

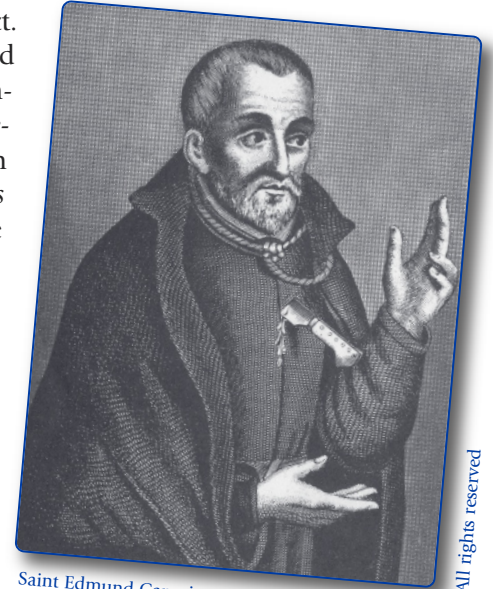


Saint Joseph de Clairval Abbey

Letter of 25 April, 2014,
Easter Week

Dear Friends,

LONDON, November 20, 1581. The jury had just issued its verdict. Father Edmund Campion and several of his accomplices were found guilty of high treason, and sentenced to be hanged and dismembered. Campion sang out his joy: "*Te Deum laudamus, Te Dominum confitemur* (We praise You, God; we confess You, Lord)." His fellow priest Sherwin continued, "*Hæc est dies quam fecit Dominus, exultemus et lætemur in ea* (This is the day the Lord has made, let us exult and rejoice in it)." Campion, his face calm, nobly declared on behalf of them all: "It was not death that ever we feared. We knew that we were not lords of our own lives. ... The only thing we have now to say is, ... In condemning us, you condemn all your own ancestors, all our ancient bishops and kings, all that was once the glory of England—the Island of Saints, and the most devoted child of the See of Peter. For what have we taught, however you may qualify it with the odious name of treason, that they did not uniformly teach? To be condemned with these old lights—not of England only, but of the world—by their degenerate descendants is both gladness and glory to us."



Saint Edmund Campion

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Edmund Campion was born in London on January 25, 1540. At the age of nine or ten, he entered into an apprenticeship with a merchant. Seeing his intellectual abilities, however, his parents decided to enroll him in school. His exceptional gifts led him to be chosen a few years later, on September 30, 1553, to give the official speech during the coronation procession of Queen Mary Tudor. In 1557, young Edmund was admitted as a student to the recently established Saint John's College, where he acquired a mastery of words that would make him thought the most eloquent man of his day.

A "diamond of England"

In 1558, Queen Mary died, and Elizabeth Tudor succeeded her. During the first years of her reign, she affected a certain religious tolerance; but later on, the sovereign imposed Anglicanism—a compromise between Henry VIII's schismatic regalism and Luther's Protestantism—on the entire kingdom with an iron fist. Students were required, when they received their degrees, to take an oath that they accepted the queen's spiritual sovereignty. Young Campion's talents had given him a taste of success and applause, so he agreed to swear the oath. In 1566, he received his master's degree. At Oxford, he became such a notable professor that his students were proud to call themselves Campionists. During a visit by the queen to the university, he was chosen to speak before her. She was favorably impressed by the speech, and the secretary of state,

Sir William Cecil, did not hesitate to call Campion one of the "diamonds of England." For a while, Edmund served as censor at the university, which placed him immediately after the vice-chancellor. The world's favor did not keep the young man from being recognized for his virtues of purity, humility, and modesty.

In his heart, Edmund was Catholic and he disapproved of the new religion. His spirit was torn between the success the world offered him and the voice of his conscience; he procrastinated. A meeting with the bishop of Gloucester, Richard Cheney, encouraged him in this. He alone out of all the Elizabethan bishops wished to remain faithful to the faith of his fathers; yet, he did not break with the Anglican Church, but strove to keep his diocese in the hope of exerting a good influence. Motivated by this same spirit of compromise, Edmund accepted, in the spring of 1569, to be made a deacon in the Anglican Church. From that day on, he was taken with a remorse that gave him no peace. Despite pressure from many, he constantly refused to be ordained an Anglican priest, and requested permission to leave the country for a while. In September 1570, he left Oxford for Ireland.

In Dublin, Campion could freely practice the Catholic faith. He took advantage of several months of

peace and quiet to write a history of Ireland. However, the queen of England succeeded in imposing British domination, including Anglicanism, on the Emerald Isle. Campion, sought for by the English authorities, decided to return incognito to his native land. He boarded a ship leaving for England. English officers came aboard and announced that they were looking for an Edmund Campion. Terrified, Campion did not even try to hide. While they were searching, he waited peacefully on the bridge, the whole time invoking Saint Patrick, whose name he had taken to avoid recognition. Of all the passengers, he alone was not searched. He attributed this protection to the great apostle of Ireland.

The College of Douai

On his return to England, Edmund found the country in flames—the queen’s excommunication by Pope Saint Pius V, and the insurrection of Catholics in the north had provoked a bloody persecution. In the face of this situation, Campion decided in June 1571 to go to the English College in Douai, a town in Spanish Flanders that would become French a century later. This college had been founded in 1568 to give young Englishmen the Catholic education they could no longer receive in their native land. There Campion found old friends. The intellectual formation was very solid. Study of the Sacred Scriptures took on prime importance, in order to equip the students to reply to Protestants who claimed their faith was based strictly on the Bible. During the reign of Elizabeth, the College of Douai would train 450 priests, of whom 135 would die as martyrs. Edmund spent two years there. The favorable atmosphere there led him to regret having received the diaconate in the Anglican Church. Conscious of the gravity of his sin, he embraced a life of poverty and penance, and immediately sought to enter a religious order. His choice fell on the Society of JESUS.

In the spring of 1573, he went to Rome, where he asked to be received as a Jesuit novice. He was accepted, and assigned to the Austrian Province. The two year novitiate began with a month of retreat according to the *Spiritual Exercises*; then the novice spent a month in a hospital caring for the sick, and another month on pilgrimage living off of alms. Then he worked for a month catechizing children and untaught adults. During the summer of 1575, the novitiate completed, Edmund took the three religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. After the completion of his studies, in 1578 Edmund received from the hands of the Archbishop of Prague the sacred orders of the diaconate and the priesthood.

Nevertheless, Edmund had not lost sight of his homeland, where persecution raged. In an apparition, the Blessed Virgin revealed to him that he would shed his blood for the faith. In Douai, they wanted English priests to send to England, to minister to the Catholics who had remained faithful to the faith of their Baptism.

Fathers Edmund Campion and Robert Persons, chosen for this dangerous mission, went first to Rome. On April 18, 1580, a group of twelve Englishmen, including three Jesuits, left the Eternal City after having received the Pope’s blessing. On May 31st, they arrived in Reims, to which the College of Douai had been transferred two years earlier. The latest news from England indicated that the island had become an extremely dangerous place for Catholic priests. But Campion was resolute: “I have freely made an offering of myself, of both my life and my death, to His Divine Majesty, and I am confident that He will give me the grace and the strength to be faithful to it; I desire nothing else.”

So as not to arouse suspicion, the priests entered the country separately. In June 1580, Edmund set foot on his native soil for the first time in nine years. There were government spies everywhere, and many English were inclined to betray priests. A Catholic gentleman imprisoned for his faith convinced the two Jesuits to put the reasons for their presence in England in writing, in order to provide the basis for a legal defense should they be arrested and taken to court. Consequently, Campion wrote a text known as Campion’s “Brag,” in which the Jesuit declares he came to England with the sole desire to bring the faithful who had been led away from the Catholic faith back to it, and asks to be able to explain himself before the authorities and the queen herself, whom he hopes likewise to convert to the faith of her ancestors.

Waiting for the “real JESUS”

Pope Francis tells us “The transmission of the faith ... travels through time, passing from one generation to another. Because faith is born of an encounter which takes place in history and lights up our journey through time, it must be passed on in every age. It is through an unbroken chain of witnesses that we come to see the face of JESUS. But how is this possible? How can we be certain, after all these centuries, that we have encountered the ‘real JESUS’? Were we merely isolated individuals, were our starting point simply our own individual ego seeking in itself the basis of absolutely sure knowledge, a certainty of this sort would be impossible. I cannot possibly verify for myself something which happened so long ago. But this is not the only way we attain knowledge. Persons always live in relationship. ... Faith’s past, that act of JESUS’ love which brought new life to the world, comes down to us through the memory of others—witnesses—and is kept alive in that one remembering subject which is the Church. The Church is a Mother who teaches us to speak the language of faith” (Encyclical *Lumen fidei*, June 29, 2013, no. 38).

Father Campion’s document soon fell into the hands of the law, and was seen as a challenge to a public religious debate. But the authorities refused this debate, which risked casting doubt on the validity of the reli-

gious reforms imposed in England. The Anglican theologians feared the Jesuits, being aware of their learning and abilities.

In October 1580, Fathers Persons and Campion met outside London to take stock and develop a plan of action. Persons would remain close to London and Campion, whose name was on everyone's lips since his "Brag" had become well known, traveled through the counties he had not yet been to. The two Jesuits parted with emotion, for the queen had just issued an arrest warrant for them. The English Parliament increased the penalties due for offenses related to religion. It declared that converting to the Catholic faith and receiving absolution from a Catholic priest were acts of treason subject to the severest punishment.

Ten reasons

With the aim of strengthening the faith of Catholics in the kingdom, Campion wrote a book that was published in June 1581 called *Rationes Decem* (*Ten Reasons*). In it, the author gives ten fundamental reasons why Protestantism cannot be true, developing five major themes: Holy Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, the Councils, the visibility of the Church, and the inconsistencies of Protestant positions. Holy Scripture, he observed, has been given to us by the Church which, guided by the Holy Spirit, discerned which books were inspired by God. However, Protestants reject some books of the Bible which were accepted for centuries in Christianity. Thus, for example, Luther calls the Letter of Saint James an "Epistle of Straw" because, contrary to Lutheran doctrine, it affirms that faith alone is not sufficient for salvation, but that good works are also necessary. On the subject of the Fathers of the Church, Campion gives several examples of the reformers rejecting their authority. He shows that the teaching of the Fathers leads to Catholicism; and if one does not accept it, one cannot even be a Christian.

Campion then shows that the reformers never agreed to take part in the Council of Trent (1545-1563) even though they had been invited, and that they rejected the testimony of the ecumenical councils. "If ever the Spirit of God has shone upon the Church," he wrote, "then surely the most favorable time for His divine aid is when the most manifest religiousness, ripeness of judgment, science, wisdom, dignity of all of the Churches on earth have flocked together in one city." Finally, according to the Protestants, the true Church of Christ remained hidden for many centuries; thus the Church would in essence be neither visible nor identifiable. On the contrary, for Catholics the Church of Christ is by nature a visible society, easily recognizable by all. It is the city set on a mountain that must give light to the world, and that cannot be hidden (cf. Mt. 5:14). In the last part of the book, the Jesuit draws attention to the reformers' many contradictions. Thus Luther, in his doctrine of justification by faith alone, claims that the Christian is

simultaneously justified before God and supremely detestable, since his sins are not remitted but merely covered up. Calvin, in his doctrine on predestination, renders God responsible for damnation. Edmund Campion's book was a great success, and was translated into many languages. It is still published today.

Shortly after this book was published, while Persons was on his way back to France, Edmund accepted an urgent invitation from a Catholic family in Lyford. While he was there, a traitor denounced him to the authorities. Captured on July 17, 1581, he was transferred to the Tower of London a few days later. The queen and her government were convinced that he and the other Jesuits were agents of the Papacy and foreign powers, sent into England to overthrow the British crown. At first Father Campion was imprisoned in a tiny cell in which he could not even stand up or lie down. Then he was put in solitary confinement, in a room lit only by a small opening at the top of a narrow shaft.

Enduring all adversities

On July 25th, he appeared before three members of the royal council, who received him courteously and asked him the real reasons for his arrival in England. The Jesuit maintained that his motives were purely religious, not at all political, and that he recognized Queen Elizabeth as the legitimate sovereign of the kingdom. Following this interview, the rumor was spread that the prisoner was about to renounce Catholicism to become Anglican, and was even offered a diocese. But in the face of his resistance, he was put to torture, to learn if he was party to Spanish efforts to overthrow Elizabeth, and to force him to reveal the names of those who had given him shelter or made use of his ministry. It is known, from a personal letter written on August 6th by a government official, that Campion admitted nothing. Nevertheless, the royal counsel spread the word that the prisoner had denounced his accomplices and had even revealed the content of the confessions he had heard. Edmund's reputation was gravely compromised.

The authorities also wished to show the world that his book *Rationes Decem* was not in keeping with the truth of the Gospels. On four occasions, Father Campion was confronted by Anglican theologians, who strove to refute his writings. The defendant had neither the means to prepare himself (he was allowed no book but the Bible, while his adversaries were free to consult all the theological works), nor the opportunity to pose questions to his contradictors. Furthermore, he was physically exhausted from the tortures he had endured. During one of these debates, torture had reduced him to such helplessness that he could not even raise an arm. One of the persons present, in an act of Christian charity, raised a glass of beer to his mouth. Edmund nevertheless succeeded in replying to all the questions and in embarrassing his opponents. He proved, in particular, that once they rejected the authority of the Church, the

reformers had become incapable of agreeing on the truths of the faith.

Saint Leo the Great affirmed, "Unless faith be one, it is not the faith". Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Lumen fidei*, commented on this, writing: "What is the secret of this unity? Faith is 'one', in the first place, because of the oneness of the God Who is known and confessed. ... Faith is also one because it is directed to the one Lord, to the life of JESUS. ... Finally, faith is one because it is shared by the whole Church ... As a service to the unity of faith and its integral transmission, the Lord gave His Church the gift of apostolic succession. Through this means, the continuity of the Church's memory is ensured and certain access can be had to the wellspring from which faith flows" (nos. 47 and 49).

The help of the Holy Spirit

Witnesses would later confirm that the lucidity of Campion's answers, in spite of his physical weakness, was in itself proof of the help of the Holy Spirit. A number of the Catholics who were present at the confrontation realized that the information spread to tarnish Father Campion's reputation was false.

The religious motivation for the condemnation of Edmund and his companions was made apparent by his own testimony: "They offered to free us if we would go to a Protestant church to listen to the sermons and the preaching of the Word." Nevertheless, to condemn to death for his religious convictions a universally known man would have scandalized all Europe. So government authorities tried to get him to admit that he did not recognize the legitimacy of Queen Elizabeth, and that he had taken part in political schemes against the throne. An entirely fabricated document was produced to show that, along with several other Catholics, Campion had

May this holy martyr obtain for us the grace of an ardent zeal for the truth, so that we too might give witness to the truth and thus show Christ's charity to the world!

Dom Antoine Marie o.s.b.

- *Edmund Campion*, by Richard Simpson. Revised, edited and enlarged by Peter Joseph. Gracewing, 2010.

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