

Did you know . . .

Blessed Among Us: St. Thomas Becket

Thomas Becket was born in Cheapside, London in 1118 or 1120 on Dec. 21, the feast day of Thomas, the Apostle. He was the son of a prosperous merchant, Gilbert Becket and his wife, Matilda. He was educated at Merton priory, then in a City of London school and finally at Paris. At age 24, Thomas' father secured a position for him in the household of Theobald of Bec, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In 1154, Theobald, upon the death of appointed Thomas as Archdeacon of Canterbury. Then in 1155 Thomas was made Chancellor, the most important position in England after the king. He and King Henry II became close friends. Henry later, upon the death of Theobald of Bec, appointed Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury, the most important position in the church in Medieval England. Henry did so to assert his royal supremacy over the English Church.

Thomas, however, resigned his post as Chancellor and adopted a new regime of prayer and fasting. He also began to resist the king's encroachments on the independence and prerogatives of the Church. This led to poor relations between Thomas and Henry and Thomas was forced to flee England of 6 years of exile in France.

In 1170, Henry had his eldest son crowned as co-king by the Archbishop of York. This undermined the authority of the pope as only Thomas Becket, as Archbishop of Canterbury, had the right to crown English monarchs. Thomas then excommunicated all those responsible. Henry, fearing an interdict for England, allowed Henry back to England but uttered a fatal curse, "Who will rid me of this troublesome priest?" Thus, four knights, understanding the king's meaning, departed for Canterbury and slew Thomas at his altar. Thomas was immediately acclaimed a saint by the common people, who venerated him as a martyr.

On Feb. 21, 1173, Pope Alexander III officially declared Thomas Becket a saint. His feast day is Dec. 29.

Major works based on his story include Alfred Lord Tennyson's play, *Becket*, T.S.Elliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral* and Jean Anouilh's play, *Becket or The Honour of God*, on which the 1964 Academy Award winning movie, *Becket*, was based.

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