

ST. (SIR) THOMAS MORE (1478 - 1535)

For such is the will of God that by doing right you may
silence the ignorance of foolish men.

—1 Peter 2:15¹

16th Century England. The England of Thomas More's youth was emerging from 31 years of civil war, known as the War of the Roses (1454-1485). The new king, Henry VII, was a harsh ruler. But the people wanted a strong king who could bring peace and stability, and Henry fit that mold. He was a tyrant, and was obeyed without question.

In 1509, Henry died and was succeeded by his son, the famous Henry VIII,² who was only 18 years old. Like his father, Henry VIII surrounded himself with people who flattered him, always agreed with him, and never questioned or opposed him. Over time, Henry lost all tolerance for people who disagreed with him. This would prove fatal to Thomas More.

Thomas' Early Years. Thomas was born in London, England, the son of John and Agnes More, on February 6, 1478. John More was a lawyer and a judge, so Thomas received an excellent education by the standards of the day, including training in Latin and a 2-year apprenticeship as a page boy to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal John Morton. Cardinal Morton also held the highest government position below the King—Lord Chancellor. So evident was Thomas' character even at an early age that the Archbishop predicted that the boy "will prove a marvelous man."

Lawyer, Judge, Christian. In 1492, at age 14, Thomas went to Canterbury College at Oxford University for two years of university studies. This was followed by several years of law school in London.³ Thomas became a lawyer in 1501, and in 1504, at the age of 26, he won election to Parliament. In 1509 he took a position as a judge for the city of London, but by 1515 he was back in Parliament, serving as Speaker of the House of Commons.

In the course of his many studies, Thomas learned Greek and theology. He seemed able to survive on little food or sleep, and spent many hours in prayer and

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* translation.

² King of England, 1509-1547

³ At this time, Oxford and Cambridge were still predominantly populated by students who were seeking a career in the Church. Students who wanted an education in law or business had to turn elsewhere.

religious study. At the youthful age of 21, More met and impressed the famous humanist and philosopher, Desiderius Erasmus (ca. 1466-1536), who would later say of Thomas: “What has nature ever created more gentle, sweet, and happy than the genius of Thomas More?”⁴ The two men became good friends.

Husband, Father, Author. In 1505, Thomas married Jane Colt, who bore him four children (a boy and three girls) before her untimely death in 1511. Not long thereafter, Thomas remarried. His new wife was a widow known as Dame Alice, to whom he remained faithful for his remaining 25 years. As a successful lawyer, he provided a good living for his family, and had time for his religious studies, prayer, and meditation.

More also wrote a book, *Utopia*,⁵ in 1516, describing the residents of a fictitious island in the New World, where all property is shared, and where greed, money, and want are unknown. On this island, crime is rare and religious toleration is the norm. Although More openly doubted the practicality of Utopia's communism because of the natural selfishness of men, the book criticizes the exploitation and suffering of the poor in England. *Utopia* was first published in Latin, and then translated into German, Italian, and French.⁶ By 1520, the book was being read all over Europe.

As a devoted father, Thomas More ensured that all of his children received a good education in Latin, Greek, and religion. He required that his daughters study no less than his son, which was unusual in that day when even many noblewomen were illiterate.

Man of “Greatest Virtue.” As a man, Thomas More became famous for his honesty, integrity, and piety. When his government duties included acting as a judge, he always gave fair, impartial judgments, and refused all bribes. Indeed, he was said to have been the only English judge of his day who did not take bribes, and as a result he never accumulated much wealth. Thomas was known as a good, kind, and gentle man, despite occasional bursts of temper. He was friendly, hospitable, and generous to those in need. His friend, Erasmus, described Thomas as a faithful friend, always

⁴ Erasmus said this in 1517, when Thomas would have been almost 40 years old.

⁵ More titled the book, “Nusquama,” which is Latin for “Nowhere.” Somewhere between his pen and the print shop, the title was changed to its Greek translation, “Utopia.” More wrote other books as well. In 1528, he wrote *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, and followed this up with *Confutation* in 1530. Both books criticized the new Protestant movements, which were gaining ground in England, as elsewhere in Europe. More also wrote a *History of Richard III*, but refused to let it be published during his lifetime because he felt it was too critical of kings, and therefore could prove fatal. The book was published after his death, and inspired Shakespeare (1564-1616) to write a play on the same topic.

⁶ The first edition in English was not published until 1551, well after More's death.

full of joy and humor, and without any trace of bitterness. Erasmus also described Thomas as a sincere Christian who was devoted to prayer. Samuel Johnson, the poet, called him "the person of the greatest virtue these islands ever produced." Indeed, Thomas was far more religious and virtuous than most of the Church leaders of his age.

Sir Thomas More. King Henry VIII became very fond of Thomas, and finally convinced him to become a member of the King's Council. These duties required Thomas to go on special missions to overseas countries. This, and his book *Utopia*, spread his reputation throughout Europe, where he was admired for both his brilliance and his high ideals. By 1518, Thomas had become an advisor to the King, and in 1520 he was knighted, becoming Sir Thomas More. He subsequently held many high government positions, culminating in his promotion, in November 1529, to the position of Lord Chancellor, second in power only to the King. Nevertheless, Sir Thomas knew how fleeting royal favor could be, once commenting: "If my head should win him a castle in France, it should not fail to go." Indeed, events were rapidly developing which would cost Sir Thomas his career, and ultimately his life.

The Church of England. After Henry VIII became king in 1509, he obtained special permission from the Pope to marry his deceased older brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon, a Spanish princess. The marriage was happy for a time, and produced a child, Princess Mary. But unfortunately for Catherine, the marriage did not give Henry what he wanted most: a male heir.⁷ So when Henry fell in love with a young woman named Anne Boleyn, he sought an annulment of his marriage to Catherine—first from Catherine herself, who refused, and then from Pope Clement VII.

Henry's request placed the Pope in a difficult position. If he refused the annulment, he would anger the King of England; but if he consented, he would anger the powerful King of Spain, Charles V, who was Catherine's nephew. So the Pope played for time and delayed the decision as long as he could. Clement's reluctance finally convinced Henry that he would never get the Pope's consent, which was probably true.

Henry decided the only way to get what he wanted was to replace the Pope with himself as the head of the Church in England. On May 15, 1532, Henry bullied the English Church leadership into accepting him as Supreme Head of the Church in England. The agreement prohibited Church leaders from enacting any new Church laws without Henry's consent. Henry's new position also allowed him to confiscate much of the Church's wealth in England. Monks and nuns lost their monasteries and

⁷ Henry VIII wanted to avert a war of succession upon his death. From Henry's viewpoint, this required a male heir.

convents, which the Crown seized. Naturally, the new Church of England declared Henry's marriage to Catherine to be null and void, allowing him to marry Anne Boleyn.

The Law of Succession. Sir Thomas More had long believed that the unity of the Roman Catholic Church must be preserved at all costs. For this reason, he supported the persecution of Protestants, whom he felt were tearing the Church asunder. Three Protestants were executed while he was Chancellor.

His strong views on Church unity, together with his high moral character, made acceptance of Henry's arrogant break from Rome and the Pope impossible for More. On May 16, 1532, the day after Henry was declared Supreme Head of the English Church, Sir Thomas resigned as Lord Chancellor, claiming ill health. He retired to a life of seclusion and royal disfavor. Since he had not accumulated wealth through dishonest means, Thomas' resignation also meant that he had to drastically reduce his standard of living. However, he found positions for all of his servants before letting them go.

Henry and Anne were married in January 1533, and in September Queen Anne gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth. Elizabeth would become the famous Queen Elizabeth I, one of England's greatest monarchs. Anne was later beheaded in 1536, and Henry would take four more wives after her.

Meanwhile, Henry and Parliament continued to divorce England from Rome. In 1533, the Statute of Appeals required all cases to be heard in English courts, thus outlawing appeals to the Pope in Rome. In January 1534, Parliament passed laws which confirmed the King's right to appoint English bishops, diverted all papal revenues to the King, and placed trials for heresy within the jurisdiction of civil courts rather than the Church.

Two months later, Henry took steps to outlaw any remaining opposition to his program. Parliament, under Henry's tight control, enacted the Law of Succession, which made the children of Henry and Anne Boleyn (i.e., Elizabeth) the rightful heirs to the throne. At or near the same time, Parliament prohibited, as treason, the denouncing of the King's marriage to Anne, the questioning of Elizabeth's legitimacy, and any refusal to accept the Law of Succession. The law also allowed the King to require all adults to take a solemn oath supporting the Law of Succession and acknowledging the King as the Supreme Head of the Church in England.⁸

⁸ In November 1534, Parliament completed the King's usurpation of the role of the Roman Catholic Church by passing the Statute of Supremacy. This statute confirmed the King's authority over the Church in all matters, and required a new oath recognizing, without any reservation, the King's supremacy. All Church officials were also required to take an oath promising never to agree to the exercise of papal authority in England. When Carthusian monks refused to take these oaths, because of their allegiance to the Pope, their leaders were arrested, brutally tortured, and executed.

Thomas' Fateful Choice. Sir Thomas, believing that the Pope had been ordained by God and that a split in the Church was contrary to the will of God, refused to take this oath. As a result, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London in April, 1534. However, he cleverly refused to state his reasons for refusing the oath, knowing that they would be used against him as evidence of treason.

Sir Thomas accepted his imprisonment with his usual good humor. Trying to comfort his family, he pointed out: “Is not this house as near to Heaven as my own?” His family, and in particular his wife, tried to convince him to take the oath, counting it a small matter in comparison with all he had lost and all he could yet lose. But More courteously refused. In late 1534, after seven months, Parliament sentenced him, without trial, to life imprisonment. He then lost what few privileges he had, such as access to books and family visits.

Trial and Execution. On July 1, 1535, Sir Thomas was put on trial for treason. He maintained his innocence, declaring: “I do nobody harm, I say none harm, I think none harm, but wish everybody good. If this be not enough to keep a man alive in good faith, I long not to live.” But the King's officials were determined to have him condemned. So the King's Solicitor General, Richard Rich, falsely testified that he had coaxed out of Sir Thomas his reasons for refusing the oath. This made out a case of treason, and Sir Thomas knew it. He commented to Rich: “I am sorrier for your perjury than for my own peril.”

A guilty verdict was promptly returned—for King Henry would have accepted no other—and Sir Thomas was condemned to death. He then explained his reason for refusing the oath: that he believed the King's actions were inconsistent with God's will, and that no king had the right to act contrary to the will of God. That night, Sir Thomas used a piece of coal to write a letter to his daughter, Margaret (whom he called Meg), in which he stated: “Farewell my dear child and pray for me, and I shall for you and all your friends that we may merrily meet in Heaven.”

On July 6, 1535, Thomas More was beheaded. Before he died, Sir Thomas asked the witnesses to pray for him and for the King. And he declared that he was “the King's good servant, but God's first.” With characteristic wit, he moved his long beard out of the way of the ax, commenting: “pity that should be cut that hath not committed treason.” More's severed head was affixed to London Bridge, and Europe shuddered to see England kill so fine a man. Erasmus felt that he had died with More, for “we had but one soul between us.”

In 1935, four-hundred years after his death, the Roman Catholic Church declared Sir Thomas More to be a saint.

- Sources:
- (1) *Thomas More: the King's Good Servant*, by Dorothy Smith (1988).
 - (2) *Lives of the Saints You Should Know, Vol. 2*, by Margaret & Matthew Bunson (Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., Huntington, Indiana, 1996).
 - (3) *Great Saints, Great Friends*, by Mary Neill and Rhonda Chervin (Alba House, New York, 1990, 1997).
 - (4) *World History Series: The Reformation*, by Sarah Flowers (1996).
 - (5) *The Story of Civilization: Vol. VI, The Reformation*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1957).
 - (6) *A History of Christianity, Volume II (Reformation to the Present, A.D. 1500 to A.D. 1975)*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).
 - (7) *Exploring Church History*, by Howard F. Vos (Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1994).