

St. Thomas Becket

December 29



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1118–1170 • England

Thomas Becket was the best friend of King Henry II of England. They hunted together and joked and laughed. Thomas was the king's chancellor, which means that Thomas was the most powerful man in England under the king. He loved to dress in rich robes and ride in full wealth and splendor. Together, the king and Thomas worked hard to run the kingdom, and people marveled over how the king and Thomas seemed to agree about everything.

But Thomas was not only the king's chancellor; he was also a deacon of the Catholic Church. When the archbishop of Canterbury died, Henry II wished to appoint Thomas as the next archbishop. Thomas warned the king that, if appointed archbishop, he must serve God before the Crown. He knew the king well, and he knew that the king would wish to take away power that rightfully belonged to the Church. Thomas would have to protect the Church.

But Henry did not believe Thomas's warning. He believed that Thomas would do as he said because Thomas was his friend. The king appointed Thomas as archbishop of Canterbury, and at the urging of a cardinal of the Church, Thomas accepted his new position and was ordained a priest and then a bishop.

After being anointed archbishop of Canterbury, a change came over Thomas. He took off his rich, luxurious robes and prayed late into the night. When the pope sent Thomas his pallium, the cloak that was the symbol of the bishop's authority, Thomas went to receive it barefoot, as a sign of his humble service before God.

Not long after, everything that Thomas had warned the king about came to pass. First, the king wanted to take one thing from the Church, and then another. Each time, Thomas opposed the king and defended the Church. Henry II was livid. He could not believe that his old friend would not do as he said! He cried out in fury, "Will no one get rid of this troublesome bishop?" Four knights who overheard this outburst took his words as a command instead of a fit of anger, and they arranged to kill Thomas Becket.

Assassins entered the cathedral as Thomas was praying Vespers. Thomas commanded no one to defend him, and he refused the assassins' command to obey the king instead of God. And so Thomas became a glorious martyr for the Faith in Canterbury Cathedral. When Henry II heard of his old friend's death, he wept terrible tears, sorrowing that his words of anger had brought about Thomas's death. He stopped taking what belonged to the Church, and when he was an old man, the king walked three miles barefoot to make a pilgrimage to St. Thomas Becket's tomb. St. Thomas Becket, help me humbly obey God above all others!