

F160218: Blessing of Windows at English Martyrs, Didcot

MARTYRS OF ENGLAND – PRAY FOR US

It is almost exactly a year since we gathered here for the solemn dedication of this church. Now today we bless these magnificent windows commemorating St. Edmund Campion, St. John Houghton and the Carthusian martyrs, and St. Thomas More in the Tower with his daughter Meg. I thank enormously Fr. Phillip and all of you for your generosity in installing these images, which for many generations to come will raise the hearts and minds of those visiting this church, especially the young, to God, to the truths of the Catholic faith, and to the witness of our predecessors. I'm unsure how this church came to be dedicated to the English Martyrs. Perhaps it was the canonisation of SS. John Fisher and Thomas More when the parish was beginning under Fr. Campbell? We used to hear a lot, when I was at school, about the Martyrs. They inspired us and captured our imagination. They were English, so they seemed real, despite the gap of history. These days we hear about them much less. This is a pity, because without our history, the Catholic community will lose its bearings. This is why I'm delighted this parish stands as a monument. It testifies to them. It bids us ask their prayers that whatever the cost we remain faithful to Christ. These days we may not need to sacrifice our life for our Catholic faith, but what's harder, we may need to sacrifice our good reputation.

Let me say a word about St. Edmund Campion, a wonderful man. In the late 16C, Catholicism was illegal; to be a Jesuit was to be a traitor; to be a priest meant sure arrest. Yet these were the perils St. Edmund risked for the love of Jesus. Born in 1540, the highly gifted son of a London bookseller, he became a fellow at Oxford and one of the finest men of his generation, an orator and scholar. Ordained a deacon in the Anglican Church, later in Ireland he became a Catholic and left for Douai and Rome for the Jesuits. Ordained in 1578, he was chosen for the first Jesuit mission to England. He landed in Dover in June 1580 disguised as a jewel merchant and ministered in secret in many houses of recusant Catholics until, a few miles from here at Lyford Grange, in July 1581, after a deadly game of cat and mouse, he was captured and arrested. Tortured in the Tower and in a show-trial accused of treason, he was condemned to death at Tyburn on 1st December with SS. Ralph Sherwin and Alexander Bryant. This brilliant man, brave, witty, full of faith, serene and holy, was brutally hanged, drawn and quartered. Triumphant in heaven, he was canonised in 1970 by Paul VI, one of the best known and best loved of all the English Martyrs.

Faith of our fathers living still: we will be true to thee til death. Today then, let's ask God to bless this window in honour of a man his friends called *suavissime et optime*, the 'sweetest and the best.' Let's ask him to pray for us, and the Carthusian martyrs and St. Thomas More too. We live in a post-Christian secular culture, in many ways admirable yet one without depth that's toxic to Christian faith and family-life. This is why we need these witnesses of faith so that *through the truth that comes from God England shall then indeed be free*. So, let us pray for our land, and for ourselves too. May we have the grace *to love both friend and foe in all our strife, preaching the Faith as love knows how by kindly words and virtuous life*. Indeed, may we persevere in practicing our faith so that one day we can reach that heavenly happiness the English Martyrs won by bravely shedding their blood.