

St. Thomas More¹

Thomas More was a versatile, brilliant, and successful young man, as well as extremely popular and charming. Of his sense of humor, Erasmus wrote, "From childhood he had such a love for witty jests that he seemed to have been sent into the world for the sole purpose of coining them; he never descends to buffoonery, but gravity and dignity were never made for him. He is always amiable and good-tempered, and puts everyone who meets him in a happy frame of mind."

More was seriously perplexed as to his vocation. He was strongly attracted by the austere life of the Carthusian monks, and had some leaning too towards the Friars Minor of the Observance; but there seemed to be no real call to either the monastic life or the secular priesthood. Though he remained a man of the world, he kept throughout life certain ascetic practices; for many years he wore a hair shirt next to his skin, he followed the rules of Church discipline for Fridays and vigils, was faithful to daily Mass and the recitation of the Little Office of Our Lady. He eventually married and had four children.

He was extremely sensitive to the sufferings of others. "His charity was without bounds, as is proved by the frequent and abundant alms he poured without distinction among all unfortunate persons. He used to go through the back lanes and inquire into the state of poor families.... He often invited to his table his poorer neighbors, receiving them . . . familiarly and joyously; he rarely invited the rich, and scarcely ever the nobility.... In his parish of Chelsea he hired a house in which he gathered many infirm, poor, and old people, and maintained them at his own expense."

In October, 1529, Henry VIII chose him as Chancellor to succeed Cardinal Wolsey, who had roused the king's wrath by opposing his scheme for nullifying his marriage. Thomas More was the first layman to hold the office.

It was said of More, "In serious matters no man's advice is more prized, while if the king wishes to recreate himself, no man's conversation is gayer. Often there are deep and intricate matters that demand a grave and prudent judge. More unravels them in such a way that he satisfies both sides. No one, however, has ever prevailed on him to receive a gift for his decision. Happy the commonwealth where kings appoint such officials! His elevation has brought with it no pride.... You would say that he had been appointed public guardian of those in need." Another tribute from More's confessor speaks of his remarkable purity and devotion. But in spite of his many honors and achievements, the public esteem which he enjoyed, and the many tokens of the royal regard, More knew well that there was no security in his position. He once said of his lofty position, "I tell thee I have no cause to be proud thereof, for if my head would win [the king] a castle in France, it should not fail to go."

King Henry VIII's relations with the Pope had become strained. When at length the break between King Henry and the Pope became open and the English clergy were commanded by Henry to acknowledge him as "Protector and Supreme Head of the Church of England... so far as the law of Christ allows," More wished to resign his office, but was persuaded to retain it and turn his attention to Henry's "great matter"- his petition for a nullification of his marriage with Catherine of Aragon, on the ground that she had previously been the wife of his dead brother Arthur. The actual reason behind the petition was Henry's desire for a male heir and his infatuation with a young woman of the court, Anne Boleyn.

More, after much study of Church authorities, had become convinced of the validity of Henry's marriage to Catherine, but, as a layman, had been allowed to refrain from taking sides publicly. When, in March,

¹ Taken from <http://www.ewtn.com/library/marty/thomasmo.htm>

1531, he reported to Parliament on the state of the case, he was asked for his opinion and refused to give it. In 1532 came the "submission of the clergy," who were now forced to promise to make no new laws without the King's consent and to submit the laws they had to a commission for revision. Later in the year an Act of Parliament prohibited the payment of annates, or first year's income from Church appointments, to the Holy See. At this More could no longer stand by in silence. To Henry's exasperation, he opposed the measure openly, and on May 16 offered his resignation as Chancellor. He had held the office for less than three years.

In March Pope Clement VII formally pronounced the marriage of Henry and Catherine valid and therefore not to be annulled. A week later an Act of Succession was pushed through Parliament, requiring all the king's subjects to take oath to the effect that his union with Catherine had been no lawful marriage, that his union with Anne Boleyn was a true marriage, and that their offspring would be legitimate heirs to the throne, regardless of the objections of "any foreign authority, prince, or potentate." Opposition to this Act was declared high treason.

Since it was a clear defiance of the Pope's authority to decide a question involving a sacrament of the Church, More refused to take the oath, was therefore imprisoned and charged with high treason which resulted in the loss of all the lands and honors granted him, leaving his family in poverty. He rejected all efforts of wife and friends to induce him to take the oath and so pacify Henry.

No temporal lord, he said, could or ought to be head of the spirituality. But even as St. Paul persecuted St. Stephen "and yet be they now both twain holy saints in Heaven, and shall continue there friends for ever, so I verily trust, and shall therefore right heartily pray, that though your lordships have now here on earth been judges of my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in Heaven merrily all meet together to everlasting salvation."

St. Thomas More was beheaded on July 6, 1535. More's final words on the scaffold were "The King's good servant, but God's first." He was beatified in 1886 and canonized by the Catholic Church as a saint by Pope Pius XI in 1935²

Small group discussion questions:

- 1) Many of the saints show their goodness and love for God in their daily ordinary lives and then later something heroic is asked of them? How did Thomas More live out his faith before he was imprisoned? What are some ways you live out your faith? If something heroic is asked of you, do you think you have the faith and virtue to rise to the occasion? Why or why not?
- 2) When was a time you had to stand up for something you believed in? Was this easy or difficult? Was there a time you wish you had said or done something and failed to do so?
- 3) Thomas More died for his faithfulness to the Church's teaching, specifically its teaching on marriage, in the midst of pressure from the government of his time. How can you be a better husband or wife? Do you believe that the Church's moral teachings are for your happiness?
- 4) What else strikes you about the life of St. Thomas More? How does he inspire you in your own life?

² <http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/morebio.htm>