

SESSION 8

The Canonization of Becket and the creation of a cult

In this unit we look at the processes that made Thomas Becket a saint and his burial place a shrine. What forces transformed the archbishop and martyr into a saint? And why did Becket's cult become so popular and widespread?

Reading Guide

The readings provided for this session comprise: Benedict of Peterborough's description of the aftermath of the murder of Becket, and the bull of Alexander III (12 March 1173) canonizing Thomas of Canterbury, and the account of Henry's penance (*EHD* II, 770–6).

See also the texts in Staunton, *Lives of Becket*, pp.205–19.

BENEDICT of PETERBOROUGH

Description of the scene after the murder of Thomas Becket (29 December 1170)

Source: *English Historical Documents, volume II: 1042-1189*. Edited by David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway. London and New York: Oxford, 1981; pp. 820-21.

While the body still lay on the pavement, some of them [the townsfolk of Canterbury] smeared their eyes with blood. Others brought bottles and carried off secretly as much of it as they could. Others cut off shreds of clothing and dipped them in the blood. At a later time no one was thought happy who had not carried off something from the precious treasure of the martyr's body. And indeed with everything in such a state of confusion and tumult, each man could do as he pleased. Some of the blood left over was carefully and cleanly collected and poured into a clean vessel and treasured up in the church. The archbishop's pallium and outer vesture, stained with blood, were with indiscreet piety given to the poor to pray for his soul, and happy would it have been for them, if they had not with inconsiderate haste sold them for a paltry sum of money.

Thus the night passed in lamentation and mourning, groans and sighs; not a ray of gladness shed its light upon the sad scene, and when the day dawned it brought with it the prospect of yet greater evil. . . . The monks, fearing lest the corpse should be shamefully abused and so precious a treasure be taken from them, prepared to bury it with all speed. They therefore had no time to wash and embalm the body, according to the custom of the church of Canterbury. And this, we believe, was occasioned not so much by the malice of men as by the providence of God. For what need had he of less precious perfumes whom the Lord had caused to be anointed with his own blood?

They therefore stripped him of his outer garments to put on him his pontifical vestments; in so doing they discovered that the body was covered in a hair-shirt, no less painful from its stiffness than from other causes and - a circumstance of which we have neither read nor heard of an example in the case of any other saint - they found the body covered in sackcloth, even from the thighs down to the knees, beneath the cowl and robe of the Cistercian habit. At this sight the monks gazed at one another, astounded at this proof of a hidden piety greater than might have been credited to the archbishop, and at this second cause of sorrow, they multiplied their tears. How could such a man have been suspected of covetousness or treachery? Could he ever have set his thoughts upon an earthly kingdom, who had thus preferred sackcloth above all worldly pleasures? Was he not betrayed by his king rather than a traitor who would neither yield to his betrayers, those sons of perdition, nor, as he could have done, resist them? . . .

Such was the passion of God's doughty champion, Thomas, archbishop of Canterbury, primate of all England and legate of the apostolic see, which took place in the year of our Lord's Incarnation 1170 and the fifty-third of his age, on Tuesday, 29 December, at about five o'clock in the afternoon, so that on the fifth day after the Lord's Nativity in this world of woe his servant might be born to glory and stand in the presence of the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be honour, glory, virtue, power and dominion, world without end. Amen.

POPE ALEXANDER III

Bull of 12 March 1173, announcing the canonization of St Thomas on 21 February 1173

Source: *English Historical Documents, volume II: 1042-1189*. Edited by David C. Douglas and George W. Greenaway. London and New York: Oxford, 1981; p. 827.

Alexander, the bishop, servant of the servants of God, to his beloved sons, the prior and monks of the church of Canterbury, greeting and apostolic benediction. The whole body of the faithful should rejoice at the marvels wrought by that saintly and reverend man, Thomas, your archbishop. But still greater joy and exultation should fill the hearts of you, who have again and again witnessed his miracles, and whose church is especially honoured by the presence of his most sacred body. Having therefore duly considered the glorious merits by which his life was so highly distinguished, the public fame of his miracles and the testimony given to them by our beloved sons, Albert, cardinal-priest of St Laurence, and Theodwin, cardinal-priest of St Vitalis, legates of the apostolic see, and by many other persons; having, moreover, full confidence in that testimony, and having also taken counsel with our brethren in the presence of a large number of clergy and laity, we have on Ash Wednesday last solemnly canonised the aforesaid archbishop and ordained that he should be numbered in the roll of saintly martyrs. We command you and the whole body of the faithful in England by our apostolic authority to observe his feast every year on the day on which he ended his life by his glorious passion with due reverence. Since therefore it is fitting and highly expedient for you that his sacred body should be buried with the reverence and honour due to it, we

command you by this our apostolic rescript to hold a solemn procession on some high feast-day when the clergy and people are met together, to inter his body devoutly and reverently behind the altar, or to place it in a chest, elevated above the altar, whichever be more convenient, and by devout supplication to God to obtain his intercession for the salvation of the faithful and the peace of the universal Church. Given at Segni, 12 March.



Canterbury Cathedral: the east end and the Trinity chapel



Canterbury Cathedral: The crypt, where Becket was first buried



Canterbury Cathedral: The Trinity Chapel, with the site of the shrine of Thomas Becket