

THOMAS MORE : NEW BUILDINGS AND OLD

an address delivered at the dedication of the
School library at Gilmour Academy,
Gates Mills, Ohio, June 5, 1964

by Richard S. Sylvester

Most Reverend Bishop, Reverend Fathers, Brothers,
Faculty and Students, Parents and Friends

It gives me great pleasure to be here with you today and to participate with you in the dedication of Gilmour's new Thomas More Library. My pleasure stems partly from my own interest, both professional and personal, in Thomas More, and from the warm feeling that grows within me as I see his name being extended, almost symbolically, in wider and wider circles. For years, as many of you no doubt know, More has been the patron saint of Catholic lawyers, and, since his canonization, Catholic chapels at secular colleges and universities have been known as St. Thomas More chapels. If one measures a saint's fame in terms of the devotion paid to him, then St. Thomas has indeed been richly recompensed by the Catholicism for which he gave his life. Yet in no area of Catholic activity is the honor which we give him more richly appropriate than in the field of education. As I shall presently try to suggest, St. Thomas More was always involved with education, with both formal, academic training and with what we call "self-education", with what comes out of books and with what goes into them.

But my pleasure in being with you today is also, I must confess, a bit more private and selfish. I am, certainly, no expert in the matter of speech-making at library dedications (perhaps even our overly specialized age has not yet quite reached the point where one can speak of expertise in such matters). I do, however, work both in and for a library, and I suppose I could be accused of indulging today in a kind of busman's holiday. The St. Thomas More Project at the Yale University Library is engaged in editing More's Latin and English Works, in making available accurate and trustworthy texts of his writings for both scholars and the general public. In our work we learn to know More through his books, but editing can often become, what Alexander Pope once called it, a very "dull duty" indeed. Thomas More wrote a great deal and it will be a good many years before our project is completed. It is, consequently, all the more heartening for me to, so to speak, step out of the library today and see, in a gathering like this, a living reminder of the larger significance that attaches to the life and works of St. Thomas. A proper perspective on one's own work comes best as one achieves a proper distance from it, and I am indeed grateful to all of you for providing me with the opportunity to achieve that perspective here with you at Gilmour.

But there is another perspective which I should like to offer to you today, one which may perhaps bring this ceremony, and the new library here at Gilmour, into a kind of focus that may relate them more directly to the vision of the great saint whom they commemorate. I pretend to no special clairvoyance on this matter, but I do think that, however much Thomas More might have shied away --with characteristic humility-- from any public monument to his fame, he would most assuredly have applauded the generosity and sacrifice that have made possible the erection of this new building. His own charitable benefactions were almost

legendary even in his own life-time, and he never ceased to support the young scholars who came to him for financial aid. Many of them he took into his household, providing for them out of his own pocket until they had secured positions of competence. Charity came naturally to Thomas More, so much so that his son-in-law, William Roper, was forced to marvel --and almost to complain-- that his father-in-law, after his retirement as Lord Chancellor, was not worth more than 100 pounds a year. Government service, you see, in Renaissance England as in twentieth-century America, was often a means to the amassing of private wealth.

But if More knew how to be generous in his benefactions, he also knew how to make money honestly. There was a stout, practical side to his personality that we sometimes tend to gloss over when we concentrate on the immense sacrifices which he made in his final years. He was, indeed, absolutely incorruptible, but he came from a hard-working London family; his father was a successful lawyer who eventually rose to be Judge of the King's Bench, and More himself was so adroitly involved in legal business that, before he was forty, he had an income which, in modern equivalents, was at least \$50,000 per year. He knew, in short, how to make a living, and a good one at that, but he also knew how to live. If he could meet the world so efficiently on its own terms, then we can see that, when he gave up the world's rewards so readily, he did not do so because he failed to appreciate the proper value which they in fact had.

Thus More's character, when we review the principal events of his life, emerges as a somewhat paradoxical composite. At first sight, so many things about him seem to be contradictory. He was called, first by his great friend Erasmus and then by other contemporaries "A Man for all Seasons", and we tend, as Robert Bolt has done in his recent play, to interpret these words to mean "a man for all times and all places", "a man whom

anyone can take as his model", remaking More to his own image, even if he himself should happen to be, like Bolt, a modern liberal agnostic. I don't think that a Catholic who reveres More as a saint need resent such an interpretation; it can do St. Thomas no harm, and it probably may do a great many people a lot of good.

Yet such a tribute to More's personality fails to grasp the exact meaning of the phrase "A Man for all Seasons" as it was originally applied to More by Robert Whittington, the Tudor grammarian, who proposed it to his schoolboys as a good translation for the Latin words, "Vir omnium horarum"--literally, a man of all hours. Erasmus, a few years earlier, had given Whittington his hint when he described More, in the dedication to the *Praise of Folly*, as a man who could adopt a role which would please everyone, in any place and on any occasion. In other words, to More's contemporaries a "man for all seasons" was not so much an imitable man as an incredibly flexible man. He was, of course, worthy of imitation; but, given his wonderfully adjustable personality and the ease with which he fitted himself into any situation--an ability which few could share--he was, in fact, quite inimitable.

Now if I were to try to transpose this description of More into modern terms, I think I would come up with something like this: he was a man who had, to an intense degree, a kind of double vision. He was able, as few men have been, constantly to see himself not only as participating in events but also as watching himself participate in them. He was always, in a sense, out of himself, viewing his own actions in a kind of eternal perspective--and yet, at the same time, and perhaps partly because he could so view himself, he was able to immerse his own feelings, his complete being, in the lives of others, in the world of action and event that surrounded him. Hence too, the wonderful comic element in his character, for

nothing makes for true humor like the ability to see ourselves as others see us. His name in Greek --*moros*--meant fool or clown, but only a wise man would remind himself and others of this fact as often as More did. Thomas More was, in short, a kind of multi-personality. Men saw that he identified with them and they warmed to him accordingly; but few of them were aware of the special, inward perspective through which he understood himself, not only in relation to men, but also in relation to God.

All this may perhaps appear paradoxical to us, and it did indeed seem so to many of More's contemporaries. More's own family, failing to understand the motives upon which he acted, urged him to submit to Henry the Eighth as they themselves were to do. On the other side, the Protestant historian Edward Halle, writing shortly after More's death, was horrified that More could jest as he ascended the scaffold. People did not do such things, Halle believed, and he ended by puzzling over More's personality --"I cannot tell whether I should call him a foolish wise man or a wise foolish man." Yet Halle saw that More was both wise and foolish even if he failed to understand how any man could be both at once, especially at the moment when "all the seasons" were to become one under the executioner's axe. But More himself, in his dying words, affirmed his double vision with passionate sincerity. Foolish though he might be in the eyes of the world, he was wise enough not to deny that the world had its claims. "I die", he said, "the King's good servant, but God's first." The perspectives, as always with this remarkable man, were perfectly in focus.

If we move backward now, from More's death, to glance briefly at his life, we find, I think, that the principle which he expressed in his last words on the scaffold was indeed a governing motive in most of his activities. He managed, in singular

fashion, to combine the active and contemplative lives within his own personality. A born scholar, he no doubt enjoyed his early years at Oxford; yet, when his father insisted that he leave the University to study law at the Inns of Court, he responded dutifully, making sure, however, that, in the midst of his legal studies, he could still find time to meditate with the Carthusian monks at the Charterhouse and to lecture on St. Augustine in a London church. We constantly find that he is doing two things at once and it often seems that one of his activities should have been precluded by the other. In 1506 he translated a life of Pico della Mirandola, adapting it as devout treatise for a friend of his who had become a nun; but in the same year he also translated the witty and worldly-wise dialogues of Lucian with his friend Erasmus. In 1522, shortly after he was knighted and made under-treasurer, a period, surely, when we would think that public affairs would absorb all his time, we find him engaged, with his children, in writing a devotional treatise on the four last things -- death, judgment, heaven and hell. It is hardly surprising, in view of such a pattern, that More, as he mounted the scaffold, should turn to his escort and say, merrily, "I pray you, master lieutenant, see me safe up, and for my coming down, let me shift for my self."

You will perhaps have noticed how, as I have tried to illustrate the ways in which More, throughout his life, reveals his multi-levelled character, I have drawn many of my examples from his literary works, the books he wrote or translated. Such illustrations come naturally enough to an editor, and I beg your indulgence if I have wandered off to that side of St. Thomas which I know best. Yet, when we think about it, More's fame today is due in no small part to one of his books, a book whose title has become a household word, and a work that has made him known in many circles where he is not revered as a saint. More's

canonization is a recent thing; it came in 1935, four hundred years after his death. But *Utopia*, appearing at the end of 1516, spread More's name over all of Western Europe within a year. Perhaps the book went everywhere -- as it has continued to do -- partly because its title means "no where" -- *nusquam*, as More playfully called it when referring to it in his letters to Erasmus. And if *Utopia* is a paradoxical book because, being nothing, it became everything, then this too helps us to understand More's complex figure... He wrote it, you see, backwards. The second book was composed in 1515 while More was on a diplomatic mission for the King in the Low Countries (as usual, he was doing two things at once); the first book was added later, in London in early 1516, after More had returned from his embassy.

We can see, I think, in the two-book structure of *Utopia*, an almost perfect reflection of the double pattern that I have been describing as characteristic of More. Book II, which describes the imaginary island of Utopia, is contemplative and removed; it concerns itself with ideals of social justice and offers us a picture of a world in which every man has everything because no man has anything. More's vision here is profoundly Christian and his society is modelled, in part, on the communal settlements of the early Church; but the communism of Utopia has also made his work a treasured volume in modern Russia. Yet the world of the Utopians is not our everyday world, as More well knew. And that is why he wrote Book I, a piercing portrayal of sixteenth-century Europe as it actually was, not as it could or should be. In that world, all too real for More and very like, in some unfortunate respects, our own present day society, social injustice and not social justice reigned supreme. The poor got poorer and the rich got richer; men were rewarded not according to their talents but according to their ability to flatter or to cheat. Not a pretty world, surely,

but, just as the world of Book II, though lovely and idealistic, was not totally beyond attainment, so the contemporary society portrayed in Book I, though ugly, was not unredeemable.

The important thing to remember, in reading *Utopia*, is that Thomas More wrote Book I and Book II, and that, somehow, the total meaning of the work is contained not in his contemplative vision of a new world and not in his biting satire on an old world, but rather in his complex fusion of the ideal and the practical which kept, on the one hand, his grasp of reality from degenerating into cynicism and, on the other, his dreams from evaporating into airy nothings.

In the prefatory letter which he wrote to his friend Peter Giles, we find More explaining just how difficult it was for him to remain true to both his vision --which was internal and ideal-- and his concern for practical affairs, which involved him in a host of personal responsibilities. He has been so busy, he tells Giles, that he could hardly find time to complete his book :

I am constantly engaged in legal business, either pleading or hearing, either giving an award as arbiter or deciding a case as judge. I pay a visit of courtesy to one man and go on business to another. I devote almost the whole day in public to other men's affairs and the remainder to my own. I leave to myself, that is to learning, nothing at all.

When I have returned home, I must talk with my wife, chat with my children, and confer with my servants. All this activity, I count as business when it must be done --and it must be unless you want to be a stranger in your own home. Besides, one must take care to be as agreeable as possible to those whom nature has supplied, or chance has made, or you yourself have chosen, to be the companions of your life, provided you do not spoil them by

kindness, or through indulgence make masters out of your servants.

Amid these occupations that I have named, the day, the month, the year slip away. When, then, can we find time to write? Nor have I spoken a word about sleep, nor even of food, which for many people takes up as much time as sleep --and sleep takes up almost half a man's life! So I get for myself only the time I filch from sleep and food. Slowly, therefore, because this time is but little, yet finally, because this time is something, I have finished *Utopia* and sent it to you, my dear Peter, to read --and to remind me of anything that has escaped me.

In *Utopia*, I feel, More summed himself up at the literary level just as, on the scaffold, he summed up his life in his double-edged final words. He had a vision, and he reflected upon it, and then he put it in a book. Books, as we are especially reminded by today's ceremony, belong in libraries, for in such buildings, they can both be preserved for the future and employed, by a variety of readers, in the present. I was very pleased to note, when I examined some of the material which Brother Ivo Regan sent me on the new library here, that Gilmour is very fortunate indeed in having, in its library, two collections of old and rare books, the Higgins Collection and the Follansbee Collection. You are fortunate not only because few prep school or high school libraries have such collections, with all of their attendant educational advantages, but also because there is a definite appropriateness in the fact that a library named after Thomas More should possess books dating back to the earlier centuries of printing history.

Now this appropriateness is partly a matter of historical coincidence, but it has its significance. Thomas More and the printing press, you see, were born, in England, in the same year

--1477, the year when William Caxton issued, from his press at Westminster, a work known as *The Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers*, the first book printed in England. More grew up not only with books, but with the printed book itself. He would have been a bookish man in any literate culture, even if books meant only rolls of papyrus or manuscript folios as they had done in the past. But, born when he was, More saw a typographical culture develop around him as he himself advanced in years and he often stopped to comment on the blessings that were being conferred on humanity by this, to him, so very modern invention. Thus he praised Erasmus' edition of the Greek *New Testament*, which appeared, like the *Utopia*, in 1516; and he remarked, in defending it against the attacks of conservative theologians, that it was a wonderful thing to have thousands of copies of the same work, all of them with the same page and line numbers. Manuscripts, written by hand, were always unique and almost always at variance with each other in their readings. The printed book changed all that, for now every man read the same text. For the first time it became possible to write to a friend and tell him to look on page sixty for a particular passage. Knowledge, because it was both more accurately transmitted and more widely shared, became more immediately relevant to practical affairs. Men now could see, in black and white, what in earlier days they had usually only heard. Thomas More's esteem for the new invention is evident from the *Utopia* itself, where he tells us how, when the first Europeans reached that remarkable island, they discovered that there were only two treasures which they possessed and the Utopians did not -- Christianity and the printing press.

More's life was thus intimately involved with books, with both the reading and writing of them. We are only now beginning to discover, by tracking down allusions which he makes in his writings and by studying remarks made by contemporaries about

his knowledge, just how wide his reading really was and how full his own library must have been. We even have one or two books which he did in fact own, though almost all of his personal property was surrendered to the crown and eventually dispersed after his death. How much his books meant to him can be seen from the fact that he had many of them with him during his fourteen months' imprisonment in the Tower of London before his execution. There he read and he wrote until, as the royal pressure on him reached its climax during the last month before his trial, the king's agents packed up his books and left him alone with himself.

More knew, of course, that a time had to come when books must be put aside. Yet this awareness in no way lessened the value he placed on the study of them. Perhaps he felt that reading a good book in some way did justice to the double aspect of his personality that I have already described. For alert reading is both an active and a passive process: one withdraws into himself, but he remains, as we say, wrapped up in a book, involved with the lives and thoughts of other men. The involvement is only vicarious, but it can rehearse us, so to speak, for the larger involvements with others that life itself always demands. We know that More viewed books and libraries in this light, for all of his biographers dwell affectionately on the house that he built for himself at Chelsea, a suburban retreat with a private chapel and a library, to which More would retire for prayer and study.

More loved that "new building", as the combined chapel and library were called, and perhaps no one knew better how much he loved it than his second wife, the famous Dame Alice, a widow whom More had married just one month after the mother of his four children had died. This second marriage was a practical one; not without love, to be sure, but Dame Alice was a woman of the world, hard-headed,

and she knew how to appeal to her husband's love of life. Towards the end of More's imprisonment, just about the time when his books were taken from him, she visited him in his cell, trying to persuade him to submit to the King. Here is Roper's account of the scene, which reveals, far better than I can do, both the involvement and the detachment which were so fundamental to More's personality :

When Sir Thomas More had continued a good while in the Tower, my lady his wife obtained license to see him ; who at her first coming, like a simple, ignorant woman and somewhat worldly too, with this manner of salutation bluntly saluted him :

"What the good-year, Master More", quoth she, "I marvel that you that have been always hitherto taken for so wise a man will now so play the fool to lie here in this close, filthy prison and be content thus to be shut up among mice and rats when you might be abroad at your liberty and with the favor and good will both of the King and his council, if you would but do as all the bishops and best learned of this realm have done. And seeing you have at Chelsea a right fair house, your library, your books, your gallery, your garden, your orchard, and all other necessaries so handsome about you, where you might in the company of me your wife, your children, and household, be merry, I muse what, a God's name, you mean here still thus fondly to tarry."

After he had a while quietly heard her, with a cheerful countenance he said unto her:

"I pray thee, good Mistress Alice, tell me one thing."

"What is that ?" quoth she.

"Is not this house", quoth he, "as nigh heaven as my own ?"

To whom she, after her accustomed homely

fashion, not liking such talk, answered :
"Tilly-valle, tilly-valle !"

"How say you, Mistress Alice", quoth he, "is it not so ?"

"Bone deus, bone deus, good God, man, will this gear never be left ?" quoth she.

"Well, then, Mistress Alice, if it be so", quoth he, "it is very well. For I see no great cause why I should much joy either of my gay house or of anything belonging there unto, when, if I should but seven years lie buried under the ground and then arise and come thither again, I should not fail to find some therein that would bid me get me out of doors and tell me it were none of mine. What cause have I then to like such an house as would so soon forget his master ?"

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I am inclined to believe that Thomas More might very well like the "house" that is dedicated to him here today ; and I both hope and trust that it will be a house, a "new building", which will not soon forget its master.