

## PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

## Rochester's Patron Saint

Four hundred and forty-two years ago today, June 22, 1535, a frail, nearly blind old man was taken from his cell in the Tower of London to a scaffold on Tower Hill to be executed for treason. So weak he had to be carried those last few hundred yards, John Fisher remembered that this day was the feast of St. Alban, the fifth English martyr who died because he refused to worship the Roman Emperor Diocletian as his god. Fisher's literary mind caught and appreciated the irony. Here he was, the Bishop of Rochester, newly made a

Cardinal by Pope Paul III, condemned to death for refusing the Oath of Supremacy that declared the King to be the head of the Church of England. Both for St. Alban and for John Fisher loyalty to Christ rather than Caesar was the issue that determined their fate. As different as the actors in the drama were, the principle was the same — either submission to the secular order which demanded too much, or loyalty to the Church and the Pope who governed it as the Vicar of Christ. As a theologian and scholar Fisher had studied and written about this very question in his treatises against the heresies that had plagued Europe for the past fifteen years. There was no doubt in his mind about where he owed his allegiance.

Carrying his copy of the New Testament, Fisher mounted the scaffold and, as was the custom, spoke his last words to the assembled crowd.

"Christian people, I am come hither to die for the faith of Christ's Catholic Church. . . Wherefore I desire you to help me, and assist me with your prayers, that at the very point and instant of my death's stroke, and in the very moment of my death, I then faint not in any point of the Catholic faith for any fear. And I pray God save the king and the realm, and hold his holy hand over it, and send the king a good counsel."

He then knelt down and prayed quietly for some moments before the headsman delivered the final blow. John Fisher confirmed by the witness of blood what he had sought to live and teach — fidelity to Christ and His Church, fidelity to his own conscience.

What prepared and led this man to the scaffold that June morning? Aside from the date and place of his birth — 1469 at Beverley in Yorkshire — not much is known about his early years. He attended the local grammar school and about 1482 entered Michaelhouse, one of the colleges at Cambridge University, to study for the priesthood. His life for the



SAINT JOHN FISHER

next twenty-two years was to be centered on Cambridge. An excellent scholar, Fisher deplored the lack of sufficient facilities for educating the clergy. Only a handful of priests were university graduates and the rest, however pious, were unlettered, even ignorant men who could not teach or preach effectively to the people they were sent to serve. Elected Master of Michaelhouse in 1497, Fisher begged for funds to erect new colleges and to endow chairs for professors of Theology. The greatest benefactor he won to this cause was Lady Margaret Beaufort, the mother of the King, Henry VII. She provided for the founding of two colleges at Cambridge, as well as for Readers in Divinity, who were to be men schooled in sacred doctrine. Not only were they to lecture regularly at both universities, but also were designated to preach at parishes in London and around the country.

So important was Fisher's work for Cambridge his peers elected him to the highest office of Chancellor of the University. Within a few months, however, his

academic career was interrupted by his appointment to the bishopric of Rochester, Kent. His consecration was on November 24, 1504. As the King wrote to his mother, he chose Fisher "for none other cause, but for the great and singular virtue that I know and see in him, as well in knowledge and natural wisdom, and especially for his good and virtuous living and conversation." This was an unusual choice because the King was more accustomed to name men Bishops who were noted for their skill as courtiers and diplomats than for their zeal as preachers and men of prayer.

Rochester, the smallest and poorest of the dioceses in England, was considered as the first rung of the episcopal ladder. Few of Fisher's predecessors remained longer than five or six years. They rarely visited their see and delegated the pastoral care to a vicar. John Fisher was a remarkable contrast. He served his diocese for thirty-one years, regularly making visitations to the parishes and religious houses, preaching, and seeing that the spiritual needs of his people were met. He took seriously the bishop's apostolic duty to be a "fisher of men." In spite of this busy life, he found time to write devotional works, learned treatises explaining the Faith, refutations of heretical books, and a closely argued theological examination of the vexing question of the marriage between Henry VIII and Queen Catherine of Aragon.

In effect Fisher's life was an example of the union of learning and holiness dedicated to the service of Christ and the Church. Thus, when the struggle between the King and the Church reached its climax in the Oath of Supremacy, John Fisher was the only bishop to stand firm. His learning enabled him to see the truth while his practice of goodness strengthened him in adversity to follow his Faith.

John Fisher was canonized on May 19, 1935. T. S. Eliot in *Murder in the Cathedral* tells us in a sermon of Thomas Becket, what martyrdom means.

A martyr, a saint, is always made by the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. A martyrdom is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God.

As St. Alban and Becket were models for Fisher, so Fisher is a model for each of us. Our world, too, needs people of Faith, of integrity, of courage to follow their Christian conscience. St. John Fisher, pray for us — the bishops, the priests, the people of this Diocese of Rochester.

## vatican news

## Talk of Excommunication Rife in Rome

Rome (RNS)—If the controversial anti-conciliar Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre gets excommunicated it won't be because of a lecture he delivered in Rome on June 6.

## A News Analysis

The French prelate, formerly of Dakar, Senegal, already suspended from sacred functions by the Vatican, arrived in the Eternal City at the invitation of an elderly princess to give voice to his traditionalist sentiments under the Pope's nose.

The affair was boycotted by most of Rome's nobility, but not by the press, which enjoyed itself hugely, recounting ancient aristocratic feuds and spotlighting a high cleric defending the past in the Baroque surroundings of a 17th Century palace. They cared little about what he said, and apparently few Italians did either. The Lefebvre movement has in fact little grassroots support in Italy.

As everyone knows, from his many open statements, Archbishop Lefebvre, who has no diocese of his own, thinks that the Second Vatican Council was worse than a mistake. It was the product of a few plotting cardinals bent on revolutionizing the Church. The Council was the "Yalta" of the Church, in which the leaders betrayed the cause to the ancient enemy. It was the French Revolution of the Church. Consequently, Lefebvre says, it is not he who is the author

of a possible schism, but rather the Pope and the bishops of Vatican II.

The present leadership in the Church, as Lefebvre writes in his book, *I Accuse the Council*, "have turned their backs on the true ancient Church; they have given it new institutions, a new priesthood, a new cult, a new and changing teaching and all this in the name of the Council."

The spirit that dominated the Council and inspired so many of its ambiguous and even erroneous texts, he claims was "not the Holy Spirit, but the spirit of the modern world, the liberal spirit, Teilhardian, Modernist, in opposition to the Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus Christ." At Rome he concluded his lecture by crying out, "I do not want to die a Protestant."

This is a challenge to Vatican II, to the bishops and to the pope. The crucial moment is not the Roman lecture but the ordination which is announced for June 29. For a second time, in defiance of the Church, Archbishop Lefebvre has said he will ordain more priests (14) out of his seminary, already canonically suppressed, at Ecône, Switzerland.

Two days after the Rome lecture, Pope Paul gave a hint of what might happen if this renewed canonical defiance takes place. In his usual Wednesday general audience he referred to the theme of unity and added, "Jesus himself admitted as possible the exclusion

from the fraternal community of those who after repeated admonitions show themselves to be refractory."

That the archbishop, formerly Superior General of the Holy Spirit Congregation, who resigned his post before the end of his term, is "refractory" can hardly be questioned. Gestures of exhortation and admonition in his direction have been abundant and without effect.

He has had four personal letters from Pope Paul and one private audience. There have been six open papal complaints, three letters from Archbishop Giovanni Benelli, two letters from the Vatican Congregation of Bishops, and another from a special commission of cardinals.

There have been other warning signs as well. Notes in the Vatican Observer and several visits from the Cardinal who succeeded him in Senegal are but two instances.

All this points to some imminent action. But what kind? It may turn out, according to some speculation, that Archbishop Lefebvre will not be excommunicated but simply defrocked, reduced to the lay state.

The worst will probably be averted if, at the last minute he desists from the announced ordinations.