



# Boston Catholic Journal



NIHIL NISI IESUM

Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

Salus Animarum Suprema Lex Esto (Canon Law 175)

The Salvation of Souls is the Supreme Law in the Church

## Our Lady of Walsingham



**The Reformation,  
The Via Crucis, and the Calvary of Walsingham**

**W**e must recognize, in justice, that in the period leading up to, and finally culminating in, the Reformation, there were scandals and abuses within the Church that needed addressing. Far too much wealth had accumulated in the hands of some. This called for both financial reform and social improvement to meet the needs of the future. Wherever human nature exists, there is always a continuing process of birth, suffering, death, and resurrection at all levels of life. It is true of the Church as well as the individual Christian.

In 1534 King Henry VIII, in an abortive attempt to secure his divorce from Queen Catherine, was encouraged by his advisors to take the whole affair of the divorce into his own hands and arrogate to himself powers which had never been the prerogative of the English monarchy, to ignore the teachings of the Church and the Pope in Rome and to declare himself as the supreme head of the church in England, and it was from this decision that so much sin and violent discord followed.

Those who openly resisted and refused to acknowledge and sign the Act of Supremacy, priests and people alike, were martyred. St. Thomas More, the Chancellor of England and St. John Fisher are among the most notable, but there

were many, many others. Many. No one in England could have foreseen how deeply wounding and widely destructive this severance would actually be.

King Henry VIII is a sad and tragic figure; a man transformed by sin and self-interest, he lost, through his arrogance, both his dignity and credibility. Henry himself had been both a pilgrim and benefactor of the shrine at Walsingham, and it is known that, despite his defection and dissolution, he did in fact have a deep love of the Blessed Sacrament and the Mother of God until the end of his life.

It has consistently been borne out by history that few can carry power and position without succumbing to corruption, unless they keep close to God and render all glory to Him.

In Walsingham, the attack came first upon the revenues, then the persons, and finally upon all the sacred things of which they were stewards and custodians.

Henry must bear the full responsibility for the execrable plunder and pillage of the monasteries.

In 1534, under constraint, the Canons of Walsingham acknowledged the Act of Supremacy. It is not known whether or not it was an unanimous assent, but we find

on the deed still preserved, 22 signatures, including the Prior and Sub-prior. This document, wrung from the hands of the Canons, basically against their will, was clearly the beginning of a dismal end, for by it they had allowed themselves to be lured into the trap of the King.

The king's commoners then arrived, resulting in the suppression of the monastery, the martyrdom of some of the canons, the destruction and removal of all valuables from the priory, the desecration of the Holy House and the removal of the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, which had been venerated by the faithful for almost 500 years. It was taken to Chelsea in London and there ignominiously burnt with other effigies and holy objects, it is said, at the feet of Thomas Cromwell.

The Crucifixion of Walsingham was complete. It was consummated!

The spirit of the time is well captured in the now famous ballad, the *Wrecks of Walsingham*, whose authorship is contended but is generally considered as having been composed by either St. Philip Howard, or St. Robert Southwell, both martyrs for the faith. It follows here:

## **The Wrecks of Walsingham**

“In the wrecks of Walsingham

Whom should I choose

But the Queen of Walsingham

to be my guide and muse !

Then, the Prince of Walsingham,

Grant me to frame

Bitter plaints to rue thy wrong,

Bitter woe for thy name.

Bitter was it, O to see

The silly sheep

Murdered by the ravenous wolves

While the shepherd did sleep.

Bitter was it, O to view

The sacred vine,  
Whilst the gardeners played all close,  
Rooted up by the swine.

Bitter, bitter, O to behold

The grass to grow  
Where the walls of Walsingham  
So stately did show.

Such were the worth of Walsingham

While she did stand,  
Such are the wrecks as now do show  
Of that Holy Land.

Level, level, with the ground

The towers do lie,  
Which, with their golden glittering tops,  
Pierced out to the sky.

Where were gates are no gates now,

The ways unknown  
Where the press of friars did pass  
While her fame was blown.

Owls do screech where the sweetest hymns  
Lately were sung,  
Toads and serpents hold their dens Where the  
palmer did throng.

Weep, weep O Walsingham,  
Whose days are nights,  
Blessings turned to blasphemies,  
Holy deeds to despites.

Sin is where Our Lady sat,  
Heaven is turned to hell,  
Stan sits where Our Lady did sway --  
Walsingham, O farewell!"

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## **The Slipper Chapel**

**T**oday the Roman Catholic Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, is within the so-called Slipper Chapel at Houghton St Giles, situated one mile away from the Priory grounds and at the location of the original medieval shrine.

Formerly this little chapel was the last stational chapel along the Pilgrims way and traditionally the place where pilgrims removed their shoes in order to walk barefoot the last mile to England's House at Nazareth. It is interesting to note that this has long been common practice to walk this last Holy mile in silence, barefoot and praying. For most pilgrims it is a profoundly moving experience, infused by the knowledge that thousands down through the centuries had walked this Holy mile carrying the joys and sorrows of mankind to Our Lady.

## **The Walsingham Seal**

The ancient seal of the Walsingham Priory is still extant, and can be seen in the British Museum in London. It was the survival of this Seal that allowed a faithful reproduction of the original shrine statue to be made. The seal shows the Priory on



one side and on the reverse side the statue of Mary sitting upon the Throne, On the original medallion around the edge of the seal are the words, "Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee" in Latin: *'Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum!'*"

It must be seen as part of the providence of God that although the original shrine and the priory were destroyed, the existence of the seal provided continuity in an accurate presentation of Our Lady as Our Lady of Walsingham.

## **The Statue**

Mary, Our Lady of Walsingham is seated on a simple wooden Saxon throne, depicting her as Queen and Mother. On her head she wears a three pointed gold Crown, which is the replica of a Saxon Crown, indicating the Trinity. On the front of the crown is a star which calls to mind her title, Mary, Star of the Sea. Mary is dressed in the flowing robes of a Saxon Queen, the blue of her cloak representing her fidelity to God and his Word, the red dress denoting her royal state, the white head-dress denotes purity and perfection.

Mary's enthronement tells us that she is the Queen and Mother of England; that England is, in fact, her dowry. The halo surrounding both her head and the head of

the Christ-Child represent the glory of God and the presence of holiness.

In her hand she holds a Lily, which is symbolic of the Annunciation or as it was always called in old England, the Salutation. It also indicates her sinlessness.

The Christ Child is sitting on her knee, holding the book of the Holy Gospel, his right hand held out in Mary's direction, saying "Behold your Mother", almost in a protective manner.

Mary is seated on a simple wooden throne, its markings indicating the seven sacraments, and Mary as Mother of the Church. On the original under or near Mary's foot is what appears to be the top of a sphere, which is sometimes mistakenly thought to represent the world. In fact it is a Toadstone, a stone supposed to resemble or to have been formed in the body of a toad, representative of the presence of evil, so here it is seen to be the embodiment of evil upon which Mary has the power to crush evil's head. In some later representations of Our Lady of Walsingham you may see an actual toad.

## **The Dawn of the Resurrection of the shrine at Walsingham**

In the early 1890's, a member of the Anglican Communion – a certain Miss Charlotte Boyd – purchased, out of devotion, the 14th Century Slipper Chapel at Houghton St Giles. The chapel as stated elsewhere in this presentation was situated at the beginning of the final Holy Mile that led into the original site of the Holy House of Walsinghams Nazareth. The chapel had fallen into disrepair: it was in a very dilapidated and neglected condition, having been used as a barn for many, many years.

In 1894 Miss Charlotte Boyd became a convert to Catholicism, and was received into the Church on September 12th in 1894. As a catholic Charlotte through all her energies and resources, devoting herself wholeheartedly to the work of the restoration of the chapel, her sole ambition being to restore the Slipper Chapel to its former glory, and to make it into the Walsingham Shrine for Mary.

This was her dream and a wonderful example of a dream, sometimes years becoming a reality in the lives of others. Unfortunately the developments were never realised in Charlotte's lifetime and she died in obscurity, but she had sown the seeds, seeds that others would water and bring to new growth.

In 1933 Bishop Laurence Youens was consecrated Bishop of Northampton, and

during the course of the celebrations he announced his firm intention to devote his episcopate to the restoration of the devotion to our Lady of Walsingham, and that at the Slipper Chapel at Houghton St Giles, The then Cardinal Bourne of Westminster, London, shared his vision and enthusiasm, and plans were made for the first official pilgrimage the following year.

In August 1934, Bishop Youens celebrated what was believed to be the first Mass in the Slipper Chapel since the Reformation, and on August 19th Cardinal Bourne presided at the Mass in Norwich and then led a throng of nearly 12,000 pilgrims, including most of the Bishops of England and Wales to Walsingham.

What joy resounded over the Dale of Walsingham, what prayers of thanksgiving for this experience of the Resurrection were offered up, a sense of redeeming the past. This was truly the beginning of a new and blessed era for Walsingham.

The next few years were witnesses to rapid growth in devotion and attendance at the shrine, accommodation was made available for pilgrims, and a pilgrims information bureau was opened.

It is now traditional that pilgrims arriving at the Slipper Chapel, having honoured

Our Lady, to pray and attend Holy Mass, then walk the Holy Mile, often barefoot, and at prayer proceed into the centre of Walsingham where the ancient priory remains are to be seen. A guided tour will indicate the remains of the old monastic refectory and the extremely beauty and majestic East Tower. In fact as one enters the area, there is an awareness of a powerful and blessed presence, prayer appears to pervade all surrounding it. To the back of the ruins lay the holy wells.

A visit to Walsingham is an unforgettable experience.

## **The Shrine of Reconciliation**

At the rear of the Slipper Chapel is a modern Church, called the Church of Reconciliation. It is flanked on both sides by an outdoor Way of the Cross.

This Church is available to both Roman Catholics and Anglicans, sometimes for the purpose of accommodating large groups of pilgrims for the celebration of Mass, for services of the Word, and for Ecumenical services. It is a place of healing and reconciliation. This is our Fathers House where all are welcome and where we endeavour to reach out across all that divides us and find that which we may share in Christ. There is great emphasis in Walsingham on the need for

Christian unity, unity between churches, families, and individuals.

Walsingham should never be relegated merely to its medieval history. It is a living, enduring, perpetually enacted history that moves us to better know and better serve Jesus Christ; to strive to imitate the dedication of our Saints and Martyrs, and to recapture the spirit of Nazareth in our own days! It is also an invitation to forgive and to strive for unity.

Walsingham, chosen and so loved by Mary, the Mother of God, invites us all to offer our Fiat to the will of God, to trust the Divine Spirit and give birth to Christ in our world today.

A Poor Clare Colettine Nun  
for the  
Boston Catholic Journal



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