

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Copyright Regulations 1969

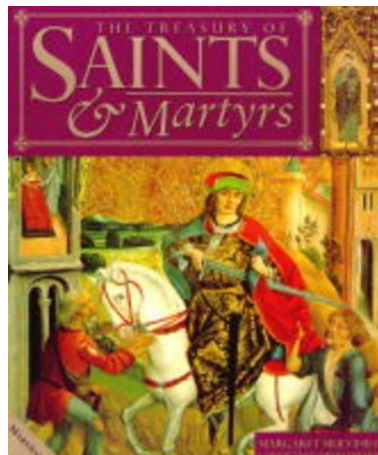
WARNING

This material has been reproduced and communicated to you by or on behalf of Methodist Ladies' College pursuant to Part VB of the Copyright Act 1968 (the Act).

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further reproduction or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

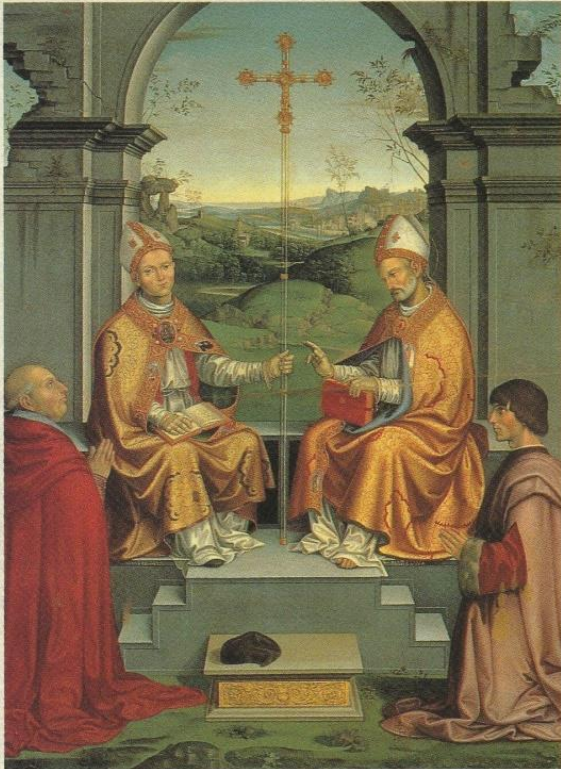
Do not remove this notice.

Mulvihill, M. (1999). *The treasury of saints and martyrs*. London: Marshall Cavendish.



THOMAS À BECKET

1118–1170



Thomas appears on the right in this 15th-century painting with Saint Martin of Tours.

(Right) Henry II, the young king whose angry words led to the murder of Thomas à Becket.

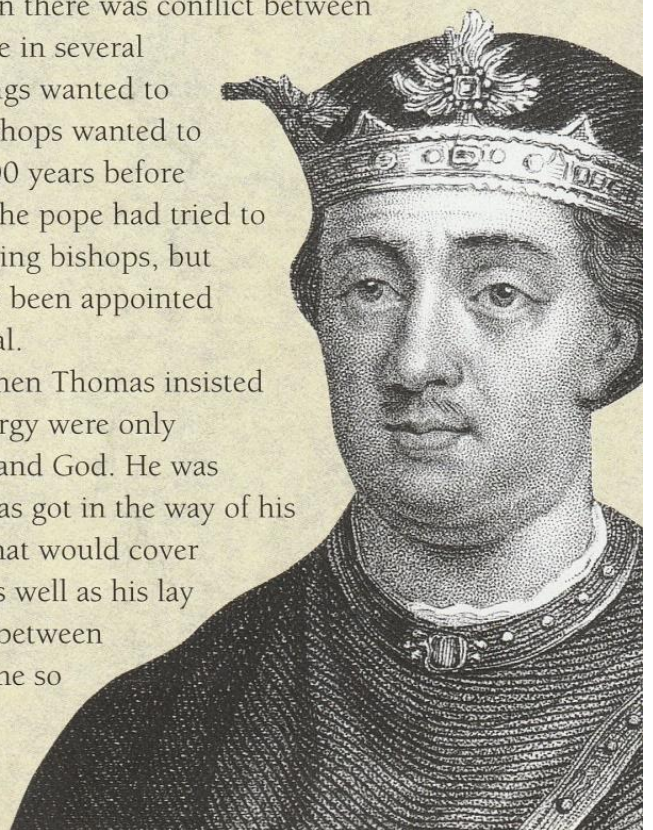
“I commend myself to God, Saint Mary and all the saints of the church....For the name of Jesus and the protection of the church I am ready to embrace death.”

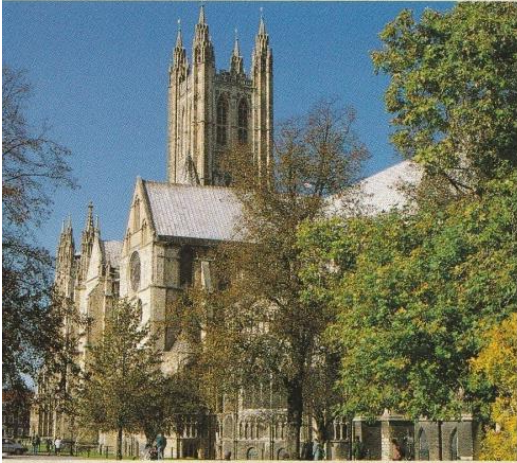
THOMAS À BECKET was born in London, although his parents were Normans who had settled in England after William the Conqueror became king. When he left school Thomas worked for the Archbishop of Canterbury, who thought so highly of him that he arranged for him to study law in France and Italy. In 1155 the new King of England, Henry II, made Thomas his chief minister. Although Thomas was 15 years older than Henry, the two men were great friends. They always sat together, even in church, and they shared a passion for riding and hunting.

In 1162 Henry got Thomas appointed as the Archbishop of Canterbury. He did not think that Thomas' new job would make any difference to their friendship, but Thomas had different ideas. Once he was Archbishop, Thomas changed from being “a patron of play-actors and a follower of

hounds, to being a shepherd of souls”. This change happened at a time when there was conflict between the Church and the State in several European countries. Kings wanted to control bishops, and bishops wanted to control kings. Nearly 100 years before Thomas' appointment, the pope had tried to stop kings from appointing bishops, but Thomas would not have been appointed without Henry's approval.

Henry was angry when Thomas insisted that bishops and the clergy were only answerable to the pope and God. He was angrier still when Thomas got in the way of his attempt to set up laws that would cover members of the clergy as well as his lay subjects. The argument between the former friends became so





serious that for his own safety Thomas left England. The pope intervened and the two men patched up their differences, so Thomas returned to Canterbury. However, the dispute blew up again. On Christmas Eve in 1170 Thomas excommunicated those that disagreed with him and the Church. Henry was in Normandy at the time and he exploded, saying, "Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?"

Henry had said things like that before, but this time four of his knights took him seriously. They crossed the Channel, rode to Canterbury and murdered Thomas in a side chapel of the cathedral. Europe was shocked to learn of this atrocity. Henry too was horrified and came to Canterbury in a rough hair shirt, to do penance for Thomas' death. Although Thomas had not lived as a saint, he died bravely in defence of the rights of the Church. Three years after his murder he was canonised, and within another seven years no fewer than 703 miracles were credited to him. His shrine became one of the most important pilgrimage centres in Europe.



(Top left) Canterbury Cathedral as it looks today.

(Above) This image from a 13th-century illuminated manuscript shows the knights brutally killing Thomas in the side chapel.