

VENERABLE NICHOLAS POSTGATE, MARTYR.

By
M.M.M.

Nicholas Postgate was born in 1596, in the parish of Egton, some miles from Whitby, in the North Riding of Yorkshire. In a Recusant List of 1604, of Egton, is mentioned the martyr's mother . . . "All Recusants (that is, all these who are mentioned in this list as given) for eight years past," says the entry. A further note adds: "Jane Postgate widowe, doth keep in her house William Postgate, her father, a Recusant who teacheth children". Again another note: "Jane Postgate, widowe . . . (and others) have had children baptised privately of late years."

Probably, then, Nicholas Postgate was one of these children, most carefully sealed to God by some zealous priest working secretly, since twenty of the sixty Recusants returned on Egton's list had been so named since Lady Day in 1603. This bitter year would allow of none but secret work. Perhaps the risks run by this and other priests were the seed of the glorious harvest the little Nicholas was one day to gather for God. His family name is usually said POSKITT or POSKETT, and is not uncommon in Yorkshire. His father seems to have been one William Postgate, of a Kirkedale House estate, and his mother a Watson. Later, Fr. Postgate was to use her maiden name as an alias, stating that he was "of that kindred." No doubt his boyhood was familiar with hunted Catholicity, with details of recusancy, and that staunch Yorkshire resistance to all forms of persecution, which helped to breed in him the stuff of which all the Martyrs were made.

In 1621, Nicholas was sent abroad to be educated for the priesthood, and was admitted to the English College at Douay; then about fifty years established, the cradle of many martyrs. He was ordained priest on March 20th, 1628, and sang his first Mass on April 1st, a fitting date for him, the lover of daffodils and lover of song. At this time he must have been 30 years old, or more, and so well able to appreciate his choice of life. On the very appropriate Feast of SS. Peter and Paul, in 1630, he was sent on the English Mission, and so came back to his native land.

He first served the Meynell and the Saltmarshe families at Kilvington, near Thirsk, and then Lady Dunbar at Burton Constable. She was the daughter-in-law of Sir John Constable, whose son Henry was created Viscount Dunbar in 1620. It is significant to note in passing that later all these connections were proud and glad to own that they had had acquaintance with the saintly priest, and even to visit him in prison. They valued his life and work, for Thomas Meynell of Kilvington was himself a priest, who had been imprisoned both in Hull and in York.

Probably it was his son's wife who went to York Castle, later, to visit Father Postgate.

About 1650 began that strenuous life of intense apostolic zeal and utter self-sacrifice that has made his name fragrant with love and honour even to this day. The story of it is not complicated. He chose some cottage on the North Yorkshire moors as a centre for his labours, and from it worked all over the surrounding country. It is nowhere on record that he proselytised in the sense of "making" non-Catholics into Catholics, but his work in reconciling lapsed Catholics was for those times and those districts little short of miraculous. He certainly saved the souls of hundreds, perhaps of a thousand people, in his one lifetime, by his own unaided labours; at what a cost to himself, no one but God can ever know.

Although the people of Egton Bridge naturally claim him for their own, his labours were never confined to one spot for long. In Whitby and in Pickering, in Ugthorpe and in Sleights, one is even to-day shown little sanctuaries where tradition says he lived and worked. In particular, the Hermitage, two miles from Ugthorpe village and three from Egton Bridge, was once his home; near the high road across the broad moor from Guisborough to Whitby. To-day, almost all the families of that whole district are Catholic; a tribute to the fruit of the Martyr's work and life. In Fr. Postgate's day, he certainly lived among friends there. A Quarter Sessions List of 1641 mentions "William Radcliffe of Ugthorpe, Gent." as a recusant; and this accounts to us for the loss of Mulgrave Castle to the family of Radcliffe. Some seven miles from the Hermitage was Danby Castle, where lived Thomas Ward, the well-known controversialist, who both knew and loved the Martyr. In Ward's "Hudibrastic" verse, called "England's Reformation" the fourth canto explicitly mentions the fact:

"Nor spared they Father Postket's blood,
A reverend priest, devout and good,
Whose spotless life in length was spun
To eighty years and three times one.
Sweet his behaviour, grave his speech,
He did by good example teach;
His love right bent, his will resigned,
Serene his look and calm his mind;
His sanctity to that degree,
As angels live, so lived he.

A thatched cottage was his cell,
Where this contemplative did dwell;
Two miles from Mulgrave Castle 't stood,
Sheltered by snowdrifts, not by wood;

Tho there he lived to that great age,
 It was a dismal heritage;
 But God placed the Saint's abode
 For Blackamoor's far greater good."

(This was the name given to that stretch of moor, rather bleak and desolate).

This kind of verse may not reach the level of poetry, but it does give us contemporary evidence of just those qualities in the Martyr which appealed to his friends and neighbours; and held him to their hearts with that fresh and tender devotion that makes him real, living and loving, in that whole countryside to-day.

His method of working was simple. A pair of linen sheets was hung on a hedge, as if to air, when he was "at home". Other sheets were hung about the nearby farms, when he stayed at any one of them; the number indicating the whereabouts of his Mass. He loved flowers, and is said to have brought the first daffodils to the Moors, planting them with his own hands. There was never recorded anything morose or sour about him, anything harsh or unsympathetic, anything fretful or weak. His great nearness to God, his unflinching severity to himself, his unsparing devotion and labour in the cause of God, all made him gentle and winning to those souls for whom to know him was to know God, to be healed by him was to learn to love God.

Fr. Postgate loved music, too. The hymn sung at all the moorside funerals for over two hundred years after his death was always called Fr. Postgate's Hymn. He may have sung it up and down those moors. Tradition says that he sang this and other hymns which he made, during his imprisonment in York Castle. Certain it is that the style of the hymn is in keeping with a sweet and simple nature; and that it has always been associated with him.

1. O Gracious God, O Saviour sweet,
 O Jesus, think of me;
 And suffer me to kiss Thy Feet,
 Tho' late I come to Thee.
2. Behold, dear Lord, I come to Thee
 With sorrow and with shame,
 For when Thy bitter wounds I see,
 I know I caused the same.
3. O Sweetest Lord, lend me the wings
 Of faith and perfect love,
 That I may fly from earthy things
 And mount to those above.

(Eight verses in all).

This life of his, sweetened by simplicity, purified by self-sacrifice and shining with the steady flame of love of God, might have drawn peacefully to a fitting end, but for the Whig machinations of Shaftesbury and Buckingham, who raised the no-Popery cry again, after so many years, that priests, especially the South Wales martyrs, could be arrested and tried on no ruling but that of the old statute of 27 Elizabeth! This meant that the sole charge against them was that of being priests; and this was applied to Father Postgate.

It is true that his life had been the hunted one common to priests of his day; true too that he had sometimes to move from place to place because of a lurking spy or possible informer. But he lived among friends for the most part, so that nothing less than the high fever of spy-hunt set agog by the Titus Oates Plot could in the end be responsible for the bitter zeal which pursued the innocent old priest of eighty-three and brought him to his sufferings and his death.

On December 8th, 1678, Fr. Postgate was called to Uggelbarnby, three miles from Sleights, to baptise a child at the house of Matthew Lyth of Redbarns. An exciseman named John Reeves "felt himself obliged" to search the house at this opportune moment, and Fr. Postgate was taken. Local traditions say that the informer was never paid his full blood-money; that he drowned himself in the Littlebeck, the stream hard by; that no fish are ever caught there, even to this day. Be these things as they may, the Martyr was certainly taken.

He was carried off to Brompton, between Pickering and Scarborough, examined by Sir William Cayley, J.P., on December 9th. His deposition, as shown in the records of the trial, named no one but Mr. Goodrick (often spelt Goodrich) and Mr. Jowsie (or Jowsey) two priests who were dead. Otherwise, he stated the facts of his life as we know them, accurately, carefully, "with the mildness of Christ".

From Brompton he was later taken to York, probably via Rillington and Malton. Some of his congregation at Redbarns had been arrested with him, and were also cast into prison; but later, by dint of fines and compromises, most of them were released. The Martyr was imprisoned in York Castle, and so brought to the bar at the York Assizes. Such a trial could hardly be other than public, which for us is fortunate, for we have its complete record. He is said to have spoken up bravely in the cause of God, and only once to have broken down. This was when one of his own flock bore witness against him. There were three witnesses who showed him to have been a priest: Elizabeth Wood, Elizabeth Baxter, and William Morris. On their evidence he was found guilty; and on no testimony but theirs and

no "crime" other than this, he was sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered. His first visitor after that sentence was the woman whose treachery had so grieved him. He blessed and comforted her, forgiving and helping her to go safely to her home at once, away from such surroundings. Mrs. Meynell of Kilvington and Mrs. Charles Fairfax of York also came for his final blessing.

In his last hours, as in the first rapture of his ministry, all his thought was for others, not for himself. Even in his last speech from the scaffold, his care was on what might help and edify his hearers rather than on what might await him in torments and death. "I die", said he, "in the Catholic religion, out of which there is no salvation. Mr. Sheriff, you know that I die not for the plot, but for my religion. Be pleased, Mr. Sheriff, to acquaint His Majesty that I never offended him in any way or manner of way. I pray God give him the grace and the light of truth. I forgive all who have wronged me and brought me to this death, and I desire forgiveness of all people."

His sentence was carried out as directed. Bishop Challoner says that a copper plate thrown into his coffin identifies him as "that most reverend and pious divine Dr. Nicholas Postgate . . . at last advanced to a crown of martyrdom at the City of York on 7th August, 1679, having been priest 51 years." His body, as such, has never been found, although parts of it are revered as relics.

The right hand, not quite whole, is at St. Cuthbert's, Durham; the left hand at Ampleforth, York. The Bar Convent in York has a piece of the rope with which he was hanged; while at Downside and at Stonyhurst may be venerated cloths dipped in his blood. Locks of his hair are kept at York and Durham also, as well as at Egton, and some very precious personal possessions at Oscott. His crucifixes and a pyx-box can be seen at St. Hedda's, Egton Bridge; two chalices which he used, at St. Ann's, Ugthorpe. Whitby holds his rosary, and the present Bishop of Middlesbrough has a small book belonging to the Martyr, in which his name is written in his own writing.

In his native parish of Egton, he had a very hallowed retreat, in the shape of a secret oratory, in a house still called the Mass-house, although the older building has been pulled down and a newer house erected in 1928 or 1929. Until the martyr's death, this oratory was probably a centre of devotion, a tiny loft just big enough for Host and priest. Then, probably for safety's sake, and as he would have wished, the oratory was sealed up and remained hidden until discovered by a servant-girl in 1830. When Bishop Penswick came to see the wonder, all was set for Mass, though that setting had been done 150 years previously;

and the priest who was to have said that Mass must have been long in Heaven. Mr. Ward, of Egton, who assisted in the demolition of the old Mass house, has many treasures carved from the wooden beams, and a precious stone slab, perhaps that on which the altar-stone rested. The altar-stone itself is inlaid in the altar of the Lady Chapel at Egton Bridge; the one Fr. Postgate carried about with him is now at Pickering.

In Whitby, there are still many Catholic families who claim to have household furniture used or blessed by the Martyr. No natives, Catholic or non-Catholic, fail to show interest at the mention of his name. All have some stories woven round him, or know some family history which binds them to him. All speak of him as "Father Postgate"; he might have just left them, so vivid is his character and presence in their hearts. Some pray for his canonisation, and aver that there ought to have been "another Rising of the North" when he was not beatified in 1929. Others are quite content that God knows best, and think that no publicity or lack of it could take their Martyr from them. There is, though, the weighty point that were he beatified or later canonised, as we hope, God would not fail to be glorified in yet another of his faithful servants; so that it would seem best to work and pray for that end.

THE ACTIVE CATHOLIC.

BY

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To avoid confusion, I must first make clear that this paper does not concern Catholic Action, the need for which is so stressed by the Hierarchy. Here we are left in no doubt as to what we should do. But I have often wondered when, why and how individual Catholics have been most active—what makes the difference between a preacher and a contemplative, and in what respects they are the same—and this represents the results of these wonderings.

What do we mean by an active Catholic? A complication arises at once, because there are obviously two sorts, both equally deserving of the name:

(a) The Catholic who spends his life in purposefully furthering Catholicism, usually by the spoken or written word; the missionary, of whom the great example is St. Paul. Him I will call the *Professional Catholic*, to distinguish him from

(b) *the Living Catholic*. He is not a preacher. He may be anything from a fisherman to an emperor, but his every thought, word and deed is vitally informed by his religion, which is the *raison d'être* of his life. Of course, these divisions are not