

8. August 2026

## THE LIVES OF THE SAINTS

**“Faithful unto death: Blessed John Felton, martyr”**

**(† August 8, 1570)**

Today’s saint—and we are not talking about St. Dominic—takes us to England during a time of great political tension. It is particularly important to note that, under the reign of Henry VIII, a difficult period began for Catholics who wished to remain faithful to their faith.

Henry VIII succeeded his father to the throne in 1509 at the age of seventeen. Initially, his countrymen were enthusiastic because he seemed to be a positive change from his father. However, over the years, his reign became oppressive. A fateful break with the Catholic Church ensued. Henry VIII wanted to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, and have his marriage annulled so that he could marry another woman. She had not given him the male heir he desired. However, he did not receive the Pope’s approval. His passion for this woman—Anne Boleyn—was so great that he went through with the break with Rome. In 1534, Henry and Anne Boleyn were excommunicated by the Pope. That same year, Henry proclaimed himself “Supreme Head of the Church of England on Earth.” This marked the birth of the Anglicans.

For Catholics, it is a sad fact that almost all the bishops in England—with only a few exceptions—followed the king in breaking with Rome.

A reign of terror began, leaving deep suffering in its wake. Catholic England was forced into hiding and faced constant threats. In 1547, the king died without being reconciled with the Church.

In 1558, when Elizabeth I—the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn—assumed the throne and began to push forward the Reformation while interfering with ecclesiastical law, the Pope felt compelled to intervene. When news reached Rome of the bloody massacre that Elizabeth had ordered against the poor, innocent Catholics in northern England, the Pope issued a papal bull on February 25, 1570, pronouncing the Queen’s excommunication and deposition. Despite England’s strict isolation from the Catholic world, the bull still found its way there. On the morning of May 25, 1570,

London residents saw it posted at the bishop's palace gate. After an exhaustive investigation, a copy of the bull was found in the possession of a law student, whose peers had long preserved the old Catholic spirit. Under torture, one of the students confessed that he had received it from Master John Felton.

John Felton, a distinguished nobleman from Southwark in southern London, was a fervent adherent of the faith of his forefathers. He considered it his duty to bring the bull to the attention of his countrymen in accordance with the Pope's will. His subsequent arrest did not unsettle him for a moment. An entire military force had been mobilized against him alone.

The Lord Mayor, the Lord Chief Justice, and the two Sheriffs of London, accompanied by 500 halberdiers, surrounded Felton's house. As soon as he spotted the officers through the window, he went downstairs, opened the door, welcomed them, and informed them that he knew why they had come. Felton immediately and candidly admitted to posting the papal bull on the gate of St. Paul's Cathedral that night, which was already under the jurisdiction of the Anglican bishop.

The trial of Blessed John Felton was straightforward. He had affirmed every single point contained in the papal bull and declared "that Elizabeth is not entitled to the title, honor, and crown of a queen, and that she should not be Queen of England at all." A more explicit confession could not have been expected. However, when asked if he was pleading guilty to high treason, Felton logically replied, "Not guilty," as he no longer recognized Elizabeth—deposed by the Pope—as his queen. Nor could he be compelled—even after repeated torture—to name any accomplices. The sentence left no room for doubt: dragging through the streets, the gallows, the customary barbaric mutilation, and quartering.

On the morning of August 8, the day the sentence was to be carried out, three Anglican preachers came to Felton's prison cell in an attempt to shake his faith through persuasion. But the blessed one resolutely rejected all attempts at conversion—or, as the government report puts it, "with great arrogance." In response to their arguments, he firmly replied that he knew what he had done and held fast to the ancient Catholic faith that the Holy Father, the Pope, had defended for so long. "Whoever accepts another faith or holds to another doctrine should know that it is evil and erroneous."

After the royal proclamation was read, he knelt and prayed the Miserere. Then he climbed the ladder. Upon seeing the gate where he had posted the bull of Pius V—the place of execution was St. Paul’s Churchyard—he said, “Yes, the Pope’s judgment against the so-called queen hung there, and now I am ready to die for the Catholic faith.”

We encounter a Blessed One who resolutely defended the Catholic faith during a time of persecution. We often see this in the martyrs of the past. Faith is more important than life. Truth stands against lies and deception.

What a sad turn of events in England at that time, when a king set himself up as the head of the Church and most of the bishops failed to resist him.

Saints are not merely our role models. They are our perfected brothers and sisters in heaven. So, in a time of growing confusion, let us ask the Blessed One that we may remain faithful to the Catholic faith, even if it costs us our lives.

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**Meditation on the day's Gospel:** <https://en.elijamission.net/acting-in-faith-2/>