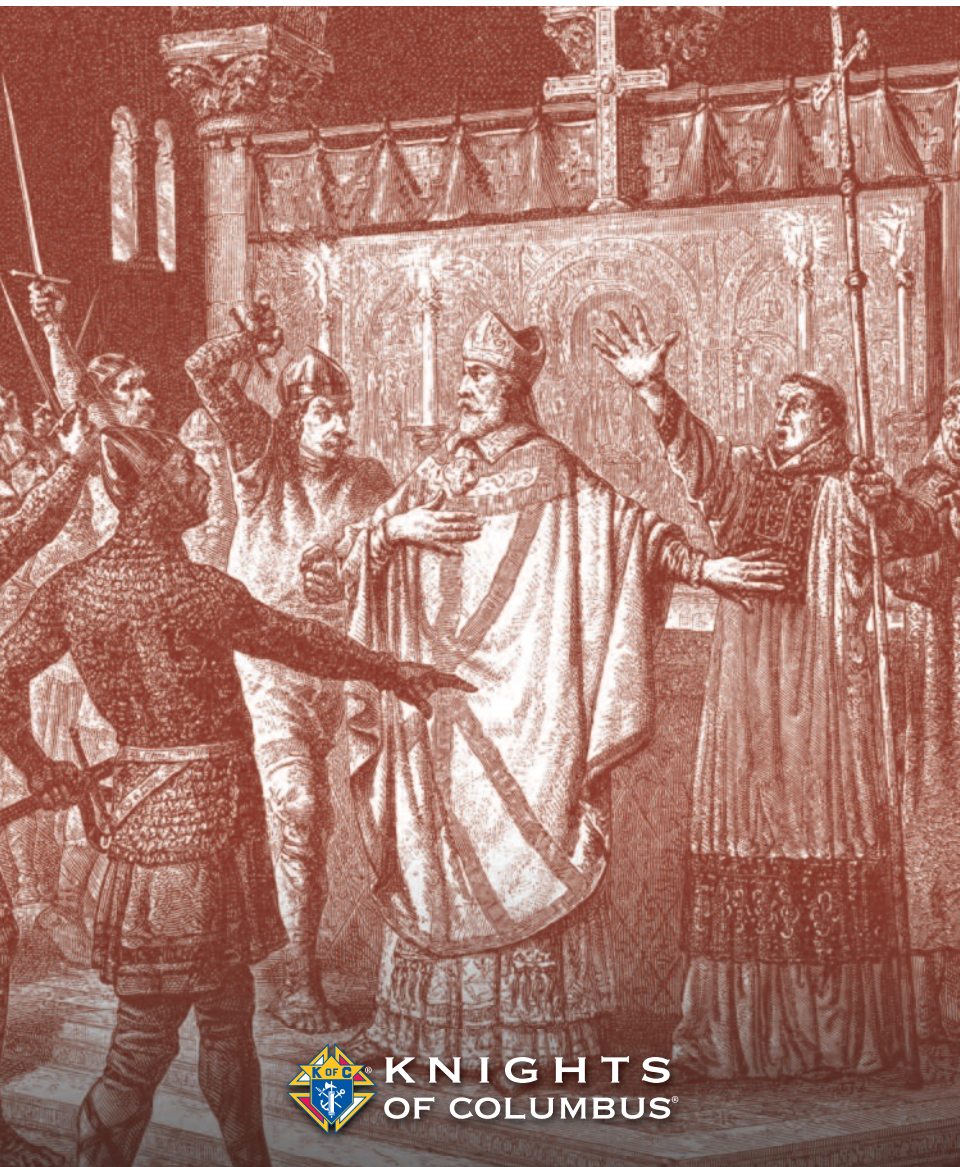


# BECKET

Study Guide



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## ❖ Introduction ❖

The road to Canterbury is well worn with the tracks of pilgrims looking to venerate the martyr Thomas Becket.

Thomas Becket was many things throughout his life—he was licentious, he was cunning, he was prideful, and, when he was young, he was a brilliant student and graduate of the University of Paris. His excellence with civil and canon law caught the eye of Theobald, the Archbishop of Canterbury, a title which Becket would one day inherit.

Becket's work under Theobald garnered him the favor of King Henry II, who made him first a member of the royal household and eventually chancellor of England, one of the highest ranking offices in the realm. While chancellor, Becket grew quite close to the king.

When the archbishop of Canterbury, preeminent bishop of England, died, King Henry II believed he could expand his power over the church by having his friend Becket ordained the next archbishop. Little did the king expect Thomas to take his duties as archbishop and obligations to God as superior to his allegiance to the crown.

The film *Becket* follows the friendship and the conflict between the English king and the future saint. Based on a French play, *Becket ou l'honneur de Dieu* (*Becket or the Honor of God*), the film bears all the same historical inaccuracies of that original stage production. Unlike the play and film, the real Thomas Becket was a Norman, not a Saxon. Furthermore, King Henry II was actually quite fond of his children. Most notably, the initial cause of strife between Becket and King Henry II in the film—the killing of a priest by Lord Gilbert and his subsequent excommunication by Thomas Becket—is an unhistorical embellishment. It does, however, demonstrate the root of the deeper conflict between the Church and the crown at that time. King Henry II *did* attempt to take upon himself the powers and duties of the Church, and Thomas Becket *did* excommunicate those who attempted to assist the king in his usurpation.

While the film does stray from the historical record, it accurately depicts the virtues and conviction of Saint Thomas Becket which drew such widespread devotion after his death. Though he was throughout his life a flawed man, in the end he died the death of a martyr, willing to place his duty to God above his duty to man.

*“Remember the sufferings of Christ, the storms that were weathered...  
the crown that came from those sufferings which gave new radiance to the faith...  
All saints give testimony to the truth that without real effort, no one ever wins the crown.”*

— Thomas Becket



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## ❖ Memorable Quotes ❖

**King Henry II:** Are you mad? You're Chancellor of England; you're mine!

**Thomas Becket:** I am also the Archbishop, and you have introduced me to deeper obligations.

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**Thomas Becket:** O Lord, how heavy thy honor is to bear.

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**King Henry II:** You give the lions of England back to me like a boy who doesn't want to play anymore. I would have gone to war with all England's might behind me, and even against England's interests, to defend you, Thomas.

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**Thomas Becket:** If I do not strike it now, the church as we know it will not survive a generation.

**Bishop Folliot:** God will see that it survives.

**Thomas Becket:** No, the Kingdom of God must be defended like any other kingdom.

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**Thomas Becket:** The King for good or ill, chose to pass the burden of the Church onto me, and now I must carry it. I have rolled up my sleeves and taken the church on my back. Nothing will ever make me set it down again.

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**Brother Philip:** Your grace, there are armed men at the doors. I bolted the doors, but...

**Thomas Becket:** It's time for vespers. Does one bolt the door during vespers? I've never heard of it.

**Brother Philip:** But, your grace...

**Thomas Becket:** Open them. Everything must be as it should be for divine service.

## ❖ Thoughts for Discussion ❖

1. The first half of *Becket* depicts the original friendship between King Henry II and Thomas Becket, demonstrating that the two men were originally incredibly close.

Was the relationship between Henry and Thomas a healthy one? How did their roles as king and chancellor play into that dynamic?

2. Early in the film, King Henry attempts to take the Welsh princess and Becket's love, Gwendolen, as a concubine. At Becket's tomb, Henry asks whether it was this action that Becket could never forgive.

Do you think that Henry was right, that this action on the part of the king is what caused Becket to oppose him? How does this incident help us to understand both King Henry and Thomas Becket better?

3. After Becket is named archbishop, he begins to give away his riches to the poor. After doing so, he approaches a crucifix and prays, "Dear Lord, I wish there was something I really regretted parting with so that I might offer it to you. But forgive me Lord, it's like going on a holiday. I've never enjoyed myself so much in my whole life."

What about these acts of charity do you think Becket found so enjoyable? What do you find enjoyable about charity? What might you 'really regret parting with'? How might you offer it to God?

4. **Though an unhistorical addition, the killing of a priest by Lord Gilbert highlights the tense relationship between canon and civil law during the time of Thomas Becket.**

Was Becket's response to Lord Gilbert just? Are his actions still admirable from the perspective of our different society today? How should we understand actions of saints which, though appropriate in their own time, appear problematic today?

5. **While speaking with an exiled Becket, King Louis of France says, "I am responsible only for France's interest, Becket. Unfortunately, I cannot afford to shoulder those of heaven as well."**

Is this perception of the duties of a civil leader correct? Or do heads of state have a responsibility both to the interests of the state and of heaven? Does that responsibility differ for different types of states?

6. **When Becket takes his case to the pope, he is told, "You are new to God's service and perhaps for that reason you were somewhat hot headed and intemperate in your methods."**

Was Becket hot headed and intemperate? If so, was this caused by his lack of experience or some other reason? If not, why did he act this way?

7. **Becket spends his exile in a monastery, where we see him live the simple and working life of a monk. In response to this lifestyle, Becket says, "Is it too easy a way? Perhaps even a luxury? The path to holiness in this monastery is too effortless."**

What does this scene tell us about Becket's vocation? How can a monastic vocation be seen as "too effortless" or even a "luxury"? How might understanding Becket's response to monastic life help us with our own vocational discernment?

8. **Throughout the film, Becket is depicted in moments of both public and private prayer.**

What is the role of prayer in Becket's life? What does he pray for? How is our own prayer life similar and different? How might it be improved?

9. **G.K. Chesterton wrote, "Becket wore a hair shirt under his gold and crimson, and there is much to be said for the combination; for Becket got the benefit of the hair shirt while the people in the street got the benefit of the crimson and gold. It is at least better than the manner of the modern millionaire, who has the black and the drab outwardly for others, and the gold next his heart."**

What benefit comes from the hair shirt, and what benefit comes from the crimson and gold? How might we change our lifestyles to achieve these two benefits?

10. **Chesterton also writes, "Our world ... cannot understand St. Thomas, any more than St. Francis, without accepting very simply a flaming and even fantastic charity, by which the great archbishop undoubtedly stands for the victims of this world, where the wheel of fortune grinds the faces of the poor."**

What actions of Becket's can be understood as standing for "the victims of this world"? How might his life help us to better understand the meaning of charity and all that it encompasses?