St. John Fisher

Today the Church celebrates the two greatest Englishmen of the 16th century: St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher. We typically hear and know quite a bit about St. Thomas More. His character is well attested in the famous film, “A Man for All Seasons.”

That said, I thought we might take a little time to reflect upon St. John Fisher. He was born in Yorkshire, England. John’s father died when he was eight years old. He studied at Cambridge University and was ordained a priest in 1491 at the age of 25. As a priest, he was known for combatting heresies, especially those proposed by Martin Luther.

At the age of 35, John became the bishop of Rochester (southeast of London). He was a good friend of Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was one of the most famous learned men of the day. Erasmus once remarked of John, “There is not a man more cultured, more admired or more holy.” He carried out his pastoral responsibilities for his flock with great care and respect. He was such a good preacher that he was appointed to preach the funeral oration of King Henry VII.

Everything was going well for Bishop Fisher, but King Henry VIII’s divorce with Catherine of Aragon changed everything. King Henry desperately wanted Bishop Fisher on his side. John, however, knew where King Henry wanted to go with marriage and split from Rome. As time progressed, he became a constant thorn in the side of the king. He became an outspoken critic as he supported Catherine of Aragon and the validity of their marriage.

In 1531, John outright dismissed King Henry’s title as Supreme Head of the Church by refusing to acknowledge the supremacy act of 1534. John’s refusal cost him greatly as he was thrown into the Tower of London along with St. Thomas More. He was imprisoned on April 26, 1534. Bishop Fisher was in his mid 60s. He was accused of treason and treated harshly inside the tower - cold damp conditions and underfed – so that he would conform to the king’s wishes. John was kept in the tower for over a year.

In 1535, Pope Paul III made John Fisher a cardinal. You can imagine how angry this made King Henry! Henry said that before the hat arrived, he would make sure that John had no head left to put it on.

A few months later, John was tried and declared guilty for failing to acknowledge the king as the head of the church in England. Sir Richard Rich was the only witness against John. He was sentenced to death, to be hanged, drawn and quartered. It was later commuted to beheading. John was taken back to the tower to await his sentence.
Public outcry was brewing and people began to see a connection between John Fisher and his namesake, St. John the Baptist. The king made sure that John Fisher was beheaded before June 24 so that people did not associate John Fisher and St. John the Baptist.

On June 22, 1535, John Fisher was led out of the Tower of London onto Tower Hill where many executions took place, just outside the tower’s walls. John Fisher prayed all along the way. When he got to the foot of the scaffold, the guards offered to help him up the stairs, but John refused.

As John went up the stairs, the sun shone brightly on his face. It was around 10:00 am. The executioner knelt down before him and asked for his forgiveness. John said, “I forgive thee said he, with all my heart and I trust thou shall see me overcome this storm.”

Then, John’s gown was taken from him and he stood in sight of all the people where there was a large number to see the execution. When John was stripped, everyone noticed his emaciated figure and was shocked at his decline. From the scaffold, he said, “Christian people I come here to die for the faith of Christ, the holy Catholic Church, and I thank God that my stomach has served me well. I beseech Almighty God of his infinite goodness to save the king and his realm and that it may please him to hold his holy hand over it and send the king a good counsel.”

After saying these words, John knelt down and said some more prayers. The executioner bound a handkerchief around his eyes. The bishop lifted his heart and hands to heaven and said a few more short prayers. He then laid his head over the block. In one blow, the executioner beaded the saintly bishop where there was an incredible flow of blood. King Henry had his body stripped and left on the scaffold for hours. It was then taken down naked and thrown into a nearby churchyard. John’s head was stuck on a spike on London Bridge and after two weeks, thrown into the river Thames.

Without question, John Fisher was a man of great courage and a true defender of the faith. When all the other clergy folded under the king’s demand, it was St. John Fisher alone who denounced the power grab. While St. Thomas More may be a “Man for All Seasons,” St. John Fisher is certainly a great inspiration and role model not only for bishops and priests, but for all Christians today.

~St. John Fisher, pray for us!

Source: *The Brutal Execution of Bishop John Fisher.*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DMN5rq1Hj8