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THE SAINT STEPHEN MOTIF
IN SAINT THOMAS MORE'S THOUGHT

St. Thomas More, addressing his judges at the conclusion of his trial, makes a comparison between himself and St. Stephen, the protomartyr, which strikes the reader by its vividness and aptness. One is prompted to ask why More chose this saint for his comparison, and upon turning to the writings of More with this image in mind, it becomes apparent that the St. Stephen figure was present in his thought long before his own troubled times. This article will point out some possible sources of the St. Stephen image and the frequent use which More makes of it. The Stephen figure appears so frequently that it constitutes a motif woven throughout More's writings and indicates that Christian typology was an habitual way of thinking for him. This fact has passed unnoticed by More's biographers and has been overlooked in More scholarship in general. The omission precludes a fuller understanding of More's complex intellectual make-up.

By 1504 More decided that his vocation was not to the Carthusian way of life and he married Jane Colt. They were to live at Bucklersbury in the parish of St. Stephen Walbrook, London, until moving to Chelsea some time about 1524. Sir Thomas' participation in the activities of the parish --singing in the choir, serving Mass, walking in processions and making pilgrimages-- is recorded by his biographers. An important aspect of parochial life at this time was attendance at sermons. Using Dr. G.R. Owst's scholarly studies, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* and *Preaching in Medieval England*, Philip Hughes has carried the investigation on into the sixteenth century.

There can be no reasonable doubt that sermons were constantly preached. We have testimony to the fact in the repeated reminder to the layman, given in the little books written as aids to prepare for a good confession of sins, that it is a duty in conscience to attend sermons. And we have further testimony in the many books written to assist the clergy to prepare their sermons. One of the most recent studies of this matter can speak of there being at this time "a real anxiety to form good preachers." And we have the testimony of the innumerable sermons that have survived, and that are, only now, beginning really to be studied (1).

Among the favorite sermon topics were the lives of the saints and martyrs, and More, no doubt, would have heard many sermons about St. Stephen, particularly since it was customary to preach on the patron saint of the parish. In *The Dialogue Concerning Tyndale* one of the "merry tales" addresses itself to the "miracle" of begetting new life by a young married couple. Perhaps More had in mind the marriage of his own daughter Margaret to William Roper which occurred sometime shortly after July 2, 1521. The point of interest here is More's reference to the practice of celebrating the feast day of the parish: "... at last they came together and were married in saint Stephen's church, which is not greatly famous for any miracles; but yet yearly on saint Stephen's day it is somewhat sought unto, and visited with folks' devotion." (2). Later in the same work More refers to the rather curious popular practice: "And on St. Stephen's day we must let all our horses' blood with a knife, because St. Stephen was killed with stones." (3). Further evidence of popular devotion to St. Stephen is shown by the appearance of the hymn "Now syng we both all & sum: / Lapidauerunt Stephanum" among the sacred songs and carols in Richard Hill's commonplace-book, a collection which extends from the early years of Henry VIII's reign until 1536 (4). It was a traditional practice to choose a patron saint as a model of the virtues one desired to

imitate in one's own life. "The excerpts hitherto passed in review have emphasized that vivid, human side of the preachers' treatment of the saints which was calculated to promote imitation of their holy lives, as well as to stimulate devotion to the persons of the saints themselves." (5). Just as More took Pico della Mirandola as a model of the Christian humanist, so too he appears to have adopted St. Stephen as a model of charity toward one's adversaries and made this lesson an integral part of his own conduct.

St. Stephen's disposition toward his persecutors at the moment of death deeply impressed More and it is this particular facet of the saint's character to which he frequently alludes. Although this attitude of St. Stephen's charity toward his enemies is found in Acts 7: 55-59, there is also a definite patristic source with which More would have been familiar. His knowledge of the Fathers of the Church and the influence which their writings exerted on his thinking is evident from even a cursory glance through his controversial works, devotional treatises and personal letters. One of the interesting things about these writings, however, is that where More frequently lists the "old holy fathers" he does not cite St. Fulgentius from whom the St. Stephen motif in his thought very probably derives (6). The works of Fulgentius were first edited by Wilibald Pirckheimer and Johannes Cochläus in 1520 at Hagenau and so would be available to More (7). But it is more likely that he obtained his knowledge of Fulgentius from the Breviary. The lessons for the second nocturn at Matins on the feast of St. Stephen December 26, are taken from Fulgentius' third sermon on St. Stephen. Lesson vi speaks of the power of Stephen's charity:

Now let us consider, brethren, the arms with which Stephen girt himself to overcome the cruelty of the Jews, and arrive at so blessed a triumph. Stephen, indeed, deserved to bear his name--"the crowned"--for he had armed himself with the mail of love, and conquered through it everywhere. Because of his love for God he was unshaken before the cruelty of

the Jews ; through his love for his neighbor he interceded even for those who stoned him. Through love he argued with the erring that they might be corrected ; through love he prayed for those who stoned him lest they be punished. Strong with the might of love he overcame Saul who had compassed his death cruelly, and won his persecutor on earth as his comrade in heaven (8).

The lessons of this office in the Carthusian Breviary correspond with those in the Roman Breviary and so would be familiar to More from his four years spent in the London Charterhouse. Later, when he decided that he did not have a vocation to be a monk, had married and was raising his family, Ro:Ba: reports that "he had also the care that on euery feast & Sunday all should here Masse. At the Solemnities of Easter, Christmas, Whit sonday, all Saintes, and the like, he would haue all to arise at night, and go to the Church, there to be present at Mattins, and after at Even song." (9).

The thought of the saint's charity at the time of his martyrdom is continually in More's mind and becomes a recurring theme in his writings. In *The Dialogue Concerning Tyndale* he uses this as an example of the love of the saints. "We see that the nearer that folk draw thitherward (toward heaven), the more good mind bear they to men here. And therefore St. Stephen when he saw heaven open for him, he began to pray for them that maliciously killed him. And think we then, that being in heaven, he will not vouchsafe to pray for them that devoutly honour him, but hath less love and charity being there, than he had going thitherward ?" (10). The obligation of the Christian to love his enemies echoes all through *The Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, composed while More was in the Tower of London. To the objection that to die for the faith under such conditions was shameful in the eyes of men, More again turns to the example of St. Stephen for his answer :

"Howe can that death be shamefull that is glorious ? or howe can it be but glorious, to dye for the faith of Christ, if we die both for the faith and in the faith ioyned with hope and charitie, whyle ye scripture so plainly sayth : Pretiosa in conspectu domini mors sanctorum eius : Precious is in the sight of God, the death of hys Sayntes. Nowe if the death of hys Sayntes be glorious in the sight of God : it can neuer be shamefull in verye dede, how shamefull soeuer it seeme here in the syghte of menne. For here we may see and be sure, that not at the death of saynt Steuen only, to whom it lyked him to shewe himselfe with the heauen open ouer his headde, but at the death also of euery man that so dieth for the fayth : God with his heauenlye companye, beholdeth his whole passion, and verely looketh on." (11).

In a letter to Dr. Nicholas Wilson, who was also a prisoner for refusing to swear to the Act of Supremacy, More writes :

But for my selff I moste humbly beseche hym to gyve me the grace in suche wyse pacyently to conforme my mynde vnto his highe pleasuer therin that after the trobelouse storme of this my tempestyous tyme his greate mercy may conducte me in to the suer haven of the ioyfull blysse of hevyn, and after at his further plesuer (yf I haue eny) all myne enymes to, for there shall we loue together well inoughe and I thanck our Lord for my parte so do I here to. Be not angry now thoughe I pray not lyke for you, you be suer ino(u)g I wolde my frendys fare no worse than they, nor yet they, so helpe me (God, no) worse than my selff. (12)

On July 1, 1535 More was tried in Westminster Hall, judged guilty and condemned to die. When the verdict had been pronounced he made a short speech disclosing his thoughts concerning the legality of the Act of Supremacy and of his own trial. William Roper, his son-in-law and first biographer, gives the account of this speech. And

then :

After which ended, the Commissioners yeat further curteouslye offred him, if he had any thinge els to alleage for his defence, to graunt him favorable audience. Who awneswered: "More haue I not to say, my Lordes, but that like as the blessed Apostle St Pawle, as we read in thactes of the Apostles, was present, and consented to the death of St Stephen, and kepte their clothes that stoned him to deathe, and yeat be they (nowe) both twayne holy Sainctes in heaven, and shall continue there frendes for euer, So I verily (truste), and shall therefore right hartelye pray, that thoughe your lordshippes haue nowe (here) in earthe bine Judges to my condemnacion, we may yeat hereafter in heaven merrily all meete together, to our euerlasting saluacion." (13)

It is noteworthy that the chapel in Westminster Hall was dedicated to St. Stephen and, without doubt, More had prayed and meditated there frequently during those years in which he himself was judging cases as Chancellor. In 1547 Henry VIII transferred the Commons from the Chapter House in Westminster Abbey to St. Stephen's Chapel. The name "St. Stephen's" became a synonym for the House of Commons and remained in use until that part of Westminster Hall was destroyed by fire in 1834. (14) One would like to speculate whether the various Speakers of the House during these years were ever aware of the devotion to St. Stephen of one of their most illustrious predecessors in that high office ?

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N O T E S

- 1) - Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England* (London : Hollis and Carter, 1952), I, 94.
- 2) - St. Thomas More, *The Dialogue Concerning Tyndale*, ed. W.E. Campbell (London : Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1931), II, 46.
- 3) - *Ibid.*, 160.
- 4) - Roman Dyboski ed., *Songs, Carols and other Miscellaneous Poems, from the Balliol Ms. 354, Richard Hill's Commonplace - Book*, (London : EETS, E. S. Cl, 1907), p. 32.
- 5) - Hughes, p. 134.
- 6) - Fabius Cladius Gordianus Fulgentius (465 - 533) wrote against the Arians and Semi-pelagians. Next to St. Gregory he is the principal theologian of the sixth century.
- 7) - See Otto Bardenhewer, *Patrology* (St. Louis, 1908), p. 618.
- 8) - *Necessarium tamen nobis est, fratres, agnoscere, quibus armis praecinctus Stephanus saevitiam Judaeorum potuit superare, ut ita meruisset feliciter triumphare. Stephanus ergo, ut nominis sui coronam meruisset accipere, caritatem pro armis habebat, et per ipsam ubique vincebat. Per caritatem Dei saevientibus Judaeis non cessit : per caritatem proximi pro lapidantibus intercessit. Per caritatem arguebat errantes, ut corrigerentur : per caritatem pro lapidantibus orabat, ne punirentur. Caritatis virtute subnixus, vicit Saulum crudeliter saevientem ; et quem habuit in terra persecutorem, in caelo meruit habere consortem. Breviarium Romanum, Pars Hiemalis (Turonibus : Sumptibus et Typis Mame, 1953), pp. 495-496. Translation from the *Roman Breviary in English* : Winter, ed. Joseph A. Nelson (New York : Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1950), pp. 348-349. Cf. J.P. Migne, *Patrologia latina* (Paris, 1847), LXV, cols. 730-731, where the text varies from that of the Breviary.*

The lessons in the Sarum Breviary for the feast of St. Stephen are numbered and divided differently from those in the Roman Breviary but both are from Fulgentius. Cf. *Breviarium ad usum insignis ecclesiae Sarum* (Cantabrigiensis, 1882), fasc. I, cc-ccii.

- 9) - Ro:Ba:; *The Life of Sir Thomas More, Somtynes Lord Chancellour of England*, eds. Elsie V. Hitchcock and P.E. Hallett (London: EETS, O. S. CCXXII, 1950), pp.126-127.
- 10) - More, *Dialogue Concerning Tundale*, p.148.
- 11) - St. Thomas More, *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, III, 23, *WORKES* p. 1251 GH. The Vulgate quote from Psalm 115 is recited in the Breviary at the hour of Prime following the reading of the Martyrology for the day.
- 12) - *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. E.F. Rogers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p.538.
- 13) - William Roper, *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, knyghte*, ed. Elsie V. Hitchcock (London: EETS, O. S. CXCVII, 1935), p.96.
- 14) - See Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927), pp. 337-338.