Book 3, Chapter 12

The Heretics Seize Four Young Brothers for Their Faith, and are Left Humiliated

Not only do the English heretics persecute the priests and the other Catholics who by their positions, learning, and influence could defend the Catholic faith and hinder the progress of the false sect of Calvin, together with the married women, widows, and maidens, as we have seen, but they also do not exempt the very children, whose tender years have, even among barbarians, customarily been shielded from all harm. Let us set aside all other examples and speak of a single one, for it is most illustrious and teaches us a great deal about the malice of the heretics and the goodness of the Lord, who triumphs over them even through children of few years.

There were four brothers, called Thomas, Robert, Richard, and John Worthington, the sons of a knight and the nephews of a priest, likewise named Thomas Worthington, their father’s brother. The eldest was sixteen years old, and the youngest had not reached twelve; all four boys were imprisoned in the province of Lancaster by the ministers of the law, who were looking for their uncle’s abode. It was astounding what ruses and tricks the queen’s councilors, false bishops, and ministers used to corrupt and deceive these boys, and the constancy, discretion, and spirit the Lord gave them, so that they did not allow themselves to be hoodwinked, nor to stray from the Catholic faith, nor to say anything that could be prejudicial to the priests and Catholics about whom they were interrogated. After the heretics had first separated them, placing the younger two in one place and the elder two in another, they kept John (the youngest of all) without food for an entire day, threatening to starve him to death and forcing him to drink a great deal of wine, so that, his head being addled and unsettled with drunkenness, he would answer the commissioners’ questions without judgment. But the Lord deigned to preserve the boy’s wit, and so when they interrogated him, he replied that though they had made him drink all that, hoping he would lose his discretion, he was himself, even if his

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1 Ribadeneyra adapts this account of the brothers Worthington from the Latin version included in the third part of the Concertatio under the title “Certamen quatuor nobilium puerorum Vvorthingtoniorum” (“The struggle of the four noble Worthington boys”). See Concertatio, n.p.

Cf. the briefer account in a letter from Robert Persons to Ribadeneyra: Persons, Letters and Memorials, 239.
stomach was so troubled that he could barely answer them, or even utter a single word. And so he escaped their clutches. After this, they brought out the eldest of the brothers, whose name was Thomas: the earl of Derby\(^2\) offered him copious gifts and made him extravagant promises, swearing to take him into his household, and exalt and nurture him there, if only he would go to one of their churches or hear some sermon by the heretical ministers, but the Catholic boy could not be moved, repeating always that he prized being Catholic above all the favors and kindesses the earl could do him. And when they pressed him to answer to their questions—where had he heard Mass, where was his uncle the priest, and other similar matters—under oath, he answered that he could not obey them, nor swear at all, because he did not even know what oath this was, nor in what cases he might swear, nor how he ought to swear according to the law of God. And until he knew this, he refused to burden his conscience. The same thing happened in the interrogation of the two other brothers, whom they likewise sought to entrap with various questions, without being able to get a word out of them that could prejudice or harm a single Catholic. And so as not to be tedious by recounting in detail everything that occurred in the four months the boys were held captive (though they were not always together, or in the same place), I will say only that repeated interrogations, conducted by various powerful lords, prominent royal officials, false bishops, preachers, lawyers, and other judicial officers, as well as the use of every one of the heretics’ usual tricks and ruses for corrupting—gifts, promises, threats, beatings, good treatment and bad—they could never weaken or corrupt them, nor move them an inch from their constancy and faith.

Indeed, having forcibly dragged them to the school of a Calvinist master, to the end that there, in the wicked company of the other boys and under the instruction of the misbelieving teacher, they might docilely drink the poison of heresy, they utterly refused to read a single book, or listen to what they said about religion, insisting that they were well-enough instructed in what they ought to believe, and that they had no need of new doctrines or a new master. They were so favored by the Lord, who desires to be praised from the mouths of children,\(^3\) that their example and excellent words sparked in many of the other schoolchildren a desire to become Catholics and to imitate them. And they uttered such sound, thoughtful arguments about the elements of our sacred faith in question that a heretical preacher who had come to sow the cockle of his false creed in the children’s hearts\(^4\) knew not how to respond to what God taught them to say.

\(^2\) Henry Stanley, fourth earl of Derby.
\(^3\) Ps. 8:3; Matt. 21:16.
\(^4\) Matt. 13:25.