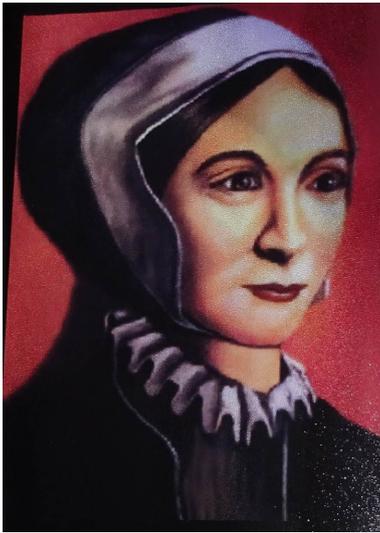


Lives of Saints

St Margaret Clitherow

1556-1586

Feastday: 4th May



"They told me that I am going to die this coming Friday; and I feel the weakness of my flesh which is troubled at this nebut my spirit rejoices greatly. For the love of God, pray for me and ask all good people to do likewise."

St Margaret Clitherow

(words spoken to a friend when she learned of her execution, showing her humanity as well as her zeal for the faith.)

I was born into a well-to-do family. My father, Thomas, was a respected and successful business man, and the sheriff of York for the year 1564. Unfortunately, I lost my father when I was fourteen years old and my mother, Jane, had to provide for my four siblings and for myself.

A year later, I married John Clitherow who was a wealthy butcher and we lived in the part of York called the Shambles where my husband had his shop. John, though a member of the Established Church, was very supportive of me and even paid my fines (12d.) for not attending church services. He was also supportive of his brother William, who was a Catholic priest.

I became a Catholic in 1574 and my zeal for the faith led me to risk my life by supporting and harbouring priests. The Jesuit etc, Act of 1584 ordered all Catholic priests and religious to leave the country under pain of capital punishment. Noble Catholic families secretly harboured and maintained priests, hiding them in 'priest holes' while claiming that they were teachers for their children. Sometimes, they even changed the priest's name.

I followed their example and maintained and kept priests hidden in my house where the Mass was celebrated regularly. When our house was under surveillance, I rented a house some distance away to keep the priests there. My home became an important hiding place for fugitive priests in the north of England.

I was imprisoned three times in York Castle for not attending church services and my third child, William, was born in prison. In all I spent nearly two years in prison.

I sent my eldest son, Henry, to the English College, which now was transferred to Reims in France, to train for the priesthood. The authorities summoned my husband to explain why my son went abroad. In March 1586 they searched our house and a frightened little boy revealed the location of the priest hole – the place where I hid priests.

For this I was arrested and accused of harbouring Catholic priests. I did not plead in order to prevent my children having to witness against me and being subjected to torture. At that time, I was pregnant with my fourth child.

I was executed on the 25th of March, the feast of Good Friday, 1586, by being crushed to death with the door of my own house. They made me lie on a stone on the Ouse Bridge and the door of my house was put over me and loaded with a huge weight of stones so that the stone under me would break my back. Though I died within a quarter of an hour, they left my corpse under the weight for six hours.

I was beatified on the 15th of December, 1929 by Pope Pius XI and declared a saint on the 25th of October, 1970 by Pope St Paul VI among the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales.

