

Thomas More's Veneration of Images, Praying to Saints and Going on Pilgrimages

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In the modern English edition of Thomas More's 1529 dialogue, in the front matter the "NOTE ON THE TITLE" begins, "A dialogue of Sir Thomas More, knight:.... Wherein be treated divers matters / as of the veneration & worship of images & relics / praying to saints & going on pilgrimage" (36).¹ While the original and lengthy title outlines other topics of the Dialogue, this essay will examine the "veneration & worship of images" and the "praying to saints & going on pilgrimage."

Reading the Dialogue one gets the impression that Thomas More was quite detached from his subject. He seems much more engaged with other topics discussed in the *Dialogue*; for instance, he is much more forceful in speaking against Tyndale's translation of the New Testament because Tyndale rejected the words coined by Tradition such as "Church," "priests," and "charity." Of course, "congregation," "elders," and "love" are accurate translations of the Greek words but More pointed out that they do not convey the meaning given by the Church from the beginning (328-33). In contrast, he seems aloof in speaking of saints, images, and pilgrimages. He defends the practice simply saying that it is the practice of the Catholic Church since time immemorial, and that, according to the words of Our Lord, the Church cannot err. In fact, in the *Dialogue* the messenger reports a number of abuses, and More grants that perhaps there are abuses but argues that there are relatively few and that they do not invalidate the practice of the Church.

We could even think that he defended the practice because he had been asked to do so by the bishop of London, for he did not show personal commitment to it.

When considering whether there are miracles that support the advantages of going on pilgrimages or venerating images, he, in his usual good humor, describes the miracle of the couple from his own previous parish, St Stephen's Wallbrook, who had a child after living together.

¹ All citations are taken from St. Thomas More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Mary Gottschalk (NY: Scepter, 2006).

Indeed, marveling at the everyday miracle of conceiving a new life may show a stronger, more mature and enlightened faith, but it does not show especial devotion or attraction towards images, saints, and pilgrimages.

In his letters as well, More does not show such devotion. We have for instance the letter of 1517 or 1518 to John Fisher in which he describes his arrival to the Court of Henry VIII. In the letter, Thomas More sounds quite flippant if not disrespectful of images and of devotion to Our Lady, he wrote of “the London wives who, as they pray before the image of the Virgin Mother of God which stands near the Tower, gaze upon it so fixedly that they imagine it smiles upon them.” And, though he extend the simile to signs of favor from the King, he declares that he is not “so despondent as to imagining” such smiles.²

Another example of showing lack of devotion is the transformation of the Family Portrait.³ Among the instructions in brown ink on the composition sketch is the mark suppressing the candle at the right hand side of the drawing. The instructions would have been given before Holbein travelled to Basel in 1528, the date of the composition of the *Dialogue*. That is, we have from the same period an unemotional written defense and a personal rejection for his Family Portrait.

Veneration of Images

Faced with such a detached approach and examples which could be construed as criticisms of looking for miracles, using candles, veneration of images, and their like, my interest is to find out More’s real personal practice. Let us look first to the veneration of images.

We have a letter, dated 1522, from Thomas More to his friend Francis Cranevelt, Counselor to the city of Bruges, in which More thanks him for looking after a painting of the Virgin, which More had commissioned. The letter was found in 1989 and it was published in *Moreana* in March 1994.⁴ In it Thomas More wrote: “I thank you for taking care of my painting. The Virgin herself will thank you, since at your insistence she was finished with greater care”. He ends, “Regards from my wife and my whole family.” Clarence Miller, editor of the letter, suggests that the painter could be Jan Gossaert (1475/8-1532) who belonged to Cranevelt’s circle and was contemporaneous with More. Gossaert executed at least eight paintings of the *Virgin and Child*. It would be interesting to trace the history of these eight paintings, and try to ascertain whether any of them might be the one commissioned by More. Two of the paintings of the *Virgin and Child* by Jan Gossaert are kept at the National Gallery in London and one of them—of unknown provenance—fits the dating of the letter to Cranevelt.⁵

Interestingly Jan Gossaert also produced a painting of *Saint Luke Painting the Virgin* in 1515. In the same year, Thomas More travelled to Bruges for the first time, and he could probably have known of this painting, for later he mentioned the theme of Saint Luke painting the Virgin in the *Dialogue*. This is another clue pointing to Jan Gossaert being the author of the painting for More, who would probably have commissioned the work during his second embassy to Bruges in 1521.

² *St Thomas More: Selected Letters*, edited by E. F. Rogers (New Haven, 1961), Letter no.17.

³ The transformation of the Family Portrait is the topic of my article, “*Non sum Oedipus sed Morus*”, published in *Moreana*, vol.43-44, nos.168-170 (June 2007), pages 12-67.

⁴ Clarence H. Miller, ‘Morus Craneveldio’, *Moreana*, No.117, 1994, pages 3-66.

⁵ See p. 66 for the painting by Jan Gossart which I suggest might have been commissioned by More. There are specific aspects of six other paintings by Jan Gossaert at the National Gallery in London which make me think that this is the one he produced for Thomas More.



Virgin and Child (circa 1520), by Jan Gossaert, oil on oak, 38.9 x 26.5 cm, National Gallery, London, Catalogue L650, © Private Collection 2000, reproduced by courtesy of the owner.

Going on Pilgrimage

With regard to going on pilgrimage, the *Dialogue* mentions the shrines of Our Lady of Walsingham, Ipswich, and Willesden. The three of them were destroyed in 1538 and the statues of Our Lady are supposed to have been burned in London. The same year the shrine of Saint Thomas a Becket in Canterbury was destroyed.

Of the three, the Shrine of Our Lady of Willesden was the closest to the City of London. Once again in the *Dialogue* we find criticism of the practice of going to Willesden: “You men of London, gang on yourselves with your wives to Willesden, in the devil’s name, or else keep them at home with you! Else you’ll be sorry!” (p.127). We do not read a specific reply from More to defend the case of Willesden but just the general defense of the practice of going on pilgrimages because the Church says so.

And yet we see that Thomas More made the point of going to Willesden and even having two of his daughters, Elizabeth and Cecily get married there at the chapel in the house of Sir Giles Alington, husband of Thomas More’s stepdaughter. Richard Marius considers that the arranging of the marriage outside their own parish would have required permission from More’s friend, the Bishop of London, and sees it as an abuse of his position and an example of his vainglory. I would have thought just the opposite. Then as now to marry outside one’s parish is not infrequent, even though permission is required. If they had married at Saint Stephen’s Wallbrook and had celebrated the wedding in his house at Bucklersbury Street, or the Hall of the Mercers or at the Guildhall, More would have been the centre of attention. By marrying at the chapel of Sir Giles Alington, Alington became the host, and, even though they were in Willesden, they choose not to use the shrine for the marriage ceremony. This choice allowed both the possibility of going to the shrine privately and of not making a show at the shrine.

Thomas More must have gone to the shrine other times. Thomas Stapleton, in his biography of Thomas More, tells us that More pilgrimaged on foot, sometimes to shrines as far as seven miles from his home;⁶ seven miles is the distance from Bucklersbury Street to Willesden and approximately the distance from Chelsea as well. And he choose to make there what he foresaw was going to be his last pilgrimage before he lost his freedom. In the first week of April 1534 he went there on pilgrimage. A few days later, on Low Sunday, April 12, after listening to a sermon at St. Paul’s, he was summoned to appear in front of the King’s Commissioners in Lambeth to take the Oath of Succession. That same night he returned to his house in Chelsea, and the following day—after going to confession and attending Mass—he went to Lambeth, where he was detained and taken to Westminster Abbey. After four days, on April 17, he was sent by river from Westminster to the Tower of London, where he remained until his execution on July 6 of the following year, 1535.

During this last pilgrimage to Our Lady of Willesden,

He stayed at the house of Sir Giles Alington, husband to his stepdaughter, and from there wrote to his secretary concerning changes to *A Treatise on the Passion*.⁷ He was concerned at this time to put his

⁶ *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More* (1588), trans. P. E. Hallett (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1928), p. 69.

⁷ The letter to John Harris, Letters, no. 48, is dated “From Willesden this present Sunday.” The footnote on p. 188 suggests that More was there as a pilgrim. Marc’Hadour dates it *circa* March. In Yale, vol. 6, part II, 486, line 7, it is dated “in the last week of his freedom.” As he went to St. Paul’s Cathedral on Low Sunday, 12 April, that would mean that the letter was written on Easter Sunday, 5 April. It may seem a bit surprising that he did not write “this Easter Sunday.” However, the letter deals with the date of the Last Supper which he had wrongly fixed previously on

The theme of *Noli me tangere* was common for painters of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The main previous paintings are those by Giotto (1267-1337), Fra Angelico (1440-41), Botticelli (c.1491) and Titian (1511-12); there are also engravings by Albert Dürer (1510) and Lucas van Leyden (1519); and yet the painting by Holbein is quite different from all the others. In the paintings by Italians, Jesus appears as the risen Christ—in white robes in the case of Giotto and Fra Angelico, and in his glorified uncovered body in the case of Titian—and Mary Magdalene appears kneeling in the attitude of worshipping; she also appears kneeling on the engravings of the Northern European artists. In the painting by Holbein, there is greater approximation to the account of the Gospel of St John and to the description of Thomas More: he “appeared to Mary Magdalene in the form of a gardener” (not as the risen Christ) and she stands as can be understood from the Gospel: after speaking to the angels who were inside the tomb, “she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.” (John 20:14). Thus, it shows greater realism than previous paintings of the *Noli me tangere*. The other two scenes shown on the painting: Peter and John returning from the tomb (John 20:10) and two angels, one at the head and one at the feet where the body had lain (John 20:12), imply greater knowledge of the Gospel narrative than just following the popular theme of the *Noli me tangere* as portrayed by previous painters.

However, in the *Dialogue* Thomas More identifies Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany without mentioning the controversy that involved his friend Bishop John Fisher.¹³

Conclusion

We are asked to consider whether, in the *Dialogue*, Thomas More shows himself to be a real humanist. Considering the few themes that we have dealt with here, I would say that his attitude of listening to the messenger, of holding a real dispassionate dialogue with him, of not showing a heated personal interest with regard to veneration of images, devotion to saints and going on pilgrimage, but on the other hand practicing these devotions personally in an unassuming way and commissioning religious paintings for a domestic setting—all of these are signs of his being a real humanist.

With reference to Mary Magdalene and the painting *Noli me tangere* by Holbein, we can say that Thomas More shows great familiarity with the Gospel account and with the Fathers of the Church. However, the identification of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, in this *Dialogue* and also in the *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* and in the *Treatise on the Passion*, shows that he had either not studied the controversy or that he avoided it. He did not identify them in a later work, the *Treatise on receiving the Blessed Body* (1534).

France. However, Dr. Foister dates it from Holbein’s first visit to England because it was painted on English oak: cf. Susan Foister, *Holbein and England* (London, 2004) and *Holbein in England* (2006).

¹³ Cf. Richard Rex, ‘The Magdalene controversy’, in *The Theology of John Fisher*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.