

☛ Saint Thomas More, Patron of Lawyers and Model for Our Changing Times

By John Cardinal Wright

WHO ARE THE saints and what is their function in our lives? A modern writer puts it somewhat like this: From the beginning God intended us to walk before His face in holiness. But we could hardly know what holiness is, for our fathers became entangled in evil and error, and the fantasies of sin obscured the vision of sanctity within us and among us. And so, God sent His Son to live among us that whoever saw Him might see the holiness of the Father also. But as the years go by, even His likeness is continually darkened by human interpretations, painted over and distorted, until His features are scarcely discernible; we come to remember Him only on the level of doctrine, not as first we saw Him in the flesh and in the glory of His holiness. Then the saint comes, and lives the very life of Christ, as it were, before the eyes of those who share his circumstances, his work and his manner and condition of life. He represents that life of Christ, so that each of us, seeing both something of Christ and something of himself in the saint, may glean and guess with longing how Christ would have lived had He been we and shared our walk in life.

This is the great function of the saints; that is the practical point of our preaching the memory of their sublime merits. This is the greatest gift of the saints to us; not the stream of good deeds which they shower on the earth; not the great works of their hands, nor the books of their wisdom, but the fact that, because of them, the living likeness of the Master of Men, the hero of our race, the image of the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, never quite disappears from the earth. Our saints, each in the context and calling he shares with us, reflect to each of us according to our nature and need that which God wills and our own best selves desire us to be.

Hence the great fascination and mighty example of a saint like Paul for the preacher of the word; or that of a saint like Francis for the servant of the poor; or that of a saint like King Louis for the wearer of a royal crown; or a saint like Thomas à Becket for a churchman in times of bitter conflict with the spirit of the world. Hence, too, the appeal of Thomas More to a layman who belongs to a learned profession or is bound by

public office and personal conscience to apply, to interpret, to plead, to practice and himself keep the Law.

Who is this saint, this mighty man of God, who is the exemplar and patron of the layman and the lawyer? He was born in London in February, 1477 or 1478; he died there, executed by King Henry, whom he served with intelligence and fidelity, on July 6, 1535. The son of a father himself devoted to the law, young More became first the page and then the protegee of Archbishop Morton, who loved him dearly and directed him to Canterbury Hall, now Christ Church, at Oxford.

He studied the law in Lincoln's Inn, distinguishing himself for his skill as a pleader and for the sharpness and grace of his mind. Cardinal Wolsey, the arrogant genius who succeeded in winning for himself symbols of the power of both Pope and King, drew young More into his civil service. The young man was shortly knighted and taken into the privy council of the King. Successively Under-Treasurer of the Exchequer, Speaker of the House of Commons, envoy to France, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, he finally replaced the worldly Cardinal as Lord High Chancellor, a post to which he brought a scrupulous integrity and uncompromising loyalty. He resigned the Great Seal when he could not in conscience acquiesce to Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Then, when finally the King was declared supreme head of the Church in England, More declined to take the oath of supremacy and paid with his head for his resistance to a totalitarian political pattern which has become so familiar in our later days. Sir Thomas accepted disgrace and death literally with cheer and with lighthearted banter that made outwardly merry his inward indomitable and austere adherence to the due order of values and to the proper primacy of principle, personal conscience and the things of the spirit.

The King, moved by his many and great debts to Sir Thomas, as well as by affection for the man and the friend, softened the sentence for treason from hanging, disembowelling and quartering, to mere beheading, an act of grace which More received in his usual vein of ready wit. He ventured the good-humored hope that none of his friends might ever have occasion to experience like mercy from the King!

A scholar of varied and genuine erudition; an orator of ready and amiable eloquence; a friend of discriminating, warm affection; a lawyer and public servant of painstaking, assiduous and learned skill; a spouse and father of exemplary virtue and provident, greathearted family spirit; one of the brightest personalities of the Renaissance: the Church offers him as an inspiration to all lawyers and public servants who officially preserve and promote the good order of this world, but who would not personally lose the good things of the world to come.

Such, in summary so brief that by it one only hopes to awaken the desire to read and reflect further on the full story of this man of renown in the liberal and sound traditions of statesmanship, was the life of Thomas More.

Dean Swift said of him that he was "the person of the greatest virtue this Kingdom [of England] has ever produced." The Anglican scholar and clergyman, W. H. Hutton, declared it difficult to speak of More without using language which seems extravagant. Dr. Hutton found his character so beautiful, his life so simple and so pure, his conscientiousness so complete, his end so heroic, that he stands out among the sordid meannesses of the sixteenth century like a single star in the darkness of a world of disappointing popes, disagreeable kings, greedy statesmen and spineless civil and ecclesiastical functionaries.

Historical research, which has reversed to their disadvantage the judgment of the sixteenth century concerning so many of More's contemporaries, has but increased the moral stature of this layman in the Church and lawyer in the world, the lustre of whose virtues and talents has grown with the passing centuries.

To present his moral portraiture I might choose from widely diversified and otherwise almost mutually irreconcilable sources. I might, of course, cite the tribute in which the Pope of Rome lauded his memory in the moment of his canonization. But so, too, I might reproduce a letter from Moscow in which an institution bearing the name of Karl Marx communicated with a convent of English nuns, seeking information on a mutual interest: the life and work of this so universally attractive scholar, social visionary and intrepid saint. I might quote to you from the Socialist Karl Kautsky, or the Catholic Theodore Maynard; from the Hollywood producer John Farrow, or the Harvard Law School professor Dean Roscoe Pound. But none would notably enhance nor, assuredly, reduce the estimate of him which Erasmus wrote while More was still alive.

It is not often that a priest finds sermons in the sometimes acid pages of Erasmus, yet one could not do better in sketching the ideal portraiture of the devout member of a learned profession than to recall some pertinent passages from a letter that Erasmus wrote on Sir Thomas More:

His house seems to have a sort of fatal felicity, no one having lived in it without being advanced to higher fortune, no inmate having ever had a stain upon his character.

It would be difficult to find anyone living on such terms with a mother as he does with his stepmother. . . . His affection for his parents, children and sisters is such that he neither wearies them with his love, nor ever fails in any kind attention.

His character is entirely free from any touch of avarice. He has set aside out of his property what he thinks sufficient for his children, and spends the rest in a

liberal fashion. When he was still dependent on his profession, he gave every client true and friendly counsel, with an eye to their advantage rather than his own, generally advising them that the cheapest thing they could do was to come to terms with their opponents. If he could not persuade them to do this, he pointed out how they might go to law at least expense; for there are some people whose character leads them to delight in litigation. . . .

It has always been part of his character to be most obliging to everybody, and marvellously ready with his sympathy; and this disposition is more conspicuous than ever, now that his power of doing good is greater. Some he relieves with money, some he protects by his authority, some he promotes by his recommendation, while those whom he cannot otherwise assist are benefited by his advice. No one is sent away in distress, and you might call him the general patron of all poor people. He counts it a great gain to himself, if he has relieved some oppressed person, made the path clear for one that was in difficulties, or brought back into favour one that was in disgrace. No man more readily confers a benefit, no man expects less in return. And successful as he is in so many ways—while success is generally accompanied by self-conceit, I have never seen any mortal being more free from this failing. . . . It would be difficult to find anyone more successful in speaking *ex tempore*, the happiest thought being attended by the happiest language; while a mind that catches and anticipates all that passes, and a ready memory, having everything as it were in stock, promptly supplies whatever the time, or the occasion, demands. In disputations nothing can be imagined more acute, so that the most eminent theologians often find their match, when he meets them on their own ground. Hence John Colet, a man of keen and exact judgment, is wont to say in familiar conversation, that England has only one genius, whereas the island abounds in distinguished intellects.

However averse he may be from all superstition, he is a steady adherent of true piety; having regular hours for his prayers, which are not uttered by rote, but from the heart. He talks with his friends about a future life in such a way as to make you feel that he believes what he says, and does not speak without the best hope. Such is More, even at Court; and there are still people who think that Christians are only to be found in monasteries!

The lessons of More's life are many and for us all; they are, of course, particularly in point for members of the legal profession. Of general interest is the striking parallel between certain aspects of his times and ours, between his destiny and what may easily be that, however secret and unsung, of many men in our day.

More's time and our own are both ages of transition. In his day the medieval order was yielding to an intellectual and economic revolution, and Christendom was rent by the divisions between Protestant and Catholic. In our day Western civilization is on trial in all spheres. The pressure of totalitarianism in various forms makes it easy to restate the central problem of More's destiny—that of liberty of conscience—in modern terms: it has been done on stage and screen. The story of his life in a confused and changing society and his death on the scaffold, after a mock trial, has deep significance to every modern man.

But to members of the legal profession the memory of St. Thomas More has special lessons for guidance, instruction and consolation. One aspect of his record of achievement is of passing, perhaps whimsical interest in places where state and local governments have tried to speed up court action.

When More came to the Chancellor's Court he found a backlog of cases that had dragged on for twenty years. He vowed to remedy the situation and his vow was not lightly made. Eventually there came one welcome morning when he was informed by the officers of the court that there was no more unfinished business, nor another cause or petition to be put before him. So was born a popular rhyme:

When MORE some time had Chancellor been,
No more suits did remain;
The same shall never more be seen
Till MORE be there again.

Clearly not the least of St. Thomas More's good examples to us is that which he gave against "the insolence of office and the law's delay"!

There are certain other points for meditation which we may glean from the life of this lawyer saint. The first follows from the fact that the lawyer is a member of a learned profession. He is therefore called to a love for the things of the mind, and he is bound to play his part in keeping alive the authentic humanistic spirit exemplified in men like Thomas More. He must have a knowledge and love for the liberal arts, those traditional "humanities" which, with the grace of God, must save us from cold materialism and de-humanizing technocracy.

Only thus will the lawyer play his proper part in the cultural revolutions of our times, a part which should parallel that which More and his like played in the comparable upheavals of his age. A man of More's learning was inevitably attached to the values of the old order; his intellectual curiosity made him sensible to those of the new. He had no part with those who would defend the old Faith only with out-moded weapons inconsistent with and inadequate to the demands of the new learning and the new methods. But neither would he cast his lot with those who, swept off their feet by the new ideas and new methods, became insensible, indifferent and finally renegade to the imperishable values of the old Faith. A devout humanistic spirit like that of More, bold yet humble, venturesome in vision yet steadfast in attachment to old truths, is a primary need of the learned professions in our own changing times.

Second, the professional man, the man in public life, remains a family man. His obligations to his career and his commitments to his public

office do not exempt him from his primary duty to be the head of his family, the companion of his spouse, the first and best educator of his own children. By the time he had reached his thirty-fifth birthday, Thomas More had achieved a state of living that would have satisfied the aims of most men. He was a lawyer with a wide and lucrative practice. As Under-Sheriff he had gained an envied position in the City of London. He was a popular "bencher" among his colleagues at Lincoln's Inn. He was an acknowledged scholar with a large circle of distinguished friends. But he took pains to be a fond parent and a considerate husband.

In the letter sending the manuscript of *Utopia* to an Antwerp friend, he wrote: "For while in pleading, in hearing, in deciding causes, or composing disputes as an arbitrator, in waiting on some men about business, and on others out of respect, the greatest part of the day is spent on other men's affairs, the remainder of it must be given to my family at home; . . . I must gossip with my wife and chat with my children, and find something to say to my servants; for all these things I reckon a part of my business, unless I were to become a stranger in my house. . . ." One suggests, without offense, I hope, that many families of professional men in our day would be the more stable and proud if their fathers could give more of their time to their sons and daughters, more of their intimate, personal love and interest than of their mere money and indulgence.

Third, the citizen of this world, the servant of its powers and principalities, its kings or its democratic majorities, remains the subject and the servant of God. That is the pattern of More's life and the point of his death. He could have been, as Wolsey was, the most powerful man in England, next only to the king, if he would have strained his conscience a bit on a point which, God help us, seems almost minor to our day and on which in his day churchmen compromised themselves.

In this, the contrast between the enlightened, sensitive nobility of the lawyer, Thomas More, and the deterioration of the prelate, Thomas Wolsey, is worth constant meditation. Wolsey and More were as unlike in many ways as men can be. One, in scarlet magnificence, was to live with a splendor never seen before or since in England. The other, in hair shirt, singing in a parish choir, was to be criticized because of the modesty of his ways. Both were to win the fickle friendship of Henry VIII, and both were to attract the petulant anger of young Anne Boleyn. "I die the King's good servant, but God's first," declared More as he faced martyrdom, gracefully meeting death with a prayer, a quip and a holy joy. "If I had served God as diligently as I have done the King," lamented Wolsey at the end, "He would not have given me over in my gray hairs."

Here, surely is a lesson for our times, a lesson for all men, high and low, who ride this planet across the troubled universe of the twentieth century.

What a glory for lawyers that one of them should so instruct us! What a tragedy for the Church and for the State, if the pattern of such a life should be lost to us, whatever else be lost in these changing times!

Vatican City

SUNDRY READINGS EPITOMIZED

Sir Thomas Moor who lived in King Henry the Eights time and had many high Offices and places of trust, the King So highly vallued him for his Learning Wisdome Experience and Exterordinary gifts of Nature, and unparalleld Integrity and Impartiallity, that he was made Lord Charcllor of England. when his Sons complained how little they gained under him, haveing small advantage of his Dignity. I will (said he) doe Justice to any man for yor Sake; and leave you a Blessing &c.

Hee would say the world was undone by looking on things at a Distance 2ly to ayme at Honour here is to Set a Coat of Armes over a Prison Gate.

He that is Covetous when he is Old, is like a Thiefe that Steales when he is goinge to the Gallows

That the greatest punishment in the world is to have our wishes

Men take more paines to goe to Hell, then they might goe to Heaven with.

The more we have of any thing Else but Riches the better, and more good we are.

Who would not send his Almes to Heaven, who would not send his Estate where he is to be Banish'd.

When any one Detracted from others, at his Table he said let any man thinke as he pleaseth I like the room well.

He wished three things in Cristendome an universall peace 2d uniforme Religion 3ly a Reformation Rather of lives then Religion. He was Beheaded for Denying the King Supremcy. . . .

Camden Reports of Sir Thomas Moore that he used to compare the greate Number of Women to be Chosen for wives, to a bag full of Snakes haveing but one Ele in it, amongst them all: So that if A man put his hand into the Bag, he may chance to light upon the Ele: but it is a hundred to one if he be not Stung with a Snake. Another Compares the Choice of a Wife to a meere Lottery, where a man may have many blankes to one Prise.

— Notebook of John Saffin, Massachusetts jurist (1632-1710); *John Saffin His Book* (New York: Harbor Press, 1928), pp. 127-9