

## ST. MARGARET OF SCOTLAND

Judith M. Casazza

*The "strong woman" who helped to sanctify a people.*

DOMINATING THE "skyline" of the city of Edinburgh is the imposing outline of Edinburgh Castle, a low, brooding, somber cluster of dark stone walls and buildings. Firmly implanted upon the massive mountain of black basalt, aptly named Castle Rock, Edinburgh Castle has stood watch over the city for centuries. In the center of the castle stands the oldest building in Edinburgh, a plain stone chapel built in the eleventh century by Queen Margaret of Scotland. It is this unassuming little chapel that stands as a mute reminder of a Scottish history that reaches beyond the misty legends of such as Mary Stuart and Robert Bruce when Scotland was Catholic.

Daughter of Edward the Exile, heir to the English throne, Margaret was born on the continent about the year 1046. In 1054 she first came to England with her family at the invitation of King Edward the Confessor. Edward died in 1066 and Margaret's brother Edgar was a likely candidate for the English throne. However, young Edgar was unable to muster the support he would need to claim the throne. Ultimately, William the Norman (i.e., Conqueror) secured the throne by defeating the Saxon forces at the Battle of Hastings. Edgar, fearing for his safety, fled from England with his mother and sister.

Shipwrecked on the coast of Scot-

land, they found refuge in the court of King Malcolm III (Malcolm Canmore, or *Caenn Mor* — "great chief"). Despite demands and threats from William to return the refugees, Malcolm continued to provide every hospitality. Having himself been an exile, Malcolm proved a sympathetic ally. For his father, King Duncan VII, fell in battle through the treachery of Macbeth, and young Malcolm had been forced to flee Scotland. Eventually he returned and was crowned king at Scone in 1057.

### An Exemplary Wife

Malcolm's friendship was well rewarded as Margaret accepted his offer of marriage. They were wed in 1070 at Dunfermline Castle, and, on that same day, Margaret was crowned Queen of Scotland. Beautiful, devout, intelligent, "...she had learned from the cradle to condemn the vanities of the world, and to regard its pleasures as poison to the heart and the bane of virtue."

It was her example and influence that turned a good king into a virtuous one. "She softened his temper, cultivated his mind, polished his manners, and inspired him with the most perfect maxims and sentiments of all Christian virtues."

Mother of eight, Queen Margaret was solicitous of her children's spiritual well-being. Reminiscent of Queen

Blanche of France, she instilled in her children a love of God and a dread of sin.

### Improving Her Subjects

With the keen insight of an outsider who had been exposed to the orderly and polished court life of England, Margaret was sorely aware of the shortcomings and rudeness of the Scottish court. However, under her wary eye, "virtue was the only recommendation to the royal favor." This policy rapidly improved the quality of court life and soon had repercussions in the life of the common man.

Having already merited the love and respect of the people by the salubrious influence she wielded at court, Queen Margaret could easily have held herself aloof from the people without forfeiting their love and esteem.

However, Margaret's charity was lavished on her subjects. Not content merely to distribute alms, she would visit the sick, serve them meals, comfort the afflicted, release debtors, and see to their spiritual needs. Her zeal led her to see to the proper training of priests to serve her people better, and to the elimination of a multitude of corruptions and superstitions with the aid of these newly trained priests.

### Austerity

Amid all her worldly cares she did not neglect her own spiritual life. Hers was an austere life. Sleeping little, she often rose at midnight and dawn to pray, and during the seasons of Advent and Lent, she would maintain a rigorous fast and redouble her prayers. Rising early she would often hear four or five Masses a day. Theodoric, her biographer and confessor, records that she sought perfection and would enjoin him to call to her attention to any imperfection he might observe in her.

In 1093 Queen Margaret was

stricken with a painful disease. Though in constant discomfort, she exhibited incredible patience and would remain for hours in constant prayer. The last great trial visited upon her in her illness was the death of her husband.

### Her Death Hastened

England and Scotland were once more at war and Malcolm, anxious for peace, was amenable to English overtures. Therefore, he agreed to parley with the English leaders. Like his father before him, he was met with treachery as a spear was thrust through the eye of the unsuspecting king.

Margaret would linger but four days after this, ever in pain, ever in prayer. To Theodoric she confided her last desire: "...so long as you live, you remember my poor soul in your Masses and prayers...assist my children and teach them to fear and love God."

On November 16, 1093, at the age of forty-seven, Queen Margaret of Scotland died. She was interred beside her husband at Dunfermline where twenty-three years earlier they were wed.

In 1251 Margaret was canonized by Pope Innocent IV, and Pope Innocent XII moved her feast to June 10th in 1693.

Shortly after her death, the plain stone chapel she had had built within the precincts of Edinburgh Castle was named for her and remains so named to this day.

Although much of the devotion to St. Margaret disappeared in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, her memory is still honored and some few still pray:

*O God, Thou who didst imbue blessed Queen Margaret with a spirit of singular charity towards the poor, grant that, by her intercession and example, Thy love may eventually grow in our hearts. Amen.*