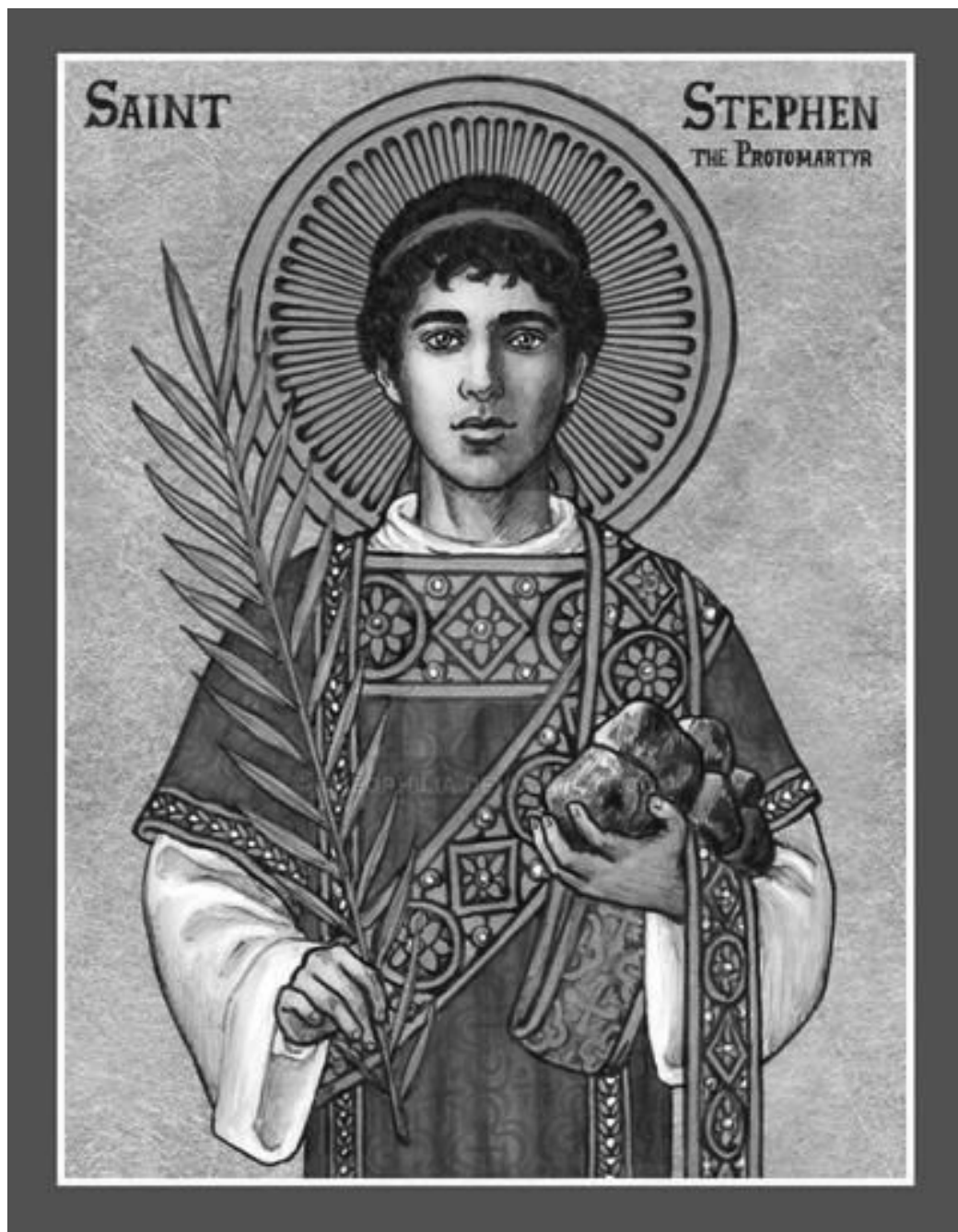


Saints of the Month

A selection of lives of the saints for December



THE CHURCH UNION



The Society

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3rd December – St Francis Xavier

Francis was born in 1506 in Xavier or Javier in the Basque region of Spain.

Whilst he was a student in Paris, he met Ignatius of Loyola and they became friends. Francis became a teacher in philosophy at the University of Paris.

In 1534 Francis was one of the first 7 people to make vows with Ignatius to form what would be known as the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits (this new order would be given formal Papal approval in 1540).

Francis was ordained as a priest in 1537. His life was to be that of a missionary in Asia. Portugal was colonising India and the King of Portugal petitioned the Pope to send missionaries to India. The Pope decided to send the new Society of Jesus and Ignatius, as superior, chose Francis to go.

Francis led extensive missions in Asia, working in India, Goa and Malacca doing much work with the poor and children in those countries. He was encouraged to go to Japan and was the first Christian missionary in that country, and he spent two years in Japan.

At this point he felt the need to go to China, but first he returned to his headquarters in Goa. It was from Goa that he embarked on a journey to China. It was on his way to secretly enter China that he stopped on an island away from the mainland and it was here that he died from a fever and exhaustion in 1552 as he was awaiting a boat to take him to the mainland.

O God, who through the preaching of Saint Francis Xavier
won many peoples to yourself,
grant that the hearts of the faithful
may burn with the same zeal for the faith
and that Holy Church may everywhere rejoice
in an abundance of offspring.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

4th December – St John Damascene

St John Damascene is also known as John of Damascus, where he was born and raised in a Christian family around the year 675.

He had a brilliant mind, and was what you might call a polymath as he contributed to the study of the law, theology, philosophy and music. He wrote many works of theology, and his writing style was very clear and accessible. He wrote works that explained the Christian faith to those who would attack it, and was very convincing in his arguments. His famous work was 'Exposition of the Orthodox Faith' which was a summary of the early Church Fathers.

He also wrote works on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and composed many hymns, some of which are still used today.

Icons are a familiar part of our Christian devotion, but during John's lifetime a group called the 'Iconoclasts' sought to prohibit their veneration and use. John vehemently defended their use, and so we are grateful to his work in defending the use of these beautiful devotional images.

He spent most of his life in a monastery near Jerusalem, and it was here that he died in the year 749.

Grant, we pray, O Lord,
that we may be helped by the prayers
of the Priest Saint John Damascene,
so that the true faith,
which he excelled in teaching,
may always be our light and our strength.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

6th December – St Nicholas

St Nicholas was born around the year 270 and died possibly in the year 343. He was a bishop from the city of Myra, which is modern day Demre in Turkey. Many miracles are attested to him and he is sometimes known as Nicholas the Wonder Worker.

His family were wealthy, but he is said to have distributed their wealth to the poor upon the death of his parents. The most famous story about him is that he heard of a man who had been wealthy, but had lost all of his money meaning that he couldn't afford a decent dowry to allow his 3 daughters to marry. This situation meant that the daughters would remain unmarried and possibly have to turn to prostitution to earn an income. Nicholas decided to help them, but wanted to save the family from humiliation of accepting charity. So, he went to the house under the cover of night and threw a purse filled with gold coins through the window of the house. The father immediately arranged a marriage for his first daughter, and after her wedding, Nicholas threw a second bag of gold through the same window late at night. After the second daughter was married, the father stayed awake for at least two nights and caught St Nicholas in the same act of charity toward the third daughter. The father fell on his knees, thanking him, and Nicholas ordered him not to tell anyone about the gifts.

St Nicholas became known for this story of gift giving and his character evolved into the Santa Claus that is now so familiar to us at this time of year. St Nicholas' story of charity helps us to look deeper at our approach to material goods as we approach the Christmas season and seek ways to extend our sharing to those in most need.

Almighty Father, lover of souls,
who chose your servant Nicholas
to be a bishop in the Church,
that he might give freely out of the treasures of your grace:
make us mindful of the needs of others
and, as we have received, so teach us also to give;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

7th December – St Ambrose

St Ambrose was born into a Christian family around the year 340, and he became one of the most important figures in the Church in the 4th century.

Ambrose's father died in 354 and the family moved to Rome where Ambrose studied law, and entered a career of public service. He became a Governor in Northern Italy and was a very popular political figure.

There was a vacancy as Bishop of Milan and Ambrose attended the election to prevent arguments and conflict between opposing groups. He gave an address and as he spoke the people called for him to be made the next Bishop. He refused as, although he was brought up in a Christian family, he was not baptised (it was common at this time for baptism to come later in life), he was a layman and not trained in theology. He attempted to hide from the crowd, but their will that he should be the next Bishop persisted and within a week he was baptised, ordained a priest and consecrated as a Bishop (his feast day of 7th December is the anniversary of his consecration as Bishop).

As he became Bishop he sold all of his land and gave his money to the poor, and throughout his episcopate he took great care of the poor. He was a great influence on St Augustine and played a key role in his conversion to Christianity.

Ambrose spoke out against the Emperor and defended the rights of the Church, and attacked some of the heresies which the Church was suffering from. He also introduced reforms to the liturgy and wrote many hymns, some of which are still in use today.

He died on Holy Saturday, 4th April in the year 397.

God of hosts,
who called Ambrose from the governor's throne
to be a bishop in your Church
and an intrepid champion of your faithful people:
mercifully grant that, as he did not fear to rebuke rulers,
so we, with like courage,
may contend for the faith we have received;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

8th December – The Immaculate Conception

The feast of the conception of the Virgin Mary first arose in the Eastern Church in the 7th century and spread to the West and became a widely celebrated by the 11th century. To celebrate today's feast we have an excerpt from the sermon by the Bishop of Coventry at the Walsingham Festival celebrated in Coventry Cathedral on 8th December 2018:

In order for Mary to be the sort of mother who will receive Christ faithfully and nurture Christ well, she needs to be of a certain character – she needs to be full of grace, transformed by the sanctifying grace of God at work in the believer. In place of the garments of skin with which the Lord mercifully clothed Adam and Eve as they left the garden, the kindness of ordinary grace, if you will, Mary needs to be clothed with gospel grace, power from on high, to receive and nurture the Son of the Most High. At the same time, in order for Mary to be truly an example of God's incongruous, undeserved, unmerited grace, she needs to be chosen irrespective of this character, simply on the basis of God's gracious favour. Hence, she is chosen at her conception, independently of her moral virtue which is – her moral virtue I mean – not a cause of God's favour to her but a consequence of it. The heart of the celebration of the Immaculate Conception is not that Mary was freed from the power of sinning but from the love of sinning. It was not that she was incapacitated to sin but that she was freed from the captivity of sin. Like Eve she was not created with an incapacity *to sin* but with a capacity *not to sin* – the stain of irresistible propensity to sin had been removed. Unlike Eve, she chooses to live in this capacity and not to fall captive to sin. Rather than saying, 'No, it will not be to me according to your word, here I am the servant of myself – the slave of my own desires who insists on choosing the fruit that delights my eyes'. Mary said, 'Yes, let it be to me according to your word – here am I, the servant of the Lord who receives the fruit that God, by grace, gives to me, the fruit of my womb, even though I fear the price of such obedience, the cost of such discipleship.' Here, at this moment, this annunciation, we see Mary, conceived in grace, formed by grace, shaped by the gift of God, choosing to live as God desires: living dependently on God, obediently to God and so openly to God that she *receives* – and *does not reject* – the life of God.

Almighty and everlasting God,
who stooped to raise fallen humanity
through the child-bearing of blessed Mary:
grant that we, who have seen your glory revealed in our human nature
and your love made perfect in our weakness,
may daily be renewed in your image
and conformed to the pattern of your Son
Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

13th December – St Lucy

Lucy's history has been lost and all we really know for certain is that this brave woman who lived in Sicily lost her life during the persecution of Christians in the early fourth century. Yet, veneration to spread very quickly and by the 6th century the whole Church recognised her courage in defence of the faith. Because people wanted to shed light on Lucy's bravery, legends began to crop up. The one that has passed the test of time tells the story of a young Christian woman who vowed to live her life in service of Christ. Her mother tried to arrange a marriage for her with a pagan and Lucy knew her mother could not be swayed by a young girl's vow, so she devised a plan to convince her mother that Christ was the better partner for life. After several prayers at the tomb of Saint Agatha, Lucy saw the saint in a dream. St. Agatha told Lucy her mother's illness would be cured through faith, which Lucy used to persuade her mother to give the dowry money to the poor and allow her to commit her life to God.

While Lucy and her mother were grateful to God, the rejected suitor was deeply angered and betrayed Lucy's faith to the governor. The governor attempted to force her into defilement at a brothel, but the guards who came to take her away were unable to move her, even after hitching her to a team of oxen. The guards heaped bundles of wood around her but it wouldn't burn so they finally resorted to their swords, and Lucy met her death.

Though details of her life remain unknown, it is widely known that during her lifetime Christians were persecuted for their faith. They were forced to endure horrific torture and often met painful ends during Diocletian's reign. Though the details surrounding her death remain only as legends, it is all modern-day Christians can rely on. Lucy's legend did not end with her death. According to later accounts, Lucy warned the governor he would be punished. When the governor heard this he ordered the guards to gouge out her eyes; however, in another telling, it was Lucy who removed her eyes in an attempt to discourage a persistent suitor who greatly admired them. When her body was being prepared for burial, they discovered her eyes had been restored. Because of this incident, St Lucy is the patron saint of the blind.

God our redeemer,
who gave light to the world that was in darkness
by the healing power of the Saviour's cross:
shed that light on us, we pray, that with your martyr Lucy
we may, by the purity of our lives, reflect the light of Christ
and, by the merits of his passion, come to the light of everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

14th December – St John of the Cross

John was born in Avila in Spain in 1542. His family were poor because his father had chosen to marry a poor woman from a lower class, and his employer disowned him. The early years of John's life were difficult as his father died when he was 3 and his brother died two years later, probably from malnutrition.

As a child John had a great interest in religion and even whilst at school he volunteered to help at the local Jesuit hospital. In 1563 he joined the Carmelite Order and was ordained a priest four years later. He longed for a simpler and quieter life and he considered joining the Carthusian Order. It was at this point in his life that he met Teresa of Avila, a charismatic and influential Carmelite nun. John was attracted to the strict regime of life that she lived. Teresa was trying to reform the Carmelite order and asked John to assist her in this work.

In 1572 he became Teresa's spiritual guide and he remained with Teresa for five years. During this time he had a vision of Jesus and made a sketch of this vision. The sketch remains to this day and shows a vision of Jesus on the cross but looking down on Jesus from above.

As the work of the reform of the Carmelite order continued, a rift arose and John was summoned back to his monastery. He refused, but was taken by force and imprisoned. To pass the time whilst imprisoned he wrote poems and he became a remarkable poet, and his works remain very influential right to this day. During his imprisonment, and revealed in his poetry, he came to know the cross very well and experienced acutely the death of Jesus. But it was in this darkness that he found light and that the cross leads to Resurrection; agony to ecstasy.

He died aged 49 in 1591.

O God, the judge of all,
who gave your servant John of the Cross
a warmth of nature, a strength of purpose
and a mystical faith
that sustained him even in the darkness:
shed your light on all who love you
and grant them union of body and soul
in your Son Jesus Christ our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

25th December – Christmas Day

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. *Luke 2.6,7*

The account of the birth of Jesus given by St Luke's Gospel is pretty brief, but those two verses are rich in meaning. When he tells us that 'the time came' for Mary to give birth he doesn't just mean that the pregnancy has reached full term. It's that God's time is right, the preparations and promises made so long ago, some of which we have been following together over the past few days, had reached the point when they can come to their fruition. "When the fullness of time had come," writes St Paul to the Galatians, "God sent his Son, born of a woman..." (4.4)

Luke tells us that the new born is laid in a manger, a feeding trough, and we might see here a sign that Jesus has come as true food, the living bread, who will give us the nourishment of body and soul that we need to truly thrive. He tells us too that Jesus is wrapped in swaddling cloths, and some writers have seen this as pointing us towards the end of the story Luke narrates, and the bandages that will wrap the body after the crucifixion. We are already seeing the good news of our redemption is emerging: the eternal God is sharing our life, and our world is changed for ever. Try and find a moment today – perhaps before the Nativity Scene in your home – to let that truth touch you.

God our Father,
whose Word has come among us
in the Holy Child of Bethlehem:
may the light of faith illumine our hearts
and shine in our words and deeds;
through him who is Christ the Lord. Amen.

Today's reflection is from *The Wondrous Gift*, a series of daily meditations for the 12 days of Christmas. You can download this resource at www.churchunion.co.uk/adventandchristmas

26th December – St Stephen

St Stephen is regarded as the first Christian martyr.

We find his story in chapters 6 and 7 of the Acts of the Apostles. He was chosen to be among the first seven Deacons in the Church. Through his witness to Jesus, his work and teaching he was persecuted and was accused of blasphemy.

During his trial he made a speech that denounced the Jewish authorities who were sitting in judgement of him. They condemned him to death and he was stoned to death. Those who stoned him laid their cloaks at the feet of a man named Saul – this man would persecute the Church, but would have a conversion experience and become Paul, who we know for his letters in the New Testament and his zeal for the Church he once persecuted.

As Stephen was being stoned, he prayed that Jesus would receive his spirit. He also prayed that those who were stoning him would be forgiven.

Stephen died: falsely accused; brought to an unjust condemnation because he spoke the truth fearlessly; he died with his eyes fixed on God, and with a prayer of forgiveness on his lips – just like Jesus.

Gracious Father,
who gave the first martyr Stephen
grace to pray for those who took up stones against him:
grant that in all our sufferings for the truth
we may learn to love even our enemies
and to seek forgiveness for those who desire our hurt,
looking up to heaven to him who was crucified for us,
Jesus Christ, our mediator and advocate,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

The Sunday after Christmas Day – The Holy Family

On the Sunday after Christmas Day we celebrate the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. This family and household is a school of prayer where we learn to listen, to meditate, to penetrate the deepest meaning of the Incarnation, of God-with-us. Mary and Joseph are our examples on how we meditate on these mysteries.

Jesus spent 30 of his 33 earthly years in Nazareth. Some spiritual writers have called these the 'hidden years', because there is so little written about them in the Gospel narratives. However, they reveal the holiness of ordinary life and show us how it becomes extraordinary for those baptised into Christ. From the very earliest times of Christianity, the Christian family has rightly been called a domestic church. In our own Christian family we can learn the way of selfless love in the School of Nazareth.

We can learn the meaning and mystery of this beautiful Feast and apply it to our own family life - the path to holiness is found in living our ordinary family life with the Lord Jesus at the centre of it all

Family is where progress in the Christian life, the way of ordinary holiness, can find its raw material. Whether we choose to respond to grace - and develop the eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to accept the hidden invitations to learn to love beneath the surface of that daily stuff - is all wrapped up in the mystery of human freedom. Our choices not only affect the world around us, they make us become the people we will become.

O God, who were pleased to give us
the shining example of the Holy Family,
graciously grant that we may imitate them
in practising the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity,
and so, in the joy of your house,
delight one day in eternal rewards.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

27th December – St John

St John is attributed by the Church as the author of the Gospel that bears his name and the epistles, also in his name. The Gospel is a very personal account. He sees the glorious and divine Jesus already in the incidents of his mortal life. At the Last Supper, John's Jesus speaks as if he were already in heaven. John's is the Gospel of Jesus' glory.

The vocation of St John as one of the Apostles, along with his brother James, is told very simply in Matthew 4: 21-22. Jesus called them and they followed him immediately.

Along with Peter they had the privilege of being present at the Transfiguration; the raising of Jairus' daughter and were present with Jesus in his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But John's friendship with Jesus was considered to be particularly special. John's own Gospel refers to him as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (see John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2), the one who reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper, and the one to whom Jesus gave the exquisite honour of caring for his mother, as John stood beneath the cross. "Woman, behold your son.... Behold, your mother" (John 19:26b, 27b).

John is believed to be the longest living of the apostles and the only one not to die a martyr's death.

Merciful Lord,
cast your bright beams of light upon the Church:
that, being enlightened by the teaching of your blessed apostle and evangelist Saint
John,
we may so walk in the light of your truth
that we may at last attain to the light of everlasting life;
through Jesus Christ your incarnate Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

28th December – The Holy Innocents

The account of the massacre of the Holy Innocents is recorded in Matthew 2: 16-18.

The Magi visit Jerusalem to seek guidance as to where the King of the Jews has been born. King Herod directs them to Bethlehem and asks them to return and report to him so that he may also go and pay his homage, but they are warned in a dream not to do so.

When Herod realises that the Magi have not returned to him and he has been tricked he is furious and gives the order that all male children under 2 years old in the vicinity of Bethlehem should be executed. Herod hoped that by doing this he would succeed in killing the new born King of the Jews.

The Holy Family had been warned about this and fled to Egypt to avoid this.

These baby boys had done nothing to deserve this cruel slaughter and today we are reminded of those who have had their innocence taken away due to the abuse of others.

Heavenly Father,
whose children suffered at the hands of Herod,
though they had done no wrong:
by the suffering of your Son
and by the innocence of our lives
frustrate all evil designs
and establish your reign of justice and peace;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

29th December – St Thomas Becket

Today is the celebration of a great English saint. His story is quite remarkable, and so we have a longer reflection on his life than normal.

He was born in Cheapside, London, to reasonably affluent Norman parents who had settled in England some years earlier. He was given a good primary education at Merton Abbey and in Paris, becoming a financial clerk.

In around 1142 he entered the service of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury. He was then sent abroad to study canon law. In 1154 Becket was ordained as a Deacon and became Archdeacon of Canterbury. Theobald was evidently impressed with Becket's work in this important administrative role, and used him as a negotiator in his dealing with the English monarchy.

Henry II succeeded Stephen on the throne in 1154, and the following year he raised Becket to the position of Chancellor of England. Becket was on excellent terms with the King and served him for seven years as a statesman and diplomat, and even as a soldier, leading troops into battle against the French during the attempt to regain the lands of Henry's queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. He had the outward appearance of a worldly cleric who fitted in with the extravagant tastes of the royal court, and even supported the King in his disagreements with the Church. It seems that Becket may have taken on a role of a particular advisor to the King, who was twelve years his junior, and may have been the true originator of many royal reforms of administration.

Archbishop Theobald died in 1161, and Henry proposed that Becket should be appointed as his successor. Becket initially resisted, warning the King that their friendship would be compromised and that he would not be able to accept the reductions of ecclesiastical privileges that he knew Henry was seeking. However, after encouragement from Cardinal Henry of Pisa, who urged him to accept the new role as a service to religion, Becket eventually agreed to become the senior churchman within England. Still only a deacon, he was ordained as a priest on Saturday 2 June 1162, and consecrated as bishop the following day. Despite Becket's warnings, Henry evidently expected that the new archbishop would continue to be a strong ally.

However, a sudden change came over Becket and he reformed himself, as he said, from 'a patron of play-actors and a follower of hounds, to being a shepherd of souls'. He took his new responsibilities seriously, lived very austere and was generous in almsgiving. He quickly came into conflict with the King when he resigned the chancellorship. There were many points of issue between them, such as taxation and the state of the King's soul, but crucially they differed over the relative rights and responsibilities of Church and state over clergymen who were convicted of crimes, and the freedom of the English

Church to appeal to the Pope against the monarch's wishes. The positions of King and archbishop became entrenched; the other bishops were divided in their views.

In 1164, following a difficult royal council at Northampton, Becket took refuge in France. He was offered help by the King of France, lived initially in the Cistercian Abbey at Pontigny and then, from 1166, at Sens. Both sides appealed to Pope Alexander III. The Pope sought hard to find an appropriate solution, and Becket came increasingly to the view that the issue was a matter of deep principle. He even attempted to resign his post, although Alexander refused to allow this.

Matters reached a head when Henry arranged for his son to be crowned by the Archbishop of York, in contravention of the tradition that the role of crowning English monarchs is reserved to the Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket, the Pope and the French King were outraged. In the case of the King this was because his own daughter, Margaret of York, was daughter-in-law to Henry and had not been present at her husband's coronation. The Pope threatened to interdict Henry's French provinces. This left Henry with little option other than capitulation, and he met, and was apparently reconciled with, his Archbishop of Canterbury in July 1170. Becket returned to his See on 1 December 1170 and was received with acclamation by the monks of the cathedral as well as the local people.

Becket also went to London to meet with the crowned heir to the English throne, an event which seems to have particularly angered Henry. The King was in Normandy at the time, and when told of Becket's doings he flew into a rage. This was the point at which he uttered reckless words which, almost certainly unintentionally, led directly to the murder of Becket, as he asked who would rid him of this turbulent priest. Four knights secretly hurried across the Channel to England, believing they were doing the King's will.

Arriving in Canterbury during the early evening of 29 December 1170, they came upon the archbishop in a side chapel of the cathedral. They demanded the absolution of the excommunicated bishops, but Becket refused. It seems that the knights left the cathedral for a short time, then returned with a band of armed men and tried to drag the archbishop outside but could not manage it. They eventually killed him where he stood. Becket is said to have died like a true saint. According to his assistant, Edward Grim, who was an eyewitness to the crime and was himself wounded in the struggle, Becket commended his cause to God and accepted death 'for the name of Jesus and in defence of the Church'.

The King was deeply repentant and did many works of penance. Thomas was very quickly regarded as a saint and the site of his martyrdom remains a place of pilgrimage to this day.

He is the patron saint of Forward in Faith.

Lord God,
who gave grace to your servant Thomas Becket
to put aside all earthly fear
and be faithful even to death:
grant that we, disregarding worldly esteem,
may fight all wrong,
uphold your rule,
and serve you to our life's end;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

