

June 8th - Saint William of York



The saint we celebrate on June 8 reminds us that the lives of saints are oftentimes difficult, filled with struggle, suffering, and even injustice. Saint William of York (died 1154), by all accounts a pious man, was ill-treated by his brothers in faith during his life, but remained steadfast in his faith in the Lord, his love and forgiveness to those around him, and his gentleness and charity.

Saint William's life started out rather privileged. Born into nobility, son of Count Herbert (treasurer to Henry I) and Emma (half sister of King Stephen), he was ordained a priest, and appointed to various positions within the Church at an early age. It is likely, given his lineage and connections, that his appointments were somewhat political in nature, although historians also agree upon his qualifications, piety, and successful shepherding of both his congregation and communities. Saint William was appointed canon of Weighton, and archdeacon of Riding, as well as treasurer of the Cathedral of York. He was, at that point, appointed Archbishop of York, but his appointment was strongly opposed by local clergy, including the acting archdeacon. William was accused of bribery, sexual incontinence, and a host of other sins, leading Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, acting upon information supplied by his Cistercian monks, to report to the pope that William was 'rotten from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head.'

Despite unwavering belief and trust in Saint William, the Archbishop of Canterbury was reluctant to consecrate William as Archbishop, and sent word to Rome, awaiting papal approval and review. Pope Innocent III, despite having received complaints and accusations, agreed to proceed with the consecration, and William became Archbishop of York in 1143.

Unfortunately, Pope Innocent died soon thereafter, and the papal legate carrying William's official bishop's pallium (signifying the authority of Rome) returned home. Without the pallium, William's authority was greatly compromised, and his adversaries again sought to have him deposed. The newly elected pope, Pope Eugenius III (himself a Cistercian) ordered William suspended, and eventually deposed following a violent attack on monks and the burning of the monastery at Fountains. While William was not responsible for these actions, it had become clear that his appointment was causing significant (and now violent) disruption to the religious lives of those living in the diocese of York.

Through the ordeal of his public humiliation and deposition, Saint William remained conciliatory, kind, and humble. He persisted in his ministry until he was unable to do so, at which point he humbly took up residence at a monastery in Winchester, living as a monk for six years, and spending his days in prayer, rigorous fasting, and bodily mortification.

Upon the death of the Archbishop of York (who had replaced him) and Pope Eugenius III, William appealed to the newly elected Pope, Anastasius IV, and was reinstated as Archbishop of York in 1154. He returned humbly to his post, but was greeted by a triumphant crowd of laity whom had never doubted his piety, leadership, or holiness. Such was their numbers that the bridge over the River Ouse on which they stood collapses. Miraculously, no one was injured, which was taken as a sign of the Lord's pleasure with Saint William's return. St. William, finally having received the pallium, showed great kindness and forgiveness to the Cistercians who had opposed him, and promised full restitution to Fountains Abbey. Sadly, Saint William died within a few weeks to months of his return to York. Allegations of poisoning by his rivals (slipped into the Holy Eucharistic chalice) were made, although investigations were proven

inconclusive. He was buried at the Cathedral of York, and shortly thereafter, a sweet-smelling oil began emanating from his tomb. Numerous miracles were reported, and many made pilgrimage to visit his place of rest. An investigation of his life, led by the Cistercians (who had been his strongest detractors), proved his innocence of all the sins he had been accused of, and William was canonized by Pope Honorius III.

William's life was certainly not easy. Putting ourselves in his shoes, it seems as if spite and anger and resentment would be normal reactions to the injustices and ill-treatment that he received. Nevertheless, Saint William remained steadfast and loving, preaching and practicing forgiveness, and focusing his attention on the Lord and His will. We might, in the midst of our busy schedules, pause and consider the implications on our own lives, the perceived injustices we suffer, the grudges we hold, the ease with which we are distracted from the will of the Lord for each of us.

Prayer:

St. William, you were chosen by God to be Archbishop of York, but were unjustly accused of sin. Your election was opposed by many in favor of another. Even through all this, you never took your eyes off of Christ and His will for you. You devoted yourself to a life of prayer and mortification. After many years, you were finally restored to the See that was rightfully yours. Instead of reserving spite, you showed the utmost amount of forgiveness and love for those who had before been in opposition to your election. Please help us to follow your example of perseverance and forgiveness so that we may forgive our transgressors and always persevere in the Lord's will. Amen.