

St. Margaret Clitherow

BORN ABOUT 1556; DIED 1586

WIFE AND MARTYR

FEAST DAY: MARCH 25

RELIGIOUS INDIFFERENTISM — the wrongful idea that all faiths are equally expressions of the truth, and all equally lead to God — is common in today's culture. But in sixteenth-century England, men and women died because they professed Catholicism as the true faith and because embracing untruth was an affront to God. St. Margaret Clitherow, one of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, was among those willing to die for the true faith.

King Henry VIII had made himself head of the Church in England to secure his right to a divorce. Following his death, his oldest daughter Queen Mary, a faithful Catholic, sought to restore the faith but soon died. She was succeeded by her half-sister Queen Elizabeth I, under whom Catholics were forbidden to go to Mass, required to attend Protestant services, and heavily fined or imprisoned if they failed to comply with the law. Being or harboring a priest was treason. (The usual punishment of men for treason in the England of this time was hanging, drawing, and quartering. The condemned was dragged to the place of execution chained to a piece of fencing, hanged but cut down while still conscious, mutilated and disemboweled. Finally his still-beating heart was cut out and the body dismembered into quarters.)

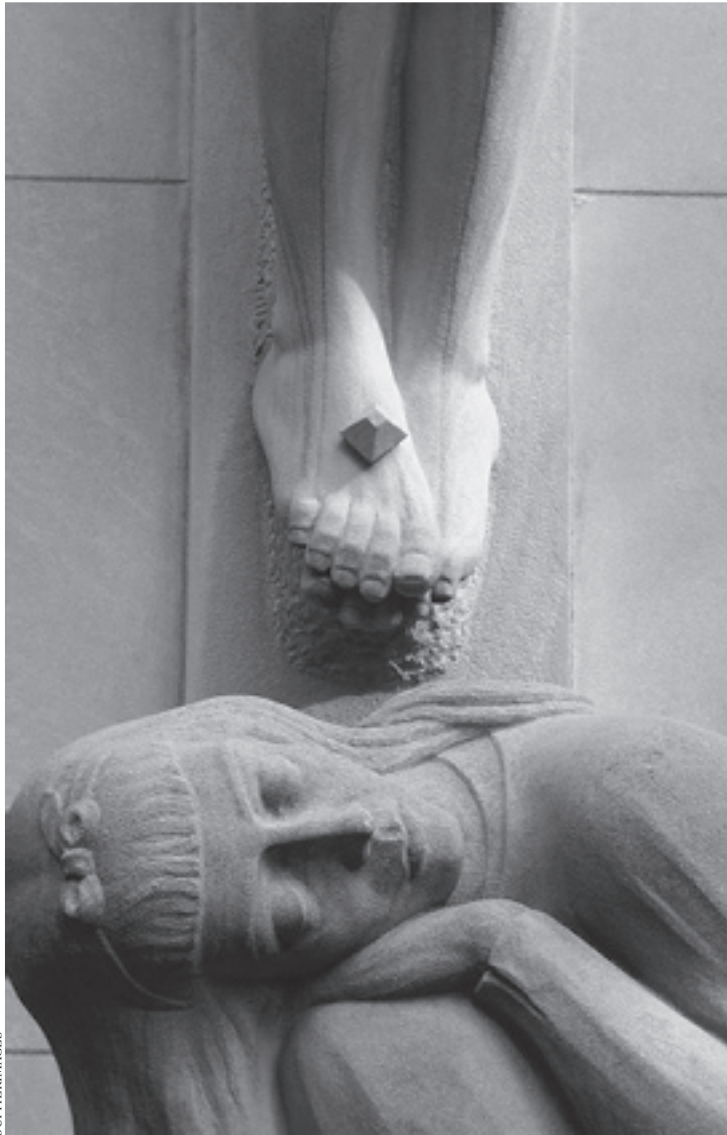
Margaret was born during the reign of Queen Mary and was two when Queen Elizabeth I made the break with Rome final. She was one of four children of a wealthy candlemaker and Sheriff of York, England, and possibly raised a Catholic. However, by the time she married widower John Clitherow, a butcher and at one point Chamberlain of York, at about fifteen, she was a Protestant. John was also



Protestant, although he too may have been raised Catholic, since both his brothers were Catholics, one a priest. John was well-to-do, kind, and generous. He and Margaret had three children, Henry, Anne, and William. John loved Margaret dearly as a wife, a mother, and manager of his household. She was merry, witty, charming, and beloved by everyone, and was often sought out for advice and consolation. She was also humble and frequently, despite servants, did the most distasteful household chores.

Within three years after her marriage, Margaret but not John converted (or returned) to Catholicism. It is not known how this came about, but she told others that she was convinced English Protestantism was untrue, and that she was awed and inspired by the numerous martyrdoms of Catholics. She embraced the Catholic faith, and the probable consequences of doing so. Seeking perfection, she deeply repented even the smallest sins. When she received the Eucharist, it was often with tears.

Over the next approximately twelve years, Margaret sheltered priests in her home, which had a "priest-hole" (a secret room). She made nighttime pilgrimages to the site of York's martyrdoms to pray, and founded a catechetical school to teach children the faith. She was imprisoned several times, once



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for two years, regarding this as a time of retreat, prayer, and fasting. Of course, her entire household was aware of the frequent visits of the priests, the Masses said, and the risks she took daily. Even though he remained a Protestant himself, John was fined again and again because she refused to attend Protestant services. She was under house arrest for the last year and a half of her life.

When John was brought to court to explain why his son Henry was abroad (he was studying for the priesthood), the Clitherow home was searched, but nothing was found. Anne and William (both under twelve) were arrested. They did not betray their mother, but under duress an eleven-year-old student of the school did; the priest-hole was found, with vessels and books for Mass. Margaret was arrested and accused of treason. A few days later, she was arraigned but refused to plead either guilty or not guilty, because a trial would have forced her family, servants, and friends to testify against her or to lie to save her. Her defense of her faith showed her well able to explain and defend Catholic doctrine. She was therefore sentenced to death, for which a new form of capital punishment, pressing, had been established for women. She was not permitted to see her children, who were still in prison. She possibly was pregnant.

Eleven days after Margaret's arrest, the sentence was carried out. She had made a shroud for herself while in prison and carried it as she walked, barefoot, smiling, and joyous, to her death. She was stripped and laid on the ground, clothed as a concession in the shroud. A sharp stone was put under her back and her hands were stretched out in the form of a cross and bound to posts. Then a heavy door was placed on top of her and at least seven hundred pounds of weights were put on top of it. She took about fifteen minutes to die, crying "Jesu! Jesu! Jesu! Have mercy on me!" Both sons became Catholic priests and her daughter a nun, testaments to the gift of faith transmitted by their mother's witness in blood.

