

Saint Thomas More Today

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This notable pamphlet marking the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Saint Thomas More is highly recommended. It should be read by everyone concerned about today's unhappy world and its restless people. It is not a biography but rather an examination of the "inner man" of this great English layman, jurist, wit and saint. All can find light and encouragement from reading it reflectively.

PREFACE

Thomas More was a Christian layman who was immersed in secular reality. He was a contemplative in a world of activity. He was not afraid to die, because he was not afraid to live.

Like us all, More was not perfect, but this is not an attempt to evaluate his sanctity critically. Rather we shall focus on the positive facets of his spiritual life that can be imitated by any of us, with the grace of God.

Like us all, More had a vocation to serve God. This is something which varies from person to person, proportional to our talents and adequate for the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Like most of us, More's vocation was to serve God by serving his neighbour for the sake of God by doing well his ordinary tasks in secular society. Again this is not an attempt to analyse More's secular achievements: this has been done more than adequately in the collection of 47 articles on More and edited by Sylvester and Marc'hadour for the quincentenary of More's birth. [See Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More (Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1977).]

To appreciate the link between the sanctity and the secularity of More it is necessary to accept that baptism and the call to sanctity are inseparable for the Christian. More is an example that the circumstances of our daily lives are the raw material of this sanctity: the work which fills one's day, the problems of family life, the time with our friends. It is so tempting to feel that we could live a better life if only our job were more interesting or not so hectic or if our children were quieter or older or if so many circumstances were different; or to decide that we shall do something about why we exist next week or next year but not now, not when we have these problems. More shows us that it is with these problems, among these people that we have to fulfil our eternal destiny, to sanctify ourselves. "If only..." was not the motto of Thomas More, Sir or Saint.

Secularity does not necessarily mean secular humanism or materialism or even worldliness. Sanctity certainly does not mean sanctimoniousness or self-righteousness.

THOMAS MORE TODAY

The 500th Anniversary of More's Birth

Five hundred years have passed since the birth of St Thomas More - 6th February, 1478.

Five hundred years sounds a long time, and indeed a lot has happened in that time: man has ventured into space and developed ways of killing more people in a shorter space of time. There have of course been the accomplishments of art and science, medicine and technology. Yet for every advance there has been an abuse: doctors can save more lives after birth but society allows them to kill children before birth. We have more time-saving devices, but no more time for each other. Many people value a second car more than a second child. In what ways have we advanced since More's time? We are closer to the milieu of More's world than half a millennium might suggest.

Whether one sees right or wrong in one side or the other during the period which led to the Protestant Revolt, there is almost universal agreement that More was a singularly unsullied personality of that era. He has been called "the person of the greatest virtue this kingdom ever produced". Even contemporary historians who are biased against More's beliefs still see in him things that can be admired by everybody.

Not that everyone has always seen More in this light. His memory was distorted until this century by religious (or perhaps un-religious) arguments about the "Reformation". His contemporaries were baffled by his obstinacy and by his blindness to the prevailing wisdom. His death was regarded, even by his family, as a suicidal rejection of the best things of this life.

Yet, in death, as in life, he has set an example to civilized men and women of succeeding centuries. He is very much "A Man for All Seasons", as the title of Robert Bolt's play suggest. His life and death show us that the seeds we sow in our daily lives might not ripen in our own time, but that does not matter if it is our Master's work that we are doing. The harvest will be gathered when the Master chooses.

A Man for Our Times

More is very much a man for our times. If the post-Vatican II age is the era of the Catholic laity, then in More we have an example of a man of the world who was not worldly. If our confused times, like the period when More lived demand an unequivocal choice of whom we shall serve, then More's life reminds us that the choice of masters is simple but not easy.

Thomas More was a man of many talents and considerable achievements, a "Knight, scholar, writer, statesman, Lord Chancellor of England", in the words on the memorial to him in the Chapel of St Peter-in-Chains in the Tower of London. He was also a devoted family man and a good friend to his friends. Above all though, he was a saint, canonized by Pope Pius XI in 1935, the 400th anniversary of More's execution.

The parallels between More's day and our own are even more striking than we have time to pursue in depth. We shall allude to some as we go, but others include "with-it" theologians, the proliferation of unorthodox doctrine, tables instead of altars for the Mass, priests who shun clerical garb to look less like priests, and a general contempt for the safeguards against the world, the flesh and the devil.

A Saint Because He Served

This is not a biography of More. Plenty of other authors have done that and done it well, both at scholarly and popular level.

Rather, the attempt here is to comment on the salient features of More's interior life, in so far as they are the source of his sanctity, and in so far as they are pertinent to the problems of our times.

This is important because we can be misled by the external actions of the saints if we overlook their internal basis. This is important today because contemporary society often sees Our Lord and his servants as social workers only. This is a caricature of true sanctity.

Not to serve society, wherever our vocation places us, is wrong because we cannot serve God unless we serve society in some way, be it in the office, the factory, the home, the monastery, and so on. Our Lord told us to love God and to love our neighbour for the sake of God. Our first duty is to serve God. That is why we were created. That is why Sir Thomas More is St Thomas More. Sins against society are sins because they offend God.

This confusion, which often reduces the saints to cardboard cut-outs, often arises from a failure to distinguish means and ends. Means rather than ends dominate discussion in the contemporary world, whereas the end is the only thing which justifies the means (which is not to say that the end justifies any means).

Means, rather than ends, preoccupied Tudor times too. Given the need, after the Wars of the Roses, to sustain the Tudor claim to the throne, peace in the realm was obviously important. But peace is meaningless unless people are free to serve God. In our times we have tended to regard peace as the absence of war, but in a just peace a man's higher duties are protected.

Thus a man like More who was able to put things in perspective was thought to be foolish, almost frivolous. Edward Hall, the Tudor lawyer and politician, wrote of More in his Chronicle: "I cannot tell whether I should call him a foolish wise man, or a wise foolish man". Indeed, More's comment to his escort as he climbed the scaffold might be deemed frivolous if we did not know the source of his serenity: "I pray, Master Lieutenant, see me safe up, and for coming down let me shift for myself"

Prayer, penance, humour

St. Thomas More was the second child of a London judge and a City merchant's daughter, born on 6th February 1478 (though there is some argument about the precise date). He first went to school at St. Anthony's, Threadneedle Street, a London grammar school, and from there to the household of Cardinal Morton who was then Lord Chancellor of England. In this capacity Morton was the main adviser of King Henry VII who had been the victor in the Wars of the Roses. Thus Morton's support of the Lancastrian cause in that bitter civil war influenced More's view of Richard III whom More vilified later in a fragmentary biography which was to colour Shakespeare's and posterity's attitude to that monarch.

With Morton's recommendation, More went up to Oxford in 1492. There he joined Canterbury Hall (now part of Christ Church College). He also spent some time at Oriel College as did Cardinal Newman a few centuries later. There is a statue and relic of St Thomas in the Catholic chapel of Oxford University.

Yet More was very much a Londoner. He was recalled there by his father to study for the law at Lincoln's Inn. Nevertheless, his love of Latin which he acquired at school and his appreciation of Greek which he learnt at Oxford from Grocyn and Linacre were never to leave him.

It was at the Charterhouse in London that More made what we would call retreats and periods of recollection while he considered his vocation in life. His decision to be a layman was a positive choice of what he believed to be the Will of God, a choice made after prayer and with a spirit of penance. With the consent of his confessor he wore a hair shirt, until the last week of his life, but

never a long face. Voluntary mortification and prayer were fundamental to the spirituality of Thomas.

More kept a bright and cheerful, if somewhat noisy, home in Chelsea in London. There was a certain amount of austerity, but the place was not like a religious museum. The family prayed together often with the psalms, and they read spiritual books together usually a passage from scripture and a commentary. The family prayers were held morning and evening. More continued to serve at Mass in his parish church even when high in the King's service, to the consternation of his 'man of the world' friend, the Duke of Norfolk.

More's spirit of poverty did not mean that he did not live in any way according to his rank. Rather it meant that he was indifferent to material possessions as such, and so he was ready to sacrifice all when the occasion demanded. Like others of his status he had a household jester, Henry Patenson, though with More's own ready wit and deep sense of humour he could supply enough jokes of his own.

The happiness of the household and the genuine culture of More attracted many Renaissance scholars and artists such as Erasmus and Holbein, almost to the exasperation of More's practical second wife, Dame Alice.

More had married Jane Colt in 1505 and they had four children in five years when Jane died soon after giving birth to John. The other children were Elizabeth, Cecily and Margaret, the eldest and More's "dearest Meg".

More then married a widow, Alice Middleton. Her down-to-earth approach to domestic life gave More the support he needed as he worked harder and harder in his numerous legal and public activities. More was a man who lived heroic sanctity in the midst of, and because of (not despite) a commitment to his work, his family and his friends.

Nevertheless, any attempts to analyse More which overlook the foundations of prayer and penance in his life will be mere superficial description. He was a man of action, but action came very much in the third place. Though action can be distinguished from prayer and penance, the three cannot be really separated in the life of a person who takes the baptismal promises seriously (which is what sanctity means). More's exterior activity was the overflow of an interior life which was supported by the twin pillars of prayer and penance.

Utopia

Utopia has come into our language to mean something unattainable: it is somewhat ironic that it should come from the pen of an eminently practical man. Perhaps it was because of his teasing temperament which we see in his dealings with Meg and Norfolk especially. Probably it is because saints are not sad and can see the ironies of this present life.

Certainly More was not sad. "His kind and friendly cheerfulness, with a little air of raillery, shone from his face," wrote Erasmus. Even his son-in-law, William Roper, could testify to his good humour: "in 16 years and more, being in his house conversant with him, I could never perceive as much as once in a fume". Roper's testimony is particularly telling as we listen to these words of More to his daughter, Meg Roper: "I have borne a long time with your husband; I have reasoned and argued with him in those points of religion, and still given to him my poor fatherly counsel; but I perceive none of this able to call him home; and, therefore, Meg, I will no longer argue nor dispute with him, but will clean given him over, and get me another while to God and pray for him" (T. E.

Bridgett, Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More). More's prayers did turn out more fruitful than his arguments, because Roper did eventually repent.

This serenity found expression in his writings which always had a purpose and which were a full measure of the European heritage of human dignity. His "Utopia", conceived in Antwerp, and published in 1516, is a marvellous fantasy which puts privilege in perspective. It is an eloquent defence of the poor in whom we see Christ. It was written by a mature lawyer and diplomat, familiar with the courts of men but who sought first the kingdom of God, whose kingdom is not of this world, but whose kingdom we find on this earth in genuine help for the needy. Although based on reason, parts of Utopia were undoubtedly written with tongue-in-cheek wit. It was written by a man who, while he did not adopt a holier-than-thou attitude to the customary garb and style of his state in life, was at the same time unattached to worldly possessions. Utopia came from a man who gave to the poor and mortified himself, but who did not thereby force mortifications or gloom on those who were near and dear to him.

Of Utopia, the island which is nowhere, but keeps fresh the hearts of men, we are reminded by Chesterton's remarks in his Orthodoxy: "I could never conceive or tolerate any Utopia which did not leave to me the liberty for which I chiefly care, the liberty to bind myself".

Freedom, conscience and authority

More's was not just a life of honour, nor is his influence upon affairs his chief claim on history. It is his defence of true liberty, of freedom of conscience, of the source of earthly authority, that has caused controversy to surround him for five hundred years.

To many he is pig-headed rather than high-principled, just as to many it is his raw courage rather than the reason for that courage that is admirable. More in the Tower of London awaiting execution is the same More who learnt the meaning of mortification from the Carthusians as a youth, who was a man of prayer and learning, whose house was a bright and cheerful home, who rose to the highest honours in the land, and who defended the faith.

This is the message of More: because he handled the humdrum events of everyday life in a saintly, but not sanctimonious way, Our Lord was able to use him when the time came as a light for his contemporaries and for us.

Henry VIII, debased by lust and vanity, has been the loser in the court of history. It is not the senseless act of the monarch that we remember so much as the manner of life of his good servant More.

Henry VIII

Henry, an immensely talented man, and in his youth a practical vindication of the Tudor claim to the throne, shared with More a love of the Holy Mass. Like More, Henry VIII wrote much in defence of the true faith against the Lutheran heretics. It is somewhat ironic that Henry, who in 1521 wrote a spirited defence of papal authority, the Assertion of the Seven Sacraments, and who was given the papal title "Defender of the Faith", a title retained by English monarchs over the centuries, was later to repulse that same authority. In so doing he destroyed any divine basis for authority within his own realm, a fact to which succeeding monarchs and his own heresy can assent.

Apologists for Henry are apt to quote the vacillations of Pope Clement VII and the latter's confinement by the Emperor Charles V as excuses for taking the initiative in the divorce issue, but Henry did undermine the basis of authority.

Professor James Hitchcock, in an address to the John XXIII Fellowship in Australia, points out that in More's time Henry VIII "had no real doctrinal quarrels with the Catholic Church, but who disliked intensely the fact that the Pope claimed to have some authority over him as king, and who solved the problem very neatly by proclaiming himself to be the head of the Church in England" (Need We Be Confused? The Laity and the Future).

Authority is not a popular concept amongst some who have had exposure to a lot of formal education, yet More who was genuinely well educated would not at first read heretical books. In 1528 Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall dispensed More so that he could read them and refute them. This true docility exemplifies More's prudence, and his awareness of the dangers of unbridled curiosity shows his temperance: two virtues to which we shall return later.

Nevertheless, Henry could not but admire More's talents and quite correctly wanted his kingdom to benefit from them. Henry appointed More as chancellor in 1529 in succession to Cardinal Wolsey. As a King's counsellor More had previously told the King that he regarded the marriage between Henry and Catherine of Aragon as valid, and so More's appointment was on the understanding that he would not be required to play any part in "the King's Great Matter". The sacredness of the oath in marriage and the oath in court was similar for More, because the presence of God was something real for him. Despite their professed Christianity many of his contemporaries could see nothing more than verbal formularies in such promises.

Because of his stand on the divorce issue as a matter of conscience, More is sometimes cited as though he were a modern liberal in the fight for freedom of conscience. Nothing could be further from reality. More used the word "conscience" a lot, but he did not mean by it that an individual had a right to follow his own guidance, because that was Protestantism. By conscience More meant the duty to acknowledge the truth, as revealed through the scriptures and the magisterium of the Church. It is in this that the dispute developed between More and Thomas Cromwell, who was Henry's chief adviser from 1533 until his own execution in 1540 and who was a convinced Protestant.

More and Newman

Three hundred years later, another Oxford man, a student at Trinity and later a Fellow of Oriel, John Henry Newman, destined to be made a Cardinal late in life by Pope Leo XIII, expounded the views on conscience which were lived by More. Curiously enough both More and Newman clarify the Christian position on conscience, in their different styles, with interchanges with the Dukes of Norfolk of their times. Like us, and unlike More, Thomas Howard, the third Duke of Norfolk, was unable to distinguish between what is important and what is urgent.

It is also of interest to note that in the intervening centuries from More to Newman, each succeeding Duke of Norfolk (with one exception) changed from the religion of his predecessor in that title, until in 1875 Newman had occasion to write his famous letter to the fifteenth Duke of Norfolk. This was written against a background of whether Catholics could be loyal English People and loving children of the Pope. In the aftermath of the First Vatican Council and the Catholic Emancipation Bill, conscience and authority were lively issues.

In the Letter to the Duke of Norfolk, Newman says: "Unless a man is able to say to himself, as in the presence of God, that he must not, and dare not act upon the Papal injunction, he is bound to obey it, and would commit a great sin in disobeying it". More too pointed out to the 3rd Duke of Norfolk that if he offended his conscience for the sake of good fellowship and went to hell, would the Duke in heaven for following his conscience then join More for the sake of good fellowship. Of course two people can follow two distinct paths of conduct in good conscience, but the Catholic should always listen to the Church and obey it, unless our conscience tells us that we must absolutely not do what the Church tells us.

In the words of Msgr. Escriva de Balaguer, the Founder of the Catholic lay association Opus Dei, of which St. Thomas More is a patron: "The advice of another Christian and especially a priest's advice, in questions of faith and morals, is a powerful help for knowing what God wants of us in our particular circumstances. Advice, however, does not eliminate personal responsibility. In the end, it is we ourselves, each one of us on our own, who have to decide for ourselves and personally account to God for our decisions" (Conversations, p. 111).

More on Conscience

There is a curious belief that conscience is something which gives the all clear for the use of the Pill, or for missing Sunday Mass. More had a very different view, and in following his conscience he was forced to give up his life, his high office, and above all, his beloved family.

More, in his defiance of "the judgement of both universities and the universal consent of all the clergy of this realm", seemed always to assume that others were following their consciences just as he was following his. At the heart of More's attitude is the idea that if your conscience tells you that you must do something, though the Church says you must not, then you should obey your conscience, though it is mistaken. But, if your conscience says you may do something but the Church says you must not do it, then you should obey the Church.

"Can I trust my conscience? It is true that some people today answer the question with a confident and unqualified Yes - to the point that they appear to endow personal conscience, in its role as a guide, with the very quality they indignantly deny to the guidance of Church or Pope: the quality of infallibility".

If we reflect on More's ascetic qualities, that he was in fact a contemplative in the midst of the world, then we can see why his conscience was so sensitive and yet so strong. On the other hand, many of his contemporaries had lost all sense of divine perspective in their view of life. Witness Norfolk's worry: "By the Mass, Master More, it is perilous striving with princes. And therefore I wish you somewhat to incline to the King's pleasure. For by Godbody Master More, Indignatio principis est mors (the anger of the princes is death)". And More's reply: "Is that all, my Lord? Then in good faith is there no more difference between your grace and me, but that I shall die today and you tomorrow".

Moriae Encomium

This was the Latin title of Erasmus' book, In Praise of Folly, and it is a pun on More's name, 'In praise of More'. We need to be careful not to be so dazzled by his spectacular deeds as to feel that the basis of these is beyond our limited talents. Underpinning his love of freedom, respect for conscience, and appreciation of authority was his living of the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice,

fortitude and temperance. A few comments on the first of these in relation to More and our own lives are not out of place here.

One might infer that More's use of silence to avoid condemnation was an example of prudence, but this is too close to the popular concept of the virtue. Certainly More hoped that silence would save him: he would not take the Oath of Supremacy (that Henry was head of the English Church), and he would not say why he would not take the oath.

What is virtue?

Virtue has to do with the Latin *vir*, man. Virtue is something manly (in the best sense), and in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: "virtue enables us to follow our natural inclinations" (in the right sense). Aquinas further says that prudence is *genitrix virtutum*: prudence gives birth to the other virtues. The ancients always considered *docilitas* to be an essential part of prudence. This is not something simple-minded, but the ability to take advice so that one can see and consider what is real. To be prudent one does not have to be a scholar. There was a saying in More's time: "the wise man is one who savours all things as they really are". It is this wisdom which is inherent in prudence.

Dr John Finnis demonstrates the role of the cardinal virtues in the alleged conflict between conscience and authority, a theme fundamental to an appreciation of More: "being reasonable... involves an effort... which like all other actions goes astray unless it is guided by intelligence, by the energy of fortitude, by the self-discipline of temperance and the impartiality which secures a just conclusion. So conscience is not a matter of 'seeing' what is right by an intuition" (*The Rational Strength of Christian Morality*).

Thus if reflection on More's life is to be more than mere entertainment, we need to see how he guided his conscience by the example of Christ and submitted his conscience to the teaching of those who teach with Christ's authority. That he was able to do so was because of his interior spirit of prayer and penance, manifested by exterior actions full of peace and joy. "The Catholic whose faith makes him see Christ in the authority of the Church ('Anyone who listens to you listens to me': {Luke 10:16}), and therefore obeys that authority, is conscious of obeying Christ. And of course he is conscious of obeying freely; there lies the dignity and merit of his obedience - it is freely given" In the words of the Second Vatican Council: "The only way truth can impose itself is by the force of its own gentle but powerful influence on the mind of man" (*Declaration on Religious Liberty*, paragraph 1).

Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell realized this as much as More and badly needed More's approval for its propaganda value. But there is nothing new in this, as More with his knowledge of the Scriptures would have realized. "Why do the nations conspire, and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves up and the rulers take council together, against the Lord and against his anointed" (Psalm 2:1-2).

Universal Call to Sanctity

More is not a saint because he died for his convictions: he died for his convictions because of his sanctity. He was aware that sanctity is not just something vague for some few somewhere else. Sanctity means being truly and completely human. Sanctity is not something superficial. Sanctity is something to which we are all called.

With a sound interior life, More's exterior life was busy, fruitful and happy. He was a man who used his talents to the fullest in the service of his heavenly master, when he must have been tempted to abuse them in the service of his earthly master. Yet he worked hard and well for the temporal kingdom to earn his eternal crown. More is a saint who can be imitated.

Forget his death on the scaffold, a death he did not seek, a death he used all his legal wits to avoid. More's fidelity and courage on the scaffold were built on his fidelity to his daily duties and his courage with the little difficulties, the same sorts of difficulties that we encounter.

We can imitate More. We can achieve sanctity. We can take seriously Christ's call to be perfect. Our Lord has asked us to do this and he will give us the help we need.

Sanctity can, with God's grace, be more readily attained than riches, than fame, than learning, and yet it is easier to acquire riches, to achieve fame, to be learned, than to be a saint. More used the riches, the fame, the learning at his disposal, as an instrument in God's service. The secular and the sacred, the profane and the profound, were part of his life.

We too can sanctify our secular environment as St. Thomas More did, because the same help that sustained him is available to us, and it is available now.

To summarize St. Thomas More's cheerful attitude to life and his difficulties and care for his friends, he used often say to friends:

"Pray for me as I do for you, that we may merrily meet in Heaven."

Further Reading

Books by St. Thomas More:

Utopia, Penguin Classics; Dialogue of Comfort, Everyman's Library; The Supplication of Souls, Newman Press; Richard III, Yale; Selected Letters, Yale.

There are others, such as Dialogue Concerning Heresies and Apologue, which contains his own defence against the accusations. The latter was written in 1533, the former in 1529. In the four years in between he wrote almost a million words. Not all his works are readily accessible.

Biographies:

Authors of these include William Roper, his son-in-law, and Cresacre More, a descendant. Other authors whose biographies can be fairly readily obtained include T. E. Bridgett, R. W. Chambers, C. Hollis, L. Paul, E. E. Reynolds, and R. L. Smith.

Dramas and novels:

Robert Bolt, A Man for All Seasons; A. Dyce, The Tragedy of Sir Thomas More; Jean Plaidy, St. Thomas's Eve.

Anthology:

To celebrate the quincentenary of the birth of St. Thomas More, R. S. Sylvester and G. P. Marc'hadour have edited a collection of 47 papers which have been written over the last eighty years and which cover most facets of his life. It is called Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More (Archon Books, Hamden, Connecticut, 1977).

