

ST. THOMAS BECKET (1118 - 1170 A.D.)

“I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”¹

—Luke 15:7

Henry and Thomas. Henry II,² the great-grandson of William the Conqueror, was a strong king. He unified England by destroying the power and independence of the feudal lords, and then ruled with wisdom and justice. He conquered Ireland with a minimum of cost and effort. Besides England and Ireland, Henry’s kingdom also included Scotland and half of France. He was one of England’s greatest kings. But his efforts to break the power of the Church brought him into conflict with Thomas Becket, one of the most amazing men in Christianity’s history.

Thomas was born in London, in about 1118 A.D., the son of middle class parents who were descended from the Normans.³ Educated by the Roman Catholic Church at Merton Abbey,⁴ Thomas also later studied in Paris. He then served as a clerk for a time before entering the employment of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury. Thomas soon rose to prominence as both a clerk and an advisor to the Archbishop. Theobald allowed Thomas to study civil and Church law for a year in Italy. When Thomas returned to England, the Archbishop ordained him as a deacon and made him Archdeacon of Canterbury. So superior were Thomas’ intellect and abilities that Theobald recommended him to the new king, Henry II, for the important position of Chancellor of England. The King acted on that recommendation, and Thomas became one of the most powerful men in England at about the age of 37.

As Chancellor, Becket lived in luxury and enjoyed the king’s confidence. They were close friends, and spent a lot of time together—governing, scheming, drinking, hunting, and carousing. Some of that scheming involved ways of tapping into the wealth of the Church for the benefit of the kingdom, which made many

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* translation.

² Henry II lived from 1133 to 1189, and reigned as King of England from about 1154 until 1189.

³ The Normans came from the Normandy region of northern France. William the Conqueror claimed the throne of England when he led the Normans to victory over King Harold at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

⁴ Merton Abbey is located in the village of Merton, about 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) southwest of London.

enemies for Becket among the English clergy.⁵ Becket served his king well in war, as a more than capable military leader, and also carried out diplomatic missions for Henry. Thomas was the King's right-hand man, and quite probably his best friend. All of this changed in 1162 when Henry appointed Thomas Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury.⁶

Becket Changes. Becket resigned as Chancellor—a move which apparently surprised King Henry—and devoted himself wholeheartedly to God. Thomas gave up all luxuries, selling his possessions and giving the money to the poor. He adopted the lifestyle of an ascetic: becoming a vegetarian, sleeping little, praying and fasting often, and wearing an irritating “hair shirt” as a sign of penitence. Every day he met with the poor and did his best to feed them, and every night he humbly washed the feet of 13 beggars.

Becket also zealously defended the interests of the Church. This quickly brought him into conflict with Henry, who was seeking to undermine the traditional exemption of clergymen from the King's courts. Henry was convinced that crimes by Church leaders too often went unpunished in ecclesiastical (Church) courts, so he wanted the right to try clerics in his own civil courts. When Henry convinced the English bishops to give him this power in 1164, Becket opposed him. Henry tried to put Becket on trial for his opposition, but Thomas appealed to the Pope and then fled from England, at night and in disguise.

Becket's Exile and Death. Pope Alexander III,⁷ urged on by King Louis VII of France, took Becket's side and ordered King Henry to reinstate the Archbishop. To back up this order, the Pope threatened to impose an interdict—i.e., the suspension of all religious services within Henry's kingdom.⁸ Henry finally capitulated and allowed Becket to return to England in 1169.

Almost immediately upon his return, Becket excommunicated the English bishops who had sided with Henry. The King learned of this action while in Normandy. Infuriated, he cried out: “Shall a man who has eaten my bread . . . insult the King and all the kingdom, and not one of the lazy servants whom I nourish at my

⁵ For example, Thomas and Henry required church officials to pay a special tax in return for their exemption from military service—a practice known as scutage.

⁶ Becket did not seek this appointment. To the contrary, he tried to dissuade the King from it, but without success.

⁷ Alexander III was Pope from 1159 to 1181.

⁸ In general, an interdict would prohibit worship services, administration of the sacraments, and funeral services. However, limited exceptions were often allowed, such as Christmas and Easter worship services, private marriages, confirmation, and extreme unction for the sick. In the Roman Catholic Church, there are seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist (i.e., communion), Penance, Extreme Unction, Orders, and Matrimony.

table does me right for such an affront?" Four knights took the hint, crossed to England, and slew Becket at the altar of the cathedral in Canterbury as he prepared for Mass. This murder occurred on December 29, 1170. A young monk named Edward Grim was injured in the assault.⁹

After Becket's Death. King Henry was universally condemned for his role in Becket's murder. After a short period of seclusion, the King ordered the arrest of the murderers, restored the clergy's exemption from civil courts, and offered to perform any act of penance the Pope might require. King Henry would continue to rule England for 19 more years, until he was deposed in 1189 by his own sons—Prince John and Richard the Lion-Hearted.

Pope Alexander III proclaimed Thomas Becket a saint in 1173, less than three years after his death, and his tomb at Canterbury became an immensely popular destination for English pilgrims. Even King Henry came in July, 1174, finally fulfilling the public penance ordered by the Pope. Henry walked the last three miles barefoot, bruising and cutting his feet on the rough road. Once there, he submitted to scourging by monks at the tomb of Thomas Becket.

Sources:

- (1) *The Story of Civilization, Volume 4 (The Age of Faith)*, by Will Durant (1950).
- (2) *A History of Christianity, Volume 1 (Beginnings to 1500)*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette (1953, 1975).
- (3) *Lives of the Saints You Should Know*, by Margaret & Matthew Bunson (1994).
- (4) The following articles in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:
"St Thomas Becket," at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14676a.htm>.
"Henry II," at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07220b.htm>.
"Interdict," at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08073a.htm>.
"Sacraments," at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13295a.htm>.
- (5) "Vita S. Thomae, Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi et Martyris," by Edward Grim, ed. in *Materials for the Life of Thomas Becket*, by James Robertson (*London: Rolls Series, 1875-1885*) (7 vols.) Vol. II, as quoted in the "Medieval Sourcebook," found at:
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/grim-becket.html>.
- (6) Various web sites discussing the location of Merton Abbey, including:
<http://pages.britishlibrary.net/tooting/merton.html>.
<http://www.morrissociety.org/mertonabbey.html>.

⁹ Edward Grim later wrote a biography of Thomas Becket.

<http://pages.britishlibrary.net/overground/abbey/>.

<http://www.merton.gov.uk/visiting/outandabout/abbeymills.htm>.