

## A PRAYER OF THE PENAL TIMES

**A**LMIGHTY GOD, Father of all mercies, and God of all comfort, have mercy on us the afflicted members of thy Catholic Church. Forgive us our sins; give us time to do penance, grace to resist sin, and peace to serve thee in holiness. Comfort us that be prisoners; deliver us that be strangers in dispersion; succour all that be afflicted for confessing thy holy Name. Make us worthy to suffer; give us strength to bear, and constancy to confess. Let no fear nor force remove us from thy unity. Let no craftiness of the Devil deceive us, nor device of men overcome us. Discern, O Lord, thy cause, humble thine enemies, recomfort thy friends, that they may give thanks unto thee, and glorify thy Name in thy holy Church. Grant this, O Lord, for Christ's sake our Lord, that suffered bitter death to make his Church glorious.

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We do not know the author of these words, yet they must have been familiar enough to the persecuted Catholics of Elizabeth's day; for they have been found, written in contemporary hands, on the flyleaves of two books of that period, both in the same collection, but probably reaching it from different sources. One is a Sarum Primer dated 1555 (a general prayer-book for the laity). The other is one of the few extant copies of Edmund Campion's *Rationes Decem* secretly printed at Stonor Park in 1581. The flyleaf of the *Rationes Decem* is partly torn away, mutilating the prayer; the copy in the Primer is complete, but roughly written and spelt, looking rather as though it had been scribbled down from dictation or memory, for there are slight verbal differences (none of which is an improvement). The two versions are here combined to give the best reading; only the spelling and punctuation have been modernised.

This prayer, with its fine, direct vigour of expression and magnificent rhythm, is the work of some unknown genius in the use of English. Who can he have been? I do not think it is Campion's. He could reach heights of his own—read his *Brag!*—but every writer has his typical 'sentence' and Campion's is not that of the prayer. Light on its authorship would be welcome.

In any case, this prayer is more than literature, more than history; surely it is a prayer for today.

O.L.