

*Moreana*, no. 1 (Sept. 1963): 9-11.

THE FRIENDS OF SAINT THOMAS MORE

by E.E. Reynolds

We picture Thomas More during his lifetime as the centre of a great company of friends. A list of their names would be a roll-call of the leading scholars, ecclesiastics and public men of his day. Nor may we forget the younger men who gathered round him and the patriarchal household of which he was the life and spirit. Wherever he went he made friends. His official visits to the Low Countries widened the circle. Above all we may recall the strongest friendship of all, that with Erasmus Roterdamus, surely one of the great friendships of history.

What was it that drew men to him ? There was, of course, his natural good humour, his friendliness and courtesy ; in a word, he was a companionable man. I like to think of him strolling with his friends in his garden with the river flowing by ; William Roper recalled walking with him "along the Thames side at Chelsea" ; so the friends of Utopia "sat down to talk in the garden", and in the Dialogue concerning Heresies "when we had after dinner a little paused, your friend and I drew ourselves aside into the garden" and there continued their discussion.

There was, of course, much more in his friendship than geniality and kindness of heart. He was a man of wise counsel, unswayed by passion or self-interest. Above all, his friends saw in him a man of absolute integrity whose whole life was the

expression of a deep religious conviction.

We think of him as the centre of a host of friends, but we must also see him as one who deliberately chose to tread the last stage of his life's journey alone. Once he had resolved to serve God rather than the king, he kept silent. Neither his family, not even his beloved daughter Margaret, nor his closest friends were allowed to break the privacy of his conscience. He would not implicate them in the consequences that he knew would follow his decision. He could quite easily have formed a party in the State, and perhaps have shaken the throne ; but his sense of duty to the king forbade that. So he went forward alone, this man of a host of friends. They were as bewildered as his own wife and children were. Nor were they at his trial and execution ; that was probably at his wish, but we recall how grateful he was that they were allowed to be "at my burial".

So we get this great contrast : a life filled with friends ; a death on the scaffold without a friend at his side - alone.

In the centuries that have followed his martyrdom, his friends have multiplied a thousandfold. They began to gather as soon as his head was displayed on London Bridge, and in the reign of Elizabeth, Anne Boleyn's daughter, a group of playwrights, perhaps Shakespeare among them, wrote a drama they were not allowed to act. His memory fortified the martyrs who followed in his steps. They knew, as we know, but as his own friends did not understand at the time, why he chose death rather than life. Listen to the words of St Robert Bellarmine ; he was writing in 1607 to an English priest who was prepared to take an oath of allegiance to James I :

"Neither can you be ignorant that those

most holy and learned men, John, Bishop of Rochester, and Thomas More, within our memory, for this one and weighty point of doctrine, the Primacy of the Apostolic See, led the way to martyrdom to many others, to the exceeding glory of the English nation".

So we too can join that great host of friends of Saint Thomas More, surely the most beloved of the laymen saints.

(Message sent to the Founder Members by President E.E. Reynolds, and read by the Vice-Chairman in the Town-Hall of Brussels, on December 29, 1962).