

Reflection Tuesday Week 12 St John Southworth 2023

John Southworth (B.1592?) is one of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales. He was the only English martyr to suffer under a dictatorship. The English Civil War ended; the King was executed; the Elizabethan Prayer-Book outlawed; freedom of conscience proclaimed. But Catholics, who had been accused of plotting against the King, were still persecuted when there was no King; they had been fined for refusing to accept the Prayer-Book, and they were still persecuted when there was no Prayer-Book; all they asked was freedom of conscience for themselves and their countrymen, and freedom of conscience was given to everyone but them. Priests had to come and go, in secret, in fear of betrayal and death.

John Southworth was ordained priest at the English College at Douai in 1618. After returning to England, he was arrested in Lancashire in 1627 and condemned to death, but the sentence was commuted to imprisonment; in 1630 he was handed over, with several other priests, to the French Ambassador for transportation abroad. Whether he actually went or not is uncertain. He was in England in 1637 when Westminster was devastated by the plague. He was seen visiting an infected house, and since there could be only one reason for anyone to visit the sick under such dangerous circumstances, he was arrested and charged with being a priest. On that occasion the authorities quietly set him free and he disappeared underground. Finally, in 1654, at his trial, John Southworth could have pleaded Not Guilty to the criminal and capital charge of being a priest – most missionaries did, causing the persecutors much trouble. But Southworth did not. If he pleaded Not Guilty, the court might have acquitted him; as it was, the judge wept as he passed sentence. He could have saved his life but been denied the glory of solidarity with all the other English martyrs.

The body of John Southworth was bought from the executioner by the Spanish Ambassador, who returned it to Douai for burial. At the time of the French Revolution, he was re-buried in an unmarked grave for protection. The grave was rediscovered in 1927 and the body returned to England – the only complete remains of any of the English martyrs. Upon Southworth's beatification in 1929, his relics were enshrined in Westminster Cathedral.