

St Edmund of Abingdon
Lecture at Abingdon
to mark the closing of the Holy Door of the Year of Mercy,
13 November 2016
Rt. Rev. Dom Geoffrey Scott, Abbot of Douai

I am always confused in mid-November each year because the Church commemorates two St Edmunds, one the Anglo-Saxon boy king, martyred by the Vikings in East Anglia in 870, patron of Douai Abbey and Bury St Edmunds, and your St Edmund, given the name 'Edmund' by his mother Mabel because he was born on 20 November the feast of St Edmund, King and Martyr. Mabel had earlier been on a pilgrimage to Bury St Edmunds.

Edmund of Abingdon was born around 1175 in what is now St Edmund's Lane in Abingdon, and died as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1240. Much detail from the surviving *Lives*, often hard to distinguish historical fact from the piety of the writers. Edmund was known for his devout life. He was educated in grammar at Oxford, close to Abingdon, and then went to Paris to study in an Arts course, carrying a hair shirt with him, the gift of his mother. He then returned to Oxford and taught in the Arts faculty between 1195 and 1201. Edmund then went back to Paris where he studied theology. Here, he probably wrote his *Moralities on the Psalms*. He then returned to England where he lived with the Augustinian canons at Merton in Surrey. In 1214 he began to study for a degree in theology at Oxford. He was one of the first English scholars to be interested in Scholasticism, through which he stressed the importance of the literal sense, the spiritual meaning and the historical context of the Scriptures. His theology was grounded in these three aspects. He is one of the first members of Oxford University, in its earliest days, about which we know anything and is credited with playing a part in introducing the New Logic into the Oxford schools.

In 1222, Edmund became Treasurer (sacristan) of Salisbury and lectured in the cathedral school. At this time, the cathedral was being built, so he would have been heavily involved in that project. In Salisbury he was well known for his almsgiving. When things got on top of him, he was inclined to retire to Stanley Abbey, a Cistercian monastery in Wiltshire, whose abbot, Stephen of Lexington (a monk of Quarr) had been a former pupil of his.

In 1233, he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by the pope after three elections had been unsuccessful. What struck me about his career as archbishop was the number of times he was involved in quarrels, disputes and wars. Behind the scenes, one observes him as a reconciler, achieving peace between opponents. His efforts to find peace meant that civil war between the king of England and the Welsh prince, Llewellyn was averted. He rarely had easy relations with the Benedictine chapter at Canterbury, described by one historian as 'the most touchy and cantankerous chapter in England'. He had constant arguments with the Canterbury monks, especially over the foundation of new churches. In these disputes, the monks appealed to the king over the head of the archbishop. Cathedral priories, and there were seven of them in England, including Canterbury, where a bishop was elected by a prior and monastic chapter, were a survival from an age of monastic bishops.

It was a short pontificate of only seven years and was punctuated by nine months' absence abroad. As a 13th century archbishop, he was more often in London on political business than he was in his cathedral dealing with church affairs. It is important to remember that there had been conflict in Europe between church and state for centuries over the authority of the religious leader, the bishop, and the secular leader, the king. It is called 'the investiture conflict', and the Thomas Becket story is part of this conflict. Edmund's administration was largely carried on by the members of his household, who staffed his chapel, his chancery, and his courts. As with the details of his life, evidence of this household is patchy. As archbishop he had a reputation as a reformer and was noted for promoting able individuals to his household. These included St. Richard of Chichester, but also his own brother, Robert of Abingdon, who was given a favoured position as the archbishop's brother, but held no specific office. It was not unusual for a 13^c archbishop to use his position to help his relatives. After Edmund's death, Robert fades into obscurity.

Edmund resisted royal interference in church affairs and criticised royal mismanagement. Like Thomas Becket before him, he objected to the royal courts subverting and encroaching upon the authority of the church courts and the liberty of the church. He had a strong sense of the pastoral ideal which a bishop should strive to follow, and he championed the independence and immunity of the clergy. Between 1234 and 1236, he mediated between the king and the barons, using the influence of the Church in politics to bring about unity which prevented civil war breaking out.

Edmund's last days are shrouded in obscurity and there is no convincing reason given for his decision to travel to Rome for the last time. It is suggested he had decided to go in person to Rome to deal with legal business. On his way to visit the pope, Edmund fell ill and died at Soissy, in a small Augustinian priory, on 16 November 1240. His remains were brought to

Pontigny on 20 November, the other St Edmund's feast. Your St Edmund has prophesied earlier to the monks at Pontigny: 'I will return to Pontigny on the coming feast of St. Edmund, king and martyr, for by that time the sun will have declined further in the sky and the first frosts of winter will have arrived'. His seal was broken at his death, as was the custom, to prevent fraud, and his household was dispersed.

There were lots of popular devotion as the body of Edmund passed along villages en route to Pontigny, and its abbot ordered the saint to desist from all miracles until the remains reached the abbey. His body was never transferred to Canterbury Cathedral because the Benedictines there had resented what they believed to be his interference in monastic affairs. His death in exile was portrayed as a kind of martyrdom and parallels were made with Becket's own exile earlier. As one historian concluded: 'Edmund was an ascetic, a master of the spiritual life. A man of great moral force to whom all turned in a time of crisis. His attachment to visitations by a bishop, his care for the maintenance of the office of a bishop, and his struggle for the freedom of the church courts show the inspiration of the major councils of the period 1179 to 1215 on Edmund.

The papal commission which investigate his cause for canonisation included the abbots of Abingdon and Reading. It was a long process; there was some scepticism about the large number of miracles reported. He was canonised by Pope Innocent IV. This pope declared that St. Edmund be inscribed in the catalogue of saints in 1247. At the first celebration of his feast, King Henry III offered to Edmund's shrine in Pontigny a chalice, a white silk vestment, and a sum of money from the farm a Canterbury to provide four candles to burn perpetually at St Edmund's shrine, and in 1254 he came on pilgrimage to the shrine. In Salisbury Cathedral, a collegiate church and an altar in the cathedral were dedicated to St. Edmund. Before the twelfth century, the translation of the relics of a holy person by a bishop from a grave to a shrine was the method of canonisation, but by the time of Edmund's death, canonisation by a solemn decree of the pope, after a rigorous process, was becoming increasingly popular, and this is what happened to St. Edmund. The manner of a person's virtuous life as well as reports of miracles were taken into account. Both were important because, as it was said, the devil could work miracles, but miracles wrought through the grace of God provided the seal of divine authenticity. St. Edmund's cult became widespread because his name was found in the Sarum Calendar, and he was particularly revered in Abingdon, his birthplace. He was also revered at Catesby in Northamptonshire where his two sisters Margaret and Alice became nuns. Modern scholars are dependent on the three Lives of St. Edmund, written before and after his canonisation in 1246 to help the saint's canonisation process, and they throw light on his life and career. Rather surprisingly, it was an English Benedictine who in the early 20c stated: Edmund had a holiness which was 'displayed in a thoroughly English character'

Edmund was the first Oxford master to be canonised officially, and St. Edmund Hall, a college of the university was named after him. The church in Oxford which he had frequented as a young master, St. Peter in the East is now the library of St Edmund Hall. C. H Lawrence concludes his masterly survey of St Edmund's life by noting that he appealed to the popular imagination because simple, ordinary people were convinced that those who ruled God's church should be learned, humble, and holy men.

Edmund's writings are mainly scriptural commentaries and devotional works. The most famous of these is the *Speculum Ecclesiae*, which was widely read in England and elsewhere in the 13th and 14th centuries. It was primarily written as a mirror for monks and nuns, and was later revised by St. Edmund as a mirror for the secular clergy and laity. In a simple way, it provided a comprehensive plan for achieving spiritual perfection: 'The will of God is your sanctification'. It was not a particularly original work, since it restated for Edmund's own time traditional monastic teaching on the contemplative life. The feast on 16 November is that of his death and the translation of his relics. At Abingdon, the feast is kept on 20 May, which is the dedication of a chapel which was the site of his birthplace.

His various achievements of arms include the most popular three radiant gold suns surrounded by three rings, now incorporated into the arms of St Edmund Hall, Oxford, into those of St Edmund's College, Cambridge, into those of St Edmund's College, Ware, the successor of the English College, Douai, and sometimes used by the Diocese of Portsmouth. They represent the three persons of the Holy Trinity, set upon a blue, azure sky. They commemorate the vision St Edmund had of his mother, Mabel, after her death when she drew in his right hand three circles in which she wrote the names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

His surviving relics include the remains of his body still at Pontigny, a large relic in St. Peter's, Rome, the tibia of his right leg in Westminster Cathedral, the fibula of his left leg at St Edmund's College, Ware, a rib in Portsmouth Cathedral, part of his big toe at Erdington (still there), and a relic at Douai Abbey, from the English secular college in Douai, concealed during the French Revolution, and given to Douai Abbey in 2005 by the townsfolk who mistook St Edmund of Abingdon for St Edmund, King and Martyr, the patron of Douai Abbey.

Prayer of St Edmund

May Our Lord Jesus Christ so allow us to honour God, to love our neighbour, to humble ourselves, that we may deserve to be honoured for our honour, to be loved for our love, and for our humility to be raised up to the joys of heaven. Amen.