Who Is St. John Fisher?

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Most mother's sons are born to live and die unheard, unsung.

That is true of many a famous churchman, scholar, administrator, even Saints. They play a part in their day, in the little field that God's providence marks out for them. From our human point of view, that could very easily have been true of St. John Fisher. One task, however, towards the end of his life lifted him above all this, marked him out for historical renown.

Now, as we look back it seems that his whole life was a preparation for that task. That task was to be the champion of the bond of marriage, of man above the state, of the primacy of the spiritual over the material, of the sacredness of the human person when when Henry VIII sued for divorce from his lawful wife Catherine of Aragon.

What had been the previous life of this man which fitted him so ideally for this role—to be the defender of truth, of the human person?

Born in 1468 or 1469, he was one of four children orphaned early in life by the death of their father, a man of some substance. His mother married a second time and had four more children. The unity of the family was preserved, however. By way of quick summary one might describe the Saint as a man "who was poor, could laugh, loved his family."

He was ordained to the priesthood in 1491, received his doctorate in 1501, and was consecrated Bishop in 1505. In a rapid succession of events, he became the confessor of Princess Margaret, Henry VIII's mother, and Chancellor of Cambridge University. Before his death, he was to write numerous works some in defense of the Faith against Luther.

His love of learning and his efforts to strengthen the financial and academic position of his university, Cambridge, clearly mark him out as a scholar. Nevertheless, his saintly character was revealed in his oft repeated observation that in prayer lay the salvation to most of the problems of the world.

Renowned as a scholar of distinction and a churchman of holiness, the key to his outlook is found in the observation which he approved about the sad condition of that age, namely, that the Church in its early centuries had many golden priests but few gold chalices but in his day many gold chalices but few golden priests.

Role In History

Henry VIII's older brother, Arthur, had married Catherine of Aragon. However, in poor health, Arthur had died shortly thereafter, the marriage never having been consummated. Since for political reasons such a marriage uniting Spain and England seemed very desirable, Henry married Catherine. Under the circumstances, a dispensation as such was hardly required but to make certain that all would be in order a dispensation was secured from the Pope.

Throughout the following years all seemed well enough. However, no male heir was born. Whatever Henry's personal life was he lent his name to a book asserting the supremacy of the Pope when the first troubles with Luther appeared. Then Anne Boleyn came on the scene. Anne, it would seem, had no scruples about chastity but, interestingly enough, did not seem to care that much about Henry, king though he be. Her price, therefore, came high, the crown of the queen.

Perhaps it was the combination of these circumstances, that is, the natural desire for an heir and the raging but unsatisfied desire for Anne that blinded Henry. However, as a rather fair theologian and the defender of the Faith he knew divorce to be impossible. So instead he developed "a scruple of conscience." He feared that this original marriage to Catherine was invalid, that he was, therefore, living in a state of sin, that the marriage, therefore, should be annulled thus leaving him free to marry Anne.

"Displeasure Means Death"

The machinery to investigate and decide upon his problem was set in motion. Would it succeed? Humanly speaking one would say that considering the state of the church in sixteenth-century England, no one would have dared to oppose him. "The displeasure of the prince means death" was a common phrase in those days. If it did not mean death it might mean loss of wealth, position or prison. For many people that was the only rule of conscience — avoid the displeasure of the prince.

The first official hearing got under way. Catherine herself was there. Strong with the might of right she nearly upset the well laid plans of the king's worshippers. Nevertheless, the proceedings went forward. It would seem that no opponent would be foolish enough to stand up against this steamroller. None save one, Bishop John Fisher. He who had been acknowledged as the "holiest and most learned prelate in the whole of Christendom." But even for him to do so was a shattering thing. It left the assemblage agog that this man would dare to rise, to risk the wrath of his King.

His plans disturbed by the truth, the angry King's answer was his best during the long years of misery that surrounded these events. "We will not stand with you in argument therein" said Henry, "for you are but ONE MAN."

Here indeed was truth. There was but one man like John Fisher. One man to stand out against the multitude. One man to stand for principle. One man to defend the innocent. Eventually for this opposition, Bishop Fisher went to the Tower and the executioner's block.

Another Baptist

Little wonder that we find in St. John Fisher, a modern John the Baptist. The Baptist rebuked Herod for taking his brother's wife. St. John Fisher rebuked Henry for putting aside his legal wife. The Baptist's head was brought upon a dish. St. John Fisher's head was brought upon a tray to Henry and his concubine.

Anne, looking on the head, said contemptuously, "Is this the head that so often exclaimed against me? I trust it shall never do me more harm."

Herod was haunted at the thought of the Baptist's death. Anne struck the dead man's mouth with the back of her hand so hard that one of the teeth in the mouth made a wound in her hand, the scar of which lasted the rest of her life.

Henry ordered the head parboiled and stuck on London Bridge as a warning to those who would oppose him. And yet, it remained so lifelike that, as some said, this man who was almost dead from consumption before his beheading lasted better in death than he had in life.

CARDINAL ST. JOHN FISHER
BISHOP OF ROCHESTER, ENGLAND

Rather than a warning, the head became a gathering place for prayers until fourteen days after the beheading it was ordered taken down and cast into the Thames.

This man as he passed away his last months in the Tower had a divine sense of humor. When he learned that his books had been suppressed by Henry, we are told that he "smiled with sad resignation."

John Fisher well understood that the only red hat he would ever wear would be the bloody crown of martyrdom. Henry's remark was so true, "Yea, is he so lusty? Well, let the Pope send him a hat when he will, but I'll so provide that whensoever it comes, he'll wear it on his shoulders, for he'll have no head to set it on."

And yet, here was a man who was no bigot. "Not that I condemn any other men's consciences," he wrote. "Their consciences may save them, and mine must save me." That was his strength. He stood for the right, not for an error collectively agreed to.

Fisher's Treasures

Eagerly did the plunderer's foot his episcopal palace after his arrest. Certainly this gaunt old man, the confessor of a Princess, austere of life, must have something even though his was the poorest diocese in England. As their search continued, the gloom of disappointment beclouded the looters brows. Then a ray of hope, a chest. However meager, there was something. They broke it open to find — a hair shirt and a discipline — Fisher's treasures.

Saint for our day, fellow in martyrdom with a layman, defender of the family, champion of man, and the spiritual against the state and the material, man of conviction, give St. John Fisher College many St. Thomas Mores to work with you.

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Modern Language Role In Liberal Arts College Cited

By REV. C. J. DROUILLARD, C.S.B., Ph.D.

A few weeks ago, the newspapers carried headlines announcing the flight of a jet-plane from England to this continent and back again within a matter of several hours. We have become so accustomed to scientific, mechanistic wonders that quite likely we went on our way through the paper towards the sport page without much reflection.

The incident really deserves some thought. It warns us that nations we once considered remote and foreign have become rather suddenly our next-door neighbors.

To live peacefully with neighbors, we must make a sincere effort to become well-acquainted with them, to learn to respect them. Surely the events of this century indicate clearly enough the need for such an effort.

In this chaotic age, civilization can survive only if the nations of the world cultivate mutual respect and fraternal love for one another.

Respect For Nation

If this civilization is to be Christian, supernatural charity must of course be the principal unifying factor. Yet, there are secondary means which can also be very effective. Among them is the study of art in all its forms. It provides an excellent meeting ground where the minds and the hearts of men can communicate.

Respect for a nation must be based on an appreciation of its worth. A reliable norm of judgment is required. An intelligent mode of procedure might consist in an examination of the best product of that nation. The surest touchstone of greatness, after holiness, is intellectual achievement.

In the literature of any country, we find the flower of its thought, the mirror of its soul and the barometer of its aspirations. Through this literature, we can penetrate to a national consciousness of a people.

We can come to know its attitudes toward life; we can perhaps even learn to forgive its mistakes.

Growth of a Nation

To come down to a more practical level, we might consider the position of America in the world today. A few short years ago, our country was considered a pioneer land, a rugged terrain where physical endurance and bull-headed determination were the requisites for success.

The older nations of Europe smiled superciliously at the antics of the young giant, whose underdeveloped brain, so they thought, was incapable of serious intellectual achievement.

Since the last world war, the United States has assumed leadership in the world. This preeminence must be founded on more than economic reasons. The nations of Europe must be convinced that they have no monopoly on intelligence if we, in turn, are to earn their respect. We can bring this about if we have a sufficient number of talented men and women whom we can send in administrative and consultative capacities to the countries still occupied and to such organizations as the United Nations and its numerous branches.

These men and women will be equal to their task, if, through the study of modern languages, they have come to understand the mentalities and the civilizations of the peoples with whom they are dealing, if they can literally and figuratively speak their languages.

Man and Beauty

For those to whom the international aspect of the problem makes no appeal, solid reasons can be found to establish the utility and value of the study of modern languages. We are living in an industrial age. Excessive concern about material things usually tends to produce atrophy of the imagination. So-called realism and naturalism invariably follow in the wake of a materialistic civilization.

The best literary minds, influenced by their age, forget that man is made up of body and soul; their probings centre more and more around the less attractive aspects of life. Like their contemporaries, they lose sight of the ideal, of spiritual values.

The average cultured man, to live a full human life, cannot afford to starve his soul. He must keep in constant touch with spiritual values to give his life meaning and purpose.

Foreign literatures can provide him with a powerful antidote to the debasing influence of materialism. He can relive the simple and profound faith of mediaeval poetry. Classicism can teach him the need for restraint and dignity. Romanticism can open his eyes to the magnificent beauty of the created world.

Symbolism will revive in him the sense of mystery. It will make him perceptive of the spiritual message which nature is constantly whispering to him. The modern Christian Renaissance will help him to anchor his life on solid Christian principles, to keep his gaze fixed on eternity.

Finally, to become completely practical, the study of foreign languages is one of the best means to learn one's own tongue. Anyone who has been engaged in the difficult work of translation knows that, to do this task successfully, it is necessary to ponder on the meaning of English words.

Cultured Men

Educators today are becoming more and more aware of the necessity of restoring the study of modern languages to its rightful place in the college curriculum. Even the schools established exclusively to teach technical and scientific subjects have found it necessary to include the study of languages in their curriculum to produce literate and educated graduates.

St. John Fisher College recognizes this need. It aims at turning out cultured men who can not only think, but who can express their thoughts in clear, cogent language.

Freshm n Day

The Student Board of Governors of St. John Fisher College set September 26, 1952 as "Freshman Day." The purpose of this day was to facilitate better relationship between the two classes of the school by promoting actual acquaintances of the students, man to man, on the athletic field of competition.

The culmination of the day's activities was a dance, sponsored by the Student Board of Governors, in the general lecture hall in the Administration Building.

Chairman of all activities was Francis Pilecki assisted by Robert Kalb, John C. Murphy, James Gaffney, Arthur Pizzoli, Nick Basile and Sam Bonsignore.

Races, games and the traditional collegiate tug-o'-war comprised the activities in the afternoon. Competition in a "bag marathon" resulted in the title "King of the Day" with the crown going to Buzzy Weaver, one of nearly one hundred participating freshmen.

Class of '56 winners in other fetes were Stanley Bojara, Leon Pieniaszak and Joseph Lersch, all freshmen.

Weaver was crowned at the dance in the evening. His date, Miss Ann Enright received the title "Queen" and in addition to her crown, was presented a beautiful bouquet of flowers. The coronation took place on the loggia in front of the Administration building following a candlelight procession from the dance floor.

Frank Pilecki and his date, Miss Genevieve Marotta, crowned the King and Queen, and this was followed by a rendition of a traditional college song, Vive L'Amour, by the College Glee Club.

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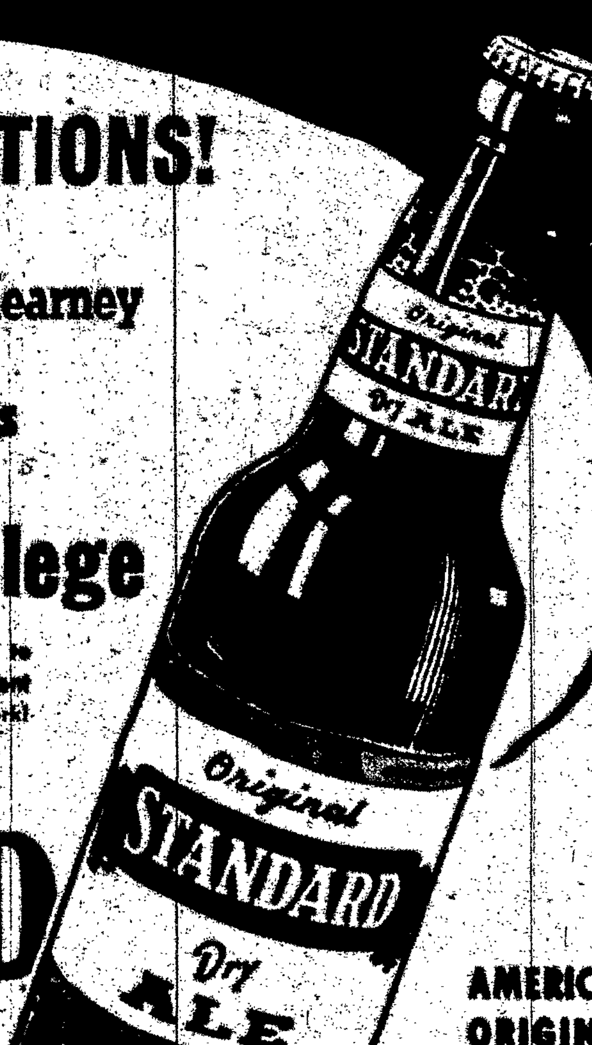

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