A Profile of St. Thomas More

By M. Alvarez

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The year 1976 marked the 500th anniversary of the birth of St. Thomas More. The following brief sketch shows why he has sometimes been referred to as "a man of today who lived five centuries ago."

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INTRODUCTION

The day was Tuesday, July 6. The year, 1535.

Sir Thomas More, ex-chancellor of England, was in his cell in the Tower of London. The following day would see the transfer of the relics of St. Thomas of Canterbury. Very early in the morning, a third Thomas, of the great English family with the name of Pope, and a good friend of the prisoner, was visiting him, with a message from King Henry VIII and the King's Council: his execution was to take place before 9 o'clock that morning.

"Master Pope," Sir Thomas said, "thank you for the good news you bring me. I am grateful to His Majesty for liberating me so soon from the miseries of this unhappy world, and I shall pray ceaselessly for him."

"It is also the King's wish," continued Master Pope, "that you limit yourself to the briefest words at the scaffold." It was customary that the condemned man be given time to speak, just before his death.

More answered that he would follow His Majesty obediently, but adding: "I had hoped to be able to say a few words. Please intercede for me, that my daughter Margaret be allowed to attend my funeral."

"The King has already granted your wish — your wife, children, and friends may be with you until the end."

More replied: "O, thank the Lord for His Majesty's concern over my burial."

The biographer of Sir Thomas More Andres Vasquez de Prada comments that this dialogue between the two friends was sincere, without any trace of irony. More was a saint, a man of innocence. His soul longed to be with his maker. He was ready to face him, and he harbored neither resentment nor vindictive feelings for those who would help take him to God.

The prisoner had slept peacefully the night before, and he woke up ready for the execution. He drank a glass of milk for breakfast. A few minutes before the set time, he left his cell to walk toward the place of execution, Tower Hill. A crowd waiting at the gate of the Tower of London rushed toward him. Sir Thomas walked with steady step, erect, his face pale and

smiling, his long beard waving in the wind. He wore an old coarse gown, and his hands clasped a red crucifix. A woman stepped out from the crowd to comfort him with a glass of wine. But he refused with these gentle words: "Christ in his passion was given, not wine, but vinegar." At the slope of Tower Hill he climbed leaning on his cane. Above rose the hastily assembled scaffold. More eyed the flimsy steps, put his foot on the first rung, and felt he could not go up alone. He threw his cane aside and said good-humoredly to the lieutenant: "Help me go up, and I shall take care of going down on my own."

Arriving at the top of Tower Hill, he fell on his knees and began reciting Psalm 50: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your great mercy." Then he rose and, true to his promise, spoke briefly, asking the people to pray to God for him, and adding that in the next world he would do likewise for them. He asked their prayers for the king, that God would give him wisdom. Lastly he asserted that he died "the king's faithful servant, but firstly, God's."

In accordance with tradition, the executioner got on his knees and asked More's forgiveness. Sir Thomas replied: "Be of good cheer, man, don't fear to do your duty! My neck is short; quick, then, but steady, cut straight, and save your honor." He covered his eyes with a handkerchief and gently lowered his head on the block. Feeling that his beard got caught between his throat and the block, he said to the executioner: "Please let me place my beard over the block — I would not want you to cut it."

The executioner did a clean job. The head rolled neatly and was raised up at London Bridge, in the very spot where his friend Bishop John Fisher's head had hung two weeks before. Both men died because they would not accept the supremacy of Henry VIII as head of the Anglican Church.

Thomas More died in the year 1535, at the age of fifty-seven.

Four hundred years later, in the year 1935, on the 19th of May, the Catholic Church declared him Saint Thomas More.

HIS FIRST YEARS

Thomas More was born in London, February 7, 1478, of "a simple, honest family," as he would later write. His father, John, was a judge in the King's Court and an upright man. Thomas was born in the hiatus between the end of the War of the Roses and the ushering in of the Tudor reign. During his half century of earthly life, Thomas saw the dawn of two great historical phenomena that inaugurated modern history: the Renaissance and the Reformation. The Middle Ages were long gone.

As a boy Thomas studied at St. Anthony's School, where he showed great precocity in the learning of Latin, Greek, English, history, and rhetoric. Appreciating the aptitudes of his son, John More installed him as page in the house of John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England. His stay there acquainted him with the world of politics. In 1492, at the age of fourteen, he was sent by Cardinal Morton to Canterbury College in Oxford. Although the family was comfortably well-off, his father provided him with a limited monthly allowance because he believed a lean purse would better prepare Thomas for a hard life. Concentrating in his studies while in college, Thomas reminisced in later years: "I took advantage of the university offerings. Thus, I had no time for extravagant and dangerous pleasures; I found no occasion to taste these vices, because my money would not allow me to."

After two years of university life, father and son agreed that Thomas would pursue the study of law. To hone his knowledge of the practice of law, Thomas enrolled in law schools in London. At New Inn, an auxiliary branch of the Chancellorship, and later, at the age of eighteen at Lincoln's Inn, a law chamber enjoying the status of a university empowered to grant licenses and titles, Thomas perfected his law practice, all the while still attending to his studies in Latin, Greek, literature, and theology. It was during this period that he and Erasmus of Rotterdam met and became great friends. Both men were good for one another: Erasmus's humanism influenced Thomas, and Thomas's gentle friendship softened Erasmus's stern and bitter character.

SEARCHING FOR THE WAY

Upon finishing his studies at New Inn and Lincoln Inn, More was impelled by a religious inclination to enter the Carthusian Monastery in London. Unsure of what he wanted most in life, he spent his days in spiritual cleansing, without making any formal commitment to vows. He could not fully understand this spiritual inclination. He loved his studies and enjoyed the good life of a healthy young man. His open character was not best suited for the cloister, but he persisted in this retired life for four years, answering faithfully God's divine call. At the end of the four years, he knew the cloister was not for him. Again he plunged into the political life and the legal world for which he had been trained. He realized that in the active competition of law and politics he might also serve God. He preserved intact a deep interior life, and as a reminder of mortification he always wore next to his skin a garment of rough and prickly haircloth.

In 1504 More's humanistic background opened doors for him in the field of politics. Still a young man, he entered Parliament, using his fiery eloquence to defend the rights of the people.

More's mind turned to marriage. A poem of his that has been preserved asks in its title: "Candido, Whom Will You Choose for a Wife?" The speaker in the poem seeks a woman who would be a companion sharing his humanistic ideas and a partner in founding a Christian family. Was this a search for the impossible? More's own desires and actions mirrored the poem as he looked for a wife. According to an account of his son-in-law: "He frequently visited the home of a Mr. Colt, an Essex esquire with three daughters whose virtuous education, clean conversation and fi ne manners must have attracted him." In 1505 More married the eldest Colt daughter, Jane, who was then seventeen. They settled down in Bucklersbury, a street in a good section of the city, where the newly married couple invited Erasmus to spend some time with them, and where More and Erasmus spent many pleasant days translating Lucianus from Greek to Latin.

Erasmus returned to visit them in 1509. By then the couple had four children: Margaret, Elizabeth, Cecily, and John. It was during a visit to the Mores that Erasmus wrote his famous "In praise of folly." The More

household was a home of Christianity and culture, and Thomas was a pioneer in the education of women: his daughters were famous for their culture, which was something unheard at the time. Erasmus compared the More home to Plato's Academy for its studies in science and virtue; "more correctly," he added, the home was compared "to a school of Christian religion."

In 1511 More's wife died. Not wishing to leave his children without a mother, soon thereafter he married a widow, Alice Middleton, who was seven years his senior. Her daughter Alice was adopted as a member of the family.

In an era shaken by the Protestant Reformation, whose tremors were clearly being felt, More now entered a long phase in his life that was devoted to study, the practice of his profession, and politics. As Vasquez de Prada has written, More was "a man straddling...two worlds, the Medieval and the Modern, two cultures, two directions, two distinct ideologies: he tried to reach both, but in that interval of space between the two, his arms shot out and stretched themselves as on a cross."

The world More wanted to mold would be the fusion of the medieval and modern worlds: the tradition of law of the Middle Ages and the essence of Christianity — her oneness and organization — would be joined with modern scientific currents and the political and social development of nations.

More wrote incessantly. The most famous of his works, Utopia, envisions an imaginary country where life is regulated by natural reason alone, and whose people live orderly and happy lives. More's sense of humor is well displayed here. The description of a utopian country was a clever censure of contemporary England and Europe, where power, selfishness, and inordinate desires and interests reigned. He also wrote vehemently against the rise Protestantism, exposing its heretical errors.

When King Henry VIII met More, he was drawn to him and made him an adviser. As the King's ambassador, in 1520 More went to Hansa (a fifth-century commercial league of free German cities), and in 1521 to Bruges to settle trade treaties. In 1520 he was present at the famous Field of Cloth of Gold in Calais, during the magnificent encounter between Henry VIII and Francis I of France. More was knighted and made Speaker of the House of Commons, as well as Chancellor of the Dukedom of Lancaster. He was also with Bishop Tunstall in Cambrai, France, during the congress that forged peace between France and the Holy Roman Empire of Charles V.

These were the golden years of King Henry VIII, during which he still possessed an idealistic and strong character. His deep literary and theological background served him well when writing verses and books against Martin Luther, thus earning the pontifical title "Defender of the Faith."

LORD CHANCELLOR OF ENGLAND

It was around 1527 when marked changes in Henry's character became noticeable. He began to neglect or ignore state matters and to cavil the matter of succession. Henry had become king in 1509 at the age of eighteen, and in that same year he married Catherine of Aragon, his brother's widow, after obtaining a papal dispensation. The couple had one daughter, Mary. Henry wanted an heir, but after a series of miscarriages the queen could bear no more children. There entered Henry's mind the nagging thought that his marriage was cursed. Perhaps it was not valid since he had married his brother's widow, and perhaps there were defects with the papal dispensation that would be grounds for dissolving the marriage.

The king brought the matter before his advisers Thomas More and John Fisher, bishop of Rochester. The latter assured him that there was no cause for worry. More, however, saw the problematic nature of the matter. He conferred with Bishops Tunstall and Clerk, and he studied the sacred scriptures and the works of the doctors of the Church. After some serious thought he presented himself before the King with his assessment: "If your Majesty claims to know the truth, you can find advisers who will never deceive you, neither for their material security nor out of fear of the King's authority."

Henry VIII continued to insist to other authorities that since this was a matter of canon law, it required the attention of persons of greater expertise than More. More realized the king had already privately resolved to do away with his marriage and was not prepared to accept any decision contrary to his wishes. The king took a new tact, no longer alleging defects in the papal dispensation bull. He went further, asserting that the pope had no authority to issue a dispensation to allow him to marry his sister-in-law because this was a matter of divine law. Nothing was going to stop him. He was going to crown his mistress, Anne Boleyn, Queen of England.

The king pursued his case. He appealed to Rome and the matter was transferred to London, where Cardinal Campeggio personally represented the pope. Cardinal Wolsey, Lord Chancellor of England, was equally empowered to act on the matter.

The London decision did not go well for the king. Bishop Fisher defended the prerogatives of Queen Catherine. When King Henry tried to pressure the authorities for a favorable decision, the pope returned the venue to Rome. In exasperation, the Tudor king accused Chancellor Wolsey of treason and dispossessed him of all his goods.

Who was to occupy the position left vacant by Wolsey? The king thought of filling the post with a layman close to the Church. After sessions with the Council and long discussions, Henry himself decided in favor of Thomas More. Thus it was that on October 25, 1529, the Great Seal of the Tudors, which had always been held as the privilege of churchmen until Wolsey's fall, passed on to More. Accepting the Great Seal under such circumstances entailed serious responsibilities and burdens that outweighed the honor, dignity, and other advantages of the position, and so it is not surprising that More was reluctant to accept the offer. He suspected Henry would try to use him to win his case; and, at the very least, he believed Henry would expect him to be partial.

More's chancellorship has gone down in the history of England as the most humanitarian of his time. He dispensed justice with firmness and compassion. But the Great Seal would not stay long in More's hands. Henry VIII was now intent on subduing the Church in England and assuming the title "Supreme Head of the Anglican Church." In January 1531 he secured the title, but with a significant qualifying clause, "as the law of Christ allows," a phrase that had been proposed by Bishop John Fisher. More recognized the implications of these events, and he resigned on May 16, 1532. Things were getting worse. If he had continued as chancellor, he would have had to act against his conscience or face the ire of his king.

HUMOR IN HIS EPITAPH

More understood the king would not be happy with this decision, for the resignation of such a personage as the Chancellor of England would certainly draw negative attention and suspicion. In defending himself and explaining his position, More resorted to something that only someone with his sense of humor could have conceived. He had a tomb built in the parish church of Chelsea. There the bones of his first wife were transferred and an epitaph was carved in Latin, briefly reciting his life and his office. It was a strike at his enemies who would have preferred to see him in the tomb instead. But the epitaph also stated that he was not afraid to die. It read: "He tended this resting place day after day, to remind himself that death asks for no reprieve."

The epitaph ends with these lines so full of Thomas More's gentle irony and grace:

Here lies Jane, dear wife of Thomas More;

This tomb awaits the bones of Alice and of More.

In my young years, Jane was my love –

She gave me a son and three gentle girls.

Alice — by God's grace my second wife —

Was more than mother to my orphan brood.

She was my love as Jane once was mine.

How can I say whom I love more!

Oh, blessed joy to be the three together

If only Faith and Destiny would grant.

Would Heaven leave Jane, More and Alice here,

In death united as in life could not!

Events unfolded quickly. On April 23, 1533, the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury nullified Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon

and performed his marriage to Anne Boleyn, thus legitimizing the child she was to bear the king.

In 1534 Parliament granted the King the title “Head of the Anglican Church,” removing the appended clause “as the law of Christ allows.” Rome’s last word was a definitive declaration of the validity of Henry’s marriage to Catherine. The English schism was completed.

THE JUDGEMENT

All English subjects of age were required to take an oath upholding the Act of Supremacy. On April 13, 1534, when More was called to Lambeth Palace, he declared that he could not swear by the Act in its entirety. He did not dispute the legitimizing of Henry's child, since that was within the jurisdiction of Parliament, but he questioned that body's power to decide on the king's supremacy over the pope.

Four days later More and Bishop Fisher, who had also refused to take the oath, were taken to the Tower of London and divested of their property.

Within the harsh limitations of his prison, More led a peaceful life, meditating and writing on spiritual themes, with all concern for temporal things set aside. What temptations came were from his family and friends, who begged him to take the oath, to save his head and theirs too. But More, resolute and intransigent, would not deny his conscience.

A new law passed by Parliament, the Treason Act, brought fear nearer. Punishable by death were acts such as manifesting "the intent, the desire, the attempt to maliciously" deprive the king, the queen, and their successors of all the honors and titles pertaining to them. Clearly, one such title was "Supreme Head of the Anglican Church."

More was repeatedly approached to take the oath. His accusers' pressure was understandable: for Thomas More to take the oath was to have the great humanist and ex-chancellor on their side. But with extreme prudence and the finesse of legal knowledge, he evaded all compromising accusations. More could not betray his conscience, and he did not wish to provoke martyrdom. But neither the death of the Carthusians in the gallows of Tyburn, nor the execution of his friend Bishop Fisher could weaken his will. He could have taken the oath. He could have saved himself. He refused to do so.

Thus, firm and uncompromising, More appeared before his judges in Westminster Hall on July 1, 1535. The accusations against him were read aloud, ending with a guarantee of the king's "clemency and benevolence" if he retracted.

More acted as his own lawyer. He took the written accusations and tore them all to shreds. He said he could not be condemned for anything he had ever said. He had always maintained silence. He had not said anything against the king. When challenged that he had never spoken in defense of the king, he quoted: “Silence means consent.” When he was asked to answer according to his conscience, he replied that he owed his conscience to God, not to the king.

Nothing could save him. His death sentence was laid down.

THE GREAT CONFESSION

As the Lord Chancellor read the death sentence, More interjected fearlessly: “My Lord, when I used to dispense justice in similar circumstances, it was customary to allow the accused to express his opposition to the sentence.” The jury was caught by surprise. They had forgotten that the accused before them was the ex-chancellor, a magistrate, a lawyer, and a scholar of jurisprudence. Lord Audley had to give him his moment.

“Since no words of mine can change by any means your intent to condemn me,” declared More, “let me open my conscience and show you, freely and sincerely, my opinion on the accusation and the statute in question.

“The Act of Supremacy is invalid because it runs counter to the law of God, for no earthly prince may occupy the seat that alone belongs to the pope of Rome, as Christ himself said. This act you would have me swear to is inadequate among Christians and is therefore powerless to accuse any Christian. The Act is also contrary to the English Magna Carta and weakens the oath taken by King Henry VIII when he assumed the Kingship of our country.”

The Duke of Norfolk interrupted him brusquely: “Now we see the malice of your thoughts.”

“Not so,” answered More. “I speak thus, to clear my conscience of your charges, and I call on God as my witness. You want my head — not only for my negation of the Act of Supremacy — but because I will have nothing to do with this matter of His Majesty’s new marriage.”

More had hit the nail on the head. All the recent laws promulgated by Henry VIII were a smokescreen for his dissoluteness and selfishness. Before the Council, the accused had become the accuser, as More indicted his jury of cowardice and complicity. Touched by his integrity and the weight of the truth of his words, they asked him “courteously” if there was anything more he wanted to say.

"My Lords," he said, "St. Paul witnessed the stoning of St. Stephen, and acquiesced with his persecutors when he volunteered to keep the capes of his tormentors while they stoned Stephen to death. Yet, they are together in heaven and together they will always be. I, too, hope and pray that, although your Lordships have been my accusers here on earth, we may meet happily in heaven. May God preserve His Majesty the King and inspire him with wisdom."

The Council rose. The court adjourned. Thomas More was led once again to the Tower of London.

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Have you ever tasted the beauty of God's presence? It's natural to want to experience his closeness more often—as often as you can! As St. Josemaría Escrivá said: "*Either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we never find Him.*"

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