

WHO was SAINT OLIVER PLUNKETT?

Oliver Plunkett was born in Loughcrew, County Meath in the midlands of Ireland on November 1, 1625 [384 years ago]. At that time in Irish history, Catholics were being persecuted for their faith. Many were evicted from their homes and forbidden to attend Mass. In all of Ireland there was only one active bishop. Priests were hunted down and persecuted. Many fled to the continent of Europe. In 1647 Oliver Plunkett had to go to Rome to study for the priesthood because there were no Colleges or institutions of learning in Ireland.



In 1647 Oliver went to study for the priesthood under Jesuit guidance in the Irish College in Rome. Oliver was ordained a priest in Rome in 1654. Due to the religious persecution in his native land, it was not possible for him to return to minister to his people. Oliver remained in Rome and taught as a professor of Theology at the Propaganda College. Because the persecution of Catholics was at a high point in Ireland Oliver Plunkett could not be ordained Archbishop in Ireland but was ordained in Ghent by Bishop Eugene D'Allmont on 1st December 1669. He was then the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland.

Archbishop Plunkett returned to Ireland and began a ministry of reform and renewal of clergy and laity for the next eleven years. Archbishop Plunkett soon established himself as a man of peace and, with religious fervour, set about visiting his people, establishing schools, ordaining priests and confirming thousands. During the reforms he made many enemies, not least among the clergy and it was one of the renegade priests whom he had censured who later gave evidence against him at his trial.

In 1673 brought a renewal of religious persecution, and bishops were banned by British government edict. Archbishop Plunkett went into hiding, suffering a great deal from cold and hunger. His many letters showed his determination not to abandon his people, but to remain a faithful shepherd.

The persecution eased a bit and he was once again able to move more openly among his people. In 1679 he was arrested and falsely charged with treason. Oliver was charged with plotting to bring 20 000 French soldiers to Ireland and levying a tax on the poverty-stricken clergy to support 70 000 armed men. Such an absurd charge had no chance of sticking in Ireland. The government in power could not get him convicted at his trial in Dundalk, Ireland, so they brought him to London where he was again tried. He was unable to defend himself because he was not given time to bring his own witnesses from Ireland. Oliver was put on trial and with the help of perjured witnesses, was sentenced to death. The judge, Sir Francis Pemberton, said that the foundation of Oliver Plunkett's treason was setting up a false religion, which was the most dishonourable and derogatory to God of all religions and that a greater crime could not be committed against God than for a man to endeavour to propagate that religion [Catholicism]

With deep serenity of soul, Oliver prepared to die, calmly rebutting the charge of treason, refusing to save himself by giving false evidence against his brother Irish bishops. Oliver Plunkett publicly forgave all those who were responsible for his death. He was executed in London on July 1, 1681. In 1920 he was declared a martyr for the faith and was canonised on 12 October 1975. His feast day is July 11.

[Acknowledgement: Catholic Online. www.catholic.org Independent Catholic news – homily by Bishop Clifford.]