

Last weekend I got together with a couple of priest friends and we (re)watched a movie about St Thomas More called: A Man for All Seasons. As saint movies go, this one was well done. You can find it for free online.

St Thomas More is a good source to reflect on, especially the difficulties he encountered. Thomas More was born in England in 1478. He was a married layman with children, a civil lawyer, and was renowned in English society. He was made chancellor of England by King Henry VIII. The chancellor, as explained by one author, was: “responsible for supervising the preparation of the king’s correspondence, sealing it with the Great Seal, where appropriate, and dispatching it.” Thus, the office of chancellor was a fairly distinguished position with a fair amount of serious responsibility. More was a landowner and was well respected in England and even beyond. As we will see, however, he was first and foremost a loyal son of our Lord and His Church. “God comes first” were not just words for Thomas More, they were a reality, a reality he lived out.

This was the early 1500’s. At that time, the entire country of England was Catholic, including the king.

The most decisive moment in Thomas More’s life came around the year 1530. The Protestant revolt had already begun with Luther and his followers in Germany. The core corruption of original sin – me and what I want – had been unleashed, declared good, and the spirit of revolt against God and His Church was in the air. Henry VIII, the King of England, turned out to be no exception. He wanted his marriage to his wife Catherine declared null. The case eventually went to Rome and the ruling came back that it was a valid marriage; the annulment was not granted. In response, King Henry cut off all ties of the Church in England to the pope, to the universal Church, and declared himself the head of the Church in England. And thus Protestantism began in England. Henry VIII divorced his wife and “married” a young woman by the name of Anne Boleyn.

Thomas More knew the grave wrong that Henry VIII had committed and had no intention of being complicit with it. He thus resigned his position as chancellor and withdrew from public life. But that was not good enough for Henry. The King had issued a so-called Act of Succession, “which required all who should be called upon to take an oath acknowledging the issue of Henry and Anne as legitimate heirs to the throne, and to this was added a clause repudiating any foreign authority, prince or potentate.” In effect, it demanded recognition of him as the supreme pontiff of the Church in England as well as acknowledgement that his “marriage” to Anne was valid. It was a sad time in Church history. Almost everyone who was called upon signed it, which included *all* the bishops in England, except one – St John Fisher. In fact, Bishop Fisher preached strongly and forthrightly against the legitimacy of the king’s marriage to Anne Boleyn and the king as head of the Church; so much so that his listeners were startled. Bishop Fisher was eventually arrested and executed. Thomas More’s signature was also demanded; he refused, was arrested, and eventually beheaded. The axe was brought down on his neck on July 6, 1535 at the age of 57.

Before turning to St Thomas More, consider all those who, out of blind self-interest, so readily gave in to the king’s demand and betrayed our Lord. They are all now just as dead as Saints John Fisher and Thomas More. In fact, all they were able to purchase with their iniquity, at the cost of their eternal lives, was a few more measly years here on earth, years spent in dread of their upcoming judgement. The pride that they likely derived from their “worldly smartness” would not have drowned out that fear. Imagine those bishops, imagine Henry VIII, going (if unrepentant) to stand before the judgement seat of our Lord. Imagine the terror.

The reason St Thomas More, as well as St John Fisher, are good examples to ponder today is especially because of the situation they faced. Try to imagine it. Everyone, *everyone*, around them had abdicated and is berating them. In the case of Bishop Fisher, *all* of his would be brothers – the other bishops – have cowardly betrayed our Lord and His Church and they try to browbeat Fisher into doing the same. In the case of Thomas More, even some of his family members are sent to plead with him to take the oath, to betray our Lord.

Last week’s article pointed out that the martyrs did not seek martyrdom, and in fact avoided it if at all possible. St Thomas More is a good example of this. He would not sign the so-called Act of Succession but he also would not say why he wouldn’t. More was a lawyer and he knew that his silence on this matter should protect

him from prosecution. But he was arrested and put on trial. The trial was a clown show, a complete farse. They could not convict him according to the law of England so cheap self-seekers were brought forward to tell outright lies about him. Outright lies will be the basis for cutting off his head. It is shocking. No one is interested in justice or truth. There is no law, only self-interest. No help is coming. Humanly speaking, he is isolated and alone. Yet in spite of all of this pressure to succumb he held firm, remained faithful, and did not doubt or waver. Would I hold firm? Would I have his faith? Do I really have to guess? Has there not been plenty of times when I have said – well everybody else is doing it? What enabled Fisher and More to hold firm? They did not use some psychological trick; it came from years of building up relation with our Lord. Both had strong “inner rooms,” as our Lord put it, built up over years of meditation, study, prayer, and devotion, culminating in an indestructible faith, hope, and charity. I too can choose to practice this virtue.

More was not immediately or even hurriedly beheaded after his arrest. He was imprisoned in a small dungy cell for some time. The goal was to get him to acquiesce and sign the Act of Succession. What went through his mind during this imprisonment? A good indication of this is found in a letter to his daughter Margaret:

“Although I know well, Margaret, that because of my past wickedness I deserve to be abandoned by God, I cannot but trust in his merciful goodness. His grace has strengthened me until now and made me content to lose goods, land, and life as well, rather than to swear against my conscience. God's grace has given the king a gracious frame of mind toward me, so that as yet he has taken from me nothing but my liberty. In doing this His Majesty has done me such great good with respect to spiritual profit that I trust that among all the great benefits he has heaped so abundantly upon me I count my imprisonment the very greatest. I cannot, therefore, mistrust the grace of God.

By the merits of his bitter passion joined to mine and far surpassing in merit for me all that I can suffer myself, his bounteous goodness shall release me from the pains of purgatory and shall increase my reward in heaven besides. I will not mistrust him, Meg, though I shall feel myself weakening and on the verge of being overcome with fear. I shall remember how Saint Peter at a blast of wind began to sink because of his lack of faith, and I shall do as he did: call upon Christ and pray to him for help. And then I trust he shall place his holy hand on me and in the stormy seas hold me up from drowning.

And finally, Margaret, I know this well: that without my fault he will not let me be lost. I shall, therefore, with good hope commit myself wholly to him. And if he permits me to perish for my faults, then I shall serve as praise for his justice. But in good faith, Meg, I trust that his tender pity shall keep my poor soul safe and make me commend his mercy.

And, therefore, my own good daughter, do not let your mind be troubled over anything that shall happen to me in this world. Nothing can come but what God wills. And I am very sure that whatever that be, however bad it may seem, it shall indeed be the best.”

This letter is steeped in a profound humility. Notice how this holy man speaks of his past wickedness. This is not false humility, it is the humility of the saints. Even the slightest sin is a cause for deep repentance. Yet he was known as a very happy man; he would talk casually, easily, and even joke with those who came to see him while he was in prison. In his strife, he is not wailing and complaining, he is not cursing the king or the many others who have betrayed. He is not thinking of himself, he is actually trying to comfort those close to him and instill in them a strong faith and peace of mind. He thinks first and foremost of our Lord and His Passion. Was this the first time that ever crossed his mind? Of course not. He had prepared for this supreme moment, this moment of great contest, his whole life, although unknowingly so, by simply studying the faith and living it out as our Lord commanded. Finally notice that St Thomas More is governed by his reason – his capacity to think and know – not by his feelings. And he tries to use reason with Meg by explaining to her why she should be happy for him; he does not say that she should not be saddened but rather that she should think about things as they really are and not allow herself to be carried away by her feelings. Many people become rather proud of their worldly accomplishments. But who among us can say that they have faced the trial that these great men faced and withstood it to the end? Perhaps it is time that we aspire to true greatness. *God bless you. Fr Kuhn*