

ST PIUS X WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sinning Saints (6)

St Andrew Wouters (1542-1572)

This is the last, and perhaps most remarkable, of this series on sinning saints. Saint Andrew Wouters was a 16th century Dutch priest from Heynoord. He was not, however, a typical priest. His behaviour had been scandalous. He was well-known in the Catholic community as a drunk and philanderer. He had fathered several illegitimate children. His conduct was so unacceptable that the bishop suspended him, at the age of 30, from his priestly duties. He was prohibited from celebrating Mass or administering the sacraments. He subsequently moved to Gorkum where he lived as a lay person.

A long-running war between the Spaniards, who ruled Holland, and Dutch rebels had commenced in 1568. It eventually lasted until 1648. The war was in part fuelled by Dutch nationalism against Spanish control and in part by religious divisions. In 1572 a violent Calvinist, anti-Catholic group, known as the Sea Beggars (Watergeuzen), captured Gorkum. The Sea Beggars regarded themselves as Dutch patriots but, whether they were patriots and/or ruthless pirates, is a matter for debate. In any event, having taken Gorkum, they plundered churches, monasteries and convents and destroyed Catholic icons and other religious art and symbols. They imprisoned nine Franciscan priests, in addition to the parish priest and other clergy, including the dishonoured Andrew Wouters, who voluntarily identified himself as a priest and thus joined the captives. They were 19 in total. All were tortured and humiliated by the Sea Beggars who ordered them to reject their belief in transubstantiation and Papal supremacy. All refused to comply, including Andrew. He, in particular, surprised his captors since they were aware of his antecedents and mistakenly thought that he would be among the first to apostasise. When he did not, he was subjected to verbal abuse based on his disreputable and sinful past conduct, as well as the daily whippings that all 19 had to endure.

After some two weeks of appalling mistreatment of the priests, the Sea Beggars decided to execute them. They ignored orders from Willem II, Prince of Orange, to spare them. The executions were particularly brutal. Andrew Wouters was hanged and, as the noose was being placed on his neck he shouted: *"Fornicator I always was; heretic I never was"*. The men's bodies were then severely mutilated after death and dumped in a marsh. Their remains were recovered and secretly taken to a friary in Brussels, thus preserving physical evidence of their martyrdom.

In 1675 all 19 martyrs were beatified by Pope Clement X and canonised in 1867 by Pope Pius IX. The canonisation of Andrew Wouters underlines the Church's teaching of redemption by martyrdom and repentance; despite his previous seriously immoral life, he was ultimately faithful to the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

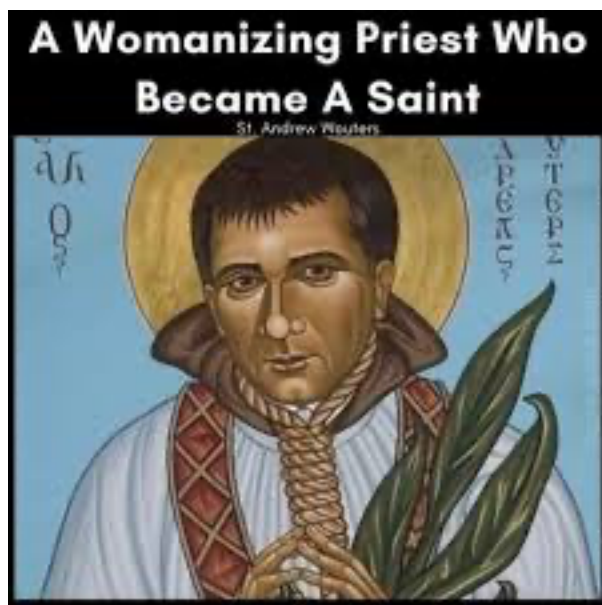
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St Andrew is a shining example of the redemptive power of grace and of the fact that a number of saints have led seriously flawed lives and were subject, and yielded, to temptation, rather than being paragons of virtue throughout. The Catholic Encyclopaedia's article on the martyrs of Gorkum¹ mentions Andrew Wouters at the end of the list and somewhat euphemistically says about him only: "*Andreas Wouters of Heynoord, whose conduct was not edifying up to the time of his arrest, but who made ample amends by his martyrdom.*"

Perhaps slightly more positive and edifying is this comment: "*He stands as a testament that God uses even imperfect people to bear witness to His truth and that courage can shine even through the cracks of human weakness.*"²

The lives of St Andrew Wouters and the other sinning saints in this series demonstrate, in the words of one writer: "*The saints are not those who never fell. They are those who, having fallen, refused to deny the One who could raise them up again. In this way, every act of humility, every confession of failure, every small surrender to grace becomes a kind of dying – so that the new man may live*"³

Stephen S



¹ <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06651c.htm>

² <https://allsaintstories.com/saints/st-andrew-wouters>

³ <https://andrewkelpie.substack.com/p/the-unlikeliest-of-saints>