

William Filby - A Catholic Martyr

by Jean-Jacques Filby (Researcher)

William Filby (sometimes spelled Filbe or Filbie) was born in Oxfordshire between 1557 and 1560. He was educated at Lincoln College, Oxford, but as he did not like the established religion, he gave up the university and went to the English College of Douay. He was admitted to the seminary in Rheims on 12th October, 1579, and was ordained a priest in Reims on 25th March, 1581, at the Church of Saint Mary by the Bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne and shortly after left for the mission in England.

He was apprehended at Henley, while incautiously attempting to speak to Father Edmund Campion, who was being conducted to London with other prisoners. He was arrested in July, 1581, committed to the Tower on 22nd July, 1581. On 14th August he was removed to Marshalsea and then back to the Tower. Along with three other priests (Luke Kirby, Laurence Richardson (whose right name was Johnson) and Thomas Cottam), he was arraigned and condemned on 20th November, 1581.

He was sentenced on 17th November, 1581, and from that date until death he was loaded with manacles and was also deprived of his bedding for two months. On Wednesday, 30th May, 1582, not above the age of 27, William was hung. William Filby was beatified by a decree of Pope Leo XIII, dated 29th December, 1886.

Cardinal Allen's account of William Filby

In his book "A briefe Historie of the Glorious Martyrdom of XII Reverend Priests, executed within these twelvemonethes for confession and defence of the Catholike faith", Rheims, 1582, Cardinal Allen provides an account concerning William Filby, drawn from the Douay diary, and from a printed account of William's death by an eye-witness, in 1582. The English government was very concerned with Allen's publication of the dying words of Fr. Filby, as Protestants thought foreign-trained priests especially untrustworthy because they had been instructed to use any means, including slippery logic and dissimulation, to advance the Catholic cause:

“He was born in Oxford, and there educated in Lincoln college; but not liking the established religion, he forsook that university, and went over to Douay or Rhemes ; where, continuing his studies in the English college, he was made priest in 1581; and returning soon after to England upon the mission, and happening to go to the house of Mr. Yates, of Lyford, at the same time as father Campion and his companions were there apprehended, he was also made a prisoner and conducted to London with them. My author relates, that in their way to

London, lodging at Henley, Mr. Filby, had in his sleep a significant dream, or vision, of the ripping up of his body, and taking out of his bowels; the terror whereof caused him to cry so loud, that the whole house was raised thereby; which afterwards was accomplished in his own, father Campion's and others, his companions, martyrdom.

He was committed to the Tower with the rest, on the 22nd of July; arraigned and condemned the following November, upon the testimony of witnesses that had never seen him in their lives before his imprisonment; and whereas he showed a more than ordinary cheerfulness and constancy upon this occasion, he was ordered to be pinioned with iron manacles, which he endured from the time that he received sentence, November 20th till the 30th of May, when he was executed. On which day, being Wednesday, he was drawn with his three companions from the Tower of London along the streets to Tyburn, about seven of the clock in the morning.

When they were come to the place of execution, Mr. Filby being the youngest, (not above twenty-seven years of age), was first taken from the hurdle; and being lifted into the cart, he blessed himself with the sign of the cross, saying, *in nomine Patris, &c.*, and then said, let me see my brethren, looking to the others that lay on the hurdle; and therewithal holding forth his hands to them, he said, Pray for me. Then, speaking to the company, he said, I am a catholic, and I protest before almighty God, that I am innocent of all these matters whereof I am condemned; and I hope to be saved by the merits and death of our Saviour Jesus Christ, beseeching him to have mercy on me, and forgive me mine offences; and therewithal a proclamation was read for keeping the peace, and at the end thereof was said, God save the Queen; to which he said, amen.

The people asking him for what Queen he prayed, he answered, for Queen Elizabeth, beseeching God to send her a long and quiet reign, to his good-will, and make her his servant, and preserve her from her enemies. With that Mr. Topcliff and others willed him to say, God save her from the Pope. To whom he answered, He is not her enemy. After that, one of the sheriff's men, standing in the cart with Mr. Filby, said to him, what hast thou there in thy handkerchief? and therewithal taking the handkerchief from him, found a little cross of wood within it, which he, holding up in his hands, said, O! what a villainous traitor is this that hath a cross, divers times repeating it; and some of the people saying the same. Whereunto Mr. Filby answered nothing, only smiling at them. He was no more ashamed, says my author in the margin, of this his Saviour's banner, than of his crown, which he made shift to shave.

Then the articles, with the preface of the book printed by authority, were read, and his answers to them. To the sixth article, he answered, that if he had been in Ireland, he would have done as a priest should have done; that is, to pray that the right might take place. Some,

upon this, asked him, did Saunders do well in that business of Ireland? I know not, said he, I was not privy to his doings; I never saw or spoke with him; let him answer for himself.

Then sheriff Martin called upon the hangman to despatch; and the rope being about his neck, the sheriff said, Filby, the Queen is merciful unto you, and we have authority from her to carry you back, if you will ask her mercy, and confess your fault; don't refuse mercy offered; ask the Queen forgiveness. To whom Mr. Filby answered, I never offended her. Well, then, said the sheriff, make an end; and thus, desiring all Catholics to pray for him, he prayed, saying his *pater*, and *ave*, and *in manus tuas*, &c., and when the cart was drawing away, he said, Lord, receive my soul; and so hanged, knocking his breast several times, till some pulled down his hands, and so he finished his mortal life.”



After the hanging, William Filby's companions in the cart, Luke Kirby, Laurence Richardson and Thomas Cottam, also about to become martyrs in turn, were first forced to watch William beheaded and drawn and quartered.