



Tradition claims that this is an authentic portrait of Bl. Margaret Clitherow.

There is much talk in these forward looking days of the greater part that nuns and laywomen ought to take in the Church's active life. There are women auditors at the Council, bishops are co-opting women to serve on diocesan bodies, and the daring even hint at the possibility of women priests. It is less popular to talk of women martyrs.

Yet three of the Forty English and Welsh martyrs now awaiting canonization were women of gaiety, resource and courage. Blessed Margaret Clitherow was the wife of a well-to-do tradesman in the northern city of York. Blessed Anne Line was a widow, and it is thought that Margaret Ward was also married. The last two came from different counties but both ended up in London where they worked and died for the Faith. All three bear special relevance to modern Catholic problems.

*A series of articles on  
the Forty Martyrs of  
England and Wales.*

## 'IT'S THE MASS THAT MATTERS'

VII.

### England's Women Martyrs

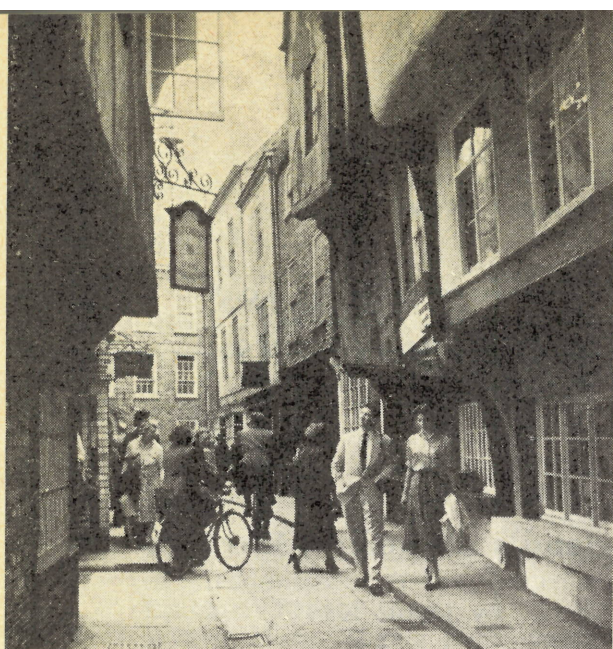
by HUGH KAY

The growing pains of the Church's renewal may involve a good deal of friction between the clergy and laity. The solution lies with the new stress on the missionary partnership between them that ought to characterise the parish and the mission field.

In this, as in other things, the pattern of the English martyrs' lives anticipates in a startling way, by 400 years, much that is coming to the fore at the moment. Of no one is this more true than of these three remarkable women whose services were invaluable to the priests of their time.

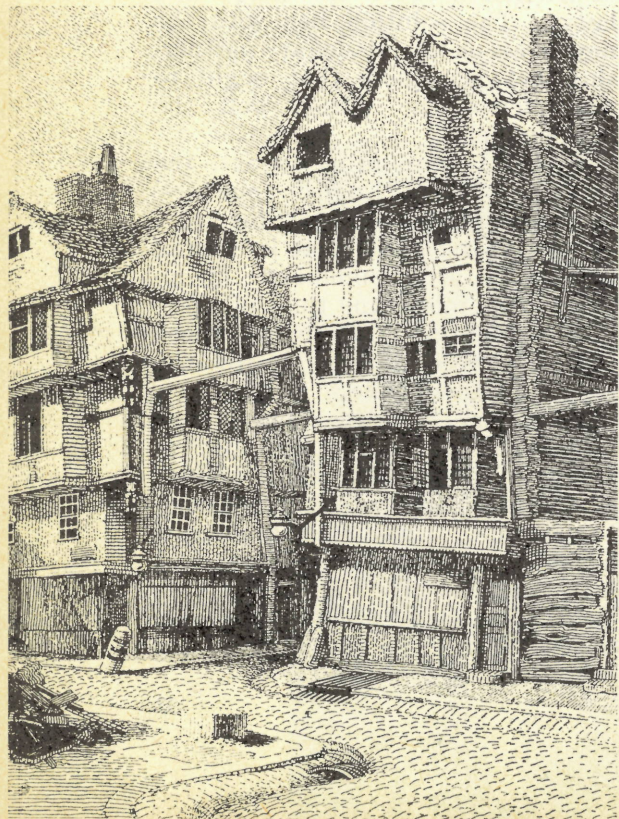
The story of 16th century persecution in England is well known. Henry VIII and Elizabeth hounded Catholics, Mary Tudor hounded Protestants. Elizabeth's reign saw a mass of arrests and trials and martyrdoms. The Mass was outlawed and the priest's life was forfeit. Those who braved the storm





**The Shambles in York today. This street has changed very little since Mistress Margaret Clitherow kept an eye on her husband's business, a butcher's shop, probably at No. 36.**

travelled the country incognito, saying Mass and giving the Sacraments to groups of the faithful meeting in secret.



The layman who harboured priests was liable to die with them, and the only safe place for a missionary to stay – from his host's point of view – was the tavern, which was subject to laws compelling the landlord to take any traveller who presented himself.

But landlords, even when they were reasonably sound Catholics, were in no position to have Mass said on the premises, and the priests were therefore dependent on Catholic families willing to give them hospitality and use their homes as meeting places for the faithful few.

### **Bl. Margaret Clitherow**

There were many unsung heroines who backed their husbands in this, but Margaret Clitherow, a convert, had to keep her activities hidden as far as possible from her Protestant husband, a man of note in the city and one who was expected to play his part in tracking priests down.

She received priests in her home repeatedly and had several spells in prison. The end came when Queen Elizabeth ordered a clean-up in the north and the local authorities started a vigorous drive to reduce the residual influence of the old faith.

Margaret was betrayed by a child she had befriended, brought to trial, and sentenced to death by crushing. She died with a sharp stone in her back and heavy weights piled on a board on top of her. She could have avoided death by claiming pregnancy, which at one time seemed assured, but she refused to do so.

### **Bl. Anne Line**

Anne Line played an even more dangerous game by running a

**John Gerard's London House (right) in St Clement's Lane, near Lincoln's Inn Fields.**



house for the Jesuit Father, John Gerard, in London, where priests could stay and Mass could be arranged. She was a sick woman all the time and was finally brought to trial before the Lord Chief Justice. She was hanged, drawn, and quartered at Tyburn in 1600.

### B1. Margaret Ward

Margaret Ward was a prison visitor, and contrived to take food and small comforts to many Catholics in London's Bridewell Prison. Among them was a priest called Watson, who twice in his life complied with the demands of the civil authority and then repented. Even his death was ambiguous for it resulted from a plot to kidnap King James with a view to forcing fair treatment for Catholics. Watson's life was a story of alternate courage under torture and betrayal of principle. But Margaret Ward secured his escape from the Bridewell by smuggling in a piece of rope. It was characteristic of this confused priest that he made a mess of it, and although he escaped, he left the rope dangling from the window of his cell and this gave his rescuer away. Her death was the same as Anne Line's.

\* \* \* \* \*

A number of extraordinary features appear almost uncannily, in the English martyrs' lives. All three women, for instance, repeatedly told their friends that they wanted to die a martyr's death. They greeted arrest with open delight - a frequent happening in the English martyrs' saga. They sang psalms in their cells and eagerly awaited the barbarous end they were sentenced to. Their constancy was severely tested - especially in Margaret Clitherow's case - by the tears of judges who implored them

to save themselves by simply going to a Protestant service, and by Protestant divines who, in some cases very sincerely, tried to argue them out of their convictions.

The three women stood absolutely firm. Margaret Ward was hung up by the hands and savagely flogged. They all stood up to the judges and - like the rest of the "Forty" - evinced a curious streak of humour which surely suggests that these were practical, realistic men and women, and quite un-neurotic.

The resource and ingenuity, the firmness and gaiety, the brief period of fear and anguish, the recovery as they accepted the chalice, the absence of reproach or vindictiveness towards their captors, their dying prayers for the King or the Queen and their Protestant brethren, and the more articulate martyrs' reasoned defence of their theology: this is the story of the Forty and of many more besides.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is sometimes said that the canonisation of the martyrs would be a reproach to Protestantism and a blow to ecumenism. But their adherence to doctrinal purity and their love of those who persecuted them must surely have a bearing on the modern dialogue. Cardinal Bea, head of the Christian Unity Secretariat, has stated flatly that the canonisation should be worked for: the martyrs died *for* Christian unity, the aim of the ecumenical movement itself. It is not without significance that there are Anglicans who pray for the martyrs' Cause and no Protestant leader in England has publicly opposed it. There is also a growing practice for Catholic groups on pilgrimage to places where the martyrs died to go and say a prayer at the nearby spots where Protestants died for *their* faith.