

SAINT'S DAY

29 DECEMBER

Murder in the Cathedral

Thomas Becket

LIKE SO MANY THINGS, it began with a quarrel. Several quarrels in fact—all of them between King Henry II of England and Thomas Becket, who was archbishop of Canterbury. Once, they'd been friends. But sadly they fell out.

At the start of this story, Henry was the most powerful king in Europe. Thomas Becket was the son of a rich merchant. He'd done very well for himself, getting better and better jobs (both in England and Rome) until he got the best job of all. The king made him royal chancellor of England, responsible for seeing that everything the king ordered was carried out.



This portion of a window in Canterbury Cathedral is one of many recalling the story of Thomas Becket, its famous martyr.

So Thomas was powerful. He lived in his own palace, which was nearly as luxurious and as well furnished as the king's. He enjoyed good food, fine clothes—and hunting.

Meanwhile, Henry had a problem. He was having trouble getting the leaders of the church, the bishops, to do what he wanted, because they didn't like being bossed around by King Henry. They felt that not even the king should tell the church what to do.

Henry didn't like that.

Then he had an idea. He made his friend Thomas archbishop of Canterbury. That meant that he would be in charge of all the bishops. They would have to do what Thomas said. And of course, as Thomas was a friend of Henry, that would mean the king would get his own way.

Thomas was made archbishop. He also gave up living in luxury and lived very simply. What mattered most to him now was the church. He took its part against the king. So it was little wonder that they soon argued so seriously that Thomas had to leave England for his own safety. He went to live in Rome in the year 1164.

Six years later, when Thomas and Henry were both in France, they met and made up their quarrel. Thomas returned to Canterbury. Everyone treated him as a hero. The people cheered as he made his way into the city. Again Thomas became the champion of the church, and soon the king's temper flared up again.

One December day while he was still in France, he lost patience well and truly. "Who will free me from this turbulent priest?" he shouted.

Four of the king's knights heard what the king said. They decided he could mean only one thing. The four of them looked at each other and nodded. And so those knights, Sir William de Tracy, Reginald FitzUrse, Richard le Breton, and Hugh de Morville, rode north as fast as they could and took a ship across the Channel. Some people say that Henry realized what had happened and sent messengers after them to stop them. If he did, they failed to catch up with the four knights.

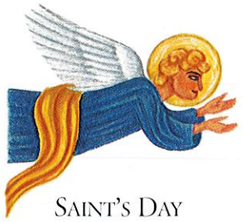


Thomas was brutally murdered while he went about his work as a priest.

Four days after Christmas, the knights arrived in Canterbury and met Thomas. An argument took place. Thomas went into the cathedral to pray at one of the altars there. The priests of the cathedral wanted to bar and lock the doors. Thomas said no, the church of God should not be locked. Then, just as it was getting dark, the knights made their way into the cathedral and there, in a holy part of the cathedral, with their great heavy swords, they struck down Thomas and killed him.

Christians all over Europe were horrified when they heard what had happened and soon people started to call him Saint Thomas Becket. It wasn't long before people started making journeys to Canterbury to pray where Saint Thomas was buried.

In the end, King Henry realized how much he was to blame. He too visited Canterbury, walking barefoot to show how sorry he was. But Thomas was dead and nothing could alter that. Henry knelt to pray at the grave of the man who, once upon a time, had been his best friend.



SAINT'S DAY

14 AUGUST

Prisoner 16670

Maximilian Kolbe

ON THE FIRST DAY OF September 1939, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler ordered the mighty German army to invade the country next door, Poland. A month later, the Polish army was defeated.

Among the thousands of Poles who were arrested was a Franciscan friar, Maximilian Kolbe. For a time, Maximilian (who was also a priest) and his fellow friars were kept in tents in Germany. They were then returned to Warsaw, the capital of Poland.

Hitler had decided to give some freedom to Polish priests if they would help the Germans by persuading the Polish people to grow food for Germany. Some German officers even said Maximilian could become a German if he'd help them—which would mean he could live in safety. Proud to be Polish, he refused. He was again arrested, this time by the Secret State Police, or Gestapo, and kept in prison.

Shortly afterward, he was sent with three hundred other prisoners in railway cattle trucks from Warsaw to the terrible concentration camp at Auschwitz. To keep his companions cheerful on the journey, he led them in singing hymns.

On arrival, each prisoner was given a striped uniform and tattooed on the forearm with a number. Maximilian Kolbe was now known as Prisoner 16670.

Maximilian was taken behind the barbed wire walls of Auschwitz for refusing to side with the Nazis.

There were sights of terrible suffering everywhere. Men, women, and children wandered around inside the barbed wire compounds, looking exactly like walking skeletons. The prisoners were given little food and made to work long hours. Because of this, and because of the violence of the guards, many prisoners died of weakness and hunger. For many, the worst thing about the camp was that there was no grass or trees or plants. No birds sang there. They at least were free to fly away from the smell of death.

Then, one day in August 1941, one of Maximilian's fellow prisoners in Block 14 was reported missing after the usual evening roll call. Somehow, he had managed to escape. The next day, all the prisoners were brought to the parade ground and were forced to stand for hours in the hot sunshine. Many fainted. Some died where they fell.

Then the camp commander announced that ten men from Block 14 must die because someone had escaped. He went along the ranks selecting his victims. The silence was unbroken until one of those chosen, a Polish soldier named Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out, "What'll happen to my wife and children?"

When he heard this, Maximilian quietly stepped out of line, took off his cap and stood in front of the commander. The commander was, for a moment, speechless. Then he yelled, "What does that Polish pig want?"

Forty-seven-year-old Maximilian replied, "I'm a Catholic priest. I'm old. I'm ready to take that man's place because he's got a wife and children."

The commander hesitated. Why should anyone, he wondered, make such an offer? But then he waved Gajowniczek back into his place and told Maximilian to join the other nine he had already chosen. They were taken to Block 13, the starvation bunker.

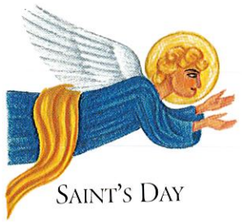
No clothing, no food, and no water was allowed. Anyone who asked for them was kicked to the ground. Slowly, one by one, the men starved to death. Five remained, half alive. Of these, Maximilian was the only one still conscious.

Soon, the Germans needed Block 13 for a new batch of victims. A doctor was ordered to execute Prisoner 16670 and his last few companions by injecting them with a deadly poison. Maximilian said a brief prayer before holding out his left arm to receive the lethal dose.

Franciszek Gajowniczek survived Auschwitz and lived for more than forty years.

Maximilian was only forty-seven when he declared himself an old man, ready to die for a younger man.





SAINT'S DAY

Oscar Romero is not officially a saint but is remembered on 24 March.

An olive branch—a traditional symbol of peace.

I Cannot Change

Oscar Romero

IT WAS ABOUT HALF past six on a Monday evening. Archbishop Romero was about to celebrate a Eucharist, or Mass, in memory of his mother, who had recently died. He was in a little chapel that was part of San Salvador's Divine Providence Hospital, in which he'd made his home.

As he stood at the altar, four men entered the chapel and walked up the aisle. They were dressed quite ordinarily. Those already in the chapel were kneeling, saying their prayers. They didn't pay too much attention to these latecomers. Until, that is, they went right up to the altar.

The four of them put their hands in their pockets. Each took out a pistol and shot the archbishop several times in the chest and face. He died almost at once. Then the men escaped.

As the news spread through the city, traffic stopped. The whole city fell silent.

This happened on 24 March 1980, in San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America. It was ruled by the army, who were helped by many powerful, rich, and violent men. Death squads roamed the city. In the countryside, soldiers could kill whomever they wanted. Nobody asked any questions.

But the army didn't control everything. Also busy in El Salvador were men who called themselves "freedom fighters" and whom others called terrorists. They didn't have much power—but they did have guns, and they wanted a revolution.

In the middle of these two groups were the poor people of El Salvador, for whom life had become more and more miserable.

Oscar Romero had become archbishop in February 1977. He was probably chosen because it seemed that he wasn't on either side.

But a month after he became archbishop, a good friend of his was murdered by an army death squad. This man had been a priest, Father Rutilio Grande. His death made Oscar Romero think hard and speak out. He refused to attend any parades or ceremonies the army organized.

The army didn't like that. They weren't used to being criticized in public.

But Archbishop Romero went on speaking up on behalf of the poor. He made lists of people who had "disappeared"—which usually meant they had been murdered. He made lists of the times the government lied to the people. It was not surprising that attempts were made on his life. The newspapers, which were owned by the government, attacked him. A radio station that was owned by his church was bombed.

Even so, Archbishop Romero became more and more popular with the poor of El Salvador. His reports and speeches began to be heard in other countries. He nearly won the Nobel Peace prize. It was no wonder that the government of El Salvador wanted him silenced.

One Sunday, he spoke out again, pleading with the rulers of his country to change their ways. "In the name of God, in the name of these suffering people, I beg you, I beseech you, I order you to stop this cruelty! Do you realize, in this last week, one hundred and fifty people have died as a result of violence by both sides in this struggle?"



Oscar Romero dared to speak out against the brutality of the government. As a result, he was murdered in a chapel as he was about to lead a church service.

Oscar Romero was shot dead the next evening.

But that wasn't the end of it. A week later, during the archbishop's funeral, four bombs exploded. They killed twenty people, and two hundred more were injured—many by snipers. All this was probably the work of freedom fighters, who were angry at the archbishop's death and forgetful that he'd condemned violence by both sides.

Oscar Romero could have kept quiet and not spoken out against what he knew was wrong. But he didn't. He'd been prepared to risk his life. As he said when they blew up his radio station, "I cannot change, except to seek to follow the Gospel more closely."