1-1-1988

Antonio Possevino's Tribute to Edmund Campion

John Donnelly
Marquette University, john.p.donnelly@marquette.edu

During June of 1580 Edmund Campion and Robert Persons were smuggled into England and worked with marked success until Campion's capture by the English government on July 17, 1581. He was tried for treason and executed December 1, 1581. The treason charges were widely disbelieved in England and on the Continent; indeed the execution caused such resentment throughout Catholic Europe that the English government felt compelled to justify its action. The most important English apology was *The Execution of Justice in England*, which first appeared anonymously on December 17, 1583. Its real author was William Cecil, Lord Burghley. An expanded edition was published in 1584; since the English government wanted to present its case to the larger European world as well as to its own subjects, there were Latin, French, Dutch, and probably Italian and German translations as early as 1584.

The news of Campion’s execution created considerable stir in far away Poland. Even before Campion’s martyrdom the famous Jesuit writer Peter Skarga had incorporated considerable material on the English martyrs in his popular *Lives of the Saints* of 1579. In 1583 there appeared at Vilna a Polish translation of Campion’s *Decem Rationes* together with a short life of the author.

During the years following Campion’s death Antonio Possevino was serving as papal legate to Northern and Eastern Europe. Most of his time was spent in Poland, where he developed close relations with the Polish King

---

2 Ibid., xvii-xviii.
Stephen Bathory. Certainly Possevino was abreast of events in England and bitter over the execution of Campion – in a letter to King Stephen dated December 10, 1583, he referred to Queen Elizabeth as «the Tisiphone [one of the Furies] who continuously spills the blood of Catholics».

Probably sometime in 1584 Possevino obtained a copy of Cecil’s The Execution of Justice in England, most likely in the Latin translation. Possevino prepared a refutation which took the form of a letter addressed directly to Queen Elizabeth, perhaps because he did not know the real author of the English apology. From the style and content of Possevino’s letter it is clear that it was meant for publication. There is no evidence that it was ever sent to the Queen; if it was sent, she probably never saw it since its tone is so bitter that any minister handing her a copy would have been exercising considerable courage. Neither was the letter ever published.

We cannot be certain why Possevino’s refutation was never published. It may be that the Jesuit censors considered its publication imprudent – later they blocked the publication of three other books by Possevino for that reason – but there is no direct evidence on the point. More likely Possevino himself decided not to publish after he learned that there were other and more effective Catholic answers in print. During 1584 Robert Persons published his Leicester’s Commonwealth. Even more effective and more directly aimed at Cecil’s Execution of Justice was William Allen’s A True, Sincere, and Modest Defense of English Catholics (1584). Both works were better attuned to the English situation and both wisely took the traditional form of attacking the monarch’s wicked counsellors rather than of a frontal attack on the monarch such as Possevino launched. A Latin translation of Allen’s Defense of English Catholics appeared in December, 1584; Possevino’s refutation of Cecil contains no reference to it, which strongly suggests that Possevino had not seen it when he wrote. At some point he certainly saw it, for he described it briefly in his Apparatus Sacer (1603). It seems probable that Possevino’s

---

5 Monumenta Poloniae Vaticana (Cracow 1938), VII-2, 708.  
6 Possevino’s refutation cannot be dated exactly. The earliest possible date of composition is 1584. It must have been written before 1588, since it makes no reference to the Spanish Armada. There are frequent references to Gregory XIII (1572-1585) but none to Sixtus V (1585-1592), which suggests composition in 1584 or 1585.  
7 Two known manuscript copies exist; both contain many defects. The better copy is at the ARSI, Opp. NN. 335 113-33. The text is in a copyist’s hand, but the title and an interpolation on f. 127v are in Possevino’s autograph. The title, which is partly cut off, reads Adversus librum de Justitia Britannica, ejus mandato editum. The ejus probably refers to Queen Elizabeth. The other copy is Bibliotheca Vaticana, Urbinate Latino 814, pars I, 126-97; which is in a different copyist’s hand. Its title reads Rev. Patris Possevini de Statu Regiae Angliae ac eius regni.  
9 Kingdon XXIII.  
10 Apparatus Sacer ... (Venice 1603) 697.
encounter with Allen’s superior response discouraged Possevino from publishing his refutation of Cecil.

The bulk of Possevino’s tract is a complex historical-juridical argument that has little interest. There is one section, however, that is worth reproducing, a eulogy of Edmund Campion, that has been ignored by scholars and was unknown to the postulators of Campion’s canonization. Admittedly the eulogy of Campion is partly conventional praise of a martyr, but Possevino had known Campion personally at Prague in 1577. Indeed their acquaintance may go back to April, 1573, when Campion entered the Jesuits at Rome. That same month Possevino was in Rome and played a prominent role in the Third General Congregation of the Jesuit order; he then served at Rome for five years as Secretary of the Society. As witness to Campion’s sanctity Possevino’s eulogy may take on added importance from the fact that Possevino had dealings with an extraordinary range of other saints: Pius V, Charles Borromeo, Peter Canisius, Robert Bellarmine, Francis Borgia, and Bernardino Realino. Among his penitents was a student at Padua, Francis de Sales.

Possevino directly addresses the Queen and denounces her as a Jezebel for her hideous barbarity against Campion, the other Jesuits, and the seminary priests whom she has had executed. Her hack writers have tried to hide the truth of this, but Campion’s zeal and saintly life cry out against her. His mission to England had but two motives, love of God and obedience to his superiors. Possevino records Campion’s zeal during the years he taught at Prague and the acclaim his work there earned in the highest circles as well as his later success as a missionary in England. The Queen tried and failed to win him to her cause by both trickery and the rack. The Queen’s hands have been busy, one shedding blood and the other spilling ink to justify her crimes, but these efforts only insure her lasting infamy. Campion embraced the religious life so that freed from merely human concerns, he could help his English homeland at the cost of certain martyrdom. The Jesuit order entered the English mission at the urgent request of English secular priests because the abundant catch of souls needed more fishermen. The Society of Jesus saw

11 Neither the Jesuit postulator’s office in Rome nor the Office of the Vice-Postulation for the Cause of the English and Welsh Martyrs in London knew of the text when I made inquiries. The only printed reference to Possevino’s refutation is John H. Pollen, *The English Catholics in the Reign of Elizabeth, 1558-1580* (London 1920) 294 n., which merely states, «He [Possevino] also composed an answer to Burghley’s *De Justitia Britannica*, which, though never printed, exists in MS». He gives no reference to its location. The Vatican copy was the subject of Andrew M. Stawowy’s ‘Antonio Possevino’s Reply to Lord Burghley’s *Execution of British Justice*’, an unpublished M.A. digest in the Department of History, St. Louis University, 1960, pp. vi, 85. Stawowy is unaware of the superior copy at the Jesuit Archives and gives only a passing glance (p.45) to the section on Campion.

12 In January, 1577, Campion wrote in a letter from Prague to Franz Coster at Cologne, «I was troubled about a parcel of manuscripts which is due to me from France, when F. Antony Possevino, who passed through this place on his way from Rome to Sweden, told me that ... you ... could lend me your aid in the business». Richard Simpson, *Edmund Campion: A Biography* (London 1867) 82.
this work as a prophetic challenge; she ignored the danger, as she did in her other apostolates everywhere around the world that she is called to serve God.

Many English Jesuits volunteered to return to England and risk their lives for their countrymen, but superiors chose Campion to pioneer the new apostolate. A scholar trained from boyhood at Oxford, he was outstanding for probity, learning and eloquence. It was Campion who obtained from Gregory XIII permission for Englishmen who wished to ease their conscience to go on calling Elizabeth queen despite her excommunication. Obviously not even her cruelty could curtail the Pope’s zeal for the salvation of England. Elizabeth reacted to the Pope’s action like a hellish Alecto by attacking certain parts of the papal documents while suppressing the passages that indicated papal zeal for the return and salvation of Englishmen generally and the Queen in particular. Instead she subjected the priests sent to her kingdom to rigged tests, while that new Judas, (Cecil), called them traitors. She vilified the Pope as the Antichrist because in his love for her and her nation he tried to win them to Christ. Possevino concluded his tribute to Campion with a terrible threat: «You will suffer, wicked woman, you will suffer eternal punishment».

This article cannot end on such a strident note. Among the prisoners tried with Campion was James Bosgrave, S.J., who taught humanities and mathematics at the Jesuit college at Vilna. In the wake of Campion’s execution Possevino went to King Stephan Bathory, with whom he was on intimate terms, and persuaded him to intervene as a Catholic king on behalf of his English co-religionists, particularly Bosgrave. The King agreed to Possevino’s request but secured the approval of the Polish senators before writing a letter to Queen Elizabeth on January 29, 1583. Pointing out the religious liberty enjoyed by Englishmen in Poland, he appealed for release of Catholics who were imprisoned simply because of their Catholic faith. Specifically he requested the release of Bosgrave, who had served well at the College of Vilna. On January 21, 1585, Bosgrave and twenty-one other prisoners were released and sent into exile. In spite of his impaired health Bosgrave returned to Poland to work and live a long, useful life until 1623.

In conclusion another tribute that Possevino paid to Campion should be noted: Possevino’s most important book, the Bibliotheca Selecta, reprints Campion’s Decem Rationes.

13 Opp. NN. 335 121r-22r. Despite his years as a papal diplomat Possevino was a strongly emotional person. In February, 1585, Marcus Pitačić, S.J. described him to the Jesuit Provincial of the Austrian Province thus: «P. Possevino est homo vehementis ingenii et non possit res aliquas dissimulare, sed mox omnia prodere ut qui os habet in corde et cor in ore ...» Ladislaus Lukács, editor, Mon. Ant. Hung. II 768.

14 Skwarczyński notes Possevino’s role in securing Bosgrave’s release. Possevino described his intervention with King Stephen Bathory in a letter of January 1, 1583, to the Cardinal of Como, Gregory XIII’s cardinal secretary: Monumenta Poloniae Vaticana VII-2, 1-2; also see 172-73. The King's letter to Elizabeth and material on Bosgrave is printed in Henry More, The Elizabethan Jesuits edited by Francis Edwards (London 1981) 168 174-76.

15 Bibliotheca Selecta (Rome 1593) 480-504. There were later editions at Venice in 1603 and Cologne in 1607.
Verum enim vero, quod ad Campi anum, ad Personium atque ad alios eiusdem ordinis quem societatem nomine Jesu vocamus praestantissimos athletas attinet, quae item ad eos spectant, quos tu seminarios nominas, nefanda sunt, quae tu adversus innocentissimum eorum sanguinem patrasti; uti nefaria, quae tui nunc ad tegendum teterrimam immanitatem tuam impie scriptitant.

Et Edmundi quidem Campiani vita sanctissime acta, et legitima nec procurata a se ipso in istam Insulam missio haec cum timore Dei suscepit, perpes autem anteaactae vitae in verbo Dei docendo studium, idque praeorsum octennii postremi spatio, quo Pracaeg urbis celeberrima, tamquam in orbis Christiani theatro, ob Maximiliani et Rodulphi Caesarum praesentiam, summa cum laude, docuit; praeterea pietas ardentissima, qua sive pernoctaret, sive sederet in equo, singulis unius anni diebus, christianam istheum religionem summis periculis in plurimis restituit; ad extremum mirae circumventiones tuorum, quibus illum equiiam iam departum et pene discerpsum, pertrahere tamen in suas partes nequiverunt; et vero falsissima testimonia, quae in ipso judicum tribunali (si pestes illae merentur hoc nomen) manifestissime deprehensa sunt, ac sanguis ipsae, quo innocentiam, avitamque fidem intrepide cum aliis beatissimis suis collegis fudit, clamant adversus te, 0 Jezabel, iamque testata orbi christiano sic veritatem fecerunt, ut quanta magis sceleratas manus ad fundendum altera sanguinem, altera atramentum, vos qui aedificatis Sion in sanguinisibus adhibetis, tanto attollat altius ipsa veritas caput, vestrorumque facinorum memoria latius futura sit sempiterna.

Quod autem Gregorii tertiidcimi partem diplomatis aut declarationis iis concessam tuo isti scripto inservasti, reliquum suppressisti, sic decebat ut omnes inustitiam impleretis; et in hoc etiam fraudes vestras aperiretis. Romam Edmundus Campianus a Praeepito suo Generali evocatus venit, non ut sanctimonialis aliqua e Monasteriis seducta, vel ut excussa reiigionis, initium deinceps secundum Evangelium vestrum praedicationis istheic faceret, sed ut in Anglia sua patria humanis omnibus rebus pridem expeditus, cum certissimo capitis discrimine, animas suorum iuvaret. Nempe plurimi Angli, quibus fidam alii optimi Sacerdotes clanculum operam spiritualem na-

1 Campion's period in Prague did not last eight years. He first arrived there toward the end of August, 1573, but left two months later for a year of novitiate at Brno in Moravia. He was back in Prague from September, 1574, to March 25, 1580.

2 This may be a polite reference to Campion's work as a dramatist. He wrote and produced plays on King Saul and on St. Ambrose and Emperor Theodosius which had command performances for the Imperial household in 1577: SIMPSON 82 83 90. About the Latin-English edition of Ambrosia see AHSI 41 (1972) 322.

3 Alexander Briant and Ralph Sherwin were executed with Campion. Three other priests were executed on May 28, 1582, as were four other priests two days later: Philip HUGHES, The Reformation in England (London 1954) III 314.

4 This is a bitter twist on Mich. 3: 10 in the Vulgate.

5 KINGDON 18.

6 This is a play on the Vulgate of Mt. 3: 15.

7 The choice of Campion for the English mission was made by the Jesuit General Everard Mercurian, probably at the suggestion of William Allen.
Sociae superant, eandem Jesu societatem per aliquot annos litteris, precibus, legationibus invitarant, ut et ipsi ad capturam piscium, quibus eorum implebantur retia, manus admoverent. Societas onus et pericula non detrectabat, quae satis prodiga imprimis patrimonii et dignitatis, deinde et corporum, ac sanguinis, atque (quod caput est) voluntatis quaquaeversus ad extremas Mundi partes, ubi divinae vocationis minimum signum apparat, excurrit; at ne temere illud suscipere videretur, aut ansam tibi et tuis praebet in perniciem infirmorum eos calumniandi, expectabat, si quid maturius effici potuisse, cum interim idem ipsi de eadem Societate Angli praefectos suos urgebatur, ut sese ad istas martyriorum epulas mitterent, ac (quod mundus capere non potest) animas suas pro fratribus exponebant. Ubi apparuit tempus, prima sors cecidit super Edmundum Campianum Civem Londinensem, et Oxoniensi Academiae iam inde a puero cognitum, honestissimis moribus, singulari doctrina, et christiana quaedam eloquentia divinitus praeditum. Is, quod intellekisset Anglos Catholicos plebescue angii, quod cum te sciret neque Reginam esse, et, variis haeresibus et foeditatibus inquinatam, ab Ecclesia Dei proiectam esse, ac tamen vel tecum tanquam cum Regina agenda, vel de te tanquam de Regina loquendum, a Gregorio Tertiodecimo Romano Pontifice petuit, ut pii illi eo scrupulo eximetur, atque si te quoque Reginam appellarent, id non minus illis liceret, quod Davide iam Regem consecrato, liuerat tamen antiquis, Saulem iam a facie Dei proiectum, et per Samuelem ita pronunciatum, regem tamen adhuc vocare. Id Campianus iam salutem suorum dies noctes meditans, ab optimo Pontifice facile obtinuit; ut perspicere posses, nisi mentis aciem amisisses, plus ab Romanis Pontificibus omnipotens salutem sitiri, quam quod ulla tantarum immanitatum vestrorum mole, pietas eorum erga istam Insulam opprimi possit. Tu vero, cum eadem verba vidisti, quasi summum facinus adversus te perpetratum fuisset, incessisti omnibus furiis, et tanquam infernalis Alecto anguineos illos crines explicans, sententiam dirissimi supplicii tulisti adversus sanctos Dei, reliquam autem Pontificii diplomatis partem reticuisti, ex qua omnibus constare poterat, divinae misericordiae thesaurum quem Christus Ecclesiae sui reliquit, per eundem Pontificem Romanum Anglis qualibuscunque (etiam tibi ipsi) proponi, licet haeresi, sacrilegio, et pessimis quibusque rebus impliciti, si ad cor redire voluissent. Et tu tamen mulier adeo es nequam, cum Deus ipse ita sit bonus? Ac Sanctissimos eius Sacerdotes extentae rationi flammibusque addicis, quoniam ut te, coeterosque ex aeternis flammis eripiant, tantum itineris periculique subeant? Et

8 William Allen was the main petitioner. HUGHES III 305.
9 Philip Hughes says of the missions of Campion and Persons, «The Jesuit superiors thought the whole thing out very carefully». Ibid. 306.
10 Campion was a fellow of St. John's College, Oxford, at seventeen.
11 1 Samuel 16 and 22.
12 On the papal response, see POLLEN 293-95. It has been published with an introduction by Mandell CREIGHTON, The Excommunication of Queen Elizabeth. English Historical Review 7 (1892) 81-88. POLLEN (294) points out that Possevino may have been responsible for a covering memorandum to the papal response which argued that since the bull excommunicating Queen Elizabeth was issued for a specific occasion and set of circumstances (the Northern Rising) that no longer obtained, the bull was no longer binding on Catholics. To Pollen's remarks I can add the specific reference to the memorandum (Opp. NN 315 36r-37v), but unfortunately I have found no evidence that would confirm Possevino as author, aside from the fact that the manuscript of the memorandum is found among his other papers relating to his dealings with various popes.
13 Alecto was one of the three furies according to Virgil's Aeneid: «Talius Alecto dictis exar sit in iras ... et geminos erexit crinibus angues» (VII, 445, 450).
prodiores, novus iste Judas Christi proditor et scriptor tuus vocat eos, cui lacrimis et sanguine salutem aeternam Campianus et reliqui procuraverunt? Et Romanum denique Pontificem tamquam Antichristum traducis, quoniam te, ac tuos, ad Christi Ecclesiam summa charitate conatur adducere. Dabis, dabis, impia, sempiternas poenas.

14 Cecil repeatedly called Campion and his companions traitors (Kingdon 78 17 32 35-40) and likens them to Judas (Kingdon 39).

RIASSUNTO

Davanti all’ondata di indignazione che aveva provocato nel continente la barbarra esecuzione, avvenuta ai primi di dicembre del 1581 a Londra, del gesuita Edmondo Campion e di altri sacerdoti cattolici inglesi, il governo della regina Elisabetta dovette difendersi. L’apologia più importante fu The Execution of Justice in England, apparsa anonima nel dicembre 1583 e presto tradotta in varie lingue. Ne era autore lo stesso William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Presto scesero in campo a rispondere due campioni, R. Persons e W. Allen. Forse proprio perché conobbe che le loro risposte erano più efficaci, Possevino non pubblicò quella che anch’egli aveva composta, tra il 1584 e la prima metà dell’85, quando stava ancora nell’Europa centrale. Così, rimasta essa fra le sue carte, non venne finora conosciuta una bella pagina, che vi si conteneva, relativa a S. E. Campion, da Possevino conosciuto personalmente a Praga e a Roma.

Il tono dello scritto concorda bene col ritratto che si faceva dell’autore proprio nel febbraio 1585: «Possevino è di carattere veemente; non può dissimulare nulla, ma deve dir subito tutto, come quegli che ha la bocca nel cuore e il cuore in bocca». Qui tale veemenza si dispiega in tutta la sua foga, servita dallo stile latino ampio e sofisticato e dagli spunti culturali, secondo il solito dell’autore: gli improperi alla regina e ai suoi ministri si sprecano.

Di Campion si tracciano brevemente, ma con efficacia, le spiccate doti naturali, la cultura e la vita virtuosa e zelante. In particolare – e chi scrive doveva ben saperlo – si afferma che fu lui a ottenere da Gregorio XIII che, nonostante la bolla piana di scomunica, i cattolici inglesi potessero continuare a chiamare Elisabetta regina.