning of June 22nd, the Lieutenant of the Tower came to his bedside and found him fast asleep. Waking the prisoner gently, Walsingham broke the news of his execution with great courtesy and sympathy. Saint John thanked him, and asked when it was to be. When he learned that the hour fixed was nine o'clock, he made answer : "Well, then, let me by your patience sleep an hour or two, for I have slept very little this night... not for any fear of death, I thank God, but by reason of my great infirmity and weakness." And he turned over and went to sleep again.

When he came out of the Tower, a summer morning's mist hung over the river, wreathing the buildings in a golden haze. Two of the Lieutenant's men carried him in a chair to the Gate, and there they set him down, while waiting for the Sheriffs. Saint John stood up and leaning his shoulder against a wall for support, opened the little New Testament he carried in his hand. "O Lord," he said, so that all could hear him, "this is the last time I shall ever open this book. Let some comforting place now chance to me" — and looking down at the page, he read: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know You, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I have glorified You on earth: I have finished the work, which You gave me to do. And now glorify You me, Father, with Yourself..." Whereupon he shut the book, saying: "Here is even learning enough for me to my life's end." His lips were moving in prayer, as they carried him to Tower Hill. And when they reached the scaffold, these rough men of his escort offered to help him up the ladder. But he smiled at them: "Nay, masters, now let me alone; you all shall see me go up to my death well enough myself, without help." And forthwith he began to climb, almost nimbly.

At the top, he met the masked headsman, who knelt — as the custom was — to ask his pardon. And again, the Saint's manliness dictated every word of his answer: "I forgive you with all my heart, and I trust on Our Lord you shall see me die even lustily." Then they stripped him of his gown and furred tippet, and he stood in his doublet and hose before the crowd, which had gathered to see his death. Rastall, who was there, describes the gasp of pity which went up at the sight of his "long, lean, slender body, nothing in manner but skin and bones... the flesh clean wasted away, and a very image of death, and as one might say, death in a man's shape and using a man's voice." For he spoke

to the crowd, from the front of the scaffold, saying: "Christian people, I am come hither to die for the faith of Christ's Catholic Church, and I thank God hitherto my courage has served me well thereto, so that yet hitherto I have not feared death; wherefore I desire you help me and assist me with your prayers, that at the very point and instant of my death's stroke, and in the very moment of my death, I then faint not in any point of the Catholic Faith for fear; and I pray God save the King and the realm, and hold His holy hand over it, and send the King a good counsel."

The power and resonance of his voice, the courage of his spirit triumphing over the obvious weakness of his body, amazed them all, and a murmur of admiration was still rustling the crowd when they saw him go down on his knees and begin to pray. They stood in awed silence while he said the Te Deum in praise of God (You, O God, we praise), and the psalm ‘In You O Lord have I put my trust’, the humble request for strength beyond his own. Then he signed to the executioner to bind his eyes. For a moment more he prayed, hands and heart raised to heaven. Then he lay down and put his wasted neck upon the low block. The executioner, who had been standing back, took one quick step forward, raised his axe and with a single blow cut off his head.

Four centuries later, on May 19, 1935, the Church ratified the common judgment of Christendom, and raised him to her altars as Saint John of Rochester. There was never a truer priest than this Yorkshire-man, taken from among men and ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, that he might offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins. His devotion to the service of all who were committed to his care, his straightness of vision and of speech, his love of his country and his unswerving loyalty to God, all built up a character whose fineness appealed to the men of his day and has maintained its appeal down the centuries. A scholar without a vestige of intellectual pride, a bishop who knew how to rule, yet without arrogance, a councillor of kings who always gave disinterested advice, he was these things and much besides because he loved God with all the powers of his soul, and loved his neighbour for God's sake. Since his motives were unselfish, his sight was keen, and in the glory of that vision, he walked unhesitatingly the narrow path of truth. "Blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God."
