



It's only a few months since the wedding of William and Catherine; now a move is under way to have another royal, Katharine of Aragon, canonised by the Catholic Church

By Thomas J. Craughwell

It was in 1970 that Gregory Nassif St. John began serving Mass at his parish church, St Mary's, in Richlands, Virginia. That was also the year that he, like millions of viewers around the globe, became captivated by the award-winning BBC series, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*. That is how he was first introduced to the story of Katharine of Aragon, Henry's first wife whom he pushed aside in order to marry Anne Boleyn. "Her story touched me very deeply," Nassif St. John said in a recent interview. "I knew she was being treated unfairly and cruelly. Her story stuck with me my whole life." But in Nassif St. John's case his sympathy for the wronged and abandoned queen blossomed into something unexpected—his conviction that Katharine should be canonised by the Catholic Church.

Nassif St. John, a 50-year-old retired actor from New York, began the process in 2009 with the help of his parish priest. Encouraged by his pastor and two other local priests, both of whom are experts in church history and who agreed that Katharine's cause was legitimate, Nassif St. John wrote to Bishop Michael Evans of East Anglia and Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, seeking their advice. Archbishop Nichols and Bishop Evans both expressed their support, but emphasised that there must be clear evidence of devotion to Katharine (Nassif St. John uses the traditional spelling of her name) among the Catholic faithful.

POPULAR DEVOTION

And in fact there is evidence of popular devotion, at least in England.

According to the Very Reverend Charles Taylor, Dean of Peterborough, every January Peterborough Cathedral, the site of Katharine's grave, has hosted a three-day festival commemorating the life of this holy queen. There is a memorial service, usually attended by about 1000 people, including members of the city government of Peterborough and representatives from Spain. Since the English Reformation Peterborough has been an Anglican cathedral, yet the cathedral clergy welcome Catholic priests to say Mass at the cathedral's High Altar (the altar closest to Katharine's tomb). In 2011, 600 people attended the Mass. It has become a tradition the night before the Mass for the people to join a candlelight procession around the cathedral to the tomb—a re-enactment of Katharine's funeral in 1536, when 200 mourners left

1000 candles burning at her grave.

“Quite a number of our visitors come to see Katharine’s grave,” Dean Taylor wrote in a recent email. “A few lay flowers or a pomegranate (symbol of Aragon), and even if most do not audibly or even consciously utter words of prayer, the visit to see and remember is to some extent an act of prayer in itself.”

To increase awareness of Katharine and her cause, in 2011 Nassif St. John launched a website, Katharine of Aragon: The Official Website for Her Cause (katharineofaragon.com/wordpress). In addition to a brief biography of Katharine and information on how to join the cause, Nassif St. John has posted a prayer of his own composition: “Good Queen Katharine, ever steadfast in your faith to your marriage and to Christ’s Church; bravely enduring unkindness and betrayal, yet never betraying your faith by succumbing to the false promises made by those who abandoned you. Teach us the way of your faith. Grant us the grace to follow the example of your faith, courage, piety, kindness and compassion. Pray for us.”

THE PROCESS

According to Msgr. Richard Soseman, a Vatican official and former episcopal delegate for the cause of Archbishop Fulton Sheen, “One of the primary indicators of the possible candidacy for sainthood of an individual is that there is popular devotion to the person. So, before a possible cause gets to the bishop, laypeople should form themselves into groups, guilds, associations, foundations, etc., to promote the life, holiness, teachings, and example of the candidate. The laity should be wildly enthusiastic about their candidate, and share the good news, which they have as a result of their devotion, with others. It is possible to have prayer cards printed, as well as biographical brochures or books, and to reproduce the writings of the candidate.”



Katharine of Aragon

The request that Katharine of Aragon’s cause be initiated would be made to the bishop of the diocese in which she died—in this case, the Catholic diocese of East Anglia in England—by one of the associations or guilds. This association becomes the Promoter of the Cause, which is an honour, but also comes with great responsibility since the Promoter must finance the cause. Should the diocese begin to investigate Katherine’s life, writings, and merits, the Promoter of the Cause will be billed for all expenses, such as collecting and copying

documents from archival sources in England, Spain, and probably the Vatican.

If Katherine’s case reaches this stage, it shifts from a grassroots movement to what is known as the Diocesan Phase of a Cause for Beatification and Canonisation. The bishop will appoint a variety of officers, everyone from notaries to typists, but the most important official at the diocesan level is the episcopal delegate who represents the bishop in every facet of the local investigation.

The bishop will write to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to request a Nihil Obstat, a statement that declares there is no obstacle to initiating the cause. Once that declaration has been received, the bishop announces that Katharine bears the title, “Servant of God.”

Next, a postulator is appointed. Msgr. Soseman defines the postulator as “the most public spokesman in favour of the cause.” It is not unusual to choose as postulator a priest in Rome who has experience with directing causes for canonisation. According to Msgr. Soseman, a Roman postulator “can oversee the various elements at the local level and then continue that work when a cause is presented to the Holy See.”



The future Queen Catherine

Once the cause has been passed from the association to the diocese, the episcopal delegate interviews all of the expert witnesses individually; he oversees the theologians who must review and approve the orthodoxy of the chief writings of the candidate; and he oversees all of the relevant historical data which can be collected from the various archives which may have information regarding the candidate. Since Katharine of Aragon has been dead for nearly 500 years, her case is handled as a historic cause: obviously, no one who knew Katherine can be interviewed, so researchers will collect her writings and the writings of others who knew the queen well.

According to Msgr. Soseman, when everyone involved at the diocesan level is satisfied that everything which is necessary or helpful to the cause has been assembled, then the closing of the diocesan phase is marked with a formal ceremony known as the *Postrema Sessio*. The ceremony is held in public, often in the cathedral, where all documents and other pieces of evidence are certified, packed, sealed, and notarised for presentation to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints in Rome. Typically the bishop will mark the occasion by celebrating Mass. If there are reports of a miracle attributed to the intercession of the candidate, all the medical evidence will be included in the package.

If the Congregation for the Causes of Saints finds that a reported healing is inexplicable, they will report their findings to the pope with the request that he declare Katharine “Blessed.” At this stage the Holy Father studies all the evidence before granting a candidate the title. Then a second miracle attributed to Katherine’s intercession is required before she can be declared a saint.

At the time of beatification the relics of the candidate are moved (the traditional term is “translated”) from the grave to a shrine where the faithful

will have easier access to the remains of the blessed. Queen Katharine lies buried in Peterborough Cathedral, which is under the jurisdiction of the Church of England. It is an open question whether the Church of England and the British government would permit Catholic Church officials to open her tomb and move her remains elsewhere, perhaps to the Catholic Cathedral of East Anglia.

WHO WAS KATHARINE OF ARAGON?

Born in 1485, Katharine was the youngest child of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castille, the royal couple renowned in Spain for driving the last Moorish emir from Spain, thereby ending more than 700 years of Moorish occupation. In the Americas, Ferdinand and Isabella are best remembered for financing Christopher Columbus’ voyage, which led to the discovery of the New World.

Katharine’s parents used her, along with her brother and sisters, to strengthen political alliances with friendly nations. In 1501 she married Prince Arthur of England, a frail, unhealthy teenager who died three months after their wedding day. Rather than lose the alliance with England, Ferdinand arranged for his daughter to marry Prince Henry, a boy six years younger than Katharine. In 1509 the prince’s father, Henry VII, died, and Henry and Katharine married. Katharine had declared that she and Arthur had never consummated their marriage, therefore the church’s prohibition of a brother marrying his brother’s widow did not apply. Nonetheless, Pope Julius II issued a dispensation to the couple.

Between 1510 and 1518, Katharine gave birth to four boys and two girls, five of whom were stillborn or died within a few weeks of birth. Only one daughter, Mary, survived to adulthood. Although queens had ruled in their own right elsewhere in Europe—Katharine’s mother being one example—Henry

was convinced that England must have a king. As the years went by and Katharine conceived no more and began to lose her looks, Henry, who had never been faithful to her, began looking for a way out of his marriage. He became infatuated with one of Katharine’s ladies-in-waiting, Anne Boleyn, the sister of one of the king’s mistresses. Anne, who had seen the king use then discard her sister, Mary, refused to be Henry’s mistress; she demanded marriage and coronation as queen, which meant Katharine had to go.

In June 1527, Henry informed Katharine that their marriage was invalid, that they had been living in mortal sin. They had no son because God was punishing them for violating Leviticus 20:21, “If a man takes his brother’s wife, it is impurity... they shall be childless.” Katharine replied that she and Prince Arthur had never consummated their marriage, therefore it was not a true marriage. She had come to Henry a virgin, she said, as he knew perfectly well. In spite of his wife’s tears and protests, Henry petitioned the pope to declare his marriage to Katharine as invalid.

Four years passed and still Pope Clement VII had not decided Henry and Katharine’s case. By 1531 the king was adamant; on July 14, he abandoned Katharine and never saw her again. She was ordered to move to a house in Hertfordshire, while her daughter, Princess Mary, was sent to Richmond. In 1532 Henry demanded that Katharine hand over the queen’s jewels; he gave them to Anne Boleyn. In January 1533, Henry and Anne were married in secret (she was pregnant at the time). In May, the new archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, annulled Katharine and Henry’s marriage and declared the king’s marriage to Anne was valid. In August, Henry stripped Katharine of the title “queen;” henceforth she was to be addressed as the Dowager Princess of Wales. Her daughter, Mary, was no

longer to be addressed as “princess,” but as the Lady Mary.

Katharine’s fortunes continued to decline: the king dismissed most of her household; she was surrounded by spies. When Anne gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth, Henry demanded that Katharine surrender the gown in which all their children had been baptized, but she refused.

In 1534, Pope Clement VII at last declared that Henry and Katharine’s marriage was valid, but it was too late. Henry had cast aside his wife, married his mistress, severed England’s ties to the Roman Catholic Church, and proclaimed himself Supreme Head of the church in England.

When Katharine refused to swear to the Act of Succession that made Mary illegitimate and the children of Anne heirs to the throne, she received a visit from the archbishop of York and the bishop of Durham, who threatened her with death if she continued to oppose Henry’s wishes. As punishment, she was cut off from her daughter and all of her friends.

One by one her supporters were arrested and executed, including Thomas More and John Fisher—the only bishop who had stood against

Henry; Thomas Abel, one of her chaplains; John Forest, her confessor; and more than 120 Franciscan Friars of the Observance—members of her favourite religious order who had been firm champions of Katharine’s cause.

In December 1535, Katharine fell seriously ill; she died on January 7, 1536.

Giles Tremlett, author of the biography *Catherine of Aragon: The Spanish Queen of Henry VIII* (Walker & Co., 2010), believes that Katherine was saintly. In a recent email he wrote, “Catherine lived her own form of passion (in the Christian sense), in that she was both fully prepared to die for her beliefs and, though she was never martyred, she suffered considerably as a result of her decision to stick by them,” he said. “People around her were being executed and there was nothing unreasonable about her own fear that the same fate awaited her—even though martyrdom, in the early 16th century, was largely something that existed in the history books. She remained steady and brave and certainly found both strength and consolation from her religion. In that sense she was as saintly as Thomas More or John Fisher, though she did not meet their awful end.” ■



The tomb of Katharine of Aragon at Peterborough Cathedral

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On January 7, 1536, just hours before she died, Katharine wrote for the last time to her husband, Henry VIII.

“My most dear lord, king and husband, the hour of my death now drawing on, the tender love I owe you forceth me, my case being such, to commend myself to you, and to put you in remembrance with a few words of the health and safeguard of your soul which you ought to prefer before all worldly matters, and before the care and pampering of your body, for the which you have cast me into many calamities and yourself into many troubles. For my part, I pardon you everything, and I wish to devoutly pray God that He will pardon you also. For the rest, I commend unto you our daughter Mary, beseeching you to be a good father unto her, as I have heretofore desired. I entreat you also, on behalf of my maids, to give them marriage portions, which is not much, they being but three. For all my other servants I solicit the wages due them, and a year more, lest they be unprovided for. Lastly, I make this vow, that mine eyes desire you above all things. Katharine the Queen.”