

*Moreana*, no. 8 (Nov. 1965): 9-20

PATRISTIC COMFORTERS IN  
MORE'S *DIALOGUE OF COMFORT*

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In April of 1534 Sir Thomas More, recently Lord Chancellor of England (1529-32), was committed to the Tower of London for refusing to swear the oath of supremacy acknowledging Henry VIII as head of the English Church. During the fifteen months of his imprisonment, and preceding his execution in July, 1535, More wrote a number of letters, treatises, and devotional pieces. The most important of these was *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* -- the only substantial literary work, written in English, which Sir Thomas ever completed.

The *Comfort* treatise demonstrates forcibly that the greatest source of comfort to More in imprisonment was the Bible -- especially the Book of Job and the Pauline Epistles (1). However, ranking close to these as a source of strength were More's beloved "old holy doctors," the patristic writers, many of whom -- like More -- had battled heresy on the one hand, and been themselves persecuted on the other.

Among the patristic writers, St. Augustine (354-430) is overwhelmingly dominant in the *Dialogue of Comfort*. The phrase "St. Austen saith" appears in almost a dozen chapters (2). The *City of God* in particular undergirds More's discussion of suicide. More begins (II, 16) by appealing to Augustine's contention that suicide is the product of cowardice (3). He then cites (*ibid.*) Augustine's condemnation of self-destruction, and paraphrases

his interpretation of Samson's death : Samson can be excused only because he was divinely inspired to punish the Philistines (*City of God*, 1 : 19, 20). Most fascinating of all in More's suicide discussion is his retelling (p.268) of a grotesque story from the *City of God*, wherein certain "holy virtuous virgins" drowned themselves rather than be ravished by pagan soldiers. More repeats Augustine's explanation that in this rare instance the virgins were divinely instructed to kill themselves (4).

Far more significant, however, is Augustine's apparent influence on More's attitude toward pagan philosophy. At the very outset of the *Comfort* treatise (I, 1), Sir Thomas states his qualified regard for pagan thinkers. He insists that they did not regard God as the chief or ultimate source of comfort. They must therefore be relegated to the status of "apothecaries" serving the great Physician God -- and by implication, those assistant physicians (the church fathers) who speak for God. Yet the pagans obviously have "many goodly sayings... toward the strength and comfort against tribulation." More therefore concedes that "we shall... neither fully receive these philosophers' reasons in this matter, nor yet utterly refuse them." The policy will be to use them "in such order as shall beseem them," while relying on the "physicians" for "the principal and (most) effectual medicines against the diseases of tribulation."

More's approach to pagan philosophy is virtually identical with that of Augustine. This greatest of the church fathers was by no means blind to the fallacies of pagan philosophy. In the *City of God*, for example, we find him pinpointing five specific heresies which Plotinus inherits from Plato, especially the failure to teach "the Incarnation of the unchangeable Son of God, whereby we are saved, and are enabled to reach the things we believe." (5). Because of such errors, Augustine was forced to conclude that Plato could not be compared in excellence to "the truth-speaking prophets, nor... to any faithful Christian

man" (*City of God*, 2 : 14). On the other hand, he conceded that the Platonists "certainly" had much to "offer" (*ibid.* 8 : 5). Among philosophers, he declared, "none come nearer to us than the Platonists." Their "gold and silver was dug out of the mines of God's providence." Such truths as they possess the Christian should therefore take away and "devote to their proper use in the preaching of the Gospel." (6)

Now we know that More was early drawn to Augustine, and especially to the *City of God*, in which the above views are constantly reiterated (7). As a young lawyer (around 1502), More delivered a series of lectures on *De civitate dei* at St. Lawrence's Jewry in London (8). Moreover, as we have noted, he frequently cites the *City of God* in the *Dialogue of Comfort*. Under these circumstances, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Augustine was the chief inspiration for More's moderate attitude toward pagan thought. The amusing metaphor of pharmacists or apothecaries to denote the subordinate position of the old philosophers, however, can probably be accepted as More's original contribution.

Although Augustine is by far the dominant patristic authority in the *Comfort* treatise, a number of other church fathers are explicitly cited, among them Jerome, Ambrose, Bernard, and Cassian (9). St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was obviously a great favorite with More (10). A number of the French abbot's works were published in London during More's maturity -- e.g. *The medytacyons of saynt Bernarde* (W. de Worde, 1525), and *An Epistle... sent to a yong religyous man* (T. Godfrey, 1530, 1531, 1535). Whether More read these specific works is uncertain, but there can be no doubt of the impression which Bernard made on him generally. As the climax of Chapter 11 (Book II), for example, More cites Bernard's appealing doctrine that our protective shield is the Spirit of Christ within us. And in repudiation of those who in tribulation seek worldly rather than divine help, More paraphrases Bernard's simile of the drowning man who tries to save himself by

grabbing a stick (I, 3) (11).

Sir Thomas makes special use of stories drawn from the works of John Cassian (360?-432?) one of the founders of monastic institutions in Western Europe (12). At the outset of Book II, Vincent and Anthony are arguing over the merit of merry tales. Anthony regrets that men would rather hear funny stories than abstract truths about heaven. Yet he must accept the lesson of Cassian's story about a "certain holy father" who spoke so "celestially" of heaven that his congregation fell asleep. But when the father said, "I shall tell you a merry tale," his listeners woke up and paid strict attention (13). It is amusing to note that Anthony fails to repeat the main point of Cassian's story, namely, that the devil inspires men to tell merry tales in order to get their minds off heaven. We can be thankful that More ignored this point -- otherwise the *Dialogue of Comfort* might have lacked the interlaced merriment which makes it palatable.

As with Augustine, More makes effective use of Cassian in the discussion on suicide. Anthony has been seeking to convince Vincent that some men are joyous at, rather than troubled by, the thought of self-destruction. To prove his point, he relates (II, 16) a story from Cassian's *Collations*, about a monk who ecstatically killed himself because he thought he was so commanded by God (14). More uses this story as a springboard for a fascinating account of devilish delusions (*ibid.*). Chapters 6 and 7 of Cassian's *Collations* (Part II), as well as most of Parts VII and VIII of that same work, treat exactly the same theme: the temptation and destruction of man through the concocted illusions and machinations of the devil. There can be little question that Cassian profoundly influenced More's thinking in this area.

Crucial for More's preoccupation with pain and persecution in the *Dialogue of Comfort* are three church fathers who were essentially historians: Cyprian, Theodoret, and Eusebius. St. Cyprian, martyr and bishop of Carthage (200-258), is cited in Chapter 17 of Book III, where Anthony

first seeks to allay Vincent's terror of bodily pain. Here Anthony argues intensely that in various ways, God protects the faithful from torture. Some He helps to survive and live happily thereafter, "as we may well see...in the epistles of Saint Cyprian."

More must have been thinking here of Cyprian's Epistle 35, "To the Clergy and People about the Ordination of Celerinus as Reader." This letter relates how Celerinus was "for nineteen days shut up in the close guard of a dungeon, ...racked and in irons; but although his body was laid in chains, his spirit remained free... His flesh wasted away..., but God fed his soul." Celerinus survived the ordeal, and now "in his glorious body shine the bright evidences of his wounds." The 32nd letter tells a similar story about the newly appointed reader Aurelius. Epistle 34 relates how the presbyter Numidicus was half-burned and submerged beneath stones, but dragged out and revived (15). From these and other passages, it is clear why More as a prisoner in the Tower was drawn to St. Cyprian. In Epistles 8, 36 and 80, for example, Cyprian admonished Christians (as the *Dialogue* admonished Tudor Catholics) to withstand the tribulations of imprisonment and torture (16). Epistle 76 treats forced labor in mines, while 56-57 discuss banishment and exile (cf. More's chapter on captivity, III, 18). In the 52nd and 53rd letters, Cyprian considers a problem with which the *Dialogue of Comfort* also wrestles (III, 24), namely, what attitude to take toward Christians who recant under duress of torture. Most significant of all, as a confirmation of Cyprian's influence on More, is Epistle 55 ("To the People of Thebaris"). Here the bishop of Carthage, anticipating More at every point, gives warning of impending persecution, holds up the Passion as an inspiration for those who must suffer martyrdom, and stresses heavenly reward for those who stand fast (17).

Quite apart from the Epistles, at least two of Cyprian's treatises must have been a considerable interest to More. The first of these, *The Unity*

of the Catholic Church, treated a subject of grave concern to Sir Thomas (18). The second was *On the Mortality of Man*. It is a curious fact that this latter treatise, together with Pico della Mirandola's "Rules of a Christian Life," were translated into English by Sir Thomas Elyot and published in London as a single volume (STC 6157) by Thomas Berthelet in 1534, the very year in which the *Dialogue of Comfort* was composed. In view of Sir Thomas's early interest in Pico (witness his translation of the Italian's "Rules" and biography around 1505), it is tempting to speculate that More's attention might have been drawn or re-drawn to Cyprian through the Elyot volume. It was precisely the kind of book which the thoughtful Margaret Roper would have brought More in prison. In any event, we know that it was in imitation of St. Cyprian that More sent an "angel" of gold to his own executioner (19).

Another patristic historian whom More probably used was Theodoret, bishop of Cyprus in Syria (386-460). In the chapter (III, 17) on bodily pain, while emphasizing that many have survived torture and lived happily thereafter, More appeals not only to St. Cyprian but to the testimony of "sundry stories." One such story is found in Book III, chap. 3 of Theodoret's *Ecclesiastical History*: A certain Marcus had in Constantine's day destroyed an idol-shrine. When Julian the Apostate came to power, Marcus was whipped, flung in sewers, and stabbed by boys. Finally he was smeared with honey and hung up to be stung by wasps. His tormentors offered to release him if he would pay to rebuild the shrine. Marcus refused, whereupon the embarrassed pagans finally let him go, and "could not refrain from admiring his constancy." (20)

Theodoret, together with Cyprian and Eusebius (c. 260-c. 341), bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, must have been the chief sources for More's knowledge of the suffering of the early Christian martyrs. The example of these martyrs, and the failure of modern man to emulate them, was much on the prisoner More's mind. In Chapter 3 of the *Dialogue of Comfort* (Book III), Sir Thomas states

his case metaphorically: modern man is like a rootless tree shoved so carelessly into a "loose heap of light sand" that he falls over at the slightest wind of persecution. By contrast, the old martyrs were firmly rooted. If a man could only emulate their courage and faith, says the character Anthony, "he would no more now stick at the pain that he must pass between than at that time those old holy martyrs did." The allusion must be at least in part to the accounts in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, where a chief theme is the perseverance of martyrs under unspeakable tortures, including martyrdom by drowning (Book VIII, chaps. 9, 12, 13, 14); by slow burning (VIII, 6, 10); and by crucifixion (III, 32, VIII, 9) (21).

To be sure, Eusebius (like Theodoret) is not cited by name in any of the early printed editions of the *Dialogue of Comfort*. But More does include him in the *Dialogue concerning Tyndale* (Campbell ed., p. 302) among those church fathers who stamped out heresy. Also, we know that More's granddaughter Mary Bassett translated Eusebius from Greek into English (22). Sir Thomas probably never saw Mary's translation; but its very existence suggests the respect in which Eusebius was held by the Renaissance, and implies that the book was well known in More's household. Most conclusively of all, the initial version of the *Corpus Christi Ms* of the *Dialogue* had contained, in addition to the reference to St. Cyprian (III, 17), mention of Eusebius and St. Blandina as well. A second hand had crossed out these latter references. Rastell, apparently loath to leave anything out, restored the substance of the Eusebius-Blandina references as marginal notes on pp. 1235 and 1236 of his 1557 edition.

The courage of the old martyrs is a theme to which More understandably returns in the final chapter (III, 27) of the *Dialogue of Comfort*. Of God's gracious help why should we "so sore now despair," he asks, "when we see (that) so many a thousand holy martyrs by His holy help suffered as much before as any man shall be put to now?"

To the modern reader, steeped in the glamorous gore of Hollywood Biblical epics, the question means little. Few cinema-goers today know (or care) that some early Christians, as Theodoret tells us, had the skin stripped off their hands, backs, and faces. Others were impaled, bandaged in sword-sharp reeds, or immersed in pits of starving mice (23).

Nor were those who persevered in these hideous torments always men. As Sir Thomas declares in his final chapter (III, 27): "What excuse can we have by the tenderness of our flesh, when we can be no more tender than were many of them (i.e., the martyrs), among whom were not only men of strength but weak women and children?" On the basis of his reference to her in the central version of the Corpus Christi Ms, More obviously had in mind here the incredible example of St. Blandina, as described by Eusebius. A slave, she was thrown into prison with a number of other Christian Gauls in 177 A.D. Her companions feared she was too frail to withstand torture. But she withstood it so well that her torturers became exhausted. When she refused an offer of freedom if she would recant, she was bound to a stake and wild beasts set on her. Then she was scourged, placed on a red-hot grate, enclosed in a net, thrown before a wild steer, and finally stabbed to death. Through it all she remained faithful, and to every question repeated: "I am a Christian and we commit no wrong-doing." (24)

The modern reader, if he is unaware of the old martyrs' sufferings as related by Eusebius and others, can hardly hope to comprehend the emotional power which More's *Dialogue of Comfort*, through its references to these martyrs, had for those Tudor Catholic readers who faced persecution at the hands of Henry VIII. Second only to Christ's Crucifixion, the courage of the early Christians was the chief source of comfort and strength of Sir Thomas as he steeled himself for the prospect of violent death.

## NOTES

- 1) - Note More's *Utopia and A Dialogue of Comfort* (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1951), Part III, Chap. 14; and the moving passage on Paul's sufferings in II, 26. All references to the *Dialogue* are to this 1951 Everyman modern spelling edition.
- 2) - e.g. II, 17, p. 303; and III, 14, p. 351.
- 3) - See *De civitate dei*, Book I, Chaps. 22, 23. The handiest modern edition in two vols., is *Saint Augustine: The City of God*, ed. R.V.G. Tasker, Intro. Ernest Barker (Everyman ed.; London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1945). Two recent valuable studies are John H. Burleigh, *The City of God: A Study of St. Augustine's Philosophy* (London: Nisbet, 1949); and Marthinus Versfeld, *A Guide to the City of God* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1958).
- 4) - See *De civitate dei*, Book I, Chap. 25: "of some unlawful acts done by the saints." Augustine is not as certain as More implies that the virgins were divinely inspired.
- 5) - *City of God*, 10:29, 12:26. See also Roy Battenhouse (ed.), *Companion to the Study of St. Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 265-6, 292, 304-5, 340.
- 6) - *Christian Doctrine*, 2:40:60. Cf. *Companion*, p. 291; and *City of God*, 8:4 and 8:9.
- 7) - Note e.g. *City of God*, Book VIII, Chaps. 5-11, esp. 9 ("Of that philosophy that comes nearest to Christianity"), and 11 ("Whence Plato might have that knowledge that brought him so near the Christian doctrine").
- 8) - See E.E. Reynolds, *St. Thomas More* (Image ed.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 24-25.
- 9) - On More's use of Jerome and Ambrose, see II,

- 4, p.223 ; and II, 17, p.294.
- 10) - For general studies of Bernard, consult Bruno S. James, *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux* (New York: Harper, 1957); and Thomas Merton, *The Last of the Fathers* (New York: Harcourt, 1954). Margaret Roper quotes More as respectfully citing Bernard at the very time (summer 1534) that he was composing the *Dialogue of Comfort*. See Elizabeth Rogers (ed.), *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton: University Press, 1947), p.525.
- 11) - In Book II, Chap. 16, More also paraphrases from Bernard's *Serm. de Tripl. genere bonorum, et Serm. in Festo Omnium Sanctorum*: "And holy St. Bernard giveth counsel, that every man should make suit unto angels and saints, to pray for him to God in the things that he would have sped at His holy hand."
- 12) - See Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian. A Study in Primitive Monasticism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1950); and Jean Claude Guy, *Jean Cassien. Vie et doctrine spirituelle* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1961).
- 13) - See Cassian's *Institutes of Coenobia*, Book V, Chap.31. The best modern edition of the *Institutes* and of Cassian's *Collations* (i. e. Conversations, Conferences) is *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), XI, 291-546. The *Collations* were ordered by St. Benedict to be read aloud in monasteries before compline.
- 14) - See the *Collations*, Part II, Chap. 5, "On the Death of the Old Man Heron." On the orders of Satan disguised as an angel, Heron cast himself into a well. He was rescued but died three days later. The abbot grudgingly ruled that the case was not technically a suicide.
- 15) - See the appropriate Epistles in *The Writings of Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage*, trans.

- Robert E. Wallis (Ante Nicene Christian Library, Vol. VIII; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868-9). Consult Joseph H. Fichter, *Saint Cecil Cyprian, Early Defender of the Faith* (St. Louis: Herder, 1942); and H.F. Wiles, "The Theological Legacy of St. Cyprian," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Oct. '63, pp.139-149.
- 16) - On imprisonment, see the *Dialogue*, III, 19-20. On torture, note e.g., III, 17, 25-27.
- 17) - Compare these three points with the *Dialogue of Comfort*, Part III, Chaps. 1, 17, 27.
- 18) - See e.g. the *Dialogue*, I, 12; and Reynolds, p.165. Cyprian's *Unity* treatise has been translated by Maurice Bevenot (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1957).
- 19) - William Roper, *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, knyghte*, ed. Elsie V. Hitchcock (Early English Text Soc. No.197; London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p.102.
- 20) - See Theodoret's *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. by Blomfield Jackson in Vol. III of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Henry Wace and Philip Schaff (Oxford: James Parker; New York: Christian Literature Co., 1892). Among infrequent studies is John Henry Newman's "The Trials of Theodoret" in *Historical Sketches* (5th ed., 1882), Vol.II. Among the "sundry stories" of those who survived torture More must also have had in mind the case of St. Roman, the Palestinian, as related in Chap.2 of Eusebius' book *The Martyrs of Palestine*; The initial version of the Corpus Christi Ms of the *Dialogue* (III,17) cites "Romanus that should have been beheaded as Eusebius telleth" as an example of martyrs who survived and died a natural death. See above, p. 15, 2nd c.
- 21) - See the Chapters indicated in *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, trans. Hugh J. Lawlor and John E.L. Oulton (London, S.P.C.K., 1928), which has

a very useful Index and Notes. Recent scholarly studies include Frederick Foakes-Jackson, *Eusebius Pamphili : A Study of the Man and His Writings* (Cambridge : Heffer, 1933) ; and David Wallace-Hadrill, *Eusebius of Caesarea* (London : Mowbray, 1960). The courage of the old martyrs is typified by one Mappalicus who, knowing he would be tortured to death the next day, said calmly to the pro-consul : "You shall see a contest tomorrow." -- See St. Cyprian, Epistle 8 (Ante-Nicene Christian Lib. ed., 1868).

- 22) - See Philip E.Hallett, Intro. to Mary Bassett's trans. of More's (Latin) *History of the Passion* (London : Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1941), pp.xl.-xii.; and Nicholas Harpsfield, *The life and death of Sr.Thomas Moore, knight*, ed. Elsie V.Hitchcock (Early English Text Soc., No.186 ; London : Oxford University Press, 1932), p.83.
- 23) - Theodoret, *History*, Book V, Chap. 38.
- 24) - See Book V, Chap. 1, sec.41-56 in the *Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius*, and the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, II, 504. Theodoret, in his own *History*, Book IV, Chap.15, tells an equally inspiring but happier story of a woman carrying a baby who forced her way through soldiers to join Christians about to be killed. When the prefect asked her why, she replied:"I want to join my friends in the faith, that I may share with them the slaughter inflicted by you."The prefect was so astonished at her courage that he called off the mass-execution.