

ST PIUS X WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sinning Saints (4):

St Thomas Becket (c1118 – 1170)

Thomas was born in Cheapside, London, into a modest family with Norman roots. He was educated to a certain level at Merton Priory and later in Paris, though he could not be described as highly educated and was by no means a scholar. On leaving school he became a secretary in London and then part of the household of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury. This was a turning point for him since the household included many erudite people, some of whom later became bishops. Further, Theobald sent Thomas to study civil and canon law at Bologna and Auxerre.

Theobald's patronage of Thomas continued and in 1154 he named him Archdeacon of Canterbury and bestowed on him other lucrative offices. Thomas succeeded quickly in these posts such that Theobald then recommended him to the new King Henry II as Lord Chancellor, a position to which he was appointed in 1155.

Henry and Becket became friends, albeit the King was some 15 years the younger. Inconsistent with his clerical offices, Becket gained a reputation as a proud, arrogant and worldly man who wallowed in immense wealth and luxury. He embraced hunting, gaming and other lavish entertainment. He attracted serious contemporary criticism for continuing as Archdeacon without performing the necessary duties and, in particular, for failing to respond to the dying Theobald's summons to visit him. Becket was also punctilious in extracting the maximum revenue from the King's traditional sources, namely landowners such as the church and bishops.

The King, with Thomas' support, resisted the Gregorian Reform which had gathered clerical support in England. The object was to give the church more control over matters such as church posts and property and immunity for the clergy from secular courts. Insofar as the Church had partially succeeded, Henry and Thomas wanted to turn back the clock to regain the authority which Henry I had had in these areas.

Archbishop Theobald died in 1161. Since Thomas was so closely allied to him, the King had the [seemingly] neat solution of appointing him as Archbishop of Canterbury, despite his reputation as a worldly and hedonistic cleric. Thomas warned the King saying: "*I know your plans for the Church, you will assert claims which I, if I were archbishop, must needs oppose.*" Yet Henry persisted and in 1162 Becket was ordained a priest and consecrated Archbishop. He resigned his chancellorship and became an ascetic. He set about protecting the Church from Henry's reforms. In 1164 at the Constitutions of Clarendon, Henry demanded that Becket agree to the King's rights. Becket refused and Henry summoned him with allegations of contempt of royal authority and malfeasance in the office of Chancellor. He was convicted whereupon he fled to France where he obtained protection.

ST PIUS X WEEKLY REFLECTION

After 6 years of hostility from both sides - until 1170 - and following diplomatic intervention by the Pope, Henry permitted Thomas to return from exile. However, the King had recently had his son crowned by other bishops as heir apparent, this being a breach of Canterbury's right to crown. On Thomas' return, he proceeded with the excommunication of the bishops responsible. Henry, then in Normandy, uttered some words which traditionally are recorded as: "*Will nobody rid me of this meddling priest?*"; the words were interpreted by four knights as a royal command. They sailed back to England, entered Canterbury Cathedral and there murdered Thomas on 29th December 1170. Just before death the knights asked: "*Where is the traitor?*" and Thomas' responded: "*Here I am, no traitor, but archbishop and priest of God.*"

Very quickly Thomas' tomb became a site of popular pilgrimage, attracting pilgrims from across Europe. He was canonised in 1173. In 1174 Henry famously made reparation at Thomas' tomb and was absolved. Henry walked barefoot through Canterbury to the tomb, where he publicly confessed his sins. Then each bishop present flogged him with 5 blows of a rod, followed by 3 blows from each of 80 Cathedral monks. Henry offered gifts at Thomas' shrine and spent a vigil at the tomb.

Given the tension between Catholic Church and state represented by the Becket history, it is perhaps unsurprising that in 1538 Henry VIII ordered that Thomas' shrine be despoiled, his bones burned and his name eliminated from all service books.

Stephen S

