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Mar. 22, St. Nicholas Owen, S.J., Martyr

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NCR Today

Today is the feast of St. Nicholas Owen, a skilled carpenter and stone mason, who used his talents to construct "priest holes" in the houses of Catholics in Elizabethan England.

Please click here for a trailer for "Saint Nicholas Owen", a film coming soon from Mary's Dowry Productions.

"During the reign of Elizabeth I, Catholics were forbidden to practice their religion. From 1585 it was considered treason, punishable by a traitor's death, to be found in England if you had been ordained a priest abroad. This meant that priests needed hiding places.

"Nicholas Owen, originally from Oxford, was a stone mason and carpenter by trade. One of the first English Jesuit lay brothers, he was arrested for protesting the innocence of Edmund Campion. Upon his release he contacted Fr. Garnet and from 1588-1605 travelled all over England constructing hiding holes in the mansion safe houses of that period. During the evening and night he worked on his own, carving concealed rooms out of the stone walls or ground. The location of the secret room was known only to himself and the owner of the house. During the daytime he would work as a travelling carpenter to fool the servants. Examples of his work survive at Sawston Hall (Cambs), Huddington Court (Worcestershire) and Coughton Hall (Warwickshire)."

--from the "Biography of St. Nicholas Owen", on the web site of St. Nicholas Owen Church in the Diocese of Northampton, England

After the failure of the Gunpowder Plot, which was blamed on the Jesuits, Owen, who had become a lay brother, was captured with three other Jesuits.

"He was tortured on the rack for hours a day, several days in succession but maintained his silence. In frustration the torturers kept adding weight to his feet but went beyond all limits. On March 1 his abdomen burst open and his intestines spilled out. Owen lingered on for one painful day before dying in the early hours of March 2. The rack-master tried to cover his behavior, excessive even under the harsh standards of the day, by saying that the Jesuit had committed suicide."

-- Jesuit Saints and Blesseds

Click here for more information about St. Nicholas Owen from the web site of St. Nicholas Owen Church in Little Thornton, in the diocese of Lancaster.

The Wiki article includes an illustration of the "concealed entrance to a priest hole in Partingdale House".

Advertisement

A priest hole at Naworth Castle.

May the blood of these Martyrs be able to heal the great wound inflicted upon God's Church by reason of the separation of the Anglican Church from the Catholic Church. Is it not one -- these Martyrs say to us -- the Church founded by Christ? Is not this their witness? Their devotion to their nation gives us the assurance that on the day when -- God willing -- the unity of the faith and of Christian life is restored, no offence will be inflicted on the honour and sovereignty of a great country such as England.

--from the Homily of Pope Paul VI at the canonization of Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, including St. Nicholas Owen

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