



# Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of August 6, 2012,

*Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ*

**Dear Friends,**

“**W**E cannot keep to ourselves the truth that sets us free,” said Pope Benedict XVI on September 18, 2010, in Hyde Park, London. “It requires giving witness, it demands to be heard, and in the end its power to convince comes from itself and not from any human eloquence or logical arguments. Not far from here, at Tyburn, a great number of our brothers and sisters died for the faith ... In our own time, the price to be paid for fidelity to the Gospel is no longer hanging or being drawn and quartered, but it often entails being ostracized, ridiculed or caricatured. And yet, the Church cannot renounce its duty: to proclaim Christ and His Gospel as saving truth, the source of our ultimate individual happiness, and the foundation of a just and humane society.” These words of the Holy Father allude to the many English martyrs who, during the time of the Reformation, gave witness to the truth through their lives and deaths. Saint Margaret Clitherow is one of these witnesses.

## **Mass was forbidden**

**B**orn around 1555 to Protestant parents, Margaret was the youngest of four children, two boys and two girls. Her father, Thomas Middleton, a citizen of York and a candle maker, was a member of the city council of York and was one of the city’s two sheriffs. Margaret was still a young child when Queen Elizabeth I, the daughter of Henry VIII, ascended to the throne. Henry VIII, who had once been very devoted to the Catholic faith, later rejected the Pope’s authority after the Pope refused to nullify his marriage with Catherine of Aragon and permit him to marry Anne Boleyn, the queen’s lady-in-waiting. In 1534, Henry VIII had Parliament pass the Act of Supremacy, which proclaimed him “the supreme head of the Church in England.” In spite of this schismatic act that separated the people of England from the See of Peter, the king pretended to keep all of Catholic dogma. But bit by bit, this schism resulted in England gradually slipping into heresy. In 1563, Queen Elizabeth would publish an “Act of Uniformity” which set forth the doctrine of the Anglican Church, of which she, as queen, was the head. This Act was inspired by the doctrines of Luther and Calvin—only two sacraments remained, Baptism and Holy Communion. The Mass was considered a blasphemous fable. In 1570, following her excommunication by Pope Saint Pius V, the queen enacted a series of laws against Catholics. From then on, celebrating the Catholic Mass, or even attending it, was forbidden.

Widowed in 1567, Margaret’s mother decided to remarry. Margaret lived with her until July 1, 1571, the



Saint Margaret Clitherow

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date of her marriage with John Clitherow, a butcher in York. Her husband was a fervent Protestant, respected by his fellow citizens, who would repeatedly choose him for important posts in the city. Three children were born of their union—Henry, William, and Anne. At the time of their marriage, Margaret, still a Protestant, practiced the official religion, but was primarily concerned with her household duties. In 1574, in spite of political events not at all favorable to such a decision, she converted to Catholicism. She herself would explain her principle motivations—the new Protestant religion did not provide her with “any substance, truth, or Christian comfort.” She had been deeply impressed by the example of “so many priests and lay people who have suffered to defend the ancient Catholic faith.” The influence of her brother-in-law William Clitherow probably contributed to this decision, to which her husband did not seem to be opposed. Margaret faithfully practiced her new faith, and the Lord gave her a talent for bringing back to the Roman Church many souls who had been threatened into repudiating it. Every day, Margaret spent considerable time in prayer. She fasted frequently, attended Mass regularly, and went to confession often. This public profession of her faith earned her several stays in prison.

The new laws against Catholics were meanwhile becoming increasingly severe. In 1585, one of them declared that not just Catholic priests, but those who aided and hid them, were guilty of high treason—a

crime punishable by death. In spite of the danger, Margaret continued to help many priests. "By the grace of God," she said, "all priests will be even more welcome than before, and I will do all I can to promote the Catholic faith." To provide her son Henry with a Catholic education, with the hope of one day seeing him elevated to the priesthood, Margaret sent him to Douai, then part of the Spanish Netherlands, today in France. Some time later, the city council of York became aware of the act—in spite of its fury, it waited to take vengeance.

### ***A ruthless search***

**I**n March 1587, the council summoned Mr. Clitherow. Margaret, who knew from experience the council members' tricks, guessed what was going to happen. She confided to the priest who had arrived at her home that very morning, "The council has summoned my husband once again. May it please God that this be not a new ruse on their part, and that, having him in their hands, they do not take advantage of the situation to search the house. They wish me ill and will not stop until they have me in their power. ... May God's will be done!" In fact, the council immediately sent the sheriff of York with an escort to search the house. They found Margaret busy doing housework. The priest remained in a bedroom of a neighbor's house, along with several others. Having learned of the sheriff's coming, they had had the time to flee. A schoolteacher was at that very moment giving a lesson to the Clitherow children and two or three little friends. He managed to escape in time, but those conducting the search seized all the children, the servants, and Margaret. They then searched chests and cupboards without finding anything incriminating.

Then they took a boy of about ten, stripped him, and threatened them with their clubs if he didn't answer all their questions. Terrified, the child yielded and led them to the priest's room, where he showed them a hiding place for the books, vestments, and liturgical objects. Margaret was brought before the council. They were infuriated by her gaiety and faithfulness to the Catholic faith. That evening, she was imprisoned in the castle, where she spent several days in a strict fast and continuous prayer. She seemed so joyful over what was happening to her that she feared she might be offending God by it. Someone told her that she would pay dearly for violating the new laws. She then burst out laughing and replied: "I wish I had a nice gift to give you for this good news! Here, take this fig, for I haven't anything better." Margaret received permission only once to speak with her husband, under the eye of the jailer. After that, she would never see him again. Their friends tried everything to get them the favor of another meeting, but each time a condition was imposed that violated Margaret's conscience.

### ***"You speak well!"***

**O**n Monday, March 14<sup>th</sup>, Margaret was brought before two judges, with several other people present. The charges were read aloud, stating 1) that Margaret Clitherow had given board and lodging to Jesuits and to priests from abroad, traitors to Her Majesty the queen and her laws, and 2) that Margaret had heard the Mass. A judge then rose and said, "Margaret Clitherow, what do you answer? Do you admit your guilt on these charges?" Then, smiling, she said sweetly but resolutely: "I know of no crime to which I must confess my guilt."—"Yes you do! You have sheltered Jesuits and priests who are enemies of Her Majesty."—"I have never known nor sheltered any such person, nor have I fed anyone who was an enemy of the Queen. God forbid!" On another occasion she explained, "I have never given shelter or sustenance to traitors to Her Majesty." The judge resumed, "How do you wish your trial to proceed?"—"Having committed no crime, I see no reason for me to have a trial."—"You have defied the laws. As a result, we must examine your case." One of the judges rose and asked, "In Whom do you believe?"—"I believe in God."—"In which God?"—"I believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. In these three Persons and in one God do I firmly believe, and also that it is by the Passion, death, and merits of Christ Jesus that I must be saved."—"You speak well!" replied the judge.

To mock her, one of the councilors hurled at her, "It's not from your religion that you provide lodging to priests, but from loose morals!" Other similar accusations were made, to which she replied, "God forgive you for these pure fabrications! ... I think that my husband has not ever accused me of ever having offended him, unless perhaps in the small things that often pass between husband and wife. As for my husband, know that I love him the first in the world after God, and that I care for my children as befits a mother. I believe I have done my duty to them in raising them in the fear of God... I am ready to offer them freely to God Who gave them to me, rather than yield an inch on my faith... I confess that death is frightening and the flesh is weak, and yet I wish, with the help of God, to shed my blood as willingly as I gave my milk to my children, and do not wish to see my death delayed." These beautiful words echo those of the Lord JESUS: *He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it (Mt. 10:37-39).*

### ***"If you knew them"***

**T**he court adjourned, and Margaret was taken to a house where she was locked up for the night in a tiny room. On the way, smiling the whole time, she gave money to the poor on both sides of the road. The next morning, she was taken back to court. "Yesterday

evening," the judge said, "we sent you away without condemning you, but we would have condemned if we had wished to ... It is apparent that you have harbored priests." Margaret replied, "I see no reason that could forbid me from receiving good Catholic priests as long as I live."—"They are all traitors, scoundrels, and impostors."—"God forgive you. You would not so speak of them if you knew them." All those present considered her obstinate and mad, because she would not yield. Then the judge described to her the death by crushing to which she would be condemned in her sentence. Standing, showing no fear, Margaret gently replied, "If this judgment is in keeping with your conscience, I pray God that He will judge you less harshly before His court. But I thank God for it from the bottom of my heart. ... Everything He sends me will be welcomed. I am not worthy of such a good death as this. I have deserved death for the sins I have committed against God, but not for the things of which I am accused." The judge then ordered the sheriff to bind her hands. A smile revealed Margaret's joy at wearing bonds for the love of Christ.

Two days later, two emissaries of the court asked her if she thought she was pregnant. Her relatives saw in this a way to save her, for if she was, the execution would have to wait until the child was born. Margaret answered, "I cannot say yes or no, as I have been mistaken other times in similar circumstances, so I cannot answer you for certain. But I am rather inclined to believe I am pregnant." The court then brought in four ladies, who examined the prisoner and reported to the judges that she did seem to be pregnant. That evening, before a group of councilors and Protestant ministers who eagerly desired her death, one of the judges declared, "God forbid that we should execute a pregnant woman! Even though she is a criminal, the child she is carrying is not. Therefore, for a thousand pounds I would not consent to her death without another examination!" Nevertheless, the matter was placed in the hands of the entire council, which sentenced Margaret to the punishment prescribed for traitors—crushing. After her sentencing, Margaret took refuge in intense prayer, and sent word to her spiritual advisor to pray fervently for her intention, for she felt great distress at the thought of not being worthy of dying for the Lord. Learning of his wife's sentence, Mr. Clitherow, like a man who had lost his mind, exclaimed weeping, "Alas! Are they going to kill my wife? Let them take all that I have and let her live! She's the best wife in all England, and the best Catholic as well!"

Once the sentence had been declared, the interrogations were not over, because they wanted at all costs to make Margaret change her mind. Protestant ministers came to badger her, but she answered them: "I have professed the Catholic faith for twelve years, thanks be to God. And if now I were to yield to fear or weakness, all that I have done until now would become worthless. I prefer death."—"What is the Church?"—"It is the community in which the true word of God, left by Christ to

His apostles and their successors who bestow the seven sacraments, is preached. It is this word that the Church has always preserved, that the doctors have preached, and to which her martyrs and confessors have testified. It is the Church I believe to be the true Church. ... JESUS Christ promised to remain with her until the end of the world, and that the gates of hell would not prevail against her. By the grace of God, I wish to live and die in this faith... I beg you to take the foregoing as my response and to stop bothering me."

### **"One and the same"**

**O**f JESUS CHRIST and the Church, I think they are one and the same thing," said Saint Joan of Arc, the six-hundredth anniversary of whose birth we are celebrating this year (2012). The Second Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism* expanded upon this truth: "For it is only through Christ's Catholic Church, which is 'the all-embracing means of salvation,' that they can benefit fully from the means of salvation. We believe that Our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, in order to establish the one Body of Christ on earth to which all should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God." *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* adds, "one cannot charge with the sin of the separation those who at present are born into these communities [that resulted from the Protestant Reformation] and in them are brought up in the faith of Christ, and the Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers ... Furthermore, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside the visible confines of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as visible elements ... All these blessings come from Christ and lead to Him, and are in themselves calls to Catholic unity" (nos. 818, 819).

A Puritan minister asked Margaret: "How do you think you will be saved?"—"By virtue of the bitter Passion and death of Christ JESUS."—"That is well said, but you believe in many other things, such as images, ceremonies, sacramentals, sacraments, and things like that. So you do not believe only in Christ."—"I believe, in accordance with what the Catholic Church teaches me, that there are seven sacraments, and it is in this faith that I wish to live and die. As for all the ceremonies, I believe that they have been instituted for the honor of God, to promote His glory and His service. As for images, they only represent that there have been good and virtuous men and women on earth who now rejoice in glory in Heaven. Furthermore, they serve to excite our feeble and lazy intellects to a greater devotion when we look upon them."

In the days that followed, ministers and relatives, both men and women, came to beg Margaret to take pity on her husband and children. Two days before the mar-



tyrdom, the sheriffs of York notified her of the time set for her execution. "The sheriffs," she confided to a friend, "told me that I will die next Friday, and now I feel the weakness of my flesh which is disturbed by this news, even though my spirit rejoices greatly. For the love of God, pray for me and ask all good people to do the same." Kneeling, she made a quick prayer which calmed her fear of death.

The Church herself asks God to grant to all the faithful the courage to remain steadfast in the faith until death. "O God, strength of all the saints ... grant ... that ... we may hold with courage even until death to the faith that we profess" (*Roman Missal*, Collect for the Feast of Saint Paul Miki and Companions, Japanese martyrs, February 6<sup>th</sup>).

The morning of Good Friday, March 25, 1586, around eight o'clock in the morning, the sheriffs arrived for Margaret, who was ready. She had put her thick head of hair up with a new ribbon. She carried a simple linen dress in her arms, like an alb, which she had sewn with her own hands. She made her way forward, distributing alms in the street jammed with people, to go joyfully to her "wedding," according to her own expression. When she arrived at the execution site, she knelt and whispered a prayer. Then, in a loud voice, she prayed for the Catholic Church, for the Pope, the cardinals, and the other priests who have charge of souls, and then for all Christian rulers. She concluded by saying that she prayed especially for Elizabeth, Queen of England, so that God might convert her to the Catholic faith, and that after this mortal life she might obtain the blessed joys of Heaven. "For," she added, "I wish as much for the good of Her Majesty's soul as for my own." Called by the

sheriff to acknowledge that she was dying for treason, she answered in a loud voice, "No, no! I am dying for the love of my Lord JESUS." Some women dressed her in her linen dress. Margaret then laid on the ground on her back, her arms in the shape of a cross, and weights were placed on her. As soon as she felt them, she cried out, "JESUS, JESUS, JESUS, have pity on me!" These were her last words. Fifteen minutes later, she rendered her soul to God. She was about thirty years old. Filled with horror at the treatment inflicted on Margaret, Queen Elizabeth would write her disapproval to the citizens of York of so harsh a judgment. Strengthened by such an example, all Margaret's children would dedicate their lives to God.

### The "pearl of York"

Margaret, later dubbed the "pearl of York," was canonized with thirty-nine martyrs of England and Wales on October 25, 1970. On this occasion, Pope Paul VI said, "Why are they martyrs? Because, with full awareness and a fearless courage they sacrificed their lives and endured agonizing torture because of their faith in the traditional Catholic doctrine, professed unceasingly over the course of the preceding centuries. In doing so, they bear witness in particular to their fidelity to the divine formation of the Church, to which Christ gave Peter as its head and universal pastor, and the Popes as his successors. They are martyrs and saints for having testified with their own blood to the hierarchical and unitary structure of the Church, which fully respects temporal power in civil affairs, but which in spiritual affairs is unencumbered and depends only on the legitimate power of bishops and the supreme power of the Pope. In a word, they are martyrs for the freedom and unity of the Church."

May Saint Margaret Clitherow and all the martyr saints obtain for us the love of truth as well as fidelity to Christ and His Church each day of our lives!

Dom Antoine Marie  
O.S.B.

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