

BLACKFRIARS

THE MARTYRS

WHEN, from the clouds of our actual vantage-point, we consider the date 1535, we are immediately conscious, because of the glorious event which illuminates this present year of suspense, of a scaffold and a block. Four hundred years intervene, and we shall perhaps congratulate ourselves on their passage, since the use of the headsman's axe as a means of religious persuasion has vanished with them and physical danger in the practise of our faith is at an end. We look back with humble reverence and gratitude to that scaffold set in the midst of our country and our history, where the two Blessed Martyrs, now to be canonized, welcomed the ultimate opportunity; and although we may be thankful that such an opportunity comes no more to Englishmen in England (since, by a curious paradox, we would often more willingly choose a life of heroism than a heroic death), we reverence them the more for their fortitude in a trial we are spared.

Their fame shines for us across the centuries, and we love them for holiness and wisdom, for wit and prevailing courage, timeless attributes displayed by them in a vanished time; for everything of that day has disappeared, the frame of life and its preoccupations, the look and sound of it. Gone is that world of individual efforts and harvests, and we think of it as a pastoral picture painted in clear tones, the green English scene enlivened by the peasant in his homespun, made ceremonial by the daily silks and velvets of the great. Its arguments and sufferings, its discoveries and abuses, are only knowledge for us.

But it was a time like this in which we live; new power, new danger, and new tyranny were abroad, and established things were threatened with disruption.

The men of that age discovered seas and continents and circumnavigated the globe, they had such proofs of man's power in adventure and were not equalled until our mastery of mechanical flight was achieved; they re-discovered the civilizations of Greece and Rome, and from their prodi-

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giously increased knowledge emerged a new form of humanity's capital peril, the danger to faith, which occurs like a spiritual indigestion in every age of expansion, and is witnessed under many shapes in our own. Their tyranny was of princes, whom they had begun to worship, foreshadowing the nation-worship of the present day. And Christendom was threatened with disruption, the struggle was joined between the spiritual power and material interests which, removed from the great stage of Europe which it then occupied, is continued in the person of every Christian to-day.

In this struggle, under that tyranny and aware of that danger in their time, died John Fisher and Thomas More, in solitary testimony. They were not inflamed by a sudden exultant inspiration, nor carried to the peak of death on a tide of popular sympathy with their cause, although they themselves aroused personal sympathy and admiration. But they died for the Supremacy of Peter, and this must have seemed an extravagance to their countrymen, entrenched and secure in the Mass and all Catholic usage, who did not see, as they saw, how no fragment of truth can be sacrificed without imperilling the whole. They were the reasoned martyrs of deliberate mind, unmoved by emotion. It will be our privilege, who distrust emotion, to invoke them in present difficulties that repeat the difficulties of their day.

It is part of their glory for us that they understood how the thing they could not deny, the thing they died for, was the only safeguard of Europe's unity. They themselves represented a European culture fostered by the European Church, they were figures of European prestige in an age when reputations were everywhere referred to the same criterion, and their execution was an early instance of the crimes of violence with which national policies are pursued, when the common spiritual authority is disregarded. That authority we, as they, acknowledge and love. We believe, as they did, that in the Catholic Church alone is to be found the concord of nations, that a shared truth is the only link between men of different race and ambition, that only

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through the love of Christ and from universal obedience to Christ's vicar can peace come.

They died, and we too shall die; not, it seems probable, for our religious beliefs, but with those beliefs our only succour in that solitary hour. The memory and the merit of their faithful valour will help us then. Their lives flowered in their dying, and we confess the same spiritual roots whence came that rare flowering. They were Englishmen, they were Catholics; because they were good Catholics and because they were good Englishmen, they have become, by God's grace, the Friends of God and honourable citizens of His eternal Kingdom.

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Several notable articles on the Martyr Saints will appear in the June issue of BLACKFRIARS.