
The Lesson of the Life of Edmund Campion

by Rev. Clarence Kelly

*Campion was a missionary, a martyr
and a champion of the Faith.*

EDMUND CAMPION was born in the year 1540, the son of a Catholic bookseller. And, as one of his biographers says, "his life is full of interest, as it is full of lessons." This is especially true for Catholics of today who cling to the same Faith for which Campion was to die a relatively short time after his ordination to the priesthood.

The year 1540 was an interesting one. It saw the dissolution of the greater monasteries by Henry VIII as well as the solemn approval of the Society of Jesus by Pope Paul III.

Edmund was destined to live the life of a tradesman but for his extraordinary intelligence which he exhibited very early in his life. At thirteen, he was chosen to deliver an address to good Queen Mary on her entry into London upon her accession to the throne. At sixteen, he entered Oxford.

Eventually this success based on his extraordinary natural gifts would provide a source of grave danger to the salvation of his soul. Thus when Mary died and Elizabeth became Queen, having abandoned the Catholic Faith she pretended to profess, she began systematically to establish a new religion and used the full force of the state to this end. Naturally pressure was exerted on all to accept the new ways. This pressure was to no small degree felt at Oxford. Many abandoned the Faith rather than risk royal censure and the loss of worldly success. Among these was numbered Edmund Campion. It is not that he believed in the new religion. It was just that public adherence to the old was too costly.

"Campion never doubted the truth of the Catholic faith, but like many before and after his time he could not bring himself to

sacrifice his splendid prospects by open confession of an outlawed creed. He was the star of all the gay pageants and learned discussions by which Oxford entertained the Queen on her visit to the University. Cecil, her Prime Minister, was forward with promises of patronage and support."

He was riding the high wave of success and idolized to such an extent that the young students at Oxford imitated him not only in his speech and writing but even in the way he dressed. They were proud to be called "Campionists." It was too much to give up. The alternative was so unthinkable. So, "Campion unhappily allowed himself to be persuaded into receiving the deaconship in the new state religion, as a necessary step to preferment. But his mind found no rest. God clamoured for his

soul. He sought for excuses for his outward conformity. But the more he sought the more clear proofs did he discover that the old faith alone was true, and that the new was false. In vain had he looked to Scripture or to the ancient Church. They both declared against him."

Return To The Church

HE BEGAN TO talk about his difficulties with the new religion and thus endangered his position. It just so happened that one of the "Campionists" was the son of the Speaker of the Irish House of Commons who happened still to be a good Catholic. Mr. Stanihurst was his name. Increasingly troubled by the promptings of grace, Campion made a decision to return to the practice of the Catholic Faith and to do penance for his cowardly abandonment of it. He fled to Ireland and was welcomed in the house of Mr. Stanihurst. He had been away from the sacraments for many years, but now in Ireland he practiced the Faith so devoutly "that the good Irish folk called him the angel."

During the years 1570-1571 fresh measures were taken against the Catholics and Campion was forced to flee Dublin, having been secretly warned by the Lord Deputy of Ireland, Sir Henry Sidney, who favored the old religion. He then went to the home of Sir Christopher Barnewall in Turvey who hid him in an attic. The search for Campion intensified and once more he was forced to flee. This time he set out for England disguised as a servant and took the name Patrick. Things continued to worsen and he was in constant danger. It was at this time that he responded to the promptings of a



vocation. He would leave England and enter the English Collage at Douai, become a priest and return as a missionary. He set sail, was captured and returned, but successfully escaped. This time he would not fail.

The English College at Douai was founded by the thirty-six year old Dr. William Allen of Oriel who would later become Cardinal Allen. Dr. Allen had left England at the first sign of the changes. Knowing the English bishops could not train or ordain priests because they were either in prison or under detention and that the Marian clergy, that is, the remnants of the priests under good Queen Mary who remained faithful, would eventually die out either naturally or on the scaffold, he saw, as Elizabeth's Prime Minister did, that "the old

Church would quietly expire." Thus Allen was determined to act and the English College was born. How important was this?

Evelyn Waugh put it this way: "That Catholicism did in fact survive—reduced, impoverished, frustrated for nearly three centuries in every attempt at participation in the public services; stultified, even, by its exclusion from the Universities, the professions and social life; but still national; so that, at the turn of opinion in the nineteenth century, it could re-emerge, not as an alien fashion brought in from abroad, but as something historically and continuously English, seeking to recover only what had been taken from it by theft—is due, more than to any other one man, to William Allen."

The College at Douai became the center to which English Catholics directed their hopes. Many flocked there and Allen was their hero.

Seminary Schedule

AT THE ENGLISH College, which welcomed Edmund Campion, Mass was at 5:00 A.M. every day. There was weekly confession and communion. They fasted twice a week and even when they did not the food was not all that good due in part to a severe shortage of funds. Greek and Hebrew were taught. It was presumed that the student knew Latin already. During the course of their scriptural studies they went completely through the New Testament sixteen times. They were trained to answer the Protestant objections and to endure suffering. They were being trained to become, not scholars, but missionaries and martyrs. Soon Douai was sending twenty priests a year to England. Eventually one hundred and sixty would die under bloody Elizabeth, that ruthless tyrant and enemy of Jesus Christ.

Allen was severely criticized by more moderately minded Catholics for sending young priests to almost certain death. The Jesuit Aquaviva, who was general of the order, said in 1584 that "to send missionaries in order to give edification by their patience under torture might injure many Catholics and do no good to souls." It is difficult to imagine any harm done by the precious blood of martyrs or any damage done to souls.

Allen's mind was more heaven directed and, "knew that the devotion of his seminarists,

so gallantly squandered, sometimes, in a few weeks of ministry, was of more value than a lifetime of discreet industry. His was the humbler task of composing their epitaphs. One aim was paramount to him, whatever its cost; the Church of Augustine, Edward the Confessor, Thomas of Canterbury and Thomas More must go on."

Campion spent two years at Douai and finished his theological studies while giving lectures in the English College. He then received the four minor orders and subdeaconate. He was not thirty-one years old. The fact that he had received the "diaconate" in the Anglican Church weighed heavily on him. He considered this "the abomination of the mark of the beast." His tender conscience suffered much for his betrayal of his Lord and Savior and thus he sought further to expiate by offering himself without reserve to the Society of Jesus. He left Douai and sought entry into the Jesuit Order and to this end arrived in Rome in the year 1573, just after the death of St. Francis Borgia, the third General of the Order. Edmund was the first postulant accepted by the new General. The various Provincials, being in Rome for the election and knowing of Campion's scholarly reputation, vied for him since there was at that time no English Province. The Austrian Province won out and he would soon begin his novitiate at Prague in Bohemia. This was a stronghold of the Hussites whose founder John Huss "owed his socialistic and anti-Catholic ideas to Wycliffe."

On October 10th, 1571, just two months after the beginning of his novitiate, he was moved to Brunn in Moravia. There he spent a year's novitiate and won many converts to the Faith. On

September 7, 1571, he was sent to the college at Prague and was made a professor of Rhetoric. In 1575 he took his first vows and established the Sodality of Our Lady for the students at the college. In 1578 he was ordained a deacon and then a priest by the Archbishop of Prague. He said his first Mass on the birthday of Our Lady.

Blood Of Martyrs

THE BLOOD OF martyrs began to flow on his native soil and Edmund longed to return. He was especially moved by the death of Blessed Cuthbert Mayne who was the first martyr trained at the English college at Douai. He died at Launceston. Father Campion was especially touched by this event because Mayne was greatly responsible for Campion's decision to leave England and enter the College of Douai. In the meantime Dr. Allen was determined that the Society of Jesus should have a role in this great work since many Englishmen had entered their ranks. He went to Rome on behalf of this cause and met with success. Two Jesuit priests and a brother would be sent: Fathers Campion and Parsons and Brother Emerson. On December 9th, 1579, Allen wrote to Campion giving him the "good news." The following March Campion received his orders. On the night before Campion's departure one of the brothers wrote over his cell: "Father Edmund Campion, Martyr." Another painted "a garland of roses and lilies on the wall of Campion's cell, just above where his head usually rested." When the Rector delivered the orders to Campion the future martyr said



to him, “ ‘God’s will be done, not mine,’ and being scarcely able to hold in his tears gave vent to weeping and thanksgiving, offering himself wholly to rack, cross-quartering or any other torment or death whatsoever.”

Father Parsons entered England first, disguised as a soldier. Campion assumed the disguise of a jewel merchant. Mr. Edmunds, he was called. Brother Ralph Emerson was his servant. Parsons safely entered. Campion and Brother Ralph were arrested and then quickly and unexplainedly released.

There had been formed a Catholic association, “a club of gentlemen” for the purpose of assisting the missionaries with all that they needed. With their aid the work began and progressed quickly. A spirit of encouragement spread among the faithful and all longed to assist at the Mass of Campion and hear his

magnificent sermons. The persecution intensified with the arrival of the young Jesuits and the young priests of the English college because Catholicism was supposed to die with the passing of the old priests. Now with the infusion of this wave of young and extraordinary virtuous young priests, it was invigorated. The enemies of the Church felt this threat to their plans.

Campion’s Challenge

CHARGES OF POLITICAL involvement were raised to obscure the real issue. One of the Catholic laymen suggested that Campion and Parsons compose letters stating their true purpose and should they be arrested these letters could then be released. Cam-

pion was reluctant at first but he then agreed and in the span of half an hour penned his famous “Challenge.” A copy was given to a certain Mr. Pound and the priests each kept a copy. Campion’s was not sealed and Pound read it. He was so moved by it that he showed it to others who in turn had to have copies to read to others and so on. Soon more than one copy was in the hands of the Queen’s Council. Basically it is an eloquent document in which Campion “challenged a discussion on religion before the Council to show how it affected the State, before the University to prove its truth, and before the men of law to show how the English statute book itself justified his creed.” Being an instant sensation, Campion became a hero to the Catholics and a much sought after “criminal” to the authorities.

Everywhere Campion and

Parsons went they were enthusiastically welcomed by the devout and faithful Catholics who longed for the true Faith and the traditional Latin Mass. Thus did they work meeting with the faithful, hearing their confessions, saying Mass very early in the morning and then preaching and moving on to the next Mass center. They were careful not to stay too long in any one place. They preferred, very frequently, the public inns to private homes for safety's sake and perhaps for privacy as well.

God's will be done, not mine, and being scarcely able to hold in his tears, gave full vent to weeping and thanksgiving, offering himself wholly to any torment whatsoever.

The Ten Reasons

AT A MEETING with Parsons and other priests at Uxbridge, it was determined that Campion would compose an appeal to the Universities in Latin. This was the beginning of the *Ten Reasons*. Campion and the others each did his task. He wrote and they made the arrangements to acquire a secret printing press and all that was necessary to print the work. It was an extraordinary feat in every way. On the 27th of June, 1581, the *Decem Rationes* were placed on the benches at St. Mary's, Oxford and stirred a blaze of controversy.

This little book is a powerful and brilliant refutation of Protestantism and can readily be applied to the Modernists of our

day as it was to the Protestants of his. Briefly, "the thesis may be analyzed as follows:—(1) All heretics have been obliged to mutilate Holy Scripture in their own interest. The Lutherans and Calvinists have done this in several instances. (2) In other cases they retain the text, but pervert the clear meaning of the passage. (3) The Protestants, by denying the existence of a visible Church, deny, for all practical purpose, the existence of any Church. (4) The Protestants pretend to revere the first four

General Councils, but deny many of their doctrines. (5) and (6) The Protestants are obliged to disregard the Fathers. (7) The History of the Church is continuous. The Protestants are without living tradition. (8) The works of Zwingli, Luther and Calvin contain grossly offensive statements. (9) The Protestants are obliged to employ many empty tricks of argument. (10) The variety and extent of Catholic witnesses are impressive."

Campion's Capture

CAMPION'S FAME continued to spread and the search for him intensified. With the intensification of the search, Parsons was

fearful that Campion's inability to refuse what were frequently the unthinking requests of the faithful might lead to unnecessary risks. He put him under obedience to Brother Ralph so that when requested to preach under carelessly dangerous circumstances he was able to refuse since he was obliged to obey Brother Ralph. In one instance Brother Ralph was so pressured that he consented, against his better judgment, to accede to a dangerous request. He reluctantly gave in and "this weakness of Brother Emerson's part was to him a subject of "lifelong regret," for it led to the arrest of Campion and two other priests. It occurred at Lyford where they were taken after hiding for some time in the hollow of a wall over a gateway.

It was a great victory for the government. Campion was led into London tied upon a horse with a paper attached to his hat saying, "Campion, the seditious Jesuit." He was put into the tower. He forgave the spy Eliot who was responsible for his arrest and told him: "And absolution, too, will I give thee, if thou wilt but repent and confess; but large penance thou must have." The rack-chamber followed and it was rumored about that he had been broken and would soon emerge a Protestant. The Catholics, not knowing what to believe, were saddened and discouraged. It seems that Campion did in fact reveal some information but "he never divulged anything that his torturers did not know before." He revealed nothing of secret nor would he, as he declared in a letter, "come rack, come rope." He did make a reference to this just before his death. After forgiving those who convicted him, he asked pardon "of any whose names he might have compromised during his ex-

amination.”

December 1, 1581, was the date set for his death. With him would die two other priests: a Father Sherwin and a young Father Alexander Briant who was twenty-six years of age. Father Sherwin was chosen to die as representing the Seminary at Rheims, to which place the college was temporarily transferred from Douai “owing to political trouble.” The character of this holy priest was beautifully expressed in his words and in the manner in which he died. To a friend he wrote from prison: “Delay of our death doth somewhat dull me. Truth it is, I had hoped ere this, casting off of this body of death, to have kissed the precious, glorified wounds of my sweet Savior, sitting in the Throne of His Father’s own glory.” Father Briant was selected as a representative of the English College and by the actual time of his execution he had been subjected to all kinds of incredible sufferings. He had been starved, deprived of water, tortured with needles and racked on three occasions. The Rackmaster had said of him that he worked to “make him a foot longer than God made him,” yet “he stood still with express refusal.” He had been condemned “in Westminster Hall, where his angelic looks, outlasting a hell of almost unique torment, did not pass unnoticed by the public.”

On coming out to die on that first day of December, Father Campion greeted the crowd: “God save you all, gentlemen!...God bless you all, and make you all good Catholics!” As they were dragged to the place of execution tied to hurdles, a man went up and wiped the face of Campion who then prayed that God would reward such kindness. As he stood prepared to die, an

Anglican clergyman presumed to direct the prayers of this saint. Campion turned to him and gently said: “Sir, you and I are not one in religion, wherefore I pray you content yourself. I bar none of prayer; but I only desire them that are of the household of faith to pray with me, and in mine agony to say one creed.” Campion died first. He was hung, quartered and disembowled. Sherman followed, and so great a reverence had he for the martyred Campion that he first bent forward and kissed his bare and

dinal Allen wrote: “Ten thousand sermons would not have published our apostolic faith and religion so winningly as the fragrance of these victims, most sweet both to God and to men.”

WE NEED THE comfort, enlightenment and inspiration which these martyred defenders of Tradition provide during these days which are so different and yet so much the same as those during which these wonderful priests, rejecting the new religion,

His mind found no rest. God clamored for his soul. The more he sought excuses, the more proofs he discovered that the old faith alone was true and that the new was false.

bloodied arm and then jumped into the execution cart and peacefully met the same fate. The young Father Briant was even more peaceful and serene. What a sight to behold: the three great saints, heroes of the traditional Catholic Faith, overcoming those who sought to overcome them by torture and death. Its effect was not lost. For “the populace, much wrought up over all three, went home, through the winter mists, in tears. Most of them who had prejudices against the Church lost them for good; and very many straightway entered her communion...a great tidal wave of conversion to the old Church swept in.” Again the persecution intensified, but in the wake of these martyrdoms “it burst over the heads not only of a far more numerous, but a far more heroic body.” As Car-

gave up everything for the exceeding love of Jesus Christ and the salvation of souls.

May we, who have not yet been called upon to give up property and life in defense of Tradition, be made worthy descendants of these our spiritual ancestors in the Faith. □

