Robert Southwell was born in 1561 in England, the third son to Richard and Bridget Southwell. This was the era just after King Henry VIII changed England’s religion to his new Church of England. Catholicism was being suppressed.

Robert’s grandfather served under King Henry VIII. Though he didn’t renounce his Catholic faith, he helped send away Catholic priests and monks and closed down monasteries. St. Robert’s mother was a pious Catholic but his father wavered between wanting to practice his Catholic faith and wanting to please the king. When he was 15, his parents agreed to send him to France for Catholic education.

At age 16, Robert tried to join the Jesuits. He was turned down, so walked on foot to Rome to plead his case. He was accepted, studied several years and was ordained in 1584. He requested to return to England as a missionary, winning souls back to the true Faith. It was extremely dangerous since Queen Elizabeth now ruled and had just decreed that any priest remaining in England longer than 40 days was to be executed. St. Robert knew the danger, went from house to house reconciling sinners, administering the Blessed Sacrament and celebrating Mass. He had to travel under the cover of darkness, sometimes hiding beneath floorboards so he would not be arrested for preaching Catholicism. Some of the people he ministered to had family members imprisoned in the infamous Tower of London for practicing Catholicism. His Christmas Poem “The Burning Babe” remains a powerful poem of the Infant Savior’s love. St. Robert’s writings are so renowned that it is said that Shakespeare is certain to have read and imitated St. Robert’s poetry.

After 6 years of ministering in secret, St. Robert was arrested by Richard Topcliffe, said to be the meanest officer at the service of the Queen. He imprisoned Robert in his own home. St. Robert was gentle, quiet, and handsome. Topcliffe believed it would be easy to break him. He tortured him repeatedly trying to get names of other Catholic priests. Each time, St. Robert would say that he was a Jesuit priest who came to England to preach Catholicism and was prepared to die for the cause. He was transferred to a prison. His father was horrified at his condition and asked the Queen for better treatment for Robert. Robert was transferred to the Tower and was no longer allowed visitors but his father was allowed to send him comfort items. After 6 years of imprisonment under harsh conditions, St. Robert appealed to the court to either execute him or release him. The next day he was sent to trial, found guilty of treason and sentenced to hanging. He said he could not have received more joyful news. The next day, he was hanged, reciting Psalm 31:6/Lk 23:46 “into your hands I commend my spirit.”

“My faultless breast is the furnace, the fuel is wounding thorns; Love is the fire and smoke the sighs, ashes shame and scorn; lay on the fuel of Justice while Mercy blows the coals; The metal in this furnace wrought are men’s defiled souls.” from “The Burning Babe”~ St. Robert Southwell