

## BLESSED RICHARD REYNOLDS

### Bridgettine Monk of Syon

S.M.D.

*'... a man of angelic countenance and angelic spirit, dear to all men and filled with the spirit of God.'*

**T**HESE words, used by more than one contemporary of Blessed Richard Reynolds, suggest at once light, purity, strength; a gaze turned ever to truth, that 'otherness' which we associate with the life of the angels and which makes them so ready to give help to sinful mortals.

For what will be said about one of our proto-martyrs in this short account, I have had to rely on the research of the late Dom Adam Hamilton, O.S.B., of Buckfast Abbey in his book, now out of print, called *The Angel of Syon* (published by Sands & Co.), and on a shorter work by Dom Ernest Graf, published in 1934 for the fourth centenary of the martyrdom.

The birthplace, family and exact date of birth of our subject still evade us, but it seems to be more or less accepted that he was born at Pinhoe, near Exeter, in 1488 or 1489. These dates are surmised from records in Cambridge university where Richard was an undergraduate, and which tell us that he took his degree of B.A. in 1506, followed three years later by that of M.A. In 1510 he was elected a fellow of Corpus Christi College. There is no record of ordination, but in 1513 he had gained the degree of bachelor of divinity and was appointed apostolic preacher to the university. He thus began that apostolic work which was to make him so widely known, at a time whose greatest evil, it has been said, was the neglect of sound theological preaching.

When admitted to the degree of B.D., Richard had stipulated that he should not be bound to residence or special work at the university because he was expecting to enter the cloister by the feast of St Barnabas of that year.

We do not know just what had turned Richard's thoughts and desires to Syon Abbey at Isleworth on the Thames, which King Henry V had established in 1415 by bringing some religious from Sweden, where St Bridget had founded her Order of Saint

Saviour in the previous century; but we know that this king had in mind to have the new house one of strict observance, some of the older orders having grown lax. One of the rules of Syon Abbey was that none might enter the enclosure till after a year's noviciate in the outside world, lived under direction and with frequent visits to test the applicant's strength of purpose. Moreover, no monk might be professed before the age of twenty-five.

Something must now be said as to Syon and the life lived there. It was, like all the houses founded by St Bridget of Sweden, what has been called a 'double' monastery, primarily for nuns to the number of sixty, under an abbess, but also with a community of monks to the number of twenty-five, owing obedience to a superior called confessor-general. Both communities were strictly enclosed, the monks almost as strictly as the nuns, so that, according to their rule, when once set in their cloister by the bishop, they were never to leave it 'except in grievous and inevitable need'. They sang the divine office from a choir (behind grilles), alternating with the office sung by the nuns in a hidden choir high above the nave of the monastic church, which seculars might attend to hear the preaching of the monks—the only time they could be seen. I have thought it well to mention the unusually strict enclosure of the monks, having read in a work by a distinguished historian of today, writing of Henry V's foundation, that 'the nuns were contemplatives but the monks were itinerant missionaries'.

To return to the entry of Bl. Richard for profession on June 11, 1513. He brought with him the reputation of being a brilliant scholar. Cardinal Pole, who was to know him intimately, said of him later that 'in the liberal arts his acquirements were extraordinary, drawn from the first sources. . . . Not only was he a man of most holy life, but he was the only English monk well-versed in the three principal languages' (Latin, Hebrew and Greek). No less than ninety-four books in Syon's fine library were inscribed with his name as donor.

'I, Brother N. do make profession and promise obedience to God Omnipotent, and the blessed Mary Virgin eternal, blessed Augustine, and blessed Bridget, and to thee bishop on their part, and to the general confessor, and to thy successors; to live without property and in chastity, according to the rule of St Augustine and the constitutions of the blessed Bridget, until death.'

I have myself seen a reproduction in rotograph of the original script with the following significant words added in the margin and in a totally different hand:

‘. . . (constitutions of the blessed Bridget) *in so far as they are not repugnant to the prerogative of the most illustrious king and the laws of the kingdom.*’

Dom Adam Hamilton, in his book *The Angel of Syon*, had not apparently seen the original document, but only a modern copy in print of the formula of profession, when he asserted that the added words were there when Richard Reynolds made his profession in 1513. But Henry VIII had not long been on the throne and had not begun interfering with the monasteries. The marginal note was probably the result of the visits of the royal commissioners either shortly before or soon after the martyrdom of May 4, 1535. When Stokesley, bishop of London, was charged with having used papal formulae in a profession and in blessing vestments, he asserted at once that, since the statute, he had used an amended formula acknowledging the royal supremacy. So we can safely release Richard from the charge of having, some twenty years earlier, used words at the solemn moment of profession which would have been, as his after life showed, utterly unacceptable to him.

A number of years spent in worship, prayer and study followed Richard's profession. His growing reputation as a learned and eloquent preacher brought crowds to hear him and seek his counsel, especially as the day of the famous Syon pardon came round.

It was in 1534, when Elizabeth Barton, known as the holy maid of Kent, claiming visions and prophecies from heaven, was executed at Tyburn after warning the King as to his marriage with Anne Boleyn, that attention was turned to Richard Reynolds, monk of Syon, since after an interview with her, he praised her personal holiness, as did St John Fisher and, later, St Thomas More. It ended in the arrest of them all and imprisonment in the Tower. Richard's companions were three Carthusian monks, John Houghton, Augustine Webster and Robert Lawrence, also two secular priests, one of whom was pardoned later. The other, John Hale, Vicar of Isleworth, was to suffer with the four religious. The indictment was that they ‘treacherously machinating . . . did openly declare and say: The King our Sovereign Lord, is not supreme head on earth of the Church of England’.

The prisoners pleaded not guilty to the charge of treason, but refused to take an oath which was against the laws of God and the Catholic Church. The trial at Westminster began on April 28, 1535, but as the jury could not bring themselves to find such holy men guilty, the verdict was left until the next day, when the jurors, browbeaten by threats of what their refusal would bring on themselves, gave in.

The Lord Chancellor, presiding, addressed Richard first, and asked why he alone persisted in his opinion against the Act of Parliament, when it was accepted by so many great lords and bishops.

'I had indeed determined', replied our martyr, 'in imitation of our Lord Jesus when he was before the court of Herod, to return no answer, but since you press me and that I may satisfy my own conscience and the consciences of those here present, I say that our belief has far more abundant testimony in its behalf than yours. For instead of the few whom you bring forward out of the Parliament of this one kingdom, I have on my side the whole Christian world—except those of this kingdom; nay, I do not say of all this kingdom, for only the lesser part is with you. And were even the greater part of the kingdom to declare against me, it would not be because they so believe, but only by outwardly feigning it, for fear of loss of dignity or for the hope of winning the royal favour. . . .' Asked by Cromwell to say of whom he was speaking, Reynolds answered: 'All good men in the kingdom'. Then he continued: 'As for the witness of the ancient Fathers, I have on my side the General Councils and all the Fathers and Doctors of the Church for fifteen hundred years, and especially Saints Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory. And I am well assured that when his Most Serene Majesty shall have known the truth of this, he will be offended beyond measure with certain bishops who have given him this counsel.'

He was interrupted and told to answer the charge of having maliciously persuaded others to rebel against the King and Parliament. To this the prisoner answered: 'I tell you first of all, that if I were here arraigned before God's own tribunal, it would be made clear that never to living man have I declared an opinion of my own maliciously against the King or anyone in authority; save when to clear my conscience I spoke of it in confession, being compelled thereto. I was indeed grieved to learn that His

Majesty had fallen into so grave an error, but I said so to none, except as I have declared. And had I not then declared what I believe, I would say it openly now, seeing I am bound to it by God and my conscience, and in doing so neither my sovereign nor anyone else may rightly take offence.'

For the second time Richard was told to cease speaking. 'Since you will not let me say more', he answered, 'judge me according to your law.'

The prisoners were told what was the verdict—that they be 'hanged, drawn, and quartered'. Richard asked for two days to prepare for death, and was told this depended on the King's clemency. His only rejoinder was from the psalm: '*Credo videre bona Domini in terra viventium*'.

May 4, 1535, was appointed for the martyrdom. No doubt all awaiting it in prison had their dark night in preparation, that agony which in their measure they shared with the divine victim, and which ended with the ministry of an angel strengthening them.

The morning came and five prisoners were led out, their faces full of joy. We know this from the words of St Thomas More. Watching the scene from his cell window, he said to his daughter: 'Dost thou not see, Meg, that these blessed fathers be now going to their deaths as cheerfully as bridegrooms to their marriage?'

I suppose most of us know now what was involved in martyrdom at Tyburn for high treason. Bound to a hurdle and dragged over the rough road from the Tower to Tyburn, the victim was watched by crowds of men and women. This in London, not much more than four hundred years ago and after some nine hundred years of Christianity! Crowds were waiting at Tyburn where all was ready: the gallows, the thick rope, the ladder, the fire in a great cauldron.

Prior John Houghton was the first victim. The rope was put round his neck and he addressed the crowd from the ladder:

'I call God to witness and I beseech all here present to attest for me on the dreadful day of judgment that being about to die in public I declare that I have refused to comply with the will of his Majesty the King, not from obstinacy, malice or a rebellious spirit, but solely for fear of offending the supreme Majesty of God. Our holy mother the Church has decreed and enjoined

otherwise than the King and the Parliament have decreed. I am therefore bound in conscience and am ready and willing to suffer every kind of torture rather than deny a doctrine of the Church.'

Then praying in the words of Psalm XXX he ended saying: '*Into thy hands I commend my spirit; for thou hast redeemed me, O Lord the God of truth*'. The ladder was then taken away and the martyr hung until nearly strangled, was cut down and the last butchery began. The martyr continued to pray while the executioner ripped open his body, flinging the entrails into the fire. Then as a hand was laid on his heart, came the last words: 'Good Jesu, what will you do with my heart?'

All that has just been described was repeated four times, Richard watching and encouraging the sufferers, promising them, it is said, a 'heavenly banquet for their sharp breakfast'. Then came at last his own turn. Cardinal Pole, writing later in his *Defence of the Unity of the Church*, was to describe the last moments as follows: 'One of these martyrs I must not pass over without special mention, as he was intimately known to myself. Reynolds was his name, and he was one who, for the sanctity of his life, might be compared with the very first of those who profess the more exact rule of conduct. . . . To manifest to all time . . . his sanctity and doctrine and to show the height of his piety in Christ and his love of his country, it was ordained that . . . he should give testimony to the truth with his own blood. He gave it . . . with such constancy of mind that, as I was told by one who was present at the spectacle and had observed most attentively all that took place, when he put his neck within the murderous halter, he seemed rather to put on a regal chain than an instrument of death, such was the alacrity manifested in his countenance. O blessed man! truly worthy of the fullest confidence of thee, O my country!' (Quoted by Dom Adam Hamilton in his book *The Angel of Syon*.)

What must have been the joy of Cardinal Pole when, some eight years after writing the words just quoted, on his way to England as legate to Queen Mary, he was able to visit Syon's exiles and encourage them with hopes of return to their homeland. A few years passed, and he saw nuns and monks—if in reduced numbers—re-established in their life of cloistered peace.