The Rt. Revd. Mark Santer, Bishop of Birmingham, in 1989 at Chelsea Old Church.

The Rt. Revd Mark Santer
Bishop of Birmingham, England.
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Bishop Mark Santer was educated at Queen's College, Cambridge. Following ordination in the Church of England, he was engaged in theological education until his appointment as Fellow and Dean of Clare College, Cambridge in 1967. He was consequently made the Principal of Westcott House, Cambridge, in 1973 and consecrated the Suffragan Bishop of the London Episcopal area of Kensington in 1981, where he served until he was translated to the Diocese of Birmingham in 1987. Bishop Santer is now in retirement.

In this paper, Bishop Santer explores the issue of authority, which haunted English and European Church history in the early 16th century. The constant stresses between local, national and international interests frequently informed the rise of conflict, when these various interests were in tension. He goes on to discuss the difficulties that national Churches have experienced in subsequent history. Thomas More's principles sought to provide an answer to the statement of the Nicene Creed "I believe in the Catholic Church". Drawing from his experience on the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission, Bishop Santer considers that the questions posed by More are unavoidable in the quest for Church unity.

Key words: Nationalism, authority, Anglicanism, ecumenism.

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L'auteur appartient par son cursus académique à l'université de Cambridge, qui eut St John Fisher comme chancelier à vie ainsi qu' Érasme comme professeur de grec. La reine qui fonda Queen's College était Marguerite d'Anjou. Mark Santer avait Chelsea dans sa juridiction en tant qui suffragant de Kensington. Faisant partie de la

Commission pour le dialogue entre Rome et Cantorbéry, il explore avec compétence le problème de l'autorité ecclésiale, qui est au cœur du débat entre More et les Réformateurs. Tous les chrétiens reconnaissent que l'Église "catholique" du Credo de Nicée se doit d'être "une", et les confessions nées au 16e siècle par rupture avec le Saint-Siège éprouvent difficultés et limites de par leur origine nationale. More apporte des éléments susceptibles d'aider la marche vers l'unité.

Mots-clés: Nationalisme, autorité, anglicanisme, œcuménisme.

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I take my text from the words which Jesus spoke to his disciples on the night before he died.

> If you were of this world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of this world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master'. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. John 15: 19-20.

"A servant is not greater than his master". We know whose servant Thomas More was. He said it himself on the scaffold: he died "the King's good servant, and God's first".[1] That is why he died. What enraged King Henry VIII was a man who put what he saw as his service to God even higher than his service to his King. He was the King's good servant – but God's first. Henry could not endure the thought that he as King could not possess a man's conscience, and that

[1] As recorded in the *Paris Newsletter* giving an account of More's execution and published within two weeks of his death. See G.R. Elton, *Reform & Renewal* Cambridge Univ Press, 1973, p. 57. Also Gerard B. Wegemer, *A Thomas More Source Book.* Catholic University of America Press: Washington, 2004, p.357.

there are laws to which Christians owe a higher allegiance than they can owe to any state or sovereign.

There was of course the matter of the King's marriage, which so exercised More's fellow martyr John Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester. But mixed up with the marriage, or with the solution the King found to his marriage, was an issue which for More was even more important: Henry's assertion that, as King of England, he was supreme Head of the Church of England, and that the Church of England owed no allegiance on earth except what it owed to him. I remember my own feeling of shock when I saw it in black and white on a photograph of one of the cannons found in Henry's flagship, the *Mary Rose.* There it was, cast in iron among the royal titles: *SVPREMVM CAPVT ECCLESIE ANGLICANE.*

Thomas More totally rejected this claim. For him, Henry had no right or power to subordinate the Church of the nation to himself in this way or to break its unity with the whole Catholic Church. "Sith Christendom is one corps", he said, "I cannot perceive how any member thereof may without the common assent of the body, depart from the common head". It was as impossible and absurd for the English Church to abjure the authority of the universal Church as it would be for the City of London to declare unilateral independence from the rest of the Kingdom of England.[2]

The primary issue for More was not, as it became for Roman Catholics later, the authority of the Pope. For him the primary issue was the unity and catholicity of the Church, of which papal jurisdiction was one aspect. His belief was that the universal Church cannot be broken up into bits, each subject to a local prince or parliament, but that the Church on earth is of necessity a universal institution; it is governed by the pastors appointed by Christ in place of the apostles; all Christian people, high as well as low, are subject to its laws.

[2] William Roper, *The Life of Sir Thomas More.* EETS p. 93.

More put it plainly at his trial. When Lord Audley reminded him that the English universities supported the King, he replied:

> I am not bounden, my Lord, to conform my conscience to the Council of one realm against the general Council of Christendom. For of the foresaid holy bishops I have, for every bishop of yours, one hundred; and for one Council of Parliament (God knoweth what manner of one) I have all the Councils made these thousand years. And for this one kingdom I have all other Christian realms.[3]

That is why King Henry came to hate More, and that is why More died.

To those of us who have lived through the 1980's, parts of Henry's programme may seem strangely familiar. Quite apart from the question of his marriage, we may see Henry VIII's repudiation of papal jurisdiction and his subjection of the Church and its courts to the Crown as part of a policy of concentrating power in one place, at the level of national government. He could not abide the supranational authority of the Pope. So there was to be no appeal beyond the borders of England, and no taxes paid outside the borders of England. At the same time, within the realm, there was to be no centre of power or jurisdiction which was not entirely subordinate to the Crown. In destroying the independent power of the Church and making it totally dependent on himself, he was pursuing the same aims as his father had in diminishing the power and independence of the nobles.[4] Everything was to be subjected to him, and he would be subject to no one.

In pursuit of these policies Henry showed himself adept in selling off other people's property and using the proceeds not for long-

[3] Thomas Stapleton, *The Life of Sir Thomas More* ed E.E. Reynolds, Burns & Oates: London, 1966, pp. 177 & 178.

[4] See D.M. Loades, *Politics and the Nation 1450-1660* Fontana: London, 1973, pp 100-123.

term investment, but to pay for current expenditure, mostly on national defence. Along with all of this went the eclipse of the old nobility and the rise of a new grasping class of men, who benefited from the ruination of the Church.[5]

We can smile at all of this, but Henry VIII was not alone. Even if his methods were his own, he shared many of his overall political aims with his European contemporaries. It was the age of the rise of the nation state.[6] The King of France was as keen as the Tudors to get his national Church under his thumb. But he managed to do it without breaking communion with the Pope. That was the crucial difference. For Henry and the Protestant princes of Germany the new-found doctrine of the Godly Prince provided a biblical fig-leaf for the total nationalization of their churches. The Lutherans developed the notion of the prince as *summus episcopus*, supreme bishop, in his territory. Henry did it pictorially, in the famous frontispiece to the Great Bible of 1538, with Henry himself lifted high on his throne, handing out bibles to Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell – a picture of Church and People receiving the Word of God not from the apostles but from the King.

The Church of England has been deeply marked by the events of the 1530's. It was not founded by King Henry VIII, as some people ignorantly assert. It was founded by the saints who brought Christianity to the land a thousand years and more before Henry. But Henry and his adjutants had their effect. Just like the other churches of the Reformation, in Scotland and Scandinavia and Germany, the Church of England is still decisively marked by the fact that it took its institutional shape as a separate national Church at the very time when the kings and princes of Europe were each claiming absolute sovereignty, so far as they could, within their own realms. Indeed, the

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 175.

[6] See G.R. Elton, *Reformation Europe 1517-1559* Fontana: London 1963, pp. 297-304.

establishment of separate national Churches was part of that process of establishing national sovereignty.

The danger now is this, that as the idea of a European identity is beginning to return, and the idea of completely sovereign nation states is weakening, the Churches may get left behind, trapped in an institutional shape which no longer relates to emerging political realities. We can see the signs already. Germany became one state in 1870, but the ecclesiastical map of Protestant Germany still reflects the independent princedoms of earlier centuries. England and Scotland are part of the United Kingdom; but we still have two national Churches, not in communion with each other, reflecting the fact that in the sixteenth century we were two separate nations.

Local identity is always important, both for the Church and for political communities. But as European institutions and identity develop and grow, and as the sense of belonging to Europe reasserts itself, there is a real danger that the Church of England may find itself the focus for all sorts of nostalgia about national identity and sovereignty which will no longer correspond with the social and political facts.

Anglicanism, insofar as it is international, is orientated primarily towards the structures of the old British Empire; and they are fading fast. As far as Europe is concerned, the Roman Catholic Church is the only Church with transnational structures in place, to equip it to respond to the new and re-emerging Europe. That is because its structures still embody the vision of the Church for which Thomas More stood out against his King. We Anglicans, like the other Protestants of the national Churches of northern Europe, remain largely locked up inside our national frontiers. Only the Roman Catholics have a supranational Church in place, claiming an allegiance and a loyalty which transcend national sovereignties.

In the time of Thomas More, Christendom was Europe, and the Pope of Rome was a European prince. But More did not die for a merely European Christianity, nor did he die for the Catholic Church

as a religious aspect of a United Europe. That would simply be national Christianity writ large. His concern was for the universal Church, the truly Catholic Church, not only the Church of all nations, but the Church which is in and over all nations, the Church to which Christ has given the promise that it will never fail.[7]

So Thomas More presents us today with one of the key ecumenical issues: What do we mean when we say, "I believe in the Catholic Church"? More was an Englishman, and none more loyal. But he was also a Catholic Christian, with loyalties deeper and higher even than his duty to England and to England's king. So he died the King's good servant, but God's first. One of the questions he puts to us is this: How are our proper local loyalties, as citizens and as churchmen, to be balanced with a proper expression of our primary loyalty to the Church's universality and unity?

When we say the Nicene creed we share with all Christians, we do not say, "We believe in the Church of England". We say, "We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church". If this unity and universality are not to be merely imaginary or notional, how are they to be expressed in the structures of the Church's life? It is no accident that for those of us who are charged by the Churches to think and talk together about Christian unity, the questions posed by Thomas More are inescapable. Whether we like it or not, we cannot talk about unity without facing difficult questions about the relation of local to universal, about the authority inherent in the Church over against kings and parliaments, about instruments of unity, and the authority of Councils and popes.

Of one thing we can be certainly sure: life will never be easy. The rulers of this world will never be content when Christian men and women act like Thomas More and assert their allegiance to an authority higher than theirs. Kings and rulers like to use divine authority to buttress their own. They do not like it when it is

[7] More expounds his ecclesiology fully in his *Letter to Bugenhagen*. See CW 7, particularly p 35/5.

perceived as a challenge to their own. As long as this world lasts, Christ's words to his servants still stand: "If you were of this world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of this world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not above his master'." Thomas More died the King's good servant, but God's first.