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St. Thomas More

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thos. More. Esq." in a cursive script.

One of the few existing specimens of More's handwriting is this signature on a letter to the King, dated 1534.

ST. THOMAS MORE

RICHARD GILMAN

ON JULY 6, 1535, a man who three years before had been Lord Chancellor of England put his head on a block near the Tower of London and calmly awaited the executioner's axe. His name was Sir Thomas More, and his last words were: "I die the King's good servant, but God's first."

To Thomas More, the stroke of the axe brought sainthood.

To King Henry VIII, it brought more than the death of a man who had been his dearest friend; it brought an end to all restraint on his power and ambition.

To England, it brought an enormous change, for it was on this day that England became an island.

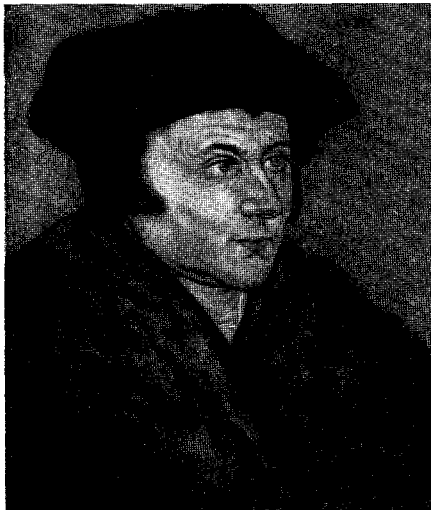
The manner of Thomas More's dying won him the crown of a saint, but martyrdom is not the work of one day only. More's entire life had prepared him to accept joyfully the burning imprint. He was born in London in 1478, the son of Sir John More, a judge of the King's Bench. Sir John wished his son to follow in the law, and Thomas obeyed, though with no great enthusiasm at first. Brilliant and self-disciplined, he rose rapidly in his profession, and, at 26, he launched a political career as well by getting elected to Parliament. He became Under-Sheriff of London, then a member of the King's Council, then Under-Treasurer of the Realm, then Speaker of the House of Commons, and finally, at 51, Lord Chancellor. Over the years, he represented Henry on the most difficult diplomatic missions and became his most trusted advisor. Yet, whatever else he was doing, he found time to satisfy a deep passion — that revival of interest in Greek and Latin culture which we know as Humanism — and to write books, like *Utopia*, that placed him among its leaders.

Such, briefly, was More's public career. But there was more to his life. In his early twenties, he passed through a profound spiritual crisis during which, as a sort of uncloistered lay-brother of the Carthusians, he prayed for a vocation. But he was not called, and in 1505 he married Jane Colt, his *cara uxorcula*, or "dear little wife," as he described her in his epitaph. She bore him four children before she died in 1511. His second wife,

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Dame Alice, was older than he and of a different nature, but she proved a loving companion and excellent mother to her stepchildren. More's family life was a noble and ordered creation. Besides his own children, he adopted several others, and he raised them all to value the things he did — learning, prayer, a purity of soul. A father who “beat his children with peacock feathers,” he took great joy in them, especially in his daughter Margaret. Their relationship, poignant and generous, touches upon a rarely fulfilled area of human love.

To men of all stations, More brought the unflinching sun of his charity. In that glow friendship flowered. The great Humanists, chief among them Erasmus of Rotterdam; the most learned and saintly prelates of England — Tunstal, Fisher, Colet; artists like Holbein; all thought of More as their particular angel, who gave more than he took. “You may call humor his father and wit his mother,” one of them said. Though he was the King's favorite, his humility and tender mercy were famous, and anti-Catholic teaching could not destroy the common people's



Albrecht Durer painted this picture of More as a young man.

memory of him, so that, three generations after his death, in the fragment of the Elizabethan play “Sir Thomas More,” he is des-

cribed as the “best friend that the poor e'er had.”

In those days, the poor had few enough friends, for society was undergoing changes that were to enthrone avarice and dissolve those strands of charity and responsibility that had bound men in the unity of Christendom. In *Utopia* and other works, More fought the tide, protesting bitterly the growing enclosure movement by which peasants were being driven off their lands, and condemning the new spirit of commercialism.

This was an age, too, of almost constant warfare among the powers — France, Spain, the Papacy and England — and, as ambassador, More played on the great stage, but his largest, noblest role was to make plea after eloquent plea for peace. The Christian nations had a common enemy — the Turk — and against that peril More begged them to unite. But like other humanists, he looked beyond the Turkish danger to a time of fruitful peace and creative order.

Most of all, this was an age of religious unrest. The weakness of the Papacy, abuses everywhere in the Church, the rise of nationalism with its centrifugal tendencies — all worked toward widening the rift that began with Luther at Wittenberg and that ultimately split the Christian world into Catholic and Protestant. Deeply aware of the need for reform in the Church, More opposed with all his intelligence and energy those who to heal the body would have dismembered it. When the hierarchy of England looked for someone to answer the heretics, they turned to him — though he was a layman — as the ablest spokesman for the Faith.

IN ENGLAND, the main attack on the Catholic Church did not come from zealots, reformers or crusaders. It came from Henry VIII, who had once been a loyal, even passionate servant of the Holy See. When Henry grew tired of his Queen, Catherine of Aragon, who had not been able to give him a son, and grew interested in Anne Boleyn, a young lady of the court, he asked the Pope to declare his marriage null and void. Embassy after embassy

went to Rome, and reputations fell, as did heads, but Clement VII, though a vacillating and confused man at most times, refused to yield. In 1529, Cardinal Wolsey, who had figured large in the scheming, was deposed as Lord Chancellor, and Sir Thomas More took his place.

And from then till the day at the Tower, against a background of tangled motives, of guile and intrigue and tragic ambition, those two men stand out — the embattled King risking more than he knew, his minister refusing compliance, withdrawing at last into the silence conscience keeps.

From the start, Henry struggled to win over England's greatest statesman and public idol; he promised More never to force his conscience, but he continued to play on his minister's unparalleled sense of duty. But faithful as More was in his King's service, he stopped short when the King began to challenge the Pope's spiritual authority. The Pope was the visible head of the Church on earth, deriving his right from Our Lord Himself; no sovereign could usurp that power; and on its continual exercise rested the integrity of the Christian world. When it became clear that the Pope was adamant, Henry proceeded, step by step, to destroy the power of the Papacy in England. He divorced Catherine, married Anne, and was excommunicated. In 1532, More resigned in tacit protest against the trend of events. Then, in 1534, Henry had himself declared by Parliament the "only supreme head in earth of the Church of England." The new Oath of Supremacy was drawn up, acknowledging the King as head of the Church as well as head of the State. Anyone who might denounce it publicly was to be put to death, while anyone who refused to sign was to be imprisoned. More, Bishop Fisher and a few others, despite continuous pressure from the King, refused to sign and were committed to the Tower of London.

For over a year More remained in a cell, writing spiritual treatises, sustained wholly by God ("Methinks He setteth me on His knee and dandleth me like a child"), refus-

ing out of duty to the King to speak against the Oath, and out of love of his Faith to sign it. Finally, evidence was produced that he *had* spoken against Henry's supremacy, and he was brought to trial. The evidence was perjured, and More's words to the lying witness, the Solicitor-General, were powerful: "If I were a man . . . that did not regard an oath, I need not stand . . . here . . . as an accused person. And if this oath of yours be true, Master Rich, then pray I that I never see God in the face, which I would not say were it otherwise, to gain the whole world. In faith, Master Rich, I am sorrier for your perjury than for my own peril."

After perfunctory deliberation, the Court found him guilty of treason and sentenced him to death. Five days later came his martyrdom.

If Thérèse of Lisieux's road to sanctity was a "little way," Thomas More's may be called a "large way." The influence of his holiness was at once more public and more unfamiliar, for it worked at what is most recalcitrant to grace: human, earthly power with its downward pull toward the immediate and the cheaply won. To the hugest material affairs of men he brought his divinely infused virtues of temperance, justice and fortitude. Knowing the province of Caesar, he gave Henry both the things due and an increment, but when he was asked for something beyond that, he refused: he would not give his soul, for he had already committed it elsewhere.

WHAT IS UNIQUE about More was the way he combined the active and contemplative lives. Under the ermine of office, he wore a hair shirt; no matter how busy he was, he spent hours each day in prayer; covered with honors, he murmured: "Our Lord keep me continually true, faithful and plain." Though he had no respect for the popes of his time, he died for the fact and the truth of the Papacy. Though he lived in austerity, he wept because he had "passed the whole course of his miserable life most sinfully." Whatever had been created he loved well, but

he loved the Creator more, and died in loneliness for having renounced what was less than Him.

For it must always be remembered that Thomas More stood almost alone. It is true that Bishop Fisher had been martyred a few weeks before, and the two saints have always been linked. But More was a layman, with less to sustain him and, materially speaking, greater treasures to lose. Even his family, all of whom followed him into death or exile, did not really understand what motivated him. Four hundred years later, we have the advantage of hindsight. We have seen the omnipotent state, legislating matters of the spirit, trying to oust God. He saw its birth, and set himself wholly against it.

In a temporal sense, nothing that More

did worked. The causes he defended were lost ones, the principles he lived by were betrayed. But he has great meaning for us — as a patron of lawyers, the married, and laymen generally, as a statesman and political thinker, as a man whose soul, one of his contemporaries said, “was more pure than any snow,” or, to quote a more recent writer, as “perhaps the supreme instance of nature perfected by grace.” We can take strength from him as a merry man, in the face of everything, who once wrote: “A man may live for the next world but be merry withal.” From his life we may draw the gifts of laughter and wisdom, from his death courage, and from his transfigured presence at the foot of Our Lord a rich and certain intercession.

Erasmus, in a letter to Ulrich von Hutten on July 23, 1519, described St. Thomas More as follows:

“In build and stature he is not what would be described as tall, but he is not noticeably short; and there is such proportion in all his limbs that it never occurs to one to wish him in any way different. His skin is bright and clear, and so, too, his face, which is neither pale nor ruddy, except for a faint glow which shines over it all. His hair is auburn, tinged with black, or, if you like, black tinged with auburn; his beard thin,* his eyes blue-grey, but with spots of different colour — a kind which is thought to show a very happy temperament, and is much liked in England, though our countrymen prefer black. No eyes, they say, are more free from blemish. His nature may be read in his face, always pleasant and friendly and cheerful, with a readiness to smile: indeed its inclination is towards merriment rather than to grave dignity, though very far removed from silly buffoonery.” Reynolds, *St. Thomas More*, at page 20 (1953).

*Although at the time of his death St. Thomas More wore a beard, existing portraits show him clean shaven or with a light stubble. Reynolds, *supra*, page 20, note 3, points out that in 1550 a rule was made at Lincoln's Inn that no member should wear a beard above a fortnight's growth. It has been suggested that More had a beard but shaved it off before Holbein painted his portrait. Reynolds thinks it more likely that the light stubble was in accordance with the custom of the times of shaving only once a week.



HOLBEIN, Hans the Younger: Family of Thomas More, by permission: Kunstmuseum, Basel