



2024 History Essay Contest

Homeschool 7/8th Grade Winner

An Unquenchable Flame: St. Edmund Campion

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Sixteenth-century England was a dangerous place for Catholics. Queen Elizabeth the First persecuted anyone who did not swear loyalty to the Church of England. Catholic priests and the faithful were forbidden to take part in the Mass or sacraments. Those who sheltered priests or attended Mass would certainly be jailed or, even worse, tortured, hanged, drawn, quartered, or burned alive. But did this stop zealous priests from following the call of Christ? No! One Jesuit priest in particular stands out for his incredible courage and joy in the face of cruel death. He testified, "I am a Catholic priest and man. In that faith have I lived, and in that faith do I intend to die." And die he did, a martyr's death. His name is St. Edmund Campion.

From the moment Campion became a priest, he had signed his death sentence; it was just a matter of when. Born in London, England on January 25, 1540, Edmund Campion had a bright future. With his scholarly, logical, and intellectual mind, he quickly gained the Queen's favor. He was always cheerful and humorous, with a winning, characteristic smile that would one day be famous throughout England. Edmund Campion was not born a Catholic, but once he chose to become one as a young man, he had set his foot on the path to martyrdom. "As for me, all is over... I have made a free oblation of myself to His

Divine majesty, both for life and death, and I hope he will give me grace and force to perform it. This is all I desire” (Gardiner 54). In the summer of 1578, he was ordained a priest in Rome. But the thought of his persecuted Catholic brothers and sisters in England compelled him to return. By becoming a priest and returning to England, Edmund Campion proclaimed to the world that he did not fear death.

Queen Elizabeth sensed his fearlessness even before he became a priest, when he was a college student. She was on the lookout for young men who could become her loyal followers, and she picked him out. Imagine Queen Elizabeth's disappointment when he rejected her favor by becoming a Catholic priest! From then on, he was her enemy, destined only to be condemned to prison as a traitor to the Queen. Several types of torture awaited most prisoners, including the *Pit*, the *Rack*, and *Little Ease*. The *Pit*, a cave of complete darkness, could drive the victim to a state of madness. The *Rack* sent its victim into excruciating pain, stretching the arms and legs to the point of dislocation. *Little Ease* was a cell so cramped that it could permanently distort the victim's body so that they could never walk straight again. Campion had heard of all these tortures, and yet he went on preaching as boldly as ever.

When he wrote *Campion's Brag*, he took another step closer to martyrdom. This document boldly proclaimed the determination of Fr. Campion and his fellow Jesuits to keep on preaching till the last priest dropped dead. “And as concerns our Society, be it known to you that we have made a league -- all the Jesuits in the world, whose succession and multitude must triumph over all the practices of England -- cheerfully to carry the cross you shall lay upon us, and never to despair of your recovery, while we have a man left to enjoy your Tyburn, or be racked with your torments... so the faith was planted, so it must be restored” (Gardiner 71). His zeal inspired and revived the persecuted Catholics' discouraged spirits and made them fight with renewed strength. But also, it made the persecutors more dead set on getting the priest. Edmund Campion strove to spread the truth for as long as he could before the end; he would often say, “Not my will, but Thine be done.”

Finally, there came the day when Fr. Edmund Campion was captured. It was after a long and heroic fight, but the day was bound to come. Queen Elizabeth did all she could to bend his will and make him renounce his faith. Campion was tortured in all the places he had heard of -- the *Pit*, the *Rack*, *Little*

Ease, and more. Every moment and every day, for over four months, he had a chance to renounce his faith but didn't. There came times when the priest's body was so dislocated and broken that it was pitiful to see him struggle to raise his own hand. "When they were called to take the oath, Campion... could not lift his arm... whereupon one of his companions drew up the sleeve, kissed his hand and raised it for him" (Waugh 110).

Eventually, Queen Elizabeth condemned him to be quartered, hanged, and drawn. Queen Elizabeth never did convert, but Campion's death and loyalty to God after a prolonged time of torture succeeded in making her doubt herself. If she were to keep on executing such loyal, extraordinary men such as Edmund Campion, who would be left? None of her followers was as faithful to her as Edmund Campion was to his God. "The flower of the realm! Where will it all end if I have to put such men to death? Who will be left? Who will love England for its own sake and not for the favors they hope to have from me?" (Gardiner 67).

On December 1, 1581, at the gallows of Tyburn, an immense crowd gathered to watch the spectacular execution of this "great prize". William Harrington, one of Edmund Campion's friends, witnessed his grisly but magnificent death. After the execution of his hero, he went to his home to ask his father's permission to become a priest. "From the day I saw him go so gallantly to his death, I have felt deep in my heart that I am called to follow Father Campion – perhaps, if it be God's will, even to Tyburn" (Gardiner 172). Thirteen years later, he went to his own martyrdom in Tyburn.

Another young man, Henry Walpole, was a lukewarm Catholic who showed up at Campion's execution for the sport of it. For him, the execution was just another event. One more victim put to death. It wasn't the execution of Campion that directly touched him; it was the drop of Campion's blood that splattered on him that shook his whole foundation. This drop of a martyr's blood accused him of doing nothing when another was giving his life. "As Henry stared at the blotch on his sleeve, it seemed to him that he heard a voice saying, 'And what are you, Henry, willing to give to me?' Henry reeled. He felt that he had been struck on the head... He changed not only his fine clothes but his way of life as well" (Gardiner 171). Many years after Campion's death, and only one year after William Harrington's, Fr.

Walpole went to his own Tyburn at York, where he was, like Campion, tried, racked, hanged, drawn, and quartered.

St. Edmund Campion had a passionate, blazing love for his people. As the end approached, this raging fire did not die but burst into an even fiercer, more intense blaze. Neither did it die when the executioner's axe flashed on December 1, 1581. Even today, that eternal flame blazes on. The sparks from his fire continue to ignite hearts across the world, including mine. St. Edmund Campion's flame will never die.

Bibliography

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