

Geddington's unknown priest

Do we know how this priest died?

A letter in the Boughton archives dating from 1736 gives us some important insight into the validity of the effigy. It seems that it is an original ornament of the church. This means that it likely commemorates a priest of Geddington church. Most intriguing is the letter's claim that there was a fond understanding amongst the local people of Geddington and surrounding areas that this priest died whilst celebrating the Eucharist. We have no way of knowing whether this is true, only that it seems to have become local folklore and that it was viewed rather fondly. It also seems that this tradition may have been reintroduced during the Victorian era; a time of deepening of spiritual interest and faith.

Isn't the whole business of the priest dying during Mass problematic? Whilst, there was a well-evidenced belief that anyone who died while observing the Mass would go straight to Heaven and this includes priests (this is referred to in the 'Lay Folk's Mass Book' and its Welsh equivalent), a reference to Wycliffe (a priest) having a stroke at the altar is recorded to have been understood as a punishment for his heretical ideas on the Eucharist.

The reason Wycliffe's death was considered as a punishment, was precisely because he had so strongly asserted heretical views concerning the Eucharist - and so undermined the sanctity of the Sacrament. At the time of his death he was despised by many in the church because of these views. His was a very rare situation at a time when the very foundations of the Church were being rocked with scandal. It is precisely that was so rare for someone who died during the Eucharist to have it viewed as punishment that in Wycliffe's merited being recorded and widely discussed as the negative reputation concerning his death only continued to grow.

Our effigy is from a far more settled period in church history and he doesn't seem to have been caught up in any theological scandal like Wycliffe. On the occasions when priests died celebrating the Eucharist leaving favourable reputations, the positive connotations of that barely need mentioning since it was so in keeping with common understanding. There is real richness to be found in Eucharistic theology that may provide insight into why a fond reputation may have developed in Geddington regarding a local priest who reputedly died whilst celebrating Mass, whether or not the reputations of his death were actually accurate or just a local myth.

It goes without saying that the early and medieval church carried extremely high regard for the Eucharist. To quote but a few of the doctors of the church: St Augustine of Hippo (d430) says: 'the angels surround and help the priest when he is saying Mass', that most certainly includes a scenario where he died whilst doing so. St Gregory (d604) also states; 'The heavens open and multitudes of Angels come to assist in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass... It is true that he who attends Mass shall be freed from many evils and from many dangers'. Then St Thomas Aquinas building on this (d1274) states; 'The celebration of Holy Mass is as valuable as the death of Jesus on the Cross'. St Gertrude the Great (d1256) adds; 'For each Mass we hear with devotion, Our Lord sends a saint to comfort us at death.' Finally, St Mechtilde (d1298) tells us that; 'He who is in the habit of devoutly hearing Holy Mass shall in death be consoled by the presence of the angels and saints, his advocates, who shall bravely defend him

from all snares of infernal spirits.' Although none of these are talking directly about people or priests dying at Mass, we do know that the medieval church considered that anyone dying during Mass would go straight to heaven, both priests and laity alike. Is this why our effigy has a cherub in attendance? Is this why he has a Missal, a Chalice and a Patten, or this just to signify his priestly credentials? We simply don't know and it would be a bit of a leap to claim this with all certainty.

There is, however, a strong custom connecting the Mass and Martyrdom. In his piece for the journal 'Theology Today' called '*Dying for the Eucharist or being Killed by it*', William Cavanaugh explains his article thus; 'This essay explores how the eucharist is inexplicably linked with martyrdom in the life of the church, as exemplified by Oscar Romero' (p.177). Oscar Romero was of course assassinated whilst celebrating Mass in his Cathedral. But there are other examples in contemporary culture that carry the same connotations. The most immediate one to spring to mind is Father Gabriel, leader of a Jesuit Community being killed whilst processing the Eucharist at the end of the 1986 film *The Mission*. In common culture, to be killed whilst celebrating Mass holds resonances of a particularly special kind of holiness.

But one does not have to be martyred in order to be recognised as saintly or specifically holy. The Church recognises as holy, and even saints in some instances, those who have died in more ordinary ways. That includes dying at the Eucharist.

Such connotations in the common believer's mind are not surprising because as Cavanaugh continues on to explain; 'the Eucharist is first the remembrance of Jesus' death at the hands of the powers' (p.182). To die during the Eucharist in whatever manner, is to be considered worthy to die with Christ. There can be no greater privilege. All priests model their ministry on that of their High Priest and King, Jesus Christ, and draw their ministry from his. So for a priest to die at such a moment is to fulfil their ministerial calling to the utmost. That is why today many priests who hold Eucharistic theology with appropriately high integrity may well communicate to people that there could be no greater privilege for them than to die whilst celebrating the Eucharist. Recently, priests who have died of natural causes whilst celebrating the Eucharist have had the following said of them after their deaths:

Msgr John Scully in America: '*It is so fitting for a man who dedicated his whole life to God... All he wanted to do was serve God and his people. It was really so perfect for him to die whilst celebrating Mass*' (Rev. Bill Swengros).

Msgr Timothy Hannagan: '*He died doing what he did best, which was saying Mass for his parish family – which I think is the greatest gift a priest could have.*' (Parishioner).

Of course, none of this proves or disproves the tale concerning our priest having died during the Mass, but it has given us a blessed chance to explore some of the questions it raises for us today. We have been able to think a little about the deep and long-running theological understanding concerning the eternal resonances of the Eucharist. From it, we can reasonably infer that if a priest were to die at Mass with a good reputation and without the stain of heresy that Wycliffe carried, that priest may well be considered by local people to have been taken up by the angels at this most holy of moments when the veil between heaven and earth is at its thinnest. Given that the priest the effigy commemorates in Geddington was regarded highly enough to have an expensive effigy made for him after his death, we can surmise, with quite some confidence, that local people believing in the rumour of his death may well have

considered this the most blessed of fates for him and began holding him up as a particularly devout and holy person as a result.

Is it really a Holy Water stoup, or just an angel holding a pillow? Does it make any difference?

The point about how local people may have viewed the growing reputation about this priest's death in the immediate months or years following his death, may well have had consequences for the effigy that we now see and the details it holds in its design. If we accept that his reputation for dying at the Eucharist gave rise to a growing reverence for the priest locally, then it seems reasonable to consider that they may well have designed certain features into his effigy that carried certain devotional qualities and foci. The effigy certainly carries some unique features not commonly found elsewhere. The chalice, paten and Missal don't really help us to identify anything beyond this man's profession – certainly they are not enough to prove anything about claims regarding the way he died. It is, however, rather unique for an effigy to display all three.

There are many problems, however, with suggesting the sunken well at the left of his head is just the arms of a cherub holding a pillow, and carries no further devotional purpose. This does not go nearly far enough in explaining the design nor shape, which would be very odd indeed were it not intended for another purpose as well. Why would anyone carve an angel's arms at such odd angles to one another? If they are arms, then why does the left arm jut out at right angles instead of mirroring the angle of the other arm? Why is the cherub's head in the corner rather than it being central? Why design it in such a strange way and create a recess at all unless for a purpose? We need to be careful not to refuse to consider that it may be a holy water stoup simply on post-reformational, post-enlightenment or protestant ideological grounds. We must remember that this effigy was created at a time when the devotional use of Holy Water will have been very widespread. Certainly, when it is filled with water today, it is hard to imagine it could be designed for anything else (see here).

The suggestion of the holy water stoup at the left side of the effigy's head was first made by a visiting academic from Leicester university, and with some conviction. But beyond appearance there is a whole system of belief building from the middle of the first millennium



and running right up to the present day that increases the validity of this argument. The properties of Holy Water are quite widely celebrated within the church, even today. A simple search of the popularist website Wikipedia will bring up the following statements: 'In Catholicism, Anglicanism, Eastern Orthodox... Holy Water is water that has been sanctified by a priest for the purpose of baptism, the blessing of persons, places and objects, or as a means of repelling evil.' Also from the same site we get,

'The use of Holy Water as a sacramental for protection against evil is common among Anglicans and Roman Catholics.'

On the website, *the Catholic Gentleman*, it states; 'Holy Water... has the power to forgive sins... Prepares us to receive the sacraments... Demons hate Holy Water!'

On a basic physiological level, water already carries many of those qualities: We wash dirty wounds to help them heal, we drink water to keep us alive, and we wash ourselves in water to cleanse our bodies and make us clean. But the tradition of Holy Water, carries all this to a much deeper spiritual level. Thomas Aquinas (d1274), possibly the most celebrated theologian and philosopher of the church, says; 'By the sprinkling of holy water the debt of venial sin is wiped out...'. This suggests that during the 13th Century Holy Water held quite wide appeal, because Aquinas felt the need to succinctly clarify its purpose. A little later, St Teresa of Avila (d1582), one of the most celebrated theological mystics of the church, recalls an event in her own life when Holy Water came to her aid; 'the devil appeared to me in an abominable form at my left side... I didn't know what to do. There was some holy water there and I threw it in that direction; he never returned again.' Avila goes on to say; 'I have myself felt an extraordinary consolation when I have used Holy Water. It is certain that I have felt a great joy and inner peace which I cannot describe, a joy with which my soul is quite refreshed... From this we can see how important everything instituted by the Church is; it comforts me to see the great power which her blessing imparts to water, so great is the difference between blessed and unblessed water.'

But this is not just a stream of thinking that begins in the second millennium. Gregory of Tours (d594) tells of a hermit named Eustitius who lived in the sixth century and possessed great power of curing fevers by giving those who were sick to drink water that he had first blessed. (*De gloria confess*, C.82). In other letters Gregory outlines that many of the faithful recognised holy water for its curative properties. In some places it was carefully preserved throughout the year and it was considered free from all earthly corruption... The people would crowd around with all sorts of vessels to take the water away with them. (*Ordo. rom.* 1", 42. in *Mus. ital*, 11, 26). This shows that as early as the 6th Century Holy Water was already being used for devotional purposes. The reputation of Holy Water and people's widespread belief in its qualities grew so great that Pope Leo 4th (d855), ordered that each priest should bless Holy Water every Sunday in his own church and sprinkle the people with it (*P.L.*, CXV, Col. 679). This practice continues in some churches to this day.

More recently, in his online article, *The Effects of Holy Water*, Henry Theiler states; 'As the soul is far superior to the body, so too are the spiritual effects of holy water superior to the corporal effects.' He continues; '(Holy Water provides) Illuminations of the intellect and inspirations of the Holy Spirit that aid the faithful to perform loyally the duties of their state of life, to pray devoutly, to hear a sermon with profit, and especially to assist the recollection and devotion at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and thus richly profitable of its treasures.'

All of this is evidence that theologically Holy Water was, and continues today, to draw upon so much more than just a literalistic reminder of one's baptismal promises. Recalling the baptismal promises during its use, is a helpful way of reorienting one's soul back to the essentials of faith, but there is also a wide tradition (prevalent during

the medieval period and common today) that Holy Water may be used in all kinds of scenarios and especially for healing, protection, blessing and exorcism.

Whilst the above only explains the theology behind Holy Water, what of sites like ours? Is there any evidence of effigies or icons of saintly or holy individuals being associated with holy water? Well, as medieval shrines grew in number, so too did the use of Holy Water around these sacred sites. In his book '*English Medieval Shrines*', John Crook speaks of a particular shrine where holy water was attributed to healing. He states; 'Ithamar's Miracula provides some detail about the shrine itself. It is referred to as a feretrum, and on one side was a depiction of the saint. This was used by a widow suffering from chronic fever to create holy water by contact with the image, a procedure for which several parallels occur in Merovingian hagiography. Her action suggests that the 'depiction' was not merely painted, but might have been a bas-relief sculpture... The feretrum, like that of Paulinus, was presumably raised up on some sort of shrine-base to form a composite monument' (p.180). It sounds as though using holy water in this way were common. Crook's claim that 'several parallels occur in Merovingian hagiography' suggests this was a widely held practice. As such, it certainly increases the plausibility that our effigy may have been designed to carry holy water to increase the possibility of similar spiritual benefits.

Most interesting for our purposes in that regard is the story of William of Norwich from the early 1150's. William was a 12-year-old boy who had reportedly been ritually murdered by the Jews because of his Christian faith (although there doesn't seem to be much evidence for this rumour). After his death lots of things are claimed to have happened concerning the burial and its resting places, and those who prayed at them or had contact with them. Crook states; 'Following further miracles (some caused by water made holy by contact with scrapings from the tomb)... the body was translated into the actual cathedral in 1151'. What we have here then is the unverifiable rumour of a 12-year-old boy dying for his faith (not too dissimilar to our own priest). Locally that rumour began to grow the reputation of his person and consequently his tomb as having certain qualities for healing and protection (again there are clear parallels). Some of the miraculous claims about the tomb involved holy water.

These examples all seem to be taken from within a hundred years or so of our effigy being built. As such they provide evidence that such beliefs were not only deeply theological but also commonly held amongst average people. This all makes the idea of a holy water stoup being designed into such an effigy for similar spiritual benefits far more plausible. In fact, it seems remarkable that there aren't many more still in existence.

There are many examples of shrines associated with holy water which continue to this day. Walsingham (the Anglican Shrine) and Lourdes are obvious examples, though admittedly with holy wells attached where apparitions of the Virgin Mary are widely believed. However, the Roman Catholic shrine at Walsingham, known as the Slipper Chapel, does not have a well, but instead has a pond which has a font as its centrepiece. The pool contains blessed water, Holy Water. The website states: 'The font is much used by pilgrims to fill their bottles with Holy Water to take away with them'. Knock shrine in Ireland is another present day example. Knock's website states: 'Water blessed at Knock Shrine is valued and cherished by Knock pilgrims and few leave Knock without filling a container to take home with them. There are 18 outdoor Holy Water Fonts located in front of the Apparition Chapel. Pilgrims are welcome to

bring their own containers to fill.' Saint Ann's Shrine in Cleveland, Ohio celebrates the availability of its Holy Water and Oils which one can purchase online and each are blessed in the presence of the saint's relic. Cobh Cathedral in Cork, Ireland has a massive stainless steel vat to the left of its entrance with a non-concussive (push) tap. On the tank is a sign reading – 'Holy Water for general use, please take what you need!'

These places all draw on the rich theological tradition of Holy Water as providing a much needed spiritual focus for believers to revisit their baptismal vows, ward off evil and experience cleansing, healing and protection, the effects of which may only be received through faith and God's grace. It was a tradition that grew up in the early church, was widely accepted during the medieval period and continues to this day in many of the mainstream Christian traditions and most especially Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

Historians have suggested this effigy dates from between late 12th to early 14th Century. What is its true date?

We simply do not know. All anyone can do at this stage is take an educated guess by comparing it to other effigies around the country. Its features are unique, which complicates things, but nonetheless it's style is similar to those found elsewhere. As far as the dating of our effigy is concerned, the Church Monuments Society appear to be leaning on the safe-side of late 13th or early 14th Century. Other academics have provided suggested evidence to widen that time-frame to include late 12th Century. Either way, it is very old. Its date is significant, because depending when it was made will help us to identify who this special priest was and what he lived through. We have some suggestions of what look like similar effigies to priests and significant people which may help us: Vicar of Avon Dassett – believed to be Hugo dated 1240, Conar O'Brian, Corcomroe Abbey in Ireland – 1268, Geoffrey de Mandeville – 1144, some of the Temple Church Knights – 1230-1270, a lay person at Westerly Waterless – late 1200's.



Hugo, Avon Dassett, 1240



Anonymous, Westley Waterless, 13th Century



Conor O'Brian, Cocomroe Abbey, 1268



Geoffrey de Mandeville, Temple – London 1144

A 13th Century effigy would certainly place this priest at a most significant period of Geddington's history, a time of huge prosperity and influence. A time when such an expensive memorial could be afforded. If he served during the reign of John 1st (who died in 1216), then he would have seen John send significant letters from Geddington,

hold councils here and supported John as he spent significant time here whilst trying to avoid civil war. If he served Edward 1st and Queen Eleanor then he would have spent much time in the company of that devout queen and maybe even presided over her funeral requiem in Geddington Church on December 6th 1290. If he served in the 100 years following Eleanor's death, then he will have overseen significant developments to the church and its chancel and seen the devotional life of the local people grow in significant ways.

At one time, normal people will have flocked here because of its royal connections and the church will have been central to their visits. Many will have walked for miles and attended Mass or said a prayer in church (a pilgrimage, if you like). Many may have heard the rumours of this priest dying at Mass (true or not, these rumours continued well into 1700s) and they may have prayed at this holy man's tomb effigy. If there was Holy Water available as a feature of this effigy, then all the better for their personal prayers for protection and health. In this sense, it may well have been some kind of small shrine, in so far as a shrine is just a holy site with a special focus where people say their prayers; have had their prayers answered.

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