



March 21

Commemoration: Thomas Cranmer, Bishop of Canterbury, martyr, 1556

Thomas Cranmer (2 July 1489 – 21 March 1556) was a leader of the English Reformation and Archbishop of Canterbury during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and, for a short time, Mary I. He helped build a favorable case for Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon which resulted in the separation of the English Church from union with the Holy See. Along with Thomas Cromwell, he supported the principle of Royal Supremacy, in which the king was considered sovereign over the Church within his realm.

During Cranmer's tenure as Archbishop of Canterbury, he was responsible for establishing the first doctrinal and liturgical structures of the reformed Church of England. Under Henry's rule, Cranmer did not make many radical changes in the Church, due to power struggles between religious conservatives and reformers. However, he succeeded in publishing the first officially authorized vernacular service, the Exhortation and Litany.

When Edward came to the throne, Cranmer was able to promote major reforms. He wrote and compiled the first two editions of the *Book of*

Common Prayer, a complete liturgy for the English Church. With the assistance of several Continental reformers to whom he gave refuge, he developed new doctrinal standards in areas such as the Eucharist, clerical celibacy, the role of images in places of worship, and the veneration of saints. Cranmer promulgated the new doctrines through the Prayer Book, the *Homilies* and other publications.

Cranmer was tried for treason and heresy after Mary I, a Roman Catholic, came to the throne. Imprisoned for over two years and under pressure from Church authorities, he made several recantations and apparently reconciled himself with the Roman Catholic Church. However, on the day of his execution, he dramatically withdrew his recantations, to die a heretic to Roman Catholics and a martyr to others. His legacy lives on within the Church of England through the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, an Anglican statement of faith derived from his work.

Painting: *Thomas Cranmer* by Gerlach Flicke, 1545
National Portrait Gallery, London