

## Reflection Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> Week Easter 2023

### The Carthusian Martyrs

**John Houghton**, Prior of the London Charterhouse, was recognised for his sanctity before his martyrdom. Under his rule the community was a model of observance and austerity. Henry VIII believed that if the Carthusians could be persuaded to accept the Act of Succession (1533) and the Act of Supremacy (1534) others would follow. However, the Prior and his Procurator Humphrey Middlemore at first refused to swear, and were imprisoned for a month in the Tower. On advice from learned bishops, they agreed to take the oath “as far as the law of God allows”, and so were released. The following year (1535) the King assumed his title of Supreme Head of the Church in England. The Treasons Act made it treason “maliciously” to deny this title. Prior Houghton began to prepare his community for the inevitable onslaught. He consulted other priors who were visiting London, **Robert Lawrence** of Beauvale, Nottinghamshire, and **Augustine Webster** of Axholme, Lincolnshire approached the King’s Minister Thomas Cromwell directly, to ask for a form of the oath which they could accept in conscience. Cromwell immediately committed them to the Tower. They were joined by a Briggittine priest, Richard Reynolds, who suffered with them.

Their trial began on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1535. Cromwell alarmed they might be acquitted, threatened the jury with death if they did. He went in person to persuade them to give the Guilty verdict. On 4<sup>th</sup> May they were dragged to Tyburn; the Prior was the first to suffer hanging, disembowelling and quartering of the body. Lawrence and Webster, undeterred by the dreadful scene, refused to recant and were similarly butchered. They were the first of a long line of martyrs for the Catholic faith in England.

This was only the beginning of the trials of the London Charterhouse. Within weeks, three more of the Fathers were committed to prison and interrogated; **Humphrey Middlemore**, the Vicar, **William Exmew**, the Procurator, and **Sebastian Newdigate**. These were singled out as leading members of the Community, and of good birth (Newdigate had been brought up in the King’s household), in the hope of terrorising the others into submission. The three steadfastly refused the Oath, and were executed on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1535.

The following year the remaining Carthusians were constantly harassed and ill-treated. Some were dispersed to other houses; **John Rochester** and **James Walworth** to Hull, but were brought to trial and executed at York (11<sup>th</sup> May 1537). Some brothers gave way to the continual pressure and took the oath. Ten continued to refuse, and on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1537 were imprisoned in Newgate. There they were left, and all but one died of starvation and ill-usage: **Richard Bere**, **Thomas Johnson** and **Thomas Green**, priests; **John Davy**, deacon; and Brothers **William Greenwood**, **Thomas Scryven**, **Robert Salt**, **Walter Pierson**, **Thomas Redyng** and **William Horn**. The last-named lingered in Newgate for nearly three years, and was finally executed on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1540.

Some who took the oath had been promised that their House would be spared; but within a year, on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1538, all who remained were expelled and the monastery desecrated. Other priories suffered a similar fate. The return of the London Charterhouse community to Sheen under Queen Mary (1557) was short-lived; they were finally exiled by Elizabeth. Only in 1873 did the Carthusians return to England, to Parkminster in the parish of West Grinstead.